




## **Mythopoetic Farewell: Strategies of Dramatic Performance in Okinba Launko's Nigerian Poetry**

Stephen T. Ogundipe<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD, Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5112-3698>

Email: [stogundipe@oauife.edu.ng](mailto:stogundipe@oauife.edu.ng)

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the strategies of dramatic performance in Okinba Launko's (the pseudonym of Femi Osofisan) poem, "Ire, A Valedictory Rite for Ogun." Employing Ivan Strenski's (2024) performative theory of myth as a framework, the study interrogates how mythopoetic and dramatic elements are utilised to explore the theme of farewell in African poetry. The analysis reveals that the poem transcends conventional verse, transforming into an embodied, ritualistic performative space. By innovatively fusing dramatic poetry with African oral performance traditions, Launko creates a powerful medium for grappling with contemporary human experiences. The study concludes that this use of mythopoetic and dramatic elements not only enriches the African poetic form but also deepens the audience's engagement with fundamental human conflicts and cultural narratives within African society.

Keywords: African Poetry, Farewell, Dramatic Performance, Mythopoetic, Okinba Launko

### **Introduction**

Poetry and performance are intertwined in Okinba Launko's aesthetics. In "Ire: A Valedictory Rite for Ogun," Okinba Launko creatively transcends the conventional lyric poetry by blending it with the communal and concrete nature of drama, creating a powerful hybrid text that functions both as a performance script and as a poem for the page. This exercise transforms poetry beyond mere textual reading into a dynamic interaction between poet/performer and audience. This dramatisation is achieved through historical reenactment of a Yoruba mythic space rooted in Ogun, a central Orisha (deity) in the Yoruba religion. The reenactment serves commemorative purposes as the audience immerses themselves in the past and connects to the present as the poet persona renders a mythopoetic valediction to "Èni Ògun" (the living embodiment of Ogun's attributes), Wole Soyinka, on his retirement from the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, in 1985. The

poet connects with the audience by borrowing from their Yoruba oral tradition through a sequence of invocations, lamentation, songs and panegyrics that enable readers to picture the poem within a well-defined mythic space. This process changed their status from passive readers to active witnesses of a valedictory rite. It also deepens the emotional weight of the mythopoetic valediction in the poem, transforming personal experiences of sending forth a retiring colleague into a collective, mythic event. This transformation compels a profound meditation on the implications of the retirement of an intellectual giant like Wole Soyinka from the academic space.

The act of saying farewell is a universal human experience. It is often used as an expression of a wish of well-being at parting but it is more than just a simple goodbye. It represents a profound cultural ritual that signifies parting and encompasses concepts like separation, transition, or finality. It also functions as a "phatic" utterance, serving a social purpose rather than simply conveying factual information. According to Laver (1975), utterances like farewell and goodbye provide a sense of predictable and orderly closure to a conversation, helping to prevent an abrupt end to the interaction (Laver, 1975, p. 221). Tracing the etymology of the term, 'farewell,' Ellen G. White says it evolved from the Middle English phrase "Faren wel," suggesting an imperative wish for someone leaving to "travel well" or "prosper" (<https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/14732.35434>).

Farewells are more than just moments of parting; they are generally regarded as transformative rituals. This idea aligns with Turner's (1969) insightful discussion about those who are saying farewell and describing them as being in a liminal or transitional phase. According to Turner, a farewell represents a threshold between different stages of life, such as leaving home, ending a job, or starting a long journey (Turner, 1969, p.95). During this period, individuals undergo significant change; they are no longer who they once were, but they have not yet become who they will be. This universal experience of farewells resonates with the celebration of Soyinka's retirement from his position at the university.

Different societies create specific rituals to manage uncertainty, such as retirement ceremonies that mark the end of a career and the transition to a new life stage. The retirement process from a place of work is frequently a time of psychological and emotional moments. Organising an event of some recognition, which allows one to say a formal farewell, could be part of the process of managing the transition. (<https://retirees.uw.edu/resources/retirement-transitions/the-retirement-process-apsychological-and-emotional-journey/>).

In literature, farewells serve as powerful tools for exploring the human experiences of change, loss and transition. It is always a moment of heightened emotion and character revelation. Okinba Launko's mythopoetic valediction brings to mind a vivid example of emotional farewell in John Donne's 1633 poem, "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning". Although Donne explicitly forbids grief about saying goodbyes, Donne's poem speaks of

the connection of separated lovers even after separation remains. It presents a unique perspective on parting, emphasising the spiritual bond between lovers over the material and emotional turmoil often associated with farewell. Far from being endings, farewells help give meaning to endings and acknowledge the impact of presence and absence in our lives.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis of Okinba Launko's poem, "Ire: A Valedictory Rite for Ogun," from the collection *Commemorations*. The analysis is guided by Strenski's (2024) performative theory of myths, which provides the primary theoretical framework. This approach is used to examine how the poem transcends its textual form to function as a dramatic, ritualistic performance. The paper investigates Launko's reinvention of the Yoruba myth of Ogun's death, arguing that this mythopoetic strategy creates a living, contentious tribute to Wole Soyinka. Through this lens, the study illuminates the poem's capacity to reanimate myth as a dynamic force within contemporary African poetic discourse.

### **Okinba Launko**

Okinba Launko is the pen name of Femi Osofisan, one of the most prolific playwrights in Nigeria and one of Nigeria's most influential creative writers. Born on June 16, 1946, in Erunwon, Ogun State, Nigeria, Osofisan is a distinguished emeritus professor at the University of Ibadan, literary critic, poet, theatre director and novelist. He is widely recognised for his contributions to literature and social commitment efforts. As a poet, he writes under a pseudonym, Okinba Launko and is highly regarded as one of the most successful Nigerian poets of the second generation. He has published a substantial number of poetry collections, including *Commemorations* (2007), *Dream Seeker on Divining Chain* (1992), *Ire and Other Poems* (1998), *Pain Remembers*, *Love Rekindled* (2000), *Minted Coins* (1987), *Mingled Coins* (2020), *Seven Stations Up the Trays Ways* (2013), *Remember Tenderness* (2023) and *The Jeweller of Night* (2023).

### **Literature Review**

Despite Launko's outstanding output in poetry, studies on his poetry appear minimal. One of the studies which focuses on Okinba Launko's poetry is that of Ogede's (1995) analysis of the lyrical temper in *Minted Coins*. He remarked that the "figure of coins offers the poet a spectacle to make wide-ranging commentary on the nature of existence and living in Nigeria" (p.331). Also related to this study is Tadi's (2010) work that engaged

*Minted Coins* and *Pain Remembers* in the light of the poet's social commitment to society. The findings of the study, inter alia, showed that Okinba Launko's poetry serves as a poetic response to Nigeria's socio-political experiences.

In addition to Launko's engagement with socio-political issues, Ogundipe (2010) engages the centrality of orality in Okinba Launko's poetry. By drawing comparisons between Launko's collection, *Commemorations* and Ezenwa-Ohaeto's *The Chants of a Minstrel*, Ogundipe reveals how these works intertwine the written word with performance. The study concluded on the existence of interdependency of the written text and performance in the two collections. This analysis concludes that both collections rely on an intricate relationship between text and oral expression, highlighting a vibrant dialogue between the two forms. In related studies, Bodunde (2002) and Sesan (2014) further explore the impact of orature in Launko's work, particularly in the collection, *Dream Seeker on the Divining Chain*. Their studies reveal how oral traditions inform the poetic landscape, enriching the narrative and emotional depth of the poems. Adding to this discourse, Afolayan and Inyang (2022) reinforce the significance of oral forms by examining various tropes and their manifestations in selected poems by Okinba Launko. These studies illuminate the idea that orature transcends mere thematic representation; it serves as a critical aesthetic principle that is intricately woven into the fabric of Okinba Launko's creativity. This emphasis on oral heritage not only enriches his work but also invites readers to engage with the cultural rhythms and traditions that shape his poetic vision.

### **Perspectives on Myths**

The mythological foundation of this poem, "Ire: A Valedictory Rite for Ogun, is rooted in Ogun, a central Orisha (deity) in the Yoruba religion. Ogun is a prominent anthropomorphic deity (Orisa) among the Yoruba in western Nigeria. He is regarded as the divinity of the science of metallurgy and, by extension, the divinity of war and hunting. His influence is not limited to a specific profession but individuals involved in various professions related to metal revere Ogun as their patron. These professions range from farmers and surgeons to barbers, mechanics, butchers, taxi drivers, soldiers and hunters. In the poem under study, the poet adopts a unique approach by subverting Ogun's myth and reinterpreting it for contemporary purposes.

Myths are generally conceived as fascinating "stories" (Abrams, 2011, p. 170) but highly problematic in scholarly definition. Brunel (1992) defines a myth as "a dynamic system of symbols, archetypes and schemas that tends, when prompted by a schema, to take the form of a story" (p. x). Yet, as "stories" told by people, Abrams (2011) affirms that though they are "once believed to be true, they are not based on facts in a society's universe, local beginnings and supernatural beings" (p. 170). According to Armstrong (2006, p. 7), "in the society in which it is told, a myth is usually regarded as a true account of the remote

past." In many societies, myths have evolved through oral transmission, and they are generally used to explain the nature of a society's universe. They are commonly transmitted through highly symbolic media, such as poetry, art, or drama. According to Levi-Strauss (1969), myth makes people aware of their roots and gives them a "tool with which to face human existence" (p. 27). In other words, myth for Levi-Strauss (1984) is not just a story of literary and thematic interest but rather a part and parcel of man's make-up in his milieu (p. 18).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of the paper is based on Strenski's (2024) performative theory of myths. This theory reinforces Okinba Launko's perspective of poetry performance by articulating a reimagined understanding of myths as "doing" acts. Strenski (2024) critiques traditional theories of myth and proposes a performative approach that emphasises the dynamic, action-oriented role of myths in social contexts. Strenski questions the intellectualist and functionalist perspectives that simplify myths as primitive explanations. This is evident in Tylor (2012) and Malinowski's (1947) functionalist views of culture, which assert that all aspects of culture are interdependent and interrelated, forming a functional unity among them. Strenski differs from these earlier opinions because they overlook the active, context-dependent roles of myths (Strenski, 2024, pp. 1–5). Drawing on Austin's (1965) speech-act theory, which emphasises how language can perform actions rather than merely convey information, Strenski posits that myths "do things" rather than simply being passive tales. According to Strenski (2024), mythical stories can be narrated to legitimise power, negotiate identities, or mobilise communities through their enactment (Strenski, 2024, pp. 10–12). They are active components in the construction and reinforcement of societal values and political ideologies. For instance, myths can play a crucial role in justifying political regimes, territorial claims, and rights to govern, significantly influencing policy and governance. Furthermore, myths gain meaning from their performative contexts, such as rituals, politics, or social conflicts, rather than from abstract content (Strenski, 2024, p. 15).

Strenski's reimagined understanding of myths as dynamic, active agents in society has significant practical implications. One of these implications is the integration of sociopolitical and cultural dynamics that potentially seek to analyse myths as practices rather than texts (Strenski, 2024, p. 14). By moving beyond static textual interpretations, Strenski's performative theory opens new avenues for analysis, revealing how myths can function within societies to influence behaviour, legitimise power structures and enact social change. It is this transformative creativity of myths that is evident in Okinba Launko's adoption of the Yoruba myth about Ogun's departure from the human society to celebrate a living legend's retirement from the university system in "Ire: A Valedictory Rite

for Ogun". Through the mythical shared experience of 'separation', the poet transforms the artistic event into a communal ritual.

### **Discussion**

The poem, "Ire: A Valedictory Rite for Ogun", is a profound tribute to Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, who is a well-known devotee of Ogun. In this poem, Launko moves beyond conventional panegyric as he harnesses the power of dramatic verse to enact a ritual farewell dedicated to Soyinka on his retirement from the University of Ife, Nigeria (Obafemi Awolowo University) in 1985. By honouring Soyinka with a farewell rite dedicated to Ogun, Launko skilfully reinterprets Ogun's myth as a tribute to him. Soyinka's artistic identity, philosophical beliefs and political struggles resonate deeply with Ogun's archetype as an artist, creator, pathfinder and destroyer. The performance of this poem functions as a transformative medium, achieving the significant dual honour of both Soyinka and Ogun, while simultaneously elevating lyrical expression into the realm of sacred drama. This interplay between literary form and thematic depth highlights the profound impact of performance on the understanding and appreciation of poetic art.

In the introduction to the poem, Okinba Launko elaborates on the reason for the poem, "Ire: A Valedictory Rite for Ogun". According to him, when Soyinka announced his voluntary retirement from the University of Ife (Obafemi Awolowo University) in 1985, it triggered a lamentation similar to that of the mythical Ogun's departure from the human community (Launko, 94). Ogun's mythical depictions oscillate between a necessary saviour (clearing paths for progress) and a war monger. A key element of the myth about Ogun's departure from the human community depicts him as sinking into the ground after declaring that he has fulfilled his life's purpose. The deity's departure is associated with the end of a specific era and the beginning of a new one, as Ogun is regarded as a bridge between the gods and humanity.

In this poem, Launko compares Soyinka's retirement to Ogun's departure from the earth, declaring Soyinka to have "dipped his sword in the earth" (Launko, p. 114). This metaphor echoes Ogun's myths as a warrior lowering his bloodied blade into the soil. As a writer, one would have expected Soyinka to "drop his pen" but Soyinka is a combatant-writer. He is an activist-writer who uses his creative works to speak truth to power in Nigeria and Africa. Sometimes, Soyinka resorts to unconventional methods of organising or leading protests against authoritarian regimes and undemocratic practices in Nigeria. Hence, the vivid imagery of a "dipped his sword in the earth" is appropriate in describing Soyinka's political activism as a writer. A dipped sword in the earth suggests cessation of fighting or withdrawal, signalling that the battle is over. This interpretation may have triggered the poet's lamentation about Soyinka's retirement, as evident in this excerpt:

We can understand a warrior quitting,

When his strength is spent  
 His shield broken, when his weary arms  
 Will no longer lift the sword  
 Quitting, when his incantations,  
 Spat into the air, scatter  
 Uselessly in the wind!  
 But you, Master—

*These are strange times, my people.  
 But the time does come when  
 The dog, however eager, must turn  
 Away from the hot scent of the hunt*

(The dirge rises: *Mo jawee gbégbé.*) (Launko, p. 114)

The above excerpt highlights conventional reasons for a warrior to withdraw from the battle. A 'failed strength', 'broken shield', 'weary arms' and 'incantations scattering uselessly in the wind' may be genuine grounds for withdrawal from battles. These grounds are tangible signs of defeat but the reasons for Soyinka's sudden retirement are different. The poet considers Soyinka's retirement premature as neither is 'his strength spent' nor 'his shield broken'. Since none of these factors apply to Soyinka's case, the sudden announcement of parting elicits a threnody of voices of women and praise singers in the poem, rendering a dirge:

"Praise Singer keening"

<i>Aaro ma ro o</i>	Stretch the dirge
<i>Aaro kon le!</i>	Oh, stretch the dirge
<i>Aaro ma ro o</i>	Stretch the dirge
<i>Aaro kon le</i>	Oh stretch the dirge
<i>Ogun mi lo-o-o!</i>	Ogun is leaving!
<i>Ogun mi lo-o-o!</i>	Ogun departs! (94)

Dirges are frequently rendered at the funeral of a loved one. They are typically meant to enact an aura of significant loss. This verse serves as a dirge for the living. It reflects a lament for the mythical Ogun's departure, which Launko has reinterpreted to convey the emotional trauma that comes with saying goodbye to a colleague who is retiring from their workplace. By this decision, Launko portrays valediction as a sacred transition. This semantic distinction is evident in the Yoruba traditional wedding ceremony, where the bride's departure from her family is sometimes marked by a bridal

lamentation that underscores the significance of her separation from her parents. The Yoruba bridal chant serves as a farewell that carries both emotional and social importance, highlighting the complex meanings of farewells as rites of passage and navigating the liminal space between separation and reintegration. In celebrating Soyinka's retirement, Okinba Launko intertwines Yoruba Ogun mythology with African elegiac traditions, emphasising farewells as a means of processing change in personal relationships.

A similar approach to subverting dirges is evident in Kofi Anyidoho's poetry, particularly in his work, *A Harvest of Our Dreams* (1984). He draws on the Anlo traditional dirge tradition of the Ewe people to mourn aspects of Ghanaian society, specifically dreams that once existed but remain unfulfilled. Probing this centrality of performance further, Anyidoho passionately asserts that poetry in African contexts is not a solitary, silent activity; rather, it is a vibrant, communal performance deeply rooted in oral traditions (Anyidoho, 1991, p. 41). He advocates for a style of poetry that blends oral elements with written verse, resulting in a dynamic and communal artistic expression.

In addition, Okinba Launko laments the erosion of the traditional performance practices in the essay "Nostalgic Drum", where he uses "drum" as a metaphor for communal rituals (Osofisan, 2001). Launko criticises contemporary African drama for being overly focused on text and disconnected from indigenous theatre. He advocates for a hybrid approach, emphasising the need for African dramatists to reconnect with their performative roots by incorporating poetic language, music, and performance that resonate with contemporary African realities. This call for hybridity suggests a fusion of the written drama's strength with the vibrancy of traditional performance. These perspectives highlight performance as essential to poetic expression and demonstrate how African performative energy can bring written texts to life for modern audiences.

"Ire: A Valedictory Rite for Ogun" is a lengthy poem with seven interrelated parts resembling a play. The poet employs dramatic elements, including a ritualistic tone and mythic voices, creating a work that goes beyond a simple elegy for Ogun. By linking a mythological event with a contemporary one, the poem explores Soyinka's withdrawal from service alongside Ogun's retreat from humanity, blurring the lines between poetry and drama. Launko's note preceding the text claims the poem for performance:

Note: The voices here are those of the Praise Singer, who is the Narrator/Raconteur, and the women who come to challenge him. For ease of reading, I have not bothered to mark out individual performers out in the script, but they should be easy enough to identify. The songs, of course, are clearly by the chorus (p.94).

The author's note emphasises a dialogic interaction between the Praise Singer

(narrator) and the women who challenge him. This style is inspired by Yoruba oral tradition, where performance is typically dialogic, incorporating elements of call-and-response, contestation, and communal participation. By refraining from identifying individual performers, the poet encourages audience involvement, allowing the voices in the poem to blend, reminiscent of a live oral performance. This approach challenges Western literary norms that typically delineate speakers, instead showcasing a collective voice among the women that highlights group agency over individualism. The note also indicates that "the songs are clearly by the chorus," reflecting the dynamics of communal performance where song enhances engagement. Additionally, the title suggests that the poet gives a mythic voice to Ogun, the Yoruba god of war and iron, reinterpreting his role through Wole Soyinka as a defiant figure against oppressive leadership in Nigeria.

The poet skilfully intertwines the dialogue between the mortal Eni Ogun and the mythical Ogun. The choral voices evoke collective mourning similar to the Greek chorus. From the above excerpts, one can say that Okinba Launko's "Ire-A Valedictory Rite for Ogun" exemplifies dramatic poetry, which is intended for public performance and intersects with theatre and music (Chapple & Kattenbelt, 2006). Such poems feature extended speeches directed at characters, the audience, or the speaker's reflections. In "Ire," a cacophony of voices, including Ogun's mythic voice, the poet's, the praise singer's and communal voices, create a profound sense of collective mourning.

The voices in the poem represent various characters, emphasising the importance of character differentiation in drama. Unlike traditional theatrical works with clearly defined major and minor characters, this poem identifies its central characters as "the Praise Singer, who is the Narrator/Raconteur," and "the women who come to challenge him" (Launko, p. 94). The poet also employs a chorus, similar to that of Greek tragedy, where the women share a collective identity and comment on the unfolding events.

To clarify the distinctions among characters, the poet also employs stage directions, a critical element of dramatic representation. There are thirty-five such stage directions in the poem. These stage directions play a significant role in the poem's structure. For instance, the activities of the chorus and fluctuations in their dirge are specially articulated through well-defined stage directions, such as "the song rises briefly and fades" (p. 94), "the dirge climbs to its climax" (p.97), "the drum change beat now" (p. 99), and "the praise singer comes forward with renewed zeal" (p.98). These stage directions not only endow the poem with structural coherence but also facilitate its adaptation for performance, as evident in the text. Moreover, they enhance the interplay of voices within the poem. The stage directions also imply a "challenge" between the two groups of characters, suggesting the presence of conflict, a critical element often found in dramatic narratives. The incorporation of these conventions contributes to a heightened dramatic performance, thereby intensifying the audience's experience.

Beyond the stage directions, the poet skillfully interweaves multiple voices,

including the chorus, the praise singer, drumming, and dancing. The unique narrative that the poet-dramatist re-enacts distinguishes the interplay of voices from conventional musical performances. Unlike normal poetry, this poem adopts a conversational framework throughout, fostering a profound sense of connection with the audience. For example, throughout the performance, the praise singer intersperses his singing with asides directed at the chorus, such as "make way" (p. 97), "tell the women to make way" (p. 98), and "step aside." This technique enhances the relational dynamic between the characters and the audience, further enriching the overall dramatic experience as inscribed in the poem:

(Poem), wait!  
We have not finished with the homage,  
For I did not come alone  
I am here together with all my manners!

I came with the lessons of my teachers:  
(For am I not the book they left behind  
For others to search and consult  
For references?) ---

(The dirge rises again :)... (97)

(But the women intervene now.)

Hurry on, hurry on  
Mister Praise singer  
Hurry on, for  
We have our own song to sing  
Words like overburdened clouds  
And dark, like  
The bottom of the favourite  
Cooking pot... (p. 98)

In the excerpts above, the dialogue occurs between the praise singer and the women. This antiphonal format allows for greater flexibility in the poem's performance. The balanced exchanges create a clear structure and enhance the poem's musical quality. At times, a character may directly address the audience, similar to how it is done in a drama:

Celebrants, everyone  
Follow me first to the house of

Baba Lamilami  
 That once-sonorous throat of pleasing tunes  
 The once-skilful fingers on àgídígbo  
 Nimble as hares---  
 He bigger than death itself:

(Drums change beat now) (p. 99)

The poet envisions reaching out to the audience. The phrase "celebrants, everyone" reflects an awareness that the audience is an active participant in the performance. These dialogues hold significant importance as they create a dramatic impact on the audience, as illustrated in the excerpt below:

Listen, listen!  
 Your dirges  
 Will not stop us from starting  
 Where the well-taught always begin:  
 And so  
 I say---Greetings!  
 All hail!  
 Hail to the singers who have come before,  
 And whose voices we have inherited,  
 (But without their curses!)—

The praise singer calls to the chorus, "Listen, listen to your dirges," while greeting his audience with "Greetings" and "Hail to the singers who have come before." In Yoruba oral performance, starting with homage is common. This acknowledgement of elders fosters a positive atmosphere for his poetry and shows appreciation for traditional performance techniques.

Furthermore, the poem features the voices of multiple praise singers, the audience, and the accompanying sound of drums, creating a multi-genre performance that can only be compared to the Yoruba hunters' guild poetry known as Ijala. Ijala is a unique form of poetry that is highly performative and theatrical. As Babalola notes, it is "mythically and ritually associated with the worship of Ògún" (Babalola, 1966, p. 3), the patron God of Yoruba hunters. Typically performed in a humorous atmosphere, Ijala features rhythmic chants and a rich use of proverbs, fostering a deep connection with the audience.

Each performance is unique, influenced by the context and the performer's improvisational skills, with meaning emerging through communal participation. Ijala can also be performed outside its traditional setting, as demonstrated by contemporary chanters

like Alabi Ogundepo, who performs in churches and mosques. Wole Soyinka has also drawn upon Ijala and the myth of Ògún in his literary works, including *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* and *Idanre and Other Poems*. The lively voices in "Ire: A Valedictory Rite for Ogun" reflect the rhythm and orality of Yoruba hunter poetry, with call-and-response patterns transforming the performance into a dialogic ritual.

Another strategy Launko adopts is drawing inspiration from Bertolt Brecht, Wole Soyinka, and popular street theatre, transforming his poem into a dramatic narrative with a versatile narrator. This narrator shifts roles, including that of a praise singer and Ogun, reflecting different perspectives on the Yoruba god Ogun. Launko's "Ire: A Valedictory Rite for Ogun" and Soyinka's "Idanre" share thematic, structural, and mythological parallels. Both works retell the myth of Ogun, but while Soyinka approaches it as a sacred communion with ancestral forces, Launko presents Ogun as a liminal figure in "Ire," suggesting a ritualistic farewell. Both poems are divided into seven parts, which aligns with Yoruba cosmology, where the number seven is sacred. These structural similarities showcase Launko's mythopoetic approach, using Ogun's myth to explore history, artistry, and human resilience, with the seven-part form representing cosmic order.

Commenting on Soyinka's influence on his development as a creative writer, Femi Osofisan observes that it is not so much about the message but rather "the mechanics of performance. That is the persuasive brilliance of the acting, the seductiveness of the successive spectacles and the rich explorations of the language deployed in the dialogue" (Osofisan, 2011, p.46). Beyond the invocation to the spirits of musical instruments, the praise singer also renders an invocation to Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron and warfare, in "Ire: A Valedictory Rite for Ogun" in this manner:

Òdògún Ooogun, Òdòdògún-ò!	Oh, Ogun! Oh, Ogun!
Ooogun, Òdòdògún- ò!	Oh, Ogun! Oh, Ogun!
Kéti ilé gbó	Let the ears at home
Kó'yin- ín-in toko!	Warn those on the farm.
Kete odon fe,	Let the plain tongue stretch.
Pée: Ògún mí lọ!	That Ogun is departing
Ògún mí lọ!	Ogun is leaving, has
O ti ida bole...	Dipped his sword into the earth.
Iii-iii, ke ma se nso o	Crying, "Carry on
Koun iii dehin bo!...	Till I come back again..."

The poet introduces the praise singers' overture as an opening glee to the

performance. In the performance, there is a remarkable tension with the cry, "Òòògún ò, Òòòògún-ò" which suggests an invocation of the Yoruba god of metallurgy and warfare. The idea is that when a divinity is called, he will be moved to pay attention to their wishes. The voices are also directed to the celebrant, Wole Soyinka. Okinba Launko implies that there is more to it: "these are strange times." This suggests that the poet is more concerned about the contemporary social realities:

They say that perhaps you run.  
Because an unspeakable Terror  
Creeps in on the land, quivering (p.116)

The "unspeakable Terror" is an allusion to one of Nigeria's ruthless military dictators, Gen Ibrahim Babangida, who was the Head of State between 1984 and 1993. The poet's apprehension seems plausible as he describes a series of confrontations that Soyinka had with past governments in Nigeria in this manner:

There was the business of a hold-up  
At Akintola's radio station.  
You fought with Baba Jemila.

You fought with Ironside, with Babyface.  
With the Emperor of the Long cap  
You fought with the dexterous Maradona  
And you fought the goggled one...  
Ooogun o! (p.108)

The reference to "hold up at Akintola's radio station" alludes to a historical incident, concerning Soyinka's trial in 1965 for sedition by the Samuel Ladoke Akintola-led Western Nigerian regional government. He was discharged and acquitted.

The poet also makes coded references to past Nigerian civilian and military rulers in the above excerpt. The repetition of "You fought..." creates a cumulative sense of Soyinka's political activism against successive Nigerian governments. "Baba Jemila" refers to Akintola; "Ironside" refers to Aguiyi Ironsi; "Babyface" alludes to General Yakubu Gowon; "Emperor of the long cap" describes Alhaji Shehu Shagari, "Maradona" refers to General Ibrahim Babangida, and "Goggled one" relates to General Sanni Abacha. The poet adopts these metonymical appellations on the assumption that the audience is sufficiently familiar with the elaborate details of these Nigerian deeds. The final call, "Ooogun o!" venerates Soyinka as a resilient fighter who fought all these influential leaders to a standstill.

The poet soon reveals that Soyinka's "withdrawal" is quite different from that of the mythical Ogun, declaring that the sudden retirement is "only a map of new voyages" (Launko, p. 118):

In your eyes, I saw a ship  
Already embarked, Sails unfurled  
And you at the jubilant helm

As a poet-seer, Launko foresees several voyages ahead of his subject. Soyinka at the "helm" of the ship accurately predicted his leading role in the literary field with his Nobel award a few years later. In essence, this farewell is not a transition to the abyss of death as in the mythical Ogun but a passage to a new beginning. No wonder he prays for a smooth passage for Soyinka and appeals that he be taken along:

*Omo Soyinka!*      Son of Soyinka!  
*Irawo o gbodo ri!*      Your star will never dim!  
*Ogun a sono rere!*      Ogun will preserve your road!

And so, instead of "Stop!"  
I heard myself crying—Master! Teacher!  
Friend! Wait! Take me along!

Go along  
Wherever you wish, go  
We shall still be here.

Go  
Knowing that wherever you land, at last,  
We shall meet you there.

Let the sword dip now dip.  
Let the new voyage begin:

Ooogun-o! O dabo-o-o-o! (p. 117).

Different mythical traditions have developed around Ogun as a divinity but it is a generally accepted view that he exhibits two contradictory personalities of a creator and a destroyer. Soyinka, in his engagement with the deity in the notes to *Idanre* poetry, sums him up as the "god of Iron and Metallurgy, Explorer, Artisan, Hunter, god of War, Guardian

of the Road, the creative essence" (1986, p.86). Ogun's inability to manage his split personality may have accounted for the circumstances surrounding his withdrawal from the humans. This naturally prompted grief and lamentation for him.

The lamentation in "Ire: A Valedictory rite for Ogun" is a coalescence of the possibilities of the dirge form in African society, including lamentation, singing, praises, drumming and dancing. It is a dirge for a living intellectual giant:

Ogun, Father of Wordsmiths  
 Husband of the Forge  
 The Notorious Confuser, who starts a battle  
 On two fronts at the same time-  
 And he still has time for his harem! (106)

"Ògún," "Father of Wordsmiths", and "the Notorious Confuser" are epithets alluding to what Jeyifo (2004) calls Soyinka's obsession with "unconventional dimensions of language and signification" (p.46). Soyinka is highly dynamic in his creative use of the English language. He sees it not just as a metaphor but as an active force, an 'embryo of thought and music' that is 'constantly mythopoeic' (Soyinka, 1976, p.147). This perspective underscores the power and influence of his art, which is intricately woven with the careful selection and manipulation of words and linguistic craftsmanship.

Soyinka's ambivalent nature is also highlighted, just like his creative mentor:

And then what of the long trail of virginal hymens  
 Shattered along your path! Baaba o  
 Ogun goes to war with seven gourds  
 One for his gunpowder  
 Two for palm-wine, and  
 The remaining four gourds brimming with sperm!  
 Ehn, let beauty hide itself  
 Under a shy hood, or pious shawl, or even  
 In the coarsest cloth – our master carries  
 A nose large enough to smell it out.

Instead of highlighting only Ogun's noble qualities, the above excerpt subverts the traditional praise (oriki) dedicated to Ogun and emphasises his raw, destructive and primal masculine attributes. Traditionally, gourds are used to hold sacred items for rituals. In this poem, Ogun, as a warrior, goes to war with "seven gourds", but only one of the gourds contains gunpowder, while the rest are filled with profanities (palm wine for intoxication and sperm for procreation and conquest). This outlook reflects the ambivalent character of

Ogun as a deity. "The long trail of virginal hymens / shattered along your path" alludes to ambivalences in some male protagonists in Soyinka's works who often reflect Ogunnian ethos. "The long trail of virginal hymens shattered" depicts Ogun not as a noble hero, but as a fearsome, relentless embodiment of raw, sexualised violence and conquest, "shattering" all that is pure in his path. A typical example is *Elésin*, a Soyinka character in *Death and the King's Horseman*.

As Horseman of the King,  
The juiciest fruit of every tree was mine.  
I saw, I touched, I wooed, rarely was the answer no. (Soyinka, 1975, p. 10).

The figure of Ogun here is that of a violator of innocence with an unbridled desire that operates beyond the constraints of society and piety. For Soyinka, understanding the duality of power constitutes the test of a genuine artist; "he is a profound artist only to the degree to which he comprehends and expresses this principle of destruction and re-creation" (Soyinka, 1978, p.150). According to Soyinka, understanding the duality of power constitutes the test of a genuine artist. "An artist is a profound artist only to the degree to which he comprehends and expresses this principle of destruction and re-creation" (Soyinka, 1978, p. 150).

### Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how Okinba Launko deployed strategies of dramatic performance in "Ire, A Valedictory Rite for Ogun" to explore the subject of farewell. It drew attention to how Okinba Launko redefined poetry as dramatic performance through the convergence of African and Western theatrical elements. This strategy is a purposive aesthetic innovation that seeks to "return African poetry to its dramatic oral roots" (Anyidoho, 1984, p. 48).

From the textual analysis, Launko's adoption of dramatic poetry is shaped by his experience as a theatre artist and dramatist. This poem is a rich blend of various dramatic elements, such as chants, drumming, song, and dance, creating a medley of dance, mime, and the vibrant sounds of African drums. The opening chant effectively sets the mood for the piece, establishing a connection with the audience. Launko's use of songs and dance further strengthens this connection, establishing the atmosphere of the poem. He also conveys scene changes through character composition and action, seamlessly blending mythic and contemporary characters who heightened the poetry performance with song, dance, pantomime, and chant. Drums serve as a constant accompaniment to the dance throughout the poem, maintaining the unity of the piece.

The analyses highlight how Launko weaves mythic elements into the fabric of this

poem. The audience's understanding of the poem's significant messages is shaped by their ability to recognise patterns of mythic and ritual deployment. The dual identity of Ogun, the Yoruba deity of metallurgy, is prominently emphasised in this poem as well as in the work of Wole Soyinka, who is often regarded as "Èni Ògun" (the living embodiment of Ogun's attributes). This prominence is not coincidental. It is a powerful reaffirmation of everything Wole Soyinka has championed and stood for as a writer who is aware of his moral and social responsibilities.

In "Ire, A Valedictory Rite for Ogun", Okinba Launko powerfully demonstrates the enduring relevance of myth to contemporary life, a notion that is central to Strenski's framework. By drawing upon the myths of Ogun, a central Orisha (deity) in the Yoruba religion, to honour a modern literary figure, the poet showcases a mythical performance that transcends mere textual reading. This historical reenactment of Yoruba mythic space successfully transforms the poem into a dynamic, shared experience between performer and audience, moving beyond the page into a communal event. It also fosters a sense of connection and engagement among the audience. This act of reenactment serves a potent commemorative purpose. The audience is invited to immerse themselves in the mythic past to understand better and celebrate the present, as the poet persona delivers a deserving farewell to Wole Soyinka upon his retirement. In doing so, Launko's work vividly reinforces Strenski's argument that myths actively "do things"; they are not passive tales but functional narratives used to legitimise power, negotiate identity, and mobilise communities through their enactment. In the end, the use of Ogun's valedictory rite to honour a retiring legend underscores that myths find their significance and strength not in abstract meanings but in their performance context.

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