

## The Declamatory Style of Atukwei Okai in *The Oath of the Fontomfrom*

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**Abstract:** Poets pay a close attention to the use of words to convey their thought about society. Thus, what a poet says and how he conveys it, is determined by his poetic vision. This makes of semiotics a relevant theory from which to delve into a poet's work and grasp his thematic preoccupation. This paper seeks therefore to explore Atukwei Okai's declamatory style in his poem "The Oath of the Fontomfrom" from the perspective of Pearce's triadic model. The study brings into the fore that Atukwei Okai appears as a pioneer of public performance of poetry on the modern African poetic scene. Indeed, the poet's declamatory style inherited from his Russian experience has been a powerful means for him to revive his people's traditional oral poetry on a modern African poetic scene hitherto dominated by the huge tribute it has paid to European modernism.

**Keywords:** declamatory style – oral poetry – dramatic style – triadic model – performing arts

**Résumé :** Les poètes portent une attention particulière aux mots qu'ils utilisent afin de d'exposer les maux qui minent la société. La vision poétique est alors ce qui détermine les mots d'un poète et sa façon de les exprimer. La sémiotique apparait de ce point de vu comme la théorie idéale pour appréhender une œuvre poétique. Cette étude a ainsi pour but de s'appuyer sur le model triadique de Peirce afin d'explorer le style déclamatoire dans le poème de Atukwei Okai. Cette étude présente le poète Ghanéen comme l'un des pionniers à envoyer la poésie moderne africaine sur scène. L'influence du style déclamatoire hérité de son expérience Russe a en effet servi de puissant canal au poète pour raviver la poésie orale traditionnelle de son peuple sur la scène de la poésie moderne africaine plongé dans le modernisme occidental.

**Mots clés:** Arts du spectacle – Modèle triadique – Poésie orale – Style déclamatoire – Style dramatique

## Introduction

Modern African poetry in its present state has gone through various steps and changes.<sup>1</sup> This can justify its vibrancy and diversity since its emergence on the modern African literary scene. Though poetry is undeniably one of the most indigenous of all the literary forms in the continent<sup>2</sup>, this literary genre missed to play its role in the daily life of modern African communities. The African people's lack of interest in modern African poetry in general is undeniably due to the huge tribute early modern African poets paid to their Western masters. During the modernist phase for instance, modern African poets were "under the impact of early twentieth-century metropolitan practices, that poetry need not come in the conventional nineteenth-century garb of regular metre and rhyme" (K. Senanu and Vincent T., 2010, p.11).

Though belonging to the modernist phase, Atukwei Okai's poetry can be defined as a transition phase between the imitation of tradition dominating subsequent generations of modern African poetry. Since its birth and the change being operated during the contemporary phase, an alternative vision has grown vividly. During this phase indeed, African poetry is finding more and more its traditional roots as poets are more and more aware of the necessity to endow their works with oral and performance flavors. This means thus for them to remove their work from the coldness of the print and bring it into the liveliness of the stage.

This paper purposes therefore to portray Okai as a forerunner of a new poetic approach in contemporary modern African poetry by exploring his poems "The Oath of the Fontomfrom." The study essentially posits that the declamatory style characterizing his poetry though proceeding from the poet's Russian experience has paved the way to the outburst of poetic performance that has become the landmark of modern African poetry in its contemporary phase.

### 1. The Declamatory Style and Oral African Poetry

Declamation is an old rhetoric form that is part and parcel of oratory and public speaking in general. It is an elocutionary practice that consists essentially in a forceful oratorical

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<sup>1</sup> Modern African poetry has gone through four major steps according to some critics. These include "the pioneering stage", "the transitional stage", "the modernist stage", and the contemporary stage" (T. Vincent, & K. Senanu, pp. 9-12).

<sup>2</sup> In traditional Africa, poetry was one of the most spread artistic expressiveness among the various indigenous communities. Every important event moment involves an intense poetic expressiveness. Moment such as harvest, funerals, marriages, libations, etc. offer opportunity for verbal dexterity and poetic expression.

performance involving “the control of voice, emotion, body, and some cases, impersonations” (Brumley, 2015, pp.6-7). Though the notion is sometimes associated to monstrosity, its involvement with recitation and public expression, ranges it in the field of performing arts and oral poetry as well. Erika Mayer-Dietrich’s following comment provides an overview on the interaction between declamation, recitation and performing arts in general. She maintains that:

Recitation, speech acts, and declamation are related to the action of speaking out loud in religious ritual and juridical contexts, as well as for entertainment. Recitations are used in contexts that demand a correct wording or the power of words as utterance. Speech acts are performative or operative texts, which have an effect by being spoken out loud and result in a change of the persons or objects that are addressed by the text. Declamations are a performance of literary compositions to an audience. The basis on which texts can be considered as part of a recitation, speech act, or declamation are not only in-text terms but also indications of their performance-context, their localization in an accessible place, and their performance by an authorized person. (2010, p.1)

The above comment clearly sets the scene for an overall apprehension of what the term declamation stands for. As it is offered to notice indeed, the notion is closely related to performing arts, poetry included. In fact, of all the literary genres, poetry is offered a wider space for performance. The essence of African poetry lies in its ability to be performed. However, modern African poetry through its written version tends to lose the performative aspect. When it comes to the printed form, poetry seems to mean nothing to the African for its oral form involves a lot of music, song and even dance. Thus from the pioneering phase to the modernist phase, modern African poets were all preoccupied to imitate their Western masters. This implied systematically the loss of the oral flavor of African poetry to the detriment of a written poetry that is not benefiting the African masses at all.

Though belonging to the generation of modernist poets, Atukwei Okai has distinguished himself by the specific flavor he has given to his poetic imagination. From his Russian experience<sup>3</sup> indeed the Ghanaian poet has implemented a poetic expressiveness that was very soon to benefit from an outburst popularity among the African masses and the younger generation of modern African poets as well with their AlterNative<sup>4</sup> vision. Indeed, once back to his native Ghana after a Master degree in literature earned from the Gorky Literary Institute, Okai started implementing the Russian declamatory style that is quite reminiscent of traditional oral African poetry. Okai appears in this regard as the first modern African poet to remove modern African poetry from the coldness of the paper and bring it into the liveliness of the stage

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<sup>4</sup> According to Newel the term “AlterNative” is the combination of the terms “later” and “native”. Thus, while the term ‘alter’ is a Latin word conveying the idea of “to make otherwise or different, to modify, to undergo a change”, while the term ‘native’ connotes the notions of “belonging and enslavement” (2006, p.132)

through the public recital of his works before an audience. Femi Osofisan's following words gives an overview on the poet's relevant contribution on the modern African poetic scene with his declamatory style. The critic writes what follows:

Not surprising then, Okai's declamatory style – a practice which he had originally learnt from Russia of the 1960's, where public performance of poetry was popular, and which he had then fused with traditional Ghanaian practices – this style soon caught on, and poets began to turn away from what Chinweizu and his friends described as 'the Hopkins disease', that is, from clumsy imitations of the European modernists, towards indigenous oral traditions to find their own models. It is the result of this kind of experimentation that has produced possibly the three most successful poets of this generation, namely Tanure Ojaide, Kofi Anyidoho, and Niyi Osundare (1996, p.24)

John Okai, as he is also known, stands obviously in Osofisan's words as the pioneer of public performance of poetry on the modern African poetic scene. He has paved the way as a forerunner for young poets following him to lead modern African poetry towards a dimension that is meaningful. What Okai did is to revive through his Russian experience the indigenous oral tradition of African poetry. In fact, the Ghanaian poet has succeeded through the experience drawn from the declamatory style to integrate Ghanaian traditional poetic practices and symbols. Though the poet's Russian and modernist influences are undeniable, he has all the same paved the way for a revolutionary fervor on the modern African poetic scene. Thus from his borrowed declamatory style, the Ghanaian poet has oriented his poetry by introducing as Senanu and Vincent quite admit "words from the wide and varied linguistic and cultural spectrum of Ghanaian life" (2010, p264).

For all these reasons, Atukwei Okai can rightly be considered as the forerunner of public performance on the modern African poetic scene. He succeeded in doing it through his successful exploitation of the Russian declamatory style. The poet's success lies essentially on the favorable space offering traditional African poetry for such a performative style to thrive. As it will be argued in the following step, the poetic dimension of the performance of the fontomfrom like the various cultural expressions underling the Ghanaian people's daily life is one aspect of the various Ghanaian cultural practices that have been successfully exploited in The Oath of the fontomfrom and his poetry as a general rule.

## **2. Fotomfrom as a Dialogic Communication act**

African tradition incorporates rich and varied practices in which drum and drumming play a relevant role. It is part and parcel of the various performing arts nurturing the people's daily life including music, poetry and dance. It is not therefore surprising that the notion of drumming echoes favourably and extensively in Okai's poetry. Throughout the collection *The*

*Oath of the Fontomfrom and Other Poems*, the Ghanaian poet has provided a wider space to the spirit of the Akan drumming expression to thrive. It is possible indeed to notice both a direct and indirect allusions to this instrument in his work. The poet's alludes thus directly to the Fontomfrom not only through the title of the collection of poems and the poem title of the same name.

The poet's direct allusion to this traditional instrument is quite evocative of his desire to make valuable his Russian experience within the modern African poetic scene. The Russian declamatory style is one aspect that Russian poetry shares with traditional African poetic expressiveness. Poetic expression in traditional Africa is first and foremost meant to be performed. This is partly due to these societies huge influence with orality. Poets perform their works through recitation and verbal dexterity before an audience. In this regard, traditional African oral poetry shares many features with the Russian declamatory style. However, though the declamatory style is one of the major features of traditional performing arts (poetic expression included), modern African poetry missed to appropriate this relevant poetic style.

Okai's Russian experience has provided him with a wider space to attempt to revive the essence of traditional oral African poetry within the modern African poetic scene hitherto subjected to Western domination. The poet's desire to make meaningful the traditional essence of African poetry is perfectly carried out through his successful exploration of the fontomfrom. Fontomfrom is in fact a generic term referring to the traditional talking drum among the Akan people. The term refers to the physical instrument as well as the drum assemble. More importantly fontomfrom convey a philosophy that has nurtured the Akan people from past to present. The Institute of African Studies presents the fontomfrom in the following terms:

It is a series of warrior dances which form a suite for showing the prowess of a valiant fighter and uses, in its many forms, symbolic gestures to mime combat motifs. It is an Akan court dance. The Akantam, The pledge for instance, is danced to seventy-seven proverbs or maxims played on the drums. It is a processional dance of the civil guard. Fontomfrom is a dance of victory, harassment and achievement on the field. It is a dance of victory which narrates the return of the warriors during celebrations in which they assert their supremacy. (p.15)

From the above words, it comes out clearly that far from identifying a mere instrument or drum, the fontomfrom embodies an important historical and philosophical dimension that regulates the social life among the Akan people. In African societies, the distance between the sacred and the ludic is blurred. This implies that an artistic expressiveness is not only meant for pleasure and that a sacred or serious event can also involve art. Artistic expression is given a holistic dimension. It plays a crucial role in every aspect of the people's daily life. Artistic

expression is also associated with the sacred and the serious. Even rituals, religious practices and various, harvest, religious matters other important aspects of the people's live are offered an artistic dimension.

Thus, the performance of an instrument such as the fontomfrom despite its sacred and royal implications is offered all its artistic expressiveness when used. The fontomfrom is required among the Akan in almost all the important events gathering the people. The circumstances requiring the performance of the drum and the main dances associated to them include the following:

(1) Atopretia, a highly serious medium-tempo dance historically played on the way to war; (2) Akantam ("oath-swearing"), a medium-tempo dance composed of over 80 Akan proverbs communicated through dance and the talking drums; (3) Naawea, a fast-tempo dance performed for joyous celebration; and (4) Ekyem ("shield"), a medium-tempo dance historically performed by shield-bearers entrusted with the protection of the king or chief.<sup>5</sup> (2010, p.3)

Such an important place offered to the performance of the fontomfrom in the Akan people's daily life is due to its ability to participate to the people's socialisation and unity among the members of the community. What makes the performance of the drum relevant among the people is its ability to represent not only a means of communication, but it also involves dialogism in the bakhtinian sense of the term. In his book *The Location of Culture* (1994) for example, Bhabha admits this performative feature of black cultural expressiveness. He describes it "as an attempt to rituals so that spectators acquire the active role of participants in collective processes which are sometimes cathartic and which may symbolize or even create a community." (1994, p.30)

The poem "The Oath of the Fontomfrom" is therefore referred to here to show Okai's deployment of the declamatory style within the modern African poetic scene. This is quite manifest in his entire collection as well as the poet's entire poetic experience. The poem presents an arrangement of verses which portrays perfectly such a dialogue between the poet's voice and the beats of the talking drum. The opening lines of the poem shed light on the dialogic atmosphere from which the fontomfrom is performed. The circumstances that have occasioned the outbreak of the drum are thoroughly exposed from the persona's words:

In the middle  
                   of a moonless  
                                   night,  
 The village rises

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<sup>5</sup>"Africa Center Stage In Peace Corps Celebrations", Alliances, 2010

to her feet  
from sleep,

Aroused  
not by owl,  
not by cock.

In the center  
of the empty  
courtyard,

The vigilant  
Fontomfrom  
peals forth—

And the living  
are awakened!

The males  
are leaping and reaching

Out  
for spears and arrows and bows; (Okai, 2005, p.15)

As these introductory lines clearly bring into the fore, the performance of the Fontomfrom in this particular occasion is far to portray celebration or rejoicing. It depicts rather a warfare atmosphere. Though the persona presents the performance of the drum to take place “in the center/of/the empty courtyard,” it does not deny its dialogic aspect. In fact, despite the silence atmosphere, the outbreak of the drum in the middle of the night has succeeded all the same to rise the entire village. This has been possible because the performance of the Fontomfrom is nothing but a communication act. It is even one of the most powerful communication tool among the Akan people. It is indeed defined as “one who swallow the elephant.”<sup>6</sup> This refers to the ability of the drum to swallow up any other sounds when performed. This is the reason why the village is able to rise “to her feet/from sleep.” The poem highlights a dialogic synergism between what the drummer utters and the resonance of the drum beats. Blank spaces are willingly left to materialize dramatic pauses and establish the rhythm of the dialogue.

This direct allusion to this musical instrument sheds light on Okai’s appropriation of the multiple rhythmic elaboration featuring African music. Contrary to the European symphonic music which is characterized by “overstated onbeats, over-bearing conductors and over-awed audiences” (Collins, 2005, p.20) as Collins remarks, African music is defined by its specific polyrhythms. Though these rhythmic polarities are manifest in Okai’s collection of poems and may appear in various forms, they are discussed here only through the notion of call-and-response that characterizes the African drum.

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<sup>6</sup> “Africa Center Stage in Peace Corps Celebrations”, Alliances, 2010, p.3.

The tonal complexity in Okai's poetry partly derives its potency from the rhythmic call-and-response of the traditional drum beats. In traditional performances, this polyrhythmic notion implies various binaries. It involves the idea of a dialogue between the poet-cantor and the audience.

### 3. Declamatory and Stylistic Elements in "The Oath of the Fontomfrom"

Given the performative aspect of traditional African artistic expression, the declamatory style is offered a wider space to thrive. It is not therefore surprising that as some modern African poets expressed the desire to revive the very essence of traditional oral African poetry on the modern African poetic scene, they also make meaningful the declamatory style in their works. This part aims to exploit the stylistic features which substantiate Atukwei Okai's appropriation of the declamatory style as a desire to make his people's poetic lore meaningful but also the poet's ability to put his Russian experience to the benefit of modern African poetry.

An artistic work is said to embody the declamatory style if it embodies some typical stylistic elements. This is argument is William J. Domnik's argument. He writes for instance that:

Stylistic elements such as hyperbole, allusiveness, anaphora, paradox, point, epigram, neatness, conceit, antithesis and concision helped to produce the defining characteristics of the declamatory style employed by the post-classical poets: vivid dramatic narrative, elaborate description, the expansion of ideas, clever expression, and various rhetorical and emotional effects. (1992, p.20)

The stylistic element listed above are thus associated to the declamatory style. It is therefore obvious that Okai's ability to successfully exploit many of these stylistic devices proves undoubtedly that the declamatory style has importantly contributed to shape his poetic experience. As it will be sustained throughout the coming lines, the Ghanaian poet's appropriation of some stylistic elements offers tangible evidence to support his implementation of the declamatory style on the modern African poetic scene.

The poem "The Oath of the Fontomfrom" provides in this regard a substantial standpoint. In fact, it provides a wider space to notice the display of various stylistic features underlying the declamatory style. Okai introduces his collection for instance by referring to an epigram that foreshadows his major thematic preoccupations. As it is offered to notice, the poet opens his book with two statements drawn from the Ga proverbial repertoire. The common point between these proverbs is that they all rest upon the omnipresence of Agye Nyame which traditionally symbolizes the Akan people's recognition of the omnipresence of God. Thus,



while the first proverb maintains that “one hand cannot clap...”, the second states that “tis courtesy, not necessary, counsels the hen to genuflect when crossing a threshold” (Okai, 2005, p.13).

The introduction of the proverbs is an opportunity for the poet to introduce a terse statement and by the same token appeal to the people’s collective wisdom. By calling his people’s collective wisdom to bear witness to his poetic imagination, Okai highlights the thematic preoccupation dominating his work. An epigram is indeed a “brief single line which sums up a poem (K. Senanu and T. Vincent, 2010, p.319). Therefore, the two proverbs introducing Okai’s collection of poems are quite meaningful for the entire book. They announce not only the poet’s drop in his people’s poetic lore but also his desire to exploit the major features akin to it. Thus, the saying among the *Ga*<sup>7</sup> that “one hand cannot clap” explains perfectly the deployment of the polyrhythmic notion in Okai’s poetry, especially in the poem “The Oath of the Fontomfrom”. Willie Anku portrays the rhythm of African traditional music and especially the music displayed through drumming in the following terms:

The drum ensemble consists of two basic concepts – the background ostinato on one hand and the master drum concept on the other. Visualize the background ostinato as consisting of concentric circular rhythms, each with its peculiar orientation to the regulative beat of the time cycle and thus revealing staggered entry relationships astride the regulative beat. Against this constant ostinato structural framework of the background, the master drum “projects” a succession of intriguing, logically ordered rhythmic manipulations which are concurrently regulated by the common timing principle of the time cycle. (Anku, 2000, p.2)

As thoroughly explained, the symbolic conveying the notion of drum involves two relevant concepts namely the drum and the performer. The proverb provides an insight of the dialogic flavour dominating the poem as well as the entire collection. It sheds light on the communication act that takes place in the performance of the Fontomfrom. It is therefore necessary to have an overview of the term and its implications. Fontomfrom drum ensembles are in fact named for the pair of oversized drums that dominate the ensemble and the dance that is performed to its music. Thus, though the term generally refers to a drum made of two parts, it also identifies the drum ensembles made of many others drums including, “an atumpan, two eguankoba, and a gongon.” (Roger Vetter, 2000, p.12)

The dialogic aspect of the fontomfrom is shaped primarily by the instrument itself and the drum ensemble to which it belongs. The fontomfom is indeed an instrument made of a pair

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<sup>7</sup>The *Ga* are a people from southern Ghana precisely in Accra and its suburban regions.

of two drums, a male and a female that are supposed to interact in the hands of the master drummer. This pair of drums is added thus to other drums forming an ensemble involving many performers playing within a synergistic action. Besides the dialogue between the different drums involving the performance of the fontomfrom ensemble, as a communicative instrument, the performance of the fontomfrom implies also a dialogue between the drums and the audience. In fact, the performing act explicitly involves a sender (the drums / the drummers) and a receiver (the audience). The drum ensemble is used to communicate important information to a people who knows in advance the code. It is even well known that present day Ghana “fontomfrom drum ensembles mark special events such as the opening of parliament, and are used to communicate important issues through ‘talking drums’” (2010, p1).

Through the epigraph, Okai invites his readership to a poetic realm that is meant to value performing arts with the primacy offered to spoken words. Likewise, the analysis of the epigraph as demonstrated with the second proverb, introduces the reader to Okai’s other major thematic concern. The proverb “tis courtesy, not necessary, counsels the hen to genuflect when crossing a threshold” in that at this stage of his poetic adventure, the reader is informed of the poet’s desire to cross roads. The poet makes thus an important announcement conveying his poetic vision. This is a tribute the poet pays to his people’s traditional achievement and his will to explore it. Beyond his people it is the entire African the poet is alluding to. Exploring thus allusiveness, Okai personifies Africa in the cadence of the fontomfrom. What the drum beats bring out as message for the African people is quite meaningful. As his voice is personified, the fontomfrom argues what follows:

I am  
     The Fontomfrom –  
   listen!  
 Fontomfrom! ... Fontomfrom!  
 Of you the living,  
 I am  
     the Fontomfrom –  
 Fontomfrom! ... Fontomfrom!  
 Of your great sires,  
 I was  
     the Fontomfrom –  
   listen!  
 Fontomfrom! ... Fontomfrom!  
 Of all your offsprings,  
 I shall be the Fontomfrom –  
   listen!  
 Fontomfrom! ... Fontomfrom! ...  
 Fontomfrom! ... Fontomfrom! ...  
 I am the Fontomfrom –  
   I am Africa! (Okai, 2005, p.21).

Through the voice of the fontomfrom, it is Africa's voice crossing time from past to present. The voice of the drum that the persona is assuming at the beginning has come to be nothing but the one of Africa as the last line offers to notice. As a drum ensemble known for its royalty, its performance involves important messages addressed to the people. The poet alludes therefore to this traditional address system as a metaphor to portray not only his desire to come back to his traditional roots but more importantly to show the urge and the relevance of the issue he is dealing with.

Referring to Pierce semiotic triangle has thus permitted to clearly establish an inherent connection between the personified voice of the traditional instrument and the voice of the poet speaking on behalf of the African continent. There is indeed here an interaction between the linguistic sign, its object and the interpretant<sup>8</sup>. The term "fontomfrom" is very meaningful in this regard. It evokes not only the traditional instrument and all its implications in traditional setting. It is thus used as a pretext to talk about Africa. Going back to the social meaning and implication of the notion has permitted to delve into Okai's message as he has made himself the spokesperson to speak on behalf of the African continent.

The poet's successful exploration of the declamatory style has allowed him to allude to Africa. Thus through the direct address system underlying the declamatory style, the poet makes himself the spokesperson on behalf of the African continent to speak to her children without any restriction and constraint. Underlying his poetic discourse upon the declamatory style has also offered a space to the Ghanaian poet to assert the urge and the seriousness of the matters addressed. As the poet alludes to Africa through voice of the fontomfrom he has also explored devices such as anaphora and hyperbole to make his message poignant and receptive. There is for example an anaphoric use of the phrase "I am / The Fontomfrom – / listen! / Fontomfrom! / ... Fontomfrom! / Of you the living," alternatively in the past, the present and the future. This deployment of the anaphora in the poem is meant to reinforce the poem's oral aspect.

Likewise, the overuse of the term "fontomfrom" throughout the poem tends to be exaggerating. This abusive use aims indeed to show the worth of the fontomfrom and by the

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<sup>8</sup> Peirce's semiotic approach rests upon his semiotic triangle. He defines semiotics thus as: "the doctrine of the essential nature and fundamental varieties of possible semiosis (...) an action, an influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object and interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in anyway resolvable into actions between pairs". (Peirce, 1931, pp. 5.484-5.488)

same token the worth of Africa. The deployment of these declamatory elements in the poem has the benefit to make the poem more vivid and demonstrate its performative aspect. By appropriating the tradition of the fontomfrom in his work, Okai asserts by this very fact his desire to make meaningful the oral poetic lore of his people.

#### 4. Dramatic Pauses

Okai's appropriation of the declamatory style through the notion of the fontomfrom is also carried out through dramatic pauses. Indeed, dramatic pauses is closely connected to performing arts and is of a paramount importance in oral poetry. It is generally used to spotlight what the performer will say next. Thus the poet's perfect understanding of declamatory style is what justifies such a perfect deployment of dramatic pauses in the poem. Dramatic pauses are indeed one feature underlying declamation and spoken arts in general. This is even quite true with traditional oral poetic performances in Africa. Thus as modern African poets expressed the desire to revive their people's poetic lore on the modern African poetic scene, they have found relevant to endow their works with oral and performance features.

By endowing his poem with dramatic pauses, Okai ranges his poetry within the declamation realm and oral performance in general. His appropriation of the rhythm underlying the fontomfrom is successfully conveyed in the poem through the poet's use of dramatic pauses. The prosodic arrangement underlying the poem convey perfectly the rhythmic cadence charactering the Akan talking drum. Such a use of pauses in the poem fits perfectly the declamatory style. Plinio A. Barbosa argues indeed that "in poetry declamation, the appropriate use of prosody to cause pleasure is essential. Among the prosodic parameters, pause is one of the most effective to engage the listeners and provide them with a pleasant experience." (2023, p.1). It sounds thus crystal clear that pauses participate into offering to a poem its declamatory feature as well as its belonging to the oral and performing realm.

It is not therefore surprising that as he wanted to walk on the footprints of his compatriot, Anyidoho who has made a name as one of the major advocate of poetic performance on the modern African poetic scene find in pauses a way to achieve his goal. Having defined different steps for modern African poetry to achieve dramatic performance, he provides a detailed description of the first step. He maintains, in the first step, the process of dramatic performance:

the poet and the poem are still somewhat bound to the written or printed text. But by the dramatic use of body language, voice, pause, tempo, gesture, and other paralinguistic techniques, the poetry is lifted from the cold print on a page and energized into a warm and living experience which the audience spontaneously

identifies and which it may enhance through various degrees of participation and through encouraging applause or comment. (1991, p.44)

As it can obviously be inferred from Anyidoho's comment, dramatic pauses play a prominent role in the process of dramatic performance. They play a crucial role in oral performance. Thus, endowing a poem with pauses is a way for the poet to set it in the dramatic realm. Therefore, the pervasiveness of pauses in Okai's poem proves undeniably the poet's appropriation of the declamatory style. Pauses partake importantly in building the musical tonality and the rhythm characterizing Okai's poetic texts.

Like the entire poem, the excerpt below provides an overview of Okai's use of pauses in the poem. His use of dramatic pauses reflects not only the oral feature of his work but more importantly the rhythmic elaboration of the fontomfrom drum. In the third movement of the poem, the persona's words are personified through the beats of the fontomfrom in the following terms:

Let no hand carve // **[end-stopped line]**  
                   // our tombstone  
 Now ... // **[end-stopped line]**  
                   // we have already // **[end-stopped line]**  
                                   // in our time,  
 Outlived // **[end-stopped line]**  
                   // the sharpness of the sword,  
 The din of the struggle, // **[end-stopped line]**  
                                   // the clashes of cutlasses;  
 We shall yet outlive // **[end-stopped line]**  
                                   // the weight  
   // of lead.  
 Let no hand carve // **[end-stopped line]**  
                   // our tombstone  
 Now ... // **[end-stopped line]**  
                   // the one to dare // **[end-stopped line]**  
                                   // will know  
 The oven // **[end-stopped line]**  
                   // heated on a pond,  
 And the cloud // **[end-stopped line]**  
                   // that rains thorns;  
 The marble // **[end-stopped line]**  
                   // that grows a beard,  
 And the upward-falling // **[end-stopped line]**  
                                   // rain;  
 The fire that burns // **[end-stopped line]**  
  
 // out of stone. (Okai, 2005, p.19)

The words conveying the above excerpt are quite meaningful. It shows the solemn occasion and the seriousness of the matter addressed by the master drummer through the drum beats. The reader is very early informed that the performance of the fontomfrom happens in a

very crucial moment. Indeed, the fontomfrom outbreak in this particular situation is neither for joy nor for celebration. The people ask not to let anyone threaten them because “We have already / in our time, / Outlived / the sharpness of the sword / The din of the struggle / the clashes of cutlasses.” These unusual outbreak of the fontomfrom as it is offered to notice announce a warfare situation. The message conveyed therefore aims at motivating the people not to fear the challenge.

Beyond the poignant message that the persona addresses here, what strikes more is the arrangement of words. Words are indeed thoroughly arranged in such a way that they perfectly convey the rhythm of the fontomfrom. The rhythmic elaboration of the traditional drum is perfectly elaborated through the poet’s use of dramatic pauses. Various forms of pauses are referred to by the poet to reflect the echoes of the drum beats performed by the master drummer. The poem portrays the use of short and long pauses. Short pauses are generally manifest through punctuation while the long ones are materialised through ellipsis. The relevance of these long pauses is quite meaningful in the communication act that takes place during the performance of the fontomfrom. They are of three orders. The first one is the end-stopped lines that take place at the end of verses. This type of pauses provides to the performer a long sequence of silence to think of his next idea. They generally occur at the beginning and the end of lines. They provide mnemonic occasions for both the performer and the audience. It offers the audience a moment of reflection so that to think about what the performer has just said while representing at the same time an opportunity for the performer to improvise.

The second type of pause that has been successfully exploited in Okai’s poem is the caesura. This second category of pauses takes place between two words within the same line. Contrary to end-stopped pauses, they provide a rather very short moment to the performer. This perfectly carried out by punctuation. They are meant to build the rhythm of the poetic discourse. During a performance for example, the performer may refer to this category of pauses just for the rhythmic elaboration of his work. In addition to these to end-stopped lines and caesura, the poem portrays an elaborated use of enjambment. Enjambment is known as the extension of a phrase from a line into the beginning of the following line. The interconnection between the two lines compels the reader of a written poem to read very quickly to catch the meaning. However, during a performance, it allows also the performer to create fluidity and continuity between his different ideas.

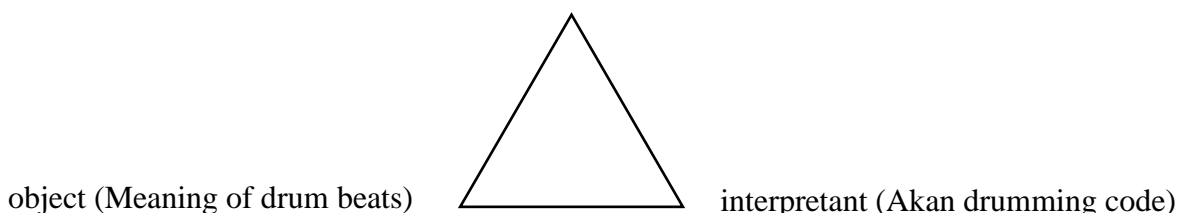
These pauses are materialised in the poem essentially through ellipses. The ellipses are meant to convey the rhythm of the drum. In fact, the performance of the traditional African drums in general and the fontomfrom more specifically is determined by a specific rhythmic. The rhythmic elaboration is shaped by the performer's performing craft. In his comparative study between Ewe and Akan drums, Willie Anku has identified common playing techniques. He remarks what follows:

Appropriate sticking procedures are observed between the left and right hand movements in playing atumpcm rhythms. Normally, the lower-pitched drum is positioned on the left-hand side with the other on the right. Where the rhythms alternate between low and high, the left and right sticks are confined to their natural domain (left hand on left drum and right hand on right drum) (Willie Anku, 2000, p.47).

As portrayed above, African drumming derives its rhythmic elaboration is from the drummer's performing craft. He does this by alternating right and left hands but also by taking into account the people's social codes. Thus the drum beats are performed to convey messages and information to people having the means to apprehend them. What is heard through the drum beats is indeed nothing but ordinary words that are inherent to the people's linguistic background. Nketia contends that lead-drum rhythms in African drumming performances are represented by "intelligible words, phrases and sentences... transformed into drum sounds which are then reinterpreted in verbal terms by the listener'. (1963, p.122) This implies that the rhythmic elaboration underlying drum performances is an interaction between three entities.

The interaction between the three elements involved in the performance of the fontomfrom is therefore quite evocative of Peirce's semiotic triangle. The interaction between the three entities of Peirce's semiotic triangle can be represented in the performance of the fontomfrom as follows:

Representamen (sounds made by Drum beats)



Peirce's triadic model applied to the performance of the fontomfrom

Referring Peirce's triadic model of the signs permits to understand the communication act that takes place in the performance of the fontomfrom. The drummer's performance and the audience relation to it is far to a random act. What is performed as drum beats proceed from the people's drumming code. Thus the people receive the drummer's message according to their prior mastery of that code. The poet's use of dramatic pauses helps him to recreate the rhythmic elaboration characterizing the performance of fontomfrom. The analysis of these pauses immerse the reader into actual performance of the drumming performance.

### Conclusion

The study has examined Okai's poem "the Oath of the Fontomfrom" to come up with the Ghanaian poet's relevant contribution to outburst popularity of performance poetry on the modern African poetic scene. The analysis of the poem from a semiotic lens allows to portray the Ghanaian poet as a pathfinder of this poetic trend that has become the landmark of contemporary modern African poetry. In fact, the poet has successfully exploited the Russian declamatory style as a means to revive his people's poetic lore. Taking his cue from his Russian experience, Okai has succeeded to revive his people's drumming poetry on the modern African poetic scene. The exploration of the poem from Peirce's triadic model has permitted to notice the poet's successful appropriation of the dialogic dimension of traditional oral poetry. Okai has thus employed various dramatic pauses that cross the poem from top to bottom to recreate the communication act that takes place during the performance of the fontomfrom. Indeed, the poem's lines have been arranged in such a way to reflect the interplay of the right and left hands of the master drummer but also the dialogic flow between the drum beats and the audience to which they are addressed.

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