

POPULAR POETRY, POLITICS AND THE VIOLATED POPULACE: AN INTERVIEW WITH LANREWAJU ADEPOJU¹

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OO: *Let's talk about your background.*

LA: Thank you very much. To your first question, let me say that I was born into an illiterate Muslim family. I was born at Okepupa village (via Akufo) in the Ido Local Government area of Oyo State. Like any tropical person, I had a rural background, being born in a village. And because of the restricted exposure, as a result of the rural nature of my family, I relied mainly on my nuclear family for my early socialization. In other words, the family was my first contact in social development and character formation. That is what I can say briefly as of now.

OO: *That leads us to the second question, that is, your family background.*

LA: As I said earlier, I was born into a pure agrarian, Muslim family. In that village, I did not have any opportunity of going to school. In other words, I did not go to school at all; I did not have any formal classroom education. All my life, I did not go to school at all. It was not until I was much older than the school age that I started picking up my education here and there. Like I have always told people, I wove basket, I sold firewood and did odd jobs to save enough money with which I bought my first book, *ABD Aláwòrán* in those days. So at that time, when I got that *ABD Aláwòrán*, then I started learning through one of my younger cousins, Muili Oyedele. He had already completed his primary six education at that time. So you can picture how old I could have been. My junior cousin who had already completed his primary six education was my first teacher who started teaching me how to understand, how to recognize Yoruba alphabets. And I can tell you . . . within five days, one week, I had finished the entire content of that *ABD Aláwòrán* because of my interest in the admirable use of the Yoruba language. When I was able to read and write Yoruba, I started learning English.

So my family was – you know the family as an important social institution plays an important role in the life of an individual. Mine was not an exception. My father was a disciplinarian but at the same time, he was very caring. My mother was soft and caring as well. That family was blessed with twelve children – five males, seven females. Unfortunately, we have lost three females and three males to the world beyond. I am one of the surviving two. And we have four female members of the family left now.

During my childhood, I was not restricted. To satisfy my curiosity here and there, whether to move about with the local people, and that enabled me to know a lot of things about my locality. So when I finished the content of my first textbook, I realized there was nothing left for me to learn in the village other than to move to town, to the city of Ibadan, to continue my continuing education. When I got to the city of Ibadan, I started learning some vocational trades like embroidery on Agbada and so on and so forth, and

¹ This interview was conducted in Chief Lanrewaju Adepoju's house in Ibadan on 1 September 2006. I appreciate the assistance of Soḷa Adekanbi and Babatunde Èkundayo who kept me company and facilitated the interview.

the barbering profession, and I then started learning English as well. The then Western (Nigeria) Library became my second home. And at every stage I was encouraged by members of my family, by my parents, to continue what I believed in. So, that is my brief history as far as family background is concerned and the role played by members of my family.

OO: *You've, in fact, answered the next question I was going to ask.*

LA: Yeah.

OO: *But the other thing I want to find out is . . .*

LA: Well, you can still ask. Maybe I will have one or two...

OO: *Yes. Let me just ask two questions at once. One, what really led to your not receiving formal education? Was it that there was no school in your village or your parents didn't attach any importance to it? Many people will find it difficult to believe that you didn't receive education. Two, how did you now acquire . . . you told us in part how you started educating yourself . . .*

LA: It happened that my family was a very poor family, and from what I observed, they did not believe in Western education. So a combination of these two – poverty and the fact they didn't believe in Western education – was responsible for my not going to school. As a matter of fact, I was the only person in the family who tried to educate myself. Others, up until date, as far as I know, remain illiterates. It happened that I remained focused from my early age. I resisted the syndrome of disability turning to inability in my life, and I saw the school system as just a means to an end in education and knowledge acquisition. To me, the end was knowledge acquisition, and I was determined to use other informal means to attain that end – self-development, private learning process, et cetera. As you rightly observed, it sounds rather incredible when I tell people that I didn't go to school at all. But with the help of God, I know within me and people know too that the level of my Western education is reasonably high. It shows you what determination can do.

OO: *Let's come to the business of ewì. How and when did you start as an akéwì?*

LA: I got it by inspiration and observation of events around me. I had the inspiration to translate these observations into imagery through lyrics. Before I left the village, I used to express awe and wonder at the beauty of some Yoruba proverbs, at the beauty expressed by Ifa diviners whenever they came to my grandfather, whenever he consulted them on certain things. I used to express surprise. Who were those who made words as beautiful as they are? Since then I had it in my mind that whenever I am able express myself better I would beautify some words in ordinary use. That idea went on developing in me until 1960 when I wrote my first poem titled '*Má sèkà*'² and I didn't have the opportunity of reading that poem for assessment to the world until 1964 when I took part in a radio

² 'Desist from doing evil'.

programme, *Tiwa-n-Tiwa*. The producer of that programme at that time was Mr Laoye Egunjobi, now a pastor with the Baptist church.

OO: *What, within your immediate environment, influenced your practice as a poet when you started?*

LA: To a great extent, my knowledge of the terms and terminologies of the agrarian profession helped me a lot. And since the language of communication in the family was pure Yoruba, I had no problem whatsoever in expressing my inner feeling using the names of local mountains, animals, trees, reptiles, insects, seasons and so on. Nobody was a formal poet in my family but my grandfather and my parents were occasionally poetic in their utterances. So I drew some of my poetic inspirations from them. We should not forget also that the rural community where I grew up was almost an ideal society – incorruptible, fair, considerate, and serene. That is why it occurs to me occasionally to go back to nature to do some farming.

OO: *Was your first poem, 'Má sèkà', published?*

LA: Well, it was not published. It was a long time ago I wrote it. Some months ago, when I was going through some old files, I saw it and I have decided that I will publish it with perhaps some of my early poems. I couldn't find it by the time I was submitting my script to the Onibonjo Publishers. They could have published it in my first collection, *Ìrònú Akéwì*.

OO: *Before you started writing, did you study the poems of those who came long before you? I am talking about Sobọ Arobiodu, Ọbasa and so on.*

LA: No. Because of my zero level educational background at the early stage of my life, I could not have read any of these authors or poets. I grew up in the rural community where I used to listen to *ijálá*, *ràrà* and *ẹsà* chanters, et cetera, which also contributed to the development of my skill. But later when I came in contact with poets like Adebayo Faleti and Ọbasa, I was thrilled by some of their works.

OO: *Apart from your talent, this ability to 'use the language beautifully', what was it around you again that inspired you? Did you admire traditional performances?*

LA: I really admired them in my childhood. I admired them. And, to a great extent, the society – the rural one predicated on love and affection for neighbours as opposed to the urban Anybody who grows up in the rural area and later on moves to the city will know that there is no basis for comparison between the lifestyles in the rural areas and the big cities.

OO: *You are a Muslim.*

LA: Yes.

OO: *Somehow, this has found expression in your work. I want to find out whether you have always been conscious of this right from the beginning or whether we can talk about a phase in your development as a poet when this became apparent.*

LA: As I said earlier, I was born into a Muslim family and we were exposed to the Islamic religious practice. So, having practised the religion for a long time, having been taught to be good to others, to be kind to others, to be God-fearing, to show dedication and commitment to what one believes, that is, serving the only one God, I became very much interested in knowing who God really is, what Islam is all about, what other religions are all about. So I have never believed that religion and culture are antithetical; rather they are complementary to each other. In Islam, for instance, there is the culture of justice, equity and humility as well as honesty in relation to others and total submission to the authority of the Almighty. What is objectionable to Islam is idol worship, which some ignorant people think is part of their culture. But this is an ugly aspect of our culture which nobody should show interest in. It always saddens me to see that in spite of the beautiful revelation in the Qur'an and the Bible some people still believe in idol worship, ancestral worship and so on. It just doesn't make any sense. That is why I have always waged relentless war against it and I have expressed my religious beliefs about all these in some of my past works, especially in my *Isípaya, Ọrọ̀ Olúwa, Takúté Ọlórún, Ìdájó Ododo*, et cetera, where I have made some submissions so that the God-fearing people can learn a lesson or two.

OO: *Still on this, if we are now to be specific, which Islamic group do you identify with and what is your own role within the organization?*

LA: Thank you very much. All my life, I have been a member of the general, large, Muslim community. We were not taught to believe in sectarianism. Even in the holy Qur'an, sects and divisions are strictly forbidden, but I have observed that in this age there are so many sects. Many so-called Muslim organizations practise an adulterated version of Islam, which is not in any way acceptable to God. So after my intensive and extensive research on matters of religion, I came to realize the futility of their practice. You know, Islam, among other so-called religions in the world, has one or two features that are conspicuously lacking in other religions: the universality of acceptance and the uniformity and practicability of practice. All these . . . when we look at the Islamic way of doing things, you will see that our five daily congregational prayers are to be observed at stated times.

So when I observed as an adult, especially when I travelled out of Nigeria one time . . . I travelled to London – I used to travel there occasionally before that year, 1985 or so. I was passing through Finsbury Park in the North of London and I saw an Islamic bookshop and that caught my interest. And out of curiosity I went in there to look at titles on the shelves and I saw one book titled *The Life of Mohammed*. And somebody who travelled for shopping had little or nothing to do in the hotel room. So I was free. I started reading that book and I finished the entire content before I returned to Nigeria. So I wept at the level of ignorance in our society. After understanding Islam perfectly I saw errors in that book but it was the first book that changed my orientation completely in favour of real Islam as it was practised by the Holy Prophet and the Caliphs and the early

generation of believers. So when I came back, I told my family that we had to practise Islam simply because before that time I had already changed to Christianity. I was in Christianity for twelve years. That was my twelfth year in Christianity through the practice of various aspects of esoteric science like Kabbalah, mysticism, occultism, Christian Science and so on. I was an adept on each aspect of those I mentioned. But when I studied Islam properly, I knew that Islam is very good.

I went back to my library and took the English translation of the Qur'an by Yussuf Ali and I started reading it. I made sure I read it page by page and bought a complete set of the Hadith by Buhari. It is in nine volumes. I read the nine volumes. There is no way you will read the Qur'an and the Hadith, which is the beautiful illustration of the Qur'an, without understanding Islam.

Having done that, I decided to form my own religious organization. We call it Universal Muslim Brotherhood³ – *Jam'iyyatul-Ukhuwwatil-Islamitil 'Aalamiyah* in Arabic. So that is my religious organization. I am the founder, the first president, the first *Amir* of that organization. So whatever we do, whatever we say, is always in conformity with Qur'anic injunction.

OO: *Should we then say that it was in that year 1985, that there was a radical shift . . . ?*

LA: Yes, departure

OO: *You said for about twelve years you practised a form of Christianity . . .*

LA: Yes. I was already in Christianity.

OO: *Okay. And I think . . .*

LA: I was about to build my own church but there were so many things that scared me from these mushroom Pentecostal churches. They were doing a lot of terrible, unprintable . . . I don't want to mention them.

OO: *Which particular Christian group did you identify with?*

LA: I was moving with all of them, you know. I did not belong to a particular one. We had our own prayer group called Servers of Cosmic Light. It was in that group that we were studying and practising various aspects of Christianity, mysticism, occultism, black and white magic, and so on. But when I read the Qur'an I [discovered] it is an abomination.

OO: *Some people will even say that some of these are not Christian and that those who practise them are not necessarily Christians.*

LA: I know. I know. They are not necessarily Christians but you know somebody who was our master was a Christian and that influenced my changing to Christianity that time.

³ The mosque that bears the name of the UMB is located in the Agodi Gate area of Ibadan.

OO: *We can also assume that your practice as a poet was also influenced from that moment by that shift.*

LA: Yes, somehow.

OO: *Now, let's talk about your life in broadcasting. You were in broadcasting at a period. I want to find out the training you received that prepared you for that and what your going into broadcasting did to your development as a poet and your practice.*

LA: First, my understanding of Yoruba sociology. This helped me a lot in developing a career in broadcasting. But before I came into broadcasting I had worked as a houseboy, as a barber, a newspaper vendor, a petrol station attendant and as a proof-reader with a newspaper establishment. I was proofreading *Ìmólẹ̀ Òwúrò* and another Sunday paper, which was in English. All these exposures, coupled with the setting in my rural background and serious private learning process, helped me to form my personality as a broadcaster. I was in broadcasting for about eleven years, and when I was in broadcasting, I knew that my prior exposure to different aspects of life was not a waste after all: it helped me a lot.

OO: *Did this enable you to read your poems on the radio?*

LA: Yes. Broadcasting and poetry overlap in a complementary manner. Through broadcasting, my talent began to show. People discovered me. The broadcasting house, WNTV/WNBS,⁴ was a tough training ground for me. Apart from producing and presenting programmes like *Káàárò o ò jùre?* on television, *Tiwa-n-tiwa* on radio, WNBS Playhouse Series and *Bárikà* request programme, I was also presenting *Ìjínjí Akéwì*, the programme that was broadcast at 6.15 a.m. during my broadcasting days. I was also responsible for producing and presenting other programmes. I was reading thirteen bulletins in a week. I was writing and presenting *Ìjínjí Akéwì* on a daily basis. It was not until it became a popular programme that other poets requested to take part in it. So the broadcasting house helped me a lot in that respect. I had a medium to express myself. My broadcasting experience was an interesting one. Apart from that, I know that I was actually broadcasting to an appreciating public.

OO: *Which other poets featured on the programme you talked about?*

LA: Yes. Poets like Olatubosun Oladapo, Alabi Ogundepo and, occasionally, Adebayo Faleti, and even some of the local poets.

OO: *I have been away from Ibadan for some years now. I don't know whether they still have programmes like that on the state radio station, BCOS.⁵*

⁴ Western Nigeria Television/Western Nigeria Broadcasting Service was based in Ibadan, the headquarters of the old Western Region.

⁵ Broadcasting Corporation of Oyo State. After the old Western Region was broken into Oyo, Ogun and Ondo states, Ibadan became the capital of Oyo State in 1976.

LA: Well, I don't know. They have changed everything now. It looks like a very strange area to me.

OO: *Let's talk about what you are doing now. Do you live on your practice as a poet or do other things?*

LA: Apart from being a poet and an author, my other business interests are Lanrad Records Limited, Lanrad Recording Studio, Wisdom Publications and Adepoju Farming Industry. It is with these that I sustain myself and my family. But more importantly, I derive enough satisfaction from my Ewi Hit Hot Series of metaphysical poetry.

OO: *Talking about your practice as an akéwì, who will you call an akéwì?*

LA: An *akéwì* is a poet who mirrors the society, using events around him to create imagery for entertainment, information, education and admonition as well as counselling as the case may be. That is an *akéwì*. He must not fold his arms and sit down complacently when things are not normal in the society.

OO: *Related to the last question is this. I have read 'Ìrònú Akéwì' from your collection with that title. This was published in 1972. Do you still stand by the contents of that poem?*

LA: Yes. I still stand by the contents of the poem.

OO: *The impression that it creates is that the akéwì is a thinker.*

LA: He is a thinker:

Ojoojúmọ̀ lakéwì í ronú
Tironú-tironú lakéwì í rìn
Àdán n ìyekan òòbẹ̀
Má-yà-mì lalábarò ọ̀ḍẹ̀ nínú oko
Ìronú lẹ̀rẹ̀ akéwì ní yẹ̀wù

(Adepoju 1972: 1)

[No day passes without the poet engaging in serious thinking
He is pregnant with thoughts as he moves about
Just as the bat and the lesser bat are of the same family
And a hunter has no companion in the wild apart from his ammunition bag
Deep thoughts are companions of the poet in his inner chamber]

An *akéwì* is a thinker, a prolific thinker for that matter because *ewì* itself is a business of prolific thinking.

OO: *When did you leave broadcasting?*

LA: I was in broadcasting for about eleven years because I started taking part in radio and television programmes in 1964. My contributions to the various programmes at that time attracted the management of the WNBS/WNTV, that they invited me to present some programmes for them. I accepted until they asked a senior broadcaster, Adebayo Faleti, to audition me for news reading. I passed that audition and they employed me as a full contract officer. I was on a contract appointment that was renewable yearly until I was forced to resign my paid appointment because each time I wrote and broadcast a poem I would find a query on my table asking me to explain why severe disciplinary action should not be brought against me for editorializing on air. That was when I realized that I should leave. And I handed in my resignation. I even paid in one month's salary in lieu of notice.

I always defended my role as a poet there. In one of my replies to their memo, I quoted John Milton when he was addressing an imaginary British Parliament. He said: 'Give me the liberty to think and write according to my own conscience.' It was not until they gave me an ultimatum. . . . The station became interested in my poems. They wanted to start publishing them with the copyright reverted to the corporation. It was that copyright issue that we disagreed upon which led to my eventual disappearance from the broadcasting scene. That did not happen until they gave me an ultimatum to submit the scripts of my past *ewì* broadcasts on radio and television on or before a particular date. And that was when I realized I should leave.

OO: *In a sense, you were being censored.*

LA: Yes.

OO: *Was it the fear of the government of the day that made the management of the station to . . .*

LA: Yes. All of them were uncomfortable; they didn't want to offend the government. They didn't want to lose their jobs. I said, 'If certain things are not good in the society, let us do something to correct such anomaly.' And as they were so fearful of the government and I was fearful of my God. Even the Controller of Programmes did say that he was becoming rather apprehensive in those days.

OO: *The akéwì in the traditional Yoruba society is highly regarded. And I guess that you owe the traditional singer a debt. But do you think the role of the singer is changing in the society?*

LA: Yes. His role is changing because of the dynamic nature of the society in which he operates. An *akéwì* should be somebody who fears God, who must be fair to everybody – both the leader and the led. With the present political structure of our society, the role of the poet is changing.

OO: *Are there roles that the akéwì plays now that the traditional akéwì did not play?*

LA: Yes, because in the primitive society, the traditional, local poet did not live to see the complex nature of the modern society. It was more or less a monolithic society that they operated. In the modern-day system, many things are happening. If you read newspapers and magazines and listen to the electronic media, there are a lot of things which are tragic enough to make one become hypertensive. It is rather unfortunate.

OO: *It is so clear that the practice of Yoruba poetry is dominated by men. What do you think accounts for this? Are there some female voices that are becoming significant?*

LA: Not really. It is not even advisable to encourage women into the ewì trade. As a religious man, I know that both Islam and Christianity do not encourage women to play dominant roles as preachers and poets. When we formed the *Egbé Akéwì Yorùbá*, there were some female members who were also making efforts to rub minds with men but as time passed by, some of them started dropping by the wayside until we have virtually no more female members of that group today.

OO: *If you are to talk about your work as a poet, what are those features of your work that you consider significant in the sense of marking a departure from whatever existed before you started practising as a poet?*

LA: As far as ewì is concerned, especially as formalized and modernized today, I want to say with all sense of modesty that it is difficult to identify anyone who came before me, but in the informal and part-time way, as it was the case before. I have a lot of respect and admiration for them. My major contribution is that I modernized and professionalized ewì. In other words, I raised it from mere mendicancy to professionalism. Nobody can be identified in Yoruba history as having achieved that feat. That is what I can say about that. If anybody wants to be honest with the role I have played as a poet . . . I have become the master of Yoruba poetry.

OO: *What categories of people patronize you?*

LA: All segments of the society, ranging from the ordinary man on the street, the rural dweller, the intellectual giants in the tertiary institutions, and so on and so forth – different groups and individuals. My Ewi Hit Hot Series of records, cassettes and CDs is very popular with millions of Yoruba-speaking people not only in the Yoruba-speaking area but in other parts of the country, like the north, the east – and the diaspora, where millions of Yoruba-speaking people sojourn in appreciable numbers. My works are very popular with various segments of the society.

OO: *Now, talking about the role of poets, do you think that poets have any role to play in politics?*

LA: The role of the poet is to educate and create public awareness, to monitor political promises and their implementation. It is also to remind the public office holders to be

alive to their responsibilities and to discourage the politics of deceit, intrigue, politics of hatred and politics of destruction, and so on and so forth. Whenever one looks at the political situation in Nigeria today, what is happening calls for the intervention of the poet most of the time.

OO: *You are known to have made a lot of controversial releases. One was said to have helped Chief Obafemi Awolowo but you later parted ways with him. And you were very critical of the military. Do you think it is proper for the poet to make partisan comments in view of the fact that it is very easy for people to conclude that a poet is identifying with a particular political group or government?*

LA: Let me say right away that I never parted ways with Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Indeed, we showed mutual respect for each other up to the time of his death. My problem was with some of his lieutenants who expected me to extend to them the same courtesy and deference that Awo enjoyed from me, even when such people did not merit it. I was certainly critical of the military, because they introduced a number of anti-people policies. An *akéwì* must draw his strength from his ability to confront tyranny wherever found. So the essential nature of poetry does not recognize sacred cows or no-go areas. That is why *ewì* is used today to discuss anything, whether economic, political, socio-political, and others. That is why *ewì* has become a recognized medium of information – a medium through which a number of problems can be solved – such as reminding the leader and the led to be God-fearing and to be alive to their responsibilities.

OO: *Closely related to this is the fact that some of your new audio releases actually comment on the achievement of some serving governors.⁶ Does this not amount to being paid to sing?*

LA: I don't think so. An *akéwì* does not have to be an opposition party to all programmes and activities. As he is able to rebuke where people misbehave, he should also acknowledge good things and virtues in some decent politicians wherever such occur. If I continue to see the ugly sides of people, everybody will lose respect for one. But when you see decent people who are God-fearing enough to make life better for the generality of our people, who fight for the collective happiness of people, they deserve commendation, even if such people call an *akéwì* and say, 'These are our programmes. We want you to help us in creating public awareness through your medium.' As I have said, I have modernized and professionalized *ewì*. Just like politicians will patronize newspapers and the electronic media to showcase their programme, the same thing can be done through the agency of *ewì* as a medium of mass communication.

Even when a poet is commissioned to do a particular job, all he needs to do is to examine that request critically and sincerely and convince himself that it is worth doing. There is nothing abnormal about it because *ewì* has become a medium which people recognize and then there is nothing you can do to divorce an *akéwì* from the rest of the society. These are some of the people who patronize our works. If you make enemies out of politicians and members of the ruling class, it will not be long before one is forgotten. It is a mark of recognition that an *akéwì* is being requested to play that kind of role. Just

⁶ This is a reference to Bola Tinubu and Gbenga Daniels of Lagos and Ogun states respectively.

like any normal professional, like a lawyer. You have a case in court and you do not know how to defend yourself, you ask somebody to defend you. If somebody is an engineer and you are not, and you want to build your house, you give it to an engineer. So if an *akéwì* is recognized to that level, I think it is good for the *akéwì*.

OO: *As a leading figure in the practice of ewì, are there people who are taking after you, whose practice assures you that the ewì tradition has a future?*

LA: Without mentioning names...

OO: *I don't mind if you mention names.*

LA: Well, I don't mention names because of the fact that they are many. Some of them are taking after me and it makes me happy. I do not begrudge them at all for taking after me. My only quarrel is with those who copy my voice for public attraction only to use their message in dysfunctional ways, using gutter language, personal abuse and so on. With that you can see that some of them are not sincere at all in the way they present their thoughts to the public. I know that many of them are taking after me. It is a welcome development.

OO: *From your own experience, what are the risks associated with being an akéwì today?*

LA: I have already paid my dues as far as risks associated with *ewì* trade are concerned – detention by the military and harassment by the political authorities, malice and hostilities from powerful groups and individuals who believe that when societal ills are being campaigned against, these campaigns are targeted towards them. When you are fighting a war of this nature, you attract enmity to yourself from right, centre, backward and forward. Only God in His power and authority saves one from the clutches of oppression.

OO: *Are you aware that some poets who are using the medium of English and are from the Yoruba cultural environment are also drawing on Yoruba traditions?*

LA: I am very much aware and I am happy about it. I see it as reflecting their respective individual backgrounds on their works. That is why cultural environment plays an important role in the thinking faculty of man. I don't see anything bad in it; it is very good and it is a justification of the role that the Yoruba poet is playing – that you cannot leave your language to become engrossed in others that are strange to you.

OO: *I wonder why Yoruba poets seem to be more courageous than poets from other cultural groups in Nigeria. And this is what those writing in Yoruba and those like Niyi Qsundare and Fẹmi Fatọba, who write in English, have in common.*

LA: But there are some like that in the north.⁷ I am aware of that. They may not be poets but they may just be musicians. You know in those days Ogunde waxed a record during the colonial era. It attracted negative reaction to what he did. The same thing is happening in the north but is not as pronounced as in Yorubaland. If they are satisfied with what government is doing, if they feel unconcerned about the plight of the public, they may continue to work like that. But if they really want to borrow a leaf from courageous Yoruba poets, they must be courageous enough to call a spade a spade and damn the consequences.

People like us, for example, are undaunted; we cannot be blackmailed or bullied into submission. So we have to continue to do what we believe in doing. But if they have not added that courage, that honesty, that ability into their thought, it pays them to add same.

OO: *Is there is a forum for Yoruba poets?*

LA: Yes. There is the *Egbé Akéwì Yorùbá* [Association of Yoruba Poets], where we exchange ideas . . . and rub minds together about the development of the *ewì* industry. And this *Egbé Akéwì Yorùbá* has branches in Oyo, Ogun, Kwara and Kogi States. It is an organization that has been doing fine since inception.

OO: *Looking at the practice of ewì today, which trends do you like and which are you not satisfied with?*

LA: I will say that what gladdens my heart is the coming together of the poets as a body. And apart from that, many Yoruba poets are springing up here and there. It shows you that *ewì* has become an important medium to reckon with. But what makes me unhappy most of the time is when an *akéwì* becomes a beggar, when he goes to a social function and talks to people there: 'Please allow me to render some *ewì*, even if you give me five minutes' just because of some Naira he will rake. That is appalling; it is embarrassing. And as a body, we took some steps against it at a time but the hungry people continue to do so, and there is no way we can stop them because we are not ubiquitous. But what I know is that every profession has its own share of quacks. That is what I can say about that.

OO: *I raised this question in another form earlier: which poets do you think are promising enough to perpetuate the tradition that you are identified with?*

LA: Before I answer that, I will like to add something to the response I gave to the last question. I want to add that in spite of all the fact that some of the poets are not decent enough to wait to be formally invited and present their thoughts, I still assess the practice of *ewì* as so far so good, bearing in mind the fact that society is the ultimate mirror. This in spite of the fact that some of them who do not believe in the culture of decency are polluting the *ewì* market with their abusive and gutter language.

To come back to your next question, I will say many of them are making strenuous effort to perpetuate the *ewì* tradition. Many of them, as long as they remain

⁷ This is a reference to northern Nigeria.

unrelenting in their desire to improve on their works I know that the succeeding generations of poets who are better trained and better informed, will definitely sustain that tradition.

OO: *But you are still not willing to mention particular poets.*

LA: Yes, the fact that the succeeding generations of poets, the yet-unborn ones and those who are alive today and are interested in learning the trade I know it will take some time but I have it on the drawing board to establish an academy to train some people. When they are properly trained, they will understand what *ewì* is all about. I think it has got to that stage. We have to train some people, formally, of course.

OO: *In other words, you are suggesting that it is not enough to be gifted and that people need to be trained.*

LA: Yes, they need to be trained. So very soon we will announce to the public how we want to go about it.

OO: *You also admitted that WNBS/WNTV played a role in promoting ewì. Is there any effort to sustain this, especially now that there is an association of Yoruba poets? Poets certainly have challenges with regard to publishing their works and so on. People like you who make regular releases and enjoy popular patronage won't have this problem.*

LA: We made several attempts at helping others. There was a time we made contact with NTA⁸ Ibadan and they agreed to air some of our poets on air or in their programme, *Ọrọ̀ Ìyànjú Tòní*.⁹ The programme went on and for a long period of time, and many of our budding poets were taking part in it. If that programme had been sustained, the situation would have been a bit different. But today it is unfortunate that things are changing a lot in the electronic media with the introduction of commercial news, commercial programmes, where virtually all social programmes are monetized. There is hardly any programme now that is left free for poets to take part in. Any poet who wants to be heard will be expected to come and sponsor a programme or buy a slot. It was not so in our days. Even if you listen to the radio today, you will discover that a lot of gutter language is used in broadcasting.

In our broadcasting days, before you played any record at all it was free of nonsense. If a record was bad you will see it clearly marked NTBB, that is, 'not to be broadcast'. It is very embarrassing.

OO: *Now, let us talk about your other activities. You have a studio where audio tapes are recorded and mass-produced. Do you make these facilities available to other people – either poets or singers?*

⁸ Nigeria Television Authority, Ibadan. This succeeded WNTV and has already been taken over by the Federal Government.

⁹ 'Admonition for Today'.

LA: Yes, many people have started patronizing us but, unfortunately, we have not given it adequate publicity to create sufficient awareness for better patronage, but we will soon do that when we complete certain things – when we install our new machines to make it what we want it to be. But in the meantime, those who patronize us know that they can have the best recording here because it has been totally computerized.

OO: *Ìrònú Akéwì, your first collection, was published in 1972. Are you planning to bring out a new one?*

LA: Let me say right away that *Ìrònú Akéwì* is not the only book I wrote.

OO: *I mean the only collection of poetry.*

LA: Yes, I am coming to that. I have also written and published *Sàgbà Di Wèrè, Ládípò Ọmọ Adánwò* as well as *Orírun Yorùbá*. But in respect of poetry, *Ìrònú Akéwì* is the only book I have published so far. But I have a lorry load of *ewì* that will soon be published for wider audience. My main constraint is, however, the dishonesty of some of the publishers who do not encourage authors at all. But with or without them, I know by the grace of God I will make my own efforts so that people will know and read my works. So efforts are on.

OO: *I think this is a problem that other Yoruba poets have also identified. Do you think we should leave this to publishers, especially as we recognize that it has implications for the promotion of our own culture? Isn't the government supposed to be involved? Some colleagues are actually talking about the possibility of meaningfully engaging practising poets in some of our higher institutions so that the students can interact with them. Almost every poet I have met has a lot of unpublished poems.*

LA: That is exactly what I have said. It is not advisable to depend on the publishers to publish our works for us but it is unfortunate that the government is totally ignorant of this important aspect of our cultural life. Any government that comes says, 'We want to sponsor this poet, we want to sponsor this artist, let us make copies of his work available to institutions of higher learning' and so on and so forth But there is no government doing that at all. It is unfortunate. They even find it difficult When you even mention some of the artists, they may say, 'Is he still existing?' What concerns them is to sit down in fully air-conditioned offices and negotiate their percentages of contracts given out. They do not believe in [the] preservation of good things at all. It is unfortunate. Unfortunately, academics do not help the matter. I know that even without the government, each of the institutions of higher learning can sponsor the publication of good works of art. They won't do that. What we see today is the production, copying, and circulation of handouts in institutions of higher learning.

OO: *We are gradually coming to the end of this interview. Let us find out how your poems are born. How do you bring a poem to life?*

LA: In meditative sessions, I usually sit down for ideas. Inspiration comes spasmodically and the mental, intellectual task of choosing appropriate word combinations is put into use in order to come out with beautiful lines of poetry. All these are attained in a serene environment of near solitude, free of interruptions and disturbances. In other words, I think better when I am alone. And by that I am able to rearrange my rough jottings and put these ideas in proper order. I make sure I carry my personal jotter with me because you may be driving along the road and inspiration comes and you are just disturbed and you jot it down. I know how to make use of that jotting at the appropriate time.

And when you are writing you may want to use some particular word that may not be readily available. You have to think, think and think before you get something of your choice or something near what you want. Even if it is not yet good enough, you put a question mark there and when you have a better word to replace it, you do so. That is a glimpse of the reality of coming out with a beautiful poem.

OO: *Is any member of your immediate family taking after you?*

LA: Eh ... well. That is left to my children, as it has never been my practice to dictate to them the choice of a career. I have always been thinking about the mistakes made by some professionals. Some lawyers will always want their children to be lawyers too, ditto the engineers, journalists and so on. I don't think like that at all. Let them choose different careers. But that does not mean that some of my children are not showing interest in my works. Some of them like to listen to my works most of the time and they also memorize some of my lines and some of them try their hands at composing. But they are You know, why I don't want to force them is that all of them were born and brought up in the big city of Ibadan. They never had the experience I had in the rural area. So it will not be proper to dictate to them to take after me.

OO: *Looking back, are there some of your releases that you regret ever bringing out, so that if you are given an opportunity you will redo?*

LA: To my knowledge, none. Even in one of my works where I was misunderstood by the listening public, *Àlàyé Ìjòba*,¹⁰ a government response to my earlier critique of Babangida's regime, I have no regret. Before I come out with any release, I make sure it is a well-thought-out work.

OO: *Let us now compare the modern Yoruba poet and the traditional singer. There is a Yoruba saying to the effect that 'Oba kì í pa ònkòrin' [the king does not kill the singer]. Do you feel that the modern poet enjoys the immunity that the poet enjoyed within the traditional Yoruba society?*

LA: The same freedom as was the case in the monolithic primitive society. One may write a poem today criticizing some aspects of government orders or policies and the next day you are charged to court. So with that kind of fear some poets do not want to express

¹⁰ 'Government's explanation'. This is probably the most controversial of Adepòju's releases, from my own finding.

themselves for fear of being intimidated and harassed. But, as I said earlier, people like us do not believe in folding one's arms when there are certain things people are not happy about. So the modern poet does not enjoy the same freedom as the local poet in the primitive society.

OO: *Is there a future for ewi?*

LA: There is a future, a very bright one for that matter.

OO: *Do you have an idea of how people of Yoruba descent outside of Nigeria – whether they are in Benin Republic, Togo, the Americas – receive your work?*

LA: I have it on reliable information that they receive my works with admiration. As a matter of fact, some of them who travel home occasionally come here to request for collections of my works. Some say that they heard it in Brazil or America. There is a place in London, Brixton Station. I visited that place and I was mobbed by Yoruba people there requesting for some of my works. I had to promise them that whenever I got back home I would send to a particular person and they would get them through him. Some of them even have retail shops overseas, in America, Britain, Canada, and some African countries. But unfortunately, most of these shop owners have plagiarized and pirated my work. That is the unfortunate aspect of it. But my work is very popular with them. If they know somebody coming back home, they will ask them to come back with some records or cassettes of Olanrewaju Adepoju.

OO: *Don't you think the best way to fight piracy in that context is to make it possible for people to get the tapes easily, especially because the number of those interested in them is significant? The tapes have become very effective as an alternative to published collections.*

LA: Yes, this depends on government. A society where government neglects a particular section or a segment of the society like the artists, people like me and others for example It is always very painful. That is why at times one resigns to fate that one day God will intervene and honest people will be at the helm of affairs; God-fearing people will come to the scene and start disseminating vital information contained in *ewi* with honesty and so on and so forth.

I think I have made some observations from what you have said. We are making efforts the little way we can, to make sure that some of our works get to the appropriate quarters, especially those who make request for them, not just those who go to the pirates and ask them to reproduce large quantities, even in Nigeria. Nigeria is a very lawless country, very lawless.

OO: *I am very grateful to you for sparing time to answer the very many questions I have raised. It is has been wonderful speaking with you.*

LA: You are welcome.