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Abstract

Dub poetry is usually taken to refer to a particular type of 'performance poetry', a brand of oral poetry performed to the accompaniment of reggae music. The term 'dub poetry' itself is thought to have been invented by the Jamaican poet Oku Onuora to describe a form of oral art that had been developing in Jamaica since the early 1970s. Oku Onuora defined the term in an interview conducted with the poet and critic Mervyn Morris in 1979.

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Jamaica's First Dub Poets: Early Jamaican Deejaying as a Form of Oral Poetry

Dub poetry is usually taken to refer to a particular type of 'performance poetry', a brand of oral poetry performed to the accompaniment of reggae music. The term 'dub poetry' itself is thought to have been invented by the Jamaican poet Oku Onuora to describe a form of oral art that had been developing in Jamaica since the early 1970s. Oku Onuora defined the term in an interview conducted with the poet and critic Mervyn Morris in 1979. Oku said that a dub poem was 'a poem that has a built-in reggae rhythm — hence when the poem is read without any reggae rhythm (so to speak) backing, one can distinctly hear the reggae rhythm coming out of the poem' (qtd in Brown, 51). So a dub poem is a poem that relies on a reggae rhythm that can be felt or heard even when there is no musical accompaniment. Oku Onuora later extended that definition to cover all kinds of musical backing, so that dub poetry would include any type of music-influenced poetry.

The term 'dub poetry' has not always found favour with all the practitioners of the genre. For instance Linton Kwesi Johnson and Mutabaruka have consistently rejected it. In an interview conducted in 1994, Mutabaruka told me that he found the term too 'limited'¹. Linton Kwesi Johnson has repeatedly stated that the term 'dub poetry' put poets 'in a bag' and defined only one facet of their work: 'I just like to be regarded as a poet who writes a particular type of poetry. I think it's dangerous to categorise you into this "dub poetry" bag' (Steffens pp 25–27). By the mid-1980s, the term had obviously run its course and the Jamaican poet Jean Binta Breeze had pleaded, in her poem 'Dubbed Out', for a type of poetry that would not 'break' words but let them live:

i
search
for words
moving
in their music
not
broken
by
the
beat (29)

Thus ‘dub poetry’ may not after all be a valid term for the reggae-influenced poetry produced by the likes of Oku Onuora, Mutabaruka and Linton Kwesi Johnson, and maybe this term should be applied to the people it was originally meant to refer to, that is Jamaica’s first deejays. Indeed, in a *Race and Class* article, Linton Kwesi Johnson himself had written about the ‘dub lyricists’ and had called them ‘poets’:

The dub lyricist is the dj turned poet. He intones his lyrics rather than sings them. Dub lyricism is a new form of (oral) music poetry, wherein the lyricist overdubs rhythmic phrases on to the rhythm background of a popular song. Dub lyricists include poets like Big Youth, I Roy, U Roy, Dillinger, Shorty the President, Prince Jazzbo and others. (qtd in Morris, 66)

So the dub poetry tag was originally meant to describe the art form of Jamaican ‘toasting’ or deejaying, a brand of popular poetry produced by and for the Jamaican masses. In fact a case could be made for the recognition of Jamaican deejaying as a form of oral poetry.

In her seminal study entitled *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context*, Ruth Finnegan wrote that the ‘mode of composition’ was a very important yardstick to assess the orality of a poem (17). Finnegan referred to that mode of composition as ‘composition in performance’ (Finnegan 18), that is, composition that takes place during the very performance of the poem. ‘Composition in performance’ was first identified by the American scholar Milman Parry and his assistant Albert Lord when they set out to prove that Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were in fact oral poems which had been composed orally by stringing together well-known phrases and formulae from the oral tradition. This method of composition was called ‘formulaic’ because it is based on the reshuffling and stringing together of ‘formulae’, that is, clichés and stock phrases that everybody had heard.

Parry took the further step of using this formulaic style to prove that the Homeric poems were orally composed. It was the need of the oral poet, he argued, for fluent and uninterrupted delivery throughout a lengthy performance that made the formulaic style both necessary and suitable. The poet had a store of ready-made diction already tailored to suit the metrical constraints of the hexameter line. By manipulating formulaic elements from this store — the ‘building blocks’ — he could construct a poem based on traditional material which was still his own and personal composition. (Finnegan 60)

Although I am not suggesting that the early Jamaican deejays produced masterpieces of the calibre of Homer’s *Odyssey*, it must be said that there are striking similarities between the formulaic style identified by Milman Parry and Jamaican deejays’ own mode of composition in performance. Performance then can be said to be closely associated with composition as most of the early Jamaican deejays composed their lyrics on the spot at sound system dances.

'Sound systems' are large mobile discotheques with huge amplifiers designed to produce the heavy bass sound that has defined Jamaican popular music since the 1960s. The first sound systems appeared in the 1950s and played American Rhythm and Blues or Jamaican imitations of them. Later, from the 1960s on, the sound systems started playing Ska — a Jamaican mixture of Mento, Rhythm and Blues and Jazz — and then Rock Steady and reggae when these musical forms developed in the late 1960s. However, the important point to remember about these early sound systems, is that they already had a 'resident deejay' who was supposed to play records, as any deejay is supposed to do, but also to fill the gaps between the records by grabbing the sound system's patrons' attention. The deejay usually managed to do that by improvising a set of catchphrases that would ease the transition to the next record. So the deejay was (and still is), to use Roger Abrahams' phrase, a 'man-of words' and he had to use words well in order to please the crowd. Indeed competition between the various sound systems was quite fierce, and patrons could always go to 'check the next sound' if they did not like what they were hearing. For instance, the late Count Machuki, who is considered to be the pioneer of Jamaican deejaying, remembers how he had to come up with a constant flow of catchphrases to catch the dancers' attention at the sound system dances where he was deejaying:

I used these words to sell our local recordings: 'French Canadian home-cooked musical biscuit'. And folks dig it, you know, and so I found myself preparing something new to say to the folks. I developed jives like 'I'm hard to catch, I'm hard to hold'. I found that people go crazy, so, you know, I keep digging, digging, I came up with 'Whether you be young or old, you just got to let the good times roll, my friend!' (qtd in Howard and Pines 70)

The tradition that Machuki helped to develop was in fact based on the American 'jiving' tradition initiated by American disc-jockeys who played jazz and blues records. The early Jamaican deejays like Count Machuki, King Stitt and King Sporty were heavily influenced by the 'live jive' of American radio deejays, and the famous reggae producer Clement 'Coxsone' Dodd is reputed to have brought that tradition back to Jamaica:

It first started when Sir Coxsone went to the United States and heard those disc jockeys on the radio ... they started to toast and slang, on the radio ... then he carried back the idea to Jamaica and tell Winston Machuki: 'this is how we want to do it on the mike' ... over the sound ... and that's where it started. Winston Machuki was the first man who started to toast on a mike on a sound system. (Duke Vin qtd in Barrow)

Count Machuki was soon joined by King Stitt and Sir Lord Comic, two deejays whose lyrics often consisted of catchphrases and wisecracks seamlessly strung together:

No matter what the people say
These sounds lead the way!

This is the order of the day
 From your boss deejay
 I, King Stitt !
 Haul it from the top
 To the very last drop! (qtd in Barrow)

The excerpt quoted above gives us a rough idea of the early deejays' style as it contains one of the most popular and widely-used formulae in Jamaican deejaying ('Haul it from the top to the very last drop!'). This formula was used by a deejay in a live dancehall setting to signal to the selector that the record he was playing had to be stopped and started again to create more excitement and to react to the crowd's enthusiasm for this record. Indeed stopping and starting a record after the first bars have been played is a device that has remained in use to the present day, even by deejays who do not work in a live setting (on a studio recording for example). The other lines from the excerpt quoted above can also be said to be formulaic and recur in countless deejay tunes from the 1970s. When used in studio recordings, these formulae are supposed to recreate the 'live' dimension which is crucial to the deejay's art as he is supposed to be a 'man of words', a 'smoothie' with a 'bag of lyrics'. But most of all, the deejay is supposed to entertain his audience and so his 'toasts' are often witty. One of the wittiest early deejays was Sir Lord Comic who released 'Jack of my Trade' in 1970:

What does it profit a man to gain the whole world
 And suffer the loss of his own soul?
 Like the farmer says to the potato
 I'll plant you now and I'll dig you later!

...

Now, since you wake the town and tell the people
 That the station rules the nation with version
 But we love the conversion
 We don't play version: we play chapter
 Calling U Roy, calling Count Machuki
 Calling King Stitt, here is the man called
 Lord Comic
 The greatest record maker who lived in Jamaica!
 Say Jack of my trade, baby, I've got it all made
 I'm sharper than a razor blade!
 Like the man Otis Redding says
 These arms of mine will hold you tight, tight
 Tight, ever so tight, wow! (qtd in Barrow)

This excerpt is a good illustration of composition in performance as the deejay strings together various catchphrases and popular sayings from the Bible ('What does it profit a man ...'), the Jamaican oral tradition ('Like the farmer says to the potato...') and American popular culture (Otis Redding's 'These arms of mine').

This is a Jamaican 'boast song', a song in which the deejay sings his own praises while acknowledging that he follows in the footsteps of Machuki and Stitt. Comic also refers to the popularity of U Roy who had at the time already established himself with such hits as 'Wake the town and tell the people' and 'This station rules the nation with version'. So Comic actually mentions the names of his fellow-deejays to emphasise the fact that they are all part of the same tradition, the Jamaican oral tradition.

King Sporty is another unsung initiator of the Jamaican jiving and toasting tradition, who contributed to popularising deejaying in the late 1960s. His lyrics are a good example of the declamatory style favoured by many deejays in the late 1960s and early 1970s:

For your ever desire
I wanna set your soul on fire!
You'd better touch not this musical wire!
So it's burning hotter, hotter fire;
I love not to brag, I love not to boast, sir!
Cause grief comes to those that brag the most, sir! (Sporty 1988)

This passage illustrates the rhetorical devices used by most deejays at the time, that is repetition ('hotter, hotter fire'), continuous rhyming, syntactic parallelism ('I love not to brag, I love not to boast') and the use of proverbs or sayings from the oral tradition ('grief comes to those that brag the most'). Indeed the excerpt from King Stitch's 'toast' illustrates the importance of the proverb in deejays' lyrics and in oral speech in general. Proverbs are part of the repertoire of 'verbal techniques' identified by Carolyn Cooper in her influential study of Jamaican oral art forms and constitute a vast body of oral literature. They are usually taken to embody the survival of the oral tradition in many cultures, and, as Walter Ong has pointed out, they are often characterised by their didactic and agonistic function: 'Proverbs and riddles are not used simply to store knowledge but to engage others in verbal and intellectual combat: utterance of one proverb or riddle challenges hearers to top it with a more apposite or contradictory one' (44). Indeed in many cultures, proverbs and sayings are used as powerful weapons to ridicule an opponent or to drive a point home. For instance, in the Caribbean, proverbs serve as teaching aids and are used to teach the youths some basic truths. Proverbs are characterised by a certain terseness and a certain allusiveness too. Gordon Rohler writes that proverbs and sayings were used for their 'crystallised form' (93). In Jamaica, proverbs are part of the oral tradition too and appear in countless folk songs and traditional songs.

The early 'dub lyricists' specialised in nonsense rhymes and jives, and their primary intention was to entertain the patrons of the sound system for which they were deejaying. Another frequent topic was also (and has remained) the rivalry between the various deejays competing for the record-buying public's attention. King Stitt remembers recording the toast 'King of Kings' as a reply to

U Roy's popular 'Rule the Nation'. U Roy's lyrics went: 'This station rules the nation with version!' and King Stitt replied: 'You say you rule the nation with version/Well, I'm the King of Kings, I rule kingdoms!' (Barrow and Dalton 115). Thus there were very few political or committed 'toasts' in the early days of Jamaican deejaying and the emphasis was more on entertaining and forging a bond with an audience in a live setting. Language was the instrument used to create that bond and to establish a relationship with the public.

Political or 'cultural' deejaying was to come later on, in the early 1970s, with the arrival on the scene of a new generation of deejays like Big Youth, I Roy, Dillinger and Prince Jazzbo among others. These deejays came under the influence of Rastafarianism and the Black Power ideology, and they took Jamaican deejaying in a different direction, but they continued to use reggae backing tracks over which they recited or 'chanted' their lyrics. In the 1970s these backing tracks were more likely to be dub reinterpretations of famous rock steady or early reggae tunes recorded at Studio One or at Treasure Isle studios in the late 1960s. Nevertheless it was the early deejays from the late 1960s and early 1970s who developed the art of the Jamaican 'talkover', an artform which recalls many of the forms of oral poetry identified and studied by Ruth Finnegan through the use of 'composition in performance'. These early deejays can then lay claim to the title of 'Jamaica's first dub poets'.

NOTES

¹ Mutabaruka interviewed by Eric Doumerc, in Toulouse, November 1994.

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