



NIGERIA AND THE CLASSICS

**Journal of the Department of Classics,
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.**

Vol. 30 (2018)

Vol. 31 (2019)

NIGERIA AND THE CLASSICS

VOLUME 30 (2018) and VOLUME 31 (2019)

ISSN: 1118-1990

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ART AND PRAGMATISM OF PRAYERS IN HOMER: SOME REFLECTIONS IN YORÙBÁ PRAYERS

Gill Oluwatosin, ADEKANNBI

Department of Classics,
University of Ibadan,
Ibadan, Nigeria.

tsn_ade@yahoo.com, tosin.adekannbi@gmail.com

Abstract

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer continue to reveal much about the socio-religious life of the Greeks. An aspect of this is the use of prayer in meeting human needs or desires. Parallels of pragmatic use of prayer are found in the Yorùbá traditional religion which has some common approaches to worship with that of ancient Greek. This paper therefore engages in an extensive interpretive analysis of the phrasing of words in Homeric prayers in order to serve as a contrastive template for examining the Yorùbá belief system. Three parts of the Homeric prayers: *invocatio*, *hypomnesis* and *precatio* are highlighted. The concept of reciprocity, as expressed by the formulaic expressions *da quia dedisti*, *da quia dedi* and *da ut recipias* are interrogated to underscore how humans make requests, seek aids and get emotional anchorage from the gods. The paper indicates that, while the use of prayer to cater for diverse human purposes is commonplace, the use of prayers in seeking vengeance, or personal glory/honour tends to be more prominent. Although it is noted that skilful ordering of phrases is not the sole determinant of whether a prayer will be answered or not, the paper highlights its key place in the two belief systems. More research can be done to determine the place of a mortal's piety or impiety in guaranteeing favourable responses in both religions.

Key words: Human Needs, Word Phrasing, Homeric Prayers, Yorùbá Prayers, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

Introduction

The trembling Priest along the shore returned, and in the anguish of a father mourned. Disconsolate, not daring to complain, silent he wandered by the sounding main: till, safe at distance, to his god he prays, the god who darts around the world his rays: "O Smintheus! sprung from fair Latona's line, thou guardian Power of Cilia the divine, thou source of light! whom Tenedos adores, and whose bright presence gilds thy Chryssa's shores; if e'er with wreaths I hung thy sacred fane, or fed the flames of oxen slain; God of the silver bow! Thy shafts employ, avenge thy servants, and the Greeks destroy (*The Iliad* 1. 47-60, Pope's trans.)

The above citation and others that are considered in this paper illustrate the ancient belief among the Greeks: 'all men need gods' (*The Odyssey* 3.48). The recognition given to this aspect

of lives of the ancient Greeks' is found in the pragmatic use of prayers in Homeric works. Prayer (from Old French *preier*, from Latin *precari* which means ask earnestly, beg, entreat),¹ has been given many definitions. Among those are: a practice of communicating with one's God; the specific words or methods used for praying; a meeting held for the express purpose of praying, a request; a petition; the activity of speaking to God; one who prays; an act of communication by humans with the sacred or holy – God, the gods, the transcendent realm, or supernatural powers.² The divinities prayed to are as diverse as the existing religions. However, although the forms of prayers differ, their patterns are usually and consistently reflected by 'benedictions (blessings), litanies (alternate statements, titles of the deity or deities, or petitions and responses), ceremonial and ritualistic prayers, free prayers (in intent following no fixed form), repetition or formula prayers . . . and other forms.'³

While prayer could be an expression of desperation or a frantic turning to a divine being when the feeling is that no one else could help, other motives behind prayers include greed, pride, and ego. Prayers⁴ request for aid of some sort from a divine/supreme being, pray for rescue or escape from dangers as well as material blessings. As shown later in this paper, some individuals would use prayers to launch attack against their enemies, entreating the gods to help them defeat their adversaries. Versatility or dynamism is well known in the use of prayer and this has made it not only an essential component of religion but also a regular feature of religious assemblies and even non-religious gatherings. In modern times, prayer has its place in public schools, formal and social gatherings; in sports and other functions such as weddings. It is not surprising to witness a pre-game prayer, either silent or public, by the team or individual players as well as the prayer which ascends with specific requests made by fans towards fine outcome of the game.⁵

Unquestionably, all ages have witnessed prayer always being of great importance in religions and cultures across the globe. Even now, making entreaties to divine ones continue to play a major role in virtually every facet of human affairs. The perception of prayer as having a far-reaching effect on human life is described below:

Humans regularly air grievances and joy. Prayer expresses human gratitude or complaint or a combination, ordinary and extraordinary monologues that mediate between those here, living now, and those beyond, living forever. Prayer transforms helpless victims of fate and mortality into active performers, and agents of protective reactions. Prayer, psychologically and constructively, vents an emotional overload. Prayer provides a vertical communication channel for the extraordinary claims of *ad hoc* survivors. Prayer, personal and corporate, then and now,

¹ Online Etymology Dictionary, Retrieved from <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=prayer>, Other meanings of prayer include vow, boast, vaunt, and object of boasting. Accessed on April 12, 2016.

² Encyclopedia Britannica, Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/prayer>, Accessed on April 12, 2016.

³ 'Forms Of Prayer In The Religions Of The World', Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/prayer>, Accessed on April 12, 2016.

⁴ 'Pray-er' refers to one who prays.

⁵ Kreider, A. J. Prayers for Assistance as Unsporting Behaviour. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 30.1. 2003, p.17

demonstrates a verbal art, a coping strategy for surprise: pain, fear, confusion, despair, need, loss, elation, and anger...Prayers disclose another human attempt to understand and influence surprising and inexplicable phenomena... "prayer shoulders almost the entire burden of establishing relations between human and divine."⁶

Laetiner here explains that prayer provides humans with a channel for expressing their feelings, either of sorrow or happiness, to the supernatural. When he says 'prayer, psychologically and constructively vents an emotional overload', he is no doubt referring to the functional rather than attractive reason for praying. With prayer, it is believed that man has got the opportunity to actively participate in or even bargain what his course of life would be. By describing it as a 'coping strategy', prayer is viewed as anchor needed to stick to hope in the face of despair and remain resolute in trying times.

While the preponderance of prayers is hardly a contemporary phenomenon, the ancient accounts of human search for superior or esoteric help parallel the modern rejuvenated use of prayer in many religions of the world. Two historic Greek literatures, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* contain records of series of notable prayers and offer insight into the place of prayer, not only as an expression of religion in ancient Greek civilisation, but also as a practice that involves some art. These books, although not compendiums of prayers, are used to explore forms or approaches to prayers, the pray-ers in relation to gods and goddesses prayed to, the motives behind prayers, when prayers are answered and when they go unanswered, as well as the reasons for acceptance and refusal. A scholarly work has been done by Onayemi⁷ on what the ancient Greek and Yorùbá gods have in common. While most part of this paper discusses the Homeric prayers, its consideration of prayer in Yorùbá cosmogony and theogony reflects a pragmatic use of Homeric prayers in an African belief system.

The Art of Prayer

The Greek word for prayer is *εὐχολίη* and *ευχεσθαι* is the Greek verb "to pray". However, in understanding what prayer means to the prayer, the socio-cultural context of prayer as expressed below is pertinent:

It is misleading simply to translate *ευχεσθαι* as "to pray." In Homer the verb *ευχεσθαι* and its nominal correlates have no precise English equivalents. They denote a culturally marked conversational exchange: a speech act in which someone is making a claim on someone else within a social structure very different from our own. Indicative of this difference is the fact that the same word, *ευχεσθαι*, is used to assert one's place and rightful claims in social space as well as to assert one's relation to and claims on a god. When Homeric heroes *ευχονται*, what they are doing is asserting their identity and their value in the society they inhabit, and by

⁶Laetiner, D. 'Homeric Prayer'. *Arethusa*, Johns Hopkins University Press Vol. 30, 2 1997, pp 242-243

⁷Onayemi, F. 2010. *Parallels of Ancient and African/Yoruba Gods*. Ghana: Neat Print.

means of this assertion creating a context in which the claim they are making on another member of that society will be appropriate and compelling⁸.

As shown by the citation above, apart from denoting asking and making claims to a god, *ευχασθαι* may be used to assert rights or privileges that emanate from the position of the pray-er in the society or the service rendered by him to the community. However, in arranging words of prayer, recognition for the grander power of the deity counts even more. Hence, in what could be understood as an act of warming the heart of the divine, pray-er expresses confidence in getting the needed help by proving or asserting the power of the god prayed to. This *invocatio* includes recounting a myth or enumerating the beneficences of the deity. Following this is *hypomnesis*, 'reminder',⁹ which lays the groundwork for enjoying the god's consideration by recalling a previous occasion or occasions on which devotion was displayed by and/or assistance rendered by the supplicant. As it were, *hypomnesis* implies building on the already existing edifice of relationship. This prayer structure should be regarded as a tool for analysis rather than being taken as a rigid pattern followed by ancient pray-ers.¹⁰ The parts of prayer which express the social-cultural nature of prayer are *invocatio* (invocation) and *precatio* (request). Notably, a typical prayer in Homer begins with the *invocatio*, followed by *hypomnesis*, the reminder of the commitment(s) of the pray-er and/or the instances of the god's aid, and lastly, *precatio*, the request itself. These prayer parts are reflected below in the prayer by Penelope to Athena in *The Odyssey*:

Invocatio: Hear me, child of Zeus, lord of the aegis, unwearied maiden!

Hypomnesis: If ever wise Odysseus in his halls burnt for thee fat slices of the thighs of heifer or of sheep,

Precatio: these things, I pray thee, now remember, and save my dear son, and ward from him the wooers in the naughtiness of their pride.¹¹

Next is Diomedes' prayer to Athena that similarly shows the same pattern:

Invocatio: O progeny of Jove! unconquer'd maid!

Hypomnesis: If e'er my godlike sire deserved thy aid, if e'er I felt thee in the fighting field;

Precatio: Now, goddess, now, thy sacred succour yield. O give my lance to reach the Trojan knight, whose arrow wounds the chief thou guard'st in fight; and lay the

⁸Depew, M. Reading Greek Prayers. *Classical Antiquity* 16.2. 1997: 229-258 p. 232.

⁹ Miller, A. M. From Delos to Delphi: A Literary Study of the Homeric Hymn to Apollo, Leiden: Brill. p. 2

¹⁰Field J. G. 2017. Worshipping with Angels – Towards a Deeper Understanding of Daily Prayer in Fourth-Century Cappadocia. *Thesis*. Theology. University of Exeter, p. 123.

¹¹ Homer, *The Odyssey* 4. 762-766

boaster grovelling on the shore, that vaunts these eyes shall view the light no more¹².

The socio-cultural context of prayer is seen here in Penelope's reminding Athena of Odysseus' rich offerings and in Diomedes' reminding the goddess of his father's worthiness; hence, his (Diomedes') worthiness, and the aid the goddess has previously given to him. These instances suggest the pray-er, following this pattern of offering prayer, expects his needs to be met by prayer as a means of claiming rewards for previous good deeds, reputation and patronage of the deity.

The pragmatic nature of prayer in Homer manifests in its being a window to the Greek's activity that encompasses posture, feelings, thoughts, words, gestures, resolve, energy, and deeds.¹³ Postures and gestures accompanying prayers include standing, looking upwards, with hands raised towards heaven to the Olympian gods, facing the sea or river for marine deities or turning to whatever location the divinity prayed to is. Chryseis raises his hands while praying to Apollo for the reversion of the plague he sent;¹⁴ Achilles faces the sea while praying to Thetis¹⁵ and Thetis, when praying to Zeus, in the posture of a suppliant, 'one hand she placed beneath his beard and one his knees embraced'.¹⁶ The pray-er sometimes touches or holds a symbolic object such as the ground or a rod. The art of prayer is also evidenced by varying prayer gestures and postures which contain their own symbolism, power and (non verbal) messages¹⁷. Understandably, prayers offered on the battle ground or while in distress in Homer do not involve all these elements. For instance, while Odysseus is swimming¹⁸, he has no time to assume any posture or make gestures and is hardly able to either open his mouth in prayer or follow any prayer pattern. Spontaneity is the rule in such instances.

Hypomnesis also requires use of certain formulaic expressions of reciprocity such as *da quiadedisti*, (give because you have given). Since the god has given or helped him in the past, the pray-er makes a claim on the god, through the god's previous benefactions to him. This expression is discernable in the prayers of Diomedes, Chryseis and Achilles earlier mentioned. Similar to this is the *da quiadedi*, (give because I gave) form that reminds the god of the petitioner's past sacrifices, supposedly making the god obligated by these sacrifices. Thetis reminds Zeus of the favour to him, Agamemnon reminds Zeus that he makes sacrifices at every opportunity he gets, Chryseis reminds Apollo of his sacrifices and the roofing of the god's temple. Typical of such claims is the quotation below:

Oh awful goddess! ever-dreadful maid, Troy's strong defence,
unconquer'd Pallas, aid! Break thou Tydides' spear, and let him fall Prone
on the dust before the Trojan wall! So twelve young heifers, guiltless of

¹² Homer, *The Iliad* 5.147-153

¹³ Lateiner, D. *Homeric Prayer*, p. 241

¹⁴ Homer, *Iliad* 1. 452

¹⁵ *Ibid* 1. 150-153

¹⁶ *Ibid* 1. 650-651

¹⁷ Picard C. *Le geste de la prière funéraire en Grèce et en Étrurie*, p.143

¹⁸ Homer, *The Odyssey* 5. 351-356

the yoke, shall fill thy temple with a grateful smoke. But thou, atoned by penitence and prayer, ourselves, our infants, and our city spare!" So pray'd the priestess in her holy fane; so vow'd the matrons, but they vow'd in vain.¹⁹

Theano, the Trojan priestess of Athena makes use of the *da utrecipias* (give so that you may receive) expression which suggests a give and take relationship. While requesting Athena's help for the downfall of Diomedes, she gives the goddess a condition or offers a "bribe". The *da utrecipias* formula is like a bargaining that the goddess would have to decide on whether it is acceptable or not before answering the prayer. Theano's case provides an instance of refusal of prayers in *The Iliad*, illustrating what occurs if prayers do not conform to the will of Zeus or providence. Since Troy is destined to fall, Hector's prayer for his son to rule Troy²⁰ is refused providing another example of prayer going unanswered in Homer. Further showing that the will of the deity supersedes that of the pray-er is Achilles' prayer for Zeus to give courage and glory to Patroclus; make him repel the Trojans and return safely to him which is partly answered because Patroclus would not return home with his glorious feats²¹. No doubt, the notion of vain prayers is never wanting in Homer.

Impiety is another reason for prayer going unanswered in Homer²². There are two instances of unanswered prayers of Penelope's suitors who engage in impious acts that violate the law of hospitality.²³ Interestingly, what may be termed a contradiction of this principle is observable in the instance of Polyphemus²⁴. Clearly, Polyphemus desecrates *xenia* by his cruel killing and eating of Odysseus' comrades and it may be argued that he gets a payback for his impiety when he is blinded by Odysseus. Yet, Polyphemus believes justice is on his side when he fervently prays to his father, Poseidon. He first prays that Odysseus never returns home and vindictively leaves no room for Odysseus' going unpunished by adding that if Poseidon cannot fulfil that wish, the god should cause Odysseus' complete loss of his men and an agonising return to Ithaca.²⁵ Poseidon, by giving no consideration to Polyphemus' violation of *xenia* in granting his son's second request, seems to see no issue with impiety. In different circumstances, the gods tend to determine how pious their devotees are and what reward should follow their acts of piety. Hence, although Penelope prays²⁶ for death as an escape from her suitors and in order to see Odysseus in the underworld, Artemis sees rewarding her piety differently and refuses to grant that wish. Signs and omens, sometimes given as responses to prayers when results of prayers would not be immediate, play significant roles in getting feedbacks to prayers. The presages indicate that the prayers have been heard and the requests would be given either a favourable or unfavourable answer. An example of such handling of prayers is seen in the passage that follows:

¹⁹Homer, *The Iliad* 6. 378-388.

²⁰*Ibid* 6. 475-479

²¹Homer, *The Iliad* 16. 210-256

²²Mikalson J. D. 1989, Unanswered Prayers in Greek Tragedy. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 109 p.97

²³Homer, *The Odyssey* 1. 366; 17. 213

²⁴*Ibid* 9. 270-280

²⁵*Ibid.* 9. 526-535

²⁶*Ibid.* 20. 59-61

Father Zeus, was there ever ere now one among mighty kings whose soul thou didst blind with blindness such as this, and rob him of great glory? Yet of a surety do I deem that never in my benched ship did I pass by fair altar of thine on my ill-starred way hither, but upon all I burned the fat and the thighs of bulls, in my eagerness to lay waste well-walled Troy. Nay, Zeus, this desire fulfil thou me: ourselves at least do thou suffer to flee and escape, and permit not the Achaeans thus to be vanquished by the Trojans." So spake he, and the Father had pity on him as he wept, and vouchsafed him that his folk should be saved and not perish. Forthwith he sent an eagle, surest of omens among winged birds, holding in his talons a fawn, the young of a swift hind. Beside the fair altar of Zeus he let fall the fawn, even where the Achaeans were wont to offer sacrifice to Zeus from whom all omens come. So they, when they saw that it was from Zeus that the bird was come, leapt the more upon the Trojans and bethought them of battle.²⁷

Agamemnon, after praying to Zeus for help against the Trojan hero, Hector, and for destruction of the Trojans in the battle field, receives a sign from Zeus to show that his prayer has been favourably answered. Zeus sends an eagle holding a fawn in his talons to indicate a favourable response. As discussed in the following sub heading, the relationship with the gods also counts in prayers.

Prayer and Relationship

The Iliad and *The Odyssey* answer the question of who sees the need for prayer— anyone. While humans, both male and female pray to one god or the other, gods and goddesses are equally shown as turning to higher deities in prayer. People from different walks of life pray. In *The Odyssey* for instance, Zeus, king of the gods hears prayers from the plebs – the old, enslaved, barley-mill grinding woman, goatherd, swineherd;²⁸ the high and mighty – heroes and warriors, priests, and kings are clearly no exemptions. This fact only points to how functional prayer is in Homer. Yet, some relationships may count more.

The first prayer in *The Iliad* is from Chryseis to Apollo. The relationship between them is that of priest and god. Chryseis, the daughter of the Trojan priest of Apollo has been taken as a war prize by Agamemnon, and when Chryseis attempts to ransom her, he (Agamemnon) refuses to return her. Chryseis then says a prayer for revenge to Apollo, asking him to destroy the Greeks. Apollo, in Greek religion, is the god of the sun, the light and knowledge, music, prophecy, poetry, art, archery, plague, medicine and healing. Although both medicine and healing are associated with Apollo, he is also capable of bringing ill-health and deadly plague,²⁹ and it is in this respect that Chryseis needs his service. The god answers his priest's prayer when he devastates the camp

²⁷Homer, *The Iliad* 8. 250

²⁸*Ibid.* 20.112–19, 236–37; 21.200–01

²⁹ <https://greekgodsandgoddesses.net/gods/apollo/>>Apollo: <https://greekgodsandgoddesses.net/> - Greek Gods & Goddesses, Retrieved September 18, 2018

of the Greeks by a plague. Through the response to prayer which leaves Agamemnon with no choice other than giving up Chryseis, Apollo defends the honour of his priest, which is the issue at stake. Understandably, full of gratitude to Apollo, the priest makes the next use of prayer to reverse the plague as expressed below:

Then Chryseis lifted up his hands, and prayed aloud for them: "Hear me, thou of the silver bow, who dost stand over Chryseis and holy Cilia, and dost rule mightily over Tenedos. Even as aforetime thou didst hear me when I prayed – to me thou didst do honour, didst mightily smite the host of the Achaeans – even so now do thou fulfil me this my desire: ward thou off now from the Danaans the loathly pestilence." So he spake in prayer, and Phoebus Apollo heard him.³⁰

Prayer in form of praise follows since Chryseis feels that his 'desire' for 'honour' has been fulfilled. Well placated, the priest's next wish in prayer is for Apollo to avert the plague. He reminds the god that he answered his prayer previously and he is confident that he would do so again. Apollo honours his priest's request and removes the pestilence³¹. To the priest, prayer can be no more pragmatic.

The above instance may be interpreted as the use of prayer to check abuse of power or to resist oppression. However, a related development also necessitates the use of prayer in a similar way and in a context of relationship. Agamemnon, on relinquishing Chryseis, robs Achilles of Briseis, his war prize.³² Infuriated and saddened, with strong emotion of despair, Achilles summons his mother, the goddess Thetis. The occurrence is described thus:

My mother, seeing thou didst bear me, though to so brief a span of life, honour surely ought the Olympian to have given into my hands, even Zeus that thundereth on high, but now hath he honoured me, no not a whit. Yea verily, the son of Atreus, wide-ruling Agamemnon hath done me dishonor, for he hath taken away and holdeth my prize through his own arrogant act." So he spake, weeping, and his queenly mother heard him, as she sat in the depths of the sea beside the old man, her father. And speedily she came forth from the grey sea like a mist, and sate her down before his face, as he wept, and she stroked him with her hand, and spake to him, and called him by name: "My child, why weepest thou? What sorrow hath come upon thy heart? Speak out; hide it not in thy mind, that we both may know."³³

³⁰Homer, *The Iliad* 1. 453-458

³¹*Ibid* 1. 459

³²*Ibid* 1. 324-328

³³*Ibid* 1. 350-363

In narrating his predicament to his mother, Achilles brings all emotions into his prayer by 'weeping'. Although his request is in form of a complaint, it does not detract from the fact that it is actually a prayer, which, as stated above, comes as an expression of human gratitude or complaint or a combination of both. By voicing his complaints through prayer, Achilles finds an outlet for his frustration and anger. Beyond getting emotional relief, Achilles makes further use of prayer by asking Thetis to state his case before Zeus, king of the gods and what follows could be described as taking prayer to the supreme authority Thetis, a goddess herself, prays to Zeus, a higher god, laying Achilles' request at his feet afraid.³⁴ This is not an isolated case of prayer said by a deity of lower rank/authority to deity higher/authority. There are other similar instances of divinities beseeching superior powers. For instance, the goddess Athena in *The Odyssey* requests of Zeus that Hermes is sent to Calypso to ask her to release Odysseus.³⁵

The relationship between the pray-er and the immortal prayed to need not be special like that of priest to god (Chryseis to Apollo) or child to parent (Achilles to Thetis, Polyphemus to Poseidon), or deity to deity. The connection could also be between even a lowly individual and a divinity, such as in the case with the swineherd, Eumaeus, and the nymphs.³⁶ In other words, prayer requires no special bond between pray-er and deity; individuals in need of help could pray to any god or goddess, with and for anything desired. The requests range from safety to protection, favourable weather, peace, healing, to destruction, killing of one's enemies and mayhem. Prayer in the Homeric works is portrayed as a potent weapon and the drives behind its uses are next considered.

Serving other Motives with Prayers

Generally, there is an intention behind every prayer. In Homer, revenge seems to be a very common theme of the prayer motive. To illustrate revenge as a reason behind a prayer, it is necessary to return to the prayer of Chryseis when he asks Apollo to avenge him by destroying the Greeks. If the bone of contention is Agamemnon's refusal to release his daughter, one may reason that the solution should simply be Chryses' asking Apollo to change Agamemnon's heart or request for favour in the king's sight so that he would have his daughter back. Rather, with extremely bitter heart, Chryses prayer motive could only be in form of an arrow of revenge, sent out to wreak havoc on the camps of the Greeks. Another instance of revenge as a prayer motive is that of the cyclops, Polyphemus.³⁷ After Odysseus and his men trick, blind and escape by outwitting Polyphemus, the cyclops prays to his father, Poseidon, the god of the sea and earthquakes, asking him to put a curse on Odysseus and his comrades. Since he feels that Odysseus and his men are out of his reach to inflict physical harm, he turns to a superior power with the belief that justice is on his side. Polyphemus is so much driven by the desire for revenge that he prays that Odysseus should never return home alive, or, if per adventure he does, that his return should be after suffering as a wanderer without any of his crew members surviving and to meet a household in trouble.

³⁴Homer, *The Iliad* 1. 500-514

³⁵Homer, *The Odyssey* 1. 63-84

³⁶*Ibid* 17. 307-313

³⁷*Ibid* 9. 561- 562

Interestingly, though, while Polyphemus feels compelled by sense of revenge to say the prayer, he seems oblivious of how he himself defiles *Xenia*³⁸ obligation or the law of hospitality. Polyphemus quickly forgets how short-lived his initial show of hospitality is. After devouring two of Odysseus's men, he imprisons Odysseus and the rest of his companions in his cave and reserves them for future meals. If he admits that the consequence of his cruelty to strangers is being outsmarted in the deadly game he instantiates, Polyphemus would probably ask for healing and not for vengeance. However, Polyphemus' pressing urge has no such moral consideration; hence, his prayer motive would be nothing but vengeance. This instance also illustrates how a prayer could be selfishly motivated.

Diomedes is the next example of an individual who prays to be avenged. When he is wounded by the Trojan, Pandarus, on the battle field, Diomedes asks Athena for vengeance:

O progeny of Jove! unconquer'd maid! If e'er my godlike sire deserved thy aid, Ife'er I felt thee in the fighting field; Now, goddess, now, thy sacred succour yield. O give my lance to reach the Trojan knight, whose arrow wounds the chief thou guard'st in fight; And lay the boaster grovelling on the shore, that vaunts these eyes shall view the light no more.³⁹

Pursuit of vengeance that is associated with prayer in the above citation is similarly implicit in the opening lines of *The Iliad*. 'Achilles' wrath, to Greece the direful spring of woes unnumber'd, heavenly goddess, sing! That wrath which hurl'd to [Hades'] gloomy reign the souls of mighty chiefs untimely slain; whose limbs unburied on the naked shore, devouring dogs and hungry vultures tore. Since great Achilles and Atrides strove...'⁴⁰When Agamemnon wounds Achilles' pride and injures his honour by taking Briseis, his war prize from him, it is interesting to note that Achilles' prayer to Thetis is not with intentions of a peaceful reconciliation. Rather, his following request is a strong call for vindictive intervention:

To high Olympus' shining court ascend... And sue for vengeance to the thundering god. [To] Conjure him [Zeus] far to drive the Grecian train, To hurl them headlong to their fleet and main, To heap the shores with copious death, and bring The Greeks to know the curse of such a king; [and to] Let Agamemnon lift his haughty head O'er all his wide dominion of the dead, And mourn in blood, that e'er he durst disgrace the boldest warrior of the Grecian race.⁴¹

Apparently, seeking revenge occupies the centre of the Homeric works. The background to the Trojan War⁴² in *The Iliad* is indeed a chain of events through which the theme of revenge

³⁸ *Xenia* is the ancient Greek word that conveys showing hospitality to strangers

³⁹ Homer, *The Iliad* 5. 146-153

⁴⁰ *Ibid* 1. 1-10

⁴¹ *Ibid* 1. 407-412

⁴² The Trojan War: Mythological Background. <http://www.hoocher.com/trojanwar.htm>.

runs. Eris, the goddess of discord, would seek revenge for her not being invited to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, who would become the parents of Achilles. The goddesses Hera and Athena would later avenge their not being chosen as the fairest; Menelaus would not allow Paris' eloping with his wife go unpunished. During the war, as noted above, Chryseis would seek vengeance for Agamemnon's refusal of the ransom of his daughter and Achilles would retaliate Agamemnon's forceful taking of his war-prize, Briseis. In *The Odyssey*, Polyphemus seeks revenge for being blinded by Odysseus. Odysseus, on the other hand, would not spare the suitors who ravage his home in his absence. These mythical accounts provide the utilitarian as well as what constitutes the Greeks' pragmatic context for the use of prayer.

It is pertinent to note that the common drive for revenge is slighted honour. The quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, for instance, points out the vital place of personal honour in the various aspects of the ancient Greek value system. Rather than setting aside their personal differences when it is urgent to do so, the two warriors place their individual glories over the safety of the Greek army. Agamemnon is bloated with the pride of being the 'king of kings', and considering himself deserving of the highest available price, that is Briseis. He is willing to alienate Achilles the strongest Greek warrior to get what he thinks is his right. Achilles, on the other hand, would defend his honour by claiming Briseis- his personal war prize- rather than defuse the situation by letting her go. Yielding to Agamemnon in this circumstance, to him, would be dishonourable, and this determines the only use to which prayer would be put.

It should not be surprising that prayers in Homer are motivated by the desire for honour, fame and glory, the terms which could be seen as interrelated. The ancient Greeks' life was generally patterned according to these qualities in various ways, with all emphasis placed on gaining fame and glory by great and heroic deeds. Notably, although glory was conferred on an individual by others who witnessed and acclaimed the glorious actions, honour may vary in meaning. 'While the public had to view actions and deem them glorious, each individual maintained their own sense of personal honour which did not always coincide with honour as defined or perceived by the masses'.⁴³ Yet, even in this context, there is no doubt that any action that is considered famous or glorious, either by an individual or a community is expected to result in experiencing honour, hence, it seems unnecessary to belabour differentiating the perceptions. The significance of the three concepts is further seen in the words of Hector: 'I have learned to be brave always and to fight in the front ranks of the Trojans, winning my father great glory and glory for myself'.⁴⁴ Hector has learned to fight in front where it is most dangerous, because that is also where great glory is won.

Risking one's life in battle is a defining feature of heroism. Those who face battles courageously and risk their lives are deemed glorious, but those who are cowardly and run away from battle are disgraced. Defectors or cowards would not feel honourable as Hector next declares: 'But I would be terribly ashamed before the men of Troy and the Trojan women trailing their long robes if I would skulk away from battle like a coward'.⁴⁵ The great desire for glory and its accompanying honour is also expressed by Hector immediately before his death in the following

⁴³Texin, C. *Honor & Glory in the Iliad: Life after Death*. p. 1

⁴⁴Homer, *The Iliad* 6.444-446

⁴⁵*Homeric Values* p. 2

words: "Nay, but not without a struggle let me die, neither ingloriously, but in the working of some great deed for the hearing of men that are yet to be."⁴⁶ Great is the desire for fame and glory that a Greek warrior would rather die on the battle field and attain it than go home alive ingloriously and dishonourably. The foregoing provides a background to why prayers in Homer are motivated by the desire for honour, fame and glory and the following prayer of Achilles further illustrates this point:

O thou supreme! high-throned all height above! O great Pelasgic, Dodonaean [Zeus]! Who 'midst surrounding frosts, and vapours chill, Presid'st on bleak Dodona's vocal hill: (Whose groves the Selli, race austere! surround, their feet unwash'd, their slumbers on the ground; Who hear, from rustling oaks, thy dark decrees; And catch the fates, low-whispered in the breeze;) Hear, as of old! Thou gav'st, at Thetis' prayer, **glory to me**, and to the Greeks despair. Lo, to the dangers of the fighting field the best, the dearest of my friends, I yield, though still determined, to my ships confined; Patroclus gone, I stay but half behind. Oh! Be his guard thy providential care, confirm his heart, and string his arm to war: Press'd by his single force let Hector see **His fame** in arms not owing all to me. But when the fleets are saved from foes and fire, Let him with conquest and renown retire; Preserve his arms, preserve his social train, And safe return him to these eyes again!⁴⁷

Achilles first prays to experience glory and then requests the same for Patroclus. Interestingly, apart from glory, the above passage also indicates that desire for safety; love and loyalty are also motives behind prayers. Indeed, requests made by Achilles, Thetis, Penelope, Telemachus, Eumaeus, Athena, Trojan women on behalf of others are all borne out of loyalty, which is not uncommon in Homer. However, it is striking to note that the examples of prayers for vengeance as well as honour in Homer depict how prayers are utilised to serve personal ends, whether justly or unjustly.

A Reflection of Homeric Prayers in Yorùbá Prayers

The Yorùbá believe in the efficacy of prayer uttered by an individual person in private worship or by the priest at corporate worship⁴⁸. However, beyond being an aspect of worship, the phrasing and purposes of Yorùbá prayers remarkably have things in common with the Homeric prayers. Particular attention is here given to how this is the case in relation to *invocatio*, *hypomnesis*, *precatio* and the concept of reciprocity, *da quiadedi*.

The pragmatic nature of prayers in Yorùbá theology is reflected by 'prayer-in-greetings'⁴⁹. Prayerful wishes are expressed by individuals as they take to different activities of each day. Such prayers represent seeking help for everything that matters to the people and covers virtually every

⁴⁶Homer, *The Iliad*, 22, 304-305

⁴⁷*Ibid*, 16.285, emphasis is mine

⁴⁸Awolalu, J.O. 1979. *Yorùbá Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*. London: Longman p.102

⁴⁹Oduyoye, M. 1971. *The Vocabulary of Yorùbá Religious Discourse*. Ibadan: Daystar Press p. 49

facet of life. At bedtime in a traditional Yorùbá setting, it is a routine for a Yorùbá to wish a family member or a neighbour as well as himself or herself a good night rest by saying *Kàsùn re o*: 'May we have a pleasant night rest'. Prayer readily comes in business transactions with the expression *Ajé o*: 'May sales turn out good', to wish the seller a successful business day or for the seller to wish that the day's business transaction would bring good profits.

In view of challenges that may arise during child delivery, the Yorùbá often sympathetically pray for a pregnant woman by saying *Asòkalẹ̀ ànfàní o*: 'May you have a safe delivery'. Congratulatory messages during celebrations or when a remarkable achievement is recorded have also got a ready prayerful response from a Yorùbá who would say *Ire àkàrí o*: 'May blessings go round' (the prayer is said for well-wishers to experience similar blessings). Typical of the settings for the Homeric prayers, occasions for prayers are summed up below:

Prayers are offered, not only at worship, but also at any time and in any place as the worshipper feels or occasion demands. People often stop on their way at shrines to offer brief prayers; or they may speak prayers in intimate ways to their divinity, whom they believe to be ever present though unseen, as they walk along the road or as they are engaged in their work. Usually, women are the more religious ones who are more frequently caught in this practice by wayside shrines, sacred trees, sacred brooks, at cross-roads, or at any other places marked with some sacred signs, asking for a blessing on their journey, their work, their wares, their family, or their private undertakings. Ejaculatory prayers at all times form part and parcel of the common life of the Yorùbá.⁵⁰

As indicated above, Yorùbá prayers are known for spontaneity since they are said in different circumstances and spurred by diverse needs. The need for prayers is often dictated by the desire 'for a blessing on their journey, their work, their wares, their family, or their private undertakings'; anything that serves the people's purpose. The prayers pragmatic nature is the reason why 'ejaculatory prayers at all times form part and parcel of the common life of the Yorùbá'. While prayer would readily be seen as 'an important element in worship'⁵¹, selection or phrasing of words really matters to the Yorùbá. A striking similarity between Homeric prayers and Yorùbá prayers is the notion that efficacy of prayer involves some art or skills. Under the next sub heading, attention is given to the significance of choice of words in Yorùbá prayers.

Praise and Recognition of Authority in Yorùbá Prayers

Deliberate careful phrasing of words in prayers, which the Yorùbá take pride in, is representative of the place of *invocation* in the Homeric prayers. This is particularly seen in the case of Yorùbá Olódùmarè. Yorùbá theology and cosmogony attribute the existence of everything in heaven on earth to Olódùmarè who in his capacity as The Creator, Èlédàá, is known as 'The King with unique and incomparable majesty'.⁵²Hence, recognition for Olódùmarè grandest

⁵⁰Idowu, B. 1962. *Olodumare, God in the Yorùbá Belief*. London: Longman, p.118

⁵¹Awolalu, J.O. 1979. *Yorùbá Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* London: Longman p.102

⁵²Idowu, B. 1962. *Olodumare, God in the Yorùbá Belief*. London: Longman pp. 36-37

position and asserting his power are crucial elements of Yorùbá prayers. His full authority is asserted with expressions such as, '*Obati dandan, rẹ́ kí sẹ̀lẹ̀*' - 'The King whose behest never return void', *Alábàáláṣẹ́, Ọba Èdùmàrẹ̀* - 'The Proposer Who wields the Sceptre, King of Superlative Attributes',⁵³ *Ọgá-ògo*, which connotes exceeding glory or resplendence, *Atẹrẹrẹ-káyé, Èlẹ̀n-àtẹ̀kẹ̀-ká*, 'He whose being spreads over the whole extent of the earth, the Owner of a mat that is never folded up', are some other epithets used to express Olódùmarẹ̀'s praise in prayer. Since he is believed to be in control of days and seasons, Olódùmarẹ̀ is also addressed as *Ọlójọ̀ ọ̀nì* - 'The Owner of this day'⁵⁴. As it is found in the Homeric prayers, recognition for the majesty of Olódùmarẹ̀, expression of confidence in his ability to answer prayers, is primary in Yorùbá prayers.

Expressions that are appropriate to the offices of other gods are similarly used to assert the deities' power and warm their hearts. Another deity that is selected illustrate this point is Ọ̀gún. It is as a result of the 'belief in his lordship over iron and steel that he is acknowledged as the divinity of war and warriors; of hunters and the chase; of all artisans – smiths, engineers, mechanics... in fact, all who deal in anything made of iron or steel'.⁵⁵ His patronage is broad and his worshipers would praise him in prayer as follows:

Ọ̀gún ọ̀nìlẹ̀ owó, ọ̀lónaqlà, ọ̀nìlẹ̀ kàngun-kàngun ọ̀nà-ọ̀run – 'Ọ̀gún the owner of the house of money, the owner of the house of riches, the owner of the innumerable house of heaven'.

He is also *Awọ̀n l' éyin' jú, égbẹ̀ léyìnmo ọ̀rukàn, ọ̀nìlẹ̀-Kàngun ọ̀nà ọ̀run* 'One whose eye-balls are-rare (to behold), support behind the orphan, the owner of the innumerable houses of heaven'.⁵⁶

Words of praise and recognition of the power of divinities in Yorùbá prayers discussed here are just a few examples to illustrate a reflection of the Homeric prayers in the Yorùbá's.

Prayers in Fighting an Enemy or Seeking Revenge

Another interesting phrasing of prayer that is common to the Homeric and Yorùbá prayers is observable in fighting an enemy or seeking vengeance. This is illustrated in the next discussion of a prominent divinity of the Yorùbá theogony, Èṣù. The use to which prayer can be put in the Yorùbá traditional religion is conveyed by what is said about Èṣù, who 'as the "inspector-general", ...is ubiquitous...In his actions, he is ambivalent as he is ambidextrous...he does not discriminate in carrying out errands good as well as evil'.⁵⁷ While the controversy surrounding roles of Èṣù is not the issue here, it is clear that the divinity could be sought in prayer by those with 'good as well as evil' intentions. The Homeric prayers give sufficient examples of partisan gods defending their favourites. Èṣù could similarly be employed against an enemy as explained below:

⁵³Idowu, B. 1962. *Olodumare, God in the Yorùbá Belief*. London: Longman p. 37

⁵⁴Idowu, B. 1962. *Olodumare, God in the Yorùbá Belief*. London: Longman p. 49

⁵⁵Idowu, B. 1962. *Olodumare, God in the Yorùbá Belief*. London: Longman p. 85

⁵⁶Idowu, B. 1962. *Olodumare, God in the Yorùbá Belief*. London: Longman p. 85

⁵⁷Awolalu, J.O. 1979. *Yorùbá Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*. London: Longman p.29

The suppliant goes before the emblem Èṣù, taking with him palm-oil and palm-kernel oil. It is said that Èṣù delights in drinking palm-oil, while palm-kernel oil is *tabu* to him. The suppliant therefore pours the palm-oil on the emblem saying, 'This is palm-oil, Èṣù: this is palm-kernel oil; I know that it is not your food and I dare not give it to you. But so-and-so (here he names the enemy) has asked me to give it to you even though he knows that it is not your food, and here (he pours the palm-kernel oil on the emblem) immediately after the ritual is completed, Èṣù will rush off to deal the enemy a blow, or stir him to some action which will bring upon him a calamitous consequence.'⁵⁸

While offering palm-kernel that is offensive to Èṣù is actually done by the suppliant, the phrasing of the prayer shifts the responsibility to the enemy. In this context, the approach only emphasises the importance of choice of words in prayer and not the failure of the divinity to see through the deceit. It is noteworthy that what appears to be playing on the emotions of a god to achieve a possibly selfish end could also be found in Homer. For example, as noted above, Polyphemus desecrates the law of hospitality, treats Odysseus as an enemy and prays to Poseidon to ruin Odysseus and his comrades.

Another example of a vengeful Yorùbá god is Ṣòpònná. Interestingly, Ṣòpònná somehow corresponds in action with the Greeks' god of plague, Apollo. Ṣòpònná, would play the role similar to the one played by Apollo when beseeched by his priest, Chryseis, to destroy the Greeks. According to the Yorùbá belief, Ṣòpònná is 'the destruction that wasteth at noonday'.⁵⁹ The dreadful and practically implacable divinity is known for using the weapon of smallpox that is *hard cure to scourge his victims. The priests or devotees of Ṣòpònná can beseech him to cause devastation, just as Chryseis entreats Apollo to do to the Agamemnon's camp. Below is a picture of what access to Ṣòpònná in prayer can bring:*

This knowledge of the die-hard nature of the disease germs has often been exploited with disastrous consequences by unscrupulous people. When the priests or devotees of Ṣòpònná threaten to 'fight' anybody or any community, what they mean is that they possess the means of spreading the disease and will do so if provoked to the point. And when they actually put up the 'fight', this is what happens: they usually have in their possession some virulent preparations made up of powdered scabs or parts of the skin of a smallpox victim, or it may be fluid which they obtain through the action of the weather and putrefaction from the corpse of a victim. Either of these they throw out in an open place or at the doorstep of a house, or even in a house. By the action of the wind, or various other agencies, the germs are carried about and the disease spread.⁶⁰

⁵⁸Idowu, B. 1962. *Olodumare, God in the Yorùbá Belief*. London: Longman p. 83

⁵⁹Idowu, B. 1962. *Olodumare, God in the Yorùbá Belief*. London: Longman p. 95

⁶⁰Idowu, B. 1962. *Olodumare, God in the Yorùbá Belief*. London: Longman p. 96

Although Şòpònná is believed to be fierce and hard to propitiate, as it is the case with Apollo, his priests can turn to him through sacrifice and prayer to appease him.

Give-Because-I-Gave Prayer

Formulaic expressions of reciprocity of the *hypomnesis* in the Homeric prayers also find expressions in the Yorùbá prayers. This can be seen in the discussion of Ògún, the Yorùbá god of iron. The god is credited with making journeys of travellers smooth by removing obstacles. Yorùbá worshippers of Ògún who are commercial drivers or frequent road users would make appeals to Ògún to make their path smooth. In the process of seeking the face of the god, the priest of Ògún uses the invocation (similar to *invocatio* in Homer): *A-wòṅ l'èyinjú, ... onilé kángunkàngun ọ̀nà ọ̀run* 'He-whose-eye-balls-are-rare (to see)...the Owner of the innumerable houses of heaven'.⁶¹ Then follows the *da quia dedi*, (give because I gave) part that is expressed below:

Lágúnjú ọ̀mọ̀ rẹ̀ wá sí ọ̀dọ̀ rẹ̀, ọ̀ ní obì, ọ̀ ní epo, ọ̀ ní ẹ̀mu, ọ̀ ní ẹ̀sunṣu, ọ̀ ní kí á mú un fún ọ̀. Lágúnjú náà ló nbẹ̀ níwájú rẹ̀ yìí àgàn ló yà tí ọ̀ rí bí ẹ̀kúnṣọ̀ l' ọ̀ n sun, ààwẹ̀ àìrì – gbé dání l' ọ̀ n gba; Ògún, jẹ́ k' ọ̀ ọ̀mọ̀ bí...'

Lágúnjú, your child is come before you, she brings to you kola-nuts, she brings palm-oil, she brings palm-wine, she brings roasted yam, she brings a dog; she asks that they be presented to you. This is Lágúnjú, before you: barren she is and has no issue; she is in tears because she has no children; she is fasting because she has none to carry in her arms; O Ògún, grant that she may have children....⁶²

In petitioning on behalf of the worshipper, the priest suggests that help is sought on the strength of the generous sacrificial items that are presented. This is a typical example of a prayer that parallels the Homeric order of *invocatio*, *hypomnesis* and *precatio*. Many more exist in the Yorùbá belief system. The brief discussion here on how Yorùbá prayers reflect the Homeric Prayers can further be explored in more studies.

Conclusion

Prayer as an art plays vital utilitarian roles in Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. These include serving as a means of communicating with divinity; making requests; seeking aids; getting emotional anchor. Highlighting the art as well as the socio-cultural context of prayers in the works of Homer, Homeric prayers are in three parts: the *invocatio*, which is calling on the god, the *hypomnesis*, which is the part that reminds the god of his past favours as well as the good deeds of the pray-er, and lastly the *precatio*, the request itself. The concept of reciprocity is a major aspect of prayer in Homer as evidenced by the use of formulaic expressions such as *da quia dedisti*, *da quiadedi* and *da utrecipias*. The phrases can be seen as strong, functional and artfully selected by man in his deliberate efforts to make a god do his bidding. In what may be termed rhetoric of prayer, he seems to make the god see why he should hearken to his request by reminding the deity that he had done it before, that the god had received something from and

⁶¹Idowu, B. 1962. *Olodumare, God in the Yorùbá Belief*. London: Longman, p. 111

⁶²Idowu, B. 1962. *Olodumare, God in the Yorùbá Belief*. London: Longman p. 111

would receive more. Skills are also shown as needed to decode portents given to pray-ers in reply to their requests.

In the utilitarian use of prayer, examples of prayers as the means of complaining, venting rage and an opportunity for controlling fate have been considered. It has also been noted that prayers occur between man, no matter his status, and any god; between lesser deities; between a lesser deity and a higher one, serving various desired purposes. The requests are diverse, ranging from asking for safety, aid, blessings, glory, to wishing the death of one's enemy. The motives behind requests in Homer are mostly vengeance and personal glory or honour. The pray-er may be very assertive in seeking these. Mortal's piety or impiety may be a consideration in whether a prayer will be heard or ignored. Poseidon's hearkening to some of the prayers of Polyphemus who violates the law of hospitality may provide explanation for why heaping up prayers does not necessarily lead to a more just society, since wrongdoings can be rationalised when seeking divine favour.

In addition to having a word-phrasing pattern similar to the Homeric prayers, Yorùbá prayers have been shown to be petitions that are largely contingent on what serves the purpose of the petitioner. Just like the Homeric prayers, they consist usually of requests for protection, material blessings, victory over enemies or damnation on ill-wishers and whatever satisfies human desire. In the two religious contexts, the petitioner artfully and pragmatically uses words of praise to warm the heart of the supernatural, draws attention to his relationship with the divine one and then ultimately goes for what would serve his interest.

Observably in the Homeric prayers, acceptance or refusal of prayers is not always based on any unique relationship between a man and a divinity. Even the skilful ordering of phrases is not always the final determinant of whether a prayer will be answered or rejected. Showing the limit of seeming human dexterity in wording prayers, Homeric prayers also indicate that the will of Zeus and/or fate supersedes any wish of the pray-er that may be skilfully phrased. Another study on prayers in the two religious settings may explore more of these aspects of human interests and the will of a divine one in prayer.

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