Ideophones and Anatomes as Literary Strategies in Bassie Kondi’s Oral Poetry: A Study of “Yengema Women”, a Love Poem

Sheikh Umarr Kamarah
Virginia State University

Introduction

Ruth Finnegan’s *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970) has been regarded as one of the groundbreaking texts in the subject of literature and orality in Africa. In that book, Finnegan defines the Ideophone as “…a special Word which conveys a kind of idea-in-sound” (66). Finnegan goes on to say that ideophones can sometimes be onomatopoeic, but more importantly, that the device’s “acoustic impression” often conveys sensory aspects such as “manner, color, taste, smell, silence, action, condition, texture, gait, posture, or intensity” (66). Refering specifically to Bantu Languages, Finnegan claims the device “is commonly used... to add emotion or vividness to a description or recitation” (66). While the discussion concentrates more on the syntactic or morphological form and function of the ideophone, Finnegan also mentions its potentialities for narrative.

In his *African Oral Literature* (1992), Isidore Okpewho states: “Ideophones are simply sounds used in conveying a vivid impression” and that they are “…more frequently used in narratives for achieving a stronger sensual or dramatic impact than any words available in the language could have done” (92). Clearly, Okpewho and Finnegan both insist on the evocative power of the ideophone.

However, whilst both Finnegan and Okpewho recognize the literary potentialities of the ideophone, there has been no sustained study of its literary uses in African oral literature. In the 2001 book on ideophones edited by F.K. Erhard Voeltz and Christa Kilian-Hatz, only one of the text’s twenty-seven articles discusses ideophones in the context of literature or verbal art. The rest of the massive work is dedicated to the phonological, morphological, or syntactic form or function of ideophones in African languages. One or two of those articles explore the possibility of theorizing about the ideophone.

As recently as 2011, Mark Dingemanse wrote a dissertation titled, “The meaning and use of Ideophone in Siwu,” and has published some articles on the ideophone since then. But in none of these works is the ideophone treated as a literary trope. In an article titled “Advances in the cross-linguistic study of Ideophones,” Dingemanse opines that ideophones “…are noted for their special forms, distinct gramatical behaviour, [and] rich sensory meaning” (654-672).

In *Bantu Linguistic Terminology* (1935), Doke defines ideophone as, “A vivid representation of an idea in sound. A Word, often onomatopoeic, which describes a predicate, a qualificative or adverb in respect to manner, color, sound, smell, action, state or intensity” (118). Although there have been several definitions of the concept, for example by Finnegan and Okphewo, Doke’s definition has been accepted to be the standard in the field. Indeed, his definition captures more fully the potential of the ideophone to be used as a devise for literary analysis.
The ideophone has received serious scholastic attention in recent years\(^2\), however the linguistic form I refer to as “anatome,” though fairly common in African cultures, is relatively unknown to linguists and literary critics alike. I coined the term anatome to characterize a linguistic game among the Temne of Sierra Leone that uses the human body as a reference point for ridicule and at times insult.\(^3\) The anatome, I would like to propose, can be defined as a speech form that compares a part of the human body to something else in order to scale down, ridicule, mock or paint an ugly picture of someone. The comparison is restricted to the parts of the body and must elicit laughter to be successful. This linguistic strategy or trope is similar to “Playing the dozens” in African American culture. The anatome, however, is a feature of African languages that neither Finnegan nor Okpewho, or anyone else, has dealt with in their works.

A study of Bassie Kondi’s effective use of both the ideophone and the anatome in his oral poem, “Yengema Women,” opens the door for researchers on ideophones and anatomes, allowing them to zoom their research lens on the literary possibilities of the tropes.

The late Bassie Kondi was a famous Sierra Leonean oral poet. His poetry is on a variety of social issues ranging from love to oppression. The word ‘Kondi,’ which has become the artist’s last name, is actually the Temne word for the musical instrument he used during his performances. The Kondi is a metal box with a number of metal strings on it, the longest placed in the center. It is played by plucking. In this paper, I am concerned with only one of his most popular poems, *Ay bera a Yenkema*, (Yengema Women).

In writing about the Ibo, Osadebay observed that,

> There is a wealth of culture and fine feelings which find expression in our music and poetry. We sing when we fight, we sing when we work, we sing when we love, we sing when we hate, we sing when a child is born, we sing when death takes a toll. (1949:154)

Love and its sexual expression are among the permanent central issues of literature, and they are present to some degree in most of the world’s great writing and oral narratives. Moreover, marital relationships and their problems are the single most common subjects in songs. Another common topic is praise or celebration of physical beauty. Witness these three lines from *One Thousand and One Nights* also known as *Arabian Nights*:

[Transliteration of the Arabic version by author]

\begin{align*}
  Wa \text{ afaa} \text{ wa aqbala fi-Ighalaa-ilii} \text{ yanthanii} \\
  Yuuli-mada li-Mujitanii wa-Mujitanii \\
  Wa raqaa f\text{a maa tughni-ittamaa imu} \\
  Wa-rruqaa wa-ssihru min lahdhaati tilka-l-a yuni
\end{align*}

[Translation]

*She came along bending from the weight of her gorgeous, splendid gown and jewelry bestowing her bounty upon both the harvest and the harvester. No amount of amulets and charms can protect one from the bewitching enchantment of those eyes.* (Translation is mine)
In the above lines, physical beauty of the woman is emphasized, hence the reference to dress, jewelry, and eyes. Admiration for the qualities of the beloved is expressed through apt adjectives, metaphor and imagery.

However, not all songs or poetry about love relationships is in the romantic vein, and expressed by a man for a woman. Zulu poetry about love relationships, for instance, seems often to be by women. Here is a poem of disillusionment in love⁴:

*I thought you loved me*
Yet I am wasting my time on you.  
*I thought we would be parted only by death.*  
*But to-day you have disappointed me.*  
*You will never be anything*  
*You are a disgrace, worthless, and unreliable.*  
*Bring my things, I will put them in my pillow*  
*You take yours and put them under your armpit*  
*You deceived me* (Tracey, 1948b: 41).

**Bassie Kondi’s Love Poem” “Yengema Women”**⁵

Bassi Kondi’s poem, “Yengema Women,” is about a failed marriage between a husband and his wife. The poem is intensely personal, and so is full of emotions. It is one of the longest oral poems I have heard. The speaker in this poem re-lives a moment in his own life, while making reference to a chapter in his country’s history. The place names in the song, Yengema, Sefadu, and Bôma (lines 13, 273, and 315), all invoke feelings of a particular era in Sierra Leone—the diamond boom of the 1950s. Yengema and Sefadu are major towns in the mining area of the country. The word Bôma is used metaphorically to refer to both towns. It is an epithet transferred to these places from the Second World War when Sierra Leoneans were taken to fight alongside the British in the Burma campaign. During the diamond boom, Yengema and Sefadu became cosmopolitan communities attracting diverse populations from different parts of the world. These diverse mining communities generated a culture of their own—different lifestyles, affluent living patterns, less sensitivity to human values, more material alertness and moral obtuseness. Material consideration was now to become a factor in love relationships. Bassie Kondi lived the experience while staying in these mining areas. His poem, “Yengema Women,” is a commentary on the nefarious effect of money and love. Here is the poem in Temne and its English translation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temne</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>ŋɛɛ bɛɛ a Yɛŋɛŋma</em></td>
<td><em>I say way shall talk, we only greet each other</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Ḑɛ sɔ ɔ tɛlɛmɛ, sɔ kɔrɪʌŋɛ nɯ ɡboŋ</td>
<td><em>Let me sing for you the song of the Yengema people</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ƙama i leŋɛ uŋ ʌŋ leŋ ŋa ʌŋ Yɛŋɛŋma</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Ɓɔ kar un ɓi thelma kɔnɔ bɔ̀r bo
4. Ƙa ƙa thelma

5. Ti kori un gbọ̀n gbọ̀n
6. Ye yi, a-a Bassie e-e

7. Ɗa ƙa, maŋ kɔli mi, ƙaŋ kɔli mi
8. Ƙaŋ kɔli mi ƙeŋka

9. Sɔŋ thelma, sɔŋ ƙaŋ ƙeŋka
10. Ɓɔ ƙaŋ fonke ay oɔ mi lɔŋ ra faɗeŋ
11. Ɗa ƙeŋka sɔŋ thelma ay ƙera ƙoʃt
12. Ɗa ƙaŋ ƙoʃt ukin

13. Ɗa ƙaŋ ƙoʃt a Yenkema-ŋ
14. Ƙaŋ ƙoʃt bo, ƙaŋ kɔli mi a raskel
15. Mɔ der mɔ yone yone, ƙɔŋpuna ƙaŋ kala
16. Mɔ ƙeŋkɛ ƙaŋ ƙaŋ mi ƙa ƙaŋ
17. ƙɔŋɛr mi ra raskel kuyəŋ
18. ɗa tumbə ƙaŋ ƙaŋ ƙeŋka gbọn
19. Mɔ ƙaŋ ƙaŋ kala- e
20. ɗa kala mi ƙaŋpuna ƙaŋ

21. ɗa boyi tef-e
22. Ɓɔ ƙaŋ tumbə ŋoŋ ƙaŋbala ƙaŋ kɔsi ƙos
23. Ɗa ƙaŋ yi, ƙaŋ ƙoʃt a bɔŋ-a-e, thetən
24. Sɔŋ thelma kɔ bɔŋ-a-e:

25. Ɓɔ ƙaŋ yɔkling mi ƙaŋ sɔ-i-i-i?
26. ɗa ƙaŋ ƙoʃt ƙedje mi ƙaŋ sɔ-i-i-i?
27. ƙaŋ ƙaŋ ƙoʃt ƙi
28. ƙaŋ ƙoʃt ƙedje ni ƙaŋ sɔ-i-i-i, minkə?

Please allow me to talk, you can add
To the discussion

I am saluting you, only, only

That’s how I am, ah, Bassie

That’s what they did, they looked at me, they
looked at me
They looked at me at that time

Talking all night long, we met them at that
time
Sure, the gentlemen plotted against me
At that time, I talked all night long, ten
women
And eleven

With the Yengema women

Those women, my dear, they lookat you, they
are ungrateful
When she comes to you, she pretends, only
to suck your money
After she knocks down your money, she
flings
She flings at you deceit and ungratefulness,
kuyəŋ
The buttocks you used to massage
When you had money

Your money she used for food

She finished it completely

oh, her buttocks, she now denies you, kos
That’s the way they are, the women of
Boma; in a minute
We shall talk; it is making slight movements:

Hay, aren’t you doing my laundry any
more?
This woman, is she not cooking for me
anymore?
You used to do a lot of cooking for me
Aren’t you cooking for me anymore, oh me?
29. е бу яка ми 
30. ен якале ми сэ -i-i, raskel?
31. Мун raskel е тые учуя ми сэ-i-i?
32. ен та кeny ма gbaki емера
33. І нап щ ё вса farfar gbo
34. ен якале ми сэ-i-i?
35. е farfar лоқо wathe, ен топлуб ми сэ-i?
36. е nemnem лоқо wathe, ен нанехе ми сэ-i?
37. е варанэ та даранэ ман кэ
38. е топлуб ми сэ-i-
39. е варанэ тадаранэ му сэ кэ
40. е конте ми сэ-i?
41. е борна лоқо конт ми
42. е боко е конте ми сэ-i?
43. ми е ноп-e
44. е пат ё кала е гбээти бэ
45. е кёлия ми сэ-i-i, пат ё кала бэ
46. Бэ  ></a>ка еве ёщене ми сэ-i-i?
47. І фосла ё лом-e wathe, ен нанехе ми сэ-i?
48. еп та кен ё боти емета
49. І еы сон е ке мэ тари ё ёнь еш
50. е кёлия ми сэ-i-i?
51. [се калак ву ми сэ-кби]
52. Му ё гбэнэ акатак е ёрйе ти]
53. е кёлия ми сэ-i-i?
54. [ро воракэ кэ гбэте ми сэ]
55. е farfar лоқо ван-лы
56. ен кёлия ми сэ-i-i?
57. аке ма й ломэр-e  ></a>ха гбээ
58. ен кёлия ми сэ-i-i?
59. ен та кен гбаки  ></a>мера
60. І та ти сэ о н й ворак-лы
61. ен кёлия ми сэ-i-i?

You used to do a lot of laundry for me
Aren’t you doing my laundry anymore, ungrateful?
You are ungrateful, aren’t you doing anything for me any more?
You gaze like one who plucks out hearts
I see you now farfar often

Aren’t you doing my laundry anymore?
It used to be farfar my dear, aren’t you cooking for me any more?
It used to be nemnem my dear, aren’t you thinking of me any more?
She would sneak through ‘back yard’ roads
Is she not cooking for me any more?
she would sneak through ‘back yard’ roads
Doesn’t she care about me any more?
She used to care a whole lot about me
This woman, doesn’t she care about me any more?
After she has sucked the money
she ‘cooked’ that much money

Is she not looking at me any more? She
‘cooked’ the money
Is this woman not seeing me any more?
I whisper in other ears, my dear, aren’t they
thinking about me any more?
they gaze like contented people
she alone can tell her name

Is she not looking at me any more?
[move your foot away, please

if I touch a foot, the instrument won’t play well]
Is she not looking at me anymore?
[it does not work, it won’t hit you again]
it used to be farfar, the lady

aren’t you looking at me any more?
when I was setting the trap until, gbasen
aren’t you looking at me any more?
your gaze like one who plucks out hearts
I no longer know that you work
aren’t you looking at me any more?
It was all pleasure ‘up there’

she would even soothe the itch on my back
aren’t you looking at me any more, because
my money is ‘short?’
she would make my bed without me asking
is she not looking at me any more because my
money is ‘short?’
she would caress my ‘you know what’
is she not looking at me any more because my
money is ‘short?’
even if you insult her gbap, my dear
is she not pinching me any more because my
money is ‘short?’
even if you insult her entire family
is she not pinching me any more because she
sees ‘short’ money?
you can fold her into a head pad
is she not pinching me any more if one has
‘short’ money?

even if you pass her without noticing her
she won’t pinch you any more if you have
‘short’ money
it used to be farfar my dear
aren’t you greeting me any more, it used to
be all pleasure ‘up there’
it useds to be nemnem, woman
is she not looking at me any more because we
have ‘short’ money?
she splits you into pieces without a lamp
she won’t look at you any more if you have
‘short’ money
she would go shopping for a dress to come
and impress
she won’t look at you any more if you have
‘short’ money

I even made her a fence to jump over
is she not looking at me any more because she
sees ‘short’ money
she doesn’t know, she doesn’t care, she says
Doesn’t she love me any more?
you sucked all the money

Aren’t you coming close any more, ungrateful?
you ‘cooked’ all my money
aren’t you looking at me any more, you?
yay, i say, ‘come’ (in Limba)
aren’t you thinking of me anymore
your gaze like one who enumerates hearts
in the market, the basket thap always
aren’t you thinking of me any more, it used to be all pleasure ‘up there’
In the market, the basket pay always
aren’t you looking at me any more, it used to be all pleasure ‘up there’
she would wear expensive flowing lappa lagbath
is she not looking at me any more, it used to be all pleasure ‘up there’
and she would wear her expensive flowing lappa, lagbath
is she not looking at me any more?
she would flaunt her lappa tely
is she not looking at me any more, at the market
after she has sucked my money, dear
is she not thinking of me any more?
after she has stuffed the money into herself
it used to be farfar, my dear
aren’t you looking at me any more?
it used to be merry over there
it used to be tete mafay
don’t you like me any more?
it used to be tete mafay
don’t you like me any more?
she sucked those days, dear
she doesn’t think about me any more, she stuffed merriment
it used to be fanfay
she would build you mountains of lies
120. ə kəliye mu so-i, be əŋ ba ə kala ə gbut e  she would not look at you any more if your money is short
121. əŋ tənpe əŋ kala poŋ-e after she has stuffed all the money
122. ə ye'maye mi so-i, munəŋ? doesn’t she love me any more, you?
123. munəŋ! munəŋ! munəŋ! munəŋ! You! You! You! You!
124. əŋ təmə əŋ ye'ŋ ye'maye mi so-i-i?
125. əŋ tək ye'ŋ ma kənt ə mera standing as you do, don’t you love me any more?
126. ma təya gbəpame ə kaki sele you gaze is like one who plucks out hearts
127. ə kəriye mi so-i-i, munəŋ? you knew how to sneak through porches sele
128. ə kəna mu əŋ tumba lagbath is she not greeting me any more, you?
129. kənte mi so-i-i, əŋ tək ye'ŋ ma kənt ə mera? she would roll her buttocks for you lagbath
130. ə kəna mu əŋ tumba lagbath don’t you care about me any more, you plucker of hearts?
131. kəliye mi so-i-i, əŋ tək ye'ŋ ma kənt ə mera? aren’t you looking at me any more, plucker of hearts?
132. bo i kəli kəli mun raskel I have noticed you are ungrateful
133. əŋ yonaye mi so-i-i, bo? aren’t you doing things for me any more, dear?
134. ma əŋ thəməsne əŋ kala poŋ-e after you have licked all the money
135. əŋ pətvye mi so-i-i? aren’t you cooking for me any more?
136. əŋ thəməs yeŋ ma kənt ə mera you lick like this, you pluck hearts
137. be ma əkər mi rə raskel-e, bo if you fling ungratefulness at me, dear
138. ma kəliye mi so-i-i and you don’t look at me any more
139. i gbəp mu ə ləl mən bo then I have to paste anatomes on you
140. be ma sak mi-e, i to thal mu ə ləl if you walk out on me, I will paste anatomes on you
141. ma kəliye mi so-i-i? aren’t you looking at me any more?
142. i pim mi rə raskel, bo I will kill the ungratefulness in you
143. ma əŋ yonaye yeŋ waθe munəŋ! look at the way you look, dear, you!
144. əŋ ye'maye mi so-i-i? don’t you love me any more?
145. əŋ tək ye'ŋ ma kənt ə mera your gaze is like one who plucks out hearts
146. ə fək ya ə ləp mar gəbo boxes of fish went down mar always
147. əŋ kəliye mi so-i, ə bəθi əŋ ləkə ro kəm ro aren’t you looking at me any more, oh it was
148. əŋ yonaye əŋ ləkə əŋ kala all merry over there those days
149. əŋ kəliye mi so-i, əŋ səpən əŋ kala əŋ kəpət you stuffed all the money
150. əŋ yonaye əŋ ləkə əŋ kala aren’t you looking at me any more, you even
151. əŋ kəliye mi so-i? squandered food money
152. əŋ səpən əŋ kala əŋ kəpət you stuffed all the money

153. i nantu mu a k'lsk mun lal
154. a k'liye mi s-g-i?
155. a k'liye ay kala a bonda

156. i then mu a k'lsk mun laliki
157. a k'liye mi s-g-i?
158. a k'liye ay kala a bonda

159. a bonda kake gbabdam
160. a k'liye mi s-g-i, a' la yay a ko m kont e mera?

161. kake a' lal mu t'lk yay
162. a' pat'iye mi s-g-i-i, raskel?

163. kake ma'yay ma u ba yay
164. a k'liye mi s-g-i, a' la ya yay a ko m kont e mera?

165. be mga laker mi ro raskel, bo
166. mga k'liye mi s-g-i, i gbap mu a lol man, bo

167. tha i far mu a lol a lol yay
168. mga k'liye mi s-g-i?
169. i k'li mun raskel, bo

170. bo c farfar ay k'lsk ka pat
171. a' k'liye mi s-g-i, ay nó'nu na k'lsk c bòthi

172. a' sanen ay kala na karat
173. a' nanye mi s-g-i-i, raskel?

174. e s'k ya e lop, mar gbo
175. a' k'liye mi s-g-i, c bòthi ay k'lsk ro kom ro

176. c sem ka c ya gbap fap
177. a' k'liye mi s-g-i, c bòthi ay k'lsk ro kom ro

178. ka kont ka c na pay far

179. a' k'liye mi s-g-i, c bòthi ay k'lsk ro kom ro

180. ra mer ra c na ro la pay
181. c nanye mi s-g-i, c bòthi ay k'lsk ro kom ro

182. ka kont ka c na k' thak gbo

you were so thin when I married you
aren't you looking at me any more?

181. you stuffed the money and now have some flesh ---look good

you were so bony when I married you
aren't you looking at me any more?

you stuffed the money and now have some flesh

you now have some flesh gbabdam

aren't you looking at me any more, plucker of hearts?

now you jump around like a deer
Aren't you cooking for me any more, ungrateful?

now you walk around like a bush cow
aren't you looking at me any more, plucker of hearts?

if you fling ungratefulness at me, dear
you don't look at me any more, so I will paste anatomes on you

I have no alternative but to paste a tiny anatome on you
aren't you looking at me any more?
I see you as ungrateful, dear

It used to be farfar in the kitchen those days
aren't you looking at me any more, you stuffed the goodies those days

you even squandered food money
aren't you thinking about me any more, ungrateful?

boxes of fish went down mar always
aren't you looking at me any more, it used to be all merry those days

the woman's meat, gbap fap
aren't you looking at me any more, it used to be all merry those days

the cow leg, pay far

aren't you looking at me any more, it used to be all merry those days

the cow tongue would fill the pot pay
is she not thinking about me any more, it used to be all merry those days

the cow foot, thak always
aren’t you looking at me any more, it used to be all merry those days
the cow, mákɔy always
aren’t you looking at me any more, it used to be all merry those days
the cow (mat) skin, sólay always
aren’t you looking at me any more, it used to be merry those days
hey, saliva used to flow from your mouth while tasting the sauce
you can’t blame any more, ka lafɔt
she would be tasting the sauce and saliva would spring from her mouth
aren’t you looking at me any more, plucker of hearts?
saliva would spring from her mouth while tasting the sauce
is she not looking at me any more, it used to be all merry those days
she would be tasting the sauce and snot would ooze
is she not looking at me any more, ka lafɔt?
she would be tasting the sauce and snot would flow out
is she not looking at me any more, ka lafɔt?
she would be tasting the sauce and snot would rush out
is she not looking at me any more, ka lafɔt?
she would plaster it on the leg fap
aren’t you looking at me any more, plucker of hearts?
she would rub it on the leg fap
is she not looking at me any more, plucker of hearts?
her mouth would be full and she would rub it on the leg fap
is she not looking at me any more, ungrateful?
look, you don’t care, say you don’t love me any more?
you gaze like one who plucks hearts
if you walk out on me, I will paste an anatome on you
aren’t you looking at me any more?
210. i kəli mun raskel bo

211. kəli esa mɔ a təmərə tən-e
212. i nəntay mə su-ʃ-i, raskel
213. esa mɔ a kus kə lome

214. i yemay mə su-ʃ-i, eʃ tak yaŋ mə kənt e mərə
215. mə la əә soth mə kə lome ə yem-e
216. i yemay mə su-ʃ-i, eʃ tak yaŋ mə kənt e mərə
217. əә əә kə bomp mɔ a kal rə wotho-e
218. əә əә la əә mi s-i, eʃ tak yaŋ mə kənt e mərə

219. a soth əә las mə ə thlə mara
220. i nəntay mə su-ʃ-i, məŋə
221. ma əә bi əә mə a kal rə wotho-e
222. i yemay mə su-ʃ-i, məŋə

223. mə əә e sek mə a gbantha ə patha-e
224. əә kəliye mə su-ʃ-i, əә tak yaŋ mə kos ə mərə
225. ma ther esa mɔ a lay e sala-e
226. i yemay mə su-ʃ-i, məŋə

227. esa mɔ a ghoya ə həŋ-k-e
228. i fəte mə su-ʃ-i, əә tak yaŋ məkənt e mərə

229. mə əә e fɔr mə a sənth kə thər-e
230. i nəntay mə su-ʃ-i, məŋə
231. ekəŋkə mə a kal kə yek-e
232. i yemay mə su-ʃ-i, əә tak yaŋ mə kənt e mərə
233. ma ya esek mə a tsə kə kethəm
234. i nəntay mə su-ʃ-i, məŋə
235. mə ya a soth mə kəlmə ə təm-e
236. i yemay mə su-ʃ-i, əә tak yaŋ mə kənt e mərə
237. Kə səŋ mə a tən ə yem-e
238. i yemay mə su-ʃ-i, məŋə

239. əә əә rə bomp mə a kəŋi ə batha-e
240. i kəliye mə su-ʃ-i, əә tak yaŋ mə kənt e mərə

241. əә der mə a kal ə thotho
242. i yemay mə su-ʃ-i, məŋə

243. eʃek ə nəŋkə mə a kən ə fufu-e

I figure you are ungrateful

I don’t love you any more, plucker of hearts
you are not my wife any more, ungrateful
your buttocks like a sheep being prepared for puberty graduation

I don’t love you any more, plucker of hearts
you are as dark as a roasted baboon
I don’t love you any more, you

your nose is as ugly as a cut ‘mara’
you are not my wife any more, you

aren’t you looking at me any more, hanging jaw bones
your buttocks like a slate laid flat
I don’t love you any more, you

your buttocks like cleared river bank
I will not be close to you any more, plucker of hearts

your eyes like a sharpened cane
you are not my wifw any more, you

your sunken eyes like a roasted monkey
your teeth like stirred brown porridge
you are not my wife any more, you

your nose like a chewing sheep
your teeth are as brown as the product of a laundry
I don’t love you any more, you

your mouth like a yawning dog
I don’t love you any more, you

you are not my wife any more, you

your head like a drum in which a hole has been drilled
I will not look at you any more, plucker of hearts

your face like a roasted big-eyed bird
I don’t love you any more, you

your buttocks like a dog being stood up
you are not my wife any more, ungrateful

your buttocks like a sheep being prepared for puberty graduation

I don’t love you any more, plucker of hearts
you are as dark as a roasted baboon
I don’t love you any more, you

aren’t you looking at me any more, hanging jaw bones
your buttocks like a slate laid flat
I don’t love you any more, you

your buttocks like cleared river bank
I will not be close to you any more, plucker of hearts

your eyes like a sharpened cane
you are not my wifw any more, you

your sunken eyes like a roasted monkey
your teeth like stirred brown porridge
you are not my wife any more, you

your nose like a chewing sheep
your teeth are as brown as the product of a laundry
I don’t love you any more, you

your mouth like a yawning dog
I don’t love you any more, you

you are not my wife any more, you

your head like a drum in which a hole has been drilled
I will not look at you any more, plucker of hearts

your face like a roasted big-eyed bird
I don’t love you any more, you

your buttocks like a dog being stood up
you are not my wife any more, ungrateful

your buttocks like a sheep being prepared for puberty graduation

I don’t love you any more, plucker of hearts
you are as dark as a roasted baboon
I don’t love you any more, you

aren’t you looking at me any more, hanging jaw bones
your buttocks like a slate laid flat
I don’t love you any more, you

your buttocks like cleared river bank
I will not be close to you any more, plucker of hearts

your eyes like a sharpened cane
you are not my wifw any more, you

your sunken eyes like a roasted monkey
your teeth like stirred brown porridge
you are not my wife any more, you

your nose like a chewing sheep
your teeth are as brown as the product of a laundry
I don’t love you any more, you

your mouth like a yawning dog
I don’t love you any more, you

you are not my wife any more, you

your head like a drum in which a hole has been drilled
I will not look at you any more, plucker of hearts

your face like a roasted big-eyed bird
I don’t love you any more, you

your buttocks like a dog being stood up
you are not my wife any more, ungrateful

your buttocks like a sheep being prepared for puberty graduation

I don’t love you any more, plucker of hearts
you are as dark as a roasted baboon
I don’t love you any more, you

aren’t you looking at me any more, hanging jaw bones
your buttocks like a slate laid flat
I don’t love you any more, you

your buttocks like cleared river bank
I will not be close to you any more, plucker of hearts

your eyes like a sharpened cane
you are not my wifw any more, you

your sunken eyes like a roasted monkey
your teeth like stirred brown porridge
you are not my wife any more, you

your nose like a chewing sheep
your teeth are as brown as the product of a laundry
I don’t love you any more, you

your mouth like a yawning dog
I don’t love you any more, you

you are not my wife any more, you

your head like a drum in which a hole has been drilled
I will not look at you any more, plucker of hearts

your face like a roasted big-eyed bird
I don’t love you any more, you
265. bepi əŋ nəŋk c nəŋkə mu as long as she knows you have money
266. mə c fək mu mə ləysə wəm ri cs when she drops you feet and hands up, you
267. kə ləsə ə mə c səm yo better get out of there
otherwise she will destroy your ‘meat’

REPEAT CHORUS

268. ə gbənt mu əŋ bayə tər be she would breal lice in your head when you
don’t have any
269. bepi əŋ nəŋk c nəŋkə mu kə gbəŋ-ə as long as she knows you have the ‘bundle’
270. wathe fəysə təmə-ə papa, pa! there is no rest, everything in haste, dear!
271. kəliye mi sə-i-i? aren’t you looking at me any more?

REPEAT CHORUS

272. ə kə liyənə mu c mumpəl səgbəy she would draw you closer and kiss you
273. hali əŋ soth əŋ gbil mu kə nənth yəŋ səgbəy
274. wathe c kəliye mi sə, bə c yə ya əwe even if your nose is oozing with snot
275. ə yə əwe c kəliye mi sə-i-i? my dear, is she not looking at me any more, this woman?

REPEAT CHORUS

276. əwə c bəra u boma bepi əŋ nəŋk look, when a Boma woman
277. c nəŋne əŋ kəla mu wathe stuffs your wealth, dear
278. fəysə təmə-ə, papa, papa, pa you will never rest again
279. kəliye mi sə-i-i? aren’t you looking at me any more?

REPEAT CHORUS

280. ə kə liyənə mu c mumpəl səgbəy she would draw you closer and kiss you
281. hali əŋ soth əŋ gbil mu kə nənth yəŋ səgbəy
even if your nose is oozing with snot
dear, is she not looking at me any more, this woman?
282. wathe c kəliye mi sə, bə c yə ya əwe is this woman not looking at me any more?
283. ə yə əwe c kəliye mi sə-i-i? is this woman not looking at me any more?

REPEAT CHORUS
284. a bra –e  
be warned, they are deceitful

285. ɔwa ɔ bera u boma bery əŋ nəŋk  
the Boma woman, when you

286. əŋ tey əŋ ro rum əŋ mu-e  
leave her alone in your room

287. əŋ tey gboya əŋ rum-e  
shew will clear everything out of that room

288. thəŋkəl əŋ tey əŋ sə  
you will never do it again

REPEAT CHORUS

289. a key kake-e, əŋ kəyl.  
they are thieves these days; they steal.

Analysis of Ideophones and Anatomes in “Yengema Women”

In “Yengema Women,” the speaker’s ex-wife is presented as materialistic, greedy, ungrateful, and deceitful. By skillfully handling literary techniques like ideophone, anatome, repetition, and parallelism for example, not only does Bassie succeed in creating the image of an ugly ex-wife, he also raises the more deeply philosophical question: ‘What is beauty?’ For him and his culture, a woman’s physical beauty turns to ugliness with the loss of moral beauty. This is why the poet presents the former wife first as one who has lost her moral fibre by bringing in material consideration into their marriage. So he subsequently strips her of physical beauty, as the Temne would say: ɔ thəsə kətiŋ, meaning “he or she is outwardly beautiful for nothing.” Bassie Kondi employs ideophones and anatomes to convey this message about this “materialistic” and “deceitful” woman.

Bassie Kondi uses ideophones to talk about how his ex-wife used to behave when he was wealthy and how she changed when he no longer had money. In lines 17 and 22, the poet talks about the ungratefulness of his former wife. The ideophone, kuye, which mimics the action of lifting something, especially a dress or female buttocks, creates a mental picture of dust raised by a vehicle on a dusty road without consideration for others. This imagery of a thick dust of ungratefulness raised by his former wife, with reckless abandon, because the poet has fallen on hard days, underscores the insalubrious place materialism has occupied in their love and marriage. In kos the sound mimics the manner in which the action is carried out. By using this ideophone, the poet points to the deliberate and hurtful manner in which his ex-wife denied him of her love. She would not allow him to touch her anymore because he no longer has money.

The poet, in nineteen ideophones (Dear, nemnem, gəəgəə, thəp gəə, pəy gəə, laqəə, tełəŋ, tətə, məfəə, fanfan, sele, mər gəə, gəəbdəəm, gəəfrəp, thək, məkəy gəə, səlay gəə, fəp, and səgəə), goes on to describe how his former wife used to behave, eat, and dress when things were good. He provided everything she desired. In line 33, the poet uses an onomatopoeic ideophone, fəəfrə, an ideophone that mimics the sound of a flying insect or bird, to paint a vivid picture of how his former wife used to cling to him, flying around him like a hungry fly. The poet sings about the rich food he used to provide for his ex-wife in lines 34, 96, 98, 112,118, 146,176, 182, 184, and 186. In these ideophones, the poet describes not only the richness of the food, but also how his ex-wife used to eat. For example, the ideophone nemnem mimics the sweet taste of food.
It is an olfactory ideophone. He describes how the exwife used to fill huge baskets with varieties of food items from the market in the ideophones, \textit{thap gbo} and \textit{pay gbo}. Both \textit{thap} and \textit{pay} are sounds that serve as adverbial ideophones pointing to the idea and image of being full to the brim. There was more than enough money to spend then. The manner in which his ex-wife chowed down food is captured in the ideophones, \textit{fan fan}, \textit{mər gbo}, \textit{ghap fəp} and the manner in which the food would glide down her throat is captured in the ideophones, \textit{makay gbo} and \textit{səlay gbo}. Both \textit{makay} and \textit{səlay} are sounds that mimic soft and quiet movement of something through another medium. The idea that his ex-wife was a glutton is reflected vividly in \textit{fan fan}, a reduplicative ideophone that hints at devouring food with such a speed that one does not share with others. One could hear the cracking of the bones of the meat, \textit{mər gbo}, as the poet’s ex-wife greedily bolts her food. In \textit{səlay} and \textit{makay}, the poet suggests how the ex-wife used to enjoy the food he provided her. It was so rich and tasty that it slid smoothly down her throat.

The poet also provides the best and most expensive clothing for his exwife. The ideophones, \textit{lagboth}, \textit{tələŋ}, and \textit{təte} mimic the the manner in which the overflowing gowns of the wife would sound when they were being dragged along the streets as she walked. The poet uses these ideophones to describe both the quality and quantity of the dress he bought for his ex-wife.

As Isidore Okpewho puts it, no other word in the language can capture a concept or idea better than the ideophone (92). The description of the food, the manner of eating, the carts filled to the brim at the food stores or market, and the quality of the clothing can only be adequately captured in the Temne language by the use of ideophones.

Having described the good life his ex-wife lived through vivid images of good food and expensive clothing, the poet, angered by her exhibition of ungratefulness when he fell on hard times, now must paint a new picture of his ex-wife. He must now reconstruct her as an ugly woman. The poet turns to the anatome to do so.

In reconstructing his ex-wife as a woman who values material things over love and human values, the poet introduces his listener/reader to his culture’s conceptualization of physical beauty. Temne culture frowns upon privileging materialism over moral considerations. Hence the poet’s stripping of his former wife of beauty, since physical beauty must be complemented by moral beauty for it to be wholesome. The parts of the body the poet refers to in this poem are the buttocks, the nose, the mouth, head, eyes, and the teeth. In essence, Kondi uses what I have called the anatome.

No doubt, Bassie Kondi’s treatment of the ex-wife in this oral poem is gendered. The reference to food and clothing the poet provides for his wife are supposed to turn her into a property of the husband, and present the image of a woman who cannot fend for herself. The references to body parts, and the song’s ridicule and mocking of the ex-wife’s body, therefore, carry sexist undertones. Reducing the essence of a woman to her body is quite common in patriarchal sexist narratives.

In lines 211 and 213, the poet compares the buttocks of his exwife to those of a dog and a sheep. Dogs and sheep are not known for buttocks, suggesting that a woman’s lack of reasonably sized buttocks in the poet’s culture is a mark of ugliness. This idea of flatness is echoed in lines 225 and 227 where the ex-wife’s buttocks are compared to a slate and a cleared bank respectively. In the poet’s culture, the buttocks contribute to what constitutes feminine beauty; their absence undermines it. In line 245, the ex-wife’s buttocks are compared to little fish balls. The diminutive size of the fish balls vividly captures the desired idea of the unimpressive size of the ex-wife’s buttocks. What comes out of these comparisons is an unattractive physical picture: of a woman with miniscule buttocks in a culture where the opposite is prized.
The nose is another feature that marks feminine beauty in the poet’s culture. In lines 215, 219, and 235, the poet compares his ex-wife’s nose to “states” (yawning and being open) and objects that put it against the norms of feminine beauty. In line 215, the nose is compared to the yawning of a sheep. This comparison evokes the idea of wideness, referencing, no doubt, the ex-wife’s wide nostrils. The idea of wide nostrils is echoed in line 219. In the poet’s culture a beautiful feminine nose is pointed, with small nostrils.

Brown teeth are a mark of ugliness in the poet’s culture. The poet therefore reconstructs his former wife with brown teeth as reflected in lines 223 and 243. In line 223, the meaning of the comparison of the ex-wife’s teeth to the hitting of a “patha” is buried in layers of suggestiveness. A “patha” is a flat board with a handle used for laundering dirty clothes in the stream. The method is that of pounding the clothes on the board. The teeth are compared to the brown and dirty water that comes out of the clothes being pounded on the “patha.” Thus, to be considered beautiful, the teeth must be white. The idea of brown and ugly teeth is repeated in line 243 where the ex-wife’s teeth are compared to churned fufu, which happens to be brown.

For a woman to be considered beautiful, her eyes must not be tiny but big and graced by long and thick eye lashes. By comparing his ex-wife’s eyes to a sharpened cane and the sunken eyes of a roasted monkey in lines 229 and 231 respectively, the poet continues to paint the picture of an ugly woman.

Huge or big mouths and heads, according to Kondi, are marks of feminine ugliness. In this poem, the poet describes his ex-wife’s mouth in line 237 as huge, comparing it to a dog’s yawning. He compares her head to a drum in line 239, therefore huge and ugly. All of these comparisons seek to paint the picture of an ugly ex-wife. But the poet, in ridiculing his former wife’s attributes, also paints the picture of a culture that is sexist and that objectifies women.

Without a doubt, Bassie Kondi uses anatomes as a literary trope of revenge. He reconstructs an ugly ex-wife because she has lost her “beauty” for introducing material considerations into their love and marriage. For him and for his culture, physical beauty must be complemented by moral beauty if a woman must be said to be “beautiful.” The question, however, is, who defines “beauty?” and what is “moral?” As patriarchal as Bassie Kondi’s Temne society is, the concepts of beauty and morality are defined from the perspective of men. Hence, the gendered texture of the poem.

In summary, the effectiveness of the ideophones and anatomes lies in the way Kondi deploys them to enhance the visual imagery that dominate “Yengema Women”; he creates for the reader a mental (as well as physical) picture of his former wife. Thus, the devices also generate figurative descriptions and rhetorical images that capture contrasting pictures of the former wife. He uses the devices to maintain vivid emphasis that produces the physical descriptions and the visual energy of the two sides he portrays of his former wife. In Kondi’s hands the ideophone and the anatome offer other possibilities; they work to create dramatic movements and tensions in the poem, as well as to adorn the creative playfulness he brings to his subject. He skillfully employs the devices as resources to both innovate and manipulate the subject and meaning of the song.

**Ideophones and Anatomes as “Literary” Tropes in Kondi’s “Yengema Woman”**

The reference to ideophones and anatomes as "literary" tropes or strategies in this oral poem can be understood via the concept of oral literature, or “orature.” According to the Cambridge University and
Yale University affiliated World Oral Literature Project, "Oral literature is a broad term which may include ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, musical genres, folk tales, creation tales, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters, word games, recitations, life histories, or historical narratives.” The broader focus of the definition provides possibilities that invite the literary dimensions of the tropes in Kondi's poem. Additionally, Jane Nandwa and Austin Bukenya define oral literature in their book, *African Oral Literature for Schools* (1983) as "those utterances, whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic character of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression" (1). Kondi’s creative uses of his vivid imagination to inventively and ingeniously express, through ideophones and anatomies, the artistic and aesthetic possibilities of his topic cannot be questioned.

Noting the contradiction in the expression “oral literature”, the World Oral Project observes: "literature, strictly speaking, is that which is written down; but the term is used [...] to emphasize the imaginative creativity and conventional structures that mark oral discourse too. Oral literature shares with written literature the use of heightened language in various genres (narrative, lyric, epic, etc), but it is set apart by being actualized only in performance by the fact the performer can (and sometimes is obliged) to improvise so that oral text constitutes an event." In “Yengema Women”, Kondi not only emerges as an oral artist, but an entertainer and a performer as well, fully engaging the literary nature of the event that constitutes the song. Oral performances like Kondi’s are always actualized within their setting and context, where they are consequential to the interaction of the artist and the audience. Primarily though, Kondi is a storyteller who, like storytellers generally, both oral and literary, constructs his story to engage the interests of his audience. Oral literature and written literature are both fundamentally about narrative performance. For Okphewo, the "idea of literature [is] a creative text", and oral literature to him means "literature delivered by word of mouth" (3). Okphewo further notes that "there are certain techniques which may be used to good effect in oral literature but which may not work in written literature; on the other hand, there are certain techniques and elements in written literature which may be seen as borrowings or survivals from oral literature" (3). What Kondi does is to present the consciousness, individual and communal, of his tradition in song and story; he deploys the interpretative expansions ideophones and anatomies provide to achieve his goals. To that end, “Yengema Woman” demonstrates Kondi's understanding of human psychology and the intersections of love and materialism. He deploys anatomies and ideophones to present his subject wittily and imaginatively. Additionally, the devices are central in the visual impact of Kondi’s descriptions and narration.

His song as oral literature demonstrates the imaginative and creative powers of the spoken word—attributes we also associate with written literature. In that sense, Kondi's song is literary, and therefore shares similar features of written literature. Oral and written literatures, in general, use heightened language and rhetorical techniques such as alliteration, flashbacks, narrative hooks and plot twists to imaginatively tell and narrate stories of the human experience. Kondi uses these tropes or strategies to convey emotions, intent, motives, action, and storyline in “Yengema Women.”

Oral and written literatures depend heavily on the use of memory to generate narratives of human experiences and motives. In so many ways, Kondi’s song operates primarily through memory. In fact, the song is about the retrieval of the narrator’s memory about his failed marriage with his ex-wife because of the latter’s foregrounding of money over love and emotional attachments. Clearly, Kondi’s memory, his remembrance of his ex-wife is subjective, and to a very large extent gendered and sexist. Obviously, the ex-wife's remembrance would be different from Kondi's, because her own memory of the love and marriage would differ from the narrator’s. The song shows clearly the intersection of oral narratives, storytelling and memory. Through memory especially, Kondi demonstrates the effectiveness
of ideophones and anatomes to facilitate narrative patterns, and techniques of narration and voice in “Yengema Women.” In that sense, Kondi’s song illustrates how oral devices perform the literary function of memory as performance, and the performer as memory.

**Conclusion**

From my discussion of the study of ideophones in African languages, and my analysis of Bassie Kondi’s use of the trope in his oral poem, “Yengema women”, it is clear that the poet has made significant contribution to the study of ideophones by his sustained use of the device aimed at constructing character, narrative and meaning in his poem. Bassie Kondi’s song offers the most sustained and elaborate use of the ideophones as a literary technique in a Temne oral poem. Subsequent research on ideophones should focus on its literary potentials, not just its linguistic value as has been the case.

The poet’s use of anatome as a literary technique is new. No known study of African oral literature has dealt with the anatome as a literary technique. Bassie Kondi, in this poem, has used the trope effectively to construct a character rendered ugly by her materialistic propensity. Further research into the resources of African languages is needed to fully understand how the anatome works as a rhetorical and literary, as well as a linguistic, device.

**Works Cited**


Notes:

1 The poem is titled “Yengema Women” but Kondi uses a particular woman, his exwife, to generalize about all Yengema women.
2 For example, on August 20-24, 2015, the 8th World Congress of African Linguistics held a workshop in Kyoto titled, “African Ideophones and their contribution to Linguistics.” Clearly, the study of ideophones and its contributions to African linguistics has been preeminent. However, the contributions of ideophones to African literature have been largely ignored.
3 I first used the concept in my analysis of Bassie Kondi’s poem in a paper presented at Haverford College in 1995.
4 This poem, as we shall soon see, is in the same vein as Kondi’s, with the significant difference that here the disappointment is felt and lamented by a woman.
5 This is my translation of the poem from Temne to English, using the standardized orthography recommended by Sierra Leone’s Ministry of Education in 1984.