

Yoruba praise poems translated by  
Susanne Wenger. Alajire is an ancient  
manifestation of the god of suffering.

THE "ORIKI" OF ALAJIRE

Alajire we ask you to be patient  
You are very quicktempered  
And we worship you for it.

Alajire we ask you to be moderate  
You are wildly extravagant  
And we pray to you for it.

Alajire we ask you not to be jealous  
You are madly jealous  
And we love you for it.

\*

He who wants to know what burns hotter than fire  
May ask the sun.  
The sun will answer with his own fire.  
He who wants to know what burns hotter than his love for Alajire  
May ask Alajire.  
Alajire will answer with his own love.

\*

Alajire you have a strange kind of pity:  
Will you swallow my head  
While you're licking the tears away from my face?

\*

Alajire have you gone mad?  
You swallow heaven and earth  
And are still hungry.  
You drink rivers and ocean  
And are still thirsty.  
Come and feed on my love  
And you will be satisfied.

\*

Alajire you are the wandering madman  
Who roams about aimlessly  
Who knows no roads and no directions  
Yet walks straight into the heart of wisdom.

\*

Alajire,  
Your love turns me inside out.  
Alajire,  
When my love is able to turn you inside out  
I will have to avert my eyes  
Lest I be blinded by beauty.

\*

Alajire who lives in a child's smile.  
When you come to show me your love,  
Be gentle, I am only a child.

\*

There is no wrong way  
That could not be the right way  
Into the wisdom of Alajire.

\*

Alajire,  
I will make you laugh.  
The one-legged man is angry with his friend:  
He accuses him of giving away his secret  
Of telling everybody  
That he only has one leg!

\*

Alajire,  
I am lost in the forest!  
No one can tell me how large it is  
But I can see how dense it is.  
Alajire,  
I will kindle your fire in it.

\*

Alajire,  
You sleep peacefully in the fire  
Like a baby in his mother's arms.  
Alajire,  
You live in the little fist of a child  
Like a King in his palace.

\*

Alajire,  
Your jokes are rough:  
Do you want to kill me  
In order to save me from getting lost?

\*

You to whom children's laughter is food and drink:  
How is it that I love the smell of your breath?  
Wasn't it yesterday that you swallowed the corpse of my child?

\*

Be merciful!  
We know you love beauty.  
Do not covet the beauty  
On the faces of dead children.  
Have mercy!  
Give us peace.  
It is hot.  
The streets are hot and dusty in the sun.  
Have some rest.  
Sit down and eat.  
We have brought you a goat,  
A cock and snails.  
Here is red oil and salt and gin  
Palmwine, honey and black pepper.  
Come on,  
Sit down and eat until you're satisfied.  
May your appetite be spoiled for things  
We do not want to give you.

\*

Alajire,  
You fall gently like a tired leaf.  
You do not fight  
Yet the warrior falls at your feet.  
You never curse  
Yet nobody can stay alive  
When you are in despair.  
You only know love.  
The one who refuses your love  
Will meet your eye  
And love will grow in his heart.

\*

Alajire greets you and says:  
The one who is outside the forest  
Will see the tree that is tallest.  
He will see its crown and branches  
Dancing in the wind.  
The one who is in the forest  
Will see the width of the tree trunk  
Under which he is resting.  
He will see how large it is  
And how full with the water of life.

\*

Nobody knows what he can do.  
The man who bathes God's eye,  
Doesn't realise what he's doing.  
The man who's destroying God's world  
Doesn't know what he's doing.

Yesterday, Before-Yesterday and Today  
Sent out the lion to kill Alajire.  
The lion goes and kills Alajire for them.  
The lion dies on the spot:  
He had forgotten he was Alajire himself.

A man goes out to kill a leopard cub.  
He wants to use it as medicine for his sick child.  
When he sees the leopard cub at play  
He remembers his child and cannot kill it.  
When he returns home he finds his child well.

\*

Alajire,  
When you go to sell your wares on the market  
Don't price them too low  
Or else you'll suffer loss.  
Don't price them too high, Alajire  
Or you'll suffer loss again.  
Alajire,  
Price me well!  
Weigh my love carefully:  
It's the only ware you can sell  
It's the fortune on which you're living.

\*

Alajire,  
You are the body  
My dreams are the soul.  
Alajire,  
You let souls flow together  
Like rivers.  
Alajire,  
To be lost to you makes me win  
And win and win.

\*

Alajire  
I fell into a cold black swamp.  
You saved me  
Now you're drying me off in the fire.  
Is that a new danger?

\*

Alajire,  
You are the weak one  
Who carries the strong one to safety.  
Alajire,  
You fall gently  
Like a withered leaf  
But where you fall  
The sun is born  
The world is changed

Dreams become true  
Lions pounce  
And horses flee  
Madness befalls flowers  
Rivers overflow  
Mountains raise their voices  
And the dead return to life.  
Alajire,  
You fall gently  
Like a withered leaf.

\*

Alajire says:  
Sonponna lives with three bodies:  
One is the eternal earth  
One is eternal knowledge  
One is the eternal heart.

\*

The white crocodile swallows the red fire  
But the fire lives on.

\*

Alajire warns his beloved:  
We do not somersault on top of a tree  
We do not sieve flour in the wind  
We do not send a dog to climb a tree  
We do not ask a goat to watch our yams.  
When we send a child to carry a load  
Let us remember that the child is dearer than the load.

\*

Wisdom we acquired yesterday  
Fails us today.  
Wisdom we gain today  
Is lost tomorrow.  
Be wise like the snake:  
It sheds its beautiful skin,  
Confident  
A more beautiful one lies underneath.

\*

Black horses carry  
Wide eyed riders  
Who point their spears  
To the sky.  
And swarm over the red hot field.  
That is the first dream.

Children born in dark cool rooms  
Play in our laps.  
Suffering throws them down  
And our hope is suspended  
Between their dying and returning.  
That is the second dream.

Alajire, let us escape!

\*

Alajire  
You fell in love with my child.  
Let me look after it for you:  
It's too young to join you now.

\*

Alajire says  
Don't try to surpass me:  
You could only surpass me in foolishness.  
Alajire says  
Don't use me:  
You wouldn't know how to handle me.  
Alajire says  
Don't sell me:  
You don't know my value.

\*

Alajire says  
I will pick you up  
As a mother picks up her new born child.  
I will seize you  
As a lion seizes his prey.  
I will pluck you

As a dreamy cow plucks a blade of grass.  
That's what I'll do, says Alajire.  
Now you get up  
And show what you can do!

\*

Alajire  
When you laugh  
Sun gets pregnant with all life.

\*

Alajire  
You don't sell prayers  
To the sufferer.  
But you accept suffering  
As payment for your own blood.

\*

Be patient  
Whispers the egret to the cow  
As it picks the ticks off the cow's neck.  
Be patient  
Says the butcher to the cow  
As he places his knife on the cow's neck.  
Alajire, Alajire  
What's this patience that we're speaking of?

\*

Alajire  
You're the tiger looking for revenge.  
You stalk your prey  
Hiding your face.  
The offender is killed by fear.

\*

Alajire  
Don't allow joy to leave us.  
You yourself would be driven away  
From the joyless shrine—  
Then where could you go?



\*

Alajire  
The hungry lion  
Controls his fury  
Slips gently into the thicket  
Where the sleepy deer  
Rests without suspicion.  
So you,  
Slip into the bride's dream  
Alajire  
Eager to add life to life.  
Your ways are still not ours.

\*

Ajagame  
Leaves his house and goes to the potter.  
Watches the woman who moulds the clay  
A long time he watches  
Looks up,  
Looks to one side,  
To the other,  
Looking behind him  
He asks his spirit companions  
Which of these two is the older:  
The woman or the pot she is moulding.  
The spirits laugh and say:  
You know it yourself, our father,  
The pot is older.  
Because the stuff the pot is made of  
Was there before the stuff the woman is made of.  
Ajagame watches the woman moulding the pots  
And continues to dream.  
He looks up,  
Looks to one side,  
To the other,  
Looking behind him  
He asks his spirit companions:  
Which of these two is the older:  
The creator—or the world he has made?  
And they laugh and say:  
You know it yourself, our father,  
The world is older.  
For the world had to exist in a dream  
Before it could be created.

\*

Alajire

When there's a smell of corpses in the forest,  
We know that a spirit has emerged from the ground.  
When you hear us abuse you,  
You will know that we're praising you.

\*

Alajire

We see what no one can hold.  
We get what no one can see.  
Alajire  
Why are your lips always parted,  
Why is my head flying  
When I remember you?  
You are bad, Alajire  
You are more than bad.  
But all we want is to hold you.  
We hold what we cannot see.  
We see what we cannot get.  
Alajire  
Why are your lips always parted,  
Why are your eyes always wide?  
You are deep, Alajire,  
You are deep.

\*

Alajire

Two hundred eyes stare at the bean seller.  
Nothing is wrong with the bean seller.  
Adunni, Adunni  
Two hundred eyes stare at the bean seller—  
Then what's wrong with those who stare?

\*

Adunni

Where did you get your head?  
I want to go and collect my own,  
Adunni where did you get your head?

\*

Alajire  
We belong to you,  
We do our own work.  
How can we know  
What everybody else is doing?

\*

Alajire  
Your work is hard.  
My breast can't hold it  
My head can't hold it  
Your work is hard.  
Alajire  
In the child's hand  
Any kind of medicine  
Is turned into your work.

Note: The survival of these praise poems, writes Ulli Beier, comes from Susanne Wenger's attempts at "reconstruction and recreation of all the forgotten and delapidated Yoruba shrines in the town of Oshogbo," including that of Alajire. "Most forgotten of the gods," writes Beier, "nothing remained of his sanctuary but the site itself. Worship had not taken place there for a couple of decades. Even the god's praise names (oriki) had been forgotten. Susanne Wenger not only rebuilt the shrine, but she revived the worship. To do so it was necessary for her, together with a group of Yoruba drummers and praise singers, to recreate the praise songs. This happened spontaneously during the ritual and the body of poems given here was built up over several weeks. "