

Urhobo Children's Aboriginal Songs: Values and Benefits

Rebecca Ufuomaroghene Ogbeide

Department of Music, Delta State University, Abraka

Email: silobogbest2016@gmail.com

&

Agatha Ijeoma Onwuekwe, Ph.D

Department of Music, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Email: musikdon@gmail.com

Abstract

Over the years, the Urhobo of Delta State place high value on their indigenous music. From history, their children learnt many of their cultural values through the performance of folksongs. This played pivotal roles in indigenous musical and non-musical knowledge transfer to the children and as well, served as a means of cultural knowledge integration. Today, this practice is gradually fading away due to civilization and the Eurocentric nature of the Nigerian educational system. This paper therefore, focuses on Urhobo children's aboriginal songs, taking cognizance of their values and benefits. Using interview and observation as the main instruments for data collection, the study reveals that indigenous songs are didactic in nature and assist to thrive entertainment performed among the Urhobo pre-colonial period. The paper recommends that indigenous songs should be the source of early music learning at pre- and basic schools' levels of education in order to enhance their preservation and sustenance.

Keywords: Urhobo, children, aboriginal songs, values, benefits

Introduction

Indigenous music is at the bedrock of every culture. They foster communication, socialization, togetherness and refreshment among community compatriots. Besides, they are tools for moulding the character and personality of the young people as they have been used to instill norms and values of the society in their sub-conscious minds. Like any other cultures, the Urhobo have songs that gear towards children's upbringing in conformity with the expected and acceptable cultural and societal standards. Moral orientation and education, which revolve around the moral obligation of the child to himself, his parents, neighbours, and society at large, are couched in the very songs. In this regard, Idamoyibo (2021:20) posits that "music does not only seek to identify the people's culture, it further upholds and checks the socio-cultural values that identify the society and the people." Also, Agu (2011:4) adds that, "moral education is mainly channelled through the medium of folk music because it enhances easy comprehension and assimilation." In the same vein, Idolor (1993) affirms:

before the intrusion of European activities into African civilization, there had been some systematized indigenous educational processes. For example, morals were taught through folktales, folksongs, moonlight activities and exemplary personality of parents. These media of instruction are seen to be effective after due consideration of their functions in the society (p. 154).

As food nutrients are essential to a child's growth and physical development, so is a child in need of moral, social and spiritual values for his/ her total wellbeing. In both formal and informal platforms, songs are used for effective transmission of these values to children.

The Child

The child is a young individual between birth and adolescent. Ekanem (2004:44) sees a "child" as "an individual ranging from zero (0) to twelve (12) years of age." Uyovbukerhi (2005:604) differs as he describes a "child" as "a living human being within the age bracket of between one and eighteen years or from one to twenty years." He further notes that a child's status is not always defined by chronological age but by other parameters often diametrically opposed to diachronic methods of determining age. Finnegan (1970:304) makes this point quite clearly when she states that "it is common for a ceremonial initiation to mark a clear dividing line between childhood and maturity; often taking place at around the age of puberty, but in some societies (or with some individuals) this may be as young as say, seven or eight years old."

From the above statement, the distinction between childhood and maturity is the age of puberty rites celebration and this varies from one community or ethnic group to another. In Urhobo land, the child referred to as *omotete* is between the ages of infancy and fifteen years (Ereforo, 2017). The child in Urhobo represents innocence; apartheid (does not belong to the father and mother alone but belongs to the community, the nation and world at large). The child is a symbol of peace, arbitration (settles disputes), perceived as sacred and respected.

Urhobo Children's Aboriginal Songs and How they are Performed

Aboriginal songs are the indigenous songs of a people. Ogebeide (2016: 190) further explains that "they are often regarded by many as the soul of culture because they serve as important vehicles for expressing emotions, communicating messages and conveying the belief systems of a society". In view of the foregoing, Urhobo children's aboriginal songs is, therefore, defined as the indigenous songs of the Urhobo that is composed and performed either by adults for children or performed by children alone. From this definition, Urhobo children's aboriginal songs can be grouped into two: those sung or performed by adults for children, especially infants, to keep them comfortable, give them pleasure, make them happy, eulogize them, and captivate their interest or perhaps lure them to sleep. As such, the children do not practically take part in the songs sometimes but just listen to them. Examples are lullabies, also referred to as songs for soothing or calming babies. Another group of Urhobo children's aboriginal songs are those children themselves sing, perform and sometimes dance to. They include songs used by them to have fun and pleasure either at school or at home. Minors sing such songs when they come together for moonlight plays and for other activities which include games for the purpose of recreation, education and socialization. The scope of these songs is broad and involves educating Urhobo children on acceptable norms and values; inculcation of history, beliefs, traditions and taboos of the people. Urhobo children's songs could be performed either officially or unofficially. Formal occasion for their performance includes certain ritual observances, festivals, Christmas celebration, graduation ceremonies, anniversaries or other events of social relevance. The informal presentation of their performance takes place at event centres, playgrounds, games or mostly at home.

Characteristics of Urhobo Children's Songs

Some of the major characteristics of Urhobo children's aboriginal songs are:

- i. They songs are in Urhobo native language, attributively short and usually recycling. They are at times in strophic form while the theme is developed with new texts, new pieces of information and concepts that revolve around the children to mould their lives so that they can understand the sociology of the society among others. Thus, the songs are motivating and instructive to young minds.
- ii. They are mostly simple both in melody and rhythm, less philosophical, of short phrases and repetitive. Even if the songs are philosophical, the adults interpret them for the children. The texts are also mainly simple with youths-related daily affairs that children easily take care of. The structure of the songs is dominantly either in call and response or just solo and refrain forms.
- iii. They are euphonic and highly rhythmical, involving gestures and general body language. These make the songs captivating, joyous and playful.
- iv. The elements therein help to showcase the uniqueness of the Urhobo ethnicity, thereby making prominent their cultural distinctiveness.
- v. In play forms, they sometimes entail children imitating adult roles, thereby sub-consciously inculcating a sense of responsibility in them.
- vi. Some of the songs address gender- based interesting issues.
- vii. Their game songs are somewhat mentally stimulating.
- viii. They are sometimes performed by the children themselves or by an adult who is singing to captivate their attention and may involve dancing.
- ix. They are specially designed to imbibe morales, manners, acceptable behaviour and values in the beneficiaries.

Formal and Informal Values of Urhobo Children's Aboriginal Songs

According to Okoro (2018:13), "Values are important social facts, useful, desirable or admirable to individuals in particular and to society in general." In furtherance, Nye (1977:153) avers that "folk music is valuable and relevant to the development of social concepts and values and also have high appeal because they are rhythmically and/or melodically attractive and have subject-matter that children can understand". Every society practises a culture with which it is uniquely identified. Beyond birth, cultural integration of an individual is paramount to making one a bonafide member of the society. One way of getting children enculturated in the rules and regulations guiding their milieu is through aboriginal songs. The songs instil in them the spirit of cultural identity and also teach the values of hard work, good manners, transparency, integrity, teamwork, uprightness, fear of the Creator (God), and fosters solidarity among them.

Thus, the children's songs possess instructional guidelines on moral behaviours essential for a well-behaved and organized life as well as are suitable tools for moulding their character. Furthermore, the songs check children's deviation from the mores of the society and in the long run help the society to thrive. The children's aboriginal songs sung by their caregivers or by the children themselves prepare them to fit into the socio-cultural structure of the society. This done helps to maintain the indigenous integrity and subsequently encourage the continuity of the internal culture by the younger generation.

Sub-consciously, children usually learn through simple songs that help to communicate their environment to their senses. The educative role of songs helps the cognitive development and self-expression of the child. In formal settings, these songs are commonly employed in pre-nursery, nursery and primary schools. Through the singing of songs, infants and teenagers are able to internalize the facts that are embedded in the songs thereby increasing their knowledge accordingly. For instance, if children are taught a song with such information as 'do not steal or take other people's belongings without obtaining permission from them; as they assimilate that teaching, it undoubtedly adds to their frontier of knowledge. By implication, values of indigenous songs, as they affect children in their social environment, gear to show them sense of direction in the course of their daily living. More so, the songs help children to be civilized thus, making them mature in planning for the future, taking the right decision, having self-confidence and good sense of judgement altogether. Urhobo children's songs provide outlets for teaching Urhobo patois. Such, children who are uninterested in learning the language in the classroom take pleasure in singing in the Urhobo patois. Thus, the songs serve as motivational tools in their learning process as they help to boost their willingness to learn. Again, Urhobo children's songs help the children to express themselves culturally, develop their environmental experience, create social awareness or expose them to their milieu and also make them engage in concerted songs, thereby enabling them experience part of the larger community.

Facets of Urhobo Children's Aboriginal Songs in Their Developmental Stages

(i) Music at Childbirth

Childbirth, a divine programme by the Almighty God, started from the foundation of the world. It is the delivery of a human being formed in the image of the triune God. In the biblical context, childbirth symbolizes joy, God's love for mankind, fruit of the womb, increment, fruitfulness and reward from God consequent upon marital union. In this regard, Okafor (2005:47) affirms that "childbirth is regarded as a blessing and an honour from God". In Urhobo land, childbirth is heralded with lots of fanfare accompanied with singing, dancing and rejoicing with the parents of the newborn baby who in return provide drinks, kola nuts (wedged with money) to welcome their nuclear family, extended families and well-wishers altogether. This presentation is usually called *Udi re Omiovwo* (drink for newborn). Thus, people usually come to drink *Udi re Omiovwo* for about a period of three months, presenting the child with various gifts and rejoicing for the baby's safe delivery. Childbirth among the Urhobo of Delta State is usually announced with songs of praises by the womenfolk expressing the joy of motherhood. An example of such song is:

OMIOVWỌ VWE RHA
(Motherhood is Sweet)

Urhobo Folksong

O-mio-vwọ vwe rhen yo jọ miọ vwọ vwe rha o miọ vwọ vwe rha
i ne ne rien vwie o-mio vwọ vwe rhen yo jọ miọ vwọ vwe rha
e mo ri ne ne o miọ vwọ vwe rha eh...

Omiovwọ vwe rhen yo, jọ miọ vwọ vwe rha
Omiovwọ vwe rhen yo, jọ miọ vwọ vwe rha
Omiovwọ vwe rha inene rien vwie
Omiovwọ vwe rhen yo, jọ miọ vwọ vwe rha
Emọ ri nene o miọ vwọ vwe rha eh....

Mothers don't sleep, but motherhood is sweet
Mothers don't sleep, but motherhood is sweet
A mother has put to bed safely
Mothers don't sleep, but motherhood is sweet
Children of our mother, motherhood is sweet.

This song is usually performed on three occasions: at childbirth, funerals or when a daughter is to be given out in marriage. The travail of childbirth is painful. However, the parents of the girl-child enjoy various gifts from the suitor before, during and after the marriage ceremony. Thus, nursing a girl-child till she becomes responsible to a marriageable age is very tasky or challenging, but seeing her grow and become fulfilled through marriage brings joy and excitement.

ii. Lullabies: These are Urhobo children's songs, sung by parents and care givers to crying infants/babies to lure them to sleep. These songs have soothing effect and as such help to keep babies calm. Aside having a great calming or lulling effect on children, lullabies are potential means of communicating with them, informing and educating them on the happenings in the society and are also vital components of the Urhobo culture. Again, they contribute generally to infants' social, historical and natural intelligence. Thus, Gunes and Gunes (2012) assert:

while the baby communicates with the mother through lullabies, its mind becomes active. Because as long as the mother keeps speaking or singing, the related perception centres in the brain of the child remain stimulated. And this contributes to a faster comprehension of the desired information the baby is supposed to perceive... lullabies have the aspect of a historical document in that they comprise history, social life, traditions and customs within their body (p. 318).

Contentwise, they may have the impression of being playful, may be educative, informative or even entertaining; but is characteristically performed with soft and friendly vocal tone. In many cases, a regular eye contact exists between the adult performing the song and the child listening to it. Bodily contact between both parties is also common; at times it involves light patting, caressing, cuddling up and gentle rocking of the baby, especially at the back. Lullabies can be performed for both pre-verbal and verbal children. One of Urhobo lullabies is exemplified below:

Inene
(Mother) Urhobo Folk Song

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I - ne ne'o Eh! Eh! Ó-mó viẹ'o Eh! Eh! O-pku-ru ro-de'o, Eh! Eh!

39

She-gbe-ri' dje-rhe'o Eh! Eh! A - sa wan'o Eh! Eh! wo rhe vwe' vie ke-o

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Eh! Eh! wo cha re! Eh! Eh! wo cha re! Eh! Eh!

Inene-o Eh! Eh! (2x)

Omọ viẹ-o Eh! Eh!
Okpurhe rode-o Eh! Eh!
Shegberi' djerhe-o Eh! Eh!
Asa wan-o Eh! Eh!
Wo rhe vwe' vie ke-o Eh! Eh!
Wo cha re, Eh! Eh!

Mother, Eh! Eh! (2x)

Baby is crying Eh! Eh!
A big tree Eh! Eh!
Has fallen across the road Eh! Eh!
You can cross it Eh! Eh!
Come and breast feed him Eh! Eh!
Are you coming now? Eh! Eh!

iii. Play Songs/Game Songs: A game is an activity performed by a group of people, usually bound by rules, unanimously accepted by the participants for the purpose of pleasure, amusement or having fun. Ogbeide and Onwuekwe (2022:192) also define game as a recreational and developmentally stimulating physical and social activity, set up to test the knowledge, cognitive alertness, mental and physical skills as well as the agility of the player(s). On the other hand, a play is a group of recreational activities engaged in by a child or children within a given age bracket for the purpose of building and strengthening the bond of friendship. A play may not involve a game. During play, children may give instructions among themselves, not necessarily adopting already existing rules or formulating another, as are commonly witnessed in games. Greenberge (1995) in Eliason and Jenkins (1999:12) writes that 'games' likewise 'plays' are “not just for recess and for fun after ‘work’ is finished; they are media through which a great deal of learning takes place.” Play and game songs are designed for children’s amusement and recreational purposes, they keep children lively, make their company pleasurable on the playground and enable them to express their joyful emotions to the fullest by singing, making bodily movements and expressions identified with different gestures.

In time past, as it was practised in most African communities, children’s play or game songs in Urhobo communities were featured prominently during moonlight games. Today, this practice is fast eroding due to cultural modernization and availability of technological devices in vogue such as- radio, television, the internet, etc. They are now performed sparingly at daytime in some rural areas or at school settings during recess or children’s leisure at home. Below is an example of Urhobo children’s play song:

Ikomfotu
(Comfort) Urhobo Folk Song

I-kom - fo - tu mua me che re o-dge kpa-uda I-kom - fo - tu mua me che
 4 re o-dge kpa-uda e-gan-gan vwi - rhi she - re o me gwa - re
 7 o - bu - nu so ni ro - ye gba dje rhe A-me re'i - ba - ba kue rha
 10 — re e - rha - re fu - re —

<i>Ikomfotu</i> Ikomfotu mua me chere <i>Odje kpa-ada 2x</i> <i>Egangan vwirhi shere,</i> <i>Ame ghwere</i> <i>Obunu so ni roye gba dje rhe</i> <i>Ame re ibaba ku kueha re</i> <i>Erhare fure</i>	(Comfort) Comfort put water on the fire and ran out to play The three- pot stand broke, the water spilt She cried for her mother to come Father's water has split on the fire the fire quenched
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This play song satirizes comfort, a girl with lackadaisical attitude, who does her chores with utmost negligence. Her yearn for play resulted in her inability to observe that the pot of water was wrongly positioned on the tripod stand. After she left for play, it broke and splash on fire. When she returned, she discovered that the fire had already quenched. Knowing full well that her parents will punish her severely for act of carelessness and negligence, she lamented and beckoned on her mother to confess her fault, asked for forgiveness and sought solution thereafter. This song cautions teenagers against negative attitudes such as stubbornness and waywardness as they attract punishment to them and are also abhorred by the Urhobo.

iv. Didactic Songs: These are Urhobo children's songs strictly intended for them at their verbal stage for the purpose of creating awareness of responsibilities expected of them in their day to day living within the milieu. These informative/ instructive songs remind them of basic house chores, personal cleanliness and unconditional submission to seniors/elders. They sharpen children physically, emotionally, intellectually and morally. Through them, children are instructed on conventional morale, social behaviours such as obedience, kindness, hardwork, good mannerism, etc. Some teach the children numeracy, alphabets and expose them to their cultural vocabulary (Urhobo). Thus, the songs play important roles in the indigenous development of children's patois. Below is one of Urhobo children's didactic songs:

Tiyoto-ta
(Tiyoto-ta) Urhobo Folk Song

Ti-yo-to ta ti-yo - to Ti-yo-to ta ti-yo to O-se wen dje we ben o-ni wen dje we
 5 ben o-rhón ro nye me - e o-v'u-yo vwin gbe hwe Ti-yo-to ta ti-yo - to Ti-yo-to ta ti-yo
 9 to Ti-yo-to ta ti-yo - to Ti-yo-to ta ti-yo to O-se wen dje we
 13 ben o - ni wen dje we ben o - rhón ro nye me - e o - v'u - yo vwin gbe
 16 hwe Ti - yo - to ta ti - yo - to Ti - yo - to ta ti - yo to

Tiyoto-ta

*Tiyoto-ta tiyoto,
 Tiyoto-ta tiyoto
 Oşẹ wẹn dje wẹ bẹn
 Oni wẹn dje wẹ bẹn
 Orhón ro nye me -e
 Ovu uyovwin gbe hwe
 Tiyoto-ta tiyoto
 Tiyoto-ta tiyoto*

(Tiyoto-ta)

Tiyoto-ta tiyoto,
 Tiyoto-ta tiyoto,
 Your father warned you severally,
 Your mother warned you severally,
 Ears that refused to listen,
 Always die with the head.
 Tiyoto-ta tiyoto
 Tiyoto-ta tiyoto

Tiyoto in this song is the name of a stubborn or disobedient child who was warned severally against the repercussive/disastrous effect of being rebellious which in the long run ends in death. Thus, children are admonished through the song to be obedient and always pay heed to their parents' instructions.

v. Songs of Respect and Appreciation: These indigenous songs of Urhobo extraction inculcate in children high moral values such as honouring and showing respect and gratitude to the Creator (God), their parents, elders, and any well-meaning compatriots. They add to proper upbringing of children in conformity with moral standards. Below is an example of Urhobo children's song of respect and appreciation:

Miche yero'ni vo'se me
(I Will Appreciate My Mother and Father)

Urhobo Folk Song

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Miche yero'ni vo'se me

*Mi che yer'oni me (2x)
Ro ké vwẹ emu me ria
Mi che yer'ose me
Ro ko'ni me igho
Ro vwo chere mu meria
Ye, ye, ye, ye, mi che
yera ye do*

(I Will Appreciate My Mother and Father)

I will greet my mother (2x),
Who gives me food to eat;
I will greet my father
Who gives my mother money
to cook the food I eat.
I gratefully, greet both of
them, thank you.

vi. **Folktale Songs:** These are Urhobo children's songs of events (imaginative or real) that attempt to teach them certain moral lessons, convey wisdom to and imbibe knowledge in them. They stimulate the children's cognitive/reasoning faculty which enable them elicit moral lessons embedded in stories associated with the said songs. Thus, these songs are didactic, historic source of information, involve moral orientation and are entertainment-oriented. In the light of the above, Lawrence (1975) posits that "folksongs, folktales and storytelling are parts of early childhood musical education which is fashioned to bring about the child's fundamental development need in a society". Originally, storytelling among the Urhobo is an evening event where both children and adults assemble under a tree, around the hearth (fireplace), market or village square, and town halls or even at homes. The song below is associated with the story of a tortoise and an antelope who were once friends. The story goes thus: One day, a tortoise decided to pay a visit to his friend. On his way, he felt a sign indicating that his friend was either eating or about to do so. At this juncture, the tortoise quickly planned to dispossess the antelope of his food. To this effect, he set a trap (on the way) some metres away from antelope's house. When he got there, he trickily requested antelope to go along the path to pick up his lost item. The unsuspecting antelope about to eat his food, respected tortoise and moved in the said direction and was trapped up. It struggled to disentangle itself from the trap to no avail. Meanwhile, tortoise settled down comfortably and started gulping the victim's food. Luckily, however, another antelope came along the same pathway and the one caught in a trap called it to come with tortoise, through this song:

Uzo bi-ogbei rhe kue- kue x2

Ogbei ruvwẹ oru vwe abọ vwirhin kue-kue

Ogbei ruvwẹ oriemu me nu kue- kue

Antelope, bring tortoise to me.

Tortoise has brutally broken my hands.

Tortoise has deceived me and eaten my food.

Realizing that he would not be able to drag tortoise towards the trap, the benefactor antelope deceived tortoise that his friend was having another delicious meal where he was trapped. Tortoise, with this piece of information rushed to the spot out of greed. The second antelope one trapped and both of them fought the tortoise. At last, they raised tortoise up and dashed him against a stone. Resultantly the

tortoise's bodily coverage broke which accounts for the tortoise shell comprising segmentation to the present day.

Moral lesson:

1. one should not be tricky
2. one should not be greedy.

The song:

Ogbesia: Uzo bio ogbei rhe

Storyteller: Antelope, bring tortoise to me.

Emo na: kue-kue

Audience: : kue-kue

Ogbesia: Ogbei ruvwe, oru vwe vwirha'abo

Storyteller: Tortoise has brutally broken my hands

Emo na: kue-kue

Audience: kue-kue

Ogbesia: Ogbei ruvwe oriemu me nu

Storyteller: Tortoise has deceived me and eaten my food

Emo na: kue-kue

Audience: kue-kue

Ogbesia: Uzo, bi'ogbei rhe

Storyteller: Antelope, bring tortoise to me.

Emo na: kue-kue

Audience: kue-kue

Uzo
(Antelope)

Urhobo Folk Song

Call: U-zo bio' gbei rhe U-zo bio' gbei rhe kue kue o-gbei ru-e

Response: kue kue kue kue

6
Cal.: o - ru vwe vwi rha' - bo Ogbei ru-vwe o - rie - mu me nu

Resp.: kue kue kue

9
Cal.: U - zo bio' gbei rhe

Resp.: kue kue kue

Conclusion

The paper concludes that Urhobo children's aboriginal songs serve as important avenues for cultural transmission. They help children to be properly groomed in their tradition of musical culture and as well prepare them to fit into the socio-cultural structure of their society. They also function as a potential means of disseminating socio-cultural, moral and educational values as they serve as effective agents of socialization and sources of acquiring neologisms, concepts and skill.

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Interviewees

- Prof. E. G. Idolor, a music educationist of Okpe/Urhobo extraction, 24th August, 2021.
- Prof. J. Obitaba, an Urhobo native, 2022.
- Dr. (Mrs.) P. I. Okpeki, a music educationist of Urhobo extraction, 24th August, 2021.
- Dr. P. Omoko, an Urhobo native, 20th July, 2021.
- Rev'd Iwvorin Godwin, an Urhobo Linguist, 14th July, 2021.
- Dr. (Mrs.). D. Ereforo, a music educationist of Urhobo extraction, 20th July, 2021.
- Mr. O. Ehwre, a music educationist of Urhobo extraction, 4th August, 2021.