

PRESERVING URHOB0 CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH SONGS AND FOLKTALE

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Abstract

Culture encompasses the entire gamut of a people's way of life which is reflected in the socio-politico-economics system of such people. Culture is by far more predominantly reflected in a people's mode of communication. This is why every culture is important as well as relates to some other cultures in one way or the other. The Urhobo culture which is replete with songs is somewhat related to its neighbouring cultures, particularly those of Benin, Iteskiri and Isoko as well as that of Yoruba. Thus, like the other cultures, the Urhobo has a rich cultural heritage which is preserved and disseminated through songs, folktales amongst others. The Urhobo language therefore becomes the index through which songs and folktales are communicated. This paper therefore focuses on the Urhobo traditional songs as valuable instruments enshrined in the Urhobo culture. The analysis of the songs revealed that the Urhobo traditional songs and folktales perform numerous functions such as being didactic, humorous etc.

Introduction

Urhobo nation is replete with oral artists in both ancient and modern times. These artists, who are gifted, perform the social and traditional roles of transmitting important and valuable aspects of the urhobo culture from one generation to another. This was particularly common in ancient times especially because writing was not

encouraged. In many communities, some oral artists otherwise known as oral poets are dexterous in their use of alliteration/assonance, when either rendering a local song or narrating a folk-tale. For example, the *Asiabe asiabe...* is a very popular folk-tale among the urhobos in Nigeria. Most of these tales are very appealing to the local consumers. In fact they are socially relevant even till now whenever they are chanted in our local dialect. Just as Art and Culture form inseparable pair, so does oral art goes together with Urhobo language culture and communication. This is why "Indigenous communication system is steeped in indigenous literature and politics. The process of gagging as prevalent in local culture led to much of oral practices, especially the oral practices of talking to oneself (soliloquy) which in Yoruba is termed **DIDASO** i.e "to talk endlessly". "to rant", (Anokari, 2002:5).

Social Relevance in Urhobo and Africa Communication System

The social relevance of the Urhobo oral art (which indeed cannot be realistically performed without the use of or reference to Urhobo language) is in fact embedded in the language. It is mere understatement to say that Urhobo language has global relevance. Apart from the value of Urhobo oral art, the language has been drafted into the scheme of things with particular reference to information technology. In the words of Salawu (2006:3) "the information technologies are being adapted to fit into the world of some African languages" which include Urhobo. To be very specific and emphatic, he further states that:

Marc Lacey, in an article published in the New York Time of November 12, 2004, made certain revelations about attempts to make computers meet African languages..., linguists are working with experts in information technology to make computers more accessible to Africans who happen not to know English, French or to other major languages that have been programmed into the world's desktops.

The achievement of the aforementioned pursuit will no doubt strengthen the recommendation of Urhobo modern artists who are urged to communicate in the local language instead of the use of national languages imposed on the African nations by the colonial masters that we call *Lingua Franca*. A *lingua franca* in this sense is the language adopted and used for the purpose of general communication. In spite of the above stand we however submit here that it is quite cumbersome to depend solely on our local languages most especially because of the need to facilitate communication in written or oral form of most Africa modern nations. We are convinced that there should be no rigidity as to whether a given African nation should adopt a *lingua franca* or not. The factor to consider therefore is whether a country is multi-ethnic and multicultural in nature. Let this become the guiding rule in deciding the language to use: local languages or *lingua franca*. The African states that speak a variety of languages as we have in the Coastal West Africa (Niger Delta) and the East Africa Coast cannot do without the use of a *lingua franca*. Their multilingual condition naturally encourages the use of a national language. This in fact is the situation in Nigeria where English language serves as *lingua franca*. In the East African Coast, Swahili is a common language of trade. But if we must argue objectively, we need to state that people in other continents of the world apart from Africa, should learn and speak African languages in order to facilitate a more cordial relationship and enjoy our rich cultural heritage. The View of Mazrui (1998:49) is related to our emphasis as seen below:

African languages need to become part of the linguistic repertoires of people of European decent... Europeans who learn African languages will have acquired a linguistic window for comprehension of the African cultural landscape; and armed with the understanding they would probably have been better equipped to participate in the construction of a new and more peaceful world order.

THE PLACE OF SONGS AND FOLKTALES IN URHOBONATION:

The Urhobo songs and folktales, like other Africa indigenous songs, have a wide range of purposes, most of which are couched in oral performance (Okorodudu, 2010). What this portends is "an indication that Africa culture still remains, largely, an oral culture" (Salawu, 2006). Most of the traditional songs in Urhobo are rendered mainly by children and youths who embark on the vocal rendition with much zest and sense of duty "through active involvement in different kinds of musical activities, such as participation in traditional dances and songs..." (Ekpo, 2011:66). Ekpo also posits that "a child who is deprived of good music training may be missing the much needed education and assistance for balanced development (Ekpo *ibid*). The roles of songs and folktales in Urhobo which shall be discussed in the presentation analysis of some traditional songs include the following highlights:

- For entertainment
- For satire
- To mock
- To teach moral lesson
- To resist oppression
- For encomium/Eulogy etc.

Analysis of songs and folktales in Urhobo.

Song Text I

Call	Babajiga m̄ e' kpe ghwa
Response	Owo mia vwe
Call	Babajiga m̄ e kpire
Response	Owo mia vwe
Call	Babajiga m̄ e kpeki
Response	Owo mia vwe
Call	Babajiga m̄ e kpi ame
Response	Owo mia vwe
Call	Babajiga m̄ a riemu
Response	Owo kpo nu re

English Translation

Call	Babajiga come and let us go to farm
Response	My leg is paining me
Call	Babajiga come, let us go and fetch firewood
Response	My leg is paining me
Call	Babajiga come and let us go to the market
Response	My leg is paining me
Call	Babajiga come and let us go and fetch water
Response	My leg is paining me
Call	Babajiga come and let us eat
Response	My leg pain is gone

Analysis

This song in Urhobo is titled Babjiga. It is chanted mainly by youths and children with an air of sarcasm in their tone. It is intended to mock the indolent child especially the children within the teenage age bracket. The child so tagged 'Babjiga' in the song is believed to be pretending. He/she hides his/her indolence under the guise of leg pain, signifying that he/she cannot walk, hence he/she refuses to heed the request to go to the farm (eghwa), or fetch water (ame), or fetch firewood (ire), or even go to the market (eki). Unfortunately and surprising, the child's response in the last call is positive and prompt. See the last two lines of the song text above. When Babjiga was called to "come and let us eat", he/she quickly exclaimed "my leg pain is gone". He/She wants to eat but does not want to work. The song was composed by parents (fathers and mothers) and handed over to the children who during play time chant it severally to mock and taunt any lazy child. Babjiga denotatively refers to the one suffering acute leg pain, or one who is physically indisposed to do any serious work. Connotatively, however, Babajiga means deceitful, dishonest, hypocritical behaviour. In one word it connotes jiggery-pokery.

Song text II

Ubi vweeeeeeeee...

Analysis

"Ubi vwe" seems to be a one line song when we look at the structure. It is a song that is pulled in one very long stretch until the vowel in one's breath tails off in a rather very slow process. "Ubi vwe" is a game song so popular among the Urhobo teenage boys and girls. It is particularly interesting to note that this is not a game for every Dick, Tom and Harry. It is essentially meant for those who can hold their breath for a very long time. To begin this game song, the boys and girls begin the selection process by dividing those they consider fit into two equal groups of five, six or so, depending on the number of people that are present. The fact that it is a moon-light game under the passive supervision and occasionally laughter from the elders close-by makes it more fascinating, competitive and lively. A distant line is drawn very far from the starting point and a moderator is positioned at the marked line to ensure that each person holding the 'ubi' (seed) gets to the marked line before returning to the starting point. This game song is more or less survival of the fittest type. Each person takes his/her turn of reaching the marked point and returning to the starting point by walking while singing "ubi vweeeee" without breaking or interrupting your breath. Every game has dos and don'ts. So in this game:

- You must sing "ubi vweee" to the hearing of every one
- You must not break the song until you complete walking to and fro the length marked for the game.
- You must not run, lest you will be disqualified.

Sometimes, the girls form their group separate from the boys. This is usually more exciting as each opposite sex group strives to win and gain the applause of the elders sitting near-by. The game is often tough to the extent that there may be no winner sometimes. This may be due to the inability of any of the participants to walk to and fro

without breaking their breath or exhausting their breath. This game song is important in Urhobo because it is entertains. It is full of laughter which is a "means by which man loses tangle with apprehension (Odebunmi and Ogunleye, 2003:243).

Song Text III

Wrestler	Adadamu o mi muabo none	(Butterfly, I wrestle with you today)
Chorus	Ai ughe	(They are watching)
Wrestler	Adadamu o mi muabo none	(Butterfly I wrestle with you today)
Chorus	Ai ughe	(They are watching)
Wrestler	Mi mu re	(I'm wrestling now)
Chorus	Ai ughe	(They are watching)
Wrestler	Mi mu re	(I'm wrestling now)
Chorus	Ai ughe	(They are watching)
Wrestler	Qri mi muru o, Me vweru rhi' usi	(Whoever I catch) (I defeat him flat)
Chorus	Ai ughe	(They are watching)
Wrestler	Abv woro-vworo kiro dibo dibo	(Soft hands like banana)

Analysis

This song is titled Adadamu' which means butterfly. As we can see from the English translation, it is a song rendered during wrestling time. Wrestling, as we know is a serious business even though play-mates engage in it as one of the exercises in Urhoboland especially during festivals. Wrestling is commonly practised among the boys, while the girls and other non-participating boys cheer-up those involved in the wrestling contest. The overall winner is usually respected and treated with some level of fear especially among peer group.

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It is practised in the primary or secondary school field or in some open compounds. Each wrestler is full of optimism that he will win the contest. This is what informs the wrestler's penultimate statement in the song: "ori mi muru o, me vwerọ rhi' usi" which means, whoever I catch I defeat him flat. With muscles visibly standing out, the two contestants struggle and breathe heavily, calculating the skill to employ in order to out-wit his opponent. There is usually a hilarious up-roar whenever a wrestler defeats his opponent. Prior to this, each wrestler takes his boasting turn - a practice which obtains till today by wrestlers and boxers in the ring. Wrestling is never done in the night or morning. It is early evening affair. The reward of the overall winner in a wrestling contest is mainly showers of encomium from those who are watching. Songs of praise are formed in honour of the winner.

Song Text IV

Traditional

Egu r' ikpekpa
Egu r' ikpkpa
Orere r' ukodo
Gbara vwọtọ
Wọ vwọ riọ

English Translation

Pounded yam kept up in the hark
Pounded yam kept up in the hark
Cricket in deep bowl
Roast it
and eat with it.

Analysis

This traditional song is sung by women only during fish festival in Agbarha Kingdom. It is therefore a piece of satire meant to resist and castigate husbands who are oppressive and negligent in providing for their families. The song is composed and rendered by the women folk. The song is a corrective measure, a mild protest and punishment of husbands who failed to provide money for food. This is why the little food the woman could provide is kept in the highest hark where

the husband will labour furiously before he can bring it down. It is unusual for food to be kept in the hark. Worse still the food is to be eaten with cricket instead of meat or fish. Similarly the husband has to labour to roast the cricket before eating. This indeed is making a caricature of the husband for failure in his duty.

Song Text V

Urhobo

Uriokr wo de vr̩̩ re
Wo mi shigue k' oghene
Uriri k' od̩̩ royē
Kiri di' oyē ma vware
Vwi akpo

English Translation

When you wake up in the morning
You kneel down to God
Give glory to His name
Because He created us
Into this world.

Urhobos have different traditional worship songs right from their existence as a nation. The above song is a typical example of one. It ascribes glory, honour and adoration to God as our creator.

Folktale Text: Tortoise and Dog's race competition.

Ed̩̩ vo k' oteri
Erako v̩̩ ogbeyi da yeyan on̩̩ dj̩̩n
Erako da ta n' oye dj̩̩ n' ogbeyi shesheri
Ogbeyi da be ta n' oye dj̩̩ n' erako
Ede s̩̩ asa shesheri vw̩̩ k' aye hwi v̩̩
Aye de muo n̩̩ phiyo n' ekwot̩̩ vo re t̩̩ fa
E̩̩ sosu̩̩ erako de pho, o̩̩ de hw̩̩ ogbeyi
Ogbeyi, ogb̩̩ ghwaren ode
Ode chere mu asa kwi ve o̩̩k̩̩k̩̩ rhi dhede k̩̩ erako
Aye vw̩̩ dj̩̩ tu khervie, erako dam re mu esosu̩̩ o̩̩da re
Oriemu nu o̩̩da vwere yara
Ogbeyi vwo joma dj̩̩ te rako nu, erako da royvw̩̩
K̩̩ roma muo ne phiyo ga gan

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Erako vwo joma dje toba oda mre mu ovwevwere ofa
Oda roma re, oda vwere yara kokodo
Ogbeyi vwo dje kene rako nu, ko yare ememera
Ovwo ya vre rako nu ko muo ne phiyo
Besie eako vwo vre no vwere, ogbeyi tasa one na bare
Iwheje ki kuphie jorororo
Koyo gbeyi dje ne rako

English Translation

Once upon a time

The dog and tortoise boasted to each other to run a race

The dog boasted more that he would gap tortoise by far

Tortoise then said he also would beat dog in the race

A distant community was then set for both of them as the finishing point

The race then commenced from one community to another

At the starting, the dog jumped up and laughed at tortoise

But tortoise is very wise

He cooked a delicious meal and set it by the roadside for the dog

When the dog reached halfway he saw the first meal and ate

After eating he rested and fell asleep

When tortoise got so close to the dog, he woke up and continued the race

The dog then increased his speed in the race

As the dog get close to the final point, he saw another sweet smelling meal

He ate again and fell into a very deep sleep

When tortoise got so close he walked quietly and passed the dog

Tortoise now increased his pace

Before the dog woke up from his deep sleep, tortoise has won the race.

Analysis

Adults and Eiders usually tell this tale to the youths and children for them to learn some moral lessons. Unlike the traditional songs, some inquisitive listeners ask questions during and after the folktale is narrated. The narrator is often looked upon as a possessor of wealth of knowledge and experience.

The best time for telling folktales is in the late evening and night. This time is very suitable because everybody would have returned from the farm and other activities during the day.

We can understand from the folktale "Tortoise and Dog's race competition" that the dog lost out in the competition due to a number of factors which include the following highlights.

1. The dog was over confident and self-conceited.
2. He was too boastful.
3. He was determined but not focused.
4. He did not understand his opponent's strategy to out shine him.
5. He was a greedy and a voracious eater.

Conclusion

This paper has revealed that Urhobo has a rich cultural heritage as far as songs and folktales are concerned. The song texts analysed in the paper perform different functions which portrays the fact that variety is the spice of life. For example the first song text Babajiga is sung in order to mock the indolent child and by implication encouraged to be hardworking. The message is still in force till today. The analysis of 'ubi' vwe' showed that the song is highly comical; it appeals to one's sense of humor. Other roles of Urhobo traditional songs and folktales include teaching of moral lesson, resisting any form of oppression and a host of others.

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