Discourse on National Identity and Resistance in the Popular Music of the Urhobo People of the Niger Delta

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Abstract:
Recent studies in African literature and history (Chinua Achebe 2001; Cheikh Anta Diop 1991) show that the reconstruction and propagation of national identity are the leitmotif of literatures fostered by colonial and oppressive experiences. Ropo Sekoni (2008) argues that the central mission of literary narratives is to counter-balance one form of hegemony against another. He adds that whenever there is a dominant ideology or worldview, there will always develop discourses that contest the situation. Isidore Okpewho has done extensive work on how the Igbo-speaking peoples of the western Niger Delta of Nigeria have employed oral narratives to reaffirm their history and cultural autonomy against the hegemonic claims of the old Benin Empire from the 16th century. This paper leans on these theoretical perspectives to examine how the self-determination struggles of the Niger Delta, the politics of oil and gas production, and the distribution of its advantages and adversities have shaped the ideological outlook of Urhobo popular musicians. In order to place the emerging tradition in perspective, the study provides a background of Urhobo cultural and historical experiences and how they have impacted on the aesthetic thoughts of the popular musicians. There is a brief account of the Urhobo people during British colonial rule (1900-1960), the impact of the petroleum economy from the late 1950s, and the place of music in the articulation of Urhobo national identity. The main body of the study highlights themes in Urhobo musical expression, the socio-economic conditioning of the subjects, the capitalist milieu and commercialisation of musical practice, and how the popular musicians have adapted to the social and technical pressures on their vocation. Songs used to illustrate these ideological battles are sourced from the repertoire of Urhobo musical maestros such as Omokomoko Osokpra, Ogute Ottan, J.C. Ogbiniki, Juju-Udjabor, Johnson Adjan, Okpan Arhibo, Nathaniel Oruma, Lucky Okwe, and Lady Rose Okirigwo of the Onorume Toroh Musical Ladies of Urhobo. The study reveals that music is a powerful instrument of indoctrination and communication of resistance against negative and hegemonic forces that tend to undermine Urhobo identity and values. The analysis of songs and nuances of performance also demonstrates that the poet-musicians are in the rank of Africa's postcolonial elite who employ the weapon of verbal arts to explore radical options of exit from the dilemmas that confront neo-colonial situations in the continent.

Introduction

Brief Profile of the Urhobo People:

The Urhobo nation with a population of about two million (2006) is the most populous in Delta State and the western Niger Delta of Nigeria. The immediate neighbours of the Urhobo are the Isoko to the east, the Ukwuani to the northeast and Edo (Bini) to the north, the Ijaw to the

south and the Itsekiri to the southwest. Urhobo language belongs to the Edoid cluster of the Kwa group of the Niger-Congo family of African languages. The language is generally referred as Urhobo but linguists recognise Okpe and Uvwie as distinct languages within the Urhobo nation. Urhobo has over a dozen dialects corresponding to various sub-cultural segments or kingdoms/clans. The Agbarho dialect is used in official and written communication.

The Urhobo territory covers about 5,000 sq. km and is in the tropical rainforest lowlands of the western Niger Delta. The territory is rich in natural resources of oil, natural gas, clay, kaolin, sharp sand, waterways, wetlands, forests, and timbers. Owing to factors of expanding urbanisation, intensive agriculture, and industrial/commercial enterprises, much of the area has lost its original forest cover. Located about 60 km from the Atlantic Ocean, the Urhobo territory was relatively shielded from the ravages of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (1450-1850) although it is well connected to the Atlantic Ocean via a welter of rivers and creeks. On account of this geographical location the Urhobo also bore the brunt of economic plunder and ideological disorientation that have resulted from the five centuries of European presence in this region of West Africa. The exploitation of Urhobo resources by European firms culminated in the imposition of British colonial rule in the late 19th century. The establishment of colonial commercial centres of Warri and Sapele in the last decade of the 19th century facilitated the penetration of Urhobo hinterland by European firms and institutions.

From the end of the slave trade in the 1850s to Nigeria's independence in 1960, the Urhobo were the main suppliers of oil palm produce, timber, and agricultural raw materials that fed western European industries. Due to the system of unequal exchange that was operated under the imperialist regimes, the Urhobo and their neighbours did not earn equitable rewards for their economic contribution to the prosperity of foreign merchants and the colonial government. Even

in political terms, the British marginalised the Urhobo people within the administration of the former Warri/Delta Province. The Urhobo were punished by the British because of their stubborn resistance against exploitation and injustice. For example, the Urhobo refused to comply with the order by the British for the supply of native personnel for the punitive expedition against the Benin monarch, Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, in 1897. Not being pliant and complicit with colonial rule exposed the Urhobo to hostile British policies. Another instance is the deliberate manner the British cultivated the goodwill of the comprador sections of the Itsekiri to injure Urhobo national interest. For nearly forty years (1897-1936), Chief Dore Numa of Itsekiri was empowered by the British to behave like a *de facto* paramount ruler of all the ethno-national groups in the western Niger Delta. He was patronised with enormous power and support because he assisted the British to conquer his kinsman, Chief Nana Olomu, in 1894 and the Oba of Benin in 1897. Chief Dore Numa was President of the Native Court of the Warri Province for about 40 years and he exploited the opportunity to oppress both the Urhobo and his arch rivals among the Itsekiri.

The experience of exploitation and political marginalisation the Urhobo had under British rule has haunted the Urhobo modern elite for over a century. This explains why the Urhobo have always been active in struggles for freedom and autonomy. During the anti-colonial uprising against the British imperialists in the early 20th century, the Urhobo occupied a vanguard position. In 1927 the Urhobo offered revolutionary leadership for the mass movement against imposition of taxation in Warri Province. The Province comprised the Urhobo, Isoko, Ijaw, Itsekiri, and Ukwuani. The anti-tax revolt was headed by Oshue Ogbiyerin of Urhobo and it dovetailed into opposition to inequitable pricing of commodities and the monopoly of foreign institutions of governance such as courts and police formations. The uprising was hallmarked by

the proclamation of political independence for the nations of the Warri Province. The revolutionary government headed by Oshue placed an embargo on the processing of palm produce and sale to any foreign firms. The anti-tax insurgents of the Province attacked British courts and warrant chiefs who were accused of sabotage and collaboration with foreign oppressors. The British applied military force to quell the revolt and sent the leaders to jail. Oshue Ogbiyerin served two years with hard labour.

Yet the Urhobo never relented in their resistance against injustice and oppression. This national outlook was evident in the strong support the Urhobo gave to anti-colonial political parties such as the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC). From the 1940s, many leaders of the Urhobo Progress Union were also activists in the NCNC. Onigu Otite (2011) Peter Ekeh (2006), and Obaro Ikime (1969) have done extensive studies on how the involvement of the Urhobo in counter-hegemonic struggles in the pre-independence years has left a strong imprint on the consciousness of elite and the general populace.

Fifty Decades of Plunder of Urhobo Oil Wealth:

Shell and other multinational oil companies have been exploiting crude oil and gas in Urhobo territory since 1958 when the first wells were drilled in the Ughelli area. There are no less than 12 oil fields in Urhobo territory in addition to abundance of natural gas. Gigantic gas-fired facilities in the Urhobo area include the Utorogu Gas Plant that supplies treated gas via the Escravos-Lagos pipeline to Ogun and Lagos States, and the West African Gas Project that extends to Benin Republic, Togo, and Ghana. Others are the Delta power station (Ughelli/Ekakpamre) and the Ogorode (Sapele) power station. The oil industry has had a

devastating impact on economic and social life. This is illustrated with unquantifiable amount of oil spillages, gas flaring, burst-pipe fires, degradation of exploration sites, and attendant ecological disasters. The negative socio-economic consequences of the petroleum industry are devastating because, being an export-oriented system, there is limited local involvement. The wealth generated from the industry benefits more foreign users and sections of Nigeria that enjoy hegemonic power to divert the wealth to favour their areas of the country.

The petroleum-pipeline economy contrasts sharply with the agricultural commodity one before the dominance of crude oil. In the era of British colonial rule (1885-1960) the industry of oil palm produce, rubber, and timber resources ensured some relative prosperity for Urhobo farmers and merchants. Rural households were involved in the production of these commodities and this created opportunities for jobs and enhanced income. The Urhobo merchants that operated in the urban centres employed Urhobo personnel and reinvested their profits in promoting the local industries. The economy of crude oil and gas that developed in the 1960s is completely different. Once an oil well is drilled, the crude is transported via pipelines to processing plants and thence to export facilities along the Atlantic coast. The organisation of this economy does not leave room for the participation of the local population. Thus, the Urhobo and other oil-rich communities in the Niger Delta region are reduced to the position of stupefied spectators as the oil majors and the Nigerian government dominate the economic environment.

From the late 1960s the central government in Nigeria made laws to appropriate the bulk of the revenue from the oil business. Consequently, the oil communities and their states have continued to receive only a small fraction of the wealth that is generated. This brigand form of resource dispossession was first introduced with the Petroleum Decree 51 of 1969, now known as the Petroleum Act. In the 1999 constitution of Nigeria, this unjust and exploitative legislation

is in Section 44 (3) which states that all oil and gas mineral resources in the country are owned *exclusively* by the Federal Government of Nigeria. In 50 years of the oil industry in the Niger Delta, the Urhobo and other peoples in the region have experienced more pervasive poverty and economic hardship than was the case during British colonial rule.

The precarious situation of the Urhobo people in the oil economy is captured by Tanure Ojaide (2003: 14) in the following graphic manner:

> Their area is dotted with oil wells and flow stations and contributes heavily to the national coffers, even as they suffer the ecological and environmental damages resulting from decades of oil explora- and subsequent spills and gas flares. Even though a few entrepreneurs …have risen to national prominence, the area ironically remains poor as oil money is used to develop other parts of the country.

In the three decades of despotic military rule from 1966 to 1999, state-sponsored corruption engendered a class of plutocratic elite whose reckless display of affluence has further exacerbated inequalities and social anomie. These inauspicious experiences have influenced the attitude of the literati and oral artists in their representation of their social ecology. For example, leading Urhobo writers such as Emmanuel Avwiorokoma, Neville Ukoli, Isidore Okpewho, Tanure Ojaide, Emmanuel Aguariavwodo, Ben Okri, Mabel Evwierhoma, Ben Omonode and Hope Eghagha have consistently articulated the socio-economic predicaments in their fictional and non-fictional works. Ojaide's poetry collections of *Delta Blues and Home Songs* and *Kingdom of Songs* as well as his novel, *The Activist,* are typical titles that explore the theme of protest against economic predators and political tyrants. Clark's play, *The Wives' Revolt* and *All For Oil,* exemplify this radical outlook. Urhobo popular musicians actively contribute to this discourse of denunciation of, and resistance against, the political and social policies of

exploitation and marginalisation. It is to the themes and aesthetic strategies of the poet-musicians that we now turn.

Musical Articulation of Identity (Ine Oma-edjephia)

The proclamation of national and group identity is a sharp feature of Urhobo poetic genres. One Urhobo folk song performed at leisure and recreation events celebrates this spirit with the title, "Edjen djen koyen e djoma" (We should always defend our identity):

Edjen djen koyen e djoma
En hen hen
Ose o vwie we ohwo re tivo?
En hen hen
Oni o vwie we ohwo re tivo?
En hen hen
Wo rien djen hen wowe ke ovien
En hen hen

We should always project our identity
Pump your voice doing so
Where is your father from?
Proudly proclaim your ancestry
Where is your mother from?
Say it loudly with gusto
If you can't say then you are not freeborn
Let's hear you defend your heritage

This song of merriment is not directed at any particular individual, yet when it is performed it makes people to feel a sense of pride in asserting their familial background.

As I explained in the introductory section the Urhobo are always assertive of their political autonomy and image. The Urhobo expressed this outlook in their national anthem composed in the 1940s ("Kokoko o gbare/Arise, the moment is due"). These were the years when the British colonial politics of divide-and-dominate was endangering the solidarity of ethnic groups in the western Niger Delta. The Urhobo anthem was done in the context of these struggles for self-determination and political renaissance. The anthem articulates the national

features of republican freedoms, plural cultural centres, and resource abundance which distinguished the Urhobo people from others with whom they contested for space and socio-political visibility. The song urges every Urhobo to subscribe to a pledge to reincarnate in Urhobo in their next life:

Kokoko, o gbare
Urhobo e, orere ivie san
Kokoko, o gbare
Urhobo e, orere ivie san
Eke Urhobo je vwe na
Asan ofa je vwe o tioyen ha-o
Edefa me cha akpo
Oto Urhobo me hwan rhe
Urhobo e, orere ivie san
Arioma eee

Arise, the moment is due
Hail Urhobo, land of freedoms
Arise, the moment has come
Hail Urhobo, land of abundance
My patriotic love for Urhobo
Surpasses that I have for others
When next I am born again
It is in Urhobo I will reincarnate
Urhobo is land of freedoms
Let us always defend our unity.

The values of solidarity and egalitarian aspirations in this anthem are echoed in some of the samples of popular music analysed in this paper. These sentiments are intended to mobilise the people to reinforce their historical and cultural bonds. Cheikh Anta Diop (1991: 211-212) has underlined three factors that construct identity for any people; these are the historical, the linguistic, and the psychological. Of the three Diop gives privilege to the historical factor. This is how he represents the matter:

> The historical factor is the cultural cement that unifies the disparate elements of a people to make them into a whole, by the particular slant of the feeling of historical continuity

> lived by the totality of the collective. It is the historical conscience thus engendered that allows a people to distinguish itself from a population, whose elements, by definition, are foreign, one from the other…
>
> The historical conscience, through the feeling of cohesion that it creates, constitutes the safest and most solid shield of cultural security for a people. That is why every people seeks to know and to live their true history well, to transmit its memory to their descendants.

Studies on Urhobo song-poetry and performance arts have examined the expression of critical temper and moral censure as a major aesthetic goal (J.P. Clark, 2008; Ojaide, 2003, 2009; G.G. Darah, 1985, 2005, 2009, 2010; David Okpako, 2011). The strategy of using the medium of the songs to expose negative behaviour and safeguard communal moral capital has been reinvented by Urhobo popular musicians to negotiate new identities for the Urhobo people. The common themes of the songs are the threats posed by the extractive economy of oil and gas as well as the attendant politics of marginalisation.

Musicians such as Omokomoko Osokpra, Ogute Ottan, and J.C. Ogbiniki are popular among the Urhobo audiences because of their relentless chastisement of the Urhobo commercial and political elite for their selfishness, lack of patriotism and courage. Even some of the songs that valorise the accomplishment of the emergent bourgeoisie contain fragments that criticise the elite for their political docility, self-imposed subservience and material greed. In one of these songs of the 1990s, Ogute employs the English expression of "attachment politics" to depict this disease of servility. One song in his album released about 1998, Ogbiniki makes sarcastic remarks about the pomposity of the Urhobo political class, warning them not to underrate the powers of the Hausa-Fulani oligarchy in Nigerian politics just because many of them are not as educated as their counterparts in the southern states of the country. Ogbiniki adds that if illiteracy

were an index of political weakness, the Hausa-Fulani would not have been able to maintain a hegemonic yoke over the more educated areas of Nigeria. Below are the poignant lines:

Urhobo je wa wonma
Ne ayen Iyibo e Naijiria
Ne Hausa vwe iroro ho
Ne ayen ihwo I suen eravwen
Ayen vwo suen avwan na
Kidie emu avwan be ta vwo?
Ayen vwe iroro ho
Ye egometi he obo r'ayen
Ke a vwe avwan ba eravwen sun
Te re a ton, te echere
E phren abo erharen hen…

The Urhobo educated elite often boast
That they are the Europeans of Nigeria
That the Hausa-Fulani are morons
They are primitive cattle herdsmen
Yet they are the ruling class of Nigeria
Whilst they rule over you, you are helpless
If they were zombies as you think
How come they are your ruling class?
They control you as they do their cattle
What is roasted and what is cooked
Both are victims of fire power…

Songs of June 12, 1993, and Anti-Military Activism:

The date, June 12, 1993, is a watershed in Nigeria's politics of transition from military rule to civilian administration. By 1993 military dictators had dominated the country for over three decades. The patriotic elite and the masses of the populace were determined to replace the reign of bayonets with the power of the ballot. General Ibrahim Babangida who ruled from 1985-1993 had devised a dubious transition programme. The military government had established two political parties for the purpose, namely, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC). General Babangida remained the military president and head of state.

The presidential election took place on June 12, 1993. The SDP candidate, Chief M.K.O. Abiola, a generous industrialist, benefactor, and publisher from Ogun State was heading for victory going by the vote count. His NRC opponent, Alhaji Bashir Tofa lost his Kano constituency to Abiola. It was the first time in the history of elections in Nigeria that a politician from the south of the country would achieve that feat. As the results were being anxiously awaited, General Babangida ordered a cancellation or annulment of the election. Popular outrage and riots were sparked spontaneously and the country was plunged into turmoil. Abiola was later arrested, detained without trial and he subsequently died in detention of suspicious causes in 1998.

Popular music and underground publishing were some of the media vehicles employed in the demand for the freeing of Abiola and the restoration of his election mandate. Okpan Arhibo of Agbarho was one of the Urhobo musicians who earned instant fame on account of his brave intervention in the controversy with his chart-buster album "June 12" in the mid-1990s. In the song Babangida is portrayed metaphorically as a scoundrel, a *Macbethian* tragic figure whose ambition for power knows no limits. One memorable image in the song alludes to Babangida as a pauper's child who, after a breakfast of sardines, demands to have eggs as well. The allegorical reference here is probably to the uncommon luck of his having been president for eight years in a country where brevity of regime was the norm. But, like the typical despot, the general had hoped to manipulate the expected nation-wide crisis generated by the election to perpetuate himself in office. He miscalculated.

In other sections of the song, Okpan makes good use of flashbacks to remind the listeners of the electoral scenario. The voting system employed in 1993 permitted supporters of candidates to queue behind their preferred candidates or their photographs. It was thus easy to determine

who was the stronger of the two presidential contestants. Okpan says categorically that the Urhobo people and the entire world knew that Chief Abiola was the victor in the polls. The SDP did very well in Urhobo and other parts of the Niger Delta. In the 1992 governorship election Olorogun Felix Ibru, an Urhobo architect and businessman, had won in Delta State on the platform of the SDP.

Against this background, Okpan recalls the mass protests and uprising that greeted the annulment of the polls. The poet-musician also draws the listeners' attention to the fury of the international community over the botched election. Okpan further reminds listeners of some of the world leaders and religious organisations that supported the Nigerian people in their determined struggle to uphold democracy. It should be noted that General Babangida had injured Urhobo national interest in 1991 when he created Delta State and located the capital in Asaba in the Igbo-speaking section instead of Warri that the Urhobo favoured. The disappointment over this act of "political dispossession" was still fresh in Urhobo and the neighbouring areas when the June 12 debacle happened.

The Okpan song exploits the mood of disenchantment that was prevalent in the Niger Delta region at the time. For example, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in Rivers State and the Ijaw National Congress (INC) for the Ijaw people in the six coastal states were founded in 1990 to drive these autonomy-seeking aspirations. The peaceful struggle of the Ogoni for economic restitution was squelched in blood with the murder of many of their leaders, a bloody trail that culminated in the hanging of the MOSOP president, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his comrades. The hanging in November 1995 was at the instance of the fascist military rule of General Sani Abacha who took over from Babangida in 1993. Abacha resisted popular pressure to release Chief Abiola from jail and declare him the winner of the

annulled election. In August 1994, oil workers in the country embarked on a strike in support of the demand for Abiola's release and the restoration of his electoral mandate. The prime leader of the oil strike was Frank Ovie-Kokori, an Urhobo radical trade unionist. Kokori and his colleagues were arrested and detained in Abacha's gulacs from 1994-1998. These political events influenced Okpan Arhibo's mood and idiom in the "June 12" song.

The anti-military mood of the 1990s featured in other Urhobo popular songs. One of the most damning attacks on military autocracy was the "Ikoriko" song by the Sir Juju-Udjabor group. The term "ikoriko" is a neologism for hardship and military despotism. The economic phrase "austerity measures" was first used by the elected government of President Shehu Shagari (1979-1983) in his budget proposals meant for implementation in 1984. He warned that there would be belt-tightening by all and sundry in view of a world crude oil glut that affected Nigeria's government revenue. On December 31, 1983, Shagari was overthrown in a military coup by General Muhammadu Buhari, an officer of the Fulani stock from northern Nigeria. One of Buhari's early policies was a law compelling the change of the national currency apparently to frustrate suspected corrupt politicians who might have hoarded money in private vaults. But the reckless implementation of the law severely hurt the innocent populace and thus induced a groundswell of resistance by the alienated masses.

The "Ikoriko" song is about the sad story of the beating of a wealthy man who had gone to the bank to exchange his old currency notes for new ones. Waiting in long queues was the fate of bank of customers. Dressed in flamboyant outfit, the rich man had hoped to use his financial status to secure favours over other less endowed customers who had waited for hours to be attended to. The man arrives and attempts to jump the queue but he is stopped by stern-looking soldiers who beat and kick him to fall, much to the glee of the angry customers. The musicians

allude to the fact that the fierce-looking soldiers were of Hausa stock from Argungu area in Kebbi State and therefore did not favour any local chieftain. As the soldiers horse-whip the man, his wife runs away to avoid a similar fate or the embarrassment of uncomplimentary comments by the poorer customers the husband tried to cheat on the queue. Feeling humiliated in his dust-laden gowns (*agbada*), the affluent man goes home to nurse his wounds, cursing the soldiers and their government for his misfortune. The song opens on a dramatic note thus:

Oga re o kpe ebanke
Ke hwe re hwe agbada
Oga re o kpe ebanke
Ke hwe re hwe agbada
Ona ke oja ikoriko…

A rich man who went to a bank
Was horse-whipped in his flowing robes
A rich man who went to a bank
Was brutalised in his flamboyant dress
Behold the agony of military rule…

The musicians exploit the ballad to comment on the various hardships experienced by the people under military dictatorship. Although they appear to pity the victim of the soldiers' brutality, the poet-singers condemn the sadism of the rich who deny help to their siblings when they are in grave need of financial assistance. Whenever a distressed relative approaches the rich for relief, the selfish money-mongers would lie that they had just completed a capital-intensive project. The economic depression of the 1980s broke marriages as women who could not endure divorced their spouses. Felonies like pilfering became commonplace. Drivers of the rich confiscated tyres of vehicles in lieu of wages owed them by their bosses whose money was trapped in the banks. Creditors became impatient with debtors as the lines below show:

By the time I returned home from the bank
The woman I bought frozen fish from on credit
Was at my door threatening to fight me to death

The high cost of food items was another cause of grumble as these lines indicate:

> Even *garri*, the staple of the poor
> Is no longer affordable to buy
> Many marriages are in great peril
> Tell my in-laws to send us *garri*
> The *ikoriko* demon is on rampage

The poets lament how the economic decline retarded their business; they lament that when they started their musical career, it cost a few coins to make the 400-km journey from Warri to Lagos to do their recordings. By the 1990s, transport fares had risen astronomically and the poets lay the blame on the misrule of the military in power:

> Soldiers, behold the evils of your reign
> Your rule has ruined every family
> Making poverty the common ailment of all

The theme of anti-military revolt is also discernible in the songs of J.C. Ogbiniki released on the eve of the transition to civilian rule in the 1998-99 years. His was the most strident voice in the mobilisation of the Urhobo electorate to use their votes to empower responsible politicians at all levels of government. Ogbiniki's appeals reminded listeners of how the Urhobo rally helped Olorogun Felix Ibru to become the first elected governor of Delta State in 1992. Ibru's tenure was abridged by the Abacha military coup of 1993. This passage shows how Ogbiniki recalls the proud moment:

> Recall the Urhobo massive support for Ibru
> That was how he was able to defeat his opponent
> It takes a multitude to win a serious war
> When Felix Ibru was the governor
> He worked hard to improve the lot of the Urhobo
> What he did in Urhobo are being relocated to Asaba
> Had Ibru completed his tenure in office
> Many Urhobo aspirations would have been met….
> In the impending elections, let's not split our votes

Let's unite in block voting to back Urhobo candidates
If we are able to do this, we will harvest the rewards
Soldiers need numbers to subdue an adversary…

By 1999, the people of the Niger Delta had garnered a decade-long experience in their campaign for an equitable federal system and environmental justice. The lessons of the Ogoni agony had sunk into popular consciousness. In October 1998, the Urhobo suffered huge human capital loss when fire gutted the Jesse section of a pipeline conveying petroleum products from Warri to Kaduna in the north of the country. About 1,000 persons perished in the inferno. When the military head of state, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, visited the scene of the disaster he infuriated the Urhobo with his callous statement that the victims deserved their fate because they were involved in illegal fuel bunkering.

In November 1999, the Urhobo suffered yet another oil-induced disaster when an oil facility owned by Shell at Ekakpamre in Ughievwen district destroyed farms, pristine forests and other biodiversity habitats. The nonchalance displayed by Shell and the Nigerian government further alienated the populace. The first Urhobo conference on the theme of "Forty Years of Oil" was held at Effurun in November 1998 under the auspices of the Urhobo Foundation. In December 1998, a conference of Ijaw radical youth announced the "Kaiama Declaration" proclaiming their inalienable rights to the ownership of oil resoruces; a 30-day ultimatum was issued to oil multinationals to quit the area or face dire consequences. The declaration was made in the birthplace of Isaac Adaka Boro, an Ijaw nationalist who had led a rebellion against the government in 1966 in demand for rights over the oil resources.

From 1999, the elected governors and legislators of the Niger Delta region joined the agitation for fiscal federalism and resource control. The campaign gained popular appeal as trade unions and community organisations participated. The "resource control" mantra was to echo in

the popular songs of the region soon after. Ogbiniki was an early commentator on the matter, with his allegorical song on the sculpture (effigy) of a fierce-looking god that watches helplessly as looters appropriate the fortunes of the lands it is expected to protect. The song opens with a riddle which Ogbiniki invites listeners to unravel:

> Gbudo, ale
> Gbudo, ale
> Edjo rhie ero phiho ye a ghwe emu royen
> Me rien oto udo na-a
> Ohwo o rien ren wa fan me
>
> Here comes a delightful riddle
> Go on, stretch it out
> A god looks on as thieves pillage its temple
> I do not know what the riddle means
> Whoever knows should provide the answer

Ogbiniki is employing innuendo in the verse to allude to the predicament of oil-rich communities which are so oppressed that they look on in helplessness whilst predators appropriate their patrimony. The metaphor refers to the sculpture of a deity found in many Urhobo shrines which are believed to possess the divine power to watch over a community's assets. But since the deity is only a wooden replica of a human being, in reality, it is powerless in apprehending human predators. The metaphorical remark applies to the oil-rich communities of the Niger Delta while the predators are the oil companies and the government of Nigeria.

Nathaniel Oruma, a genial rap exponent, is more explicit in his articulation of the "resource control" discourse. In one of his albums, Oruma pays tribute to the elected governors of the region for their courageous advocacy for an equitable distribution of revenue from natural resources. The song opens with a proverbial trope about the traditional law that permits a child to inherit property from parents. Oruma urges listeners to recall the pre-1966 era in Nigeria when regional governments exercised autonomy over major economic endowments. He adds that the

Northern region relied on revenue from groundnuts and cotton; the Eastern region benefitted from palm produce and coal whilst the Western region enjoyed the boom of cocoa, timber, and rubber. According to Oruma, that system of revenue sharing promoted development in each region. The poet-musician urges the governors of the region to be steadfast in their demand because it was a just pursuit. This song was used to propaganda advantage during the rallies and discourses on the "resource control" struggles up to the early years of the 21st century.

Yet Oruma is not a subservient propagandist of the ruling political elite. Often, he castigates those of them who exhibit ostentatious affluence, warning of the serious consequences of their reckless lifestyle. In one of his songs, he warns the corrupt politicians to beware of the dangers their excessive materialism posed to the survival of the nascent democratic system. The lines below convey the censure:

Politishans re Naijiria
Politishans re Naijiria
Avwan mue rue he
Edjo-ame he ovwerhe

Politicians of Nigeria
The ruling elite of Nigeria
Beware of your excesses
Mermaids (the military) wait in ambush

The mermaids in this context refer to ambitious officers in the armed forces who might take advantage of the reckless manner of the civilian politicians to stage a comeback in power. The implication of this warning was obvious to the Nigerian populace who waged a titanic struggle to push out the military tyrants in 1999. Although the influence of Oruma's cautionary message is difficult to measure, it is highly probable that the song was a popular weapon of moral mediation for the sustenance of Nigeria's democracy.

Another of Oruma's chart-busters of the era is "Hurricane of Hunger" in which he recounts the plight of the poor people in the wake of inflation caused by frequent increase in the price of petroleum products during the years of General Olusegun Obasanjo's presidency (1999-2007). He illustrates the crisis with the situation of wage earners whose pay does not bring relief to their families. The approach of each pay day raises anxiety because what the workers receive is too meagre to maintain their livelihoods. Oruma attributes the parlous condition to the failure of the ruling elite to provide for the welfare of the electorate. This is his pithy comment on the matter:

> Oil that we have in abundance
> Is now the source of our plight
> Almost everyday fuel prices are raised
> The Nigerian government is oppressive
> Educated young people are restive for idleness
> Those in private business are in distress too
> Why is government so callous and insensitive?

Lucky Okwe of Ogharreki district of Urhobo can be described as the popular "singer of tales". His musical trademark rests strongly on his elegant manipulation of the Urhobo folktale motif to pass stinging comments on current affairs. He begins his songs with either a proverbial remark or folk story and goes on to illustrate the themes with examples. Okwe rose to fame in the late 1990s with his "No Food for Lazy Man" album. The song begins thus:

> Owien ve akpo na
> Ovwiere koyen ewevwe hwe
>
> Many economic enterprises abound
> It is the lazy one who experiences hardship

With this pre-emptive moral point Okwe goes on in the body of the song to tell the story of a typical slothful man who suffers hardship because of his failure to apply his talents productively. Instead of doing farm work to earn a living, the man spends his time on leisure games. He even

jeers at those who leave home early each day to work in farms. Sections of the song are rendered in Pidgin English to reach a wider audience than the musician's primary linguistic constituency of Urhobo:

> All your mates get work
> You say you non go work
> All your mates get cars
> Common bicycle you non get
> You say na your people na im de worry you
> Na your hand you take spoil your life

The rendering in standard English goes thus:

> All your age mates have work to do
> But you say you don't want to labour
> All your peers ride in motor cars
> Even a bicycle you don't have
> You accuse your family of bewitching you
> No, you are the architect of your misfortune

In Urhobo rural economy, engagement in manual labour and self-reliance were the virtues of a responsible citizen. However, with fortuitous wealth from the oil industry from the 1970s, some lucky ones became rich without exerting themselves in hard work. A generation of youth evolved that shunned jobs that demanded industry and husbandry of income. But the oil economy is not labour-intensive, thus the majority of the young people are stranded in unemployment and idleness. The person satirised in the Okwe song is one such victim of the delusion of growing rich without hard work.

In another song, Okwe examines the factors that instigate young people to turn to crime. He recalls the systematic decline in living conditions in Nigeria from the late 1990s. As a consequence some take desperate measures to survive as this passage illustrates:

> Young ones who leave school are jobless
> Thus some took vows not to die in misery
> Many young ones now take to violent robbery

Some others resort to acts of cultism
There are others who are fraudsters ("419")
Money has devalued haloed traditions of old
Some commit ritual murders for money-making charms
A child can kill the parents to procure the charm
Parents sell children to acquire the money-making wand
A husband can submit his wife to get the charm
A wife can deliver her husband to charlatans
No one can predict where our society is headed…

The grim tussle to lay claims to oil sites and financial inducements paid by multinational oil companies has intensified communal conflicts in the Niger Delta region. The tri-ethnic city of Warri (founded on lands of Urhobo, Ijaw, and Itsekiri) has experienced scenes of strife on account of the oil. The bad blood generated by these internecine conflicts has permeated social and political relations. During his years as elected governor (1999-2007), James Onanefe Ibori invested enormous efforts to promote inter-ethnic trust and harmony. In his 2004 album "Cool Your Temper", Lucky Okwe paid tribute to governor Ibori's peace-building initiatives. Okwe adopts the narrative strategy of allegory to enhance the aesthetic and ethical appeal of the song. He observes that war-mongering does not pay and cites the instance of Liberia that was racked by fratricidal war in the 1990s. To avert that tragedy, Okwe admonishes thus:

Ijaw cool your temper
Urhobo cool our temper
Itsekiri cool your temper
War hinders progress
Ibori cool your temper
Obasnajo cool your temper…

"Coll your temper" in the local Pidgin English parlance means "calm down" or "eschew confrontation". The reference to Ibori and Obasanjo is an allusion to the political tension in the 2000-2003 years when Delta State was pitted against the Nigerian government under Obasanjo on the twin issues of equitable revenue distribution and "resource control".

Although he is less vocal than his musical peers on political themes, Johnson Adjan from Ughelli area is also a noted critic of Urhobo elite on issues of falling moral standards and patriotism. In the 1990s Adjan delivered a general rebuke on affluent Urhobo who transgress against traditional ethical conduct in the name of wealth and "modernity". In his song "Ughwu Ikpregede" ("Untimely Death") he argues that disregard for Urhobo morality is the prime cause of premature death in the society. He targets the affluent young men who breach conjugal taboos by dating wives of relatives:

Me ve owe erivwin ovo
Yu wo due aye me
Wo da mre oto ihwo ofa
Wo me reyo mie ayen

We both share the same ancestral roots
Yet you commit adultery with my wife
When you see lands owned by others
You dispossess them fraudulently

In another of Adjan's songs he denounces the habit of Urhobo urban dwellers who are ashamed to speak their mother tongue and instead conduct their domestic and social events in English language. But whilst the Urhobo elite alienate themselves from their language, Igbo and Yoruba immigrants in Urhobo towns speak their own languages and teach their children to do same.

The use of songs as a weapon of public censure is a common aesthetic trait of Urhobo musical practice. The feature is dominant in genres such as *udje*, *ighovwan*, *ikpeba*, and *adjuya*. The "Egini Voices" group that emerged in the 1990s exemplified the censorial temper in popular music. They sing about the prevalent anti-social maladies generated by urbanisation and oil-fuelled affluence. In one song, the "Egini Voices" decries the arrogance of the wealthy in these lines:

Ayen roro ne ayen ghu yo-ooo
Efian avwan nyavwan, iroro phien avwan

The rich ones think they will never die
In vain you dream; you delude yourselves

In another song, the "Egini Voices" bemoaned how criminality in Nigeria is going the American way, "Life in Nigeria is now like America's/Violence and crime are commonplace".

This musical group comes from the Udu area of Urhobo and it lies to the east of the Warri-Effurun urban cluster. Urban influences entered the Udu section when the Delta Steel Company, Ovwian-Aladja, was opened in the late 1970s. Housing estates owned by the company redefined the social landscape of Udu and environs and they lost their rural innocence in the process. The popular musicians articulate the views of the conservative sections of the society in transition. Ogute Ottan, the most notable of the artists, ridicules housewives who are envious of housemaids who attract the sexual attention of married men. Long distance female traders were active in the Warri economy in the 1980s. Whenever they were away in Cotonou (Benin Republic) to procure goods, their husbands were catered for by housemaids. Some husbands got seduced in this way and Ogute justifies the infidelity of the husbands with the point that the wives have already passed their prime:

Eya na kpe eki re Ikotonu
Ye ehasogele he uwovwin
Je urhuru je ohwo e sio?
Ivien we she kri re
Ke opkaivien wo vwo ghwa ayen
Ohwo e se hasowaife
Eye te uwovwin ke a vwa
Eya ahwaren me je vwe
E mu obo aje yoron ha-o

When housewives travel to Cotonou
Their housemaids keep the homes
Why will husbands not be tempted?
Your breasts have long collapsed

You now support them with brasiers
A woman called a housewife
Should always stay at home
Wives of old are preferable
It was taboo to hold a wife's hand…

The views of Ogute in this song are at variance with the demands of the urban economy during the era in question. As is common in Nigerian cities, it is the women who play a pivotal role in the domestic economy of Warri and its environs. In many households, the women fend for food, fuel, healthcare, and payment of school fees for the children. Ogute's nostalgia about the vanishing traditional society blinds him to the realities of the urban economy.

Edeamroma Kona (Adama) was one of Ogute's contemporaries in the Udu circuit of popular musicians. Adama's song on "Women in Maxi Skirts" is typical of this genre of anti-feminism in Urhobo popular music. Married women in Urhobo traditional setting wear double wrappers and a blouse. But with urbanisation and relaxation of social conventions from the 1970s, married women began to patronise long, loose gowns known as "Maxi" in fashion circles. The menfolk associated this trend with women of easy virtue and prostitutes. Adama exploits this image to depict such women as conjugal delinquents. This song begins with an alarm about the trendy dressing:

Maxi re o she rhe igberadja na ghwa
Eya ri vw'eshare koyen ghwa yen
Avwan mre ebe akpo na rhe mre
Aje he uwovwin ye o ghwa etrosa
A me vwe ame ovwavware vwo gbe unu…

Maxi dress in vogue patronised by prostitutes
This is what married women now wear freely
Behold the abomination of modernity
Housewives now dress in trousers
They would colour their lips with red paint…

When the song was released the Adama group was criticised for its biased attack on women as if they were the only ones that had caught the bug of cultural alienation. The popular view was that the menfolk were also addicted to immoral habits, with many married men abandoning their family responsibilities. After about a decade the Adama group produced a rejoinder to the song in which male spouses are castigated and pilloried for squandering their earnings on concubines and wayward girls. The new song describes scenarios in which truant husbands would take rooms in hotels and guest houses where they engage in illicit sex and acts of conjugal infidelity. The response of the Adama group to public opinion is a remarkable index of the power of song and music to shape and orientate popular consciousness.

Okpan Arhibo's song ("Catch Your Gulder") was a sensational hit of the 1990s for its radical advocacy of freedom for women to express their sexuality through drinking and dancing at public events. "Gulder" is a popular beer brand in Nigeria and its manufacturers project its value in advertisements as the "ultimate" in taste. In the song Okpan urges women to dare the men, seize their cultural space and defend their gender identity. The song became the mantra of the womenfolk, especially those in the urban milieu who were desirous of shaking off the shackles of rural piety and forbidding etiquettes that favoured the menfolk. In subsequent years, Okpan produced other songs to pay tribute to married women who work hard to support their households. His most avant-garde sentiments are expressed in the dance genre he styles "Urhobo Makosa", a hybrid of Urhobo disco and Congo music that gives premium to the gyration of the hips and waistline in gestures of sexual erotica.

The feminine gendering of Urhobo popular music attained its zenith in the late 1990s with the emergence of the all-female orchestra known as "Onorume Toroh Musical Ladies of Urhobo". The founder, Onorume Toroh, is male known by the sobriquet of "Computer". He

mentors the female musicians, composes most of the songs but the public performance is done by the female members. The group glided into stardom primarily because of the extraordinarily gifted female maestro, Lady Rose Okiriguo; she died in a motor cycle accident in 2007. She was a quintessential minstrel whose graceful dance steps and vocal rhapsody raised the aesthetics of Urhobo popular music to a level never experienced hitherto. The group's fame also rests on its dexterity in combining the temper of panegyric music with that of censure and social criticism.

In many of its songs the group unveils the sociology of communal unrests and youth militancy occasioned by the oil-induced economic crisis in the Niger Delta. The radical ideology of the music is manifested in the exposure of the corruption and banditry exhibited by the institutions and officials of the government. The police are prime targets of burlesque and ridicule. The satirical salience of the songs is enhanced through the embroidering of the lyrics with dramatic sketches showing how the police brutalise and extort money from innocent people. Although the youth are presented as victims of economic distress, they are not spared in the songs as they are castigated for their excesses in violent conduct and extortion of money from individuals and companies doing business in the region. The group is conscious in distinguishing justified protests from acts of barbarism and brigandage as these lines indicate:

> O re yutu na rie ovwravwra ha nene
> O re yutu na rie ovwravwra ha nene
> Ona orhue…
>
> The violent acts by the youth are not radicalism
> The brigand acts of the youth are not radicalism
> They are the exhibition of lunacy….

These witty remarks rendered in enchanting vocals help the listeners to ponder and re-evaluate the relevance of the violent methods employed by many youth groups in their articulation of dissent against the government and the oil companies. This is an apt illustration of how popular

music edifies the populace and guides it to make rational decisions on how to cope with contemporary challenges.

Conclusion:

Viewed from the prism of artistic and socio-political engagement, the songs of the Urhobo popular musicians represent a radical discourse on the production and reproduction of identity and knowledge in the postcolonial setting of Nigeria. The songs examined in the paper are a rich reservoir of data on the diverse ways events in the spheres of politics, economics, and domestic affairs influence the aesthetic choices and ideological outlook of popular artists and entertainers in the western Niger Delta. The dialectical and philosophical acuteness exhibited by the popular musicians is indicative of how much the ideas of freedom and counter-hegemonic consciousness have permeated the ranks of the masses of the region. The radical responses of the musicians are shared by the social justice movements and other armed groups that have sustained the self-determination agendas of the exploited oil-rich region.

No less remarkable is the quality of folk wisdom and courage found in the songs. Nearly all the musicians referred to in the paper are, at best, products of secondary school education yet they display an apprehension of issues to a degree more profound than that of the average graduate of tertiary institutions. This is a positive development in Africa where political and economic power is dominated by the so-called educated elite made in the image of former colonial societies. In this regard, the Urhobo poet-musicians are making their modest contribution to the emergence of the revolutionary ideas that could drive the socio-economic redemption of the Niger Delta and Africa in the 21st century.

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