

Urhobo Female Musicians

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Abstract

The spectrum of female song-poets in Africa, though in high proportion, has been shown little interest by African scholars. In the Urhobo musical repertoire, male musicians have dominated the foray of academic output; whenever mention is made to female song-poets/ensembles, significant details about the content and functions of their songs are not considered. However, the steady growth of professional/semi-professional Urhobo female musical ensembles in recent times has provided vents for critical evaluation of their songs. This paper therefore examines the contribution of Urhobo female song-poets to the development of African music and Urhobo popular music tradition. It discusses aspects of the Urhobo popular music genre as a form that replaces the satiric/classical traditions such as udje and ighovwan. Extensive references are made to early female musical ensembles like the igbe-emete (maiden dance-songs). We adopted the formalist and sociological approaches in the examination of the compositional mechanics of the selected song-texts in relation to the society. It concludes that more researches should be carried out on female musicians in Urhobo land in order to popularize the form as well as encourage new entrants.

Keywords: Female Musicians, Study, Poet-Musicians, Popular Music

Introduction

Following the publication of J.P. Clark's first article on Urhobo song-poetry, "Poetry of the Urhobo Dance Udje" in the *Nigerian Magazine* No. 87, in 1965, Urhobo secular song-poetry began to receive adequate attention by Urhobo scholars. However, the extant literature on the evolution of the Urhobo poetry from the classical tradition to professional and semi-professional ensembles generally and rightly so, portrays the art as male dominated. All instances of such discourse are designed to celebrate only the *ororile* (song composer) and *obuole* (vocalist) who

are mainly male performers while women are seen only in the areas of hand clapping and dancing – as in the classical traditions. One can identify such renowned names of male song composers/vocalists as Oloya (Ighwrekan), Memerume (Edjophe), Okitiakpe/Majota (Ekakpamre), Orhoro/Omoko (Egbo-Ideh), Kpeha (Owahwa), Ako/Muayo (Esaba), Yembra (Ubogo), Vhovhen (Okwagbe), Sikogo (Aladja), all males. This tendency in the classical tradition may be attributed to, among other factors, the fact that in the olden days, Urhobo women were not in the habit of combining home-keeping chores with the rigours of song-making.

Macaulay Mowarin and Sunny Awhefeada's works on various forms of Urhobo song-poetry also reverberate this trend of "male only" musical tradition. Mowarin in his article, "Urhobo Gospel Music" examines the role of Urhobo gospel music in the propagation of Christianity among the Urhobo. His analysed texts are taken from the works of male gospel musicians such as Amos Ighaka, Stephen Aruoture, Solomon Sharakure and others. The general idea, either by omission or commission therefore is that female musicians are not recognized in Urhobo land. Awhefeada on the other hand, focuses on the aesthetics of the songs of two Urhobo popular music minstrels, Johnson Adjan and Okpan Arhibo – both male, thus confirming Clark's assertion in terms of *Udje* that the art is practised "principally by male members of an Urhobo community" (107). Mary E.M. Kolawole laments this 'male only tradition when she observes that: "certain critics maintain that African women are not artists; at best, they parrot communal oral pieces." She notes further that: "...women have been consigned to a secondary status in an attempt to overlook the diversity of creative role and pragmatic functions" (93).

These scholars may not be wrong altogether. The process of song making, particularly the satiric forms such as *udje* and *ighovwan*, has been dealt with extensively by Ojaide (2003)

and Darah (2005). It involves official proclamation for composition to commence, sourcing and review of song materials and joint assessment of new compositions and rehearsals of dance movements (Darah 2005:44). The process sometimes requires lead composers and vocalists to rehearse all through the night. This will not be an option for the traditional Urhobo woman of the 1920s. Also, the “battles of songs” phenomenon of the satiric tradition in which each group is expected to sing the other to fall is done at the community or ward level. It should, therefore, not be surprising not to find a woman leading such communal associative song-dance troupes or ensembles to a song duel. ‘Battle’ in the Urhobo society is an exclusive preserve of male ‘warriors’.

Female Participation in Musical Ensembles/Groups

However, women in Urhoboland participate actively in dance ensembles known as *igbe-emetete* (maidens’ dance-song), a song-dance form that is performed as folk art usually by young maidens/women. This form of song-dance art is performed at female age-grades ceremonies, particularly during female circumcision or sometimes by young married women to their children at moon-lit gatherings where tales of sundry themes are told. It is common in all Urhobo societies and it is often accompanied with simple songs and drumming.

This type of female ensembles is not only common with the Urhobos but also practised in some parts of Africa and Europe. Linda Dahl in her book, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* explains that, “Female musicianship seems to have flourished in the large number of less stratified, more egalitarian African societies” (41). Quoting Kwabena Nketia, she adds:

Women in these simpler societies historically formed their own permanent associations specifically to make music... Women's dance bands and clubs usually performed for specific occasions such as female puberty rites, the healing of the sick, funerals and wakes, and sometimes court entertainments. (41-42)

Dahl's study of female music in medieval Europe also shows that women in medieval Europe also had the opportunity of composing their own verses as well as forming music ensembles. According to her, "The most richly inventive period of female music-making in Europe began during the Renaissance, when, particularly in Italy, women in convents and orphanages established and directed their own ensembles" (40).

However, the *igbe-emet* ensembles in traditional Urhobo society serve as one of the socialization processes of the young maidens/wives. It is very important as it acts as the bond that binds young girls to the community's norms and values. This is why E.A Babalola believes that these types of folk dance-songs constitute a "great resource for the moulding of a child's character for a successful adult experience of life" (432). Some of the *igbe-emet* songs centre on the moral roles of young maidens/wives in traditional Urhobo society. Young maidens are expected to be respectful and helpful to their parents, particularly their mothers. They are not to indulge in any act of flirtation; getting married to their future husbands chaste. And above all, they should be well versed in house chores. Any maiden/wife who falls short of these standards is ridiculed in song. It should be stated here that maidens' dance-songs are by no means confined to these themes. For instance, a girl who revels in her beauty by turning down the hands of any suitor that comes to ask for her hand in marriage for flimsy reasons is also harangued in song. This conclusion is apparently demonstrated in the maidens' song below:

Omọtigege your well erect breasts
Will still get sagged
Whenever you are approached
You would pose off
Whenever you are advised
You would pay deaf ears
Omọtigege your well erect breasts
Will still get sagged

Correspondingly, in another song, we are confronted by a father who finds himself in a dilemma over what would become the future of his daughter whom he had sent to school to be educated. Would she still find a man to marry, owing to her educational sophistication? This is the father's lamentation as the song is intoned:

Ikekele kekele he! 2x
This is truly the child I gave birth to
I enrolled her into the school
Uti wrote a letter to her father
Father, I will soon become a graduate
The cocoyam leaf is wide open
Yet no one knows what is inside it.

This song provides an insight into the stereotypes created by a traditional and male chauvinistic society that does not privilege the education of the girl child. A brave father who does, sometimes finds it difficult to imagine where the future of the daughter lies. The belief is that she would find it difficult to find a man to marry in a traditional Urhobo society where majority of the men are farmers and fishing folks. The dilemma of the father is accentuated in the last two lines of the song: "The cocoyam leaf is wide open/Yet no one knows what is inside it." Cocoyam (*colocasia esculenta*) is one of the major staples of the Urhobo people. It is made up of wide glossy leaves used for wrapping edible foods. The puzzle here is that the wideness of the cocoyam leaf does not determine the growth of its tuber. In other words, a female's education does not guarantee her a marriage, which is the hallmark of the girl-child.

Maidens' dance-songs unite the young women in traditional Urhobo society. It is the school where the young maidens mature into other strata of the society. Their coming together as an ensemble helps to strengthen their bond as a group. This is what J.H.K. Nketia means when he notes that, "Social and religious ceremonies or rites that bring members of a community together provide an important means of encouraging involvement in collective behaviours, a means of strengthening the social bonds that bind them and the value that inspire their corporate life." According to him, "The performance of music in such contexts...assumes a multiple role in relation to the creative experience, for participating in music as a form of community experience and for using music as an avenue for the expression of group sentiments" (22).

Female Voices in Urhobo Secular Song-Poetry

The attempt towards the replacement of the satiric forms of Urhobo song-poetry such as *udje*, *ijuri*, *ighovwan*, *ighomọ*, *adjuya* and *overen* had been started during the 1950s and gained ground irrevocably after the Nigerian civil war of 1967-70. Before this period, musical practice was by peer groups and age grades in various rural communities. Involvement by youths was part of the traditional socialization process. All participants were amateurs; they did not engage in music for a living. New compositions were performed at annual or seasonal festivals. However, events after the war inspired a new temper of song making from the satiric form to the popular or panegyric form. Among such factors that necessitated the change was the rural-urban drift of the post civil-war Urhobo sons and daughters which shifted the Urhobo audience of music to cities such as Warri, Effurun, Sapele, Ughelli, Port Harcourt, Benin, Lagos, Ibadan, and other parts of the country. In addition, economic pressure and material reward became the main motivation for music making. This is because the urban economy after the war had created a new class of music patrons; these were the Urhobo business elite and wealthy people. This generation

of poets therefore composed songs to praise the exploits of those Urhobo people who were successful in their adventure in businesses and other economic endeavours (Omoko, 2013:2).

The distinction between the classical tradition (*ileahwaren*) and the modern trend of music (*ileokena*) in Urhobo land is succinctly explained by Darah when he declares that the

ile ahwaren tradition embraces all songs performed by village-or quarter-based dance ensembles at annual or periodic dance-song festivals. Songs of this tradition were usually critical and satirical in intention. This tradition suffered a decline in the early 1960s. The modern, *ile okena*... refers to all types of songs that are produced as commodities. (p.475, 2005 b).

Some of the songs of this popular tradition tell elaborate stories about the life of an individual whose achievement is considered by the poet to be relevant to the entire Urhobo society while others explore experiences that concern a particular community (Omoko, 2013:2). Other favoured themes are heroism, death, flirtation and warfare. The story in the songs is told in such a manner that every essential detail concerning the subject's life is brought into sharp focus. The songs are laced with appropriate literary tropes, images and metaphors with vivid verbal expression and tonal variation. Among the poet-musicians that feature in this tradition are: Ogute Otan, J.C. Ogbiniki, Omokomoko Osokpra, Edeamroma Felix Kona (Adama), Gometi Oyibo/Badia/Taxi, Sally Young, Sir. Juju/Udjabo, and Johnson Adjan. Others are Okpan Arhibo, America Djalere, Eghweyanudje, to mention but a few.

An important aspect to the expansion of this new trend of popular music in Urhobo land is the advent of female musical groups. Faced with the existential contradictions, political mismanagements, military dictatorship that became the lot of the politics of the post civil-war Nigeria, these female musicians turn to the classical satiric form of Urhobo song-poetry to

protest against bad government and poor leadership, police brutality and exploitation. The emergent female artists are Lady Rose Okiriguo, Rume Otovotoma, Sotu Idjesan, Ese Badia, Helen Ebiko, and Christy Nukoko. Others are Lucky Olomu Ovwugheghe, Mrs. Simakoro Oberha, Kefee Obareki, Veronica Etaghene and Joy Odiete Eseoghene (J'odie). Unlike their male counterparts, they took the redemption path. They invoked the muse of Urhobo song-poetry to lead them to the spring of ancient wisdom. And in order to fulfil this mission, they rooted for the satiric form, *udje* and look to it as the premier song-poetry tradition. They experiment between an evocation of a nostalgic past of Urhobo land with a vision of the future. In her song, "Udje", Rume Otovotoma intones:

A corpse is laid on the ground
 'kwagbe would call to Moghwe
 That they should put on hold, *udje*
 Eni had questioned:
 "If you put a stop to *udje*
 What then is left for entertainment?"
 The Oba's palace has fallen!

As mothers, these female song-poets try to use their songs to mould and redirect public morality in order to reduce social injustice, irresponsibility among political leaders and the youths, unfaithfulness among married couples and, in addition, preach compliance with societal mores. The songs of Onorume Utoro Musical Ladies Group led by Lady Rose Okiriguo and later Rume Otovotoma display these themes which have emerged as the defining features of the song-poems of these female musicians. The first musical album of the group entitled, *The Message (Ovue)* released in 2004 is a testimony to the blind political rascality, politically motivated ritual killings, social vices among youths and cultural selfishness in modern Nigeria. The title song, "The Message" (Ovue) is suffused with metaphors of political mismanagement, decay,

corruption, rape, greed and it portrays the Nigerian nation as a dying child that needs an urgent attention.

They are dribbling Nigeria
Like Okocha* in action
They tricked Nigeria and raped her
Like a common prostitute in Osonṣo
The entire Nigeria has been shared and taken to homes
They sit in the capitals
Where they share the resources of Nigeria
What an abomination!
Nigeria is dying!
You should come with an ambulance
Marvellous! So a nation could die, Urhobo?
A nation could die! This is doom
That Nigeria is faced with – behold death!

Okocha: Nigerian football midfield maestro*

The metaphors in Lady Rose's songs are distinctive; they are charged with passion and energy with electrifying effects. The sheer bulk of themes, many of which are interwoven in the evocation of the despoliation of the Nigerian political space, tends to grace the songs' narrative momentum. They build up to a powerful and passionate vision of the Urhobo cultural heritage.

The social vision and level of commitment of these song-poets are enormous. The gory details of ritual murder as manifested in the Otokutu bridge saga of 2004 are evoked in the song rightly thumbbed "Otokutu Bridge". Otokutu bridge is a boundary bridge across the Warri River that separates Ugbomro, a village in Uvwie Local Government Council and Otokutu, another village in Ughelli South Local Government Council, both in Delta State. The Otokutu bridge ritual killings were exposed in 2004 when an *okada* man (a commercial motorcyclist) who went to answer nature's call under the bridge was shot at by a "madman". Fortunately for the *okada* man, the dart of the madman missed him by the whiskers. He quickly ran away and raised the

alarm in the community. In no time, the youths of Otokutu mobilized and surrounded the bushes around the bridge. The search paid off. The “madman” was caught and when the area was ransacked, it was discovered that like Clifford Orji (an insane man-eater caught in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1999 with roasted human parts), this “madman” was capturing and killing people who got close to his “domain” and probably selling off their choice parts to some interested buyers.

As the ladies lament in the song,

We tell tales of other places and our bodies would shiver
Only to find faeces in our mustache
Under a bridge that was where I found evil at Otokutu...
I went under the bridge to behold horror
Wigs of young ladies and brassieres of women
Shoes and pants are uncountable
Overalls of *okada* men are scattered around
A little child was smoked erect
Fresh corpses litter the place like mortuary
Human bones and human skulls
Litter the entire place
Cow bones in the abattoirs cannot compare with this.

The song succinctly captures the savagery that goes with the “get rich quick” syndrome that characterizes the modern Nigerian society. A situation where a sane human being would pretend to be mad as a ploy to cover up his/her nefarious activities. The song exposes the inefficiencies of the Nigeria police who parade criminals publicly and secretly free them when the dust has died down. Some of the songs use folktale materials to lend substance to current socio-political and ethical problems in Nigeria.

Their second album, *Ibuele Urhobo Rikpori* (Urhobo Late Musicians) is a tribute to dead Urhobo musicians who made their mark in the musical trade. As the group alluded in the title song, “It is the muse of late musicians that came to us/that we should proclaim them in song.” Lady Rose’s death in 2007, few months after the release of the album, expresses the shock that

she had a premonition of her death. The group's anger for the inadequacies of politicians and social immorality was sustained by Rume Otovotoma who led the group after the death of Lady Rose. The group released two albums before Otovotoma, the new leader, left to form her own group known as, Rume Musical Ladies of Udu. The group has released two albums, *Do Me I Do You* and *Udje*. In Otovotoma's song, one confronts an internalization of the personality of the poet. Her songs lack the radical and satiric fervour that characterized the fulcrum of her earlier group. Most of her songs are a template of her personal musical prowess. For instance, she celebrates her autonomy in one of her songs thus:

Ophia re ophia re
Rume ophia re
Onana ke ole re obo vwe
Emu obo ohwo oye te ohwo ria
Oghene we ko biruo

It has happened, I have come out
Rume is out
This is my personal album
One's own food is satisfying
God, may you be praised

Presently, the Onorume Utoro Musical Ladies Group has metamorphosed into two separate groups, one led by Mrs. Sotu Idjesan and the other by Mrs. A. Ojiyovwin. Lady Rose's poetic preoccupation and her concern for social justice not only found voice in the songs of these latest groups but serves as the groups' cultural moorings. Their songs are a manifestation of music flowing from the same source of artistry which encourages cultural engagement with popular taste and consciousness. There is no mistaking their pride in Urhobo, their desire to use the medium of songs to express the virtues of the Urhobo people and their historical relevance in the Western Niger Delta region in flamboyant poetic tropes. In their songs, there is experimentation with song-dance forms of the classical tradition such as *igbe-emete* and *adjuya*.

Moreover, the disillusionment that confronted the people of the Niger Delta few years after democracy was again achieved in 1999 made these female musicians to turn to God for salvation. Successive military regimes had alienated the people from the affairs of their country. Their resources – land, economic trees, and waterways have all been destroyed by the oil multi-nationals in collaboration with the military dictators with no corresponding development in the land. Therefore when democracy was gained in 1999, the people accepted it as a breath of fresh air. They had hoped that the civilian politician would be more accessible and would listen to their demand for social justice. But few years into civil rule, it was clear to the people that the civilian-politicians are a chip of the old block – as gross mismanagement and looting of the nation's wealth become a normal way of life among the privileged few. The people, therefore, lost faith in man and worldly empires, and thus turned to God for redemption. Among the female song-poets that evolved in this period are Professor Lucky Olomu Ọvwughẹghẹ (Ogburine 1 of Ubiesha), Aladja Choral Group of God's Kingdom Society and Salvation Group of God's Kingdom Mission led by Mrs. Simakoro Oberha.

In Ọvwughẹghẹ's music, one encounters an understanding of the teachings of the *Igbe Ubiesha* religious sect. *IgbeUbiesha* is an indigenous religious sect among the Urhobo people of Delta State founded by Ubiesha Etarakpor of Kokori during the later half of the 19th c. The sect has a belief that professes God as the universal creator of mankind and of all things both visible and invisible and they cherish the white chalk as a symbol of purity of Ọghẹnẹ (God). To them, all humans should fashion their life in the purity of the white chalk void of offence to God and man. According to Nabofa, "Adherents of Igbe strongly stress that the holy chalk and the fan are capable of solving all human problems provided one leads a clean and honest life" (330). With this religious background, Ovwugheghe therefore calls on her listeners to lead a life that is pure

as the *Orhen* (white chalk) in order to be free from all troubles that are associated with poverty and barrenness. The social dialectics between life and death and between life and the afterlife become her songs' ideological underpinnings. One lives according to his/her destiny as *Orise* (God) has outlined. Some of her songs express questions about morality, that of human existence, relationship between human beings and their maker. Her album, *King Destiny* with seven tracks, elucidates these beliefs and doctrines of the Igbe-Ubiesha religious sect.

These themes are also manifested in the song-poems of Christian female musicians with borrowings from both the Bible and the Urhobo song-poetry tradition, what Darah refers to as “hybrids of Christian music and udje” (2009:78). Some of the songs use Bible stories to remind modern Christians about the basic attributes of God – wisdom, power, justice and love and to warn them about the impending destruction that awaits evil doers. However, the triumph in Veronica Etaghene's *Ajuwe*, Keffe Obareki's *Branama* and J'odie's (Joy Odiete Eseoghene) *Africa Woman* with a track such as “Akpona igbunu” is a testimony that Urhobo female music has come of age. Kefee and J'odie introduced a new temper into Urhobo female music with borrowings from other musical forms such as Highlife, Reggae, R&B and Pops. Their music/songs are a blend of the Urhobo indigenous language and English, particularly the Nigerian pidgin. A blend in music which Awhefeada describes as music that “wears two unequal hats”. According to Awhefeada,

The bigger of the two hats is indigenous while the other is foreign. The indigenous elements find expression in the minstrels' appropriation of the loric repertoire of Urhobo mostly through the indigenous language... The foreign hat accommodates the deployment of modern musical equipments, the borrowing and sometimes corruption of foreign lexeme and so on. (133).

This has not only increased the entertainment value of the Urhobo female song-poetry but also given it wider audiences/listeners.

Apart from the entertainment functions of the songs, they have served as an ample means by which the Urhobo female musicians express their resistance to obnoxious government policies and the utter disrespect for morality in the Nigerian society. To them, music is the major public media to chastise the despoliation of the people's cherished socio-cultural values; as Darah puts it, "...unlike the more stable forms such as drama and tales, songs usually provide more reliable evidence of the various ways Urhobo people have responded to the ruptures in their material and super structural situations..." (2005(b), p.471). Ojaide supports this idea when he avers that, "the songs are very relevant today as societies everywhere continue to fashion means of dealing and coping with their lesser crimes and protecting their ethical and moral values" (5).

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, female musicians in Urhoboland should be encouraged by both the elite in Urhobo land and the government – by invitation to perform at high class social functions and government sponsored musical competitions both within and outside the Urhobo nation. This is because most Urhobo people have been cut off from their villages and traditions. Their children, who probably do not have competence in the Urhobo language, may need knowledge of the actual performance in order to understand the idioms of the songs. Their videos are often illustrated with sub-titles. This, on its own, does not only showcase the songs to larger audiences/listeners but also creates an avenue for non-speakers of the Urhobo language to listen and appreciate the themes and idioms of the songs. This is necessary in Africa, particularly in

Nigeria with over 400 language groups. According to Akin Euba (1969:5), "...the present structure of African societies requires communication on an inter-ethnic basis and the average African is becoming increasingly confronted with idioms of African music other than those belonging to his own ethnic group". As he adds further: "An African whose only experience of musical art is limited to the music of his own ethnic group may find himself unsympathetic to the music of a different ethnic group" (5). Thus, the present level of the development of female musicians from mere age-grade group to semi-professional groups/ensembles is a step in the right direction and should be appreciated by Urhobo scholars.

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