

## **URHOB0 FOLKLORE, SCIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS**

**Godini G. Darah**

### **Abstract**

This study attempts a preliminary survey of some aspects of Urhobo culture and folklore that pertain to Urhobo worldview, scientific thought and indigenous knowledge systems. The survey is not based on any grand theories and discourses in philosophy or humanistic studies. Rather, I have identified key features and domains of Urhobo culture and folklore; they are illustrated with fragments of texts of Urhobo oral narratives and songs. In this paper, folklore, folkways, and indigenous science are treated as referring to similar realms of thought and experience. Each item of folk thought designated is described in relation to how the Urhobo utilise it to explain their existence and mechanisms for coping with and surviving in their tropical rainforest environment. The study reveals that the neglect of the traditional thoughts and indigenous folkways has handicapped the capacity of the Urhobo people to connect their past to the present. Accordingly, the concluding section of the paper calls for a review of the curriculum of educational institutions to incorporate Urhobo traditional thought, folkways, and science in the context of the competitive, global challenges of modernisation and development.

**Keywords:** Urhobo culture, folklore, science, knowledge systems, modernisation/development

### **Introduction**

#### **Aspects of Culture**

A people's culture comprises the spheres of ideas, philosophy, world view, institutions, systems, practices, materials, products and experiences developed by that people in the context of living in a specific environment. The definition of culture given in the *Cultural Policy for Nigeria* (1988) can serve as a guide:

Culture is the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their norms and modes of organisations,

thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours. Culture comprises material, institutional, philosophical and creative aspects. The material aspect has to do with artifacts... (namely tools, clothing, food, medicine, utensils, housing, etc); the institutional deals with structures erected to help achieve material and spiritual objectives; while the philosophical is concerned with ideas, beliefs and values; the creative concerns a people's literature (oral or written) as well as their visual and performing arts... Culture is not merely a return to the customs of the past. It embodies the attitude of a people to the future of their traditional values faced with the demands of modern technology which is an essential factor of development and progress. (Sections 1.1 – 1.3)

The four aspects of culture, namely, the material, institutional, philosophical and creative, are applied to the examination of the Urhobo experience discussed in the paper. Culture is a broader and more embracing concept than folklore. In his essay "What is Folklore?" (1965), the American folklorist, Alan Dundes attempts a definition that is useful to our discussion. According to Dundes, "The term 'folk' can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is – it could be a common occupation, language, or religion – but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own." (*The Study of Folklore*, p.2) Folklore derives from two words – "folk" meaning the people and "lore" meaning idea or knowledge. The notion of a shared tradition in the definition by Dundes informs our use of the term in this discussion.

### **Domains of Urhobo Folklore:**

Urhobo folklore constitutes the body of ideas, beliefs, thoughts, traditions, sciences, technology, and knowledge systems that are learned and transmitted essentially by oral communication. Urhobo folklore also refers to the indigenous elements and attributes of Urhobo cultural heritage which have been created and transmitted from generation to generation over the millennia. In other words, Urhobo folklore comprises those elements, ways of doing things, and institutions that give the Urhobo people their distinct identity as an ethno-linguistic constituency. Some of these domains of culture and folklore are examined in this paper; they are selected from folk narratives and song-poems. Examples of the Urhobo folklore and science are *akpososo* (cosmos/universe) *akpo ve erivwin*

(human and spiritual worlds), *urhoro* (paradise/heaven), *orhan* (witchcraft), *osio-emu* (science for controlling rainfall), *orẹ* (festival of ancestor veneration) and *emuerivwin* (moral abomination).

### ***Akpọsọsọ*: Cosmos or Universe**

The most pervasive images in Urhobo folk imagination are those of the cosmos or universe (*Akpọ-sọsọ*), the supreme God (*Oghenẹ*) or creator/origin of the universe and all that are contained in it. The description of Urhobo world view by Ekeh (2004) gives a useful insight:

The Urhobo world view is based on polarity: a pervasive and universal differentiation of our known Earth (*Akpọ*) from an unknown spirit world (*Erivwin*). The distinction between *Akpọ* and *Erivwin*, and the complex relations between them, dominate Urhobo cultural consciousness. Living people inhabit *Akpọ* and control its affairs; *Erivwin* is peopled by the spirits of the dead. Those among the departed who have been properly buried, and for whom prescribed rituals of passage have been performed by their living relations, will live in peace therein. Until the dead achieve such status, their spirits wander in strange places awaiting admission into their final resting places. (Ekeh, 2004:30)

The folk image of the cosmos in Ekeh's description guides the average Urhobo person to relate to the world. The geography of the two hemispheres influences human conduct. People who are alive on earth (*akpọ*) are keenly aware of the existence of the ancestral and post-mortem sphere (*erivwin*); this consciousness is expressed in the duality "*akpọ vẹ erivwin*" explained below.

### ***Akpọ Vẹ Erivwin*: Human and Spiritual Worlds:**

Ekeh's hemispheric division of the cosmos has implication for the ways living people (*ihwo re akpọ*) relate to the world and conduct their own affairs. Every cultured Urhobo person lives in perpetual dread of *Erivwin* and its limitless powers. This is explained by the philosophy of dialectical opposition or conflictive relationship that exists between the two hemispheres. The Urhobo, like many people in Africa, believe that *Erivwin* is the home or

domain of the dead or spiritual beings. *Erivwin* is also believed to be the abode of the unborn. Every time a new human being is born it is assumed that the world of the dead or *Erivwin* has lost someone. Similarly, when a human being dies, it is lamented that *Erivwin* has captured a victim. When an old, successful and morally upright person passes away, the deceased person is described as having “gone home” or returned to the place of origin (*o kpori*). This ceaseless traffic of souls between the two worlds of *Akpọ* and *Erivwin* is alluded to in a song by the Sir Juju and Udjabor musical group of Aladja in Udu area of Delta State:

Ohwohwo vwię ohwo ihwo r’akpọ vwo bun mana  
 Eşę ide esuosuọ amono ghwaran vw’ayen?  
 Akpọ wene oma kiri imu ri kpẹ ohọren  
 Evọ cha evọ kpo

One human gives birth to another; that is how the world is  
 populated  
 Our forebears of yore whoever grew up to meet them alive?  
 Humanity renews itself like soldier ants marching to war  
 While some are returning, others are heading to battle

The interaction between *Akpọ* and *Erivwin* is so ingrained in the consciousness of the average Urhobo person that it is represented artistically and metaphorically in various forms. There are Urhobo folk stories and myths depicting wrestling contests between humans and dead spirits. Some folktales treat the subject of spirits that disguise as human beings to deceive and kidnap innocent children. The *Akpọ* and *Erivwin* relationship is sometimes demystified when *Akpọ* is depicted as the genuine, brighter side while *Erivwin* is the counterfeit or inferior side. We see this demystification in textile aesthetics: the brighter face of a cloth or apparel is *akpọ amwa* while the covert side is *erivwin amwa*. Crops and fruits that are harmful for human consumption are classified as *ekankon erivwin*. When used in this context, *erivwin* refers to something inferior, counterfeit, fake or harmful.

### ***Erivwin*: Spiritual Space or Ancestral World:**

In Urhobo folklore, *Erivwin* also describes spiritual space or the abode of the dead. There are several tiers of the meaning. It could refer to the sphere, territory, underground or subterranean resting place or heaven for the departed souls. As shown in the outline of the

world view given by Ekeh, qualification for admission into *Erivwin* is not automatic for the departed soul; he or she has to attain old age, have children and integrity whilst alive in order to earn entry into *Erivwin*. The elaborate rituals of funerals and burials performed by the Urhobo are some of the essential requirements that qualify the dead soul for immortality in *Erivwin*. David Okpako has a graphic portrait of the *Erivwin* Elysium:

...The mental space where the dead reside is called *erivwin*, a word that is derived from *orinvwin* (corpse of a person as distinct from that of an animal). The distinction is important because of the Urhobo belief that even though a person is dead to the living, he/she is alive somewhere else, watching over and protecting his/her descendants; hence his/her body must be treated and buried with the dignity the dead person deserves. This partly accounts for the elaborate funerals; the more distinguished the dead person was, the more elaborate is his/her funeral. An elaborate funeral is not simply a display of the descendants' affluence, but an honour to the departed, who is watching!...In Urhobo thought, the ancestor, though dead, is alive; some writers such as John Mbiti and Michael Nabofa, refer to them as the 'living dead'; but they are not 'zombies' wandering about aimlessly; in Urhobo thought they are people just as they were when they were alive, capable of exercising moral influence over the living. The Urhobo refer to their elderly dead as *ekpakorikpori* (the elders who have gone home).(Okpako, 2011:75).

There are complex philosophical and medical issues embedded in these concepts that call for diligent inquiry and exegesis. What is important for our present purpose is that the cultured Urhobo person endeavours to live on Earth with the supreme aspiration to merit admission to the *Erivwin* Elysium. This positivism propels the Urhobo to always strive to avoid abominable acts that could incur a negative image and imperil the possibility of being a welcome guest in *Erivwin*. This gives significance to the notion of *evunarherhe* or sinless living in Urhobo experience. Also implicated in the Urhobo concept of *Erivwin* is that of immortality; it is believed that the soul of an individual leaves the body at death and sojourns to *Erivwin*. Nabofa has examined this eschatological matter. He describes the duality of the human being as having *ugboma* (physical body) and *erhi* (soul). In his essay "Reincarnation: The Doctrine of Heredity and Hope in Urhobo Culture", Nabofa observes that:

In the Urhobo concept of man, it is stated that every human being is composed of two principal entities which are referred to as *Erhi* and *Ugboma*, which could be roughly translated as Soul/Spirit and body. In referring to these two halves of man at the same time, the people first mention *Erhi* before *Ugboma* (soul and body) because it is the former that gives meaning and expression or reality to the latter. (Nabofa, 2005:289).

The process of post-mortem trial indicated in the Urhobo *Erivwin* has striking resemblance with the trial of souls in ancient Black Egypt. The Senegalese Egyptologist, Cheikh Anta Diop describes the images of paradise and hell in Egyptian religion as follows:

The religion of Osiris is the first in the history of humanity to invent the notions of paradise and hell. Two thousand years before Moses, and three thousand years before Christ, Osiris, the personification of the Good, was already presiding over the judgment of the dead in the world beyond the grave, wearing on his head the *Atew* or *Atef*. If the dead person during his terrestrial life had satisfied the different moral criteria... he gained the *Aaru* or *Aar*, a garden protected by an iron wall with several gates, and a river running through it ... The vindicated dead man becomes an Osiris, immortal and from then on lives among the gods eternally... (Diop, 1991:331).

Further research is needed on these complex issues of Urhobo world view and eschatology. We need to examine the nexus between these thoughts and the ideas of moral and ethical hygiene, the mental terror suffered by people who are childless and wretched, and the dread that one could lose the opportunity to be given a decent and elaborate funeral as a fitting farewell to *Erivwin*. Specialists in science, medical science, particularly anatomy and human genetics have much to do in this field.

There is some similarity between the Urhobo theology and that of Christianity, for example, in the conception and spatial geography of the ancestral world and post-mortem residence for the souls of the dead. As seen above, the Urhobo construction of the heavenly abode or paradise is in *Erivwin* whose spatial location is underground or subterranean. Christians believe that the soul of the departed appears for trial and judgment after death; the successful ones are rewarded with permanent residency in heaven or paradise (*odjuvwu*) located in the celestial realm or cyber space. For Christians, those found guilty at the post-mortem trials are imprisoned in hell of burning fires.

### ***Urhoro: Another Urhobo Paradise?***

In Urhobo theology, paradise is also known as *Urhoro* while the Eternal Gatekeeper is *Orhiurhoro*. Quite often, the two concepts of *Erivwin* and *Urhoro* are applied to the same spiritual space. The Urhobo myth about *Urhoro* is quite elaborate and complex. According to this mythology, every child born into the world first assumes the status of an adult in the spirit world. In this form, the person appears before God (*Ọghẹnẹ*) and consciously chooses the career of life he/she would follow. The choices are arrayed by God who calls on the yet-to-be-born human to select in the exercise of free will or predestination (*ọtarhẹ*). The person could choose a long or short span of life, a prosperous or wretched material condition, the manner of dying, the type of marital partner desired, either to have fame or infamy, etc. Once these choices are made, they are endorsed by God with *Orhiurhoro* as sole witness and chronicler or keeper of the register. The decisions made here are sealed by God and not changeable; but if a person's destiny is later discovered to be inauspicious and unbearable in life time, it can be remedied or ameliorated through the agency of the fortune teller or medicine man (*ọboepha*).

The next stage in creation or divine genetics is for the person to be turned into a foetus and deposited in the womb of a would-be mother. Pregnancy (*evun-emre*) develops from this. When the child is born, it undergoes the entire process of growing up to an adult and old age, if lucky, or, if environmental factors permit. Born-to-die children known as *oji/oghi* in Urhobo, (*abiku* in Yoruba, and *ogbanje* in Igbo) are believed to be those who opted for brief lifespans at the seat of creation. In the case of someone whose otherwise long life is terminated prematurely through occult means or accidents, there is the opportunity for *Orhiurhoro* (Eternal Gatekeeper) to open an inquest or investigation. If the dead person is found to be an innocent victim of witchcraft or diabolic attack, it is believed that *Orhiurhoro* can order the offended soul to return to earth to complete its lifespan previously endorsed and sealed at the point of creation. On rare occasions when a person dies for a brief period and is revived, it is interpreted that *Orhiurhoro* has passed a verdict of "not guilty, discharged and acquitted".

There are fragments of Urhobo songs that explore this theme. There is the "Bidọfọ" song by the Sir Juju and Udjabor group of Aladja which relates the tragic incident of an insane police officer in Ovwian in Udu Kingdom of Delta State who murdered the mother on suspicion of witchcraft. The young man, Avwọkọnrūo, makes rapid progress in the police; his uncle, Asifo, invites him from Lagos to be fortified with charms for bravery and

antidotes against poisons and occult “missile attacks”. He takes the “recipes” and turns instantly mad. He returns from Lagos, occasionally sets clothes on fire and becomes an addict of marijuana. One day he travels to Warri, purchases a machet, sharpens it expertly (*jalojalo*) like a shaving razor and attacks the innocent mother in the dead of night. He butchers the body the way cow meat is treated, and displays the human parts for sale at daybreak. In the conclusion of the song, the poet-musicians explain how the innocent mother is turned back at *Urhoro* because her appointed time is not yet due:

O tẹ Urhoro re, Orhiurhoro se re vuẹ:  
 Ẹḍẹ wẹ je gba ha diemus ọrọ wọ vwọ fuorhe?  
 Ughu re omakpọkpo, obara gbomini re  
 Oyivwin yivwin ikpin ẹḍẹ yẹna...

When she got to *Urhoro*, the Gatekeeper queried her:  
 “Your time is not due yet, what made you come in a  
 hurry?”  
 Death of a healthy body, behold how blood flooded  
 everywhere  
 Even the bravest lost their nerves that fateful day...

The judicial process adopted in the narrative above accords well with the high premium the Urhobo place on justice and equity; one who has not committed any abominable act should not be punished unjustly. The Urhobo folk expression for this is: *E ruchọ-ọ; e ghwuẹchọ-ọ*. The concept of *Urhoro* is fascinating and complex. There are ideas of creation, genetics, philosophy, predestination, life before life, paradise, metaphysics, subterranean human and spiritual communities, law and justice. More scientific investigation is required to unravel these primordial thoughts and dialectical imagination of the Urhobo people.

### Science in Some Urhobo Folksongs

There are Urhobo folk songs that explore some of the issues raised in the foregoing section. Let us consider the idea of a supreme creator of the cosmos or universe as invoked in the children’s rhyme titled “Mamako”

Mamako, mamako



O we ya  
 Mamako, mamako  
 O we ya  
 Ọghẹnẹghẹnẹdjuphrẹphrẹ  
 Mani je akpọ ere  
 O re Mamako...

The fifth line of the rhyme “*Ọghẹnẹ ghẹnẹ dju phrẹphrẹ*” could refer to the endless rotation of the earth or heavenly bodies such as planets, moon, and stars. The song fragment alludes to Urhobo folk science of the cosmos and cosmogony. The phrase “*mani je akpọ ere*” suggests the notion of an endless cosmic principle.

Another juvenile song, “*Emetẹ-erha Ọghẹnẹ*” (Three Stellar Maidens) directs attention to Urhobo folk astronomy and space science. It shows how the Urhobo, though comparatively handicapped by their location in the tropical rainforest environment, were able to study and visualise the star-studded heavenly dome to produce mathematical images of happenings there. Children chant the song at play thus:

Emetẹ erha re hẹ Ọghẹnẹ  
 Ọvọ Tatamulele  
 Ọvọ Taphrunmeketa  
 Ọvọ Ataphrun-arehọ  
 Ayen lo, ayen lo  
 Ayen lolo mi lo

Behold three maidens in the heavens  
 One is called Tatamulele  
 The second is Taphrumeketa  
 The third is Ataphrunarehọ  
 They are twinkling, they are twinkling  
 Twinkling bright and beautiful

This folk tune depicts one of the three-some formations of stars that is visible in the night sky in the western Niger Delta area. On a very bright night sky the triple stars can be seen in a straight line as if they are soldiers on parade. The space separating the stars is almost equidistant, giving the impression that a supernatural artist or engineer arranged them in

that aesthetically appealing symmetry. Of course, there is a game of pun in the name attributed to each of the stars. They are represented in the image of females, probably a replica of village maidens journeying to the brook to fetch water. This was a familiar figure in rural Urhobo of old. As in that rural setting, the stellar sisters are chatty and talkative, apparently revelling in juicy rumours in their community or peer group. The onomatopoeic sound of their names is suggestive of this loquacious spirit. *Tatamulele* could mean “garrulous”; *Taphrunmeketa* suggests the image of a non-committal interlocutor who would prefer to speak after everyone else has done so. The third name, *Ataphrunareho*, could be rendered literarily as “I accept whatever others have said” which, in Urhobo socio-linguistic experience, is a cowardly or treacherous position to take as anyone who says she or he is prepared to follow what others have said or decided could be untrustworthy.

### **Eyayogho: The Mystical Maker of Mortars**

The genetic matter of the primordial relation between a creator and humans is hinted at in the song of the woodcutter and maker of mortars:

Kokoko, amono she urhen oboyin?	
Mẹvwen Eyayogho	
Kokoko, amono she urhen oboyin?	
Mẹvwen Eyayogho	
Diemu wọ vwe urhen ru?	5
Urhen me vwo karẹ odo	
Diemu wọ vwe odo ru?	
Odo mi vwo duvwun igun	
Diemu wọ vwe igun ru?	
Igun me vwo ghẹrẹ emọ	10
Diemu wọ vwe emọ ru?	
Emọ mi vwo yenre akpọ	
Diemu wọ vwe akpọ ru?	
Akpọ mi vwo je ghuo....	

Hark, hark, who is hewing wood there?  
 It is me Eyayogho  
 Hark, hark, who is hewing wood there?

It is me Eyayogho  
 What use is the wood to you? 5  
 It is wood to make a mortar  
 What do you need a mortar for?  
 The mortar to prepare pounded yam  
 What do you need pounded yam for?  
 Pounded yam to cater for my children 10  
 What do you need children for?  
 Children to ensure fulfilled life  
 What use is fulfilled life to you?  
 Life to guarantee eternity....

Children's songs like the ones reviewed above were part of the folk educational process with which children were instructed about the wonders and marvels of the world around them. The didactic potential of the rhymes was enhanced by the act of employing the medium of song and music to make them delightful and memorable. Before formal educational institutions came to Urhobo in the early 20th century, the folkways served as the sources of knowledge. Children developed their character and expanded their imagination or scientific faculties through keen observation, role playing, listening to or telling folktales, and being involved in the regular routines of living.

With the destruction of much of the forest cover of Urhobo territory through uncoordinated land use, it is not easy anymore to measure how much of the knowledge or science of the heavens is learned by children and juveniles. However, space exploration and improved tools for recording cosmic events have enlarged humanity's grasp of the mysteries and functions of heavenly bodies. For example, we now have a clearer idea about stars, their birth, lifespan, movement, and functions in the cosmos. Bill Bryson's study explains these developments:

...little of the universe is visible to us when we incline our heads to the sky. Only about six thousand stars are visible to the naked eye from Earth and only about two thousand can be seen from any one spot. With binoculars the number of stars you can see from a single location rises to about fifty thousand and with a small 2-inch telescope it leaps to three hundred thousand (Bryson, 2005:48).

### **Folklore of *Orhan* (Witchcraft)**

Another of the fascinating folk sciences of the Urhobo deals with witchcraft (*orhan*). For the average Urhobo, the fear of *orhan* is the beginning of wisdom and survival. The aspects of *orhan* that relate to our topic are those of limitless powers, flying, aviation and aeronautics. The Urhobo believe that the witch/wizard (*oriendan*) is capable of just any evil, with enough occult power to destroy and undo any resource, energy, gift, asset, and destiny. The Urhobo word “*oriendan*” connotes aviation energy or aeronautics. According to the belief, those endowed with these powers can be transformed into birds, and can fly, usually at night or under the cover of darkness, to just any site or place to inflict damage on any target. There is a variety of this thought that celebrates naval and nautical science. Seafaring is done by ocean liners and ships. But in Urhobo witchcraft ingenuity, maritime journeys can be made in groundnut shells to distant places like England and the Americas to plant the “nuclear arsenal” of *orhan* on a relation or family member in a foreign land. This implies that the perpetrators also know the residential addresses of their potential victims in the foreign lands! The argument can be stretched to include ballistic missile technology and nanotechnology.

Why are the Urhobo people who are so versed in the folklore of witchcraft still chained to the imagination of only the evil side of the belief? Are there no ways of demystifying the folk ideas to stimulate invention and industry that can transform creativity and thinking to aid modern living? Forests and darkness are integral to the imagination about witchcraft probably because the ancient Urhobo environment was thickly forested.

For some years I handled the course on “Urhobo Language and Modern Science and Technology” of the Linguistics/Urhobo programme at the Delta State University, Abraka. The students and I often engaged in debates over *orhan* in our exploration of the technology of aviation and aeronautics. We examined the science and industry of cyberspace, satellites, and digital communication. In our exciting debates, we often wondered why Urhobo witches and wizards, who are believed to be able to conduct winged flights to any location, choose to use unsafe spaces of trees and woodlands instead of the comfort of hotels and guest houses in the urban centres of Warri, Effurun, Sapele, Ughelli, Ovwian, Agbarho, Abraka, etc. The folk explanation is that experts in witchcraft prefer darkness to operate in. If Urhobo witches and wizards are so adept in seafaring and ocean surfing to travel to foreign locations to bewitch relations, why are the Urhobo people not famous for shipbuilding and navigation to participate in the world’s global

maritime economy? Questions, questions, and more questions; yet there are only few answers for now!

### ***Osio-Emuo*: (“Science of Rain Doctors”)**

*Osio-emuo* is an indigenous Urhobo science for controlling rain fall. Urhobo country is in the tropical rainforest belt of West Africa. Average annual rainfall is above 300mm. However, being an artistically active people, the Urhobo regularly organise outdoor events such as funerals, weddings, and festivals. In this context the management of good weather is necessary for ensuring successful events. The “rain doctor” (*omu-osio/omu-eshovwin*) is a central figure in this business. The *omuo-osio* is believed to be able to use herbal energy to hold back or divert rain from the scene of a public event. Sometimes people underrate their skills and go ahead in the hope to enjoy fine weather “by the grace of God”. Quite often when such an expert feels slighted, he is believed to be able to “draw rain” (cause rain to fall) to mess up an outdoor occasion.

If “rain doctors” have such awesome powers, why are they usually materially indigent? This enigma is the thematic focus of an *udje* song, “Tomi” composed in the 1940s by Yembra of Ubogo in Udu district. Yembra also produced alcoholic beverages from vegetable materials, gunpowder, as well as therapeutic drugs. In the song under review Yembra casts doubt on the efficacy of the “rain doctor’s” power of being able to communicate directly with God. These are the relevant lines:

Q rię ohwo ọvọ iroro bẹn yo	
Akpọ bẹn omu-eshovwin ke mẹ vwen hẹn	
Omu-eshoevwin	
Q ta nẹ osio rho ọ me rho	
Q ta nẹ uvo rhovwon ọ mẹ rhovwon	5
E manẹ ke etiyin	
E manẹ ke etiyin ọ sa vue Ọghẹnẹ	
Ebete re ọ da rọ	
Ke etiyin Ọghẹnẹ ye nyo phẹrẹ	
Iroro phien ren re	10
Mavọ oma mu oni-eravwen	
Nẹ e mu ọmọ royen vwọ giwe suvwen?	
Etiyin efian, efian ...	

Misjudgement is not the fate of one person

Even the rain maker is poor, so my case is not peculiar  
 The famous rain doctor  
 Whenever he commands rain, it falls  
 Whenever he commands sunshine, it shines 5  
 That should have been the right moment  
 That is when he should have beseeched God  
 To hear his plea for blessings  
 That is the moment that God would have granted his boon  
 Alas! Even the rain doctor miscalculated 10  
 When does it happen that a parent animal falls ill  
 And its children are sacrificed to heal the parent?  
 That is impossible in nature

Scholars and researchers in the natural sciences have several bones to crack in these twelve lines of poetic puzzle. Consider the multiple fields and sites of knowledge explored by the poet. There is the opening line that warns about every human being's proneness to error of judgment. The next jigsaw describes the enigma and irony of the rain expert being materially poor in spite of his exceptional gifts. He has the rare opportunity to communicate directly with God in the heavens. As fate would have it, the rain doctor fails to take advantage of the dialogue with God. Why does he fail to use his special powers to transform his material conditions? Experts in animal biology have something to chew in the last three lines pertaining to an ailing animal. How grave can the ailment of a parent beast be to warrant sacrificing the children to obtain a cure?

In another segment of the same *udje* song Yembra subtly lambasts the arrogance and self-indulgence of parents and the rich. He draws an analogy between the boast of those blessed with children and the wealthy as shown in the passage below:

O bori vwię emọ gbikun re emọ  
 Wo roro nẹ ayen ghwa ehware rhe  
 Otiọyen je hẹ edafena  
 Obọ ri vwe igho gbikun re igho  
 Wo roro nẹ ayen tu du emu

When parents talk boastfully about children  
 You would think they originated sex

The same is true of the wealthy  
 When rich people boast about money  
 You would think they were the first to labour

In these few lines of verse, Yembra exhibits wit and profound thought that are the hallmarks of classical poetry. He achieves this flight of fancy largely because of his natural gifts and enculturation in Urhobo indigenous values, folklore, and science.

### **Dialectics of Critical Thought:**

As scholars of the *udje* genre have pointed out, the tradition is so rooted in indigenous and traditional creativity and philosophy that its veteran artists may be described as the equivalent of modern intellectuals. Argument, divergence of views and dialectical thought are common features of *udje* song-poetry. These scientific shifts of thought are evident in some songs that take a critical look at cherished folk beliefs and religious ideology. Urhobo religious outlook is amenable to review and even irreverent inquiry from time to time. Divine principles and orders can be questioned, analysed and rationalised in pursuit of higher truth and justice. Divinities perceived to be inefficient and docile in their lines of duty can be rebuked, chastised, and queried for negligence. In more serious cases such as suspicion of a divinity's inadvertent negligence leading to illness or death of a dear follower, more drastic action can be taken against such delinquent spiritual agents. They can be denied worship and sacrifice, suspended from routine care or even abolished or exterminated.

Let us recall the image of the sacred domain of the ancestors. Their haloed status in the chain of creation and being entitles them to elaborate rites and ceremonies of passage. In kingdoms like the Ughievwen, Udu, and Eghwu, the feasts of ancestor veneration (*Ore*) were like cultural Olympiads. The spirits of the ancestors would be invited as special guests and feted along with the living; it was believed that their temporary stay during the festive season afforded them time to interact spiritually with their families. After the grand finale of the ancestral feast a special ceremony of fire brands was organised to ritually expel the departed forebears to their post-mortem abodes. Known as *adjerivwinkpo* (expelling the ancestors), the ritual involved the use of lighted faggots to brush the surrounding bushes and orchards, urging the ancestral guests to vacate and depart for

*Erivwin*. Those wielding the lighted faggots would be heard saying, “*Avwan we kpo, ore na rere*” (You can now rise and go home, the feast is over).

Yet, as has been explained in previous sections on Urhobo mortuary culture, the Urhobo hold the dead in very high esteem, particularly because of the awesome power and authority they are believed to be able to wield over the living. In this regard, it is a mark of unbridled poetic licence that some *udje* artists use the matter of the ritual of ancestor expulsion to joke about the irrepressible spirit of the average Urhobo to question cherished values and dogma. There is an *udje* example of this poetic freedom in the “*Kpɔlɔdjẹ*” song by the Owahwa community of Ughievwen area as shown in these lines:

Erivwin rho  
 Akpɔ eghughu Erivwin rho re  
 Ohwo ghu phrun re ne e shoh’uwovwin  
 A rẹ Orẹ phrun nẹ a djẹ Erivwin kpo  
 Ehe, obovọ a vwandjẹ ayen ra ile?

The ancestral world is unfathomable  
 The abode of the dead is a mysterious place  
 When a person dies we insist the body be buried in the house  
 But when ancestral feasts are over, we use fire to expel them  
 Where, indeed, can the dead be expelled to?

“*Toborise*”, another *udje* song of Owahwa, furnishes exciting material for the comparative analysis of the resemblance between the botanical art of the petal of plantain (*Musa paradisiaca*) and the technology of a dug-out canoe. The colour of the petals of the plantain is crimson red like the parrot’s feather. The petal, about half a metre long, is shaped like a canoe with a sharp, pointed front. Interestingly, the technical finesse of the front is not reproduced in the formation of the section of the petal that is attached to the body of the plantain. That end, when yanked from the body of the plant, is always roughly-hewn, with jagged edges, unlike the front of a dug-out canoe which is always sculptured in a smooth, shapely form. The poets in the “*Toborise*” piece make a humorous contrast between these two mechanical designs to prove the point that even the most gifted of artists can, like the plantain or nature, be overwhelmed by the demands of technical skills:

Kohwokohwo rẹ ọ hẹ akpọ na kono iroro jẹ bẹn  
 Ke rẹ ọrhẹ  
 Ọ rẹ hẹ uphoron omoko vwọ karẹ okọ phrun nene  
 Ọ ghie ona eghuvwen, ona eghuvwen beren ẹ ghie, ido



All humans in the world; who is it that does not face a dilemma  
 Consider the case of the plantain plant (*Musa paradisiaca*)  
 That used the structure of the parrot's feather to shape its canoe  
 But when it came to the shaping of the helm, its technical skills  
 failed

The sciences of boat building, sculpture, visual arts, botany, agriculture, and philosophy are all yoked together in these ornate idioms of beautiful oral poetry. There are just four lines, yet the ideas they contain crisscross several spheres and domains of thought, experience, art, and technology.

## Conclusion

The preliminary survey of Urhobo folklore, science and knowledge systems attempted in this paper reveals that the Urhobo of ancient times applied logical thinking and scientific inquiry to their apprehension of their world and environment. The ideas and images treated in the paper demonstrate that Urhobo people of ancient times were not merely concerned about mundane matters; they gave attention to deeper things, they speculated about abstract and esoteric issues of philosophy and science. The intellectual discourses stimulated by these realms of thought can enrich the idioms of our cultural sciences.

Our study shows that the multiple knowledge sites explored in these verbal reflections constitute a rich reservoir of endangered, intangible cultural heritage of the Urhobo people. Attention has been drawn to the factors of endangerment, particularly the introduction of colonial education and the ideology of Christian religion which have marginalised indigenous knowledge systems. However, for the Urhobo to respond creatively to the challenge of modernisation and self-reliant development, there is an imperative need to document extant Urhobo folkways, analyse their scientific value and relevance and incorporate them into the curriculum of formal educational institutions to support our determination to be competent and competitive in the knowledge-driven world.

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