

Okpan Arhibo: The Minstrel and His Ethno-Music Poetry

Akporherhe Friday PhD¹, Udi Peter Oghenerioborue¹ and Philo Igue Okpeki PhD²

¹Department of Languages (English), University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State. ²Department of Music, Delta State University, Abraka.

Corresponding author: friday.akporherhe@unidel.edu.ng

Abstract

This study examines Joseph Edjevwedje (Okpan Arhibo) as a legendary minstrel and how his ethno-music performances promote the Urhobo people and their rich cultural heritage within Nigeria and in the Diaspora. It engages the unquantifiable quest of the ethno-musical poet towards the sustainable peace, unity and transformation of Urhobo society. This research is both field and library based with the oral texts (songs) carefully selected due to their thematic thrust and purpose of the study. The oral data are qualitatively analyzed with secondary materials sourced from the internet employed to substantiate discussions raised in this research. The song-texts are transcribed and translated from Urhobo language to English for other researchers and reader to appreciate. The findings show that like most popular oral artists elsewhere across the world, Okpan Arhibo demonstrated creative ingenuity through the originality of his artistic works, skillful improvisation and mastery of ethno-linguistic and paralinguistic resources which endeared him to his teaming supporters and audience. Thematically, the ethnosong-poems of the performing artist convey love and unity, cultural integration, belief systems, reincarnation, development, peace and harmonious co-existence to audience. The study concludes that the commitment demonstrated by the iconic folk music artist towards promoting Urhobo culture and unity through song performances shall be sustained as successive generations would psychologically reflect on their central thematic preoccupations, rhythmical patterns and formal elements.

Keywords: Oral, folklore, cohesion, performances, worldview.

Introduction

Every traditional society is endowed with ethno-musical poetry contextually and constantly deployed for promoting cultural heritage, peaceful co-existence, socio-economic and political development of such ethnic nationality. The ethno-musical artists refer to oral performers, oral poets, bards, folk minstrels and ethno-song poets. In this study, the researchers will utilize the foregoing concepts interchangeably. The study of Akinyemi (2011:27) reveals that "the continent of Africa hosts the largest reservoir of varieties of verbal arts, which could be classified into categories, namely, literary and historical. While the literary category includes the poetic genres such as praise poetry, sacred chants, songs, and the verbal formulaic like parables, and proverbs." The scholar also asserts that the historical type includes "forms as narratives based on myths, legends, folktales, and

historical genres like epics." (27). All the foregoing folklore elements are encapsulated by folksongs which are rendered by ethno-musical poets in traditional African societies.

Folk-music performers saddled with the responsibility of promoting cultural values employ indigenous languages to bring primordial and contemporary didactic experiences, contentious issues, indigenous knowledge, self-referential narratives and family background to public consciousness. By implication, the oral poets retrospectively recreate and portray cultural, socio-economic and political experiences as they affect psyche and wellbeing of the listening audience within their cultural domains and beyond. According to Bula (2020:21), "an oral song is like a written poem just as an oral narrative is similar to a novel or short story. In other words, even before African were formally educated and knew how to write, creativity was a part of their lives. For instance, poetry was expressed by the singing of songs when women were fishing, or a man was farming, or during a marriage ceremony and when someone died while prose fiction was ever present in the moonlight tales told around a burning torch or under the brilliance of the moonlight at night." In the submission of Dediego (2015:1), "the lyrics of a song tell a story and emphasize strong emotions through the lyricist's themes." The scholar acknowledges Gladding, et al (2008) who note that, "use of song lyrics in counselling is common and effective as an emotional recessing tool to evoke deep emotional responses from client." In traditional Urhobo society, music minstrel-poets including John Adjan, Okpan Arhibo, Ovedje Ayonuwe, Nathaniel Oruma, Arhire Okoro, Lucky Okwe, and so on, have their respective ways of promoting culture through their folksong performances, traversing the nooks and crannies of the 24 kingdoms and beyond Urhobo land.

Okpan Arhibo, particularly has demonstrated profound knowledge of Urhobo traditions and practices as evident in his performances which shall be our focus in this research. He displayed his *Urhobocentricism* from the beginning of his singing career until his glorious departure. This study therefore examines the folk music minstrel, Joseph Obererhiri Edjevwedje popularly known as Okpan Arhibo and how his "*Urhobocentricism*" and ethnomusic performances help to promote peaceful co-existence and integration of the Urhobo. The goal of this research is to bring to the limelight the effort made by this ethno-music poet legend in his quest for Urhobo peace, unity and development.

Okpan Arhibo: the Urhobo Music Legend

Olorogun Joseph Edjevwedje popularly known as Okpan Arhibo was born into the families of Odjevwedje Emesevwobue of Ewherhe-Agbarho in Ughelli North and Akpojisheri of Kokori Inland in Ethiope East both of Delta State, Nigeria. The legendary traditional music minstrel was a driver at the Delta Steel Company (DSC), Ovwian Aladja, Delta State before developing his career in song performance. In the 1980s, Okpan Arhibo's album titled, "Catch Fire" changed the dimension of Urhobo music performance and dance. He drifted to western beats but still retained Urhobo folkloric elements in his new dimensional performative art. He also performed some Christian songs together with the cultural songs he was known for. The Urhobo music maestro battled with kidney ailment which was

diagnosed in 2021. He joined his ancestors on March 22, 2022 after the protracted illness. The traditional chief of Agbon and Ughelli Kingdoms was buried on July 30, 2022 in a mournful celebratory atmosphere. The folk music minstrel produced numerous albums and was the President General of Urhobo performing musicians of Nigeria until his demise. Okpan Arhibo's infusion of pidgin English, western traditional rhythms and utterances into his performances attracted the teeming youth population who patronize him until he was called to glory.

Literature Review

African researchers have carried out tremendous investigations into cultural songs and their utilitarian functionalities in socio-cultural settings in the past decades. Their major focus in most of the studies were on education, peace and conflicts, entertainment, national development, satire and propagation of religious doctrines and practices, to mention a few. However, the aspect of ethno-song poetry and cultural integration for societal development has not received adequate scholarly attention. For instance, studies on cultural songs include those of Tanure Ojaide (2001), Gladding, *et al* (2008), Dediego (2015), Bula (2020), Akinyemi (2011), Agawu (2007), Kehinde (2016), Nnamani (2019), Idolor (2020), Mbaegbu (2015), and so on. Ojaide (2001) investigated poetry, performance and art with major focus on udje dance songs of Nigeria's Urhobo people. The scholar engaged the thematic thrusts of the dance songs, the satirical performance, characters and poetic devices that characterized the entire performative art. Dediego's (2015:2) study explores literature review on the use of song lyrics as an expressive arts tool in counselling. The review focused on the historical context of using music in general, and more specifically, prerecorded songs in counselling. These studies add immeasurable value to the current research which focuses on the utilization of traditional songs in promoting unity and harmonious co-existence in Urhobo communities.

The research carried out by Agawu (2007) investigated the communal ethos in African performance which encompasses ritual, narrative and music among the Northern Ewe. Kehinde (2016:111) explored socio-cultural and religious significance of music and dance in African milieu. The study reveals that the African has institutionalized devices for preserving and transmitting their norms, beliefs and traditions, one of such is their traditional music and dance. The study of Nnamani (2014:305) focused on folk music in traditional African society, particularly from the Igbo experience. The scholar noted that music plays an important part in the lives of the people and one of the major characteristics is the function it performs. It is basically for entertainment, enjoyment by the performer or listener. In the study, types of traditional Igbo music with traditional musical instruments are also explored.

Idolor (2020:1) in his research examines orality in Okpe disco music performance. The song-texts were subjected to critical analysis with clear identification of the use of humour, proverbs, parallelisms, repetitions and fables infused into the performance. The research presented the structural layout of the Okpe disco music, thus; *Otonrho* (introduction), *Ekele*

(narrative), *Ikpokporo* (instrumental) and *Irhiren* (conclusion/end) (5). Various oral features of Okpe disco popular music were also explored in the study. Mbaegbu (2015:176) investigated the effective power of music in African societies. The findings showed that music plays indispensable role at work, in politics, religious worships, moral life, socioeconomic engagements and integral development. Nnamani (2019:1) focused on the importance of music in the cultural policy of Nigeria. The study explores selected Igbo folk songs on maternity, installation, funeral, war and moonlight. The scholar argued that through these folk songs, the younger generation is educated morally, intellectually, socially and in creativity. Chiang (2008) examines ethno-musicology and how it has involved extensive work on documentation of traditional music and healing traditions. The findings of Gladding, *et al* (2008) show that music is an important anchor in people's lives, navigating them through challenges, providing strength in struggles, or celebrating the overcoming of obstacles. The foregoing submission was affirmed by Dediego (2015:2). These studies illuminated the current research. However, the major focus is on how Joseph Obererhiri Edjevwedje (Okpan Arhibo) as a legendary minstrel promotes unification of the Urhobo both in Nigeria and the diaspora through ethno-musical song performances.

Methodology

This research is both field and library based with the oral texts (songs) carefully selected based on their thematic thrust. They are collected from audio recordings, audio-visual recordings, in-depth interviews and observations. The oral data are qualitatively analyzed with secondary materials sourced from the internet employed to substantiate discussions raised in this research. The song texts are transcribed and translated from Urhobo language to English for other researchers and reader to appreciate.

The Minstrel and Language Usage

Okpan Arhibo confidently utilized the Urhobo language in communicating his messages to listening audience. From his earliest songs till his death in 2022, the minstrel cross-fertilized his philosophical ideologies, experiences, cultural beliefs and perceptions about human existence through the indigenous Urhobo language especially the Agbarho dialect which is mutually intelligible among the Urhobo people. Ojaide (2007:17) posits that, "the language is a vehicle of a people's values and civilization and the development of Urhobo language should proceed *pari pasu* with the study of Urhobo history, culture, the arts, and others. A language's strength too is not only based on the number of its speakers but also more on its development to carry intellectual and complex thought." Most Urhobo minstrels render their songs using the Urhobo language with traditional musical accompaniment. However, there are those who employ modern western musical instruments in communicating their messages to audience. They include Sally Young, Friday Oviri, Nathaniel Oruma, and so on. Awhefeada (2007:137) observes that, "language is the most important element of one's identity, but most people who are ignorant of this, resort to speaking other languages to the detriment of theirs." It is against this background that the likes of Okpan Arhibo,

Johnson Adjan, Orhire Okoro, and Lucky Okwe, to mention a few, utilized Urhobo language in expressing their thoughts, feelings and beliefs to audience.

Okpan Arhibo like most Urhobo ethno-musical poet code-switches from his normal medium of expression which is the Urhobo language to Pidgin English because of the homogenous nature of his society; to enable non-native speakers understand every subject of his performances. Dikenwosi (2014:57) reveals that, "Pidgin being a language used by wider majority of people is enjoying an overwhelming support." The reasons are that "Pidgin is a very popular language of mobilization, persuasion, education as well as for maintaining good public relations". This among other factors made Okpan to doubtlessly attain the status of widely celebrated itinerant cultural song performers among the Urhobo people both within Nigeria and in the Diaspora. Okpan Arhibo is known for songs with the captures, "Cash and Carry", "Cash your Gulder", "Alaye '89", "Urhobo Makosa", "You do for me; I do for you", "You scratch my back; I scratch your back", "When tyre rolls; driver chop", "You chop alone; You die alone" and so on. The articulation of these utterances by Okpan activate the consciousness of listeners who have been immersed in the songs with the above flagships as they retrospect into the past and psychologically reflect on the present situation of life.

In the literary world particularly the English society, poets such as John Donne, Andrew Marvel, John Milton, William Wordsworth, John Keats, William Shakespeare, John Keats, W. B. Yeats, and so on, are known for their great works which still speak volumes about them. In Nigeria, there are the likes of John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Nnimmo Bassey, and so on, whose poetry though produced in written literature, activate literary engagements or discourse depending on their thematic preoccupations. Similarly, on the aspect of oral literature, particularly the genre of oral poetic performances, several traditional song artists otherwise known as the oral poets abound in Urhobo communities among whom is Okpan Arhibo.

Okpan Arhibo and Oral Traditions

In African societies, the oral artists perform functions that are similar to those of the English poets in western world. They are skilful and spontaneously render oral services in traditional settings. The oral artists are imaginative, creative, innovative, humorous, competent, conscious of their audience and ensure verbal variability in Urhobo society. Prominence among these oral performers is Okpan Arhibo at public performances. In terms of artistic productions, Okpan Arhibo's song performances convey imagery of masquerades, rituals, incantations, folktales, proverbs, and other African linguistic resources. The songs are also characterized with myths (of origin or creation of a group of people, deities), legendary stories (of communal heroes such as founders and brave warriors) of community. The myths and legends help to preserve and promote a people's cultural beliefs. Ajuwon (1985:306) observes in his study that, "at a period when writing was unknown, the oral medium served the people as a bank for the preservation of their ancient experiences and beliefs. Much of the evidence that related to the past of Nigeria therefore could be found in oral tradition."

Investigation has shown that the Urhobo society is endowed with various oral traditions that are composed, performed and transmitted to successive generations as could be found elsewhere. While most of these folkloric forms are spoken, others are dramatic in nature and so researchers in these regards often transcribe and translate the foregoing from the various dialects of the Urhobo language into the English version for non-indigenous speakers to study. Performances like folksongs, folktales, myths, legends, folk epics and proverbs, among others, often come to life as they are performed by the oral poets in public. The performer demonstrates his creative skills, resourcefulness, maximum use of innovations (*improvisation*) and *verbal variability*. He employs relevant stylistics or paralinguistic resources such as repetitions (for emphasis), parallelism, idiophones, allusions, hyperbole, alliteration, and imagery to make the subject matter memorable and understandable to audience.

Plate 1.



Late Okpan Arhibo as a young man



Late Chief Okpan Arhibo in his 70's.

Plate 2.



Audience Listening to Song Performances Organized in Honour of Late Okpan Arhibo in Agbarho- Ughelli, Delta State on July 30, 2022.

Okpan Arhibo's itinerant performances spread across ceremonial occasions such as marriages, funerals, coronations, festivals, chieftaincy confirmations, and visit of dignitaries, etc. According to Abivwevwo Michael who is a respondent, there is hardly a community in the Urhobo land where the oral poet did not perform until his demise. Even in the riverine communities like Orere, Okuama and Egbaegolo, which are under Eghwu Kingdoms in Ughelli South, Delta State, Okpan and his musical group of Agbarho had been invited to perform. The warmth reception the indigenes of communities received was also acknowledged in one of his popular songs, thus; "Oyowwi ke ihwo re Egbaegolo/Oyowwi ke ihwo re Ewu re urhie/Eghereka, Ichihi hwe ebe..." (May it be well with Egbaegolo people/May it be well with Ewu people who reside in the riverine/Eghereka, Footprints that destroy weeds...). The audience of this oral poet is mixed hence in his song titled, "Ojijevwe" (I Still Love her), he declares thus;

<p>Me vwe re Okpan de mue une phiyor, Une re Ikrisimasi ko ye me sua na; oma vwe rho vwe ko ye Okpan de mre obo; Me ve imitete edere, me vwe ekpako edere; Wa ne erhovwo ke vwe me vwo ton ke owwavwan.</p>	<p>I, Okpan began singing, The song of Christmas is what I am singing now; It's out of joyfulness that Okpan has this opportunity, I and children are mate; I and adults are mate; You should pray for me so that I can live long for you all.</p>
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In the above excerpt, Okpan Arhibo is conscious of the categories of his audience and supporters who are both young and old. So, he wished that they pray for his longevity to continue in his profession as oral poet. Okpan's audience based on the foregoing include children, the young and the old, men and women. Findings also revealed that because of the philosophical, didactic and wisdom lore that characterize the songs of this oral poet, Urhobo people who are conversant with the elements of folklore attended ceremonies uninvited just to be entertained by the famous folk minstrel and his group.

Okpan Arhibo consciously communed with Urhobo muse of folksongs which he also acknowledged in some of his early songs. For instance, in the song titled, "Ewwo Rhe Orise" (Let's Give it to Orise-God), the performing artist encouraged people to show appreciation in form of annual thanksgiving to Orise-God who protects, guides and provides for every individual in society. The poet always demonstrated his skills of storytelling as a method of promoting his cultural heritage and values to successive generations within Urhobo land and beyond. He drew on Urhobo oral traditions such as myths, legendary stories, folktales, proverbs, tongue twisting, histories, folk epics, and so on. With these folkloric materials, the oral poet communicates his reformatory messages to audience whose thoughts, emotions and actions could be influenced positively as they psychologically reflect on the performances and their central themes. The creative ingenuity of the oral performer is also brought to the fore as he introduced several patterns of dances and movements with his performances. These generated mixed reactions from his teaming supporters across Urhobo land of which he clarified issues in his successive performances especially through his released audio albums.

The Song-Poet and Urhobo Cosmology

The Urhobo people like their counterparts in other societies believe in supernatural beings and their influence on human existence on earth. In the opinion of Ojaide (1995:5), "the supernatural plays an important part in African literature (and so) the mystically minded African believes that not everything that happens in life can be explained rationally. There are ancestors, spirits, and gods influencing the affairs of the living. There are natural laws which when violated trigger punitive responses in the form of ailments from the spiritual world." Findings show that Okpan Arhibo explores the Urhobo cosmology or worldview through his oral performances. He demonstrated his profound knowledge of the folklores of his ethnic nationality and bring them to the fore. These include archetypal patterns like cultural beliefs and practices, festivals, primordial sacred rituals, societal norms, and faith in traditional religion and ancestral worships. Above all, he presents the supremacy of God and shows that every creature must adore, reverence and worship Him as the creator of Heaven and Earth, hence he acknowledged that, "*Ede se ode re Oghene nu, ake mre ame edjoor*" (After the mention of God, then you call the gods). Apart from the Almighty God, the gods and the divinities, in various African traditional societies, there is the belief in the activities of the witches and wizards in the spiritual realm. According to Ojaide (1995:5), "witches and wizards abound in societies to cause mainly mischief. Diviners and medicine-

men also abound to ward off evil forces from individuals, families, and communities by recommending sacrifices." The role of the above supernatural beings is sometimes woven into the songs of oral poets among the Urhobo people particularly Okpan Arhibo who decried evil machinations in socio-cultural settings as evident in most of his song performances. The study of Erivwo (2005:194) revealed that there are various gods and goddesses based on their inhabitants in traditional societies. According to the findings, "as nature gods and goddesses, some of them inhabit lakes, creeks, rivers, and the sea; these are called *edjo r' ame*. Others dwell in forest and in big trees and are called *edjor' aghwa*. Though often asserting their independence, the *edjo* are known to be under the suzerainty, if not strict control, of Oghene whose emanations they are."

As a custodian of Urhobo customs and traditions, Okpan activates the consciousness of his listening audience about supernatural beings like *esemor* (ancestors), *erhan re orere* (community deities), *edjo* (gods), *erhi re ohwo* (guiding spirits), *erhi ogbegbe* (evil spirits) and *emete ame* (water goddesses), among others, and their influence on the lives of individuals and society in general. The performances of Okpan also interrogates existential issues such as foolishness of man, inevitability of death, frugality, prudence, wisdom lore and knowledge. All these subjects are expressed to audience, using storytelling technique with animals mostly used as characters in the narrative songs. The ethno-music poet juxtaposed primordial and contemporary issues which trigger nostalgic feelings among the older generation audience and also awaken their past experiences. Apart from entertainment, character shaping and counselling of audience through his performances, he employed the songs as means of informal education, social cohesion, personal introspection and purgatory technique, among others.

The Minstrel-Poet as a Unifier

The ethno-music artist has employed several songs to champion the call for unification and harmonious co-existence within families, communities and the Urhobo nation throughout his musical profession. In some of his songs, he laments the insensitivity of *erivwin*, the spiritual world and inhabitant of the dreadful death that randomly snatches away the good and the bad, young and old, wealthy and the poor. Through some of his performances, the folksong legend declares his happiness over his reconciliation with Johnson Adjan, another famous traditional minstrel in Urhobo society. For instance, in the song titled, "Kaye gu vwe" (So they were gossiping me) Okpan Arhibo appreciates the role played by individuals and associations during the peaceful resolution of the conflict. According to the oral poet, the conflict mediators and facilitators include Ukoko Ri Bedebe (Urhobo Immortal Musician), Chief Omokomoko Osokpa (the founder of Urhobo folk music), Chief Djanere, and so on. The performer also attributed the success of the resolution to the role of the gods and deities that he believed are instrumental to peace and harmonious co-existence in traditional Urhobo communities.

Plate 3.



A Cross Section of UPU Members at the Funeral Ceremony of Late Chief Okpan Arhibo at Agbarho, Delta State on July 30, 2022.

Plate 4.



Another Cross Section of UPU Members at Agbarho, Delta State on July 30, 2022.

In the song performance presented in autobiographical form, Okpan strongly affirmed the role of the supernatural beings particularly the *edjo* (gods) for providence, guidance, protection, and in promoting peace and harmonious co-existence in various communities where they are domicile. According to Erhivwo (2005:194), "the Urhobo term *Edjo* is a generic name for all spiritual beings that are believed to exist in another sphere. This may

not necessarily be *erivwin*. They are generally not as powerful as *esemo*; but they are often connected with nature over which they apparently exercise some power." In advancing his submission, Erivwo states that the foregoing "connection justifies their description as nature gods, and so they would in some way correspond to naiad, nymphs, faun (fauna), Neptune Poseidom, etc., in English and Classic folklores." Some of the foregoing archetypal characters are prevalent in most early songs of Okpan Arhibo before his conversion to Christianity.

In his quest for sustainable peace and progress of Urhobo nation, Okpan Arhibo deployed song performance as performative instrumentality to condemn the leadership tussle that split the *Ukoko Ri Bedebede* (Urhobo Immortal Musician) into two factions. Findings have however revealed that the factions were later reconciled amicably until the demise of the oral poet who was buried in July 30, 2022 in Agbarho, Delta State. He pledged his unalloyed loyalty to Urhobo ethnic nationality and its people through the Urhobo Anthem which inspired his song performance titled, "Urhobo Me Jevwe" (I Love My Urhobo). The song begins, thus;

Urhobo me jevwe inene o-o I love my Urhobo o-o
Urhobo me jevwe isio o-o I love my Urhobo o-o
Ede fe me chakpor otor re The next time I reincarnate,
Urhobo me je wan rhiakpor, I will come through Urhobo land
Urhobo me jevwe ine o-o!!! I love my Urhobo o-o

The oral performer in the above lines reveals his ethnocentrism about the Urhobo nation and its cultural values hence he declared that he would reincarnate through Urhobo. His passion for the unity and progress of Urhobo people is unquantifiable hence he declared also in the above song that a child whose lineage is not traceable to Urhobo communities is bound to suffer. This assertion is not meant to degrade nor regard indigenes of other ethnic nationalities as inferior to the Urhobo. However, the oral poet employed this song to activate the consciousness of Urhobo audience about the need to be proud of and also promote their culture at all times. It is against this background that the music poet declared that he would reincarnate through Urhobo land in his next world. Africans, particularly the Urhobo strongly believe in reincarnation, a cyclical pattern of life and death. Though some researchers regard the concept of reincarnation as myth, without scientific proof, it is generally acknowledged among the Urhobo as archetypal phenomenon, cutting across several cultures and societies.

Okpan perceives the Urhobo people as unique in diverse ways: linguistic, culture, worldview, economy, leadership styles, religion and intellectuality, to mention a few. Like the founder of Progress Union (UPU), late Chief Mukoro Mowoe and numerous Urhobo sons and daughters, the oral artist has been an advocate of peace, unity and progress of the Urhobo nation as evident in most of his song performances. Ojaide (2001:3) noted that, "Urhobo people are not as cohesive as many other Nigerian ethnic groups. One reason could be the disparate groups that Mukoro Mowoe glued into one. The Isoko have broken

away to ascertain their own ethnic autonomy. The Okpe, a large fragment of the ethnic group, are unsure of whether they are real Urhobo or a different group. In the past, they have at different times not mutually comprehensible dialects of the language, lack of a common festival, and absence of a single ruler have all helped to fragment the psyche of the Urhobo people." Despite the foregoing, the Okpe people like the Uvwies have been re-integrated and this is demonstrated at the annual UPU carnival that holds at Uvwiamuge-Agbarho where all the kingdoms in Urhobo land converge to celebrate the peace, unity and progress in Urhobo land.

The Urhobo nation is made up of twenty-four kingdoms and the traditional rulers at the helm of affairs. Next to the kings are the *Ilorogun or Ehovwore* (traditional chiefs). Okpan in his song performances acknowledged the significant roles of Urhobo leaders. However, Urhobo Progress Union (UPU) is the apex socio-cultural organization that binds all Urhobo people together and in order to foster peace, unity and progress across the Urhobo land, an annual cultural festival is celebrated at Uvwiamuge, Agbarho, Delta State. The leaders of UPU from inception till date are as follows: Chief Omorohwovo Okoro (1931-1937), Chief Mukoro Mowoe (1937-1948), Chief John Okpodu, (1948-1957), Chief Jabin Obahor, (1957-1961), Chief T. E. A. Salubi (1961-1982), Chief (Dr) Frederick Esiri (1982-1993), Chief (Dr) James Ogboko Edewor (1993-1998), Olorogun (Maj Gen) David Ejoor, Rtd (1998-1999), HRM Benjamin Okumagba (1999-2007), Olorogun Senator Felix Ibru (2007-2010), Chief (Maj Gen) Patrick Aziza, Rtd (2010-2014), Chief Engr Joe Omene (2014-2016), Olorogun (Dr) Moses Oghenerume Taiga (2016-2022). While the leadership of the Urhobo Progress Union including the monarchs mobilize all sons and daughters of the Urhobo nation for socio-cultural and economic development of society, the folk-musicians and minstrels promote Urhobo culture across every kingdom through their song performances.

Okpan Arhibo challenged all Urhobo sons and daughters to storm the dancing floor and showcase their Urhoboness. The refrain of the song is presented thus; "*Wo de se oma ne Urhobo, gba vwe oma vwo phia*" (If you call yourself an Urhobo person then come out). Cultural songs are means of promoting social cohesion and so in the above performance, the oral poet craves the indulgence of the Urhobo sons and daughters both in the homeland and the Diaspora to show their cultural identity. Social organizations formed by Urhobo people globally are with this song performance expected to promote the economic growth and development of the society and also indigenous language at all times. Ojaide (2007:17) notes that "in modern times, there are the Ufuoma and Eguono Clubs and others that bring same-minded people together. Some of the associations are for men, others for women; some mixed, and yet others for the youths and the so-called elites. In these clubs and associations, Urhobo is the medium of communication. Many of them sponsor events and ceremonies, which promote the Urhobo language."

Okpan is a legendary character and unifying folk music performer in Urhobo socio-cultural settings and the various songs traceable to him attest to this assertion. He has the creative ingenuity and imaginative skills which enabled him to employ traditional songs to captivate his audience and sustain their interest throughout his performances. Most of his folksong

renditions are aimed at promoting peace, unity and social cohesion between couples, and among families, friends, communities, ethnic groups, and so on. Davis (2010:126) notes that, "music creates powerful connections between people as it provides a means to communicate, entertain, remember, mourn, or celebrate the lives of people." In terms of communication, songs are expressed through indigenous languages of the society where such performative arts are produced. According to Akpofure-Okenrentie (2018:206), "language is said to be a binding force, for, when a people can communicate with one another, there is an unbroken chain of understanding which holds a people or peoples together." In advancing the above, the scholar states that, "language is a means of expression amongst people of a given community. By means of language a people can express their emotions, emotions such as joy and sorrow; wants and needs; feelings such as cold and warmth. Language is used to express, to articulate aspirations and ambitions." The language in question should be mutually intelligible to the people where it is used for communication of verbal arts. Language is important to a people, not just as a means of self-expression; it is a people's identity (Akpofure-Okenrentie, 2018:206).

Okpan Arhibo performed dirges at funeral ceremonies to resolve emotional and psychic conflicts and promote psychological wellbeing of listening audience. At public performances, the singers recount the attributes of the deceased and what his transition would cause those he/she left behind. Such songs are also sung to console the bereaved family and his close friends. There are also chants alongside cultural songs that are rendered during funeral ceremonies or memorials and they are usually longer than dirges during presentation. The performances are inspiring, disheartening, consolatory and counselling techniques for the family of the bereaved who has suffered disintegrated heart. Iyeh (2010:82) observes that, "Africans have the belief that their departed ones have gone to join their ancestors in the world of the dead. The significance of the ancestors is simply the belief that they watch over the affairs of the living members of their families, helping, deserving ones and punishing the delinquent. Hence, the lavishness to honour and placate their spirits, therefore, ancestors, are there to see the good of the living." Okpan Arhibo as a legendary oral artist skillfully composed and performed songs that are contextual and thematically suitable irrespective of the timeframe slated for his public performances. His forms of oral poetic composition include invocative songs, primordial songs, narrative songs, praise songs, heroic songs, religious songs, satirical songs, funeral songs, marriage songs, war songs, ritual rendition, political songs, and so on. These forms of oral traditions are dramatically performed in several forms, thus; masquerade dances, traditional festivals, rituals, and ancestor worships, to mention a few. These could be visualized in the song performative arts. For instance, there are songs about the worship of divinities or gods which are performed at sacred places like the shrines and it is mainly for protection, blessings, fertility, forgiveness, renewal of oaths, and so on. There are song performances on spirit possession and mediumship before Okpan got conversion to Christianity.

The subject matters of Okpan cultural songs cut across all aspects of human existence such as *eguono* (love), *okugbe* (unity), *ughwu* (death), *efe* (riches and wealth), *egan* (sicknesses),

usivwo (treatments), *Ogbiru* (social vices) and *obevwe* (poverty). There are songs that focus on *urhivwe* (predestination), *ofarhie/egberadjan* (prostitution/ adultery), *omiovwo* (motherhood) and so on, in Urhobo socio-cultural settings. All these are drawn from the reservoir of oral traditions of the Urhobo people.

Okpan Arhibo's Career and Patronages

Some oral artists such as bards (oral poets), orators and singers have taken their performing art as their careers; hence they are hired to public functions and receive awards in cash and kind for their performances. The legendary oral poet performed at public ceremonies, eulogizing dignitaries who have made meaningful impact in society. Like the ancient bards in other societies, he dedicated special songs to people, recounting their family background, the greatness of their family lineage, personal attributes and achievements. Okpan like other oral artists also rendered services to distinguished individuals in communities such as politicians, businessmen, intending couples, corporate organizations, cultural groups, ethnic groups and socio clubs both far and near until his death. He had in time past performed in marriage ceremonies, funerals, chieftaincy confirmation and coronations. The foregoing therefore affirmed the submission of Ajuwon (1985:306) that, "Pre-literate Nigerian once enjoyed a verbal art civilization which, at its high point, was warmly patronized by traditional rulers and the general public." Oral artists including Okpan Arhibo enjoyed public patronages unlike the ancient bards whose services were restricted to royal courts. Okpan as an oral poet received public patronage from social clubs, cultural associations, families and so on. Apart from financial rewards, Okpan and his musical group received from philanthropists and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), animals such as goats, rams and expensive souvenirs are also given to them based on their impressive performances.

Plate 5.



Urhobo Women Enthralled by the Performance of Okpan Arhibo's Early Songs

Among audience who listened to the song performances of the Agbarho-born music minstrel across Urhobo communities were people who regard the oral poet as their favourite because of the messages he conveyed (to listeners and viewers) during performances. These are either in the recorded audio and audio-visual or those performed physically at ceremonial occasions across Urhobo land. Even non-indigenes who understood the messages and rhythm of Okpan's cultural songs, listened to the legend performances and rewarded him in cash and kind.

The Oral Poet and Modernism

Okpan Arhibo showed serious commitment towards the betterment of the Urhobo nation and its people through numerous song performances. He never allowed modernization to derail his course even though he digressed to contemporary subjects like modern lifestyle, fashions, politics and civilization, to mention a few. It has been discovered that Urhobo oral poets adopt the performative style of code-mixing and code-switching in order to convey their subjects to both indigenous and non-native audience. Often times, an oral performer weaves English language into the Urhobo which is actually the major medium of communication during song performances. On code-switching, the minstrel and his musical group intermittently switch from Urhobo language into English and return to the status quo (the indigenous language) during song performances. They demonstrate their artistic and communication skills while maintaining constantly the subject matter, tempo and rhythm of the musical performances. On the aspect of utilization of foreign instruments, investigation reveals that Okpan Arhibo is among the song performers in Urhobo society who adhered strongly to the use of traditional musical instruments in his performing art. Other music minstrels and song performers with these instruments include Johnson Adjan, Orhire Okoro, Thompson Ulolo, Oghenekparobor Odjighoro, and so on. The likes of Sally Young, Nathaniel Oruma, Lucky Okwe, Friday Oviri, and Ovedje Ayonuwe, to mention a few, introduced foreign musical instruments into their performances in order to attract wider audience who reside within and outside the Urhobo society. The foregoing affirmed the view of Akporabaro (2004:18) that: "The forms and techniques of African oral literature have not been borrowed from external cultural traditions, and are by and large uncontaminated by western influences. For this reason, they constitute the most authentic expression of the creative intelligence and world-view of the African people."

Plate 6.



A Musical Group Performing at the Funeral of Okpan Arhibo in Agbarho Town

The emergence of the social media has contributed to the wide spread of oral performances across the world. There are artistic works of Urhobo oral poets like their counterparts in other societies where there are presence of new technologies. For instance, there are oral performances of Okpan Arhibo and other Urhobo singers on Youtube, Instagram, WhatsApp groups and so on. All these are being created by people to consciously or unconsciously promote oral poet in particular and the Urhobo literature in general. Some of the recorded videos of Okpan song performances within and outside the shores of Nigeria abound in the internet, specifically the Youtube. Findings have further shown that several of Okpan Arhibo's oral performances have been documented and played by indigenous listeners and viewers worldwide via the mass media such as the radio and television stations. Some scholars have also carried out research on folk music in Urhobo land of which songs performed by this popular minstrel provide sufficient reference points and oral texts for analysis and discourses. Disc Jockey's innovation has promoted the folk music performances in society. For instance, Most Okpan's songs have been collected and used for entertainment of audience at different occasions where the celebrants prefer the services of Disc Jockey experts. Although the DJs play varieties of songs performed by different oral artists, those with passion for the performances of Okpan Arhibo showcase more of his artistic works at traditional ceremonies such as funeral, marriage, coronations, chieftaincy confirmations, cultural carnivals, and so on. The commitment of the iconic folk music artist towards promoting Urhobo culture and unity through song performances shall be sustained as successive generations would psychologically reflect on their central thematic preoccupations, rhythmical patterns and formal elements.

Conclusion

The research shows that like most popular oral artists (minstrels) across the world, Okpan Arhibo demonstrated exceptional creative ingenuity, originality of works and mastery of linguistic and paralinguistic resources which endeared him to his teaming supporters and audience. Most of his folksongs are centred on peaceful co-existence, motherhood, education, employment, development, social life and historical experiences. They also explored Urhobo worldview, primordial subject matters, inevitable deaths and re-incarnations, to mention a few.

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