

Challenges and Prospects of Sustaining the Folk Songs of the Urhobo of Delta State Nigeria

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Abstract

Folksongs are the music of the common people in the society whose texts are based on their belief, world view, philosophy and the nature of their work. Examples of folksongs include work songs, love songs, children songs and storytelling songs sung and played by the ordinary people in the community. Basically, folk-music lives in oral tradition; it is learned through hearing rather than reading. It is functional in the sense that it is associated with other activities. It is “valued both for its beauty and how well it is fulfilling its function of accompanying work, storytelling, and providing a sense of group solidarity in the society”. In recent times, due to the forces of urbanization and advancement in technology, the folk songs of the Urhobo are confronted with the challenge of extinction as most people no longer sing the songs. Their performances have been replaced with foreign music from the western world; which is a dangerous trend because the Urhobo will lose their music culture and identity generally. Sustaining the folk songs of the Urhobo will enrich the corpus of traditional music world-wide in this period of advancement in technology where the world has become a global village. It is therefore recommended that the Urhobo language should be made the official language in the home; more so kindergarten and primary school teachers in Urhobo land should rather teach their pupils the folk songs which are laden with moral values instead of the rhymes from the western world which have little or no moral knowledge to bequeath to the children.

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Introduction

Folk songs are indigenous songs that originate from the people, performed by them and for them. They are transmitted orally from one generation to the other. America heritage dictionary (5th edition) defines folksongs as a song belonging to the folk music of a people or area. The Century dictionary on the other hand says, it is a song of the people, a song based on the legendary or historical events, or on some incident of common life, the words and generally the music of which have originated among the common people and are extensively used by them. Princeton (2006) defined it as a song that is traditionally sung by the common people of a region and form part of their culture. Britannica dictionary says folk songs are a type of traditional and generally rural music that originally was passed down through families and other small social groups. Oghiator (2022) simply says that Folk songs are traditional or indigenous songs of a society.

The International folk music council define folk music generally as “the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission and the factors that shape that tradition are: continuity that links the present with the past, variation which springs from the impulse of the individual and the group and selection by the community which determines the form in which the music survives” (Ekwueme, 2001;17-18). Thus since folksongs exist in oral mode, the unpopular songs are doomed for extinction due to non-performance while the most liked of them are performed regularly and thus survives till the next generation.

From the foregoing it implies that folksongs are the music of the common people in the society whose texts are based on their belief, world view, philosophy and the nature of their work. Examples of folksongs include work songs, love songs, children songs and storytelling songs sung and played by the ordinary people in the community. Basically, folk-music lives in oral tradition; it is learned through hearing rather than reading. It is

functional in the sense that it is associated with other activities. It is “valued both for its beauty and how well it is fulfilling its function of accompanying work, story-telling, and providing a sense of group solidarity in the society” (Dick-Duvwarovwo. 2003; 28)

The folksongs of the Urhobo therefore are songs composed and performed by them to accompany their domestic and social activities. The songs are based on their philosophy of life, belief system and their culture generally

Characteristics of folksongs

The circumstances surrounding the composition of folksongs make them to have common features which are hereby discussed below;

- They are short and repetitive; this does not lead to boredom, rather the continuous repetition of the songs lead to excitement of the performer and the listener as well as impact the message behind the song on the people.
- The composers are not known even though they are created by individuals. The composers not being known can be attributed to some factors, some of which are;
 - i) Nobody actually agree to be the composer of a song because of the claim that songs are gifts from the gods revealed through dreams, vision or created on directives from a supernatural being. Thus if songs are given by the gods, no one should claim it for him/her self
 - ii) More so, some of the songs are composed extempore based on the activity going on at the time; at such instance, those around can also contribute to the text and melody so it now becomes a group composition that cannot be

credited to an individual. Most of the songs are created in this manner during one communal activity or the other.

- iii) The folksongs could also be the result of the thought of someone at a particular time, maybe reflecting on his own condition of life, the happenings around him and life generally.
- They are subject to change in text and melody due to their mode of transmission, which is orally. As it passes from one person to the other, there is the tendency to modify the tune, rhythm and even the text. This is why folksongs are both old and new because it represents the heritage of the people and their current taste of music. Thus they are in various versions both in text, rhythm and melody
 - They are based on the culture of the society as music cannot be separated from the culture in which it exists as it is based on the language, customs and world view of the people hence one cannot successfully understand the music of any group of people unless he understand their culture.
 - Folksongs are not written on staff but exist in oral mode and are so transmitted and preserved. This implies that the songs loved by the people are what will survive, the un-loved will naturally extinct due to non-performance. In recent times however, music scholars are making attempt to transcribe the songs as they are gradually going into extinction due to their non-performance.
 - The songs are accompanied with instruments constructed locally from the materials within the environment

The significance of folk songs in the society

Africans generally are music lovers; music surrounds all their activities ranging from the celebration of the birth of a child through marriage to death. The child is born and nurtured with music. It is through folksongs that the child learns his culture; the do's and don'ts of the society because they are infused in the songs he sings regularly.

“Folksongs serve as a means of relaxation, entertainment, for the transmission of idioms and proverbs, and a channel through which virtues and vices are commended and condemned (Emusi, 2016). This explains the reason Vander Graaff (2022) gave six importance's of folksongs in the education of the child. To him they;

- a. Have expressive quality: in the course of singing, the participants are able to express themselves with regard to their feelings, their thoughts, and their joy and their fears. Folk songs create the enabling environment for the expression of group sentiments either that of joy or sorrow, hatred or love towards those in authority. Through the expressive quality of folk songs the society is able to regulate itself.
- b. Historical and cultural; folk songs are historical and cultural; through the texts of the songs, the people are acquainted with their culture and their origin. Culture is the way of life of a people which are often embedded in the folk songs of the people. Thus, through the songs the up-coming generation learns their culture. The song below teaches members that belong to the same vocational association to always have the habit of saving money so that they can assist anyone that comes to them for financial assistance.

Urhobo

English

Wo ri'emerha no, wo ri'emerha cheko eat small, keep some

Se otu we de se when you are called upon

wo mi vre nene	you should follow
Eki r'utitan ru wo chwa na	the onion market you are into
Eki r'iyeri ru wo chwa na	the fish market you are into
Wo ri'emerha no, wo ri'emerha cheko	eat some, keep some
Se out we de se	when you are called upon
wo mi vre nene	you should follow

There are songs that also teach members of the society, especially the younger generation the negative effect of greed, covetousness, hatred, envy, jealousy and other vices that can hinder the life of someone. Therefore, through folk songs that accompany story-telling, children are taught the acceptable way of behavior in the society. One of the songs that reflect the origin of the Urhobo is stated below;

Urhobo	English
Ese me dje, ese me ys	should I run, should I trek
Ese me mr'oba ri sanu-u	whether I can see the king of sanu
Ukpe r'oyibo mu'oba r'aka	the year oyibo arrested the king of aka
Idjoyer' oye shumuevwerhe	his followers were complaining
Ese me dja, ese me ya	should I run, should I trek
Ese me mr'oba ri sanu-u	whether I can see the king of sanu

This song corroborates the claim of the Urhobo that they migrated from Benin because this incident happened while they were still dwelling in Benin

- c. Expand vocabulary; folk songs expand the vocabulary of the children based on the fact that in the course of singing, they will come across a word that they are hearing for the first time.

- d. Teach natural musical concept; folk songs teach natural music concept in the sense that they are singing naturally based on the music culture of their society.
- e. Are music inheritance; folk songs are the music inheritance of the society; they constitute part of what were inherited from their ancestors. Members feel excited singing songs that their fore-fathers sang thereby enjoying the creative activities of their parents.
- f. More so, folk songs are fun for children, especially when they accompany themselves with instruments and moving their bodies to the rhythm of the songs

Dick-Duvwarovwo (2015) listed ten importance's of folksongs to the society;

- Since music making is generally organized as a social event, its performance provides an opportunity for its members to share in creative experience of others since everyone cannot be a composer
- It enables members to participate in music as a form of community experience
- It affords them the avenue for the expression of group sentiments of joy or sadness concerning the leadership of the community
- Since the society didn't have a written tradition initially, the songs act as the perpetuator of the people historical records, their world view and general knowledge. This corroborate Vander Graff (2022) point of folksongs being historical and cultural
- Folksongs serve as educational agent as both the performers and spectators alike as they acquire moral, spiritual and matrimonial knowledge from the songs performed

- It ensures the continuity of the society as it reflects the past and present state of the society as well as the younger generation learns from the older generation during social occasions. Thus , their performance lead to cultural continuity
- It propagate instructions for self discipline, self control, propriety, and physical fitness
- Folksongs provide opportunity to release pent up emotions, especially at the loss of a loved one.
- Music strengthens the social bond that bind the people and the values that led to their corporate existence. As people sing and dance together in the celebration of one event or the other, they are reminded of their genealogy and relationships, thus strengthening family ties and contributing to cultural stability.

The afore mentioned testify to the fact that folk songs are very important to the society, as they are seen by the people as life and not just as a means of entertainment.

The Challenges of sustaining the folk songs of the Urhobo communities

The folk songs of the Urhobo are currently experiencing the challenges of sustenance due to lack of its performance. Traditional music activities that were hitherto performed in the evenings as part of recreational activities are gradually disappearing and are being substituted with foreign music. Some of the factors responsible for this trend are discussed below;

Firstly is the gradual fading away of the language; Urhobo men and women hardly speak the language in their homes, thus most Urhobo children cannot speak the language. The English language has taken over most Nigerian languages because everyone wants to belong to the elite group to the detriment of their culture and identity. Language according to Essien (i998) in Baba (2007) is “a system of structured arbitrary vocal

symbols by means of which human beings make meaning and communicate with each other in a given community”. Human beings are born into an environment that has a particular language with which they communicate with each other; thus children born into that community are expected to learn how to speak the language being the means of communication in that community. They first learn it from their parents and those in their immediate environment. A major feature of language according to Aziza (20i5) is that it must be spoken, used for a variety of purposes, nurtured, maintained and developed otherwise; it will die and become extinct. Aziza (20i5) states,

Language embodies the knowledge of how its speakers
View the world; their culture and traditions, relationship
With each other and with others, evolution, innovative
trends, their philosophy, science, commerce and educational
practices, their concept of the divine and spirituality
indeed, their totality and uniqueness as a distinct people
in the world.

From the above, it is pertinent that language is a vital feature of a group of people, because their culture is embedded in the language; folk songs are in the language of the people. Thus if a person cannot speak the language he is born into, how can he sing and understand the music of his people? Here lays the problem associated with the folk songs of the Urhobo.

Another challenge of the Urhobo folk songs is its association with timidity and being classified as an old way of life; those that received Western education see themselves as too enlightened to participate in the performance of their traditional music. Thus the educated men and women, boys and girls abandoned their folk-songs for western popular

music. More so, children in nursery and primary schools that are supposed to be introduced to the folk songs of their environment are rather taught western nursery rhymes because the teachers themselves cannot sing the songs.

Rural-urban migration in search of jobs and improved economic activities has also alienated the people, especially the youths from their environment and folk-songs. Consequently, Nzewi (1997; 10) observes that “modern Africa has recklessly abandoned its human essence and cultural values while gobbling up the modern-publicity-hoisted glamorous allures of Western thought and life styles”. The consequence of this is loss of identity and weakened social cohesion.

Advancement in technology that has led to the availability of different cable networks, where the activities of foreign countries including their music can be viewed in one’s sitting-room has exposed the Urhobo youth and children to the songs of other cultures which seem to be more appealing, captivating and in tune with modernism; therefore they rather associate with such music at the detriment of their local songs.

The availability of alternative Western forms of recreational activities in the homes in form of computer games and home videos, recreational centers as well as the recent security challenges has made parents prefer their children to stay at home watching films or play computer games rather than being outside for the usual moonlight games. But many might recall the days when children congregated out doors to play their favourite games, sing and dance or participating in a story telling session often laced with folk songs. Apart from being fun, the games and other music activities helped build fundamental skills which range from social interaction to physical hand-eye co-ordination and even basic Mathematics and strategic thinking. As Ogisi (2006:84) rightly observes,

“the evening recreational activities are fast disappearing in the urban areas in response to television, home movie, and satellite television...these have made Nigerians passive observers of musical activities in contrast to a people known for being music makers”. The implication is that the folksongs of the Urhobo are no longer performed, thus leading to their gradual extinction

The Prospects of the Folk songs of the Urhobo

Folk songs are very important in the society because they are functional as they communicate ideas, feelings; they educate and propagate the culture of the people they represent. They also provide entertainment during celebrations; folk songs are part of a people cultural heritage; it is their identity

Sustaining the folk songs of the Urhobo will enrich the corpus of traditional music world-wide in this period of advancement in technology where the world has become a global village. This period is an opportunity for people to propagate their culture, especially their music culture. Art music composers can derive sound materials from folk songs for their compositions especially in this era of cultural re-awakening. Oluwatade (2016) in his article *Excerption of motivic materials from folk songs as tool for contemporary music composition* said that the law of flexibility demands a clear separation between folk melody and its text such that each folk material could be a tool for re-creation and further re-arrangement in music composition. Basing his study on the theory of flexibility of folk songs, stated further that the theory of flexibility in folk songs requires the composer to give a considerable attention to lyrical, rhythmical and melodic pattern of a folk music in order to utilize them as motives for other compositions. Thus folk songs can be used as motives for more comprehensive compositions; this will be possible because folk songs are short and repetitive. This will further enhance the accessibility of the folk songs of the

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Urhobo. Popular musicians on the other hand can also base their songs on folk songs of their culture.

In addition, playwrights who are of the Urhobo stock can lace their drama pieces with folk songs that reflect its theme. The traditional music accompanying the drama heightens the emotion behind the play. “It attracts the attention of the audience, sustains their interest while the play lasted, and effectively communicates the message to the audience” (Dick-Duvwarovwo, 2015). Infusing folk songs into the drama of Urhobo playwright will not only sustain their performance, but will also propagate the language.

More so, sustaining the folk songs will enable music educators to use them as resource materials to teach the different concepts in music such as melody, rhythm, texture and harmony. It will not make teaching and learning interesting but will also give them the opportunity to be abreast with the moral lessons in the songs. School proprietors will also have the opportunity of teaching the school children the folk songs for the purpose of entertainment during end of term and year activities.

Thus there is a great prospect in sustaining the folk songs of the Urhobo for the sake of un-born generation; it will also constitute part of the indigenous music of the world projecting music culture of the Urhobo.

Recommendation

Folk songs are part of a people’ s culture; they are the life wire of a society; sustaining them is sustaining the identity of the people and the continuity of the society. Thus the following are recommended for the sustenance of the folk songs of the Urhobo;

- First and foremost, the Urhobo must make deliberate effort to sustain the language by speaking it to their children and family members; they should make the official language in the family

- Primary and kindergarten teachers should teach their pupils the folk songs of the Urhobo instead of the western rhyme that seems to moral value. Folk songs are laden with moral lessons that will benefit the children as they grow older. By so doing, the children will be able to learn and participate in the performance of the songs they did not have the opportunity to learn at home.
- Music educators should use the music quality of the songs to teach the concepts in music such as melody, rhythm, harmony and texture. This will make the teaching and learning of music to be fun and enjoyable.
- Urhobo playwrights should infuse the songs into their drama pieces; this will highlight the theme of the drama and will also make it more interesting and fascinating.
- Art music composers as well as popular musicians should also make use of the folk songs as a theme of their compositions. This will make their compositions and music more meaningful and interesting.
- The ministry of Arts and Culture as well as each community should organize yearly competition in the performance of indigenous music. This will encourage each community to preserve their music

Conclusion

Folk music is the identity of any group of people; sustaining them is sustaining the people's identity and their society. Allowing them to extinct will lead to the dearth of the people and what concerns them. It is therefore expedient for the Urhobo to sustain their folksongs.

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