

Edo Folk Songs as Sources of Historical Reconstruction

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ABSTRACT Of the several ethnic groups in Nigeria and among the Edo people for which we are primarily concerned in this paper, traditions occupy the apogee of their mores. And folksongs are principal part of oral traditions. While little has been done on the use of folksongs as historical data, few attempts in this similar direction are perfunctorily handled. This study therefore examines five folksongs from Edo speaking Nigeria as data for historical reconstruction. In doing this, the researchers corroborated the validity of the selected songs with the available treatises, traditions and literature in Edo nation.

INTRODUCTION

Edo State is Located in the South Western part of Nigeria. It was carved out of the then Bendel state in 1991. While the state can be said to be a homogenous one with all the various ethnic groups such as the Benin, the Esan, the Afemai, the Akoko-Edo and the Owans sharing identical historical origin and political institutions, differences exist especially in the area of culture among the Etsako and Akoko-Edo peoples. The word Edo however refers to these peoples who have shared historical origin as well as political and cultural similarities. These peoples are called the Edoid peoples. This paper therefore examines some selected folk songs from these ethnic groups which serve as historical reconstruction. Because almost all the ethnic groups claimed to have migrated from Benin, the dominant ethnic group in Edo state, there will be over reliance on Benin songs. This is due to the fact that these songs gain favour in almost all the other ethnic groups.

In Edo and indeed in Nigeria today, music making is enshrined in every activity of the people's lives. Folk songs are the principal works used in the ceremonies that induce music making. In spite of the abundance of folk songs in these cultures, very scanty scholarly attention has been given to it this paper therefore attempts a critical study of selected folk songs within these ethnic groups with the view of unveiling how these songs have tallied with historical datas and thus help in the reconstruction of historical process.

FOLKSONGS

A Definition

To Miller (1960) folk songs are the uncon-

scious expression in melody of racial feelings, character and interest of people. In a similar strain Lloyd (1968), notes that a folksong is that which has become so much a part of the heritage of a group or nation that there is a feeling of common ownership whether or not the composer is known.. In the view of Ofosu (1989), folksong is any traditional song, which is of obscure and indeterminate antiquity but has passed into general currency and acceptance.

From the above definitions, it could be observed that folksongs are always closely bound to a culture within which it fulfils positive functional purposes. Similarly, folksongs in essence, show a degree of continuity and link the present with the past even though they are created by anonymous individuals and transmitted orally by singers. Because the preservers of these traditions are mainly people of pre-literate class, they have developed a peculiar musical craftsmanship in choices of text, high powers of memory and handed down their traditions in a form made suitable for oral transmission.

Functions of Edo Songs

The Edo culture is rich and lively. They draw their inspiration from the indigenous ways of learning and training—ways that have been passed on from generations to generations. In trying to impart knowledge in this province, folksongs, handclapping, drumming and dancing are used. For some topics however, trainers additionally use role play, dramatic sketches and demonstration techniques. For the purpose of this study, due attention will be paid to folksongs. A critical examination of the diverse folksongs available in this culture will present about ten typologies. Vis-à-vis: (1) Historical songs (2) Funeral

songs (3) Birth songs (4) War songs (5) Work songs (6) songs for sales (7) songs of insult or songs of allusion (8) philosophical songs (9) children songs (10) Ritual songs. According to Merriam (1964) expression of cultural value revealed in song text can be carried further to a study of the underlined Psychological set of ethos of a particular culture.

The folksongs typologies can be broken down into three major categories in line with their functions. The categories are

- a. Economic Functions
- b. Political Functions
- c. Social Functions

a. Economic Function: In Edo, evidences abound in market places on how songs are used to attract attention in the process of selling products like Native soap, Herbal Mixture, knives e.t.c In a similar strain, music is profusely made during communal labour. The essence of this music is to enable workers ease tension. Some of the tasks that attract music making in this realm are;

- (a) Clearing the community road to the river or farm.
- (b) Building a collapsed neighbour's house
- (c) Roofing a neighbour's thatched house
- (d) Dressing a bride and leading her to the husband's abode. Work songs and songs for sales fall into this level also.

b. Political Functions: The eminence of music in political institution cannot be over stressed. In Edo, the enthronement and dethronement exercise of a reigning monarch will be incomplete without music making. As a symbol of authority, there exist guilds of court musicians who are charged with the performance of court music in their palaces. Some of the instruments used are historical drums and tusks of Elephants bequeathed to successive kings which cannot be found in the hands of princes and subordinate chiefs. The songs often used are accounts of exploits of the predecessors, battles fought and won, of festivals and shrines in their domain. The songs under this level are historical songs, war songs, ritual songs and entertainment songs.

c. Social Function: "Music exists only in terms of social interaction and it is learned behaviour ...it involves the behaviour of learned individuals and group of individuals (Merriam, 1964: 27). In Edo, Music is enshrined in every event of their life cycle-Birth, puberty marriage, death e t c. In these cultures, it is very common to

find friends gathering together on moon lit nights to tell stories with musical interludes entertain themselves with songs and dances and also celebrate initiations into manhood. The typologies under this category are funeral songs, Birth songs, philosophical songs, allusive songs or songs of insult.

Songs as Historical Reconstruction

From the ongoing discussion, historical songs form a major part of the palace political structure hence there exist in palaces court musicians who are repositories of their peoples' traditions. Chroniclers are carefully selected in a competitive contest throwing more light on this, Vansina (1973: 4), observes that "preliterate peoples have highly developed powers of memory, and hand down their tradition by the use of rhyme or other formulae for linking the materials together". In the Nigerian culture, appointment of singers of particular songs is often the exclusive choice of the monarch hence there are families of drummers for the Emirs, families of Seers for the royalty, Queen producing village etc. The Edo culture is not left out while Benin Royal musicians are the only prescribed authority to entertain the Oba in the palace, the Unuwazi Village are also the only prescribed persons charged with the performance of Ayele music for the onojie of Uromi

To ensure continuity in this exercise the families of court musicians teach their children from infancy, the ethos or mores of their people.

Nketia (1975) Blacking (1971) opine that just as an ethnomusicologist may observe how a peoples choice and creation of music is affected by historical processes, so a historian ought to be able to learn something about its social and cultural music by studying its music settings. They argue further that if musical evidence is to be used in reconstructing African history, musical styles must be carefully described both as patterns of social and cultural action and as patterns of sound.. Ignoring these, any analysis is likely to be spurious and misleading and so historians may by this trend fail in getting the confirmation needed in their study.

Music making is not restricted simply to the organization sound only, it also includes a symbolic expression of social and cultural organization, which reflects the values, the past and present ways of life of the human beings. If a people's music is carefully studied and analyzed, it will be of considerable use in reconstructing

African history. The musical relationship between different groups may be examined to clear doubts of their affinity or otherwise. Musical homogeneity could confirm doubts about historical origins. The musicologist –Akin Euba has noticed Islamic musical culture among the Yoruba people. This musical view further corroborates the fact that the Yoruba in their folklore claim that part of Middle East, which was the source of Islam.

Using Historical Songs in Historical Reconstruction Some Caution

Fage (1971: 257) observes that “it is only about 1950 that historians have begun a coherent study about Africa. Such historians concerned themselves with Africa and their interest was simply on European activities-Africa. He concluded by saying that such activities though part of African history, are very far from being the same as African history. Music historiography in the view of Ogisi (1996: 63) is a recent trend in Nigeria and in the author’s view; songs as sources of historical reconstruction is very embryonic. Given this background, it therefore calls for utmost care in their use.

According to Bauer in Vansina (1973: 148), wars or the death of famous men, form the themes of such folk songs- (Historical songs). “He posits that since historical poetry is usually composed for propaganda purposes; it can be used for studying the political attitudes of the group, which gave birth to it. But its value as a historical source is diminished by its propaganda aims, which give rise to major distortions in the account of the facts, and also by the fact that it is full of allusions, which often can no longer be interpreted. He says further that it cannot be used for the purposes of analysis of the events, which it describes. Bauer’s view is not entirely correct. It should be observed first, that Historical songs are only a part of folk song which is very wide in scope. Similarly, a panegyric poetry or song which is a poem to praise is certainly not composed for the purpose of recording history but in all it is a kind of folk song. In the submission of Vansina (1965: 20) Oral traditions of many African states can be used and treated as equivalent of written chronicles, provided they are used with due care and circumspection...They are ex-parte statements which must be subjected to careful checking and cross checking” it is in this direction that attempts will be made to examine five Edo

historical folk songs in terms of their textual analysis, period of composition with the aim of eliciting historical relevance.

In the opinion of Vansina (1973: 148), Historical songs and poems are works intended to provide an account of historical events”. Historical songs have diverse themes like in-equality in life, theft, lies, new cases of infidelity, wars, exploits, life histories of notable men etcetera. The associated texts or poems are care-fully framed into songs with new or already existing melodies. The songs are not performed ordinarily but during festivals and the currency of the subject matter is manifested by the tenets, which address various issues of attention. In the view of Alagoa, (1974: 3), “tropical songs are songs concerning historical and current events in the society”. Alagoa sees historical songs as the same as Topical songs whose subject is usually of current issues. This view is true because what is yet the topic of the day today, turns a past event moments after, and so calls for historical analysis. To a reasonable extent, his view may be upheld because documenting the present in songs provides a retroactive reference for historical construction.

Song 1: The theme of the first song *Idia* is that *Idia* was a very brave woman and so went to battle. The song text further reveals that in that period, it was unusual and rare to find such a woman.. Subjecting this song to a critical examination, one finds that the song was composed after an event that took place between 1515-1516 during the Benin-Idah war. The text further shows that *Idia*, the Queen mother of *Esigie*, the reigning monarch then mobilized troops and went to the battlefield. Although *Egharevba* (1968) shares a similar view in his book, *A short History of Benin*, he did however not confirm whether *Idia* actually look part in the fighting process. He writes:

During this war (Benin/Idah), Queen *Idia*, the *Oba*’s mother, sent men from *Urelu* captained by her head slave, who fought very bravely, and killed the General of the *Idah* army but while trying to steal his dress, the slave was kicked to death by the horse of the fallen General (*Egharevba*, 1968: 28).

Be it as it may, the song remains very important because it serves a historical reminder to the people of a particular war during the reign of *Oba Esigie* and the war in which his mother *Idia* played a very active role.

Song 2: ...*Ogiso* banished *Ekaladerhan* with his mother from the city (Benin)

Selected Folksongs and their English Translation

	<i>Text in Edo</i>	<i>Text in English</i>
Song 1.	Okhuo hi yo Kulo Sokpin Idia ni ye'sigie Okhuo hi yo Kulo Sokpin Idia ni ye sigie	No woman ever goes to war Except Idia-Esigie's mother No Woman ever goes to war Except Idia-Esigie's mother
Song 2.	Ekaladerhan Oyuluo Ekaladehan Oyuluo (twice) Meghi Mene Ojie no bie Mwen Amen ghito lo Oruen ghi yimwon 'Kpako, na la Mwien I sogiso	Ekaladeahan is dead I won't Mind my Parents it will not rain here it will not sun here Drought will abound in Ogiso's Palace.
Song 3.	UWAIFIOKUN Uwaifiokun Eiman nomwan t'oghe Uwaifiokun Eiman nomwan t'oghe, Erere nu mwen nu ya t'oghe Oe emwin nu mwen nia	Uwaifiokun it is no good to tell lies Uwaifiokun it is no good to tell lies the gain you get from telling lies is what you have seen now.
Song 4.	Ovonramwen Text in Benin Edo Kpa ke ghi re Ini Idobo ke mien ede Aiguobasimwin n' ogie Aiguobasimwin n' ogie No ovbi Obonranwen n' odwn Ke do mu egbe calabar Oghi so do ni Oyo Obo si ebo hia koko One ti do rinmwian uwa Eti do rinmwian uwa Nu wa mu ikun erhare nae No ya re re vbo ore edo Ebo hia kegui he Iran we onn ghi gia ni Iran we ona ghi gia ni Ere Oyn gba vbe ede ha Na ghe dolo osorhue yi Ovonramwen ughegbe no yibo	Text in English a day came Difficulties claimed the day Aiguobasimwin the great king Aiguobnsimwin the great king the first son of ovonramwen got ready to go to calabar when he got there He gathered the whites together and said I came to beg you. I came to beg you To give me my father's corpse that I may bury him in Benin All the whites refused They said it is impossible They said it is impossible That today makes it three days That they have buried the white chalk Ovonramwen, the mirror that glitters
Song 5.	Text in Esan Iseghohimhen Iseghohimhen ghunakpa Iseghohimhen ghunakpa Iseghohimhen ghunakpa nuane Ghunakpa	Text in English Iseghohimhen look at govt. official Iseghohimhen look at govt. official Iseghohimhen look at a govt. official be on the run

Textual Analysis of Songs and Their Historical Significance

Instead of killing him and Ekaladerhan eventually became the founder of the village of Ughoton... The day of Ekaladerhen's banishment from the city of Benin is still remembered by the Benin people as it was very cool and there was neither rain nor sun. Any such day is called Ede Ekaladerhan or Ekaladerhen's day to this day (Egharevba, 1968: 2).

The quoted text above corroborates a Benin folk tale which was told of Ogiso Owodo's only son Ekaladerhan, who was although innocent of the charge but accused of using mystical powers to make the father's wives barren. Rather than kill

him, he was banished with his mother from Benin. Banished without food items, they thought death was looming ahead of them hence a song was composed in the palace that Ekaladerhan is dead. Ekaladerhan did not die during the cause of his journey as wished by the Ogiso family and as reflected by the song. But one thing stands out very clear that is Ekaladerhan was banished and that he founded Ughoton.

Song 3: The song Uwaifiokun stresses truth and justice. Uwaifiokun the Younger brother to Ogun had told his people that Ogun was nowhere to be found to get the Obaship of Benin. Before

his final coronation, he was killed by the true heir to the throne, prince Ogun and was consequently crowned. Supporting this assertion, Egbarevba (1968) opines that after the murder of Uwaifiokun, Ogun was crowned the Oba of Benin with the title Ewuare in 1440.

The song enjoins every one to be truthful because natural justice will always take its course after all Uwaifiokun would have been a king but his for over ambition. In the Benin culture, it is customary for the Oba to appoint the younger ones kings to other subordinate towns to check rivalry and inordinate ambition.

This song is performed till date in Benin social occasions. Wherever it is sung, one is reminded of Uwaifiokun's over-zealousness. The song is historical because it tells of an event that occurred around 1439 before Ogun's coronation in 1440 A.D as Oba.

Song 4: This song on Oba Ovonramwen though historical has a very solemn melody and style of rendition perhaps because of the message it carries. A vivid account of how Oba Ovonramwen was deported to a mosquito stricken area in Calabar for about sixteen years, became sick and died consequently. The Benins felt that their royal father should not be buried in a non-ancestral home. Based on this view, Aiguoba simwin-the heir to the throne was sent to Calabar to retrieve the body but the government refused.

Of all the four songs gathered from Benin, this song retains every minute account of the Oba's troubles in the hands of the white men. It is the view of the researcher that this accuracy could be as a result of three possible factors. (a) That the subject the song treats has to do with how a monarch and his people were humiliated (b) That the song was craftsmanshiply composed by a faithful court music performer and (c) That because of the Seriousness of the message it conveys, it fails to suffer some distortions as concomitant with folk songs. Recording this account in his book, Egharevba (1968) says:

After sixteen years, exile Ovonramwen died in January 1914. His eldest son Oko (prince) Aiguobasimwin asked that he might be allowed to bring his father's remains home in order to give him the customary royal burial, but the request was refused as he had already been buried at old Calabar by the government. The death was announced in Benin City in January 1914, after the return of Aiguoba simwin from old Calabar (Egbarevba 1968: 60).

Song 5: Iseghohimhen is a historical song gathered from the field in Uromi in Esan, Iseghohimhen was one of the sons of Ogbidi Okogie-one of the kings that reigned in Uromi. Commenting on his reign Egharevba says that:

In 1918, there was a great epidemic of influenza. His people rejected Okogie; the onogie of Uromi in the same year and the government deported him to Benin City. For a subsequent offence, he was sent to Ibadan in January 1926 from where he returned to his native town without permission (Egbarevba, 1968: 62).

Running away from Ibadan without permission caused government agents to search for him. It came to a point when the children were invited to court to take Oaths and say sincerely when they saw their father last. Okojie (1997) says these of Iseghohimhen's defense.

"...But Iseghohimhen like Simon Peter an Apostle of Christ, denied his father in court and he claimed that he had been sick for some time. He removed his wrapper from his body to show his slim nature. He was however fined EI (one pound) for being a bad son to his father, because at least he was supposed to look for his father on his return" (Okojie, 1997: 13).

Paying a handsome amount of one pound in 1926 was a big burden, besides the presence of Government agents was a signal of great danger, hence the song tells Iseghohimhen of the presence of the government agent and that he should run.

The contextual import of the song is more than what the text depicts. It is a historical song that helps recall how Iseghohimhen was fined in court. Something led to court invitation –that Ogbidi Okojie ran away from Ibadan confinement. That Iseghohimhen should look at the government agents does not mean Iseghohimhen parse, it goes to show the psychological and emotional trauma our rulers went through under the colonial rule. Traditional rulers who revolted against the system were arrested on frivolous charges. There was also unchecked deportation of reigning monarchs and the disintegration of African political structures.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it must be pointed out that these five songs discussed are by no means the historical songs in the locale studied. The point however is, they provide accurate accounts which

are further tested in Historical, Ethno-musicological and anthropological surveys. One more note to end, if this paper has provoked thought, raised questions and relations, then its aim has been achieved.

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