
ORAL FORMS AS A VEHICLE FOR THE ARTICULATION OF URHOBOS COSMOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents aspects of the cosmology of Urhobo people, as articulated in Urhobo oral forms. The paper examines five poems (Texts I – V) for their thematic contents which exemplify aspects of the cosmology of the Urhobo poetry. Aspects of the cosmology identified include: the essence of life, the uniqueness of the individual, the efficacy of paternal blessings, objectivity in assessing situations and attitude to physical prowess. To these, the paper strongly posits that they bear semblance to other cultural elements in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Cosmology is the worldview of any group of people. It is the complex of their beliefs and attitudes concerning the origin, nature and structure of the universe, and the interaction of its beings (Metuh, 1981). It is the intellectual or rational explanation of the order which undergirds human lives and environment (Kalu, 38). Simply put, cosmology is the belief-system of any particular group of people. This paper presents aspects of the cosmology of Urhobo people as articulated in Urhobo oral poetry. Understanding the cosmology of any particular group of people helps us to understand their actions, why they act the way they do. As Ubrurhe (2003:22) puts it, understanding a people's cosmology or worldview helps us to appreciate why they behave in a particular way, why they think differently from others, and why their philosophy of life is distinct from that of other people. As a people, the Urhobo have their particular worldview. Although it is not codified as most western cosmologies are, it is by no means amorphous. Urhobo cosmology - the totality of the beliefs and practices of the people - are clearly expressed through, and in, their cultural, religious, and socio-political institution practice. In this paper, shall limit our investigation to some aspects of Urhobo worldview which are discernible in Urhobo oral poetry. Urhobo poetry belongs to the genre known as 'orature' or oral literature. Like the traditional ballad which has its roots in folk song and dance, Urhobo poems are not written or recited; they are sung, to educate, entertain, enlighten and inform their audience.

CLASSIFICATION AND FUNCTIONS OF URHOBOS POETRY

In classifying Urhobo poems, we examine the content as well as the use to which the poem is put, all the time conscious of the fact that Urhobo poems are essentially folk songs. Like all traditional poems, they have no known or acknowledged composer in the western sense. How may we classify Urhobo poems? This is not an easy question to answer. The literary critic, steeped as it were in Western literary tradition, thinks of poetry classification in terms of lyrical (sonnet, ode, elegy, eulogy) and narrative (epic, ballad, romance) poems. Should we bring such a mindset to classifying Urhobo poetry, we might find ourselves pouring new

wine (in this case, the relatively new and still largely unexplored field of Urhobo poetry) into the old wine skin of Western literary stylistics. Such a literary venture might mutilate rather than elucidate the true nature of Urhobo poetry. One approach to classifying Urhobo poems is by examining the content of, and the typical situations in which the poem is sung. In this sense, we may classify Urhobo poems as *ile-eha* (game songs), *lie-oha* (songs of folk stories), and *ile-otoeghovwio* (songs of leisure). Urhobo secular song-poetry can (also) be divided into traditions: The classical (*ile ahwaren*) and the modern (*ile okena*) (Darah in Ekeh, 2005: 475). These songs or poems perform more than a mere entertainment function; they express different moods, philosophies, and situations (Onunwa 44). As Brascow (1965: 475) observed, folktales and folksongs serve as a vehicle for the transmission of idioms and proverbs, and a channel through which virtues and vices are commended or condemned. Urhobo oral poems are not therefore, a mere exercise in the organization of sounds into a melodious sequence but a symbolic expression of social and cultural organization which reflects the values as well as the past and present ways of life of the people who compose the poems (Blacking 1991: 186).

THE ESSENCE OF LIFE

The first poem we shall examine expresses the Urhobo view of the essence of life.

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| 1. Ko-ka-ko-ko, amono sh'urhe vw'oboyi-o? | 1. Ko-ko-ko-ko, who's felling logs over there? |
| 2. Mevwe, Yayogho. | 2. It's me Yayagho. |
| 3. Ko-ko-ko-ko, amono sh'urhe vw'oboyi-o? | 3. Ko-ko-ko-ko, who's felling logs over there? |
| 4. Mevwe, Yayoqho. | 4. It's me Yayagho. |
| 5. Diemu wo vw'urhe ru? | 5. What do you need wood for? |
| 6. Urhe me vwo Kar'odo. | 6. I need to carve a mortar. |
| 7. Diemu wo vw'odo ru? | 7. What do you need mortar for? |
| 8. Odo mi vwo duvw'egu. | 8. I need it for pounding yam. |
| 9. Diemu wg vw'egu ru? | 9. What do you need pounded yam for? |
| 10. Egu mevwg ghr'emo. | 10. I need it to feed my children. |
| 11. diemu wo vw'emo ru? | 11. What do you need children for? |
| 12. Emo ml vwoyer' akpo. | 12. I need them to live a good life. |
| 13. Diemu wç vw'akpg ru? | 13. What do you need life for? |
| 14. Akpo mi vw'akpo ru . | 14. I need it so I won't die. |
| 15. Kona, kona edje, | 15. Kona, kona edje, |
| 16. Edje, edj'akara | 16. Edje, edj'akara; |
| 17. Kara, akar'ughwe; | 17. Kara, akar'ughwe; |
| 18. Ughwe, ughwe n'obo; | 18. Ughwe, ughwe n'obo; |
| 19. Obo, obo rume; | 19. Obo, obo rume; |
| 20. Ume, ume rere; | 20. Ume, ume rere; |
| 21. Sabobo mi rare-o, | 21. Sabobo mi rare-o, |
| 22. Sabobo, sabobo gbaun! | 22. Sabobo, sabobo gbaun! |

Before commenting on the thematic content of this poem, it would not be inexpedient to briefly examine the structure of this poem. This poem has an antiphonal structure The theme

is developed through a series of questions and answers which progressively peel off layers of truth until the inquirer (who asks the questions) arrives at the final truth which is expressed in line 14 'I need (life) so I won't die'.

Part of the lyrical beauty of this poem derives from the echoic arrangement of the words and lines, particularly lines 15-20 which exemplify effective use of the type of verbal parallelism called 'anadiplosis' where the last part of one unit (in this case, the stanzaic line) is repeated at the beginning of the next. The discerning listener or reader may also discern 'onomatopoeia' ('ko-ko-ko-ko') in lines 1 and 3 which echo sense of an axe striking wood. This poem, which may be described as a dramatic and a narrative poem, tells the story of a man, Eyayogho, who is felling a tree. In response to a series of questions, he explains that he needs the trunk of the tree to fashion or carve a mortar which he will use to pound yam to feed his children with. He needs to feed his children so that he will have the satisfaction of knowing that he has lived a good life by performing his parental duty of caring for them. The children, in turn, will ensure that Eyayogho does not 'die' for they will continue his posterity and perpetuate his name, in addition to giving him regular veneration when he joins the ancestors.

From the thematic analysis above, it may be readily inferred that Urhobo consider having and raising children a major essence of life and living. In this regard they share the sentiments of the Bible writer who said, 'as arrows are in the hand of a mighty man, so are children of one's youth' (Psalm 127:4; KJV). For the Urhobo, children play a vital role in ensuring the immortality of man, and that is why *egan* (barrenness) and *Okibe* (impotence, or an impotent man) are regarded as curses. For the Western theologian who denounces polygamy as a 'heathen practice' one should perhaps point out that polygamy among the Urhobo was not influenced by hedonistic considerations but rather by the conviction that everyman has the moral obligation of having and raising children so as to ensure immortality. Hence, if a man's wife is barren, it becomes expedient for him to marry a second wife.

THE UNIQUENESS OF EVERY PERSON

Urhobo people believe that every individual is unique. No matter how insignificant a person may appear to be, this is something s/he has which makes him or her unique. Consequently, no one should be derided or belittled because those we mock as being insignificant may be in possession of powers we do not have. This is the moral of the second poem which we shall presently examine. The poem, which is always sung when telling a particular folk tale, tells the story of how 'Ukun' a mere shrimp humiliated an 'Oba' (king) who mocked *Ukun* because of his diminutive size. In the narrative, people were going to market or for shopping, and *Ukun* (shrimp) also resolved to go (shopping). When the *Oba* saw *Ukun*, the Oba burst in derisive laughter on account of *Ukun's* diminutive size, whereupon *Ukun* beggar to sing:

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|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. kp'eje kp'eki, saibolo! | 1. All went shopping, saibolo! |
| 2. 'kp'eje kp'eki, saibolo! | 2. All went shopping, saibolo! |
| 3. Omevwe r'uku saibolo | 3. Even me, small shrimp, saibolo |

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|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 4. Mene me jera saibolo, | 4. Said I would go too, saibolo |
| 5. Oba mre vwe, saibolo, | 5. Oba saw me, saibolo |
| 6. Ofrako r'ehwe, saibolo | 6. And laughed me to scorn, saibolo |
| 7. Oba wa vwo, saibolo | 7. 'Oba swell up', saibolo |
| 8. Oba vwre, saibolo | 8. Oba swelled up, saibolo. |
| 9. Oba wa kpo, saibolo | 9. 'Oba deflate', saibolo; |
| 10. Oba kpo re, saibolo | 10. He deflated, saibolo! |

That Virgin, tiny as he is, could successfully invoke a curse of swelling and having made his point, cause the thoroughly chastened Oba to deflate (that is, to return to his normal size) underscores the moral of the poem: Never underestimate anyone. As the saying goes, 'Ugbobo r'ozighe rua-a' ('A murderer's biceps are not necessarily big'); hence people who appear insignificant may be capable of causing copious embarrassment to those who mock them.

THE EFFICACY OF PATERNAL BLESSING

The next poem shows the attitude of the Urhobo efficacy of paternal blessings.

TEXT III

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|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1. Emo r' Urhobo re ri' akpo rhe, | 1. Urhobo people are fortunate, |
| 2. Akpo vwerhe, | 2. Life is pleasant, |
| 3. Avwaren ri' akpo rhe. | 3. We are so fortunate. |
| 4. Ole teha ghel'ofe. | 4. Yam sprouts in spite of beetles. |
| 5. Erhovwo r'ose koy' ighor'emo | 5. A father's prayer is the children's wealth. |

This poem underscores the fact that the Urhobo have a pleasant outlook on life: life is pleasant, and they as a people are fortunate or favoured. The proverb in line 4, 'ole teha ghel'ofe' (which is glossed here as 'yam sprouts in spite of beetles') underscores the spirit of resilience among the Urhobo: No matter the challenges and excel. The reason for this confidence is that the prayers of their fathers are efficacious, and inevitably translate into wealth (that is, general wellbeing and success in life) in the lives of the children.

OBJECTIVITY IN ASSESSING SITUATIONS

The fourth and final poem which we shall examine gives an insight into a well known attitude of the Urhobo: their objective (and frequently unflattering assessment) of their own weaknesses and shortcomings. This attitude, which is frequently misinterpreted as a lack of patriotism is often exploited by unscrupulous outsiders to achieve unwholesome ends. Whenever Urhobo people perceive that their own institutions or people have fallen short of the mark, they do not try to conceal the fact or invent excuses for the failure. Let us consider the poem.

TEXT IV

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|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Isio, isio, kere kere! | 1. Twinkle star, twinkle star! |
| 2. Isio, isio, kere kere! | 2. Twinkle star, twinkle star! |

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|----------------------------------|---|
| 3. Emete oke na, | 3. Girls of these days |
| 4. Ovwravwra a'e vwo hian, | 4. Are impetuous; |
| 5. Ugborhi a'e vwo hian, | 5. They are gossips. |
| 6. Aelee shevwe, koi | 6. Alele struck me, coil |
| 7. Si mi t'idjede r'Aka, | 7. When I walk on Aka road, |
| 8. Meme hian vwovwo; | 8. My progressip smooth; |
| 9. Si mi t'or'Urhobo me, | 9. When I tread Urhobo paths, |
| 10. Odjigbe djvw' ohia, Oghreke! | 10. Thorns impede my movement, Oghreke! |

Impetuosity (*ovwra*) and flippancy or gossip (*ugborhi*) are frowned at. The Urhobo commend smartness (*esasea*) but condemned impetuosity. Similarly, a gossip (*ogbor' ughorli*) is seen as a miscreant.

The second stanza (Lines 7-10) bear out the attitude of objectivity towards social realities: The persona in the poem unabashedly admits that while Aka (Benin) roads are smooth, Urhobo roads are thistle-infested. One only needs to consider the fact that the persona is an Urhobo in order to appreciate the frankness and objectivity involved in admitting that his own infrastructures are not as good as those of outsiders Whether this attitude is negatively adjudged as lack of patriotism or positively as objectivity depends on the sentiments of the assessor.

ATTITUDE TO PHYSICAL PROWESS

The Urhobos deride cowardice and laud strength, particularly the prowess displayed by wrestlers and warriors. It should be noted, however, that this does not translate to war-mongering; rather, in the mongering; rather, in the socio-cultural milieu/enivornment in which the Urhobos emerged as a distinct socio-cultural group, strength (physical prowess) was necessary for survival.

To encourage the development of physical fitness and prowess, the Urhobos treasured the art of wrestling. The poem 'Adadamu' (dragon-fly) is a taunt used by wrestlers during wrestling contests.

TEXT V

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| 1. Dadamu-o, Mi, Mu'abo none | 1. Dragon-fly I'll wrestle today |
| 2. Aunghe! | 2. Behold! |
| 3. Dadamu-o, Mi, Mu'abo none | 3. Dragon-fly I'll wrestle today |
| 4. Aunghe! | 4. Behold! |
| 5. Ori mimuru-o mevvero oto! | 5. Anyone I catch, I'll dash to the ground! |
| 6. Aunghe! | 6. Behold |
| 7. Mi mue re-Aunghe! | 7. I'm wrestling now-behold! |
| 8. Mi mue re-Aunghe! | 8. I'm wrestling now-behold! |
| 9. Abo vworu vworu ker'odibo-dibo! | 9. Hands so smooth like a banana-banana! |
| 10. Abo vworu vworu ker'odibo-dibo! | 10. Hands so smooth like a banana-banana! |

This poem-song is intended to intimidate the opponent and weaken him/her psychologically. This is similar to the effect which professional wrestlers often seek to achieve in their boastful and aggressive outburst before a wrestling bout. Line 5 "anyone I catch, I'll dash to the ground" is particularly intimidating to the opponent, while line 9 and 10 'hands so smooth like a banana' is a taunt-the opponent is being derided as having 'smooth' hands like a child; in other words, he lacks the grit and grip of a wrestler.

CONCLUSION

Urhobo oral poems, as we have attempted to demonstrate here, perform more than a mere entertainment function; they articulate the beliefs and attitudes of the Urhobo people. These beliefs and attitude which constitute the cosmology of the people are include: the place of children in ensuring perpetuity of life, the uniqueness of every individual (and thus, the need to respect every person irrespective of his/her socio-political /economic status); the role of paternal blessing in securing financial well-being for the children; objectivity in assessing situations, as well as an attitude of admiration/ adulation of physical prowess.

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