

SINGING IT OUT: LYSEARCH AS AN ETHNOGRAPHIC TOOL

By
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Abstract

Okposi, a subgroup of the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria, is typical of societies where literacy are nascent and so have to store the social memory of their nonliterate days in diverse oral media. One of such media is music, which in traditional times was entirely a group phenomenon and is only secondarily used for entertainment. New ethnographies have shown interest in the recent history of their hosts and autochthonous management of social memory. However, where absence of coeval documents is encountered, as is always the case, such an endeavour might be impossible. My present study suggests lysearch, from lyrics and search, as one option that has hitherto not been considered in such a situation. I used participant observation to study 21 songs dating between 1917 and 1960s from 50 performers with results that suggest that lyrics can be helpful data in researching social history of groups that lack documents.

Key words: music, lyric, ethnography, social memory, nonliterate society

Background

I have always suspected that oral literary performance of a group might contain some insight on their culture. On occasions I have asked students to collect some of these as part of their class work. In my fieldwork among the Orring of south-eastern Nigeria I also collected some but all this has always been in the form of such genres as fables, proverbs, ballads, and such fossilised forms, which are sometimes lumped together under the rubric, folklore (Mbunda, 2007). I never gave qua songs a serious thought as a possible repository of a group's corporate point of view on issues that are contemporary to them. My mistake was in looking at songs from the Western prism, where they tended to be individualistic. Songs among the Okposi Igbo, as well as many other traditional African groups tend to be products of a group. A song may originate from the efforts of an individual but for it to be acceptable it must fit the prevailing social ideology. So, for a group that is nonliterate or among whom literacy is nascent, songs may or indeed do serve such purposes as written literature and modern mass media in literate societies: publicity, censure, education, satire, protest, and a host of other social processes. Baumgardt (2008) seems to have found this fact much earlier when after a wider study she has titled her essay, "Oral literature is not a closed set".

Use of group oral artistic performance as first-hand data researching the past of nonliterate or recently literate societies is important since there may be no other reliable source. As a rule, there may not be written sources. In the absence of documents the researcher is obviously left with only two other sources: oral accounts of elders, and documented speculations of writers who are not direct witnesses of the events under reference; writers who are outsiders to the time or community that are the subjects of the study. Even where respondents mean well, they often, due to the limitations of human memory, cannot give an accurate account of events dating to a distant past, relying only on their recollections

(Ezeh, 1984). Often inaccuracy is worsened by deliberate distortions and embellishments to serve group or personal ends.

Writings by narrators who are not from the place or time under study present their own shortcomings. They are usually inaccurate, their data in the first place being imprecise. In my present case, for example, although there are some archival documents mainly in the shape of colonial records, such documents do not cover the subject under study. They contain just the much they could on the description of the autochthonous social organisation of the community and efforts of the colonial officers to bring in Western-style government (Waddington, 1933).

The fact that a narrator hails from a particular nonliterate community does not ipso facto make his/her narrative reliable where that has to do with events that that occurred at a time predating him/her. It is possible to reconstruct with some accuracy events that have coeval records but not those lacking such records. For example, in my present case, one incident of civil unrest against the colonial government, namely the women revolt of 1929, has been well documented in later accounts. But that is because records could be found that chronicled it. As lately as 1939 the ethnography, Sylvia Leith-Ross would still refer to it after she deftly got around a bout of hostility from a group of women mistaking her for a government agent and blaming the colonial authority for local economic hardship (Leith-Ross, 1965: 178, 179). The 1929 event was a women-only uprising that spread to, practically, all Igbo communities, including Okposi, against an unpopular policy by the colonial government to impose chiefs and create quasi-centralised native authorities among the group that traditionally were acephalous. It was government's strategy to extend its so-called indirect rule to this part of Nigeria, having found it cost-saving in other parts of the colony. By it did not consider the difference in autochthonous social structure of the Igbo. Authors writing textbooks these days find it easy to reconstruct that event with a fair level of accuracy because there are documents to fall back on (Nweze, 2006: 102 – 104).

Protests that were not as dramatic and openly disruptive as the women uprising could not be captured in colonial documents. Although official and even fewer nongovernmental ethnographers were employed, they were not in such number nor typically did they attain such level of integration that could expose such furtive native discontent. This part of the Igbo country was one of the last to acquire literacy. First attempts at setting up Western-style primary schools were only in 1930s, so again natives were not literate to document their reactions to colonial administration. Studying of social events at such times in any society will have to do with other strategies. It seems from my experience among the Okposi Igbo, that songs that are coeval with such social events can be a good source of data.

The Okposi

It may help to say one or two words on the the Okposi as a group to make the understanding of the report easier. They are traditionally an acephalous patrilineal, patrilocal Igbo community. They share patriliney with their neighbours to the north, the Onicha Igbo Eze, and to the west, the Uburu. Their eastern neighbours, the Amasiri, and their southern neighbours, the Edda, are both matrilineal. Although the Church of Scotland missionaries had visited the Afikpo area, about 30 kilometres south east of Okposi, as early as 1888 (Isichei, 1976: 161),

nevertheless it was not until 1930s that the colonial government began serious efforts to establish effective presence in the community. It is difficult to imagine these days the immense challenge that lack of means of transport posed at time when practically the options were only the waterways and trekking through largely undeveloped footpaths. With regard to the former, the Afikpo area had the advantage of being on the bank of the River Cross that empties into the Atlantic in Calabar where the Presbyterians first landed. By 1933 the District Officer, H. Waddington, found the group largely untouched by Westernisation.

In mode of life the people are practically uniformly primitive, houses, food and clothing being all of the simplest character. Considering the fact that a European member of the Church of Scotland Mission has been many years resident in Okposi and has in his charge schools at Okposi Uku and Umebi Orua, it is a little surprising to find no noticeable signs of educational influence or social progress. Doubtless the work of the mission does to some extent bear fruit and achieve a purpose in its effect on the young people directly in contact with mission institutions, an effect which may come to fuller fruition when the young adherents grow up (Waddington, 1933: 4).

Waddington's curious orthography of the dialect can be excused if it is remembered that there was no model to copy and also that negative mother-tongue interference on the phonology of the local tongue is only all too obvious. His Okposi Uku is really Okposi Okwu, the largest sub-group within the community, and his Umebi Orua is Mebi Owa. It is also evidence of lack of the foreigner's less-than-efficient knowledge of the local language that he was not able to detect how aware his hosts were on the issue of culture clash; awareness that is palpable in the lines of the protest songs that are coeval with the report of the District Officer. I find one of such contradictions particularly piquant. While Waddington cited the supposed adaptation of the native arbitration system for colonial use as one of the ways that local custom had changed (Waddington, 1933: 4), the youth opined in one of their angry songs [entry no. 4 in the Matrix below and its corresponding note] that such was a mere imposition that did not reflect authentic autochthonous practices.

The Data

It is important to underline what the type of data that I describe in this report are not. That way what they are may, hopefully, be put in relief. I do not talk of the various uses to which songs or music is put in this part of Africa. Every writer of a 100-level textbook on the subject remembers to include a litany of such functions as ritual, relieving of boredom or fatigue while working, rallying people for war, celebrating births, social-control, entertainment, and so on (Nwadike, 1992: 32 -35; Okebalama, 2003: 65: - 79). It is not the existence of such categories among the Okposi Igbo that this article is about. What this article is about is a methodological strategy whereby lyrics of a song can be analysed so that the words it contains can help a researcher who is investigating a social event or a period in the history of a nonliterate human group to access some social facts, social ideology, or the prevailing mood of the group in the period under reference. I have suggested the term,

lysearch, [from lyrics and search] for such a strategy. Unlike ethnographers of the functionalist persuasions recent ethnographies have shown increased interest in the recent history of their host, in the main so that they can investigate autochthonous management of social memory among such groups. Canessa (2000) has reported the efforts of Thomas Abercrombie using historical documents on this among some South American groups. But the pre-eminent snag is that where absence of coeval documents is encountered, as is always the case, such an endeavour might be impossible. My present study suggests one option that has hitherto not been considered in such a situation.

For this to be valid, certain conditions are necessary. The songs must be rendered in their original form. Preferably the performer must be among those that originally sang the song. Failing this, the current performer must be confirmed to have learned the song from the original performers and must not have modified it. The researcher must crosscheck his recording with as many other performers as possible at the different venues and times outside the hearing of performers whose versions he/she already has.

This is a method that is necessary otherwise there would not be any other way of accessing the data in question. The alternative to it will be to impose the researcher's conjecture on the subject under investigation, which will be as good as useless. The method calls for a thorough mastery of the language of the performance. It also calls for patience and ability to associate in an unassuming manner that is capable of putting respondents/performers at ease so as to bring out the best in them.

My present investigation took six years. Between 2005 and 2011 I was only able to collect 21 songs from 50 performers. It cannot be otherwise since these are songs that are no longer current. Performers are more than songs because I had to crosscheck the lyrics from as many performers as I could find. I am native of the community, born there and lived there until I was 18 before I left for the city for higher education and work. But as characteristic of most people here I return from time to time to visit relatives and participate in other communal activities. The strategy for collection of these data was to weave the activity into other appropriate communal events: occasions of feast and other convivial meetings. It had the effect of not removing suspicion of ulterior motives, which would have reduced or removed co-operation on the part of the respondents/performers. I became, in the terminology of classification of the participant observation methods, a complete participant, or what Brewer (2000: 60, 61, 190) has called observer participant. I did not need to learn the language. I had a native competence in it as well as had studied it all the way from my primary education to the university where I combined it with linguistics for a double honours Bachelor of Art degree. I was a bona fide participant in the community's affairs and did not need any special authorization to do so. In ethnography and qualitative sociology, complete participant or observer participation has been found to be the thorough way to investigate a group holistically. If there are few examples of it, it is because research needs and membership of the group under study rarely coincide in the form that may make the use of this strategy feasible.

It emerged that most social themes that are coeval to the songs are present in the lyrics: political, gender, family, amorous, sexual indiscretion, religion, and so on. The social structure of this patrilineal group is also reflected in most of the songs. The time covered by

the songs is late 19th century to the middle of 1960s. This is the case of only the first two songs in the matrix below. In the earliest part of this time range it was easy to see an insular society that was culturally self-contained. Towards its middle we see a society that was confident in its autochthonous ways but confronted with an assertive alien rival system, and by the last part of it a significant impact of acculturation is evident.

Source: the author

Legend: + indicates the gender that performs the song in question

Matrix summarizing the songs and their social themes

	song	male	Fe- male	theme(s)	Terms	period
1	Ogbuu	-	+	male sexual		
2	laxity; trouble making	R	c. 1917			
3	Adene Eke	-	+	gender debate	R	c. 1917
4	Ụbọ I	+	-	sexual offence; foreign rule; inter-communal trouble	Nr	c. 1935
5	Ụbọ II	+	-	dishonesty;		
6	culture clash;					
7	colonial institution;	Nr	c. 1935			
8	Sẹ e mere nne	-	+	Modernity	Nr	c. 1953
9	Nkwọ Nwachiku Eze	-	+	Acculturation	Nr	c. 1953
10	Iveonwa	+	+	censure of sexual indiscretion of a native junior appointee in the colonial government; strong girl wrestler vaunting her strength; bride's choice of suitor;	Nr	c. 1953]
11	Egwu mgbe	+	+	camaraderie, paternal responsibility; thievery	R	c. 1953
12	Ire mbara	-	+	flippancy; sexual laxity	R	c. 1953
13	Aga Igwe	-	+	filial indiscipline; valour	R	c. 1953
14	Igberi	+	+	sorcery; marital conflict	R	c. 1953
15	Owiyo owiya	-	+	marital relations; neglect of agriculture; dislike of imported second-hand clothes	Nr	c. 1953
16	Awo Nwụnẹgwụ	-	+	acculturation vis-à-vis Western-style schooling	Nr	c. 1953
17	Ogo Nweze	+	+	emigration; Angst over invincible; widow promiscuity	Nr	c. 1953
18	Titi	-	+	financial prudence; extramarital sex	Nr	c. 1953
19	Nnadi Oti nẹ Ne Oti	+	+	virilian insensitivity	Nr	c. 1956
20	Umụdaya	-	+	child adoption	Nr	c. 1964
21	Bebi	+	+	amiability; decorum	Nr	c. 1964
	Shọkọ	+	+	moral depravity	Nr	c. 1964
	Ayara uke a na di	-	+	female camaraderie	R	c. 1964
	Waga	+	+	depravity; culture change; abortion	R	c. 1965

- indicates that the gender does not usually perform the song in question
- R indicates that terms are drawn exclusively from the local speech community
- Nr indicates that terms are drawn from the local speech community as well as from extraneous sources, usually English

In the following passage I identify for each entry the lines in the song that refer to its theme(s). Each entry is referenced with its number in the matrix. The rendering in the Okposi Igbo dialect is given first and followed immediately by the English translation.

1. Ogbuu, Ogbuu, Ogbuu e jewo ozi; kwahụ ịnọ n'ụnọ e me agboọ n'ehe. [male sexual laxity]
Ogbuu, Ogbuu, Ogbuu, the work-shy; all he does is lay about at home groping groins of maidens.
A gụta Nwankwọ Nsude sẹ ekebe/ A gụta Ẹkpa Nwankwọ Nsude sẹ ekebe. Sẹ ẹrẹrẹ koro n'akwarị n bụ ẹrẹrẹ;/ nkotanko kokwasị ẹ, sẹ o koro. [denouncing of trouble making]
Invoke Nwankwọ Nsude and put an anti-trouble making spell on him/ Invoke Ẹkpa Nwankwọ Nsude and put an anti-trouble making spell on him. May trouble-making thus be disempowered and disturbance along with it;/ may both of them thus be disabled.
2. Otubere nwoke ugo, adene Eke, ngboghọ bụ anyị nyenụ di ẹ aya. [gender debate]
She that is the honour of the male, Eke's sister, the maiden that fought the battle in place of her man.
Okoraavọ Nwọja Nwaneke Nweze o turu anyị nwa ẹra ẹra./Anyị sụ Nwọja Nwaneke Nweze ụwa ọ wakwara mę ọ nụtakwa ẹra. [gender debate]
Okoraavọ Nwọja Nwaneke Nweze said all that we could flaunt were big boobs. /We countered telling him that when he reincarnates he would have the luck of never suckling the product of breasts.
Okoraavọ Nwọja Nwaneke Nweze o turu anyị nwekwenkpọ. Anyị sụ Nwọja Nwaneke Nweze ụwa ọ wakwara mę ọ hụmakwa ngbọ. [gender debate]
Okoraavọ Nwọja Nwaneke Nweze said we were but mere tomboys. / We countered telling Nwọja Nwaneke Nweze that he was accursed never to experience the companionship of a maiden when he would reincarnate.
3. Nkwọ nẹ Okori ama; Nkwọ nẹ Okori hẹ a chikọta anị nru na mbụ rụa .../ Omenjọ e riu anị ubịọ. [sexual offence]
Nkwọ nẹ Okori have had sex; Nkwọ nẹ Okori have ended up desecrating the Earth force twice .../ Evildoers will never escape the retribution of the Earth deity.
Zia Kojo ozi mę Kojo a nahę okpogo ọzọ. /Kojo a nahę okpogo; i ma nẹ ịnụ nwanị bụ anyị. / Kojo a nahę okpogo; i ma nẹ ikwaje ukwu bụ anyị. [foreign rule]
Warn Kojo [their Igbonisation of the name of the colonial government agent, Robert Codjoe, from Ghana who learnt Igbo language and worked for the government in this part of Nigeria] to stop collecting taxes from us. /Kojo, you stop collecting taxes from us; you know fully well that it is us that raise the money to pay bride prices./ Kojo,

you stop collecting taxes; you know fully well that other expenses connected with marriage are also borne by us.

Okwu Okposi Okwu egere Nwite Nwọkpankpọ. [communal trouble]

The trouble between Okposi Okwu and Mgbom has got its fall guy in Nwite Nwọkpankpọ [or Nwite the truncheon-carrier, an African agent of the colonial government who worked with the fledgling local Court].

4. Ọmụoke Ẹkpa Chiku hẹ mere nta mere e imo, Agbaeze Ọmụoke sụ hẹ nẹ erikpa ẹkụ techaa yẹ ẹka ẹ. [dishonesty]

Ọmụoke Ẹkpa Chiku the one that everything good has been showered on, [yet] Agbaeze Ọmụoke lodged a complaint [at the colonial court] that he had been denied of all his patrimony leaving him with only crumbs.

Isiani a tųwokwara irọ mẹ Nwaẹkpa je nkpọrọ wa;/ Isiani a tųwokwara irọ mẹ Nwaẹkpa je nkpọrọ wa. [culture clash/colonial institution]

We will make sure that the colonial-appointed Native Court judges pay dearly for this when Nwaẹkpa returns from gaol;/ We will make sure that the colonial-appointed Native Court judges pay dearly for this when Nwaẹkpa returns from gaol.

5. Sẹ e meere nne-o gẹ e meere papa-o. Unu a sụ nne-o nẹ ụgbọ vunụ m e je Yoruba. /Tanki ọga. [modernity]

Get the approval of my mother the same as my father's approval has been got. Then inform my mother that I am aboard the mammy wagon bound for the land of the Yoruba. Thank you sir. [What adds to the hilarity of this song of light-hearted messages is also to be found in its code switching in three languages: Igbo, Yoruba and English, one of the earliest boldest attempts in these parts. Note the use of papa, tanki (thanks), and ọga (the Yoruba for master, or sir) For a place so distant from the coastal region, it is a clear prove of how far the British influence had finally spread at the time the song relates].

6. Otu ntee ava nambu uke anyi a fukwọọ rizo Nkwọ-o; Nkwọ nna Nwachiku Eze n nadeje gẹ Mbeke n yere uwe. [acculturation]

Even in two years' time our age mates will certainly not have forgotten Nkwọ; Nkwọ the beloved of her dad Nwachiku Eze the belle pretty as an attired European. [European ladies in their clothes are for these girls that are witnessing Western lifestyle for the first time the reference point of comeliness.]

7. Okori Nwanguaruude nọọ kansuru obodo anyi-o; Okori Nwanguaruude, agwo abani na-achụ ngbogo osọ. [censure of sexual indiscretion of a native junior appointee in the colonial government]

Okori Nwanguaruude is the Councillor of our community; Okori Nwanguaruude, a venomous viper pursuing girls in the dark.

Nẹ yẹ bụ ọ dọbuwa ijigi ngbọ; yẹ dọbuari ọnọkpọ ngbọ. [strong girl wrestler vaunting her strength]

She claims to be the great female wrestler that shames her challenger by tearing her waist beads; by tearing beads that cover her groin.

Ajuka nwoke a nū nwoke, a nū m nwoke tchoro Ẹkpa. [bride's choice of suitor]
A bride who rejects a suitor may choose his rival just as I chose Ẹkpa.

8. Madu bụ ibe ya ugwu. [camaraderie]

Human is the dignity of his fellow.

Oke nwa bụ nna ya nkpa. [paternal responsibility]

An exceptional child is the responsibility of his father.

Ndiohi bụ iwi ndiḡkụ. [thievery] P-J Ezeh

Thieves are the calamity of the wealthy.

9. Ire mbara nẹ-egbu mbara nẹ ẹka o jebeje ije. [flippancy]

The tongue of the frog is the undoing of the frog wherever it goes.

Eke gbahigerẹ je za oku je za ndi n kuru u oku;/ je za otu ge unu na-ama n'ebọ; ge unu n mere uradi. [sexual laxity]

Eke leave decent company and go and meet those that call you;/ go and answer the call of those with whom you make love in the palm grove; those with whom you sleep around.

10. Uke anyi kere iwu a me onyee e me njọ, Nkwọ Ada Eze kee me onye a ga ne. [filial indiscipline]

Our age-grade has made a rule that no one should do wrong, on the contrary Nkwọ Ada Eze made a rule that no one should be of any use to her mother.

11. Nwanyi o ye jere inu ẹka nwuhu e okpa gwọ ye eju ye juka inu se kwe nẹ Ebiri nẹ e me njọ [sorcery]

A suitor once approached a maiden and upon a close inspection found that her hands was paralysed and her legs twisted and it was only then he accepted that Ebiri practised evil.

12. O jihụ di jide ụma kakwa i jiri di akọ. [marital relations]

She that must marry must be of good conduct but even more importantly must be tactful in her relations with her husband.

O je di Ẹkuma Ọbja tia iba ntikwokwa, wota eju wota mma rita ikpa nri n'avia [neglect of agriculture]

She that must get married to a member of the Ẹkuma Ọbja group should get more than one pair of working shorts, take along a load-carrying pad, take along a machete and remember that she will depend on the market for buying her food.

Ukpata iwe akishionu a gbara m ehụ m otọ. /Ada, nẹ isi akishionu jorọ njọ ka n'imi. [dislike of imported second-hand clothes]

Rather than wear imported second-clothes I will go naked. /Old girl, the pong of imported second-hand clothes is so offensive to the nose.

13. Awo Nwụnẹgwụ, nẹ m kuru Awo-o ọdụ mma e me evie. /A gbachia sukunu mvu a gwụ-o, ọ dụ mma e me evie; nẹ n kuru Awo.
[acculturation vis-à-vis Western-style schooling]
Awo Nwụnẹgwụ, it is you that I address Awo, handsome but one who is also a mere layabout. /When the school closes all that you consider your toil comes to an end, you the handsome but who is also a mere layabout; it is you that I address.
14. Ogo Nweze a naa Ugwu Awụsa, nwanyi n dụ mma a naa Ugwu Awụsa. Ogo Nweze a naa Ugwu Awụsa, nwanyi n n new ego a naa Ugwu Awụsa.
[emigration]
Ogo Nweze has gone to live in the Hausaland in the North, the beautiful lady has gone to live in the Hausaland in the North. Ogo Nweze has gone to live in the Hausaland in the North, the wealthy lady has gone to live in the Hausaland in the North.
15. Onye n jere Panya e jiu ego wa nẹ o jere ọkpara. [financial prudence]
Whoever went to work in Fernando Póo [present Equatorial Guinea. The name, Panya in the dialect is the local rendering of Espagnol, Spanish, or Spain the former colonial power in this island.] and returned empty handed might just have been spending his earnings on prostitutes.
Onye nọnụ nẹ di nẹ-eke di nẹ ọ bụụ ụma m. [marital fidelity]
Whoever has got a husband and still ogles fresh suitors will never get my support.
16. Ive nnadi Oti n mere ne Oti bụ ive dụnụ chi. /Ive nnadi Oti n gburu ne Oti bụ mę yę taa ewu. [virilian insensitivity]
What Oti's father did to Oti's mother can only be avenged by God. /Oti's father caused the death of Oti's mother so that he might eat from the funeral goat meat.
17. M je nere ụmụ Daya, m je nere sirima. / M je nere ụmụ Daya, m je nere sirima. / 'Era gara ịkụrụ evu m ga n'ebe ahụ ga kuru nwa.' / 'Era gara ịkụrụ evu m ga n'ebe ahụ ga kuru nwa.' / Elele n' ụmụ Daya anyị e merigo. Yę bụnụ n' ụmụ Ọkpọsị anyị, anyị e megị otu ahụ. [child adoption]
I'd like to go and observe the Daya people, I'd like to go and watch a film. / I'd like to go and observe the Daya people, I'd like to go and watch a film. / 'Breasts were getting too old to make milk for a baby and I had to go somewhere and take a child.' / 'Breasts were getting too old to make milk for a baby and I had to go somewhere and take a child.' Lo, you Daya people we are pacemakers. We the Ọkpọsị people do not behave that way.
18. Bebi-o, onye ọma Bebi-o, onyeije Bebi-o, Ọnịcha Bebi-o ..., /Bebi fūrụ m n'uzọ sị m 'My dear'. /Ugbọ jekọ Ọnịcha kene Bebi-o.
[amiability; decorum]

Oh, Bebi, Oh Bebi the nice girl, Oh Bebi the footloose, Oh the Onitsha-domiciled Bebi ..., /Bebi met me on the road and addressed me as 'My dear'./ Passengers in Onitsha-bound vehicles remember me to Bebi.

19. Na him-o, na him-o, shọkọ. /Oyimamma-o. /Akwakaa, a kwakwa bed yẹ. / Oyimamma-o. / 'Nọọ bed m zụrụ ego iri n'ise.' / Oyimamma-o. [depravity]

Here is it, here is it, the sleep-around fad. / Oyimamma-o. /Crack, crack, crack, do not ruin his bed. / 'It is a bed that I bought fifteen shillings.' /Oyimamma-o. [The refrain is untranslatable and even in the source text has no linguistic meaning other than the stylistic value of providing a rhythm to enhance the melody of the song.]

20. Eee, a yara uke a na di. /Unari ẹkwẹkẹkwe nee, a yara uke a na di. / Ẹnyanwụ chiri ọza nneo, a yara uke a na di. /Añara ipotipo nee, a yara uke a na di. [female camaraderie]

Yeah, do not abandon your mates to go and get married. /You who have the gracefulness of linen do not abandon your mates to go and get married. /You whose complexion gleams with the glow of the sunset, do not abandon your mates to go and get married. /You who are with the freshness of a luxuriant garden egg leaf, do not abandon your mates to go and get married.

21. Waga waga e vuru ude, onye n kwere a waga ẹ. [depravity]
Depravity is now everywhere [but] it takes weak will to fall for it.
Eye a ya. Eye nẹ-ayara onye? Eye nẹ-ayara Igwe. [culture change]
Time has changed. For whom is time changing? Time is changing for Igwe.
Igwe Nwagbaranze nẹ nsikwo nsikwo sikworo nwe yẹ. [abortion]
Igwe Nwagbaranze is the miscarrier extraordinary who cut the life of her own foetus short.

Lysearch

What are needed in a research method that attempts to use folk music in the manner that I have suggested in this essay are the words of the song of such music. This is not to deny the immense contribution that musicology as such can make, or indeed has even made, to ethnography of nonliterate societies. An important subspecialisation, ethnomusicology, has indeed emerged from such efforts (Seupin & DeCorse, 2009: 20). It just happens that the type of research that I propose aims to access a social message or the attitude of a nonliterate group to a historical event or situation, or the management of social memory among such a group. What is needed in this case is not the music as such, but the message that is contained in the words of their songs. For this reason, if anthropology borrows from another discipline in this regard, it is from linguistics, and not musicology as such. Where the songs are accompanied by musical instruments, usually it is not those instruments that may reveal the message in the form that will be helpful in this type of method. Since the words of the songs are the basic data in this method a thorough mastery of the linguistic

variety in which the songs are rendered is crucial. Such a variety may be the dialect, slang, argot, or any other. It seems unlikely that a Standard variety may be needed because a Standard variety is usually a literate variety. All the songs in this report are rendered in the Okposi dialect of Igbo language. Out of the 21 songs in the above matrix only seven, namely, numbers 3, 4, 11, 14, 17, 18, and 20 were accompanied by instruments.

Dating

Again because documents are not available, it is in general impossible to get exact dates; only approximations are possible. Historians are already conversant with both the use of a different type of oral performance in the study of the past of nonliterate groups and a method for arriving at approximate dates in such contexts. Erim (1981) has employed the methods with highly rated results in a Nigerian case of his study of the Idoma indigenous chieftaincy. However, his methods are not applicable to the present case. While he used griot-style chant of the Idoma where an oral historian recited the succession of a line of rulers from the origin to the present, the songs that I am interested in are not in such a fixed form. While the chant he studied refers to a particular social institution, the songs in my study serve diverse purposes. Following models that had been tried elsewhere in Africa, he used generations calibrated at 30-year intervals to arrive at his dates which of course ran much farther in time than in my present case.

I traced the dates using the information on the life stories of the performers. It may be that a study going farther back in time than my present case but using the same basic principle as in this study might still find the 30-year generation calculation useful.

In this case what I have done was to calculate the approximate period when the group that performed the songs might have been in their youth. This was not too difficult to do with regard to songs number 5 – 20 in the matrix. For songs numbers 1 – 4 the main problem was that practically the cohorts that authored them were all dead. However, I calculated backwards using what information I could get from their direct descendants whose own age I could compute. It is important to add that the dates compare favourably with those given for some documented social events that were coeval with some of the songs.

Social Themes

It is easy to see that the preoccupations of the period that produced the songs were always captured. Numbers 1 and 2 although being the oldest and being sung at the period with least European influence is remarkable for the assertiveness of the female voice, vis-à-vis gender equity. It seems to support the view of the first Governor-General of Nigeria, Lord Frederick Lugard and the ethnographer, Sylvia Leith-Ross, that among the Igbo there was such traditional favourable gender relations for the woman that she would seem to have been better placed than the man (Lugard, 1965: 6; Leith-Ross, 1965: 277). Bishop Basden writing at about the same time as the age of the two songs in a different part of the Igbo country put it more graphically in a book whose manuscript was finished in 1917.

On one occasion I had the opportunity of watching a crowd of women making preparations for a meeting. The peculiar feature about it was the fact that they were dressed up as men; they wore men's hats and, in some cases, coats; the breasts were

bound down close to the body by crossover straps and each member flourished a cutlass in her hand, and in every way they imitated men (Basden, 1966: 94).

The point being made is that this method of data collection seems to be reliable for its purpose because other sources appear to have corroborated the conclusions that are reached independently using this strategy that has not been previously tried in the study of nonliterate settings. Note also how the language employed in each song reflects apparent insularity or lack of it of the community that has been studied. Once the Europeans started establishing presence, the dialects in which the songs were sung began to be interspersed with English words, however domesticated. It has also to be noted that some of the songs that were sung after the contact did not include foreign words all the same. But it is important that the two songs, numbers 1 and 2, which were sung before the contact, have dictions that were limited to the dialect.

Utility of this Method

In anthropology the views of the past of non-Western peoples have been treated in two basic ways. Early anthropologists who worked in the social evolutionary framework ignored such views altogether and replaced them with the scholars' armchair conjecture. When the usefulness of fieldwork was discovered in the structural-functional schools the views of the culture-bearers acquired increased respect but only insofar as such were about the present of the society. Any undocumented data the nonliterate culturebearer contributed about his/her society were rejected as a mere conjecture. Unlike the evolutionists, the structural-functionalists determined to access dependable empirical facts about non-Western societies would accept the views about the past of the society they were studying if they were sure that such views would have the reliability of documents that were made at the same time as the social events under reference.

The postmodernists in their blurring of the boundary between facts and fiction are willing or indeed advocate the acceptance of the views the indigenes hold about the past of their society. Being largely polemical or, at best, philosophical the postmodernists do not bother about the veracity of such views. In the first place they hold the possibility of determination of truth or even meaning in contempt (Alvesson, 2002).

Many of the parts of the world that will profit from the research strategy that I propose are among the so-called developing countries that came into the Euro-American-mediated modernity through colonisation. As a rule, literacy came to such societies relatively late. Yanking off a large cache of data from their social history just because documents cannot be found is unfair. It may even be justified to describe such as academic defeatism. If in archaeology researchers could unearth artefacts dating 1000s of years and manage to make sense of them, there seems to be no reason why more efforts cannot be made to see how oral sources can assist in reconstructing the recent past of nonliterate groups.

Substituting facts with figments as the postmodernists imply is, at best, sheer insensitivity. Since knowledge of social facts is often used to for policies, no policy that is based on such conjectures can work. And no wonder that most recent policies in such societies fail (Khor, 2001). Many of such societies are in the so-called South and are economically the

poorest, politically unstable and suffer under other social problems, e.g. health challenges. Many of these problems can be handled if the social conditions leading up to or on some other ways connected with them are better understood. The same way that a patient narrates his/her condition to his/her doctor before the latter can carry out any helpful investigation, so also, it seems to me, the social scientist may only reach a reliable conclusion if the group under study contribute by providing those sorts of data, which usually may not be available through the efforts of the outsider.

Many writers have recognized the inadequacy of current social science methodology in dealing with all the subject matters that are studied in the disciplines (Smith, 1999). With particular reference to anthropology, improvement of methodology is a major sub-theme in the special issue of CODESRIA Bulletin honouring the Belgian ethnographer, René Devisch (Devisch, 2008-a, 2008-b). What ought to be done has always been recognized. What is not so common is to show how it should be done. This report is an attempt to suggest one of such ways.

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