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Analysis of Lullabic Songs in Traditional African Communities: Some Nigerian Examples (Pp. 147-157)

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Abstract

Like other forms of traditional poetry, African lullabies which are a relatively described genre, tell stories about the African experience; and therefore serve as a veritable source of socio-cultural commentary on one hand, and a ventilative and therapeutic medium on the other: composed and transmitted with individual touch from age to age. Drawing from different ethno-cultural backgrounds, the present paper examines the form, content and function of some Nigerian lullabies thereby revealing their inevitable relevance to the overall realisation of an African cultural continuity, language growth and literary experience. The paper is to stir up further discussions and stimulate comments which should eventually result in a wider interest in African lullabies and African Childlore in general.

Introduction

It is plain that while wide-spread interest in children's oral and written literature cannot be denied; a systematic description of African lullabic songs is yet to receive adequate attention. Studies show that the few investigations of children's traditional games, playsongs and traditional toys in the African environments have produced varied findings. In some sections of Nigeria, for instance, the reputation, achievements and relevance of such studies, are still debatable. In other instances, children are portrayed as "passive, quiet observers of adult activity" (Nwokah & Ikekeonwu, 1998, p.59) who do not

initiate individual or group play or songs. In contrast, Abarry (1998); Bayo Ogunjimi, et. al. (1994), Okanlanwo (1983, 1989), Oyesakin (1983), Ebeogu (1991), Lyndersay (1987), Rossie (2005), Sutton-Smith(2005), Finnegan(1979), June Factor(2001), Tunde Fatunde(1992), Bishop(2001), Tunde Olunlade(1987), Richard Priebe(2006), Froebel (1801), Etuk (1989), Iwaketok (2000, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2007) and a few others, stress that the concept of childlore in Africa and in Nigeria in particular is well defined and clearly recognized. However, only a few of the genres of African childlore particularly lullabies have been identified and investigated with a meaningful discussion which reveals that beyond their lulling functions, African lullabies, inter alia, promote cultural continuity and language growth; as well as offer an enlightening test case for inter-disciplinary studies. The objective of this essay therefore is to further contribute to a better understanding of African lullabic songs and to their appreciation as a potent source for language development, cultural imbibition and transmission and their therapeutic property. The study also portrays the songs as forms of human expression which have their own intrinsic cultural and literary values that must be understood in their right. Selected for specific focus are some Nigerian lullabic songs. The songs represent a large body of Nigerian collectanea in my possession and have had a widespread oral circulation in the different language groups of their origin. They have sustained an intimate relation to the lives, character and interest of those to whom they belong. The songs exhibit the life, value, traditions and norms of the people who perform them. They also possess the qualities of popular literature that make them comparable in variety, richness and excellence with their written or foreign counterparts. The analytical procedure of the texts consists of a critical examination of the context and literary merits of the genre. The songs are divided into two major categories each expressing aspects of the performers' experiences thereby making a universal statement about women, the socially disadvantaged and life in general.

First Category

The first category comprises songs by mothers. An example is taken from

Ibibioland

Ukama eyin ikakka eka-o-o
Yak ñka udua ñikedep mbooro.

Translation

Child rearing is not tasking to a mother.
I'm off to get some banana from the market.

This text describes the stereotypical role of an African woman; which is procreation and housekeeping. The song does not address the child directly; rather it draws an analogy between child-rearing and shopping on the one hand; and serves as a medium of emotional expression on the other. It is a dossier on the African woman's daily routine. Implying that child rearing is not tasking. If that was all that the singer was saying, one would have wondered at the Africanness of the song; its essence and the singer. But anyone who is familiar with the African cosmological terrain knows that nothing given to the eyes, ears and mind lacks an underlying meaning. A giant tree or an anthill not only serves a natural role but is the domicile of preternatural beings who the living must of necessity pay adequate respect to cut their benevolence. Behind the veil of this simply expressed daily chores of the African woman is the cynical voice of the disadvantaged, whose rendition is an attack or a response set to allay the fears of the singer's detractors who are wondering how she will cope with a lean financial situation and several children. Banana is used metaphorically here to assure her foes of her family's sufficiency even if it is the basic meals. The food item represents the reality of the material universe of both mother and child. Much the same subject is being expressed by Okot p'Bitek's Lawino who is proud of her Black descent compared with Clementine.

The second lullabic song is from Edo State in Nigeria.

Text 2

Omi hen hö na

Oha re ha hurun

Omi hen nö

Oha re ha mö osha

Omi hen nö

Translation

This is my child

Whether ugly;

He is my child.

Whether beautiful

He is my child

The song is rendered antiphonally; typical of most African songs. Functionally this pattern portrays the African sense of communality and brother-hood. The piece is an affectionate appreciation of motherhood. Here the mother is not mindful of people's opinion. Her interest is in the fact that the birth of the child has given her a pride of place and a voice in the comity of women and "accorded her respect among the men in the traditional community" (Okereke,1994, p,19). Hidden in these lines is a disguised echo of mocking the "preferred one" who perhaps has no evidence of marital consummation to show. The mockery obviously, contradicts Iniobong Uko's

(2006) stance about women writers whom she says are now charting a new direction in their perception of themselves and other women. She says:

Some female writers...have made bold attempts re-envisioning African womanhood....This act...emboldens the Nnu Egos to resist being coerced by society into subjecting themselves to motherhood as the only means to the attainment of fulfilment and satisfaction(p.86).

In other words, neither barrenness nor child bearing should be a yardstick for fulfilment. A woman should be fulfilled in herself as homo sapiens. Sometimes mothers launch an attack on imaginary enemies. The example from Kagoro in Kaduna State is typical.

Text 3

Are you ala tswodn uguwanka?
Nda Nae -a e?
Zwang Za a?
Zwang Za'a?
Yok tswot ushaw Nguwan ka dak

Translation

Who is beating my child?
Is it sleep?
Is it hunger?
Is it sickness?
Don't beat my beautify child?

Adopting the “cumulative motif”(Bishop & Curtis, 2001,p.13) the singer identifies her child's adversary and goes ahead to warn him against a further molestation of her child. Beyond the overt level; the song depicts a striking and elaborate use of symbols, which ultimately is the world we all live in and experience; a world where sleep, hunger, and sickness predate on man. And so we notice that even lullabic songs give valuable insight into the fears and the discomforts which plague mankind. Thus bringing to mind the profound but paradoxical statement about man being everywhere in chains wherever he turns. He is either tortured by sleep or tormented by hunger or at another time ravaged by sickness of innumerable diagnosis and little prophylaxis and yet man still lives on in spite of all these.

Also noticed in the genre are instances where mothers sing derisive songs to muckrake their rivals; especially, the barren ones. The next song from Nassarawa State supplies an example. It says:

Text 4

Arre ko otuwo pio doma la

Odoma he arre ko tuwo pio doma la

Ashe ela mani gwa awo ikpolo, oke

Awa awo abwo lo

The song recounts the sad story of a woman whose barrenness is traced to her character. This reveals the premium the traditional African communities place on character and good behaviour as it was the practice in the far past and is still the same today. Because to the traditional African a life of penury and good name is preferred to ill-gotten wealth and dishonour. This lullaby much the same way conveys this value. The song further portrays the people's belief in the law of cause and effect; thereby reminding the young of the likely consequences of their behaviour.

The next song from Koro Local Government Area in Kaduna State is a paradoxical statement about motherhood. Though motherhood is a much desired experience in a woman's life as earlier mentioned; it also brings along with it filth, squalor, and other inconveniences which mother's would rather have than bear the agony of childlessness. For them womanhood is validated through procreation. The song goes thus:

Text 5

Neke bika shai ru wye

Abi a sheko na bin nhe ye

A hira sheko na bin nhe ye

Inuk I shoye na nyoh ye

Uner a wye kanwu bine onye

Uno me dah shu na nin kona

Ye sha ne mu her.

Translation

It's your habit that made you barren

And the problem does not seem to affect you.

You invited the problem to yourself

That's why you're barren.

Translation

A woman without a child

No faeces on her clothes

No urine in her wrapper

Her room is impeccably clean.

You with child take care of him;

One day you'll get the best.

The barren woman suffers worse.

This song further describes the state of some homes; where cleanliness is not observed. However, it uses the waste metaphor to capture the essence of motherhood and also indict poor home management. It enjoins mothers to train up their children in the right way so that they can reap the benefits of filial love and care in their old age. In some instances, mothers and wives use cradle songs as a medium to vent their bitterness or jealousy on persons or

issues. The example from Foron in Barkin Ladi LGA of Plateau State describes some domestic squabbles which gave rise to the song in question.

Text 6

Imi ba na cha ba
Imi ba na kuoh ba,
Amarya mirshan kubok

Translation

I'll not pound
I'll not grind.
A bride has taken over from me.

Imi ba na nyes ba
Imi ba na tos ba
Amarya mirsha kubok
Imi ba na ciyar ba
Imi ba na kab ba
Amarya mirsha kubok

I'll not cook
I'll not cry
A bride has taken over from me.
I'll not talk
I'll not farm
A bride has taken over from me.

This is evidently a protest song. The repetitive refrain captures the cause of the woman's revolt and determination to fight and win back her husband's recognition and affection. She adopts silence and withdrawal as her weapons of war. For her, crying is an inferior strategy in the kind of war she is poised to wage. The alliterative flow of the song and the plosives in the original text combine with some assonance to give the song a military tone. The song tells us of the painful emotional reaction of a wounded woman. Through the images of grinding, cooking talking, crying and farming, we realise how resolved the woman is and her determination to fight. The battle promises to be grievous as the woman withdraws from all stereotypical role of the African women. The repetitive personal pronoun with the emphatic auxiliary verb "will" coupled with the negative "not" (the contracted form not used) all support the resolution and self-confidence to win the battle against tradition and trespass. Unlike the typical African woman, the aggrieved protagonist seems to have moved to the centre of things where gender equity prevails. The song is an extended comment against women's passivity in politics and other social issues. It calls for a radical change and condemns what Uko(p.85) refers to as "the inter-gender polemics of women-as-outsiders". The song leaves the bride and the audience in a haunted atmosphere, especially as the woman has declined the use of the well known feminine weapon.

The last song in this first category is a social commentary on some noticeable vices in the community. The song recalls D. H. Lawrence's stance on the art

cited in Thompson (1974, p.17) (inclusive of songs) which says: “moral, not aesthetic, not decorative, not pastime and recreation” because it is the pathway to truth which though bitter must be told the way it is. The song below agrees succinctly with this thought. Truth, metaphorically spoken in love or spite but spoken all the same. In this case indolence is unequivocally condemned.

Text 7

Ara - ara - a -a
Aralo ami awe
Ashe ayin?
Ashe Yohanna
Uyi agbi oka,
Agbi ala soso
Ara-ara- a - a
Ara lo ami awe

Translation

Dance, dance,
That’s the dance - o
Whose wife is that?
It’s Yohanna’s wife.
Visit her farm and see -
The farm is bush
Dance, Dance
That’s the dance -

The text is a sarcastic description of a woman, Yohanna’s wife to be precise, who prefers a life of ease to industry. The farm imagery not only tells the occupational engagement of the Eggon people of Nassarawa State (the origin of the lullaby) but it also reveals Yohanna’s wife as an indolent fellow and the abhorrence of laziness in Eggonland. Dance is used metaphorically to further show societal contempt for indolence.

Second Category

The next category of lullabic songs are often rendered or performed by babysitters; hence the Ibibio name “Ikuö edepyin” (the song of babysitters). Through these songs most babysitters bemoan their lot in life, their hopes, fears and expectations. At times they use the songs to tell on their unfaithful mistresses. An Igbo lullaby from Imo State reveals a babysitter’s expectation.

Text 8

Nye kwam ji ka nye nwa
Nwa eri-gi ,
Erie - m .

Translation

Give me yam to give baby.
If the baby refuses to eat,
I’ll eat.

The song describes the plight of babysitters who eat only after everybody, including the baby, has eaten and probably gone to sleep. It is a plea expressing the desire for their basic necessities to be met. Overtly speaking

this song is a light-hearted joke or tease. The babysitter here is trying to cajole the baby to eat. But beyond the overt level and the experiences of most babysitters, the lullaby is a passionate plea for care and appreciation. Sometimes the song is a summary of a deep-seated anguish resulting from the misfortunes suffered in life by a care-giver. A good instance which aptly describes the point just made is the next song from Ejagham in Cross River State. It is a painful reminiscence of a babysitter's accident of birth.

Text 9

Nsumoh ayumo - o!
Nye nome ayumo - o
Kpekum meh ñkakuoh
Ato mmeh nko ndumo - o!
Ndum Okot chang-o ayumo - o

Translation

My father has killed me - o!
My mother has killed me - o!
Even when I'm still a kid,
They've asked me to get married;
To a husband who is not loving.

Songs, serve as outlets for sorrow and anxiety (Finnegan, 1977). Orpingalik, cited by Finnegan further adds that they are thoughts, sung with the breath when people are moved by great forces, and ordinary speech no longer suffices. The text above is a corroboration of these scholars' views as it recounts the unfortunate incidence and sad story of child-marriage: an obnoxious practice that is still plaguing the Nigerian society. The protagonist is obviously under-aged; (hence the reference to "kid") whose parents must have forced into an early marriage. "Kid" is used metaphorically to describe the innocence, vulnerability and helplessness of the babysitter. The girl, it appears, escapes from the deal and takes up a baby-sitting job; but soon finds that her new situation is as bad as the one she was fleeing from. The repeated use of "killed" and the separate mention of her parents, intensify the degree of exploitation, oppression and abuse. The word "killed" signifies the destruction of her destiny, abuse of her right, the psychological destruction of her self-worth and the overall trauma she is facing. This lamentation shows that the babysitter is neither in good hands nor from a comfortable home. If she were in good hands, she would perhaps have forgotten her past or not bemoan it so grievously. Here the singer bewails her plight. The song gives the pathetic circumstance and dilemma in which the girl finds herself: that is, neither the father, mother, nor the mistress appreciates her. The song is an embodiment of the general plight of babysitters who are subjected to all kinds of oppression and exploitations. This indeed is a deeply emotional and symbolic song which describes the plight of the under-trodden in the society. From the far past, songs chanted, intoned or sung have played healing roles

in the life mankind. The Biblical Saul and Shakespeare's Orsino make good references. On the other hand, just as listening to the "minstrels provides a helpful adjunct to clinical therapy"(Thompson, 1974, p.210) so does the singing of lullabies. They provide a medium to vent one's anger, hatred, hurt, envy, anxiety, aspiration, misfortunes, and so on. In this discussion we have noticed that caregivers employ lullabies to modify their grievances instead of brooding over them and making them worse. Often after these ventilative songs, the singers usually are revived and they usually return to their chores with a renewed hope of a better future. John Stuart Mill cited by Thompson says the therapeutic potency of the songs lie not in their beauty of diction or language but the "states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling"(p.214).

Conclusion

Like other forms of poetry, Nigerian lullabies stand up to the claim staked for poetry as contributive in value to health and the growth of literature and language. According to T. S. Eliot also cited by Thompson, "the poetry of a people takes its life from the people's speech and in turn gives life to it" (p. 216). This statement to a large extent has been validated by the samples of lullabies collected from various cultural backgrounds in Nigeria. Their collection and analysis assure their documentation and subsequent preservation of the language in which they have been written. The images and circumstances surrounding the songs are archetypal in the tradition of lullabic songs as they symbolize hardship, low self-esteem, abuse, poverty, relegation among others. Again like other literary genre or folklore; cradle songs ensure continuity from generation to generation. Okot p'Bitek confirms this in relation to the Acoli children of Northern Uganda:

The lullabies...form a most important introduction to the cultural and moral education of the Acoli child. As he participates in these enjoyable activities, he learns to express himself...in the poetry. He develops his sense of rhythm as he keeps time with the rest ... [of the] music and poetry of the adults. The child is plunged into the core of poetry which is the song that arises from the tensions of human reaction(p'Bitek, 1974:2)

In other words, although the folksongs or lullabies which children may at times be absorbed in, tend to be conservative; they actually act as a

portraiture of adult life and couched in them are the societal mores. Following up on this Thompson (1974) adds that the

words that used to be sung to their children by mothers [or caregivers] among the Euahlayi of Australia may have been a lullaby, the words of which the children could not understand. But the words, chosen by the mother in her desire to implant the best tradition of behaviour, would eventually be understood and drop into the mental place prepared for them (p.98)

As earlier observed, there is a rising interest in African childlore generally but not so much in lullabic songs. Perhaps due to their mode of performance some scholars have come to consider them as “a qualitatively low grade of poetry”. But the few investigations of the genre reveal that it is a serious repertoire which deserves serious disciplinary and inter-disciplinary attention. Like any form of oral poetry, lullabies are used to communicate social values and condemn vices where they are found in any traditional African community; the essence being to protect the society. And as the past is available in language; it lives in the present through the continued life of literature. This essentially is what the songs discussed in this paper and several others yet to be recorded and analysed do. For instance, the “motif of the underprivileged” and exploited babysitter are recurrent decimals in Nigerian lullabic songs. This gives the understanding of why the Ibibio call the genre, “Ikuö edepeyin” (the songs of babysitters). Beyond the portrayal of the social values, norms and material culture of the people; Nigerian lullabic songs reveal convincingly how the people apprehend their universe against the background of their daily experience. Embedded in these songs are the ecological features of the people’s environment, which the artists have employed imagistically to describe their various situation in life. Besides the analysis supports the fact that some Nigerian languages are threatened by extinction; while others do not as yet have a standard orthography. Nevertheless, certain attributes of these lullabies present sufficient grounds for further research and analysis by scholars of arts and social sciences.

The paper has shown very remarkably that Nigerian lullabies discuss subjects bordering on humanity and nature, among other issues, just like any form of oral or written poetry. Sometimes they function as satires condemning social vices; at another time they serve as a medium through which the singers express their feelings. Linguistic insight has been given into the relevance of

the genre thereby drawing attention to the need for continued documentation and analysis of Nigerian lullabic songs, especially as they are becoming rapidly eroded or replaced by more “attractive” alternatives. By their vitality; their joy and sometimes the pains they depict, Nigerian lullabic songs provide a vent for the singers and become a window into the cultures, values and languages in Nigeria. It is possible that further studies of the genre have more revealing statements to make about the literature of the Nigerian traditional communities.

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