



Patriarchal orientations and womanist protests in pre-colonial Urhobo women's songs

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The subject of conflict between men and women constitutes much of cultural productions. Existing studies on gender experiences in African literature have paid attention to written literature, with scant evaluation of oral arts. Pre-colonial Urhobo women deployed songs to interrogate the vexatious issue of male chauvinism and to express its oppressive outcomes in songs known as *ile ekan* (satirical songs). In this study, we examine Urhobo women's protest against patriarchal orientations in pre-colonial songs, showing how the women's protest songs reflect experiences of relationships between men and women. We purposively selected five songs that explore this theme and recorded, transcribed, translated, and subjected them to qualitative, textual analysis. The songs are: "Okoro", "Ohwoghwhia" (Adulterous man), "Orharhe Oshare" (Useless man), "Emuoje" (Abomination), and "Uvi Aje" (A precious wife). The selected songs are mainly performed during traditional festivals, burials, and marriage ceremonies. We deploy womanism, an African-oriented gender theory that emphasises accommodationist relationships between genders. Our analysis reveals that pre-colonial Urhobo women expressed their dissatisfaction with men's patriarchal and self-serving interests. Contrary to the popular view that African women were comfortable with patriarchal manifestations, we argue that, right from pre-colonial times, some Urhobo women composed songs to express their disenchantment over some of the experiences of patriarchy, including the practice of polygamy and the act of adultery. This further underlines the fact that human existence is sparked by emotions, and spousal jealousy is not limited to any cultural or historical space. **Keywords:** Nigeria, protest music, Urhobo women musicians, literature and gender, transnationality, womanism.

Introduction

In this study, we investigate pre-colonial Urhobo women's songs that protest against patriarchal expressions like polygamy and adultery. The concept of 'womanist protest' is redolent of the tenets of womanism, an African variant of feminism that decries oppression on the basis of gender and prioritises a harmonious relationship between genders. The protest ideas depicted in the songs do not espouse separatist sentiments but seek to promote inter-gender equity and peaceful coexistence. The realities of pre-colonial patriarchal orientations expressed in the selected songs attest to the social function of the Urhobo song-poetry tradition, a form of cultural production. The fight against women's oppression is central to gender studies, and it finds expression in both conventional literature and popular culture (Okonjo-Ogunyemi, "Women and Nigerian Literature" 60; Sachar 33). Music stands out as a significant cultural medium that articulates the realities of African women, and musical productions often deploy distressing and protest tones to highlight the challenges faced by black women (Wald 73; Moelwyn-Hughes 35).

We purposively selected five pre-modern Urhobo songs for this study through a process of recording, transcription, and translation. The songs were performed by a group of Urhobo women who possess a deep knowledge of the musical repertoire and its cultural significance. The songs are: "Okoro", "Ohwoghwhia"

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(Adulterous man), “Orharhe Oshare” (Useless man), “Emuoje” (Abomination), and “Uvi Aje” (A precious wife). To date, the selected songs are mainly performed during traditional festivals, burials, and marriage ceremonies. The songs are performed by *eghweya* (married women), *emete* (maidens), and *emetogbe* (divorces/returnees). Our analysis is driven by the tenets of womanism. The selected songs were subjected to qualitative textual analysis, focusing on themes and images that convey protest against patriarchal practices and gender oppression.

Urhobo and its cultural productions

The Urhobo are one of the largest ethnic groups in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, predominantly located in the Delta and Bayelsa states. Known for their rich cultural heritage, the Urhobo are traditionally organised into 24 autonomous kingdoms, each headed by a king who plays both traditional and spiritual roles in the society. These kingdoms, according to John Odjuvwuederie Atake, “share ancestral and cultural affinities as well as beliefs” (26). Their language, also called Urhobo, belongs to the Niger-Congo language family and serves as a vital marker of identity. The Urhobo maintain deep roots in agrarian and fishing traditions, and palm oil production and artisanal crafts also form key parts of their local economy. Culturally, they are renowned for vibrant festivals such as the Egba of Owahwa in Ughievwen Kingdom, Kokori in Agbon Kingdom, Edovie of Esaba in Ughievwen Kingdom, Akuovworho of Okwagbe in Ughievwen Kingdom, Umanoku of Ughelli Kingdom, Ovwuvwe of Oruarivie-Abraka and Umiaghwa-Abraka Kingdoms, Ohworhu of Udu Kingdom, Ogbaurhie of Ughievwen Kingdom, and Ekene of Agbarha-Otor Kingdom, all of which celebrate ancestral spirits and community values. During these festivals, traditional song forms such as “Udje”, “Ighomo”, “Adjuya”, “Ekan”, “Ejiri”, “Ofovwin”, and “Uvweri” are performed, serving both artistic and spiritual functions. Despite challenges such as environmental degradation from oil exploration and the pressures of modernisation, the Urhobo people continue to preserve their customs while striving for greater cultural recognition, political representation, and sustainable development within Nigeria.

Recent linguistic research presents differing estimates for the number of people who actively speak Urhobo. Available demographic and sociolinguistic data place the number of fluent Urhobo speakers between 500,000 and 1.5 million. This broad range reflects the absence of a dedicated national language census as well as the influence of migration, urbanisation, and shifting linguistic practices in Delta state. Language-use databases and ethnographic reports, including those produced by the Digital Bible Society and the Joshua Project, commonly report speaker figures of around one million. These converging estimates reinforce the conclusion that, while Urhobo remains a major language of southern Nigeria, its active speaker base is shrinking. This trend positions Urhobo within the category of moderately endangered languages, a classification consistent with wider scholarly assessments of language shifts in the Niger Delta, where English, Nigerian Pidgin, and neighbouring Edoid languages increasingly dominate daily communication (Ekiugbo). Although cultural organisations such as the Urhobo Progress Union often cite a broader ethnic population of three to four million, not all individuals of Urhobo heritage maintain proficiency in the language, particularly younger generations raised in multilingual urban environments.

Urhobo sits comfortably within the broad spectrum of Niger-Congo languages, which range from widely used regional languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, and Swahili to smaller community languages spoken by only a few thousand people. This variation exemplifies one of the defining characteristics of the Niger-Congo language family: its immense demographic diversity, shaped by centuries of migration, trade, cultural interaction, and ecological factors. Urhobo’s position within the Edoid subgroup further highlights the internal complexity of the Niger-Congo language family. It is not only vast in terms of the number of languages it encompasses; it is also deeply layered, consisting of numerous branches—including Kwa, Benue-Congo, Atlantic, Mande, and Bantu, each with its own internal structure and linguistic distinctions. The classification of Urhobo within the Edoid subgroup illustrates how languages in this family, though related by distant historical ancestry, often differ significantly in grammar, phonology, and vocabulary.

Prior to colonial incursion, the Urhobo people maintained distinct, strong men- and women-centred institutions that brought structural and moral stability to the society. Religious, political, judicial, and marriage institutions were established across Urhoboland before the invasion of missionaries and colonialists. Despite the influence of Western orientations, the aforementioned institutions still exist in different Urhobo communities. Williams Oghenekpobor Atubi demonstrates the role of Urhobo traditional practices of ordeals, taboos, totems, oracles, and deities before the colonial period, highlighting the influence of colonial rule on such cultural practices in Urhoboland. Though his study is not concerned with pre-colonial patriarchal orientations and women’s protest, Atubi nonetheless provides great insights into the historical changes that have been witnessed in indigenous

cultural experiences in Urhoboland. Women occupy a significant place in Urhobo society and manifest a substantial level of influence. Martha Omotetobore Egbedi argues that Urhobo women “enjoyed a measure of prominence, authority and independence right from precolonial through contemporary times” (Egbedi 289). In what reads like an attempt to privilege pre-colonial structure, Egbedi argues that colonialism and many other factors have almost completely erased the valuable role of women “as complements of men in Urhobo society” (289). She privileges “the pre-colonial structure of gender relations, rather than the indiscriminate clamour for equality of the sexes” (Egbedi 289).

Marriage, whether monogamy or polygamy, is a major Urhobo institution, and women play a central role in it. According to Regina Otite, “an Urhobo woman exercises a high degree of independence and autonomy and can return to her patrilineage as an *omotogbe*” (Otite 42). *Omotogbe* is a word used to characterise a divorced Urhobo woman who returns to her father’s house. Urhobo women enjoy this authority, right, and flexibility due to the fact that the bride price of Urhobo women “is not paid in full and its acceptance from the groom constitutes a key aspect of legality of an Urhobo marriage” (Otite 42). Egbedi declares the “marital institution is an important cultural organization which ascribes a significant role and power to the Urhobo woman”, noting that the marriage culture is meant to “bestow much dignity and pride on the Urhobo woman”, who, upon marriage, joins the Council of Women known as *Ewheya* (Egbedi 291).

In this study, we examine protest against patriarchal orientations in selected pre-colonial Urhobo women’s songs. The selected pre-colonial songs are commonly performed during traditional festivals, marriage ceremonies, funeral events, and other solemn occasions in different Urhobo communities in contemporary times. They cannot be traced to any specific composer(s), but they exist as artistic expressions by women who relate their discontent towards certain behaviours of men. Beyond the didactic and satirical import of this category of songs, they have come to survive mainly for entertainment. Due to their amusing quality, they have now been classified under the sub-genres of *ile ekan* (satirical songs) and *adjuya* or *ile cheri* (songs of merriment). While the audience derives pleasure from the rhythm and humour in the songs, their images and rhetoric are satirical and moralising. This implies that the songs both stimulate delight and foster societal transformation. Though the women performers of these songs are not professional musicians, the songs aptly reflect the cultural realities of the Urhobo people to whom they are attributed.

Protest music and gender studies

Scholars have widely acknowledged the significance of music in articulating protest (Heilbrunner 688–700). Sumangala Damodaran recognises the role of music in championing protest causes and observes that, despite its prevalence in global cultural productions, the relationship between music and protest remains relatively under-explored. This observation underscores the relevance of this study in expanding scholarship on protest music. Edward Clough similarly asserts that “the connection between music and protest [...] is an intimate, and long-established, one” (275). Hence, Asit Goswam, Avishi Goswam, and Avik Goswam argue that, beyond its aesthetic appeal, music possesses a unique ability to evoke emotions, inspire unity, and catalyse social change.

Music recreates narratives that resonate with the sensibilities of people. Its social function is embedded in its capacity to interrogate critical issues, inform public opinion, and shape collective consciousness. Detlef Siegfried reinforces this perspective, stating that “the social relevance of music does not emerge from melody or sound” but “exhibits individually specific characteristics of form and content that are loaded with assigned meanings” (Siegfried 57). Over time, music has emerged as a potent tool of protest, inspiring social change. In a historical perspective, Goswam, Goswam, and Goswam note that “the roots of music as a means of protest can be traced back to ancient civilizations, where songs and chants were utilized to express dissatisfaction with ruling powers, advocate for labour rights, and demand justice” (167). They further assert that, since the era of the transatlantic slave trade, music “has long served as a medium for marginalized groups to voice their grievances” (168). Through its often confrontational and emotive tones, music has served as an avenue to convey social discontent.

In African societies, music has functioned as a revolutionary art form. African and black artists deploy music to express disenchantment, particularly concerning political repression and marginalisation. Various musical productions have addressed the injustices of slavery, racism, and political aggression experienced by black communities worldwide. Omotayo Jolaosho’s ethnographic study of anti-apartheid freedom songs in Johannesburg reveals that “freedom songs constitute a distinct register that is politically efficacious” (6). Jolaosho’s study demonstrates how protest songs contribute to political and community mobilisation in Africa.

Although his research does not focus specifically on women's protest songs, it affirms the broader effectiveness of protest music in stimulating political engagement and social transformation. Similarly, Andra le Roux-Kemp notes that "in South Africa, music also played a central role in the struggle for liberation from white domination" (le Roux-Kemp 247).

Gendered experiences are a significant component of protest music. Rodolfo Disi Pavlic, Valetina Paredes, and Catherine Reyes-Housholder define gendered protests as "social conflicts motivated by equality issues concerning men and women as well as sexual majorities and minorities" (Disi Pavlic, Paredes and Reyes-Housholder 145). Frank Jacob and Jowan Mohammed also argue that "gender and protest are both social phenomena and powerful historical determinants" (1). The feminist movement and broader gender struggles seek to establish equitable relationships between genders, inherently carrying the tenor of protestation. Jacob and Mohammed further contend that gendered protests are shaped not only by participants' identities but also by their aims, demands, and how such protests are represented in public discourse (1). By implication, the quest for gender equity remains central to protest narratives and is often vividly captured in music.

Studies have shown the ability of music to address different historical and sociocultural realities. In Kholeka Shange's examination of the musical tradition of Mzilikazi Khumalo (1932–2021), she demonstrates the place of historicity in the composition, production, and documentation of African music (189). In exploring gender protest in pre-colonial Urhobo women's songs, this study is reflective of Shange's perspective of 'music history' in South Africa (189). This underscores the fact that musical artists perform realities that form part of the historical experiences of the people, especially the question of inter-gender relationships. Several scholars have examined the intersection of gender and protest, offering diverse perspectives across historical and cultural contexts. Mariela Fargas Penarrocha investigates the interplay of secrecy, seduction, and protest among women in 17th-century Barcelona, recounting narratives of women's advocacy that challenge the structures of family and the patriarchal culture of the time. This suggests that discourses on inter-gender relationships are often anchored in acts of resistance. As Jacob and Mohammed assert, "the struggle for new gender norms is consequently often related to protest" (3). Lawrence Makoare observes that feminine protests challenge the dominant power structures that governed family decisions, particularly in controlling the destinies of young women (65). Similarly, Jilly Boyce Kay and Kaitlynn Mendes maintain that "the fight for women's rights has been figured in different historical moments", reinforcing the centrality of protest in gender activism (137). Unlike Kay and Mendes, we specifically explore protest indices against patriarchal practices such as polygamy and adultery within the Urhobo cultural milieu in this study.

The theme of gendered protest has been addressed in African oral literature and popular culture, but there remains a scholarly gap in examining music as a potent oral art form that articulates inter-gender conflicts. Stephen Kekeghe, for example, investigates inter-gender and intra-gender oppression in Urhobo folktales and argues that women express distress stemming from hostilities inflicted by men and co-wives, particularly in polygamous contexts. However, Kekeghe's study is neither centred on protest themes nor it is focused on women's songs, which distinguishes it from this study. Thus, a targeted exploration of gender issues in Urhobo music remains largely unexamined.

Music, with its rich rhythms, narrative depth, and transmissible power, stands out as a utilitarian and potent medium for expressing inter-gender tensions across various African communities, including among the Urhobo of Nigeria. Lynda Gichanda Spencer, Dina Ligaga, and Grace Musila argue that gendered protest is a recurring feature in African popular culture, encompassing oral narratives, music, and performances. Nonetheless, their study differs from our study in terms of thematic focus and cultural scope. Russell Kaschula similarly highlights the "voice of protest" embedded in African oral art forms, including songs and folktales. He asserts that protest voices have historically emerged in specific African contexts such as Senegal, South Africa, Somalia, Guinea, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Lesotho (453). However, while Kaschula's focus is on political protest, this study is distinct in our investigation of gendered protest specifically in Urhobo women's music.

From the foregoing review, it is evident that the portrayal of patriarchal manifestations and protest in Urhobo songs has not received close critical investigation. In this study, we examine this and argue that, prior to modern feminist struggles, pre-colonial Urhobo women had invented songs to resent patriarchal orientations like polygamy and adultery. The disenchantment expressed by the women in the songs we analyse agrees with transnational ideas of women's protest.

Womanist orientations

Our analysis in this study is guided by the tenets of womanism, an African-centred theoretical approach that emerged in response to the perceived limitations of Western feminism in addressing the experiences of African women. We rely significantly on the womanist notions of Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi and Mary Eibun Modupe Kolawole, two prominent proponents of womanism. Womanism was formulated to critique and transcend the shortcomings of Western feminism, particularly its tendency to reflect the aspirations of middle-class white women, whose priorities often differ from those of African women. Some African gender scholars, such as Okonjo-Ogunyemi, Kolawole, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, and Catherine Acholonu, among others, argue that the radical and separatist tendencies within mainstream feminism are inconsistent with African cultural values and social norms. Womanism, therefore, interrogates these inclinations, positioning itself as a culturally grounded alternative that aligns more closely with African realities.

The concept of womanism was formulated by Alice Walker in her seminal work *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), in which she offers a comprehensive four-part definition. First, she describes the womanist as demonstrating "outrageous, audacious, courageous or wilful behaviour". Second, the womanist is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist [...]". Third, the womanist is one who "loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless". Finally, the "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (Walker 11). These tenets signify a broader, deeper, and more inclusive perspective. Layli Phillips describes womanism as a "version" of feminism (406), a position that has been contested by many womanist scholars who insist that womanism is an independent theory in its own right. Although both womanism and feminism are concerned with women's issues, their orientations and priorities differ. For black women, particularly in African and diasporic contexts, the struggle is not solely against sexism but also against the intersecting oppressions of racism and classism.

African scholars and writers have continued to enrich and sustain the debate on womanism by articulating gender theories that reflect the unique experiences of African women. Okonjo-Ogunyemi, through her theorisation of African womanism, argues that African women's concerns are distinct from Western feminism, emphasising cultural rootedness, family solidarity, and complementarity between men and women. In a related trajectory, Clenora Hudson-Weems advances the concept of Africana womanism, a philosophy grounded in African heritage that prioritises community, motherhood, racial uplift, and male-female cooperation, while rejecting Western feminist frameworks as unsuitable for African contexts. Ogundipe-Leslie contributes significantly with her model of Stiwanism—Social Transformation Including Women in Africa—which calls for the political, economic, and social restructuring of African societies to address the multiple layers of oppression confronting women, including colonial legacies, patriarchy, and poverty. Acholonu adds another dimension with Motherism, an Afrocentric alternative to Western feminism that positions motherhood, nurture, environmental care, and peaceful coexistence as central to African womanhood. Complementing these theoretical interventions, Ifi Amadiume's anthropological research reveals that pre-colonial African societies, particularly the Igbo, operated with flexible and complementary gender roles, which have been disrupted by colonialism's imposition of rigid gender binaries. Together, these scholars sustain a vibrant womanist tradition by presenting African womanhood as dynamic, culturally grounded, communal, and committed to balanced gender relations and social transformation.

The perspectives of womanism articulated by Okonjo-Ogunyemi and Kolawole underscore its usefulness for African-oriented approaches. Okonjo-Ogunyemi characterises womanism as a "philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideas of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom. It concerns itself as much with the black sexual power tussle as with the world power structure that subjugates blacks. Its ideal is for black unity [...]" (Okonjo-Ogunyemi, *African Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* 70). Kolawole reinforces the core tenets of womanism by stating that "African women yearn for a society in which they can assert their innate resourcefulness by rejecting the fetters of tradition and any aspect of socialization that puts them at a disadvantage" (30). Okonjo-Ogunyemi's definition of womanism as an African-oriented approach is apt: "Womanism is black-centred; it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism; unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand. It is also interested in communal wellbeing [...]" (Okonjo-Ogunyemi, "Women" 65).

In this study, we employ the principles of womanism to interpret the Urhobo women's protest against patriarchal structures, as expressed through their vibrant musical traditions. Anjaly Nair and G. M. Tungesh

assert that “womanism emerged from Black women’s distinctive historical and cultural experiences” (6). By implication, “womanism maintains unique characteristics—including its spiritual dimensions, celebration of women’s culture, commitment to communal survival, and value placed on emotional depth and flexibility” (Nair and Tungesh 6). The reaction against polygamy and adultery in the songs reveals the women’s emotional and ideological resistance to what they consider to be the repressive and reprehensible aspects of patriarchy while also advocating for equitable and peaceful inter-gender relationships. These protest songs are not merely artistic expressions but strategic cultural interventions that advocate for gender justice, marital harmony, and communal well-being—core ideals of the womanist philosophy.

Women’s protests against patriarchal manifestations in the examined songs

The songs analysed in this section reflect Urhobo women’s protest against manifestations of patriarchy, particularly polygamy and adultery, while reinforcing their quest for gender parity. In the pre-colonial Urhobo society, polygamy was often rooted in the man’s pride and was seen as a key determinant of wealth and social status. Women, in turn, served as an essential labour force on the farm, contributing significantly to agricultural production and the household economy. Though polygamy appears to be a stable form of marriage in pre-colonial Urhobo society, some women, as found in this study, composed songs to protest against it and other patriarchal orientations. The examined songs “Okoro”, “Ohwoghwia”, “Orharhe Oshare”, “Emuoje”, and “Uvi Aje” do not merely criticise patriarchal manifestations, they espouse inter-gender justice and marital harmony.

The first song, “Okoro”, ridicules Okoro, a polygamist who makes excuses about his wives’ conduct; he marries more wives, only to find worse traits in them. The song decries the practices and implications of polygamy, portraying it as a tool utilised by men to subjugate women in a patriarchal society. In the song, Okoro is criticised for exploiting trivial and often unfounded complaints about his wives’ behaviours as justifications for taking additional wives. Through these lyrics, the women singers intentionally and vocally condemn polygamy in all its forms and appearances, articulating a collective resistance to a system that perpetuates the subjugation of women. The following extract of the song greatly attests:

*Okoro rehọ aje ovo
Nẹ o phi aro rhon
Kẹ ọna mu Okoro rehọ cya ive
Ọ rive ọ rhoma rehọ
Diẹ ọna kẹ oghi
Kẹ ọna mu Okoro rehọ cya erha
Ọ rerha ọ rhomar chọ
Diẹ ovwofarhiẹn
Eşesanọ ọ kerhe sane egodo von
Diẹ a vwẹ ubiario vwo vughe uvi ajee
Okoro ọna gbẹwe*

Okoro married the first
He complained that she is jealous
This pushed him to marry a second wife
The second wife he took
She is a thief
Okoro took the third wife
The third wife was a prostitute
Okoro was searching for a good wife everywhere
Until he married multiple wives into his compound
Truly one cannot get a virtuous wife with mere looking
Okoro has failed

The song demonstrates that, rather than making excuses for polygamy, a man should be intentional in choosing one virtuous woman. The implication is that, like Okoro, some men who are moved by the physical appearance of women end up marrying women with bad conduct, and in the quest for better partners, such men end up practicing polygamy. Expressing their aversion against Okoro’s justifications for polygamy, the women-singers state that

“Okoro has failed”. Thus, Okoro is portrayed as a failed man whose downfall is attributed to his indulgence in polygamy and his inability to choose a worthy woman. This depiction reflects the women’s disdain for polygamy and their prioritisation of monogamy as a more stable and equitable marital structure. The women in the song seek to subvert polygamy and advocate for new gender norms, aligning with Jacob and Mohammed’s assertion that “the struggle for new gender norms is consequently often related to protest” (3). The women singers’ loathing towards polygamous marriage is vividly articulated. From the first wife, whom Okoro accuses of jealousy, to the third wife, depicted as a prostitute, Okoro’s choices are presented as a sequence of poor decisions—“jumping from the frying pan into a blazing fire”. Rather than gaining fulfilment from polygamy, Okoro reaps only the agonies and disillusionment associated with it. In this narrative, the women singers parody polygamy through a satirical tone that signals clear protestation.

In “Okoro”, the protest tone is articulated through a womanist lens, which offers a revolutionary response to patriarchal oppression. Womanism is a “version” of feminism that is particularly attuned to the challenges faced by African women and black families (Okonjo-Ogunyemi 70). Okoro’s flimsy excuses for marrying a second and third wife—labelled respectively as a thief and a prostitute—are portrayed as hollow justifications for his polygamous ventures. Beyond critiquing polygamy, the song implicitly advocates for intentionality and mutual commitment within marriage. It suggests that men, like Okoro, who pursue polygamy often do so out of self-indulgence and desire for sexual gratification, at the expense of their families’ well-being. This aligns with Okonjo-Ogunyemi’s observation that womanism seeks “meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand” (Okonjo-Ogunyemi, “Women” 65).

The searing indictment directed at Okoro—“Okoro has failed”—is a deliberate and calculated expression of protest. This narrative strategy exposes the flaws of polygamy, thereby making a clear moral statement against it. The women singers’ revulsion towards polygamy is presented as a conscious, womanist’s critique of an institution that sustains gender imbalance. Okonjo-Ogunyemi argues that womanism “concerns itself as much with the black sexual power tussle as with the world power structure that subjugates blacks” (70). The protest in these songs is thus not just against polygamy, but against the broader sexual power imbalance that grants men the liberty to marry multiple women, reinforcing women’s subjugation.

In addition to condemning polygamy, the selected songs express the women’s revolt against adultery, particularly the recklessness of adulterous men. True to the womanist ethos, the women singers exhibit what Walker describes as “audacious, courageous or wilful behaviour” (Walker 11) by boldly voicing their disgust at men who engage in extramarital affairs.

In the second song, “Ohwoghwhia”, the singers criticise men who squander family resources on secret lovers, ultimately impoverishing their homes. Through a tone of protest, the women musicians denounce adultery, highlighting the economic and emotional depletion it causes within families. In both songs, the protest against polygamy and adultery underscores a broader womanist agenda advocating for gender justice, family stability, and equitable sexual relationships. This is evident in the song “Ohwoghwhia”:

Igho rẹ ohwoghwhia
Oyen eya na vwọ gba ikpolo
Diemu avwan gbe

It is the money of the adulterous man
 The women used to buy waist beads
 No doubt about that

In the song, it is noted that the money of an adulterous man is frivolously spent by his extramarital partners “to buy waist beads”, a metaphor that underscores the irrationality of such expenditure. This line satirically portrays adultery as a wasteful and demeaning venture, where the man’s financial resources are squandered on trivial adornments. The derision aimed at the adulterous man’s spending habits reinforces the women’s protest against adultery, exposing it as not only morally reprehensible but economically foolish. By framing adultery as a “ridiculous transaction”, the song employs ridicule as a rhetorical device to condemn the practice in a tone steeped in protest.

Adultery remains a visible reality in many African societies (Albert, Christopher, and Ezugworie 33), and music, as exemplified here, becomes a medium through which such social vices are interrogated. Like the

women musicians, the womanist perspective advocates for healthy and equitable inter-gender relationships, while simultaneously affirming “the freedom and independence of women,” which is also the core tenet of feminism (Okonjo-Ogunyemi, “Women” 65). The bold and unambiguous language of the women in the song signals a deliberate and strategic resistance to patriarchal repression and male chauvinism.

Similarly, in the next song, “Orharhe Oshare”, the women singers extend their critique by ridiculing adulterous men who engage in romantic escapades with other people’s wives. This further demonstrates the singers’ commitment to confronting the moral and social disorder perpetuated by male infidelity. Through these protest songs, the women assert their agency and challenge the patriarchal structures that enable such exploitative behaviours. The disenchantment of the women singers is evident in the rhythm of the song:

*Wọ nàbọ riẹn nẹ Umuto aje rẹ Okoro
Kẹ ọyen wọ vwe oma riẹn kire ologbo
Wẹ ẹkpa
Wọ ke be bẹbẹ
Ebebe rẹ chware
Wẹ oghi rẹ ohoro
Ogodogun rẹ oshare na*

You are aware that Umuto is Okoro’s wife
And you are romancing her like a cat
You are a fool
You are also monitoring her with the intention to have sex with her
You are a thief of vagina
You are a useless man

The song decries the vice of adultery and protests against men who engage in it. The moralising tenor of the song is targeted at adulterous men, notably excusing or overlooking the complicity of women in such acts. This selective indictment reveals the singers’ primary objective of confronting the manifestations of patriarchy by holding adulterous men accountable for various sexual vices. The use of castigatory and punitive language against men who pursue illicit relationships with married women amplifies the protest tone of the song. This is evident in the curses levelled against the adulterous man. By labelling the adulterous man “a thief of vagina”, the women singers metaphorically represent such an individual as engaging in sexual theft—appropriating what does not belong to him. This metaphor underscores adultery as not merely an immoral act but also as an act of dishonesty and violation of social order. Through this stern denunciation, the song advocates for sexual honesty and decency, echoing the Urhobo cultural stance that condemns sexual perversion and considers adultery, especially with a married woman, an abomination.

Moreover, the collective voice of the women singers seems to suggest a consensus that men are the principal initiators of adultery and should be held accountable for its prevalence in society. The intensity of the protest tone reflects the women’s palpable anger at the rising incidence of adultery and its corrosive effects on marital stability and social morality. In positioning men as the culpable agents of adultery, the singers not only critique men’s sexual misconduct but also implicitly challenge the patriarchal structures that embolden such behaviour. This condemnation of infidelity and the protest against adulterous men is also apparent in the song “Emuoje”:

*E kuo ughe erọ!
Qna ughe erọ
Emuoje he orere
Eshare wa kenoma
Qyen ughe erọ
Eshare ẹvo rehọ ufi ohwoghwa
Qnana obo ri miovwu ohwo
E kuo ughe erọ
Qna riẹ obo re ruẹ
E kuo ughe erọ*

Behold a spectacle!
 Oh here is a spectacle
 There is an abomination in town
 Men should beware
 Yes there is a spectacle
 Some men are now champions of adultery
 This is what destroys humanity
 Yes there is a spectacle
 It is not expected of humans
 Behold a spectacle!

The musicians direct a fierce tirade at men who are described as “champions of adultery”, further emphasising the destructive consequences of adulterous behaviour. The intensity of the women’s rage may stem from a social reality in which adulterous women are harshly vilified, while the men involved in the same acts often escape societal sanction. In the Urhobo society, there are strong sanctions for adulterous women, which include spiritual torments and physical humiliation. This, however, is not the case with men who engage in the act of adultery. The tone of the song shows that this disparity exposes the entrenched patriarchal structures and their chauvinistic underpinnings, which protect male misconduct while policing women’s sexuality.

The examined songs clearly express the women’s anger towards patriarchy and its various manifestations. In protesting against patriarchal orientations, the women musicians particularly criticise the assertion of dominance by men of low socio-economic status. In the song “Uvi Aje”, they argue that a poor man, lacking the material capacity to exert authority, should instead exercise patience and tolerance towards his wife’s shortcomings, rather than enforcing patriarchal control. This sentiment directly challenges men’s dominance, suggesting that authority in the household should not be solely based on gender but perhaps on mutual respect and responsibility. Through these critiques, the women articulate a broader resistance to the systemic imbalances that sustain male privilege in both the private and public spheres. This suggests that patriarchal ego should only be exercised by men with superlative financial and economic status. The song “Uvi Aje” conveys this idea:

*Ọ chobọ kpo je me be sa rehọ
 Kọyen nẹhẹ ogbere re isọn aje
 Bẹsiẹn re ọ vwọ ghwa
 Ogbere nabọ riẹn ọnana
 O ki di họn
 Ọrharẹ ọ viẹn emu kpo eki
 Ọ nabọ riẹn nẹ ọghware herọ
 Kẹsiẹye o ki viẹn*

A wife will be difficult to replace once she leaves marriage
 It is one of the reasons a pauper eats a wife’s excreta
 Till old age
 The pauper is aware of this
 But he kept mute
 Like a bachelor who sent someone to buy items from the market
 He is aware that he would be short-changed
 Before he made the request

This song illustrates that even in pre-modern African societies, some women exhibited a strong sense of ego and rebellion, particularly towards poor husbands. The musicians highlight this dynamic with the assertion that “a wife will be difficult to replace once she leaves marriage”, thereby elevating the woman’s status above the patriarchal order. This portrayal challenges the common assumption of unchallenged male dominance by presenting a scenario where the woman wields significant influence and control within the family. The song suggests that this is a prevalent predicament for poor husbands, who suffer the humiliation of subordination in the domestic sphere. The song further underscores this power dynamic with the vivid metaphor:

[...] a pauper eats a wife’s excreta
 Till old age

This image symbolises the intolerable behaviours and indignities that a poor man must endure from his wife, driven by his fear of losing her. The metaphor of “excreta” conveys the extent of the woman’s perceived misconduct, which the impoverished husband is forced to tolerate throughout his life. This poetic statement in the song implies that, within certain socio-economic contexts, women engage in subtle yet effective forms of protest against male chauvinism, thereby subverting traditional gender hierarchies. The song reveals that, contrary to prevailing discourses on women empowerment as a contemporary necessity, the composers of this traditional song demonstrate that women have historically devised their own strategies for emancipation within the marital space. In these instances, poverty renders men particularly vulnerable to women’s dominance, effectively subverting expected gender roles. This subversion highlights the complexities of gender relations in African societies, where power dynamics are not strictly defined by patriarchal dictates but can be negotiated through social, economic, and personal agency.

Conclusion

The discussion above demonstrates that traditional women songs in Urhobo society function as protest art against patriarchal expressions and the subjugation of women. This song form, *ile ekan*, is both entertaining and moralising. The five songs analysed reveal various indices of patriarchy and male chauvinism, particularly in the forms of polygamy and adultery, which are predominantly associated with male behaviour. The songs’ titles and the issues depicted in them evidently reflect the subject of protest against patriarchal orientations. The song “Okoro” ridicules a polygamous man, Okoro, who only reaps the agonies of polygamy. The second song, “Ohwoghwia”, condemns men who engage in the act of adultery, with scathing images that underscore the women’s repugnance against men who commit adultery. Songs like “Orharhe Oshare” and “Emuoje” also protest against adulterous men as a way of repudiating patriarchal ego. The last song, “Uvi Aje”, celebrates virtuous women and condemns men who maltreat such women. Through these songs, the women singers voice their anger and frustration at the ways men unapologetically practice polygamy and adultery—practices that the women identify as instruments of women’s oppression within the cultural context portrayed. Although these songs originate from pre-modern times, their protestive tone resonates with contemporary global discourses on black women’s oppression. The themes articulated in these songs parallel the concerns of modern gender activism, especially in their advocacy for women’s dignity and resistance to patriarchal structures. The tenets of womanism are particularly relevant in interpreting these protest songs, as they encapsulate the quest for women’s emancipation alongside the vision for healthy, unified black families. These songs, therefore, not only critique gender dissatisfaction but also align with womanist ideals that seek both gender justice and familial cohesion.

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