

Full Length Research Paper

Folk music, tradition and gender stereotypes: A feminist analysis of the work of a Nigerian folk icon

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Received 23 June, 2022; Accepted 29 December, 2022

This research adopts a feminist content analytic framework to examine the portrayal of Nigerian women in the work of Uko Akpan Cultural Group, iconic champions of folk music in south-eastern Nigeria. The purpose of this research is to understand if folk music reinforces gender stereotypes or empowers women by providing them with a legitimate platform to utilize their talents as a source of income and livelihood. To achieve the goal of the research, ten hours of digital content were examined for mentions, images, and the presence of girls and women and the contexts in which they occur in the work of the Uko Akpan Cultural Group. The content included songs, choreography, costume, instrumentation, and public performances spanning several decades and addressing key socio-political and cultural issues. The research demonstrates that while folk music provides a legitimate platform for women to showcase their talents as artists against the backdrop of patriarchal structures, it also reinforces gender stereotypes and narratives of women as subordinate and subservient beings. Folk music can be a viable vehicle for the advancement of women, especially those on the socio-economic and geographic margins of society if new narratives about women are integrated into the artifacts of folk music.

Key words: folk music; folk culture, gender stereotypes, gender and music, Ukokpan, Ukokpanism.

INTRODUCTION

There are two versions of the story, none of which may be accurate. One version has it that in his early days, a renowned folk artiste and cultural icon in southeastern Nigeria, Chief Uko Akpan Ekpo Umanah (1927-2020, and henceforth referred to as Ukokpan), public-shamed a young woman in one of his songs. Upset, the woman insisted that he married her because he had ruined her reputation and rendered her unmarriageable. The other version of the story is that the woman's father was so enraged at the public shaming of his daughter that he forced Ukokpan to marry her.

Research shows no evidence of the specifics of this incident or the outcomes. It is probably one of those urban legends about people in the public eye. This is more prevalent in oral cultures where stories get lost both in translation and in the narrative iterations. Also, fragments of stories and information are often spiced with hyperbole with each re-telling until they get a brand-new life radically different from their origins. Nevertheless, certain aspects of this particular story lend it a veneer of credibility.

First, public shaming in folk songs is common in

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Nigeria's folk culture. The tradition is also gendered: women are often public-shamed while men are generally the subjects of praise-singing, another common element of folk music. Second, Ukokpan, like many folk artists in Nigeria, was polygamous. It is, therefore, imaginable that one of his wives would have been the subject of the legend. For our present purpose, the veracity of the story is not critical because even as an urban legend or myth, it provides a metaphor for the complexity in the attempt to evaluate the representation of women in Nigerian folk music. While the issues raised in this article are generalizable to Nigerian women, especially those in rural communities where folk music is a prevalent organizing principle of communal practices and events, this article focuses on the Anaañ women of southeastern Nigeria. The purpose is to interrogate how folk music reinforces gender¹ stereotypes even as it also provides a legitimate platform for women to showcase their artistic talents against the backdrop of patriarchal structures. The research is predicated on the following assumptions.

- 1) Folk music provides women with a platform for agency, economic independence and social acceptability.
- 2) Folk music perpetuates women's marginalization by reiterating negative cultural, assumptions, narratives and stereotypes.

These assumptions are reflected in the above anecdote. As agency, the woman examined her position as a 'shamed woman' and determined that her prospects of marriage to an eligible man in the community were slim. She decided that her best option was to insist on marriage to the man who had compromised her reputation. In the second version, to preserve the family's honor, a father forced a man who had publicly shamed his daughter into marrying her. This reduced the woman's position to that of an object of control by two men (her father and the man who had 'disgraced' her in public). This is emblematic of the dual role of the Anaañ woman as an actor-agent and as a subordinate, a thread that runs through Ukokpan's oeuvre. In songs, choreography, costume and instrumentation, women are simultaneously visible and invisible, active participants and marginalized background props. This article examines this duality in the work of Ukokpan to highlight the impact of folk music on attitudes toward women especially those outside geographical and socio-economic mainstreams of society. It studies the 'gender content' of Ukokpanism² for references to and portrayal of women in the lyrics, choreography, instrumentation and public performances. It addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How does folk music intersect with cultural narratives about women?
- 2) How does Ukokpan's brand of folk music reinforce gender stereotypes in its portrayal of women in Anaañ society?

These questions frame the evaluation of the body of work of Ukokpan, an acclaimed moral authority whose art occurred in a specific sociocultural and political context. He was not reticent in utilizing his art and its popularity to advocate public and private morality and ethics. He also had a significant capacity to mirror or alter attitudes and beliefs on gender relations given the intersections of music, gender and culture. These intersections are discussed in the next section to underscore the imperative to examine Ukokpanism from a gender standpoint. The theoretical and methodological overview follows in the third section. The fourth section features the review of a selection of songs/lyrics, choreography, costume, and instrumentation for mentions and depictions of women and the context in which they occur. The fifth section is a general discussion and analysis of the portrayal of women in the different aspects of Ukokpanism examined in the previous section. The article begins with an overview of the phenomenon of public shaming through songs. This provides some context for an understanding of the centrality of Ukokpan's work in the Anaañ cultural landscape.

Public shaming as entertainment

In an earlier era, public shaming through songs was common among the Anaañ people of southeastern Nigeria and many other parts of the country. More common (at least at the national level) was the praise-singing tradition of folk music in the southwestern part of the country. Public shaming is comparable to gossip columns and sensational tabloid newspaper headlines that go far back to the invention of the printing press when the hypocrisy of religious leaders was published on flyers and distributed to the public. Also, in 17th century England, barbaric acts of public shaming (such as maiming of body parts) declined as the media 'increasingly became the arena in which reputations were forged, damaged, and destroyed' (Green, 2017:13). One can argue that in contemporary times, especially in the age of misinformation through social media and cyberbullying, public shaming is flourishing exponentially.

Public shaming in Anaañland occurred in two distinct forms. One was through a masquerade called Eköñ, a repertoire of news and gossip in the community. People were often warned against improper acts such as those involving immorality and unethical behavior to avoid being the subject of the next Eköñ outing. The assumption was that nothing was hidden from Eköñ, which, like other Anaañ masquerades, was supposedly imbued with spiritual powers and could sniff out every

¹ Gender is defined here as the relationship between men and women and the societal roles assigned to them on the basis of biological sex.

² Ukokpanism is used in this article to capture the totality of Chief Uko Akpan Ekanem's songs/lyrics and the choreographic styles associated with him. However, all mentions of Ukokpan are in reference to the artiste himself.

bad deed in the community. As noted by Assibong (2002), Eköñ was a regulatory institution that functioned as modern-day police in its mission to expose and punish corruption and deviancy in the community. The punishment came in the form of public destruction of reputations.

Public shaming also occurred through folk singers who used satire and other tropes to criticize community leaders without fear of reprisal (Knight, 2004). The arena of public performance shielded artists from punishment, perhaps in the same way that the First Amendment protects (public) speech in the United States. Satirical singers made extensive use of the medium of music and public acceptance of their arts to 'perform rites of reversal and rebellion by pouring insults not only on themselves but also on the elders and those who wielded power and authority in society' (Ekanem, 2016:2).

Gold (1997) makes the same observation about female folksingers in the Rajasthani Community in northern India where women are socialized to be meek and subservient in public spaces but find their voices through folksongs and performative satire.

These songs are inhabited by outspoken females who commonly address males directly, often making explicit demands upon them. Other folk performance genres from the same community, including women's stories and men's epic tales, contain frequent examples of bold female voices. (Gold, 1997:104).

In Ukokpanism, these two categories of public shaming coalesce to create a unique form of protest and demand for public accountability and morality. Like the Eköñ, Ukokpan demonstrated unique knowledge of societal secrets and deployed them in his songs. As his stature as an artiste grew, his name assumed the same behavior-shaping impact as Eköñ did. For instance, people were often cautioned to conduct themselves well (morally and ethically) to avoid being the subject of Ukokpan's next song (*Dioño nnaña asaña mbak Uko Akpan ama usin k'ikwö*). Over time, as the musician's fame transcended the spatial boundaries of his community, the songs became less about the misdeeds of individuals and more about those of social and ruling classes, systems and institutions. He called attention to societal improprieties in lyrics that were more subdued and respectful than those of traditional satirical singers (or those of his former and younger self). Many of his latter songs resonated with a suppliant tone often prefaced with 'Please let me ask you a question' (*Mbökö nna ubip mbime ise*). While he wasn't particularly asking for permission, the phrase often signaled that he was introducing an idea, issue or problem on which his audience should reflect or might be offensive to religious or political leaders and groups. These issues were wide-ranging and covered many aspects of life – society, politics and religion. One example is *Ama abo Isua kaa* ('When you ask the passing year to depart'), a song that disparages New Year's Eve conventions of 'chasing away' the passing year. He wondered where the old year was being sent

given that everywhere was inhabited by people who were also busy chasing off the old year. The lesson was that rather than the verbal banishments of the old year to parts unknown, folks should be proactive and take concrete measures to achieve better outcomes in the coming new year.

Over a career spanning more than seven decades, Ukokpan raised similar questions and issues that compelled reflection and action by people across generations, classes, religions, regions and national borders. As noted by Titus (2020), Ukokpan was not only celebrated for his 'commitment to typically African pattern of music' but also for attracting a 'large followership including younger generation' and getting them to think. While he did not set out to be society's moral voice, he inevitably became one because of his talents and the public acceptance they conferred on him. Through his songs, he advocated peace, unity, fairness and social justice. While these values are universal, they also have specific gendered dimensions and are reproduced in the relationships between men and women. The manner through which Ukokpan included or excluded these values in the context of gender is critical to a more robust appreciation of his contribution to humanity and the societal role of folk art generally.

Making the connections: Music, gender and culture

Like all cultural artifacts, music reflects and entrenches societal customs, beliefs and values (Rogers, 2013) but can also create, or at least contribute to, social transformation and radically novel ways of thinking. It is indeed in this aspect of the role of music that we examine how Ukokpanism as a cultural artifact in Annañland challenges or perpetuates 'traditional gender roles that cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive (and) women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive' (Tyson, 2006:81). 'Tradition' is used here to describe 'elements of culture that are transmitted (language) or to a body of collective wisdom (folk tales) and ... implies continuity and consistency ...' (Longhurst et al., 2016:10). Tradition or culture is often the site of inequality and its production when it justifies negative societal practices. Gender, for instance, is formed within a culture and perpetuated by tradition. This explains why culture is an important research interest for feminist scholars who 'examine the ways in which cultural expectations and assumptions about sex have fed the idea that gender inequality is natural' (Longhurst et al., 2016:24). As noted by Rogers (2013), 'culture can have many meanings, but it typically refers to the values or beliefs that are unique to an individual society ... within culture in general, popular culture in particular is defined as anything that is consumed by large audiences of people within a society with the purpose of entertainment' (Bharadwaj, 2007:131).

Indeed, while Ukokpanism is fundamentally an

entertainment platform, it is framed by a notable discourse on politics in its classical definition as the authoritative allocation of values, resources and power in a society (Easton, 1965; Kruschke, 1973) often resulting in conflicts among contesting groups. Ukokpanism challenges various forms of authority (political, religious and moral) by drawing on its legitimacy to public-shame and advocacy for adherence to norms of good behavior in religion, tradition, or basic social norms. Its reach is intensive and expansive over space and time. Several generations (and beyond) of Anaañ men and women may not remember a time when Ukokpan did not feature in the socio-cultural landscape of their lived experiences. What that landscape looks like when viewed through the analytical lenses of gender constitutes a significant part of his legacy and how he challenged or reinforced patriarchy through his arts. One notes that to 'challenge' is a conscious act while 'reinforcement' may be achieved by commission or omission. In other words, the absence of awareness or action unwittingly reinforces or leaves the status quo unchallenged and therefore becomes problematic in circumstances as significant as the advancement of women in society.

Given the connections between various forms of inequality (such as class and race) and culture, the deconstruction – to reject its negative aspects and retain what is valuable – is a good place to start in advocating social change. This is even more so for Ukokpanism, a genre that is deeply embedded in Anaañ culture in the language of its lyrics, instrumentation and performative styles (such as choreography and costume). Given its ambassadorial reach (James, 2021), Ukokpanism may be the most singular avenue through which people from other socio-cultural and geographical spaces learn about the Anaañ people. Though its original purpose is entertainment, Ukokpanism also became a medium to understand Anaañ culture, norms and values. Since traditional songs and folk music generally 'perpetuate societal views of women (in ways that attempt) to keep them within gendered roles' (Bunting, 2019:7), there is justification therefore for exploring the ways through which Ukokpanism portrays the Anaañ woman and her role in the society. Bunting (2019) also highlights the power of songs to provide 'insight into specific issues, such as gender and gender norms, and how they have progressed' (3). The representation of women specifically in cultural artifacts can either improve the conditions of women or perpetuate existing norms through 'discrimination on the basis of sex or gender.

Indeed, popular culture is where much of the conversation about sex and gender takes place, or at least the conversation that has social, political, and economic consequences' (Crasnow and Waugh, 2012:9). As Newton (2019) argues 'it's naive to assume that folk music rises above the general inequalities women face day-to-day' (5). The same argument can be made about Ukokpan's form of folk or 'cultural' music.

Looking through feminist lens: Theoretical and methodological framework

A gender-based assessment of Ukokpanism compels the adoption of a critical feminist qualitative approach both as a methodology and as an analytical tool. This approach achieves three interrelated goals. First, it illuminates the relationships between men and women in society and the different roles and expectations assigned to them (Tyson 2006), as well as how culture may unwittingly or knowingly 'embody patriarchal attitudes or undercut them, sometimes both happening within the same work' (Napikoski, 2021:2). Second, it highlights how 'literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women' (Tyson, 2006:83). And third, it advances an understanding of how aspects of culture are either inherently patriarchal or challenge explicit or implicit negative concepts about the place of women.

The research method that aligns with this approach is the content analysis of the totality of cultural artifacts and symbols (song lyrics, choreography, costume and instrumentation) in the representation of girls and women in Ukokpan's body of work. Accordingly, ten hours of Ukokpan's recorded performances were examined for mentions, images and the presence of girls and women and the contexts in which they occur. The physical locations and positioning of women on the performing sets or arenas are also assessed. One acknowledges the limitation of the sample size as a holistic representation of the totality of Ukokpan's performances. For one thing, not many were recorded or are available in digital forms. Of those in digital forms, few are accessible online. Indeed, as Ukokpan himself stated during an interview, he recorded hundreds of albums starting when the media of music storage and dissemination were *uchan ikwo* (vinyl records). Ten hours of immersion in Ukokpanism is admittedly a scintilla of a body of work spanning over seven decades. However, the evaluated content covers a variety of topics from the Nigerian Civil War of the 1960s to more contemporary issues such as divisiveness in Nigerian politics and dictatorial regimes. It is therefore a sufficient representative sample for the present purpose. The analysis is organized into two categories: the songs and lyrics, and the choreography and costume. The instrumentation is an aspect of interest but it does not rise to the level of a separate section in this discussion given that the instruments are played predominantly by male members of the group with an insignificant number of female instrumentalists.

Review of selected songs/lyrics, choreography and costumes

Ukokpan was male and it was inevitable that his craft would project a gendered standpoint on socio-cultural and political issues. As his craft evolved and his public

legitimation increased, he was no longer just an entertainer but a public figure and a cultural icon with a credible platform from which he challenged political and religious authority and advocated social and political reforms. Part of the issues of his time included the condition of women in Anaañ society, especially given that his ascendance as a popular artiste occurred in an era when the education of girls was not a priority. When parents with limited resources had to choose between sending a son or daughter to school, they often favored the son.³ Was the condition of women ever an issue of concern in Ukokpanism? Also, as women were an important component of Ukokpanism in their role as dancers, did the context in which they appeared support their aspirations as members of the larger community? It is expected that a review of selected songs/lyrics⁴, choreography and costume in Ukokpan's recorded performances (available online) will provide some answers to these questions as a scaffold to addressing the two major questions that frame this research.

Songs/Lyrics⁵:

Ufök Awasi Adede? ('Is that church?') is a song about the hypocrisy of Christians, especially church leaders. It includes a commentary on boys and girls who frequent *ufök akam* (prayer houses) for the sole purpose of finding sex partners.

Girls are advised to avoid unwanted pregnancies from indiscriminate sex while boys should avoid being infected with *udöñö* (sexually transmitted diseases, STD) by having sex with girls. On the surface, this is constructive advice because unexpected pregnancy is rarely a thing of joy for a young girl or woman, especially if unmarried; STDs are not welcome by anyone – male or female. However, beyond this paternalistic advice is a sub-textual commentary on morality. The song assigns an equal indictment of hypocrisy to boys and girls who go to church for less-than-spiritual reasons, but the gender specificity of the consequences resonates with perceptions of women as prostitutes. Indeed, this labeling

is so pervasive that some women, tired of explaining themselves, shrug off with *akpara ade anyiñ uduök mmöñ iban* ('prostitute' is a woman's baptismal name). The reference to STDs as consequences for young men who pick up sexual partners underscores the idea of women as carriers and transmitters of diseases and those who lure innocent men to their destruction. It ignores the fact that men who have non-monogamous and unprotected sex can also spread STDs or that perhaps the girls and women were infected by their male partners in the first place. The perception of women as irresponsible and sexualized objects is echoed in another song, *Mmekoro nsipe* ('I have sweated'), which extols the value of hard work. A passage⁶ in the Bible about how those who do not work should not eat is cited as God-approved evidence. The song begins by calling both men and women to *koro sipe* (sweat) if they want to eat, but then, assigns gender-specific tasks.

Traditionally, men performed *ntem* (the process of clear-cutting a piece of farmland and getting rid of wild plants and trees to prepare the land for a new planting season). When the cuttings have dried sufficiently, the land is set on fire to burn them and any remaining flora. The next task is performed by women who finalize the preparation process by clearing out the charred remnants and would typically be covered in *nkañ atuk* (charcoal). The actual planting is also gendered: some crops such as yams are planted by men while women are responsible for vegetables and other less valuable crops. Between planting and harvest, the farm needs weeding, a back-breaking task traditionally assigned to women. Indeed, in traditional Anaañ culture, a man may be public-shamed if he is found weeding; while women who clear-cut (*tem ntem*) may be derided for being *ejjara* (a male animal). This is the context in which *nkañ atuk* and *mbieere* (weeding) appear in *Mme koro nsipe*; The gendered connotations are recognized by anyone familiar with the Anaañ farming culture.

Any doubt that *Mmekoro nsipe* reinforces gendered roles even when the value of hard work is a universal attribute is dispelled when the totality of the song is examined. For instance, it speaks in perjorative terms about girls who, rather than work, adorn themselves (with make-up and nail polish) and roam the streets. The song also uses the phrase *aröbö itöñ ubök akana iruñ* to describe hand gestures ascribed to an idle person. The phrase is also evocative of femininity and people (both men and women) who have delicate or amble wrists and stroll aimlessly around the community. The image contrasts with that of the industrious Anaañ woman who is covered in *nkañ atuk* (charcoal) and does not forget when it is *mbieere* (weeding) season. The song also calls on girls to settle down (get married, for instance) early because *utöt ade amanyöngö, mkparawa edaka ukpöñ*

³ The reasoning was two-fold. First, sons carry on the family heritage and name, girls do not. Second, it was considered a 'waste of money' to educate girls because the rewards of such education accrued to the husband's family. Attitudes have changed over the years and education for girls is now taken for granted. However, families with limited financial resources still prefer to send their sons to school while encouraging the daughters to get married as soon as possible.

⁴ Ukokpan songs were written and performed in the Anaañ language. References to them are therefore in the original language with English translations in parenthesis.

⁵ Other songs/performances evaluated for this analysis albeit not directly referenced include: *Mwon Onyong* (Water from the sky, or Rain), *Nse Agwo Anam Ari Duku Ifun* ('All endeavors require sacrifices'), *Anyie Agwo Eku Abogho* ('Who has lost out on a windfall?'), *Mkpa Asong Anyen Abogho* ('Death is very disrespectful; can also be translated as 'Death does not discriminate'), and *Naira Udorji* (reference to a bonus pay package to Nigerian federal civil servants as a consequence of the oil boom of the 1970s).

⁶ 2 Thess. 3:10. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat.' (NIV)

(‘when the buttocks lose their firmness, young men will abandon you’). Reference to the firmness of the buttocks is probably a metaphor for youthfulness. But given the social context of the song, it also perpetuates a prevailing assumption that women’s achievements are derivative of their physical features (and buttocks that have not yet succumbed to gravity and age are positive attributes). This aspersion of accomplished women is somewhat universal but takes an added dimension in the Nigerian context where notions of ‘bottom power’⁷ are pervasive and invariably reduce women’s professional and corporate achievements to functions of their sexual relationships with men. The song reinforces the idea that only beautiful women succeed (in education, career or business enterprise) because men in positions of authority (now described as ‘destiny makers’ and ‘mentors’ in Nigeria) favor them but ignore ‘ugly’ women.

This notion that only beautiful women (with firm buttocks) succeed in marriage and careers somewhat contradicts the high value assigned to the hard-working charcoal-covered Anaañ woman. Can it be assumed that these women failed to leverage their youthfully firm buttocks before gravity rendered them ‘unattractive’ and had no other option but to work on the farm? Or, perhaps, the industrious farm worker is the ideal Anaañ woman?⁸ If so, this raises questions about the career trajectory of the girls with painted nails, faces and delicate wrists who, according to the song, do nothing but stroll idly through the streets in a presumed attempt to leverage their firm buttocks for personal and economic advancement.

In its video, *Nse ajen⁹ ijaya ntom* (‘What a beautiful girl!’) begins with a young woman dancing happily on a table. The mood is carefree and celebratory. Below her is a group of women dancing in a circle and looking up at her admiringly. Their gesture is a response to the song’s prompt for the community to behold the woman’s beauty. In the middle of the celebration, part of the woman’s clothing (a wrapper) rolls off her body and drops on the ground below her. She looks desperately for someone to pick up the wrap and cover her assumed nudity.¹⁰ No one picks up the wrapper and her dancing turns from joy to desperation. The song too changes from the celebration

of a woman’s beauty to lamentation of her aloneness and the tragedy of having no one to cover her nakedness. In *Mmekoro nsipe* (‘I have sweated’), it was implied that youthfulness and beauty are critical to a woman’s success. Here, it appears that *ujai* (beauty) by itself is not a sufficient condition for a woman’s success if she is alone.

This song could also have been about a man who has no family. Indeed, the theme of family transfuses Ukokpanism. The artiste often sang about how being *ajen nnana* (an orphan) is a major tragedy. For instance, in *Edemme Ema Agwo Inogho Uko’kpan*, he sings about he was denied material resources because as an orphan, he lacked people who could advocate for him. The message about the importance of family would still be powerful if it was a man whose loincloth dropped while he was dancing. Perhaps for the point to be made about women’s dependence and powerlessness, the subject of the song and the video performance had to be female.

The gendering of aloneness in this song not only signals the emotional and economic cost of being an unmarried woman in Anaañ culture but also highlights the gendered attitudes toward nudity. As Weinberg and Williams (2010) note, female nudity has strong sexual connotations not usually associated with the male body. The sexualization of female nudity may also underscore the pervasiveness of unclothed or half-clothed female bodies in popular cultures such as movies and fashion shows in greater degrees than male bodies. Even in hyper-erotic movies, the female body is often displayed in full while the male body is not. Marwaha (2019) concludes a four-part report of a study of men and women at a nude beach in Barcelona this way: ‘Well, male bodies are just bodies while women’s bodies are sex. This explains a lot about sexual violence and messed-up concepts of consent.’ This conclusion captures some of the cultural attitudes toward male nudity as being less ‘abominable’ than female nudity. On the one hand, the female body is venerated for being the site of reproduction and life. On the other hand, it is seen as an object for male emotional satisfaction which must be controlled and protected like other types of male possessions. This is why female nudity attracts a greater reputational cost in the community generally but especially among the Anaañ people.

The gendering of nudity and aloneness in *Nse ajen ijaya ntom* can also be explained by the larger cultural and family structure in Anaañ culture. The orphaned male does not receive as much attention as the orphaned female because of the assumption that men are stronger, more independent and capable of survival in the absence of a family. A common saying among the Anaañ people acknowledges the presumed independence of the male child. Loosely translated it goes like this: when an *akpan* (the first son) goes to his mother’s *ufök ubom*, it means he is in serious trouble. *Ufök ubom* refers to the kitchen but also includes the area of the household occupied by women and young children. It is traditionally located

⁷ ‘Bottom’ is slang for buttocks in Nigeria. ‘Bottom power’ is often used as pejorative for a woman whose achievements are assumed to be a product of her ability to sleep her way to success.

⁸ This may not be a far-fetched speculation because not too long ago in Anaañland, one of the metrics for determining if a girl was marriageable was her ability to work on the farm. This was particularly important for prospective mothers-in-law who wanted their potential daughter-in-law to be an asset to the family. The perfect wife material was therefore a woman who was not only capable of working on the farm but also one who would do it willingly, tirelessly and without complaining. This contrasted with the *ifö* (lazy girl) who could not or was unwilling to do farm work or *mkpö isoñ ufök* (domestic chores).

⁹ *Ajen* can also refer to a male child.

¹⁰ In the video, the dancer wears a long dress under the wrapper. In the traditional attire of the Anaañ woman, there would have been no dress under the wrapper and the audience understands that the loss of the wrapper would have exposed the woman’s nudity.

behind the main house. In other words, a son does not need his mother – or father, for that matter – except in extreme situations since he can, ordinarily, take care of himself. Even in this hypothetical scenario, the son exercises agency in his choice to go to his mother's *ufök ubom* probably for emotional support and care. Girls and women, on the other hand, need the protection of the family to actualize their sense of belonging and identity. The song then serves as a cautionary tale to the beautiful and happy young woman about over-confidence in her physical attributes as they would not be sufficient for her actualization if she does not have the protection of a family, namely a husband. The wrapper covers the body and its absence symbolizes physical, economic and social vulnerability.

Se ukpono se ajen akpono ete ('See the honor that a child gives to his/her father') is about children who neglect their parents while they are alive but put on an elaborate and expensive funeral when they die. The song also rebukes children who failed to provide medical care for their sick parents by taking them to the hospital but are ready to spend tons of money for extended embalment in the mortuary as they prepare for an elaborate funeral. This song is about *ajen* (child) and 'mother' is mentioned as part of 'parents' but the totality of the lyrics is masculine (father and son) in its context and title. Culturally, the responsibility to bury a parent falls on the son but the song goes beyond this filial duty to stress the need for the son to take care of his parents while they are alive rather than impress the community with an extravagant funeral ceremony. One argues that a message that asks adult children to support their elderly parents applies to both sons and daughters. The gendered nuances were unnecessary and only served to accentuate the invisibility of the female child.

Choreography, costumes and instrumentation

As with the lyrics, the choreography, costumes, instrumentation, and the spaces occupied by the dancers have gendered undertones in Ukokpanism. This is most visible in the specific style of dancing associated with the genre. Generally referred to as *Unek itak isin* ('waist dance' because of the distinctive gyration of the waist), Ukokpan's dance is energetic and physically exacting.

The active utilization of the waist and lower abdominal areas of the body distinguishes it from dance forms commonly associated with women (examples include *abang*, *mbobo* and *asian akan anwan*). Until recent years, the dance was performed exclusively by male dancers. In contrast to *unek itak isin*, the choreography of the female dancers is very gentle, often involving the swaying of the arms in an undulating manner.

Their costumes also align with their dance styles without deviating from the traditional everyday dressing style of the Anaañ woman. This consists of a blouse (often with flared sleeves), two wrappers tied on top of

each other (*eka eka iba*) and *bokit* (headscarves). This dressing style was traditionally associated with married women in Anaañland and other parts of Southeastern Nigeria. Indeed, in the Anaañ culture, the *eka eka iba* and *bokit* combo on a woman was the equivalent of a gold band on a woman's ring finger signaling her marital status.

The costume presented female dancers as married women or widows and more likely to perform as backup dancers in male-dominated cultural groups. This shielded the woman in two ways. First, they were less likely to be propositioned by their male colleagues or fans who would see them as unavailable or too old for sexual adventures. Secondly, in presenting the women as married or widowed, the few younger and unmarried dancers were not exposed to the public derision that might circumscribe their marriage prospects. The perception was having multiple sex partners was associated with their performance and public exposure. In other words 'good girls did not perform in public.' Viewed from this perspective, one may conclude that in recruiting married or older women or at least presenting the female dancers as such through a costume that aligned with the traditional style of dressing of married women, Ukokpan actively sought to protect the reputation of his dancers.

The male performers in the Ukokpan Cultural Group, on the other hand, are costumed differently and festively. Theirs is not an everyday outfit but a traditional costume for male dancers. They consist of a colourfully decorated t-shirt, a red and white knitted beanie hat, a kilt-like skirt made mostly of colourful strips of fabric. Around the waist is *njoho* (a fluffy belt made of ropes from the bark of the palm wine tree, ubiquitous in Anaañland). Draped around the neck, waist and arms are colourful long beads and tiny bells and rattles made from cowries and other shells. The costume is distinctive and the appearance of a man thus attired creates immediate anticipation of Ukokpan even before the ever-present whistle signaling the artiste's entry is heard. While the female costume is indistinguishable from routine women's attire the male costume is vibrant, loudly cheerful, celebratory, and captures the attention of the audience thus overshadowing the presence of the female performers.

The physical spaces that Ukokpan dancers occupy during public performances are as gendered as the costumes. Male dancers are located centerstage during public performances while female dancers are placed in the margins. The latter are often seen/shown dancing and waving handkerchiefs in the background as their movements rise and fall in synchrony with the tempo of the music. They cast images reminiscent of trees at the edge of the village square, far from the center of community life, their branches swaying to the wind like a supporting cast of silent observers. These images mirror the physical spaces occupied by women in Anaañ society.

Traditionally, Anaañ women were consigned to the margins of community life and female-specific spaces

such as the domestic sphere. The households, especially in polygamous families, were organized around gender. For instance, women were assigned separate living quarters behind the main house. Children were part of the mother's living area until the sons came of age, usually in adolescence, when they graduated to the 'main house.' The 'main house' was also the center of family life and public space where the father/husband presided over family issues and received guests. Husbands rarely went to the wife or wives' *ufök ubom* (living quarters) except for conjugal purposes but often it was the wife who 'visited' the husband in the main house when her company was required. The 'main house' was bigger and had the luxuries absent in *ufök ubom*, thus more convenient for the husband if the wife attended to him there. This arrangement (location of women in *ufök ubom*) is replicated in Ukokpanism as male dancers occupy the center stage while women remain in the background to provide support – visible but not intrusive.

Incidentally, this gender-specific household arrangement parallels the place of Ukokpanism in the Nigerian popular music landscape. For a long time, it occupied a narrow terrain of 'cultural music' but it has since evolved over the years from the margins of 'culture' as a performance genre into contemporary and 'modern' artistry diffusing to other parts of Nigeria. The choreography has subsequently become a prominent feature in the music videos of younger artists of all genres in the country. In these music videos, female dancers are shown performing *Unek itak isin* and displaying the same stamina and gyration style for which Ukokpan and his male dancers are famous. Recent Ukokpan performances have also featured female dancers performing *Unek itak isin*. Indeed, when a female dancer emerged on the screen as an opening act in *Afo akpono Obong Abasi* ('Are you worshipping God?'), one had to look more closely to confirm that the dancer was female. In *Utom obong asok adede?* ('Is that still God's work?'), female dancers occupy the center of the set. One of them is dressed in the traditional *mbobo* (maiden) costume instead of the double-wrappers of the older women. Rather than the feminine *mbobo* dance, she performs *Unek itak isin*.

Also, a 67-min 2015 production of various songs and performances features several female dancers dressed in similar costumes to those of the male dancers and dance alongside their male counterparts. In another performance, some male dancers are placed at the margins of the performance set, seemingly providing backup support for some 'double-wrapped' women at the centre. The camera focuses on the women for a longer time than was often the case in the past. The hybridization and genderization of costume, choreography and performance highlight the evolution of Ukokpanism, perhaps in response to the contemporary imperatives of the larger Nigerian entertainment landscape and the participation of female performers in various genres.

Despite the emerging mainstreaming in choreography, costume and physical positioning, instrumentation remains exclusively male. This seems to be a universal phenomenon in folk music. For instance, Newton (2019) notes the absence of female instrumentalists in Scottish folk music: 'Why do we still so often feel the need to categorize women as singers and men as instrumentalists?' (3). She argues that the active and successful participation of female instrumentalists in summer schools and university courses demonstrates superior playing skills and wonders why these are not showcased in real-life performances. Any girl or woman who has attended an all-girls school in Nigeria would agree with this as girls constitute 100% of school dance groups: they dance, sing, and play instruments such as the drums that feature in Ukokpanism. Those skills are not lost when girls become women. It is expected that the gender mainstreaming that has already begun in other areas of Ukokpanism will continue and be more inclusive of women as instrumentalists.

In the singing department, there is also a conspicuous absence of female voices – both literally and metaphorically. The major singer in the samples reviewed for this article is Ukokpan himself with his ubiquitous *akwa ikwö* (lead back-up vocalist). Personal interviews with people familiar with Ukokpan indicated that the man composed many of the songs, often on the spot during live performances. This author observed during a live performance how Ukokpan 'customized' a song to coax a grieving daughter to stop crying at her father's funeral and join him in a dance. Instantly, the funereal atmosphere was transformed into a festive celebration of songs and *unek itak isin*. The ability to compose songs on the spot contributed significantly to Ukokpan's popularity in Anaañ. It also reduced the opportunities for other members of the group, especially women, to co-create content or contribute in any significant manner.

Portrait of the Anaañ woman in folk music: Discussion

The presence of female members in cultural music groups generally, and Ukokpanism specifically, is indicative of their role as active agents. Through their performances, they seemingly leverage their physical attributes and talents (as dancers and backup vocalists) to achieve their personal goals (such as income-earning). On the other hand, female performers in folk music groups operate within entrenched social norms. The external evidence is in their costume and the supporting, often marginal, roles assigned to them. In this sense, female artists are at once empowered through their decisions to belong to these groups but those decisions are also subordinated to gendered structures and hierarchies. In so doing, they remain within gendered socio-cultural boundaries without threatening or

destabilizing entrenched patriarchal institutions. While Ukokpanism is not representative of the varieties of folk music groups in Nigeria or even the south-eastern region, its ethos and structures mirror what occurs in other cultural music groups. This is particularly so because, after seven decades in the industry, Ukokpan was considered a trailblazer of the genre and newer/younger groups adopted his style, especially in the choreography and the themes/issues that frame the songs.

As this research demonstrates, Ukokpanism presents a specific narrative about women through lyrics, choreography, costumes and instrumentation. While the gendered depictions are muted in the last three categories, most of the lyrics are overtly gendered and portray women and girls in a less-than-salutary light. There is a conspicuous absence of positive and empowering references to women and silence on contemporary practices that affect women negatively such as the treatment of widows and continued preference for sons over daughters. The presence of women as female performers in the group contrasts with female references in Ukokpan's songs. Often, when women show up in the songs, they are depicted as idle, purposeless and sexually promiscuous. These themes are elaborated in this section, albeit with a caveat: the analysis and conclusions are based on the materials reviewed for this article rather than on the totality of Ukokpanism or judgment about Ukokpan, the man.¹¹

First, most of the songs in Ukokpan's repertoire are generic enough to apply to both men and women, particularly those in positions of authority; however, mentions and references to women routinely resonate with sociocultural stereotypes that portray women negatively. Even a song that compliments a woman's beauty echo social ethos about women as objects of beauty for male admiration and gaze. Another song cast the female body as a commodity that must be leveraged before it loses its market value. Painted faces and nails (cosmetics makeup) are contrasted with bodies covered in charcoal with the first symbolizing laziness and the latter hard work. It seems unimaginable that women who wear make-up can also be industrious and that hard work can occur outside the context of the farm or without physical sweat. Though cosmetics are generally accepted in Anaañ communities, girls and women with 'painted faces' still get overt or implicit rebuke (the 'side-eye') by older people especially those in the rural areas where the primary and most consistent consumers of Ukokpanism are likely to be in the majority.

Second, for many decades, female dancers were excluded from the signature dance styles of Ukokpanism. The message was that women lacked the energy and

stamina to attempt and sustain *Unek itak isin*. This also resonates with the deliberate assignment of certain tasks to women either because they require physical strength that women presumably lack (*ntem*) or the tasks themselves are too demeaning for men to perform (*mbieere*). The choreography of Ukokpanism reflected this gendered division of labor.

Third, the differences in the dance costumes reinforced Anaañ fashion. Indeed, an adolescent girl might be described as *ajöhö akuno aföng agwo-nwan* ('she is old enough to tie a wrapper') to another person in place of the girl's actual age. It also signifies the importance of the traditional wrapper in the rites of womanhood for the Anaañ woman. This remained unchanged for much of the Ukokpan years as the costume of the female backup dancers portrayed the traditional attire of the Anaañ woman. In more recent years, the inclusion of female dancers in the *Unek itak isin* section of the ensemble compelled a gradual change in costume such that some female dancers were allowed to wear the same costume as the male dancers. Both the physical location of the performers and costumes have also ceased to be the distinguishing features between male and female dancers. Nevertheless, the general choreography and costume of the backup female dancers remain unaltered even when they occasionally now perform centre stage.

In general, the sample materials used for this analysis demonstrate how Ukokpanism portrays women in ways that (intentionally or not) reinforce gendered constructs and stereotypes. Perhaps, this was inevitable given the nature of folk music which typically reflects the customs and traditions of the people. Known in the Nigerian music and performance industry as 'culture,' the genre was hitherto relegated to the realm of village artistes many of whom did not have formal Western education or training. They used their natural talents of composing, singing, dancing and skills at playing local instruments (such as xylophones, drums, rattles, gongs, etc.) to perform at funerals, weddings and other community events. The songs are usually in the local languages and dialects of the artiste's communities and echo local customs and practices. Ukokpan and his cultural group were prominent in this genre of performing arts. Their work generated recognition and acceptance beyond the cultural borders of Anaañland and was universally recognised as ambassadors of Anaañ culture. It was therefore inevitable that the culture that Ukokpanism presented to the world was unabashedly patriarchal and unencumbered with any conscious interrogation of gender. It was not in the interest of a 'culture artiste' such as Ukokpan to upset the cultural order that propelled him to international prominence even when that order was imbued with assertions of female inferiority.

However, the nature of the art form does not absolve Ukokpanism from the lack of awareness of gender issues and/or a conscious effort to deconstruct stereotypical notions about women. Indeed, the paradox is that though Ukokpanism did not consciously alter social perceptions

¹¹ The materials reviewed for this analysis were randomly selected and covered many years and issue areas. Since it is impossible to review the totality of Ukokpanism, these materials serve as a good sample from which to make some inferences about Ukokpanism and its portrayal of women.

about women, there was no such reticence when it came to other social and political issues such as the hypocrisy and contradictions exhibited by institutions and authorities. For instance, in a song about teachers, Ukokpan reminds his audience that without teachers, there would be no doctors, engineers or politicians and it was therefore unfair that teachers were so poorly paid. Since he commented on injustice and inequities in various areas of life, his silence about how these issues affected women in uniquely gendered ways cannot be dismissed based on the genre of his work. In keeping silent about gender issues, the artiste reinforced patriarchal conceptualizations of women even if that was not his intention.

There is no argument about how women have been portrayed in Ukokpanism. On the other hand, to its credit, it provided a platform for visibility and a source of livelihood for female entertainers even if all they did was serve as props on the margins of performance sets. Also, as part of the traveling troupe, the female dancers were exposed to places outside their immediate communities. Admittedly, the presence of women as dancers in a musical group adds a unique entertainment value to its performances and this possibly explains why women have always been part of the Uko Akpan Cultural Group.

Conclusion

The article began with an anecdote of an event that did or did not happen but reveals something about the man behind Ukokpanism, a side of him that may be lost in his public performances and songs. That is, he empowered women by including them in his public performances even as other aspects of his work perpetuated women's subservient role in Anaañ society. This conflict (between intentions and actions) shows the complexity of the effort to evaluate a cultural artiste whose life and work spanned more than seven decades and through various changes in society. Nevertheless, the analysis of the work of Ukokpan demonstrates that folk music generally and his genre in particular intersects with cultural narratives about women in ways that are simultaneously empowering and marginalizing. It empowers by providing a platform for women to participate in the public space to showcase their talents as artists and as a source of livelihood. At the same time, folk lyrics and performances continue to be superimposed on entrenched cultural ethos and systems that, deliberately or unwittingly, assign subordinate roles to women. The gradual gender mainstreaming in Ukokpanism might have been indicative of the awareness of this perpetuation of gender stereotypes and the changing societal trend toward gender equity even in folk cultures.

In his way, therefore, Ukokpan was an advocate for Anaañ women by providing them (at least his dancers) a platform to perform even though his lyrics continued to cast him as a stalwart of patriarchy. In the end, he stayed

true to himself as an Anaañ man and a product of his time and place. His 70-year career began as a 15-year-old boy with no formal education. When he passed away in 2020, he had created a niche for himself as a cultural icon who reinforced and challenged traditional values, demonstrating the capacity of folk music as a viable vehicle to transform society – if properly directed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Dr. Mercy Ette of the University of Leeds and Ms. Ini Ubong, the author of *Ekoñ Ñke - Our Stories*, for reading the early draft of the manuscript and providing helpful feedback.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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