

SONGS AS HISTORICAL DATA:Examplesfrom the Niger Delta

by E.J. Alagoa*

The realisation of the potentialities of oral tradition in the reconstruction of African history is slowly taking root among Africanists. More and more discussion of the subject is taking place, and discussion should blossom into greater acceptance and use of oral traditions as historical document. It is, of course, true that some historians still accept oral tradition as no more than an aid to written records - as no more than a mere enrichment or complement to archives. But whatever the degree of acceptance, it is right to stress, even in the heat of the discussion, that oral traditions themselves are of diverse types. And that the richest reconstruction of oral history results from the use of more than one oral source and type. What most people mean by oral tradition are the formal historical accounts recited by professionals or handed down as informal narratives of past events within non-literate communities. These indeed form the base of oral history, but what are commonly referred to as oral literature also merit the attention of the historian of non-literate societies, just as the social or cultural historian in literate societies makes use of its literary record.

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Within the category of oral literature, the genre of poetry is probably the most fruitful as historical source material. At the same time, it is one of the most difficult to utilise. Among the Ijò of the Niger Delta, songs represent the most popular poetic expression. The discussion that follows will, accordingly, present a number of song texts for discussion of their significance as historical documents.

Songs, however, have all the limitations of oral literature as historical data, together with some special difficulties peculiar to them alone.¹ For these reasons many scholars are prepared to pay no more than lip service to them as sources of historical information. The problems are, indeed, many and difficult, and we mention only a few here.

First, songs produce initial inhibitions in the historian, since he is likely to consider them a preserve of the specialist in music. He is not likely, therefore, to record songs except for the mere listening pleasure. It is true, too, that even after songs have been recorded, it is difficult to know what to do with them. One is aware of the great part the pure music of a song plays in defining its meaning to the people of the culture to which the song belongs. (And it would seem that not even the specialists are agreed on a proper notation for African music). For the non-specialist, there is little beyond the study of song texts, largely taken out of their musical context, and studied as example of oral poetic literature. That is, in fact, what we attempt in the present discussion.

Second, song texts are likely to present special problems of understanding. There is the problem of archaic words and expressions. But also difficulties resulting from peculiar inflexions or twists given to words because of the requirements of musical expression. Because of

1. See A.P. Merriam, The Anthropology of Music (Chicago, 1964)

these and other reasons, one comes across words in song texts that even native speakers cannot explain.

Third, the historical information to be obtained from song texts, as from other oral literary sources, is neither obvious, explicit, nor large in quantity. References to historical events may be at best oblique or indirect. Accordingly, one does not simply record the song text and there obtain a plentiful supply of clear, simple data. The reference indicated has to be followed up by the recording of local commentaries indicating the historical events to which the song refers. These limitations of the song as historical document derive from its very nature. The survival of a song depends mainly on its musical quality. If it is deliberately preserved for a particular social, religious, or historical purpose, a song soon becomes esoteric and obscure in meaning. If a song continues to be popular it is often because it is satisfying in its own right, as a piece of music.

The fact that songs are assessed within their society mainly as music constitutes one of its advantages as historical document. They contain information that is unlikely to be preserved in the direct historical traditions handed down formally or officially. It has been observed that song makers take greater liberties with rulers and otherwise sacred subjects than other commentators on society and politics: although they can also use flattery and the hyperbole. And once songs have been made and preserved because of their musical appeal or the relevance of their content, they are more likely to survive the attempts of later generations to adapt them to contemporary taste or ideas than the formal traditions. Song texts and similar oral literary data may, accordingly, be said to have more of the 'neutral' or impartial qualities of the best archives. That is, that they were created for other purposes than to preserve history. And even where they were originally created for propaganda purposes, such propaganda is recorded and preserved, largely in its original form.

The problem of transmission is, in fact, one of the factors that determines the form of Ijò songs. A song normally deals with a single theme and treats this in a brief, but arresting sentence or two. The solo

singer states this theme once, sometimes twice, and the chorus repeats it. This continues several times, the elements of improvisation and surprise in each song performance lies completely with the solo singer who adds flourishes, or makes new statements. The chorus repeats the constant song theme which is the message of the song. Such prolonged performance is completely satisfying to a native audience, but sounds excessively repetitive and flat to a foreigner - especially when the bare text is transcribed and presented on paper as poetry. In the examples used here, only the theme element of each song is presented. But the brevity of this element helps to make it easy for a chorus to learn quickly, and to preserve it in their memory for other occasions.

Finally, the historian newly arrived in a community to record its oral tradition is often discouraged by the varieties of song. Among delta communities there are funeral songs, war songs, songs used by drinking or other convivial groups, songs used by various dancing clubs in their performances, and songs composed by individual persons to record private or public experience, among others. Faced with this diversity, the historian can easily decide to leave songs severely alone, concentrating on the formal oral traditions. The proper approach would seem to be, to record all types of oral literature that it is practicable to procure while one is recording the formal oral traditions. Thus, in recording the activities of kings or rulers, to ask for any songs, riddles, proverbs, or tales concerned with these rulers or with occurrences in their reigns. And in recording the traditions of lineages or other groups, to ask for any songs or literature peculiar to such groups.

Thus the amount of information to be obtained from song texts may not be large, but it is often of a type that would be absent from the official or formal traditions. The information in song texts indicates fruitful lines of further investigation.

Two categories of song text are presented here from the Nembe (Brass) kingdom of the Niger Delta. The first examples refer to early

periods of history, and have been handed down. That is, these are songs whose original composers have been long dead. Such original composers are often not identifiable. A second category is given as a means of checking on our ideas concerning the transmission of oral literature and tradition. Most of these songs were composed as comments on the life and actions of the last amanyanabo (king) of Nembe who died only last year. Some of these songs were composed by living people during his life or at his funeral in March 1967, and were tape-recorded by the author on the spot.

Francis Osamade Joseph Allagoa was amanyanabo of Nembe from 1954-67. And although not all the songs composed by his people during this period in praise and criticism have yet been recorded, some idea can be gained of the number of such songs composed during the reign. We can see to what parts of a ruler's life get commented upon in song, and which of such songs get remembered in later times (by comparison with the songs handed down on the earlier kings). We can, of course, also observe how such songs of comment on contemporary history get composed.

The first example deals with a very early period of Nembe history. The ruler is named Onyoma-pere, and does not even appear on the king lists. He was the leader of one of seven ancestor settlements to Nembe. Each of these settlements was dispersed by plague, civil war, or external attack. Kala Ekule, the first on the king lists, apparently, gathered the remnants of all seven settlements together to form the nucleus of the Nembe kingdom. The period of this ruler has

been estimated to about 1400.² And since separate king lists of up to nine names have been given for some of the earlier seven settlements, these could have flourished for up to two centuries before Kala Ekule. In any case, Onyoma-pere may have lived before 1400.

The particular song text refers to the time when the settlement named Onyoma was destroyed by the neighbouring Kalabari settlement of Kula. This song is regularly rendered by most narrators of the early history and is put into the mouth of Onyoma-pere's own daughter, whose husband (a prince from Kula) had been killed by Onyoma-pere. In this song she calls on the people of Kula to come avenge the death of their prince, since her father had committed the crime of hostility towards his guest and son-in-law:

1. Ónyoma, fua tarigha Nembenowef!
 Ẹurú ẹẹlẹ indí nẹngi
 Ẹurú na indí na ẹ gbọrì ẹẹlẹ;
 O mu ẹẹrẹ ẹkì o b'í ó:
 Orita ẹ deibef na oná
 Tei ẹ igbanfa wọf ma?

(Onyoma of Nembe who hates a son-in-law!
 Yam is sweeter than fish,
 Yam and fish alone belong in a pot,
 Go and take issue with him:
 What quarrel did 'Orita' my man have with him?)

Since this song is given as a normal part of the traditions, it requires no special effort on the part of the historian either to record or seek local commentaries on its historical relevance. It may be

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2. E.J. Alagoa, The Small Brave City-State: A History of Nembe-Brass in the Niger Delta (Madison and Ibadan, 1964), p.51.

inferred from the context that the peoples of Onyoma and Kyla inter-married and probably had other cultural and similar contact. The song heightens the dramatic effect of the narrative at this point before the Kyla onslaught on Onyoma. But what does it tell the historian that could have been lost otherwise?

First, we have an insight into the attitudes of the people, if not at the remote date of around 1400, at least of the time when the song was composed and put into the mouth of the princess. We learn, for example, that it offended against the customs of the times for a man to show hostility towards his son-in-law.

Second, the lines comparing the taste of 'yam' and 'fish' are an allusion to ritual cannibalism. In some narratives of the traditions, Onyoma-peṛe is explicitly stated to have used his son-in-law for ritual offering to his gods and had, accordingly, eaten parts of him. But such statements are now left out more often than not. It is the song alone that continues to hint at this fact. (It may be noted, however, that the fact of cannibalism is considered unnatural. It is pointed out to Onyoma that 'yam' is preferable to 'fish'; but if one insisted on 'fish' he should stop at 'fish' and 'yam'.)

Third, song texts, together with other well-preserved literary texts, record the changes in word usage, and so changes in society or the environment that may not be remembered in the direct historical traditions. The ruler of Onyoma is, for example, referred to in other texts, though not in this, as Onyoma-peṛe. The rulers in the reconstituted kingdom of Nembe are called amanyanabọ, and there are traditions of Edo migrants of the Benin Empire from Warri. The title of peṛe is still used among the Western Delta Ijọ for the High Priest of the guardian spirit of an ethnic group. Such a priest served as the single authority over the group. Peṛe, accordingly, was an ancient Ijọ title for a 'priest-king'.

The reference to the rulers of the first seven settlements as *perę* confirms the traditions that their inhabitants were ethnically *Ijo*, and that the re-constitution may have been accompanied or shortly followed by the introduction of new ideas of political organisation (possibly brought by new migrants).

Examples of indication of change recorded by archaisms are to be found in the use of 'yam' and 'fish' to stand for vegetable and protein or meat diets respectively. Yam (*buru*) has become something of a luxury item in the diet of the Nembe *pe*ople, as of many Niger Delta peoples. Their most important food since anybody can now remember is the plantain, *musa paradisiaca* and to a lesser extent, the banana. The plantain has been so identified as typical to the delta that it is the principal food offered to the gods. The use of yam, *dioscorea*, as the figure for vegetable food seems to confirm that in the Niger Delta this food plant came before either the plantain or banana. In view of the river environment and the prevalent fish diet, the use of 'fish' (*indi*) for all non-vegetable food is easy to understand. But even this is gradually becoming an archaism as 'meat' (*nama*) gets attached to it, or even to the exclusion of 'fish' (*indi*) in colloquial expression (as people become familiar with beef imported from Northern Nigeria).

The following three song texts come from the last decade of the nineteenth century. They are said to have been used by the High Priest of *Okpoma* (the largest town in the Nembe Kingdom after the capital) when the *amanyanabọ*, Frederick William Koko, came to seek the town's support in his war against the Royal Niger Company in 1895. The *Okpoma* community was angry with King Koko for past acts of oppression, and replied to his plea for support with these songs through their High Priest:

2. Inḡwoma mangi mangi ɓou sɔq,
Ɛri ɓirimɓɔ mɔ?
Koko, Ɛri ɓirimɓɔ aan?
Inḡwoma mangi mangi ɓou mɔ,
Ɛri ɓirimɓɔ aan?
Opu Mingi, Ɛri ɓirimɓɔ aan?

(My children keep running into the bush
Am I of Ibo stock?
Koko, am I of Ibo stock?
My children keep fleeing into the bush
Am I of Ibo stock?
Great Mingi, am I of Ibo stock?)

3. Ini ɔlabɔ sɔnoma ejigalɔ kuntɛ,
Mɛmi fɛtɛ kirɔ o;
Mingi o, mɛmi fɛtɛ kirɔ ɔ.

(My priest put on the headgear with seven folds;
This was lost territory,
Mingi, this was lost territory).

4. Okurɔɓei rɛ i tariyɔ ma?
Okurɔɓei rɛ i tariyɔ ɓajyɔ Mingi o?
Igbemamɔ rɛ i tariyɔ ɓaiyɛ?
Igbemamɔ rɛ i tariyɔ ɓaiyɔ Mingi o?

(Is it my medicine bag you want?
 Is it the medicine bag that attracts you, Mingi?
 Do you want my bell?
 Does the jingling bell attract you, Mingi?)

The first point to note about these songs is their source. The British records of their 1895 war against King Koko, contain no word of what happened between him and his subordinate leaders. But they do mention the great part King Obu of Ọkpoma played to help Koko.³ They had, in fact, to destroy Ọkpoma for its part in the attack on the Royal Niger Company's depot at Akassa. The local accounts of the conflict too would usually single out King Obu almost as the sole leader of Ọkpoma. What stands out from these songs, however, is that the High Priest of the guardian spirit of Ọkpoma was the real spokesman for the town. In times of crisis the political leadership took its cue from the religious. The political leadership became the executive arm of the system, carrying out the decisions handed down by the priesthood.

This does not mean, however, that the priesthood exercised arbitrary control. The priests were, naturally, subject to public pressures, and were fully aware of the public mood and opinion. Moreover, whatever decisions they pronounced were given in the name of the gods, and were given in a condition of spirit possession. Thus, we notice that in these songs, it is the guardian spirit of the town that speaks, using the priest as its instrument. We therefore have reference to "My children" and to "My Priest". Considered in this light, the political leader had no option but to subject himself to the guidance of the collective will of the people dramatically presented by the High Priest in a state of possession.

3. Sir John Kirk, Report on the disturbances at Brass, p.26.

Second, what were the historical events to which these songs refer? Song No.2 refers to events in 1893 when the British Consul-General, Major MacDonald, visited Ọkpoma with a military force. The people believed that it was a hostile visit inspired by King Koko. They had fled into the surrounding bush at the British approach. In songs No.2 and No.3, King Koko is reproached with this incident, since proper delta people should live close to the water, and they had been forced to hide in the forests and live like Ibo landmen.

Further search for commentaries on the songs reveals the basis of the Ọkpoma conviction that King Koko had engineered the British visit of 1893. King Obu's predecessor and uncle, Sagbe Ọbasi, had lost property in the capital during civil disturbances. He demanded reparation, but did not get it before his death. Obu took up the quarrel with the support of the entire people of Ọkpoma. King Koko sat over the dispute and approved reparation that appeared ridiculously inadequate to Obu and his people. In 1893 they took the law into their hands and seized produce from the capital meant for the British traders. Koko apparently sought the assistance of the British authorities against his recalcitrant subjects. And although the dispute was settled by the British taking over the payment of reparation (in the form of a yearly subsidy), Koko's sins were remembered against him when he came in 1895: this time to seek assistance against the British.

After the 'facts' have been stated against King Koko in song 2 and 3, song No.4 tries to suggest motives for his previous hostile actions. His actions are put down to covetousness.

The events of 1895 are still quite vividly remembered throughout the area of the Nembe Kingdom, and one or two eye-witnesses may still be found alive. But it is already obvious that only the broad themes and outlines of the British-Nembe conflict get retold as time passes. Soon, the quite acute problems of leadership and organisation faced by

King Koko may be forgotten.⁴ When that time comes, these songs would still be a valuable guide to the wary historian who cares to follow the directions of research they indicate.

111.

It is only necessary to give a sample of songs about amanyanaḅḅ Francis Osamade Joseph Allagoa, Ming X (1954-67), and to examine their historical significance. This would reveal how much information may be obtained by future historians from an investigation of songs and song commentaries alone concerning the life and times of this most recent Nembe ruler.

The first example deals with the amanyanaḅḅ's ancestry:

5. Èrì ka nimigha ye rẹ ẓiyḅ ḅḅ:
 Igbobḅ ẹḅḅḅḅ ẓẓḅḅ rẹ ḅ fḅ ma?
 Tḅḅḅ rẹ ḅ nyanḅ ma, Nembe n'ongu?

(I ask this out of ignorance:
 They say he is an Ibo, but who bought him?
 And who is his master, people of Nembe?)

This song records the fact that the king's mother was Okwei, a princess from the riverain Ibo town of Ossomari on the River Niger south of

4. For an account of the 1895 incidents from the King's point of view, see E.J. Alagoa, "Koko: Amanyanaḅḅ of Nembe" in Tarikh (Ibadan) Vol.1, No.4, 1967 p. 65-77.

Onitsha.⁵ He had been born there in 1888 and grew up there. So that even after he became ruler of Nembe in 1954, he spoke no word of Nembe. He spoke only Ibo and English. The song, accordingly, records some of the resentment that was expressed by some members of the community. But it also shows that the insinuation of 'slave' origin implied by some detractors was equally firmly rejected by the majority of his subjects. (The singer gives a simple reason: a slave has a master, but the Tenth Mingi had none). That was, of course, evident in his election to the office in the first place: an election fully justified by his paternal ancestry. His father was Joseph Alagoa, one of the most prominent chiefs in nineteenth and early twentieth century Nembe history, who traded on the River Niger. The chief's mother was Yeh, daughter of King Boy Amain (amanyanabọ of Nembe 1832-46), son of King Forday Kulo (c. 1800-1832), son of King Mingi (founder of the current dynasty at Nembe).⁶

If for nothing else, this example shows that in traditional African society even the highest in the land were not exempt from barbed comment. But such comment is usually expressed in a literary form (in songs, riddles, proverbs etc.), a fact which further outlines the importance of recording oral literature for historical purposes.

The next example sees the king's power as extending through the length and breadth of Nigeria (and even to Europe) so that nobody who offends him can escape punishment:

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5. Felicia Ekejiuba, "Omu Okwei: the merchant queen of Ossomari", Nigeria Magazine No. 90, Sept. 1966, pp. 213-20.
 6. E.J. Alagoa, The Small Brave City-State, p. 130/1, "Appendix II Genealogy of the Kings of Nembe". All rulers of the dynasty are named Mingi together with a number indicating the number of rulers since Mingi 1.

6. | mu yọ mu yó, o i temi woro;
 Légoṣi mú ka, o i temi woro:
 Mingi Tẹniṣei igaragaraḅá ḅ
 Kọmḅ gbolḅ gbolo ḅarḅ fḅa.

(Wherever you go, he has you nailed:
 You go to Lagos, and he has you nailed:
 Mingi Tenth is like a prickly thorn
 That cannot be handled with impunity).

This is clearly a good record of the ordinary people's assessment of their King's great influence. The assessment was necessarily high because he had, in fact, managed to gain the good opinion, not only of the local people, but also of the new political leaders of the former Eastern Region of Nigeria. He had worked through all grades of the colonial Civil Service, and in 1954 was a Magistrate in the Judiciary when he became amyanabọ of Nembe. He then became, after independence, a First Class Chief in the Eastern House of Chiefs (where he was named in discussions of its Presidency). In addition, his sons occupied responsible positions in many parts of the country (one became Mayor of Port Harcourt and later, a Judge of the Eastern Nigeria High Court).

In the following song composed by a group of women during the funeral celebrations in March 1967, the leader of the group enumerates what the community considered to be the most memorable things about the king and the reign:⁷

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7. For an account of the ceremonies before and after burial, see E.J. Alagoa, "Ijọ Funeral Rites", Nigeria Magazine, No. 95, December 1967, pp. 279-87.

7. Ọ ọo ọ yoú ọ, Mingi o.
 Mingi ọef igoínbọ ka seleghá,
 Tọgu ka seleghá, ebi aláọọbefi.
 Ọ ọo ọ yoú ọ, Mingi o.

(Come and mourn him, Mingi.
 Mingi did not shun the poor,
 Not even children, the good chief.
 Come and mourn him, Mingi).

As rendered by the group, the last line was repeated by the entire group as a chorus while the solo singer named a different virtue each time at lines two and three. This list may be fairly taken to represent their ideas of the good ruler. The quality of accepting both the high and the low, the rich, poor and the weak on equal terms was stressed. Next, that his word was his bond: he carried out what he promised. And it is suggested that his period received supernatural approval and favour: business prospered, barren women bore children, every project he planned turned out well. Finally, they repeatedly mention the single Secondary School in the area built by the Roman Catholic Church through his efforts. (He was himself a Roman Catholic, all the Christians in the community being Anglicans).

From the indications of this most recent ruler, a ten year reign of average success may have up to two dozen songs composed in praise or criticism of the ruler. In Nembe, and other Niger Delta ọjọ areas, there were no official praise singers, but individuals and musical groups spontaneously expressed their feelings in song. There were, accordingly, all types of songs composed, and only the fittest would survive.

The criteria for fitness to survive are likely to be mainly the aesthetic appeal of each composition. If the subject treated is unique and grips the imagination such a composition may get remembered. Another song may survive because of the appeal of the musical element. There was, in fact, an air of informal competition for a grading of songs on a popularity listing among composers. Songs were composed to record particular incidents at the funeral as well as gossip and rumour.

IV

Song texts then, can be fruitfully utilised as historical data along with other literary sources. They are capable of supplying subtle insights, local colour and details beyond what archives and other forms of oral tradition can provide. Songs and other literary texts also have some of the advantages of archives. That is, that they were often originally created for purposes other than those of historical record, and therefore stand a chance of containing material outside the official traditions. Further, later additions to or changes in the text are more difficult, and fairly easy to detect.

Song texts, however, have their own limitations. The identification of the historically significant songs out of the great body of these materials, still largely unrecorded, is only one of several problems. There are, in addition, problems of understanding texts and of interpretation. Finally there are the technical problems of recording and transcription. In the consideration of song texts as historical data therefore, the historian needs the assistance of other specialists, just as the material itself has to be used as only one among several other resources for historical reconstruction.



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