WOMEN, MYTH AND HEROISM IN URHOBO TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS

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Abstract

This study examines the image and import of Urhobo oral performances in which women are the dominant figures within the context of traditional festivals. The festival presents a performance situation that mutually utilizes the gender in a non-exclusive manner, thereby creating a balance in the society. Each festival symbolizes a quest with a battle motif demanding female chivalry as much as male heroism. The performances done by women are veritable avenues to project female heroic archetypes, worthy of celebration and emulation in the society. They are heroes because in each festival, they undergo series of rites that are believed as necessary for the promotion and preservation of the socio-cultural norms, values and ideals of the society. However, not many readings of the heroine have been undertaken, especially in the Urhobo situation. This paper seeks to bridge this gap.

Key words: Festivals, women, gender, heroism, Urhobo, Myth

Introduction

From traditional to modern culture, as in Urhobo tradition in Delta State of South-Southern Nigeria, the notion of female heroism, of women that “intrigue people ... [that are] brave, defiant … stir imaginations, rouse passions and often inspire thousands of followers”(Marianna Mayer 1), is a near myth. More often than not, the archetypes of heroism in oral and written literatures, cultural creations and performances such as the festival are overtly associated with maleness. For instance, in most Urhobo cultural aesthetic creations like the festival, not all performances are realized by male performers. Some performances are set apart for women. In addition, such performances are like the crucial “central bead” that heralds the aesthetic import of the festival as a whole. A case in hand is the ghiaboghiawo performance in the Utuwhen festival at Orhughworun.

Orhughworun is a three-community kingdom in Udu Local Government Area of Delta State in Nigeria. It is one of twenty four (24) divisions of the Urhobo spread across nine Local Government Areas (out of twenty five) in the present Delta State. They celebrate the Utuwhen festival made up of several events. Prominent among these events are the Udje dance and satirical performance and ghiaboghiawo performance. The Udje performers are basically ‘male’. The
ghiaboghiawo performance on the other hand, according to G. G. Darah is “the procession of all [bridal] initiates through the streets … on the feast day of Utuwhen deity on whose behalf all communal cultural events in Orhughworun are celebrated” (11). The procession is only a phase in the entire initiation rites which has great import in the entire festival and for the community at large. The heroic import of the ghiaboghiawo performance is the centre of circumference of this study. The aim of the study is to portray the archetypes of female heroism in Urhobo culture and project the archetypal features and values that they represent side by side their more obviously celebrated male counterpart.

The study’s focus on heroic (female) performance among the Urhobo is justified by the fact that the Urhobo people, rank as the fifth largest ethnic nationality in Nigeria, with a total of about “1.5 million populations” (2006 census 26), the first four largest ethnic nationalities being the Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and Ijaw in no particular order. The Urhobo consist of several groups such as the Udu, Ughievwen, Orougn, Ughwerun, amongst others, which according to Onigu Otite, are identified as one people: Urhobo. They are one because “they believe that they share a common, though remote, ancestor”(Xiii). This belief necessitates the development of a worldview which Bruce Onobrakpeya says is fascinating and includes “thoughts, beliefs, religions, concepts, rich folklore, and work culture … [as an] attempt to explain their environment and survive in it”(377). He further reiterates that aspects of this worldview inspire the Urhobo, including himself as an artist to creativity. It is the aesthetic import of the Urhobo worldview that is relevant to this study.

**The Urhobo Worldview and Art**

Intrinsic in the worldview of the Urhobo are folk ideas that shape the artistic configurations of the people, which are aesthetically harnessed in each festival. These ideas are underlying narratives of Urhobo art which Isidore Okpewho views as “the irreducible aesthetic substratum in all varieties of human cultural endeavour, from one generation to another” (69). This substratum in the Urhobo situation is the myth which forms the undercurrent of the people's cultural creations especially the festival. The myth expresses the people’s cultural consciousness of quest, death and rebirth (immortality) and heroism. The notion of heroism which is the focus of this study is realized by the actualization if the quest and immortality myths. The immortality myth is constructed on the view that individuals, families and whole communities in the Urhobo world live in a cosmos divided into the land of the living (akpor) and the spirit world (erivwin). Both spheres of the cosmos are respectively occupied by the living and the spirits of the dead. Through rites and rituals
the dead are empowered to come and go from the land of the living either as ancestors or
reincarnates through birth. Ancestors are conceived of as family and communal heroes who protect
the living in the unseen spiritual realm and punish those (among the living) who violate the
communities’ code of conduct.

The need for ancestral and other forms of heroes in Urhobo world is expressed by Peter Ekeh
in his “Urhobo World View” that:

Sandwiched between Akpo and Erivwin are the edjo [gods], intermediary spiritual forces that interact with living humans. The
world of the edjo is a kind of stepped down Erivwin—a vast world inhabited by a large group of nature-spirit forces, some benign,
others cruel and dangerous ... the menace of traditional Urhobo communities. Their friendship must be achieved for the welfare of the community ... Urhobo people ... try constantly to control the
edjo-to neutralize their powers through spirit counter-forces ... priests (eboh, singular oboh) of various grades act as agent in
dealing with this lower cadre of spirits. (30)

The presence of menacing forces in Urhobo universe represents archetypal foes which influence human affairs and must be curtailed using ‘superhuman’ heroes. The control of the heroes is
achieved through rites and performances which bridge the sacred and the mundane, enhance the
mobility of the gods on behalf of man and transform men and women to ‘superhuman’ characters.
During each Urhobo traditional festival, the people through ritual, art, dance and drama, transform
priests, priestesses and other performers to symbolic beings that articulate existing morals, values
and ideas which the community aspires to renew and sustain.

Each festival is in essence a quest for the entire wellbeing of the community. As a quest, it
embodies the journey motif in which a hero undertakes a difficult task or journey on behalf of the
community, in the Urhobo case, the journey is from the realm of the living to the dead. The hero
is the intermediary quester who dares the benign forces in erivwin on behalf of the people.
Sometimes they are the gods which arrive and depart seasonally through stages of rites and
performances. This narrative becomes, in the instance of Utuwhen festival at Orhughworun, the
foundation myth of the aesthetic realization of the annual recounting and re-enactment of the
process of death and rebirth as observed in chant below:

Chant I
In *Utuwhen* festival, other heroes besides the gods are the *Udje* performers (males) that combat recalcitrant behaviour in the community through songs, the priestesses who escort the priest out of the symbolic stage of battle and the bridal initiates who have passed from maidenhood to womanhood by undergoing series of rites or rituals. The bridal initiates are heroines because they are meant to portray to the society an ideal in morals and values, which the gods and ancestors endorse. The forbears in *erivwin* function as social police that ‘arrest’ those who breach moral codes, with the weapons of disease and death. It is therefore essential to create quintessential models of those codes supervised by the ancestors. During *Utuwhen* festival, the bridal initiates undergo certain rites which are believed to facilitate ‘contentment’ in matrimony and life. Thus, they are believed to be examples of adherence to the moral codes of the society and therefore heroines, in addition to the gods. So, on the same day, there is the masculine substantial ‘battle of songs’ alongside the ‘return’ of the brides from a heroic ‘isolation’ and symbolic battle against forces that promote moral decadence in the society. The dance and verbal contest and symbolic battle of the brides re-enacts the contest between the forces of good and evil in the people’s cosmology.

**The Heroine in Urhobo Festivals**

Battle is a major motif in virtually all Urhobo festivals. This battle is symbolically represented and dramatized in each festival. The character of the heroine in this battle is paramount to the realization of the dramatic-duel in the festivals, especially that of *Utuwhen* festival. For the initiation of the brides is an essential event from the opening to the close of the festival, without which the *Utuwhen* deity would lack the sacred-mundane link to engage in the symbolic battle between good and evil on behalf of the community during the festival.

It is this crucial chivalric role of the female character in the symbolic ‘battle of the god(s)’ that necessitates the interpretation of the character of the heroine in Urhobo festivals. This reading of the festivals attempts to hail the presence and role of the heroine in Urhobo traditional oral performance(s), just as Mayer and Julek do the heroines in the English society. They attempt a realization of the resurgence of the heroine’s character type, by retelling the unconcluded stories of heroines in their *Women Warriors: Myths and Legends of Heroic Women*, through narrative and
graphic illustrations. What appeals to this study however, is the idea that among the Urhobo, and possibly, other Nigerian cum African cultures, the concept of female heroism is not downplayed; it exists, is recognized and celebrated. The paper’s task therefore is not that of retelling, but of interpretation. The seemingly predominance of heroes in interpretations of most traditional tales, rituals, customs, and cultural aesthetic creations, and the honoring of heroes in modern societies is “essentially the [problem of] interpretation of the evidence” to use the words of Fontenrose (54).

From traditional to modern society, the interpretation of heroism in masculine traits does not preclude the existence of heroines worthy of social and literary celebration. In “The Heroism of Women and Men”, Selwyn W. Becker and Alice H. Eagly present contemporary situations demanding heroic feat from both men and women, such as “the emergency situations in which Carnegie medalists rescued others and the holocaust in which some non-Jews risked their lives to rescue Jews … also … prosocial actions: living kidney donation, volunteering for the Peace Corps, and Volunteering for Doctors of the World” (163). They note that although the Carnegie medalists were disproportionately men, the other actions represented women at least as “equal to and in most cases higher than those of men”. But they do also emphasis the lacuna in societies’ honoring of female heroes. They say, “Contemporary societies maintain the tradition of honoring heroes … One striking feature of the heroes who have achieved public recognition is that they are almost exclusively male.” The notion of the hero as he permeates literature: oral and written, folklore and cultural configurations.

In GraecoMuse’ *Heroism in Ancient Greek Literature*, Lyons’ definition of the heroine as a “heroized female personage or recipient of heroic honours” is equated to the definitions of male heroes, with a note that “yet female heroic figures in literature were rarely seen in the same light”(Pgh. 1). This expresses a possible assumption in classical Greek mythology and or cultural configuration, that the heroine was not a character of “significantly recognized qualities” (Pgh. 2). Something of this notion is articulated in Okpewho’s *Myth in Africa*, when he points to Fontenrose’ invalidation of Frazer’s “King of the woods”, with the argument that “the goddess Diana was served not by a ‘King’ but by a priestess and vestals” (48). Frazer’s *The Golden Bough: A study in Comparative Religion*, actually opens with the Chapter 1: “The King of the woods” in which he recounts the tale of the ‘priest-king’ who must preserve his life and office by constant watchfulness and readiness for battle, day and night. His priesthood and service to Diana lasted only as long as he could protect the office through battle. The “man who murders him, holds the priesthood in his
stead”(9). If the goddess Diana was served by a priestess and vestals, why would Frazer, as Fontenrose points out, present the king as male rather than female? The battle motif is of import here. Primarily because it embodies masculine conceptions of the heroic feat, one which Frazer in his interpretation of the Myth of Nemi, probably could not ascribe to women. In so doing, an archetype of heroism and gender that is created that lingers in our literary psyche.

The masculine model of heroism has its toll on interpretations of Urhobo traditional performances which project males as the dominant characters or traditional performers. An example of a traditional performance in which women are given the tangential role is the Udje dance-song performance among the Urhobo. J.P. Clark in his “Another kind of poetry” declares that the dance Udje, is “Practiced principally by male members of an Urhobo community …” (18). Something of this view is expressed by Tanure Ojaide in his “Deploying Masculinity in African Oral Poetic Performance: The Man in Udje” as he notes that

_Udje_ is a male performance tradition. The composers of the songs (Iroro-ile) and the performers/cantors (ebo-ile) are all men. Women stay at the periphery in Udje dance-song performance (67).

These readings of the Udje dance performance neglect the place of the audience (mostly “the women in the periphery”) in the realization of the entire performance which according to O.R. Dathorne is “a dialogue ... of cultural images existing in the memory of both the artist and the audience” (x-xi). The Udje dance performance is in essence an artistic act and the performers and audience are both agents of its execution.

Unlike Clark and Ojaide, G.G. Darah captures in his Battles of Songs: Udje Tradition of the Urhobo, the complementary place of the male and female characters in Utuwhen festival, that:

The Udje festival … took place on the day of ghiaboghiawo.” Ghiaboghiawo is “the procession of all [bridal] initiates through the streets … on the feast day of Utuwhen deity on whose behalf all communal cultural events in Orhughworun are celebrated. (11)

_Udje_ and ghiaboghiawo are in essence, two of the performance beads strung together in the festival celebrated in honour of Utuwhen deity in Orhughworun, the former performed by men and the latter by women.

The preference of scholarly attention to Udje dance-song performance, to the seemingly failure to notice the ghiaboghiawo performance, which exists in same festival context, and the assigning of peripheral role to the ‘female co-executioners’ of Udje, projects the concept male
heroism within the context of Urhobo culture. This paper is an attempt to project models of female heroism which exist side by side male heroism in Urhobo festivals cum culture. The study uses an archetypal lens with focus on archetypal character(s) in Utuwhen festival. The character type in focus is the hero. The presence of a hero connotes the presence of a villain which sets the tune for combat in the conceptualization of Urhobo festival performances. The focus on the character of the hero in the festival has a feminine tilt, enabling the study look effectively on the female literary figures in the festivals, their qualities and importance in the festival and to the community at large. The method of the paper is comparative, across festivals in Urhobo culture with Utuwhen as it focal point. Occasionally, it compares the heroism of men and women in the festivals. This method is geared at unearthing the concept of female heroism in the cosmology of the Urhobo. The facts which the study seeks to observe to realize the concept of female heroism in Urhobo festival include: incidents in the life of the female hero, the qualities of the female hero (by cultural standards and belief), the representation of heroes in Urhobo communities.

Taking the Utuwhen festival as a whole act of battle, there are three main preparatory events: the evocation of the Utuwhen deity and its appearance in the tangible form of the Ikororo (Night masquerade) and Chechegbe (Masquerade of the day) for a cleansing duel that ostracises evil forces and their ‘fruits’ from the community; the composition of songs for the popular Udje dance, to ridicule and verbally attack societal members who were envisioned as breaches of moral codes and values; the initiation rites of ladies of ‘marriageable’ age into womanhood (performers of the ghiaboghiawo), which is one of the highlights of the festival and awaited by the community with much expectation. The bridal initiates are isolated from the general public and groomed for other rites in the festival. One of such rites is the symbolic sweeping of the shrine at night and clapping event. In this rite the initiates invokes the communal ancestors and their earthly guardian, who then gives them the blessings and permission of the ancestors to use the songs composed specifically for that event. They then clap with special hand fans and march round the community to the Utuwhen shrine. There they sweep the shrine and its environs, spread special mats and lie till dawn. It is important that all the brides wake up alive the next morning. It spells victory for the bride, her family and the community. The event is viewed as a battle between the living and the dead; those brides that died prematurely are believed to envy the living since on account of age, they can not become ancestors and are doomed to roam because in Urhobo cosmology, people become ancestors “if they attained a respectable age and are given proper burial” (Nabofa). It therefore takes
courage for the living brides to engage in battle with the dead in the ‘dark’.

The celebrative part of the festival (main feast) is proclaimed by the crowning of a lead bridal initiate, using coral beads and a feather. All initiates without children are also crowned as a reward for chastity and a deterrent to a lifestyle of immorality and promiscuity before and during marriage. Marriage is envisioned by the Urhobo as a ‘mother’ institution. Therefore, single motherhood is abhorred among the people. A woman who bears children only in wedlock is a heroine. The crowning of the ‘lead Opha/bridal initiate’ provides proper rites of rebirth for the deity to enable him fight for the people and create for them a spiritual rejuvenation. When the king/priest proclaims the festival open by the crowning of a lead heroine, he goes into the shrine unseen by any body at the early hours of the main feast day between 1:00am to 3:00am, representing the deity who has been evoked and has been present in the community in the form of the masquerades. By 5:00am to 6:00am the priestesses of the deity (Ututwen) and warlords (Iletu) converge at the entrance of the shrine to welcome the priest from the ‘battle’. So, the initiates usher him to the battle and the priestess welcome him from the battle. The community joins the priestesses and warlords by 7:00am to 8:00am. As soon as the priest emerges from the shrine alive, the community goes agog. Various performances begin to take place in a planned order. The emergence of the priest is symbolic of the victory of the deity on behalf of the people.

Although the Orhughworun situation and structure may not be strictly typical of all cases of Urhobo festivals, isolation is a major element in the realisation of the hero myth/archetype in most of the festivals. In Erosefe festival at Orogun, the warriors engage in a mock duel in front of the shrine awaiting the priest who battles with the adversaries of the community in the shrine alone and unseen. The warriors return from the shrine triumphant when the priest returns from the shrine. In Ade festival at Ughweru, isolation takes the form of prayers made before and at the end of the main feast by the priest and special chiefs. The Priest leaves for the shrine alone before dawn and is not seen by anyone to wrestle with menacing forces on behalf of the people, prayers to the community’s deity (Oniedjor). Between 7:00am and 8:00am, the special chiefs join him in the shrine to receive the benefits of the war and take them to their respective quarters in the community. This prayer is similar to that in Ohworu festival captured by Perkins Foss in his “Ohworu: A Spectacle for the Spirits”, in which the senior priest returns to the water side [alone] to send more prayers to the spirit at regular intervals ... On [the] sacred day, known as “the day of arrival
"ebiocha), the priest and his executives return to the riverbank ... If the spirit has heard their prayers, ... the cult leaders triumphantly reenter the town, sing praises of the spirit ...” (117)

The aspects of isolation in the festivals are those which Darah refers to when he states that “some of these performance arts are conducted in secluded enclosures or temples ...” (110). In these festivals, the ‘heroes’ are set apart to combat the superhuman villain. This is similar to the pattern of battle in Greek mythology, the Trojan War tale being a case, where the battle is set in array without the Trojan gates and the walls of the Greek War Camp. Peter T Struck notes that “The Trojans ... [avoid] a general engagement and remain ... behind their walls. On the other hand, the Acheans [Greeks] can do nothing against the well fortified and defended town ... The Greeks [then] ... surround their camp with a wall and trench.” (pgh 3, 5) The whole clash was then to be determined by a duel between two warriors on both sides: Paris and Menelaus, outside the walls. This is also in consonance with the contest between the biblical David and Goliath. The heroes return to the city after victory.

In the Urhobo situation, the hero-god represented by the priest or king goes into the shrine situated in most cases at the outskirts or entry of the town to combat the ‘enemies’. He returns only after the victory has been won. The hero myth among the Urhobo is founded on the belief that the spiritual forces (gods and ancestors) in erivwin (the home of the dead and spirits) have the ability to control the Urhobo universe. This control can create for the Urhobo a reality other than that anticipated. The average Urhobo person needs intermediary spiritual forces (the gods and ancestors) to help him challenge the negative forces in his universe and gain control of that universe. In Utuwhen festival, the gods and ancestors cannot perform this task without the role of the bridal initiates and the priestesses. In Erosefe traditional festival, young virgins help administer charms (e kpo) on warriors, to make them immune to machete cuts and other weapons of war wielded during the mock duel. At Ughweru Ade festival, female wrestling takes place at the shrine on the final day of the festival, before the final prayer said by the priest. This is to commemorate the gender of the deity who is pictured as a female; a wrestling goddess or goddess of war. Similarly in Ohworu festival at Evwreni the spirit, according to Foss (116) is considered female. Two of its masks represent female characters: Oyunworia (Ohworu’s most faithful servant) and Inene-ode (mother-of-us-all). Also, the opening song at all preparatory events in the festival, is dedicated to the memory of the fidelity of Ovata (the wife of Omeha) to her husband while on his three-years expeditio
n to Ijo land where he encountered the deity, learnt its ways, songs, dances, music and acquired the charms needed to control the spirit. These females in these festivals depict features of chastity, contentment, leadership, empowerment, fidelity, commitment, nurturing, and protection.

These notions of female heroism among the Urhobo is antithetical to the concept of heroism in which males are the dominant figures in traditional performances. However, most readings of Urhobo traditional performances present circumstances in which males heroic archetypes dominate the performance scene. As stated earlier, the Udje dance—song performance is one such traditional performance. Clark, Ojaide and Darah all agree on the aesthetic and functional appeal of the performance. Except that somewhat, Darah touches on the fact that “the Udje… took place on the day of ghiaboghiawo…”(11). The expression: “the day of ghiaboghiawo” is worthy of note. It points to the import of the ghiaboghiawo performance in the Utuwhen festival. It is a highlight in the festival. Since the brides have been isolated from the public, the community anticipates their return with much eagerness. By this time, members of neighboring communities would have arrived to witness the procession of the brides; the pride of Orhughworun, referred to as “Emete Ugbede” (Ladies of worth). These ladies of worth are so acclaimed for several qualities which they represent: disciple, chastity and contentment. This is captured in the adage:

**Adage I**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urhobo</th>
<th>English</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Ọmọ, Ọmọ ọrọ oni”</td>
<td>A child does not see its mother’s bridal/maiden crown.</td>
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So, a woman who has had a child before her bridal initiation is forbidden from putting on the crown. This crown is woven as an attachment on the hair-do of the brides. Everyone is therefore eager to identify the lead Opha/bride, those with crowns and those without crown. This usually sparks off comments among observers, while mothers admonish their daughters to maintain their chastity.

There are feminine principles that the Urhobo female must exhibit to be a model or heroine in her society. One of such principles as in the cases of the ghiaboghiawo and the young virgin anti-weapon charm maker at Erosefe in Orogun, is that of sexual purity. The combat they engage in is one of morality measured by sexual contentment. Consequently, a lady who bears children outside wedlock or for more than one man is derogatorily referred to as “Igheradja” (prostitute). Stamina is another virtue that heroines must display. In ghiaboghiawo the initiates undergo series of rites which include circumcision. They are expected to display staying-power during the rites.
Those who scale the rites successfully are held in high regards. It is believed that they have imbibed lessons and characters that will enable them weather all storms of life. Courage and competence are two other marks of the heroine. Competence comes with training and learning. During the period of isolation from the community’s eyes, the bridal initiates are tutored on the acts of the ghiaboghiawo parade or procession and other rites. The parade involves specially calculated steps and swinging of the arms. They are to focus on their destination, ignore cheers, comments and applaud, and not look behind. It was an ill omen for an initiate to miss her steps and fall. This competence is expected to be transferred to every activity in her life and society. Courage is depicted by the initiates especially in the clapping event which takes place at night and demanded careful training long before the actual performance.

Masculine heroism on the other hand is depicted by the actions of the deity represented by the masquerades and the king-priest. This hero battles unseen forces, while the heroines consolidate their victory by battling social forces. Other masculine heroes are the Udje dance-song performers, who battle social excesses by satire. The technique in Udje is to lampoon those that breech moral codes, while the modus operandi of ghiaboghiawo is to uphold the acceptable virtues in the community. While each event seem to be performed exclusively by men or women, no event in is mutually exclusive of either gender. For instance, the king-priest cannot represent the deity in the various stages of battle in the festival without the initiation rites of the initiates and the support of priestesses. Conversely, the bridal procession is accomplished by the company able bodied men that escort the brides to protect them from harassment. The crowning of the initiates to open the festival is done by the king-priest. So, gender consciousness seems fluid in the context of the Utuwhen festival.

When the priest enters the shrine unseen in the dark to combat the ‘enemies’ of the community and emerges from shrine victorious, the community goes into celebration. Then the bridal procession takes place. Three days later, the brides undertake a clapping event first in the day then at night. They use adjudju (small hand fans made for the occasion), sing special songs that are composed for and sung only for this event. During the night clapping event, able bodied men are on ground to physically protect the initiates from harm, as well as spiritualists whose job is to protect the initiates from evil spiritual machinations. After this, the initiates marched to the shrine, swept its surrounding and slept on special mats which they carried to the shrine. Between 4:00am and 6:00am, the initiates undergo another rite/event called the Nuwedodo. In this exercise,
four able-bodied men hold a six yards piece of cloth high up and above the head of the bride (Opha) or initiate who stood in the middle. As the songs for this event are sung, both the initiate and the men holding the cloth move in measured steps to the market square and back home without a break. The men are not allowed to lower their hands lest the cloth touch the head of the initiate. Similarly, the initiate maintained her steps to keep away from the cloth. It is a well calculated walk by the initiates and the men. Since it is an abomination for the cloth to touch the initiate and the performance took close to two hours, only men who are confident of their ability volunteered to take part in the exercise. Thus, any man who volunteers for this event is highly acclaimed, respected and considered a hero. So, the male and female genders are not mutually exclusive in the festival. This inter-dependence ripples into other aspects of the society as is captured in the idea that “The Ekpako [aged or ‘mature’ men] Ekokweya [aged or ‘mature’ women] age grades assist in the day-to-day administration of the clan and serve as custodians of the Urhobo culture…” (Kwekudee 9).

Given this scenario, the preference of scholarly attention for the Udje dance-song performance to the seemingly failure to notice the ghiabogiawo, which exist in same festival context, may be ascribed to the fact that the deity of Orhughworun: Utuwhen is considered male just as the Udje performers are male. The Utuwhen deity is considered in the thought and cosmology of the Orhughworun people as a hero who traverse mundane and sacred realms on behalf of the people; negotiate systems and processes of continuity for the community. The deity’s portrait as a hero is conceived along the lines of the hero archetype which according to Wilfred L. Guerin is a transformation and redemptive archetype. Its plot is one of quest realized by the hero that “undertakes some long journey during which he or she must perform impossible tasks, battle with monsters … and overcome insurmountable obstacles in order to save the kingdom” (190). In the case of the Utuwhen deity, its heroism is realized within the context of the Utuwhen festival which cannot be celebrated without the availability of bridal initiates. This highlights in the festival, the notion of ‘she’ as a hero in Guerin’s framework. The ‘she’ concept draws the focus of this paper to the ghiabogiawo performance in the Utuwhen festival, that is a symbolic representation of women as social heroes complementing the male (deity) that engages the ‘enemies’ in the battle front. They therefore have their role in the heroic narrative of the gods, defined by the heroic feat of initiation. As initiates, their heroic narrative is aesthetically structured to portray characters that undergo “series of excruciating ordeals in passing from ignorance and
immaturity to social and spiritual adulthood … becoming … full-fledge member[s] of … [their] social group. The initiation most commonly consist of three distinct phases: (1) separation, (2) transformation, and (3) return” (Guerin 190). They lead the ‘warrior’ in majestic steps through the community. In *Utuwhen festival*, the first two phases are accomplished before the main festival celebration. The return of now mature brides is what is witnessed in the *ghiaboghiawo* procession on the festival day. The full import of *ghiaboghiawo* performance in systematizing the cultural events in *Utuwhen* festival into a holistic aesthetic configuration among the Orhughworun people, and its expression of the concept of female heroism, is best captured in an understanding of the idea of “no-brides-no-festival”, which is a symbolic defeat of the community before the commencement of the battle.

There is a saying among the people which captures the portrayal of heroism as realized in *Utuwhen* festival. That:

**Adage II**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urhobo</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>orọ rue’be rohwo pha se ru emi jiro</em></td>
<td>One who achieves a feat that others cannot achieve should be praised.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The image of the heroine in the festival is etched by this ideal that the female hero must surpass her peers in intellectual and creative abilities, moral uprightness, agility and stamina, and a disposition to preserve and promote the community’s customs and continued existence. This presupposes the existence of rational-cognitive, artistic, moral, ‘bravado’ and sacrificial heroism. Moral heroism lies at the center of the heroines’ character in the other forms of heroism. Walker, Lawrence J. and Frimer, Jeremy A. and Dunlop, William L. work on “Varieties of moral Personalities”. The analysis of the moral exemplars yielded three types: a "communal" cluster was strongly relational and generative, a "deliberative" cluster had sophisticated epistemic and moral reasoning as well as heightened self-development motivation, and an "ordinary" cluster had a more commonplace personality. (907)

Within the context of Urhobo festivals, the relational and generative qualities of the communal type hero and the rational-cognitive, self-development/motivation holds true.

The relational behavior of the communal heroine is a bridge conduct that fosters peace and unity between the realms of the living and the dead, individuals and the community and among families. This bridge is created as bridal initiates are isolated for initiation rituals, which makes fluid the passage between the sacred and mundane spheres of the people’s universe. This quality
connects with the rational-cognitive heroism and sacrificial heroism. The rational-cognitive heroism depicts characters that draw from the people’s collective thought to develop an awareness of need and respond with appropriate action (performance). Action in this context is necessitated by empathy for the community and involves courageous, sometimes risky and self-sacrificing feats. These feats are deliberate efforts on the part of the heroines to terminate spiritual and terrestrial misconduct in the society, with little or no consideration for personal gain.

The notion of self-sacrifice exemplified by the female initiation rites in *Utuwhen* festival is unlike popular ideals of heroic sacrifice where the hero or heroine is not afraid to die. In the context of the festivals, the heroines are pitched against menacing spiritual forces; hence charms are employed consciously to protect them from harm during their performances. It is the idea of a battle between the terrestrial characters and superhuman characters that sets the tone for courage and heroism in the festival performance. Heroism is further measured by the communal benefit of the female initiation rites, as even those that have hurt the initiates in the past would benefit from the good fortune that the rites are meant to procure for the community. This act embodies the virtue of forgiveness and forfeiture of self-aggrandizement. This kind of sacrifice runs from the beginning of the festival till the end, setting the tone for the narration and dramatization of the hero myth in the festival.

It is however not enough for the female heroes in the festival to be relational, rational and self-sacrificing. They must also display the generative marks of heroism. In the Urhobo situation, it alludes to creativity; an ability to generate, regenerate and artistically present same to others. This involves deliberately work on their ideals, skills and artistic prowess in a manner that transform them from ordinary persons to become ‘superhuman’ characters worthy of emulation. This accounts partly for the isolation of the bridal initiates from the beginning of the festival till the time appointed for their ‘return’ to the community. Discipline and self-motivation are crucial to attain the expected status of heroism. Initiates who failed in their art are prone to death, which becomes tragic, because these heroines are not meant to die physical death. They have died symbolically by their isolation from society and have been reborn by their return.

By staying alive to complete the performance of their rites, the bridal initiates conserve and advance the existence of their community. Raoul Grangvist and Nnadozie Inyama sees this as “the aspect of moderation and balance that informs her world … the quest for peace, harmony and joy … [the power and] quality [that] has the potential of improving his lot and that of the society”(iii).
The power of balance wielded by the heroines (bridal initiates) is articulated in the prestigious *Ugolo* dance performance during the festival. The *Ugolo* dance took place on the day of *ghiaboghiawo* performance and performed by elders and ‘mature’ men. They are costumed in costly apparels and jewels to demonstrate their status and greatness in the society. But, some young men surmount the age barrier: those whose wives were initiates. So initiation accords the initiate the heroic stance and power to neutralize age and gender barriers. Gender exclusion is checked by the *eghweya* (association of married women) most of which are initiates. In the community, they act as a check and balance in the administration of the community and socio-cultural domains of the society. The typical initiate-*eghweya* is confident, firm and ‘aggressive’ in the face of obstacles and oppression.

Her confidence stems from the creative genius which she has acquired and nurtured to undergo the initiation rites. She learns and masters the steps and ‘special’ songs of each stage of performance within 21 days, performs with purpose and dexterity, braves the night, sleeps under the open sky at the entrance of the shrine, and demonstrates the art of ‘sweeping’ (which is symbolic of warding off evil) alone. The initiation and performance process therefore takes young ladies into isolation and return to the community courageous, self-confident and ‘independent’ women ready to conserve the culture and existence of the community.

**Conclusion**

It is observed that the festival as a form of oral cultural creation among the Urhobo does not convey the popular notion of male-centered performance as depicted in most readings of Urhobo folklore. Women play key roles (as ‘performing’ audience) in the realization of seemingly male dominated performances such as the *Udje* dance performance. Also, gender is not conceived of in rigidly separate terms among the Urhobo. Virtually all traditional festivals in Urhobo communities intertwine the masculine and feminine principles in the realization of the symbolic quest and war enacted in the festival; the quest for renewal, harmony and continued existence. What is more, the Urhobo worldview thrives on balance between the spheres of the living (*akpor*) and the living-dead (ancestors), gods and nature spirits (*erivwin*), individuals and the community and the sexes. Each pair thus convey existence by inter-dependence though they seem polar. Furthermore, the behavioural expectations for male heroes are not exactly the same for female heroes. The expected qualities that a female possesses need to be acclaimed as super-ordinary, as they project heroic types along the lines of rational/cognitive ability, artistic command, moral excellence, bravery and
sacrifice. Lastly, the death and rebirth of heroic characters in Urhobo festivals are symbolic and not earthly. Physical death of heroes or heroines during performance is actually tragic. Meanwhile, the festivals are aesthetically tailored towards a non-tragic end. Death, deviance from good moral codes, illness, poverty and defeat are tragic occurrences among the Urhobo. They are caused by ominous spirits that must be checkmated by a combined force of gods, ancestors and heroic characters made active in festival context. The study recommends that a book of essays on Urhobo women’s oral literature or women in Urhobo folklore be promoted in line with the endeavour of Raoul Grangvist and Nnadozie Inyama on Igbo oral tradition in their edited book of essays: *Power and Powerlessness of Women in West African Orality*, as well as Oyeronke Olademo’s work: *Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions*.

**Appendix (Pictorial Representation of Aspects of Utuwhen Festival)**

Young men admitted to *Ugolo* Dance (Left) *Ekpako* performing *Ugolo* dance with young men behind (Right). Women dance along by the side.

Priestesses (first, second in the middle) with *Ugolo* performers and community members in celebrative mood (Early hours after ‘return’ of the priest-king from the shrine)
Epha (Bridal initiates) performing ghiaoghiawo with men holding hands to make a wall of protection around her (Left), after performance of the clapping event and Nuwedodo (Right). Men holding the 6-yards piece of cloth not captured.

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