A Thematic Study of the Lullaby amongst the Ịjọ of Nigeria[xxxii]

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Abstract

Since Brakeley's definition of the lullaby in the middle of the 20th century, scholars have studied the lullaby to see whether Brakeley's view of it applies universally. That has contributed to a commendable body of literature on lullaby. However, scholars in the disciplines of folklore, oral literature, culture and anthropology have not given attention to the lullaby amongst the Ijo of the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. Therefore, this paper explores the world of the lullaby in Ịjọland to see how it compares with the phenomenon in other places as well as the apparent themes expressed in it. The paper points out that the Ịjọ have a thriving lullabic culture due to the industriousness of Ịjọ women. It argues that the lullaby in Ịjọland is used chiefly to play with a baby. The paper, in addition, asserts that the lullaby is both functional and non-functional. It concludes by pointing out that goading, protest, hope and fear are some of the apparent themes expressed in the lullaby. The data for the research were collected through unstructured interviews and non-participant observations in Ogboin, Kokokuma, Gbarain and Biseni clans and the performances were audio-recorded using a tablet and a cell phone, without using the visual aspects.

Keywords: *Lullaby, oral literature, Ijoland, babies, lullabic themes,*

1.Introduction

That the lullaby is a universal "manifestation of the human spirit," to borrow the words of the notable American folklorist, Thompson Stith, has now become a cliché **(**171**)**. However, since Brakeley's conception of the lullaby as "a type of song sung by mothers and nurses the world over to coax their babies to sleep," different commentators have come out to say whether Brakeley's definition truly reflects the situation all over the earth (qtd. Masuyama 144). For example, contrary to the view of Brakeley, Metzger has argued that in Yiddish culture, the lullaby is "much more than a means of lulling the baby to sleep" (253). Finnegan too has pointed out that, in Africa, some lullabies "seem to represent more the mother's delight in playing with her child than the desire to soothe it" (293). Moreover, Masuyama argues that Brakeley's "definition does not explain the whole situation" in Japan (144). Contrary to the statements of these commentators, and in affirmation of Brakeley's position, Mackinlay, in her study of the lullaby amongst the Aboriginal Yanyuwa people of Australia, avers that "the lullaby is a type of song sung the world over to calm a crying child and gently lull babies into

the arms of sleep" (97). Moreover, Spitz, in his article on East Slavic lullabies, has observed that a lullaby "is ostensibly designed to force the wakeful child to sleep" (20). Similar comments have been made by Ebeogu of the lullaby in Igboland (99-100; see also Hawes 141 of the lullaby in the US). Therefore, in what follows, I shall explore how the lullaby in Ịjọland compares with the views of these scholars.

2. The Lullaby in Ịjọland

In Ịjọland, the lullaby refers to *kalaọwọụ duma* (children's song). It is used to play with, soothe a crying baby and lull it to sleep. However, the lullaby is more often used to play with a baby. In different terms, amongst the Ịjọ, the lullaby is chiefly used to play with the baby. To date, the Ịjọ have a thriving lullabic culture, especially in the rural areas. This positive phenomenon bears on the hardworking nature of Ịjọ women. Let me make this connection clearer. Ịjọ women are farmers. There is no farm work that a woman does not do in Ịjọland. Fishing? She fishes much more than the husband. She goes into different kinds of fishing. One can recall Clark's observation in the introduction to*The Ozidi Saga* that "in the large polygamous family run by every successful man, it is the mother who is for all practical purposes a child's mainstay" (xxxiv). Moreover, the Ịjọ woman does the chores in the house. This is one of the reasons why most children revere their mothers more than their fathers in Ịjọland. For when you see your mother doing all this, having no time for herself, you only feel pity for her. She goes fishing and farming both rain and sun. In all this, she hardly leaves her child at home to be looked after by others.

There are few reasons for this. Firstly, the man she calls her husband cannot properly look after the baby. Secondly, the belief in witchcraft is very strong amongst the people. In fact, the belief in witchcraft, as in the Yoruba of south western Nigeria, "extends from the illiterate up to the most educated and elite members of society" (Okonofua et al 211). What if a witch comes and lures your two little children into "eating witchcraft," as they say in Ịjọ? Furthermore, despite your frequent warnings, the older child will go to the river and swim on the pretext of going to wash plates and she sits her younger sibling who has not known how to walk very well somewhere close to the waterfront; not minding when the waves of a passing speedboat will sweep the baby onto the river. As such, when you are walking on the road to your farm, you see a mother weeding the grasses in her yam or cassava farm while someone else is singing lullabies to the child under a shade. It could be the baby's brother, sister or a babysitter.

When an Ịjọ woman has got a baby, she looks around at her extended family and the husband's to see if there is a little girl who she can take to her house to care for the baby when she would be carrying out an activity, if she has no child who can serve that purpose. The little girl who serves this purpose is *tọbọụdẹịaraụ* (literally, the girl who cares for a baby). For

example, a mother is pounding fufu – fermented and processed cassava the Ịjọ use in eating the different kinds of soup they cook - and you see the woman battling to remove the hands of her crying or smiling baby from the mortar. If she leaves the *fufu* and gives attention to the child, the *fufu* will get bad. If she is indifferent to the cries of the baby, she will pound the baby's fingers. The baby might also get sick from the cries. Or she is frying *garri* (ground and dried cassava that is made in hot water like maize flour which is used to eat soup). Any little mistake, the child falls into the big frying pan and gets burnt. She needs a little girl in situations like these.

Ịjọ women sing lullabies to their babies. They are not like their Ngoni counterparts "who assume the role of aristocrats and had a number of attendant women who did all their work for them" and spared no time in singing lullabies for their children (Read 207-208). Mothers play with their babies any time they have no activity at hand. Is it after breastfeeding a child or when the mother, trying to make the baby learn how to walk, make her child toddle to where she is? It should also be noted that it is not only a mother and a babysitter that sing lullabies to a baby. Lullabies are sung by the baby's siblings and an outsider (somebody outside the immediate family circle) as Ebeogu has rightly shown in his study of the lullaby in Igbo society (104). In this case, the lullaby in Ịjọland is different from the phenomenon amongst the Yanyuwa where the reader is told that "the task of singing lullabies is largely handed over to experienced and mature singers" (Mackinlay 102). It must also be pointed out that the Ịjọ do not have a set of lullabies in their lullabic oeuvre that only babysitters sing as in the case of the Ibibio of Nigeria's Niger Delta region (Iwoketok 153). Moreover, the situation in Ịjọ is different from Albania where, as Doja observes, "lullabies are only sung to the child once he has begun to walk, understand the words, and may even be able to sing themselves." (133). The Ịjọ sing lullabies to their infants before even they start smiling. To the Ịjọ, as in Hopi culture, "lullabies are the child's introduction to language, literature and life" (Sands and Sekaquaptewa195).

I have already pointed out that in Ịjọland, the lullaby is primarily used to play with the baby. This is true of even lullabies in which the lyrics apparently show a lulling or soothing function as in the two below:

1.

Indou da pẹlẹ o	Suck and stop crying
Yengi indou ebi fịyaị o	Mother's breastmilk is good food
Tọbọụ mịẹ dụbamọmị	It makes a baby grow
Tọbọụ mịẹ ebimọmị	It makes a baby fine
Indou da pẹlẹ o	Suck and stop crying
Yengi indou ebi fịyaị o	Mother's breastmilk is good food

2.

Ayapịtị-o, ayapịtị-o, ayapịtị-o	O newborn, o newborn, o newborn
Sisei youkụmọ-o	Please stop crying
I yengi boda buru akị	Take yam when your mother comes back
I daụ boda ofoni akị	Take a fowl when your father comes back
Kokorokoo	*Kokorokoo*
Ayapịtị-o, ayapịtị-o, ayapịtị-o	O newborn, o newborn, o newborn
Sisei youkụmọ-oo	Please stop crying

These two are amongst the lullabies I sing to my daughter on a regular basis to play with her. "*Kokorokoo*" in the song is an onomatopoeic word that describes the sound a fowl makes when it crows.

2.1. Manifest Themes in the Ịjọ Lullaby

In spite of the argument that the primary function of the lullaby amongst the Ịjọ is to play with the baby, the lullaby still expresses some themes, for example, protest or the motif of the suffering babysitter as in the following:

Tuu tu	*Tuu, tu*
Tuu tu	*Tuu, tu*
Kala bẹlẹ tụọ kpọ ye ị pịrị fụgha	You cooked a small pot, I wasn't given to eat
Opu bẹlẹ tụọ kpọ ye ịpịrị fụgha	You cooked a big pot, I wasn't given to eat
Tọbọụdẹịaraụ youyemo	Nanny is crying
Mama bo	Come, mother
Mama bo	Come, mother

It is apparent that this lullaby, even though sung to the baby, is about the plight of the nursemaid. The reader could conclude that it is a subtle criticism on the baby's mother. Amongst the Ịjọ too, some babysitters suffer in their new homes. Some are not given food to eat for any perceived slight indiscretion. On occasion, one sees a babysitter crying and singing this song as she cares for the crying baby whose mother is not in sight. This mirrors the situation in Yiddish culture where Metzger notes that lullabies "contain… the trepidations and fears, and sometimes the hopelessness and despair" of those who sing them" (253). Bansisa, too, has long noted this about the Bunyoro of western Uganda (110). Even in Igboland, according to Ebeogu, "the lullaby becomes a subconscious avenue for venting her [the babysitter] protest against a system that oppresses her [the babysitter]" (110).

However, in Ịjọland, the above lullaby can be sung by anyone to the baby. It could be the baby's older sibling, the mother or a happy babysitter who is trying to elicit warm smiles from the baby with the song. It is never intended as an insult. This is what makes the lullabic culture in Ịjọ very ironic. This phenomenon is not exclusive to the Ịjọ. Some of the lullabies of the Gurage people of Ethiopia collected by Leslau have this characteristic as well (280). Here is another lullaby in which the reader might argue that it is on the plight of the babysitter:

Aboy yo	Oh, boy!
Tịbị kokolo	With a big head
Àrị ma daụ fabia	Is it because I don't have a father?
Àrị ma yengi fabia	Is it because I don't have a mother?
Umbu gboru, gboru	With a big, big navel
Wosaa	*Wosaa*

Seemingly, this song is much more of the singer than the baby that is sung to. However, as noted earlier, it is the nature of the Ịjọ lullaby. The little nursemaid or the mother is just playing with the baby. The onomatopoeic word, "*wosaa,*" in the context of the song describes how big the baby's navel is but it is does not mean that the baby really has a big navel.

Another theme in Ịjọ lullabies also involves goading. The Ịjọ, as earlier mentioned, are a polygamous ethnic group. It is not unusual for a man to have up to seven wives, sometimes in the same compound. Barrenness too is a common and major issue amongst the people. Therefore, it is only natural that lullabies of goading exist. A mother may want to sing a lullaby to her baby that will make her barren co-wife jealous:

Tọbọụ nana kịmị tọbọụ ye fịmo	The one who has a child eats what belongs to one's child
Araụ paki dọọnmị	How come she is jealous!

A woman who sings this lullaby to goad her co-wife must have a grown-up child who has been taking proper care of her by buying her such things as bags of rice and pieces of wrap. Oftentimes, such a child lives in an urban area while the mum lives in the rural area.Here is another example of such a lullaby:

Inè a-boị-o	It's my son
Inè a-boị iné a-boịgha	My son is not your son
Inè a-boị-o	It's my son
Inè a-boị iné a-boịgha	My son is not your son
Inè a-boị-o	It's my son

A further theme expressed in lullabies is hope. This view is also true of the situation amongst the Ịjọ as demonstrated by the following:

Ayapịtị-o, indou, indou, indou	Suck, suck and suck, o newborn
Ayapịtị-o, indou	Suck, o newborn
Deinbaị laya, ayapịtị bo opu kịmị 'pa	Tomorrow, newborn will become a big man,
opu warị kọrị, opu akolo kọrịmọ	build a big house and walk with a big staff

In this song, the mother hopes that the child will grow to become a great man in life. The mother's aspirations for the baby do not end there. She hopes that the baby will live on to old age. This is in consonance with the argument of Macfie and Macfie that "lullabies express the feelings of the mother, in particular her feelings of hope, fear, love" (196; see also Honig 33).Moreover, Ịjọ lullabies reflect the fear of the mother as illustrated by the following:

Sịẹn da boo	×2	Sleep and wake
Kala tọbọụ famụngi kịmị bo àrị kị famụ	×2	The one who wants to beat a child should come and beat me instead
Sịẹn da bo o, oo o	×2	Sleep and wake

The fear the mother expresses in this lullaby is hinged on the reality in Ịjọland where, in some instances, a baby fails to wake up from its sleep; that is, the baby dies in its sleep. Also, the lullaby in Ịjọland, as in Hopi culture, sometimes bear on the things they value in life. Sands and Sekaquaptewa argue in their study which was earlier referred to that Hopi lullabies "bear a direct relationship to social norms and cultural beliefs" (195). Here is one of such lullabies in the Ịjọland:

Bei ọkpọ ị nana ye nana ye		Whatever thing I have in this world
Tọbọụ kị ebidẹịn ye		A child is the best thing
Tọbọụ ịmbẹlẹ mị	x3	Oh! A child is sweet
Tọbọụ ịmbẹlẹ na sịlị dẹịn		A child is sweeter than money

Tọbọụ ịmbẹlẹ mị	Oh! A child is sweet
Tọbọụ ịmbẹlẹ na kị sịlị dẹịn	A child is sweeter than money
Tọbọụ ịmbẹlẹ mị	Oh! A child is sweet
Tọbọụ ịmbẹlẹ nakị sịlị dẹịn	A child is sweeter than money
Aan tọbọụ ịmbẹlẹ mị	Yes, a child is sweet

This lullaby foregrounds what the Ịjọ value the most in life: children. This special importance they place on children is reflected in their oral narratives, oral drama and other poetic forms. They expect everyone to have children, and many for that matter; not just one. As such, if a woman is barren, she is treated in a very unfair manner. They do not even want to hear that someone decides to be childless because of matters relating to religion. As the song shows, they value children more than even money. Today, unfortunately, globalisation and modern politics have affected the way some persons view money. Some people are ready to harm their fellow Ịjọ brothers and sisters for money. In fact, there is a narrative in Bayelsa State, an oil-rich state owned by the Ịjọ in Nigeria's Niger Delta region, that the state will continue to be underdeveloped despite the huge federal allocation accruing to it each month until the politicians in the state cleanse themselves of the blood in their hands and other evil deeds they carried out because of their pursuit of money. This narrative is hinged on the fact that, traditionally, the Ịjọ never killed a man because of money since they did not value it the way it is valued today.

3. Conclusions

The lullaby is still a thriving poetic art amongst the Ịjọ that is used chiefly to play with the baby. The industriousness of mothers in Ịjọland accounts for this positive phenomenon. The lullaby is both functional and nonfunctional. It is functional when the intent is to lull a baby to sleep or to make the baby stop crying and start smiling in order to give the mother ample time to continue with what she is doing. It is also functional when the intent is to make the child learn how to walk. It is non-functional when a mother sings it to her baby with no intent other than just to play with the child of her womb. Some of the apparent themes expressed in the lullabies are the motif of the suffering babysitter, fear, goading and hope. However, it should be noted that anybody can sing any lullaby no matter the kind of theme expressed in it.

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