

## Orality, Ibibio Cultural Epistemology and Aesthetics of Exploring Sociopolitical Imaginaries in Selected Songs of Prophet Ubokudom

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### Abstract

Traditional music and songs are the soul and spirit of indigenous African societies, expressing historical memories and the indigenous value system of a people. Extant studies on Ibibio traditional songs most often examine women and satirical songs as tools for gender and social critique. However, almost no study exists on the songs of Ubokudom, especially the representation of Ibibio philosophy and the aesthetics of religious and sociopolitical commentaries in his songs. Therefore, this study investigates Ibibio cultural epistemology and examines the aesthetics of exploring religious and sociopolitical imaginaries in three songs of Ubokudom. Bronislaw Malinowski's functionalism is the theoretical framework deployed, while qualitative research design is used. Three songs were purposively selected because of their relevant leitmotif, and were afterwards subjected to literary analysis. The work reveals that the songs offer critical perspectives on indigenous Ibibio philosophies and values system, the core of Ibibio epistemology and cosmology. Also, the philosophical underpinnings in the songs are fundamental for shaping people's behaviour, thereby fulfilling their functional expectations as oral art forms, just as oral literature elsewhere in Africa. Through themes, *akata* tradition and repetitions as major discursive and aesthetic devices, the songs offer a critical lens through which societal ills can be seen. Similarly, they reflect the pervasive maladministration, corruption and religious hypocrisy in Nigeria, while holding corrupt regimes responsible for abject poverty amongst the citizenry. Hence, the study concludes that Ibibio traditional songs offer the medium for sustaining indigenous Ibibio cultural epistemology, and evaluate human life to return humanity to the path of morality, unity and progress.

**Keywords:** *Orality, Ibibio, Traditional Songs, Aesthetics, Epistemology, Functionalism*

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## **Introduction**

Traditional music and songs significantly influence the politics of indigenous knowledge production, and efficiently facilitate the propagation and policing of cultural epistemology in indigenous societies like the Ibibio society. Traditional societies are founded on indigenous epistemologies that are often transferred orally from one generation to another (M. C. Onyejekwe and E.S.Ikeokwu, 2013, p.66). Indigenous epistemology serves as an instrument for regulating the desired behaviour and cultural practices of a people; therefore, oral performance or orality becomes the conduit for enshrining indigenous values in every traditional society. Cultural values, norms, gnomic sayings, traditional philosophy, observances and cosmology constitute the epistemological foundation of African societies. It is worthy to state that Ibibio indigenous philosophy, gnomic sayings and traditional values, amongst other things, constitute Ibibio cultural epistemology, often driven by orality.

Walter Ong (1982) defines orality as a communication of any sort which is done with the voice and not written (p.11). For the scholar, orality means the use of spoken language, vocal performance and acoustic elements in communication, with specific emphasis on oral-aural tradition. Consequently, oral literature, to the scholar, does not necessarily mean the literature of the primitive age, but any form of literature of the locals performed verbally. This implies that oral literature encompasses oral arts like folktale, epic, legends, riddles, proverbs, and songs, amongst others. Beyond this, the Ong's distinction between primary and secondary orality offers insights into the preservation and dissemination of oral literature via various literate media. This form is what he describes as secondary orality; that is oral literature in the literate tradition. Paula McDowell (2012, p.172) sees orality '... as the quality of being oral or orally communicated; preference for or tendency to use spoken forms of language'. This definition indicates that orality is anything orally rendered, be it songs, tales, folklores, chants, rituals or speeches. According to Mark Ighile (2021, p. 49), orality is a practice, an experience and an event that is participatory. He argues that not all oral acts can pass for oral literature.

Consequently, oral literary performances such as songs, proverbs, dance and traditional music are the indigenous African and, indeed, Ibibio traditional 'technologies' for the

transmission of the cultural epistemology or the indigenous knowledge and values system from one generation to another. This is in synch with the anthropological perspective on orality, which often conceives it in light of its influence on the identity, culture and norms of a people or society, emphasising how orality helps to shape society. It equally explicates the nuanced understanding of how cultural knowledge is transmitted from one generation of people to another (Ruth Finnegan, 2012 [1970]). Accordingly, Jan Vassina (1965, page/range) states that communication in the primitive age was oral, and so were the forms of literature, such as folktales, rituals, myths and legends, amongst others. This foregrounds the vital role of oral performances like songs in upholding the traditional value system and cultural epistemology of a people.

Furthermore, orality in this paper alludes to the oral literary performances like the songs of Prophet Ubokudom and his Akata Cultural Troupe. It bears no connotative interpretation for the communication in primitive or non-literate societies. In this sense, oral literature and the songs of Ubokudom are inevitably part of Ibibio oral literature. Uche Nnyagu (2017, p.1149) buttresses this when he states that oral literature '... may include ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, musical genres, folk tales, creation tales, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters, word games, recitations. . .' All these belong to different generic oral forms and have underlying relationships. Oral literature could be narrative (like legends and myths), poetry (like riddles and cultural songs) or drama. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that unlike the sub-genres of written literature, the distinction amongst the generic forms of oral literature is most often blurry, particularly the difference between drama and the remaining genres. Finnegan (2012 [1970]), John Afolabi (2004) and Oluwatoyin Jegede (2023) recognise poetry, prose and drama as generic forms of oral literature. However, Afolabi (2004) and Jegede (2023) specifically point out that there is no oral art form that does not contain performance (drama) and that there are overlaps amongst the various genres. For instance, there are performative acts in rendering of chants, songs and poetry through gestures and demonstrations. According to Afolabi (2004, p.21), '... the generic forms in oral literature are performance-oriented. The forms flow into one another in a manner that almost obliterates the generic boundaries in some performances.' Therefore, the taxonomy of oral literature could be very problematic when considering African oral literature as performance-based. The challenge notwithstanding, the characteristics of the generic forms are decipherable in African oral literature and

indeed, Ibibio oral art forms.

Oral literatures serves as a cultural or historical memory of a people. It is significant in upholding the indigenous value system of society and transferring the culture and tradition of a people from one generation to another. This is corroborated by Alessandro Portelli (1991), who asserts that oral literature enhances the preservation of the culture and tradition of a people. Moreover, Bruce Rosenberg (1987) observes that even in literate societies, the passing of instruction to younger ones is done face-to-face. Invariably, the customs and traditions of the people are preserved and taught to subsequent generations orally or through oral literature. This underscores the critical role of oral literature in the preservation of indigenous philosophy and value systems. Afolabi (2004) argues that it is disheartening that most societies abandon their oral art forms at the advent of technologies, stressing that oral literature offers the most efficient means of expressing man's innate, intellectual and spiritual experiences. Thus, cultural epistemology is expressed or taught through oral performances. Mark Turin (2013, p.174) corroborates this by stating that 'For societies in which traditions are conveyed more through speech than through writing, oral literature is often an important medium for the transmission of ideas, knowledge, and history. 'Thus, oral performances like the songs of Ubokudom not only preserve Ibibio indigenous tradition and culture but also express the ethics, indigenous epistemology and core values that define the Ibibio people.

### **Ibibio and Cultural Epistemology**

The Ibibio people are amongst the oldest indigenous people in Nigeria, and they possess a rich cultural and linguistic heritage predominantly found in the present-day Akwa Ibom State, South-South Nigeria. Rebecca Usoro (2018) opines that Ibibio is an omnibus word which refers to both ethnic and linguistic identities of the people (p. 198). The language of the Ibibio people is Ibibio, and it is spoken and understood by speakers of other languages like Oro, Eki and Efik. Jackson Etuk (2021, p.15) states that the Ibibio language is genetically traced to "... the Benue-Congo sub-family which equally belongs to the Niger-Congo family considered one of the largest language families in Africa". It is mutually intelligible to the Annang language, and it is often regarded as the language with the fourth largest population of speakers in Nigeria after Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (Usoro, 2018;

Mensah, *et al.*, 2024). The Ibibio people are found in all parts of the state, but they populate nineteen of the thirty-one Local Government Areas in Akwa Ibom State (Mensah *et al.*, 2024). According to Usoro (2018), Ibibio is spoken in over 1,181 communities in Akwa Ibom State, and given in widespread use of the language in 19 of the 31 Local Government Areas of the state, Ibibio is the major language in Akwa Ibom.

Contrary to Doris Ofili and Aniekere Inyang's (2024, p. 126) claim that Ibibio people occupy only the eastern region of the state, the Ibibios are in all three senatorial districts in Akwa Ibom: Uyo Senatorial District (Akwa Ibom North-East), Ikot Ekpene Senatorial District (Akwa Ibom North-West) and Eket Senatorial District (Akwa Ibom South). By virtue of their population, the Ibibios are the dominant ethnic nationality in Akwa Ibom state. It thus makes sense when Etuk (2021: p. 14) describes 'Ibibio' as the ancestral name for the indigenous people of Akwa Ibom State. The Ibibio language is also spoken in parts of Cross River, Abia and Rivers States. Usoro (2018) notes that Ibibio is the major language in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

A people with vibrant culture and tradition, Ibibio is rich with folklore evinced in folksongs, rituals, masquerades and delicious traditional cuisines (Eyo Mensah *et al.*, 2024). The Ibibio people are also known for their oral storytelling tradition, and oral poetry like *utó*, a kind of praise poetry that can also serve as a vehicle for sociopolitical critique of society. Others include the ritualised and deritualised masquerade performances like *ekoong* and *akata*. In many communities in Ibibio, there still exist the ritualised *ekoong* masquerade performances, often serving security measures. *Akata* usually serves as the watchdog of social behaviour and preservation of communal values in traditional Ibibio communities. Therefore, it renders satirical songs, sometimes calling out people who committed crimes in secret. Such crimes could be stealing, encroaching on someone's land, oppressing the poor and the less privileged or having a premarital or extramarital sexual affair, amongst others.

Moreover, Ibibio cultural epistemology encapsulates all the traditional or cultural knowledge, value system and cosmology of the Ibibio people. Kirui Kipyegon *et al.* (2025, pp.14-15) argue that African epistemology entails the traditional knowledge of the African people, although there are divergences based on cultures. The scholars note that in the African epistemic system, reality is the intersection of individuals, the spiritual and the

material. This gives insights into Ibibio epistemology, wherein the actions and the welfare of humans are believed to be directly shaped by and linked to the supernatural. For the Ibibio, the supernatural is the Supreme Being (God). Accordingly, Etuk (2021) avers that Ibibio cultural values are usually based on the moral philosophy, communal and cultural principles of the people. For him, the indigenous Ibibio people derive their cultural epistemology and value system from the Supreme Being. That is, Abasi Ibom or Akwa Abasi Ibom (the Almighty God), whose dictates and principles must be abided by. Amongst the Ibibio people, family, communal unity, justice, peace, respect for elders, reverence for God and sanctity of human life are some of the most important values upheld by members of Ibibio society (Etuk, 2021). Unity, solidarity and justice are always predicated on the gnomic sayings and proverbs like “*Mkpoama’ anamanyin anaminwo*”. This could be translated thus: 'When something happens to the eyes, it also happens to nose; meaning that what affects one person in Ibibio land affects all. Another one is '*Obong isibongog ikpong*.' This could be translated as 'A lord does not shout alone', meaning that a leader does not lead without the support of others. The next is '*Akan owo ikanna Abasi*', translated in English as 'He who conquers or oppresses man does not conquer God.' These proverbs collectively express Ibibio indigenous philosophy, reflecting themes of unity, cooperation, solidarity, sovereignty and justice.

The indigenous Ibibio people value human relationships and family ties so much that in-laws and grandchildren are very dear to Ibibio communities. In the traditional Ibibio society, visitors, in-laws and grandchildren are regarded as special people. Therefore, it is a taboo to harm any of these people. In fact, fighting and spilling the blood of these people is believed to be a curse on the concerned person. Although colonisation, migration and civilisation have greatly influenced some of these taboos, they are still in vogue in most Ibibio communities. They are core values that constitute the Ibibio indigenous epistemology or Ibibio indigenous philosophy. This underscores the peaceful disposition and hospitality of the Ibibio people. These cultural beliefs and values reflect the cosmology and worldview of the Ibibio people, which are transferred orally to younger generations through songs, proverbs and folktales. Therefore, the critical role of orality in the production and transmission of cultural knowledge or value systems cannot be overemphasised. Mensah et al. (2024) argue that the Ibibio cosmology and societal values are transmitted through various forms of oral scripts and performances. From the socio-onomastic perspective on

Ibibio, they state that naming provides a vehicle for the expression and transfer of the Ibibio values, strengthening unity, sense of belonging and community solidarity. Therefore, Ibibio traditional songs serve as a conduit for the propagation of the Ibibio worldview on religion, culture, peace, security, economic development and sociopolitical affairs of the Ibibio people and humanity at large.

### **Relevant Scholarship on Traditional Music/Songs and Literary Criticism**

Usoro and Udoette (2014) argue that songs in African societies are an integral part of human existence, emphasising that songs express the innermost feelings of man, such as joy, sorrow or sadness. Ibibio traditional songs encompass the worldview of the people and express the essence of human life, amongst other things, which are found in the people's indigenous knowledge. According to Ofili and Inyang (2024), traditional or indigenous music usually contains the cultural and collective philosophies of a people. They aver that Ibibio indigenous music is associated with the Ibibio language speakers, and that it evinces the shared cultural values of the people, while at the same time functioning as a corrective tool in Ibibio land. Their assertion points to the functionalist role of Ibibio traditional music, highlighting the sociopolitical role of traditional music in Ibibio society. The scholars opine that Ibibio indigenous songs and music have been with the people from pristine time. This is not surprising because cultural songs are an integral part of the Ibibio people. Therefore, ceremonies and other important events in Ibibio land are embellished with traditional songs and cultural performances. In modern-day Ibibio society, traditional songs and cultural performances are common in marriage ceremonies, coronation ceremonies, as well as important government programmes and events like inaugural ceremonies.

Similarly, Afolabi (2004) and Onyejekwe and Ikeokwu (2013) argue that oral art forms in Africa serve as instruments of social reformation. Therefore, traditional songs like those of Ubokudom could be used for reconstructing the corrupt fabric of human society, while also entertaining traditional society. According to Umanah (2021), indigenous music or songs focus on the experiences of the immediate environment. Since such songs are specifically stylised for the consumption by members of the traditional society, they are steeped in the indigenous epistemology of the people. Consequently, Ubokudom's songs are laced with Ibibio cultural values meant to correct social anomie and reconstruct the Ibibio



sociopolitical landscape.

Furthermore, extant scholarship on indigenous music and songs focuses on other songs, while Ibibio traditional songs by Ubokudom have received little or no attention in literary scholarship. Usoro and Udoette (2014) investigate the social relevance of the indigenous music of the Annang people by exploring how the performance by Uko Akpan Cultural Troupe authenticates it. Their work particularly concentrated on selected performances by Uko Akpan on events such as traditional marriage, funeral, title taking and annual festivals. They explore how the performance by Uko Akpan serves as the oil that lubricates social fabrics, while the songs and instruments transmit special meanings that resonate with the performance environment. Their study mainly focuses on the authentication of performance by Uko Akpan within the praxis of oral forms, without specific attention to how the performances scrutinise religious and sociopolitical imaginaries. This is what this paper is set out to critique in the selected songs of Ubokudom and his Akata Cultural Troupe.

Usoro (2018) examines the representation of womanhood in *Ikwọ Ibaan* Ibibio amongst the Offot people of Akwa Ibom state. She notes that songs express feelings amongst the Ibibios of South-South Nigeria, highlighting how social media has also facilitated the transmission of culture. Using ten songs collected from important women sociocultural groups in Offot Clan, Uyo, the scholar asserts that Ibibio women continue to navigate their ways through patriarchal obstructions in the Ibibio land. Through cultural groups, they express their opinion while negotiating their place in the sociopolitical space. What is very interesting in this work is that *Ikwọ Ibaan* Ibibio, as the researcher concludes, influences the behaviour of women regarding womanhood and strategies for survival. However, the study does not examine how Ibibio cultural epistemology is reflected in the songs, and how they are used as tools of sociopolitical critique.

Inyabri *et al.* (2022) examine how Ibibio women utilise satirical songs to challenge or conform to ontological gender ideologies and stereotypes. As ethnographic research, the researchers used interviews, participant observations and selected fifteen songs to analyse gender dynamics and ideologies expressed. The scholars argue that Ibibio satirical songs offer the womenfolk the creative and cultural agency to confront patriarchal oppression. They assert that Ibibio satirical songs provide a medium through which marginalised



women speak up and deploy agency to contest all forms of patriarchal oppression. These songs, they argue, constitute a critical site for the expansion of feminist activism in Ibibio culture. However, the work by Inyabri *et al.* (2022) specifically concentrates on the use of satirical Ibibio women's songs as a medium of gender and feminist activism. Although gender oppression is a social issue in every society, the study is limited to the kind of Ibibio cultural songs used and the scope of the study: gender and feminism. Therefore, this work seeks to examine the representation of Ibibio cultural epistemology in traditional songs like those of Ubokudom, as well as how these songs serve as a tool for sociopolitical and religious reconstruction.

Additionally, Ofili and Inyang's (2024) study on Ibibio cultural music focuses on the integration of Ibibio music in the teaching-learning process in secondary schools in Akwa Ibom state, with a view to ascertaining the number of Ibibio songs used in teaching, and how Ibibio indigenous music facilitates teaching and learning. They argue that Western education has been a great impediment to the advancement of Ibibio cultural education. While their work does not elaborate on how Ibibio music is used in teaching in the selected secondary schools, their findings and conclusions point to the utilitarian role of Ibibio indigenous music. For instance, the researchers conclude that Ibibio indigenous music enhances the teaching of moral value, the propagation of indigenous cultural values and the Ibibio worldview. Nevertheless, the representation of Ibibio philosophy and how the selected songs by the women's cultural group critique social anomalies are left unexplored, even as the songs of Ubokudom are understudied.

A critical review of existing scholarship on Ibibio traditional songs indicates not only the paucity of research on how Ibibio songs serve as a vehicle for cultural propagation and social change but also reflects that the songs of Ubokudom are not significantly explored in literary scholarship. This study seeks to examine the nuances of Ibibio cultural epistemology in the selected songs of Ubokudom, and investigate how the songs serve as instruments for religious, economic and sociopolitical reconstruction. Ubokudom is an indigene of Ikot Ayan Ediene, Ikono, Akwa Ibom State. Ikono Local Government is often referred to as the cradle of Ibibio land and Ibibio people. It is one of the three largest local government areas in Akwa Ibom State. Three songs of Ubokdom are purposively selected as primary data for the study. The selected songs are 'Ato Nto Udaha', 'Yak Isan Ambib' and

## Functionalism

The theoretical framework deployed in the study is the functionalism of Bronislaw Malinowski. Functionalism as a theory is credited to Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist, whose research on the culture of the Trobriand Islanders is well explicated in his 1922 work, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. However, the theoretical offerings Malinowski's functionalism could be found in the text *A Scientific Theory Culture and Other Essays* (1944), his manuscript published two years after his demise. As a response to evolutionism and diffusionism, Malinowski (1960 [1944]) argues that previous theorists in anthropology lost sight of the functional perspective of cultural and social institutions like marriage and kinship. For instance, he criticises exponents of diffusionism for doing a false analysis of culture:

Graebner, rigging up a false or puerile analysis of culture in order to lay the foundation of what he regarded as a fool-proof world-wide diffusionism, has created an anti-functional approach of first-rate imbecility. He first of all assumes that it is possible to isolate single items from their cultural context. He defines, then, form as completely disconnected from function. (p. 149).

Malinowski (1960 [1944]) posits that no aspect of human material reality exists on isolation to one another. For him, culture is an apparatus with which humans are able to face the concrete problems that arise in their environment in the process of satisfying fundamental needs. In this sense, everything 'exists as a means to an end' (p. 150). Therefore, humans as central in every cultural process are organised and exist in functional relation to one another, just like the cultural materials of a society.

Moreover, Malinowski (1960 [1944]) states that every material element of culture is meant for the satisfaction of a need. In the functionalist approach, function does not imply a mere contribution of a part to a whole. Rather, it is the satisfaction derived by performance of an

act. In his analogy, the Polish scholar compares the function to the satisfaction obtained by taking sacred communion as regards its symbolism in connecting man to the Almighty God. Nonetheless, in oral literature, functionalism sees literature as serving specific social function. It interrogates how stories, songs and other oral texts contribute to social cohesion, moral instruction and reinforcement of cultural norms, values and indigenous philosophy. It emphasises the role of oral texts in the daily transactions in human communities.

Functionalism proposes that oral literature facilitates the understanding of the social organisation, culture and creative thought of society. Oral literature is believed to have a clear social purpose, and it is intended to record, preserve and designate the social norms for the continued survival of the social system. Under this theory, every oral form, whether riddle, song or proverb, has its social function (Oyetimi, 2024). Afolabi (2004) affirms this by stating that, beyond the emotional satisfaction derived from arts, oral art forms possess additional functions. This could be argued for Ibibio traditional songs by Ubokudom and Akata Cultural Troupe in Ikono. Similarly, Ikeokwu (2007) posits that functionalism examines literature from the perspective of its social commitment. This implies that oral literature or cultural songs are functionally committed to the society they emanate. Within this praxis, Ibibio cultural songs by Ubokudom are believed not only to entertain society but also to be socially committed to the sociopolitical affairs of the people.

Moreover, it is only when a piece of oral art is committed to the service of society that it can be said to be functional. According to Onyejekwe and Ikeokwu (2013), the functionalist theory maintains that literature must have a social relevance or function in the society it exists. For the scholars, “. . . literature plays a major role in effecting and affecting social and intellectual changes within the community. In this way, literature becomes a potential weapon used to bring about enduring positive changes in the community that engenders it” (p. 67). They emphasise that in the functionalist approach to literary criticism, any oral literature or performance which has no social value cannot be preserved in society. Onu and Ugwuoke (2022) aver that functionalism as a literary theory implies that the focus of analysis of a literary work is basically on how such a piece of work serves society by facilitating the maintenance of part or the whole of society's life. Therefore, the social relevance of oral forms like the songs of Ubokudom could be critically assessed through the lens of

functionalism to critique their social commitment to the service of Ibibio society and Akwa Ibom State as a whole; hence the justification for adopting the theory.

### **Ibibio Cultural Epistemology and Aesthetics of Reconstructing Sociopolitical Imaginaries**

Traditional Ibibio music and songs convey beyond the rhythmic and melodious sounds that entertain; they are carriers of the indigenous philosophy of the people. Okokon Akpan and Aniefon Akpan (2022) state that indigenous music carries messages regarding the cultural beliefs of a people, and that Ibibio indigenous music is steeped in the fundamental philosophies of the Ibibio people. Therefore, the songs of Ubokudom are not ordinary pieces of traditional music but contain critical cultural epistemological values for the Ibibio society and humanity at large. All three songs under study indicate the functionalist dimension of oral literature to society; media for the propagation of cultural values and indigenous philosophies, and a tool for sociopolitical reconstruction. The first song examined is entitled 'Ato Nte Udaha', literally meaning wherever you are placed or privileged to be at a point in time.

Through the song, Ubokudom evinces the indigenous philosophy of the Ibibio people regarding contentment and satisfaction. The song begins with the vocalist rendering the traditional philosophy of Ibibio on contentment thus: '*Ato da, ato nte udaha da do*,' translated as "Wherever you are placed, wherever you are, be there". This philosophy does not discourage Ibibio people from aspiring for better things and higher positions in life, but it serves as a warning against greed, which could lead to corruption or committing a crime that brings shame and disrepute to an individual, family and the Ibibio people in general. Therefore, Ubokudom uses his song to remind the younger generation of Ibibio about the ethics of life, the need for consistency, transparency and gratitude to God in both private and public affairs. This is because it is believed in Ibibio society that the Almighty God is the giver of all things and the promoter of men. He gives power and wealth to all men at the appropriate time. Thus, every responsible Ibibio person is expected to be contented with their position in society, while looking up to God for elevation. Ubokudom creatively expresses this cultural knowledge in this verse: '*Ntonte Abasi udaha da do o, nte anye udaha da do*'.

This literally means whichever position God has placed you, be there. This is a confirmation of the Ibibio cultural epistemology which recognises the Almighty God as one who gives to every man his due. To wait for God's appointed time in life implies contentment and shunning of lust and greed, which could lead to other social vices such as theft, fraud, deception and even murder.

Moreover, incorporating the nuances of this philosophy in the songs is meant to teach the younger population of the Ibibio people the cultural standard and philosophy of society. Ubokudom's artistic industry facilitates not only the teaching of morals to the younger generation of Ibibio but also in producing people of sound mind and good conscience in a post-colonial Nigeria that is fraught with the evil of political corruption and socio-cultural decadence in the face of threatening human greed and lust. Following the classification of society by Ferdinand Tönnies (1957), a German sociologist and philosopher, the Ibibio society is a typical *gemeinschaft* society with its complex sociopolitical system and a large population. Consequently, conflict is inevitable, but the understanding of the guiding philosophy of a people can enhance the management of crises. Therefore, the propagation of Ibibio cultural epistemology aids the maintenance of peace by discouraging greed and upholding contentment. The epistemological offerings embedded in this song help to shape human conduct and aspirations in Ibibio land. Matthew Arnold recognised the role of literature in the lives of people beyond the aesthetic pleasure or entertainment (Carter, 2006, pp. 21-22). It is from this perspective that one can imagine the true essence and beauty in the creative output of Ubokudom.

Ubokudom's songs are functional beyond aesthetic satisfaction. Laced with indigenous Ibibio philosophy, they are means of introjecting into society the collective ideology and the shared values of the indigenous people. In light of this, Etuk and Akpan (2023) state that Tekno propagates gender ideology in his song, 'Woman'. Afolabi (2004) argues that every oral art form has a social duty to perform. Hence, Ubokudom's essence and artistic value can be gleaned from the way he uses his songs to teach Ibibio cultural philosophy and evaluate human activities amongst the Ibibio people. His songs are steeped in Ibibio indigenous philosophy which presents cause and effect within the paradigm of actions and consequences. The artist advises people to be conscious of every action taken because there

are unpleasant consequences for every wrong deed. This could be deduced from this excerpt: *'Mbo ku'yana ubofo adudiana; ku'fehe uboho ad'uboho usung.'* It literally means 'I'm saying don't overstretch [your hand] so that you won't fall; don't rush so you won't miss the road or the right way. 'Over stretching here means one's attempt to obtain what one cannot afford or what one is not even qualified for. Indigenous philosophy of the Ibibio people is embedded in that expression. For instance, it is decipherable that the Ibibio people believe in God and his appointed time for all things. Consequently, any attempt to rush or be greedy is believed to result in a disaster that causes two fundamental problems: missing the target and the downfall of man. Therefore, to achieve one's goals and attain the desired heights in life, Ibibio philosophy, as explicated in Ubokudom's song, encourages all persons to be contented. In the post-colonial Nigerian society where the 'get-rich-quick' syndrome is pervasive, Ibibio indigenous philosophy teaches contentment and self-discipline.

Additionally, the fundamental value in Ibibio indigenous philosophy expressed in the song is the belief in time and divine orchestration of things. For instance, the artist points out the time factor and reiterates the place of God in human accomplishments amongst the Ibibios thus: *'Sia amaikeme ini uniehe mkpo; nkom anam se anam ukit'usung. Ette, amaikeme ini uniehe mkpo; ñkom akpenam se anam ukit'usung.'* The expression means that no matter what one does, when it is not God's appointed time or approval, one cannot be anything and cannot get rich, even if one tries all means. This resonates with the earlier warning against rushing and greed. Therefore, the Ibibio people believe in God and due process as contained in their cultural epistemology. The common saying, 'All power belongs to God, and he gives to whom He pleases', has its foundation in Ibibio cultural epistemology, highlighting the belief in God's hands in the affairs of man.

Hence, the artist provides a compelling analogy of time and God factors, and man's success in Ibibio epistemology by comparing human success and growth. Ubokudom states that greater accomplishments are designed to follow the natural growth of humans from childhood to adulthood. In Ubokudom's view, no one is born into the world with wealth, but people become wealthy at the right time in life. This applies to a man who is first a baby and later grows into an adult. The following verses foreground this philosophy in the song: *'Imo owo nkom akedo uwuene, akekem ini anye anie mkpo. Ette, akwa owo ñkom akedo ayen*

*owong, adọ akekem ini anye kpon owo.*' The first verse means that a rich man was once poor but became rich at the right time, while the subsequent verse means that an adult was first a child before becoming an adult at the right time. This foregrounds the Ibibio epistemological foundation in natural and moral laws as noted by Etuk (2021). Regardless, while the artist introjects Ibibio cultural belief on the importance of times and seasons, it is worthy to note that it does not invalidate the reality of individuals who are born into wealthy families which, by implication, makes them rich without experiencing poverty first. Ubokudom incorporates the Ibibio philosophy about life, time and achievement to probe the character of the current generation of Ibibio and people of Akwa Ibom State, especially their attitude towards making money and attaining greater heights. Akande (2024) states that music, which encapsulates both the vocal and the instrumental perspectives, is very significant in African cultures. Thus, indigenous music awakens the spirit of members of the traditional society because it communicates ideas, philosophy and expresses emotions. Hence, Ubokudom laces his song with Ibibio epistemology on life and success.

Furthermore, Ngugi (1981) argues that literature is a reflection of society because it is a product of the behaviour and social relations of humans in society. Therefore, the artist serves as the mouthpiece of society, while his art is the medium of passing information. Therefore, if the philosophical underpinnings in his songs are a product of society, those underpinnings reflect the cultural epistemology of the people. Hence, '*Atọ nte udaha da, atọ nte udaha da do*' constitutes one of the epistemic values in Ibibio land because of its implied philosophical and cultural implications for the Ibibio people. Other constituents of the Ibibio epistemological system evinced in the song are belief in the Almighty God for sustenance and promotion in life, and respect for due time and due process. This could be deduced from these expressions: '*Abasi ama ibokho ado, udokho mkpo, nkom akpe wod owo uniehe utip*, and *Mi'keme ini uniehe mkpo, nkom akpenam se anam ukutu'sung*.' These are the last two verses in the song, and they are literally translated as: 'If God doesn't say you should be something, you can't be; even if you kill or sacrifice a human being you can't succeed' and 'When it is not yet time, you can't be rich; even if you do whatever you do. You can't succeed', respectively. Although Ibibio epistemic system does not permit human sacrifice, the reference made by the artist is meant to intensify the notion that man cannot be anything



except God approves of it, and that no effort or even magic brings wealth and fame if not within its divine time.

These foreground the Ibibio philosophical foundations and epistemological offerings in the song that direct and shape the conduct of people in Ibibio land. According to Kipyegon *et al.* (2025, p. 14), 'In many African societies, music is not merely an aesthetic artefact but a part and parcel of African life, deeply rooted in social structures, spiritual beliefs, historical consciousness, and philosophical underpinnings.' This buttresses the fact that Ibibio indigenous oral literature is not an ordinary oral art form whose aesthetics is meant to provide a delectate satisfaction; it provides both didactic and aesthetic relevance because the indigenous literature, as could be seen in the song under study, is steeped in the philosophical and core value system of the society it emanates from. Hence, the song, 'Atọ Nte Udaha', provides a window through which Ibibio historical, cultural values and philosophical or epistemic currents can be accessed or tapped. Consequently, Ibibio oral literature exists within the paradigm of African oral literary forms, and Ubokudom fits into the description of a typical African oral artist whose works, beyond the histrionics deployed during performance, reflect the sociocultural realities and value system of the immediate society.

Additionally, if African cultural knowledge is validated by the social network wherein the elders and accomplished oral artists are custodians of this knowledge, according to Kipyegon *et al.* (2025), Ubokudom could be described as one of the custodians of Ibibio indigenous epistemology, and his songs are reflections of Ibibio traditional philosophy and value system. In the song, the Ibibio worldview and epistemology are continuously expressed by the artist, and most of the philosophies portrayed resonate with the universal philosophy about human existence and human affairs. For instance, the artist presents the Ibibio indigenous philosophy which states that the nature and character of a man determine his success or failure. This could be seen in the excerpt below:

*Owo ama do ndono-ndono, usangamo ado ndono-ndono.  
Ette, owoamadouyuk-uyuk, usungamo ado uyuk-uyuk.  
Dungo se.Ama,  
owoamadonkwañga-nkwañga, usungamo ado nkwañga-  
nkwañga.*

*Owo ama do ndono-ndono, usungamo ado ndono-ndono.  
Ette, owo amado uyuk-uyuk, usang amo ado uyuk-uyuk. Dungo se.*

This excerpt is a portraiture of the underlying universal principle of cause-and-effect dynamics in Ibibio traditional epistemology. It is universally believed that right decisions and good deeds bring about good outcomes, while wrong decisions and evil deeds result in unpleasant consequences. Therefore, the artist draws from the depth of Ibibio indigenous philosophy to warn against certain decisions and actions that may bring failure or disaster to man. The first sentence in the excerpt means that an honourable deed attracts an honourable outcome. In the same vein, the last two sentences imply that a crooked, indecent and unwholesome behaviour brings about undesirable results. While it is like a piece of advice, the underlying implication reveals that it is a curse to lead a dishonourable life. Therefore, the Ibibio society does celebrate criminality, and fraudulent activities are regarded as a curse on the people partaking in them. That is why Ubokubom, while emphasising the importance of due process, prays thus: '*Akwa Abasi mbok, mbok nyanga mien mbak ndi yip mkpo ñkedia ndok.*' In this prayer, the artist asks God to intervene in his situation so that he would not steal and become an object of public ridicule and embarrassment.

While representing Ibibio cultural epistemology, Ubokudom equally aligns with the opinion of the functionalists. In this way, his oral art not only entertains and preserves the people's indigenous philosophies but also teaches morals expected to be visible in the daily conduct of Ibibio people in all facets of life. This validates Ubokudom's songs as vessels of Ibibio indigenous epistemology and moral codes. According to Kipyegon *et al.* (2025), the oral tradition provides a significant support system for indigenous philosophy, and functions as the primary channel through which cultural knowledge is passed to people in society. Similarly, Ighile (2021) asserts that oral performance offers a medium not only for the expression of the current social realities of a people but also for defining themselves. Oral literature serves as the repertoire of a people's culture, traditions, norms and values. In a nutshell, it defines a people and gives identity to their existence. Therefore, considering the song, 'Ato Nte Udaha', as a discursive channel for self-naming, identity formation and reconstruction, Ibibio traditional songs by Ubokudom provide the agency for self-definition for the Ibibio people.

In the artistic representation of Ibibio indigenous philosophy, there is a conscious repetition of the philosophy, '*Ato nte udaha da, ato nte udaha da do*', to emphasise the traditional philosophy of the Ibibios. Such repetitions mark both aesthetic and functional significance of Ibibio epistemology and philosophies in the song. According to Egglezou and Nakas (2014, p. 621), repetition is 'the dominant recurrence of structural, thematic, phonological, stylistic and linguistic patterns within the oral literature'. The scholars further state that it is an aesthetic device of narratives, which enhances the intensity of actions and emotions. However, in the context of this song, the device is used to emphasise Ibibio traditional epistemology and cosmology. For instance, the repetition by the *akata* singers gives credence to the value attached to contentment, hard work and belief in God's supernatural blessing. Also, it adds to the natural flow of rhythm in the oral performance.

Friday Okon and Inimfon Udoinyang (2021) consider repetition in African folksongs as a major stylistic device that drives the song's rhythmic value. This is true of the Ibibio traditional song by Ubokudom, in which repetitions not only serve as a reinforcement but also act as the instrument with which the artist boosts the quality of rhythm and rhymes. Ighile (2021) validates the authenticity of Ubokudom's song as an oral literary art when stating that for a piece of oral art to be adjudged as oral literature, it must be orally composed, meant for public presentation, have an element of repetition and be presented in public many times. Beyond the deployment of repetition as a stylistic device in this song, the artistic linguistic choices at every point in the song express beauty and efficiency in the representation of the indigenous epistemology and teaching of societal values to the audience.

### **Sociopolitical Dialectics and Social Reconstruction in the Songs**

Ubokudom's songs, steeped in the cultural epistemology of the Ibibio people, are packed with the evaluation of social, religious, economic and political affairs of the people. Hence, from the functionalist perspective, the songs of Ubokudom serve as tools for the assessment of the current socio-religious, economic and political realities of Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria in general. The two songs, '*Yak Isan Ambip*' and '*Jesus Enyedi Ama*', provide a critical lens through which the rot in the religious and sociopolitical landscape of Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria could be seen and understood. According to Ighile (2021), oral

performance offers the opportunity for resisting or subverting the prevalent social order. Therefore, the Ibibio traditional songs under study take a critical look at the important religious and sociopolitical realities in Nigeria. Suitable in this regard is the nature of the genre, which is *akata*. Earlier in this work, *akata* is the indigenous policing system in traditional Ibibio society. It is a masquerade which exposes evil with a view to getting society rid of crimes, and conscientising members of society. Consequently, the incorporation of *akata* aesthetics in the songs of Ubokudom reveals the poetics of social critique, and also serves as a suitable conduit for probing society and purging it of evil. It is within this premise that aesthetic satisfaction, according to Malinowski's (1960 [1944]) idea on functionalism, could be said to be achieved.

In 'Yak Isan Ambib', the artist decries the state of poverty and hunger in society, indicting government for the deplorable condition of citizens, especially the civil servants. The song, although building on the Ibibio traditional philosophy on good morals, communal service and unity, criticises government's poor treatment of workers. The excerpt below gives insights into the artistic probing of government, the effects of maladministration on the people and the indigenous philosophy that guides social conduct amidst hardship.

*Yak isan ambib o, yak isan ambib kenyakpe.*

*Yak isan ambib.*

*Ubok udom afoñ ofon afuk owo awuo erong.*

*Ndi'kaná mben idem inkä inó.*

*Gofmen aka'kama mbi'owo isan inohọ.*

*Mma gofmen akama owo isan inohọ.*

*Imah nnamdie nkama idem nte mfäk ubioñ?*

The first verse simply means 'let me owe o, let me owe; I'll pay.' The second verse is a repetition of the first part of the first verse. This repetition is foregrounded in the songs of Ubokudom, as it is a common feature in other songs of his examined in this paper. The fourth and fifth verses mean 'I won't be able to go for robbery or steal' and 'Government even owes people and doesn't pay', respectively. The artist notes that it is better to owe rather than steal from people, citing that even government owes people. The sense in these is that stealing is prohibited in Ibibio land, and that it is honourable for a person to owe rather than steal, provided that the debtor settles his debts afterwards. Also, the last two verses indicate that if government owed people's salaries and other entitlements, those affected had no option but to owe.

Moreover, the artist goes ahead to hold government responsible for the poverty that bedevils society, arguing that government's lackadaisical attitude towards the masses has resulted in abject poverty and excruciating pains. Of course, the indices of poverty in the song are not only reflected in the repetition of '*Yak isan ambib*' but also in the imagery deployed to describe an average civil servant in Nigeria. These imageries are presented thus: '*Ofoñ idem añwaha'ma; nnim idem uyaha. Ette ikpa ukod añwaha'ma; nsaña ukod uyaha. Ette yak ndaka nyem nte mbo ebene*.' These expressions can be simply translated as: 'My dresses are all torn; I keep my body bare (or naked). Father, my shoes are all torn; I walk barefoot. Father, let me go look for where to buy on credit.' Images of a torn dress, bare feet and a near-naked appearance suggest one who is suffering from abject poverty. Also, Ubokudom uses living on perpetual debts to represent the deplorable condition of the underpaid civil servants who are already bankrupt. The artist's indictment of government regarding the poverty of the citizens is glaring. He states that government has turned civil servants into slaves and beggars as a result of withheld salaries and other financial benefits of the workers. The artist is current with the present economic realities in Nigeria, where employees work like elephants but eat like ants. In many states in Nigeria, workers are suffering because of non-payment of salaries, while other entitlements are completely denied with impunity.

In contemporary Nigeria, the issue of poor salaries and the welfare of staff is a recurrent topic

in national newspapers and broadcasting corporations. Almost every year, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) embark on a series of warning industrial actions (strike) and national protests over poor wages and withheld allowances. It is common to see civil servants, including professors, struggling to meet their daily needs. *The Punch* (Online) reported on September 1, 2025, the poor salary scale of Nigerian university lecturers. In a news article entitled 'Address lecturers' 'poverty pay', *The Punch* notes that Nigerian university lecturers are the least paid in the world. Anene et al. (2024) argue that personal and sectional interests have been the primary concern of most political leaders in Nigeria, and that government lacks policies that benefit the masses, whom they do not prioritise. According to the scholars, Nigeria's political leadership has been hijacked by a political mafia whose interest is to plunder the national treasury at the expense of the citizenry. It is within this structural oppression that citizens wallow in poverty. Therefore, the artist does not hesitate to state: '*Mbo gofmen inama ndido akama isañ*', meaning that government is responsible for the poverty and misery of citizens, particularly turning civil servants into debtors.

In 'Jesus Enyedi Ama', Ubokudom probes into religious hypocrisy amongst Nigerian Christians, stressing the atrocities committed by those who claim to be Christ-like. The artist casts aspersion on church members, pastors and other church leaders whose antagonism for traditional cultural practices like the *akata* cultural display is merely a decoy to destroy the sanctity of indigenous practices and cover up their corruption. In the expression, '*Asuk abo Jesus anyedo ama mfo, inoafu'diangaki'dem*', Ubokudom portrays the hypocrisy of Christians who proclaim the love of God but lack true repentance. This is profound in these expressions: '*... amayong ino ntorodo adidaka utre udia. Amayong ino eyop owo adidaka combine.*' The two sentences reveal that some Christians return from stealing cassava and palm fruit before attending fasting and general church service. This hypocrisy destroys the fabric that holds society together, as some people are despised because of religion. Yet, heinous crimes are committed regardless of the proclamation of name of Jesus Christ, one who is without blemish. For instance, the artist questions the morality of those who go to church services after robbery and other unwholesome practices. These are expressed thus:

*Aben akpan udua ayiñ uka ake wed ke añwa ifòd.*

*Aben idip ańwan ayin uka ake wed ke ańwa ifod.*

*Ama adaka Jesus anye ado ama mfo.*

*Ino afu'dianga ki'dem.*

*Uwod owo afu'dianga ki'dem.*

*Asuk abo Jesus anyedo ama o.*

The excerpt reveals that while proclaiming Jesus Christ, the acclaimed Christians are still practising witchcraft, destroying people's businesses and killing with witchcraft powers. The artist is critical of all these and demands that society change for the better.

'*Uwod owo afu'dianga ki'dem*' is interpreted as unrepentance from murder. Therefore, Ubokudom questions the character and morality of religious leaders and their followers, demanding a change for the good of society. He hints at the destructive religious practices by hypocritical Christians, and warns against crimes which are, in Ibibio epistemology and cosmology, curses that hinder human progress and development. The artist uses the songs to critique social behaviour, sociopolitical affairs and reconstruct society through the unapologetic questioning of immorality and condemnation of evil in society. Carter (2006) argues that Matthew Arnold's position was that poetry would interpret life and console humanity where religion had failed. Hence, Ibibio oral literature interprets, evaluates life and returns humanity to the path of unity, progress and development, where religion has failed. It is within this paradigm that the functionalist dynamics of Ibibio oral literature could be fully grasped.

## **Conclusion**

The study examines Ibibio cultural epistemology and the poetics of reconstructing sociopolitical dialectics in the selected songs of Ubokudom alongside his Akata Cultural Troupe. Ubokudom's songs are not ordinary oral literary compositions, but rather artistic, cultural, and anthropological iconography that embodies the worldview and traditional value system of a people. The songs offer critical perspectives on the indigenous philosophy of the



Ibibio. This philosophy includes a core belief in Akwa Abasi Ibom (the Almighty God) who oversees the affairs of man, as well as principles that include respect for due process and divine timing, intolerance toward fraud and other crimes that hinder human progress, and discouragement of greed, a strong support for hard work, contentment, respect for elders and unity. These philosophical underpinnings shape the conduct of people in both private and public affairs in the Ibibio land. Thus, the songs fulfil their functional expectations as oral art forms in Ibibio land, just as oral literature elsewhere in Africa. Beyond this, there is a characteristic probing into the activities of individuals and government, and how such activities affect human progress. For instance, maladministration and corruption of the post-colonial Nigerian regimes are noted as factors responsible for abject poverty in Nigeria. Also, religious hypocrisy among Christians is critiqued as a contributing factor for the continuous social vices in society.

This study concludes that through the *akata* music tradition, the artist boldly probes society, condemns evil, and calls out government and members of society, particularly Christians and political and religious leaders. Through the songs, individuals, private and corporate bodies are warned against greed and other crimes that impede societal development. In terms of literary poetics, the themes and aesthetic appeal created by repeating important verses through a call-and-response technique situate the songs of Ubokudom within the paradigm of African oral literature. Therefore, the *akata* genre itself becomes a discursive model and aesthetic framework through which the artist deconstructs and reconstructs religious and sociopolitical imaginaries in Nigeria. The choice of words and repetition of important verses in the songs not only emphasise the kernel idea and philosophical imports in the songs but also offer an efficient boost to the aesthetics of the oral performance. Hence, Ibibio oral literature offers a critical medium for sustaining African indigenous philosophies and the cultural epistemology of Ibibio.

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