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Existentialism, *Ughwu*-Death and Resilience in Urhobo Folkore

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Abstract
Ughwu, death is an inevitable occurrence that cuts across all cultures and societies. It is an existential concern that triggers emotional disorders such as anxieties and phobias in society. This paper examines *Ughwu*-death and resilience in Urhobo folklore with a view to establishing the coping mechanisms adopted for emotionally disturbed individuals in traditional society. The study adopted ethnographic design, investigating cultural materials collected from natural environment. The oral data were carefully selected based on their thematic thrust. They were collected from audio recordings, in-depth interviews and observations. The song-poetry were transcribed and translated from Urhobo language to English andsubjected to literary analysis. The study found that in Urhobo society death is portrayed in funeral song-poetry, folktales, proverbs, and proverbial using metaphors, similes, euphemisms and imagery to provide coping skills to audience.
Keywords: *Ughwu*-death, human existence, folklore, song-poetry**,** bereavement

Introduction

Human existence is characterised with uncertainty, absurdity, decision making, continuous struggle, freedom, and inevitable death which is dreadful to individuals irrespective of their social status. The existence of man is the focal point of existentialism which depicts "a philosophical trend that enquires into the concrete experience of human life for better understanding of man and the world around him" (Egbekpalu, 2022:261). The scholar argues that the existence of man could be understood from a critical study of his personal life experience and the interrelationship within his physical environment.Akporherhe (2008:195) explains existentialism as the doctrine about the human nature that deals with ambivalence, futility and nothingness in human nature.The concept of existentialism is traceable to the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard who posits that man is a synthesis which implies a complex formative creation of various binary elements. Kierkegaard (1974:146) notes that, "man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of possibility and necessity." In corroborating the foregoing, Egbekpalu (2022:262) states that "Kierkegaard gave the understanding that man is a synthesis of not just the body and soul but also of other opposing elements of reality and identity, time and eternal, necessity and possibility." The notion of man as a dual being is also acknowledged by the Urhobo as evident in their oral traditions which shall receive attention in this study.

The research of Mbiti (1970) establishes that "death is a separation and not annihilation: the dead person is suddenly cut off from the human society and yet, the corporate group clings to him. This is shown through the elaborate funeral rites as well as other methods of keeping in contact with the departed" (46). The idea of death in the foregoing is that of physical detachment from the living but there is spiritual contact and connectivity between the dead and the living, the ancestors. Among the Urhobo, death is viewed "as a natural phenomenon mostly when it involves a young person who is considered not to have lived the fullness of his or

her life" (Mbiti, 1970:56). The study of Raimela (1994:24) finds death as a welcome thing when one has been successful in life and has become old. Anything short of this makes death painful and grievous for the irreplaceable loss of the person. Idogho (2015:70) asserts that "the Urhobo recognize only two kinds of death, the good death and the bad death. A good death is one that is associated with somebody who has attained the ripe age of sixty years and above, married with children and lived a morally just life and is not a member of secret cult." The scholar further clarifies that the bad death refers to those that "died a premature death, members of witchcraft, evil people, those that died an abominable death, such as not given proper funeral rites" (70). In corroborating the foregoing, Ekore and Lanre-Abass (2016:370) state that "After death, an individual life in a spirit world, receiving a new body which is identical to the earthly body, but with the capacity to move about as an ancestor." Nabofa (1983:296) notes that in "Urhobo cultural understanding, "the soul of the departed is said to stand near the body or hover around the premises where the corpse lies, watching over the burial and funeral performances on its physical part. It remains there for about ninety days before it finally expires into the land of the dead to be fully incorporated."

The existential concept of *Ughwu* (death*)* resonates in folklore materials such as folktales, legends, myths, folksongs, and re-enactment of traditional festivals, to mention a few, which are available in Urhobo communities. There are narratives about the migration of *ihwo re erivwin* (the dead), *ihwo re erivwin*as traders, spirits of *ihwo re erivwin* roaming, and *ihwo re erivwin* visiting their relations. Stories also abound aboutancestral spirits protecting the family members, spirits of *ihwo re erivwin* farming, or fishing in communities. These narratives might be factual or fictional, depending on the sources of the stories. Funeral songs abound in every community and they are means of communicating intra-psychic and negative emotions about the dead and the bereaved family. The Urhobo describe *Ughwu* as a transition and comparing the phenomenon to the marketing, footballing, hunting, voyage and

river current. It is painful, "pepperish," dreadful, non-selective and insensitive as evident in folklore materials such as folktales, myths, legendary stories, and song-poetry. The verbal arts above, however, are meant to alleviate the psychic and emotional pains of the emotionally disturbed individuals, especially the deceased family at the venue of oral performance. The performing arts are deployed to interrogate human existence from the Urhobo cosmological perspective.

The essence of existence has received discussions from scholars over time. Barrett (1958:102) notes that man exists and makes himself to be what he is; his individual essence or nature comes to be out of his existence; and in this sense it is proper to say that existence precedes essence." This implies that individuals are created without purpose and they live in a world that is devoid of meaning so they must make meaning out of their own existence. Barrett maintains that "Man does not have fixed essence that is handed to him ready-made; rather, he makes his own nature out of his freedom and the historical conditions in which he is placed" (Barrett, 1958:102). Individual's freedom can stimulate creative imagination, critical thinking and inventive power because it gives room for independent exploration into the metaphysical realm and intra-personal world with a view to creating meaning out of absurdity. Mareille (2021:3) notes that "meaning comes from the period of reflection or introspection one undertakes of their own life experiences. Meaning is derived from the insight gained about the essences of one's cumulative life experiences." The concept of absurdity depicts the condition in which man lives in a disordered, irrational and incongruous universe where he has to create meaning within his own existence. Against this background, Sartre (1948) argues that "the Being is ontologically estranged from the world; and that all that is available to the individual is one's subjective experience and the freedom to create meaning out of nothingness" (cited in Winston, 2015:42). The alienation of man from the metaphysical realm as posited by Sartre makes him to

become more inquisitive and industrious in order to address essential needs for survival.

The task of creating meaning out of this absurdist world is enormous with much dissipation of mental energies and so individuals introspect and retrospect into their personal lives. They should discover their hidden potentials and develop them for self-fulfillment and societal transformation. The issue of choice making cannot be ignored among the existential themes because it contributes to the fulfilment in life. Ona, *et al*. (2018:707) notes that existentialism is of the view that individuals are free to make choices and decisions based on what appeals to them as meaningful rather than what is rational." The essence of existence leads to the thematic thrust of living authenticity. Kolawole (2022:92) establishes that "authenticity of life implies that one must affirm and manifest one's uniqueness, in spite of the fact that one is interrelated with other human beings." Life of authenticity depicts human existence that is genuine and free from artificiality. The scholar further asserts that, "living authentically is the better way to live as it enables one to live a true life and not a 'borrowed' life" In advancing his argument, the scholar states that life of authenticity "enables one to develop optimally and to live maximally as it enables one to overcome barriers that impede the one who lives authentically in actualizing him/herself" (92). Life of authenticity is worthy of living because it can stimulate the feelings of happiness for individuals and the community, especially in African societies where the people handle crucial issues that can shape the future of society and promote harmonious co-existence.

Agbakwuo (2013:162) acknowledges the foregoing view with the assertion that "Africans do not see themselves as individuals living independently, but rather as people living in a community interdependently, with communal responsibilities." This viewpoint attests to the reasons Africans come together in moments of sorrow and joyfulness for whatever affects an individual affects the entire community. Neighbouring

communities with verbal or written peace accord with history of intermarriage may also share similar feelings and ideologies for the betterment of all. The foregoing studies give insights into the current research that focuses on deployment of folklore materials, especially folksongs in alleviating the psychological pains of individuals triggered by existential concern of *Ughwu*-death in socio-cultural settings.

Purpose of the Study

Ughwu is an existential occurrence that cantrigger emotional disturbances among individualsin society. The notion of *Ughwu* is portrayed in various forms of folklore and they are capable ofproviding coping skills to audience. This research examines the existential concept of *Ughwu* in folkloric materials, particularly song-poetry in Urhobo communities. Specifically, it explores language and the concept of *Ughwu*, *Ughwu* and Urhobo worldview, *Ughwu*and resilience in Urhobosong-poetry, and *Ughwu* and dance-movements.

Methodology

This study is ethnographic and library-based research with the oral data carefully selected based on their thematic thrust. They are collected from audio recordings, in-depth interviews and observations. The song-poetry are transcribed and translated from Urhobo language to English. They are subjected to literary analysis with secondary materials which are mostly gathered from journals articles employed to support opinions and ideas raised in this research.

***Ughwu* Motif in Urhobo Folklore**

The dead are believed to reincarnate or appear before the living whom they want to share information with. They might be summoned by elders and priests when they need fair judgement during traditional judicial proceedings. Africa literary works such as the poetry, novels and plays convey subject of life and death. *Ughwu* is non-selective and so it can visit both the rich and the

poor, great and small, monarchs and subjects, and so on, in societies. It creates tension, fears, anxieties and emotional depression among the bereaved. Among the Urhobo of Nigeria, *Ughwu*-death becomes aberration when it occurs in the following ways: death in the farm, drowning, hanging, youthful death and with pregnancy, to mention a few. Oral traditions are often appreciated in traditional societies because they help in transmitting cultural values, beliefs and practices of the people to successive generations. Ajuwon (1985:306) observes that, "At a period when writing was unknown, the oral medium served the people as a bank for the preservation of their ancient experiences and beliefs." The scholar further establishes that "much of the evidence that related to the past of Nigeria therefore could be found in oral tradition." The preservation of oral resources has gone beyond the periodic verbal performances and dramatization. However, Wasamba (2014:13) states that "digitalization of oral genre in Africa should be handled cautiously. He maintains that we must retain the traditional modes of collection, storage, performances and dissemination through the oral artist, just in case the digital platform collapses like the Titanic." This research is therefore important as it helps to document the concept of *Ughwu*-death as portrayed in selected Urhobo folklore materials.

The existential thematic thrust of death also resonates in folktales and myths. There is no ethnic nationality without folktales, myths and legendary stories handed down from past generations. Folktales are narrated by storytellers to expose certain natural phenomenon and teach the audience some lessons. Through folkloric forms, issues about human existence are deployed to educate listeners in an informal setting. Narratives about birth and death, the living and the dead, reincarnation and so on, abound in traditional communities as evident in oral literary products.

Language and *Ughwu* Motif

Language is an integral part of culture through which people express their thoughts, perceptions, feelings and worldview.

Akpofure-Okenrentie (2018:206) notes that, "language is a means of expression amongst people of a given community. By means of language a people can express their emotions, emotions such as joy and sorrow; wants and needs; feelings such as cold and warmth. Language is used to express, to articulate aspirations and ambitions." The language in question should be mutually intelligible to the people where it is used for communication of verbal arts. Language is important to a people, not just as a means of self-expression; it is a people's identity.

In clarifying the concept of communication, Umudhe (2005:28) states that "communication involves the production, transmission and reception of messages. It involves a source and extension of imagination in forms that can be learned and shared." The scholar further asserts that it also refers to "the production, perception and understanding of messages that bear man's notion of what is, what is related to something else" (28). During funeral rites, information can also be communicated among the people in a nonverbal means such as facial expressions, gestures, slow movements, folding of arms across the breasts, and so on. Unuabonah (2010:62) notes that, "Nonverbal communication is concerned with the process of sending and receiving messages through wordless and visual medium which aid verbal language." In times of mourning, both verbal and non-verbal signs are employed for communication. Apart from daily communication, ceremonial occasions such as marriage, funeral, coronation, confirmation of chieftaincy titles, and so on, are avenues where language is used by people. All these have been infused into the folklore of the Urhobo as could be found in other cultural societies. Such infusion is basically meant to communicate information about one's cosmology, preserve, assert and showcase Africans' rich cultural heritage to the outside world (Udi, 2016:113).

The significance of language in society cannot be overemphasized. Akpofure-Okenrentie (2018:206) notes that it is"a binding force, for, when a people can communicate with one another there is an unbroken chain of understanding which holds a

people or peoples together."In Urhobo society, existential themes of struggle, freedom and responsibility, authenticity, futility, inevitability of death, and meaninglessness, among others, are expressed through both scientific and figurative language.

Ughwu and Urhobo Worldview

Among the Urhobo people, *Ughwu*-death can be described in various ways using euphemistic expressions such as*ovwerhere* (sleep), *okpori* (he/she went home), *oseukpophieoma* (he/she invited home call upon himself of herself), *okpe obo ronurhe* (he/she went to where he/she came from), and so on. These depict transition from the physical space to the spiritual world which can trigger fears and anxieties among the bereaved. Iyeh (2010:82) states that, "Africans have the belief that their departed ones have gone to join their ancestors in the world of the dead. The significance of the ancestors is simply the belief that they watch over the affairs of the living members of their families, helping, deserving ones and punishing the delinquent. Hence, the lavishness to honour and placate their spirits, therefore, ancestors, are there to see the good of the living." The role of the ancestors is not peculiar toUrhobo. It is a primordial phenomenon that cuts across cultures as evident in oral traditions of people. Ojaide (1995:5) established that, "the supernatural plays an important part in African literature (and so) the mystically minded African believes that not everything that happens in life can be explained rationally. There are ancestors, spirits, and gods influencing the affairs of the living. There are natural laws which when violated trigger punitive responses in the form of ailments from the spiritual world." These supernatural beings activate phobic anxieties and the feelings of happiness among believers. Before the advent of Christianity, they served as sources of wealth, protection, fruitfulness, provision and bumper harvest, and so on.

The causes of death could benatural, accidental, supernatural, and so on. These are captured in song-poetry of oral artists in traditional Urhobo communities. Ojaide (1995:5),

"witches and wizards abound in societies to cause mainly mischief. Diviners and medicine-men also abound to ward off evil forces from individuals, families, and communities by recommending sacrifices." The foregoing form parts of the psychic contents of individuals who are custodians of the oral traditions in their communities. Oral performers through their songs activate the mental consciousness of audience about the activities of the above supernatural elements who are perceived as antisocial characters in African societies. Bressler (1999) affirms that the unconscious mind is the storehouse for hidden desires, emotions, ambitions, and fears" (Al-Dmour, 2019:48). Africans, particularly the Urhobo strongly believe that the supernatural beings have strong control over the affairs of the mortals. For instance, the gods and goddesses can terminate the life of a man if he commits serious abominable acts without appropriate sacrificial offerings.

Erivwo (2005:194) notes that there are various gods and goddesses based on their inhabitants in traditional societies. According to the findings, "as nature gods and goddesses, some of them inhabit lakes, creeks, rivers, and the sea; these are called *edjo r' ame.* Others dwell in forest and in big trees and are called *edjor' aghwa.* Though often asserting their independence, the*edjo* are known to be under the suzerainty, if not strict control, of Oghene whose emanations they are." The Urhobo perceive edjo (gods) as next to the Almighty God and through them supplications are made and answered.

Ughwu and Resilience in Urhobo Song-Poetry

Traditional performing artists deploy songs as hope therapy in socio-cultural settings. As hope-based interventions, the song performances contain hopeful stories or experiences that can address severe health issues of audience. For instance, *Ughwu*-death is an existential concern that often triggers psychic conflicts and emotional disorders, leading to depression and other mental illnesses whenever it occurs. Findings reveal that Urhobo cultural songs are handy as antidepressant and adaptive coping strategy,

consoling the bereaved over the loss of loved ones and regulating their emotional feelings and psychic pains. Sabar (2000:152) observes that loss is an inevitable part of life, whether it be the death of a beloved person, estrangement from living family or friends, illness, disability, unemployment, retirement, divorce, adoption, emigration. She further argues that a great loss is recorded when there is any separation from a person, place, thing, or activity to which we have become attached and with which we find an important part of our identity and sense of self.

The form of detachment in most traditional songs is not that from a thing or place but rather a physical separation from a person which calls for bereavement. For instance in the song "*Okere ode mievweuge*," (Strong Current Has Snatched My Fish Cage) the song performer, OrhireOkoro laments the detachment from the physical world of Senator Pius AkporEwherido who hailed from Ewu-Urhobo in Ughelli South of Delta. The traditional music therapist describes death as "high sea current" that snatched away his beloved brother and friend which symbolises "a fish cage" in the song. According to him, the late Senator was kind-hearted, hospitable, amiable, generous and sensitive to the plight of the downtrodden. His sudden death was shocking, unexpected and shattered plans which were supposed to alleviate the suffering of people across the Urhobo land. As an *uchebro* (counseling) song, it therefore functions as antianxiety (anxiolytic treatments) reducing or counteracting anxiety symptoms or sensations and as antidepressant, de-activating depressive symptoms triggered by stressors such as death, disappointment, heartbreak, anxiety and childlessness, just to mention a few. However, in this song the main cause of emotional conflict is the untimely transition of a public figure who affected several lives until his demise.

This song performance serves as diversionary therapy to both the song performer and other mourners as their minds shall be temporarily diverted from their emotional pains to pleasant memories that will sedate and alleviate their emotions. The traditional oral performer employs distractive strategies,

highlighting some of the landmark achievements of the deceased to repress mourners' unpleasant memories underlying their psychic and emotional pains and also providing succor for them. The song equally serves as an adjustment and coping techniques for the patients and regulates their bottled up emotional feelings. Again, the song performs subliminal function as the music therapist converts his psychic and emotional sufferings to something productive and acceptable in socio-cultural settings.

Investigation reveals that some of the late Senator's political associates and kinsmen were overwhelmed by depression when the news of his demise spread across the Niger Delta region. Depression is disastrous and according to Veale (2008:30) it can lead to different forms of avoidance such as social withdrawal from friends, non-social avoidance like sitting around the house and spending excessive time in bed; cognitive avoidance like not thinking about relationship problems, indecision and lack of interest about work or education. The death of the Senator is thus "a huge disruption" of the performer's dreams and aspirations. Through this performance, the "Chief Mourner" and song leader, OrhireOkoro activates the consciousness of audience, counselling them to be prepared to face death whenever it calls.

Ughwu could come at any time but the most important thing is the legacy of the deceased in his community. All the pleasant memories evoked through the rendition are meant to provide emotional support to those who are distressed as a result of the sudden death of the Senator. This song thus functions as distractive therapy, antidepressant and as mood stabilizer to patients whose emotional wounds will be activated as they listen to central themes that are consolatory and palliative. It further provides adaptive skills to enable patients cope with their mood disorders as they reflect on the central themes of the performance.

The song performer also draws the attention of listeners to futility of life by pointing out the Senator's magnificent mansion which has become wasted at his country home since people cannot maintain such a gigantic structure. In the performance, the trado-

music artist identifies death as inevitable and uses the song to create the awareness and confrontation of the ultimate concern of death which he describes as "an inescapable part of human existence." He maintains that the fear of death is so overwhelming that human beings would not be able to function if this fear was totally conscious (Moore &Goldner-Vukov, 2009:455). Even though *Ughwu*awaits everyone, the folkmusicperformer through this song gives confidence to audience and encourages them to live without being anxious about death. He is not the only lamenter in the song performance since the pattern of most Urhobo music is in call and response format. All members of the choral group express their grief either by responding to the words of the lead singer or demonstrating their feelings through a peculiar pattern of playing the musical instruments. The rendition performs subliminal function as both the music artist and his choral group divert their emotional pains into something socially acceptable, productive and economically valuable.

Another Urhobo music minstrel who renders songs that regulate emotional distress and depressive symptoms of patients is Lady Rose Okirigwo. In the song, *Igbuile R' Ikpo* (Dead Song Performers) which the female music therapist dedicated to late UrhoboFolkmusic performers, she expresses her grief over their legendary exit especially those that had made great impact on her life. She highlights them to include Chief OguteOttan of Udu, OwheyanudjeOtubure of Orhuakpor and David Ayandju, a prominent performer from Agbarha-Otor, Joseph Edo and America Djalere. Though David Ayandju was old, people wished he could live longer to enable them acquire more knowledge from his wealth of experience in the music industry. The above song serves as purgatory and coping strategies employed by the music artist to heal her personal psychic and emotional pains. It is believed that expressing emotional conflicts previously repressed or suppressed heals patients psychologically.

The memories of the dead song performers will have positive psychotherapeutic effects on Lady Rose as her psychic

pains and emotional burdens would be reduced. However, she perceives life as worthless and cruel to both great and small in society. She also remembers the death of OmokomokokoOsopka, who was "The Field Marshal of Folkmusic" in Urhobo land until his death. She laments over the innocence of singers who often eat and drink with enemies in public and pleads with God that death meant for others should not befall her because some of the deceased died mysteriously. Her mode of expression of deep feelings helps alleviate grief, agony and pains over the great singers who once motivated her into the music industry. Nevertheless, Bowlby (1980) cited in Stephanie (2000:157) states that, "there is also an instinctive expectation of the return of a loved one from whom one is separated, expressed in separation anxiety and attachment behavior: shock, protest, crying, and searching." The scholar portrayed death as a form of separation that can lead to emotional distress if not properly manage. According to him, "Only when the loved one is repeatedly not found do the feelings change to despair and mourning" (157). Stephanie's argument is that detachment leads to despair and sorrow but with songs, psychological and emotional pains are alleviated. So, Urhobo songs are characterized with emotive words that can regulate the emotions, thoughts and actions of individuals because of the images they contain. In affirming the efficacy of *uchebro* (counsel) particularly during funeral ceremonies, Uzochukwu (2004:28) states that through such words, the pent-up emotion of the bereaved is assuaged. The bereaved are enchanted by the *eta re uchebro* uttered by the music artist with or without instruments because of their psychotherapeutic effects on them.

The performer retrospectively declares that his extended family members had demonstrated love and care towards him in the past but today they swindle, betray, neglect and exploit him. The singer is facing emotional disorder such as phobic anxiety that could degenerate into depression but this song provides a kind of self-medication which affirms the view shared by Austin (1993) that, "Music can give voice to what is still inaudible. Music can

give us access to the invisible world-the world of image, memory and association" (cited in Diane, 1996:33). In advancing the utilitarian functions of music in societies, the scholar states that, "Music can function as a bridge over which aspects of the self normally not heard from can cross over into consciousness where they can be experienced, related to, and eventually integrated" (cited in Diane, 1996:33).

Songs are therefore outlets for bringing psychic and emotional conflicts to their consciousness and also providing supportive therapy to those facing certain difficulties that need divine intervention. Most of these songs function as antidepressant and anxiolytic treatments for patients' mood disorders such as phobia, anxiety and depression rather than consuming pharmacological drugs. As antidepressant, we imply that the artistic work helps in alleviating emotional depression of listening audience as well as the performing artists in socio-cultural settings. Phobic anxieties of individuals are also addressed with the linguistic resources under discourse because they are deployed to inhibit or suppress worries by shifting the focus of listeners and performers temporarily to something pleasant. The phobia of death can activate anxieties emotional depression even though death is among the existential themes which individuals must be conscious of at all times. Hoelterhoff (2015:3) acknowledged the foregoing and affirmed that, "Death anxiety is part of normal existence when it is an impetus for individuals to live fully. However, denying death may only serve to cause underlying death anxiety to persist, and encourage people to live in inauthentic ways." The scholar's argument is that people should perceive death as inevitable and unpredictable phenomenon so it should not cause emotional disorders to individuals whose lifestyle is authentic in society.

Ughwu and Dance-Movements

In traditional Urhobo communities, dance and movements also play vital role in communicating thoughts and feelings in traditional societies especially during funeral ceremonies. Dance cannot be separated from oral performance henceRomain (2002:9) notes that, "dance has always brought people together, forging a place where mind and body, interacting with one another, take precedence over all other things. Dance is a time when aperson may forget all of their worries and concentrate on the here and now." Folk dancers in Urhobo communities are usually women and maidens but during funeral ceremonies, the former take central stage of the performative arts of singing and dancing, recounting the achievements of the deceased while he/she was alive. The significance of dance cannot be overemphasized in African societies. "It is throughdance when any community comes together and shows its solidarity. It is within dance that social interactions are made and where the community springs to life. It is with dance where people affirm their beliefs as a community and come together in praise of life, God, death, etc." (Romain, 2002:9).

Dance and movements in Urhobo communities usually take oscillatory pattern as the womenfolk form a full circle while dancing to the song performances with(out) the accompaniment of musical instruments. During funeral ceremonies, dance, gestures and movements are common because these are ways of expressing emotions, psychic pains and perceptions instead of verbal arts.

Conclusion

This study established that human existence is characterised with various thematic thrusts which pose threats and create psychological conflicts to individuals in society. The concept of existentialism cuts across both African and Western societies. It is perceived as communal in traditional settings where people do things that will promote peace and development in common and take decisions collectively. However, this research has shown that Western existentialism originated from the Danish

Philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard who was "the major proponent and one of the key forerunners of Western existentialism" (Egbekpalu, 2022:261). The existential themes include futility, meaninglessness, struggle, freedom and responsibility, authenticity of living, inevitable death, and so on. Of these thematic thrusts that characterised human existence, death is mostly dreaded and capable of activating psychic and emotional sufferings among individuals. This research, therefore, examined the existential theme of *Ughwu*-death which reoccurs in various folklore elements such as song performance, folktales, myths and legendary stories, to mention a few, in Urhobo society.

The deployment of the above linguistic products in alleviating emotional pains among the bereaved and listening audience during funeral ceremonies received the attention of our discourse. It was found that the verbal arts are employed by performing artist such as traditional musicians and orators in communicating negative thoughts and emotions, perceptions about human existence and behavioural patterns. Individuals or groups of mourners can also draw on the Urhobo oral traditions for purgatory and subliminal purposes.

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