A Preliminary Study of *Ema* Dance in Okpe and Uvwie

By

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Abstract

Dance as an art is of huge importance in every facet of human life. It is a vital aspect of social, political, economic and religious activities. Dance is an indispensable fabric of every social and religious entity. It basically incorporates rhythm to achieve its goals and unique status. Dance is a rhythmic body movement, patterned to express emotions and convey meanings that may be coded in specific body movements. Dance is context dependent in Africa and is partly determined by form, which has to do with structural arrangements. Form also states the overall internal design of dance organization. The structure of dance gives it an understanding of its appreciation. Given the realities of the above facts, it is necessary to study the ema dance, while still making effort to draw attention to germane aspects like form, structure, performance techniques, costumes, etc. The paper utilized the descriptive method in discussing Ema dance among the Okpe and Uvwie cultures in Delta State. The origin and content of the music are highlighted in the

exordium of the paper, while the uses of the dance are also discussed. Primary data were obtained through participant observation of practitioners, and interview of key informants. The study notes that the Ema dance of the Okpe and Uvwie is unique, and is mainly performed for royalty.

Introduction

Okpe is one of the minority ethnic groups in Nigeria. It consists of two local governments (Okpe and Sapele) wherein there are over two hundred villages. The kingdom boasts of major cities and towns like Sapele, Orerokpe, Osubi, Okuokoko, Jeddo, Ughoton and Aghalokpe. It shares boundaries with Urhobo towns including Mosogar, Jesse, Agbarho and other commercial cities like Warri and Effurun. The people are traditionally governed by an Orodje (king) whose coronation only takes place after undergoing a rigorous selection/election process by the *Udogun Okpe*, the supreme Okpe council of chiefs. The present Orodje is Felix Mujakperuo of the Orhue ruling house, a retired Major General of the Nigerian Army, and a trained Lawyer. The people of Okpe engage in various economic and agricultural activities, and are mostly farmers and traders. They are very culturally diverse, boasting of several traditional music and dance types. These include *Ijurhi*, *Igoru*, *Ikpeba*, *Iphri*, *Okpe Disco*, *Ema*, etc.

The scope of this paper also covers Uvwie, which is one of the several clans of the Urhobo ethnic group in Delta State. It occupies the northern part of Urhobo and shares boundaries with Okpe, Okere-Urhobo and Itsekiri. Uvwie has four quarters; Alegbo, Ogbe, Ekpan and Ugbromo which consist of twenty three towns and villages. Its capital town is Effurun, the gate-way town to the oil-rich city of Warri. The people of Uvwie also operate a traditional system of monarchy where the seat of power is resident in the *ovie* (king).[1] The Uvwie dialect belongs to the Edoian language group and bears some linguistic semblance with Okpe, Isoko and Urhobo languages.[2] Like the Okpe, some scholars have also

argued that the Uvwies are not the same ethnic nationality with Urhobos, citing differences in history and linguistics as major factors.

Dance in Okpe and Uvwie Cultures

As it is in most African societies, dance is an artistic expression that permeates all aspects of life. Among the Uvwie, it features significantly in different rites such as burials, marriages, coronation, and other social activities. According to kwabena 'African dance is life itself; it is a way of thinking, living, and communicating. The dance forms an integral part of all important facets of his life cycle: he conducts puberty rite; he dances during marriage and funeral celebration, religions, after a day's hand work. In fact, dancing is both an art and a way of life to the African'[3]. All human activities in traditional African societies are accompanied with one kind of dance or the other; and in almost every case, once there is dance, there is music, and vice versa. Aside entertainment, music and dance are used for other purposes. While Idolor (2014:5) observes that 'music is regarded as an effective means of expressing satisfaction or redress, love or hatred, praise or rebuke, to entertain, educate and keep the community lively', Layiwola (2015:1) defines dance as 'the rhythmic movement of the human body and mind in time and space'. Citing Geoffrey Gorer, Layiwola (2015) presents the following poetic exclamation, that:

Africans dance, they dance for joy and they dance for grief. They dance for love and they dance for hate. They dance to bring prosperity and they dance to avert calamity. They dance for religion and they dance to pass time.

Geoffrey Gorer's assertion is very true of the concept of dance in Okpe and Uvwie cultures. Dance is utilized for several celebrations like birth, traditional weddings, victory over foes, festivals, and passage rites of the aged. In whatever way dance is conceived, one thing is clear – it is characterized by elegance, beauty, brevity, and utilizes space and tension. Every dance is structurally organized, and follows a pattern, which is generally referred to as form.

Dance also plays significant roles in the day-to-day life of Okpe and Uvwie people. It is context dependent to the extent that there are dances for disseminating information, entertainment and accompaniment to various activities such as festivals, burials, marriages, recreational activities, births, puberty rites, war campaign, hunting, religious, cultic and political activities. Among these affirmations, a political activity has its predominance to a specific performance where dances and music is utilized. Royal activities also have appropriate songs and dances that are used. For example, *Ema* dance is an elegant, graceful and vigorous traditional dance used extensively during coronation and conferment ceremonies of kings and chiefs in Okpe and Uvwie societies. *Ema* dance according to Idolor (2001) is 'performed during coronations, the title taking, burial and funeral ceremonies of the ruling class'. Idolor also affirms that of particular significance of the music is the authentication of status of a newly installed *Okakuro* or *Orodje*.

Historical Background of *Ema* Dance in Uvwie

Ema dance among the Uvwie, has its existence linked to inter-ethnic wars were it was used to celebrate successful campaigns, valour and bravery, both of which were attributes expected of leaders. It later came to be used in initiation rites of kings and conferment of titles on individuals, where it climaxes the social aspects of the events. The installation of Erowhow II in 1954 as Ovie of Uvwie kingdom was the time it took the status of a royal dance, where it was used to express power and affluences[5] Otite (2003). Thereafter, it became a statuesque dance in royal and coronation ceremonies as entertainment component especially in the social aspect of the events.

Ema dance (*Igbe Ema*) for the purposes of coronation and conferment of chieftaincy starts on the eight day after the rite of the title (*Ohovwore*) chieftaincy, as approved by the king. Immediately after the rites which is the installation of chieftaincy title, the social aspects of the installation which is the peak of the installation ceremony commences with *Ema* dance,

whereby a newly installed titled person performs *Ema* to pay homage and appreciation to the king (*ovie*/*orodje*) and chiefs present at the ceremony [6] (Omokri, 1997). The performance is used to symbolize strength of wealth, bravery and valor. Although a professional *Ema* dance group is usually engaged for the installation, aside coronation, the dance may also be performed during the burial ceremonies of the affluent and distinguished sons of the land.

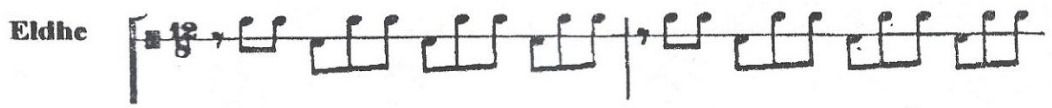
Ema dance involves fast and flexible movements that make it an energy sapping dance capable of being performed by both male and female dancers who are energetic and agile. As a vigorous dance, its basic elements are characterized and subsumed under the following: rhythm, orchestra, costume and song.

Rhythm in *Ema* Dance

Rhythm is the strongest and most distinctive musical component of *Ema* dance performance. The rhythms control and encourage the fast and flexible body movements of the dancers during performance. *Ema* dance rhythm is very complex. The complexity is mostly noticeable in the instrumental part of the dance, and the kinetic response of the dancers to the rhythms being played. This is due to the highly syncopated and varied rhythmic patterns, which are assigned to the instruments.

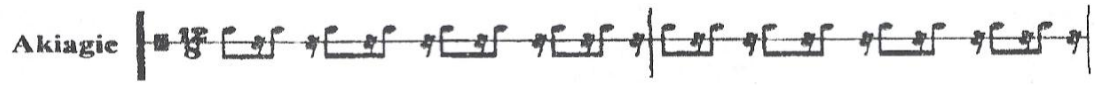
The rhythm from the vocal section is borne out of speech rhythm of the texts. The complexity of the rhythm in *Ema* dance, especially in the instrumental section facilitates dance movements that are unique on its own. The basic rhythm of *Ema* is produced by four instruments, three traditional drums and one trumpet (*Akere*) the drums are *Eldhe*, the mother drum, *Akiaghe*, the middle drum and the baby drum, *Tidi*. The mother drum *Eldhe* plays a leading role by acting as the master instrument in the ensemble. The rhythm produced by this drum is not steady, as it improvises on the fixed rhythms of the middle drum.

The following rhythmic pattern is typical of the *Eldhe*.

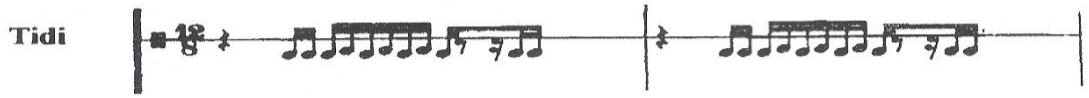


Akiagie, the middle drum produces steady rhythms that support the mother drum *Eldhe*. In other words, it is from the *akiagie* that other drums build their improvisation.

Example of Akiagie Rhythmic Pattern



The *Tidi* on the other hand plays an unsteady fast rhythmic pattern that gives direction and focus to the dancers. Example of Tidi rhythmic pattern is shown below.



The trumpet (*akpere*) on the other hand,plays mellow pulsatiing tones which serve as supportive accompaniment to the entire drumming. It is vital in punctuating the movements of the dancers.

An example of *akpere* rhythm is shown here.



***Ema* Orchestra**

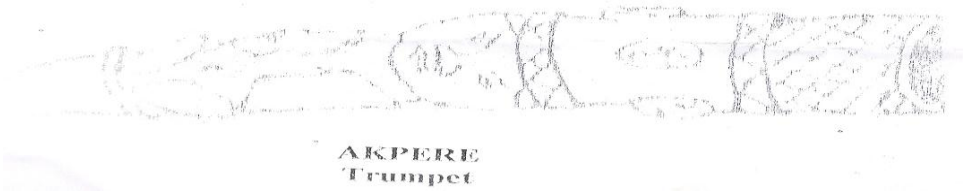
Instrumental ensembles of different types usually characterize most musical types of Africa. The different ensembles have their peculiar sonic and other musical features that consciously or unconsciously create an exhilarating feeling to the listener. For example, Nzewi and Nzewi (2007:12) note that 'African drum music is the friendliest ensemble in which to experience the extra-musical benefits and joy of performance'. The instruments of *Ema* orchestra consist of three drums and a trumpet. The dance is accompanied with three drums and a trumpet, namely: *Eldle*, the

motter drum, *akiagie* the middle drum, *Tide* the baby drum, and the trumpet (*akpere*). These are the instruments that provide the basic rhythmic pattern of *Ema* dance.

In Okpe culture, it is the *ekaigen* orchestra which consists of five membrane drums and two trumpets (*Ekpere* and *Inawori*), that accompany *Ema* dance. Nzewi and Nzewi (2007:2) rightly note that 'in most [African] cultures, drums may be used in pairs of different sizes and thereby provide primary tone levels played by different performaers in music ensembles'. Both the drums and trumpets are usually played by adult males. It is expected that such males be technically proficient on the instruments. Thus, females are usually prohibited from the instrumental performance. Reasons for the prohibition of women from drumming in *Ema* (instrumental) musical performance and other Okpe traditional music types have been discussed elswhere (see Idamoyibo, 2006 and Igbi, 2018). *Ema* orchestra instruments are peculiar to *Ema* dance. This implies that they are mainly used for *Ema* dance performance. The trumpet (*Akpere*) is a royal insignia in Okpe and Uvwie cultures. It is a special instrument that depicts royalty and power during coronation and conferment of chieftaincy titles.

Photograph Showing some *Ema* Musical Instruments.





Ema Performance Costume

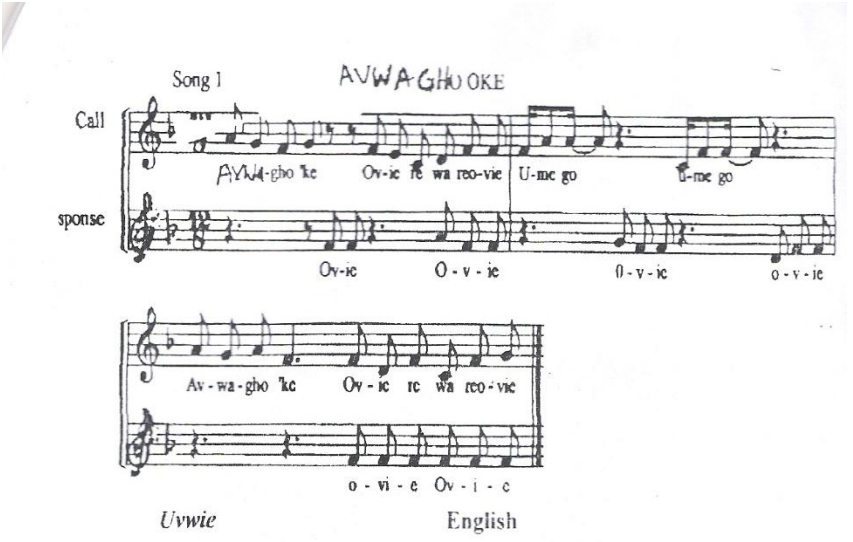
Ema dance is a rigorous dance requiring brisk movements, thus, the dancers are clad in costumes that allow such free body movements. The female costume consists of two white loin cloth (*Osebe gbe onuku*) one upon each other flowing from the breast region down to the ankle with head tie or belt to hold the loin cloth firmly at the stomach. While the male costume consists of white single loin cloth extending from the waist region to the ankle. The white colour of the loin cloth is symbolic, it stands for purity, and this portrays the state of a new chief or king after installation rite. Another aspect of the costume is the use of beads and gold chain worn round the neck and arms by both male and female. The females also hold white handkerchief. Likewise, the males wear hat or cap (*etu*), and hold hand fan (*adjudju*) and horsewhip (*ujo*). The beads are seen as ornaments of dignity.



Ema Songs

According to ldolor (2001), '*Ema* songs are characterized by short melodic sentences repeatedly sung in solo and choral response form'. He further notes that 'some of the texts are made up of obsolete language expressions, dignifying words, and proverbial/[aphoristic sayings] which depict the royal institution with which it is associated'. *Ema* dance songs are mainly dominated by praise and personage themes that are replete with proverbs characterized by meanings understood only by those vast in the culture including her linguistics. Another striking feature of the vocals is the use of repetition. Kofie (1994) cited in Adedeji (2007:62) notes that 'almost all methods of African musical composition, to this day, consist of repetitions'[8]. *Ema* songs make use of repetition that are in call and response form with panegyric undertone. However, such repetitions may occur with variations, depending on the creative ability of the singer.

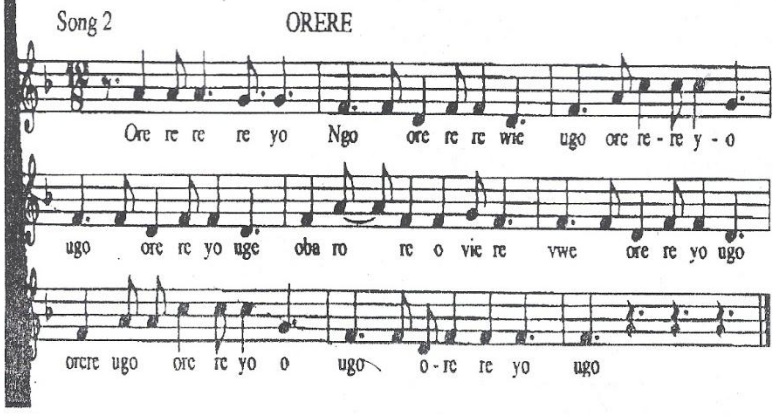
The following are two examples of *Ema* dance songs.



Uvwie English

ORERE YO

2.	*Orere yo ugo*	*Our land is great like the eagle*
	Orere Uvwie ugo	*Uvwie land is great like the eagle*
	Orere you go	*Our land is great like the eagle*
	Obaro de	*Great king!*
	Ovie re vwa re ugo	*Uvwie king is great like the eagle*
	Orere yo ugo	*land is great like the eagle*



ENI

Eee eni enio	Great. Great, great
E-ee-eno – ee – enio	Great, great, great
Oview, re ri be vugie	his movements are
E- eeni ooe – e eni	great, great, great



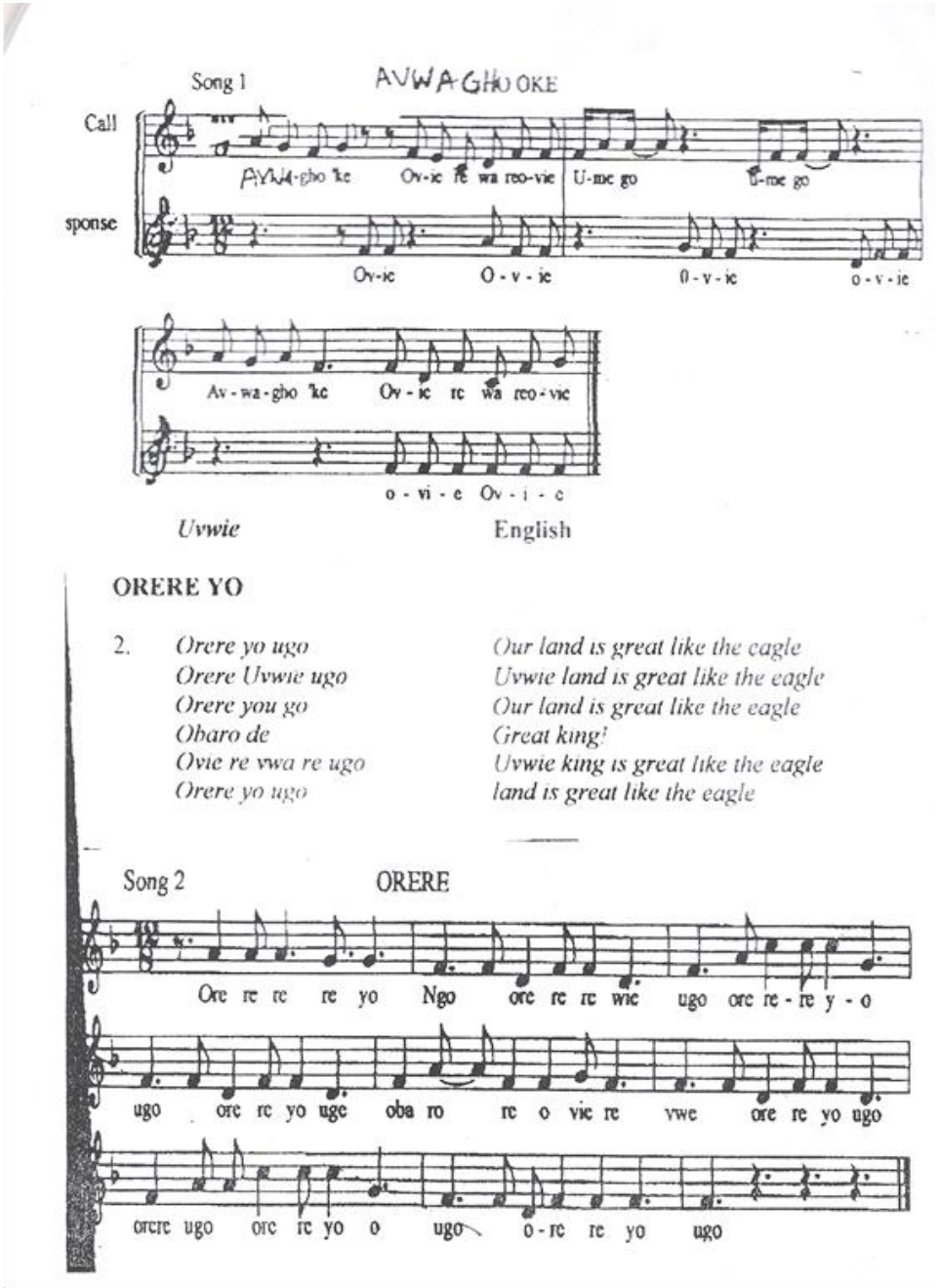
OYIVWARO - O

Oyivwaro, Oyivwaro o, o.	Insulter!, insulter!,
yivwaro was dio hwo yi wue	insulter, who can dare the king?
oba ro de	Great King
oyivwaro.	Insulter



STRUCTURE OF EMA DANCE.

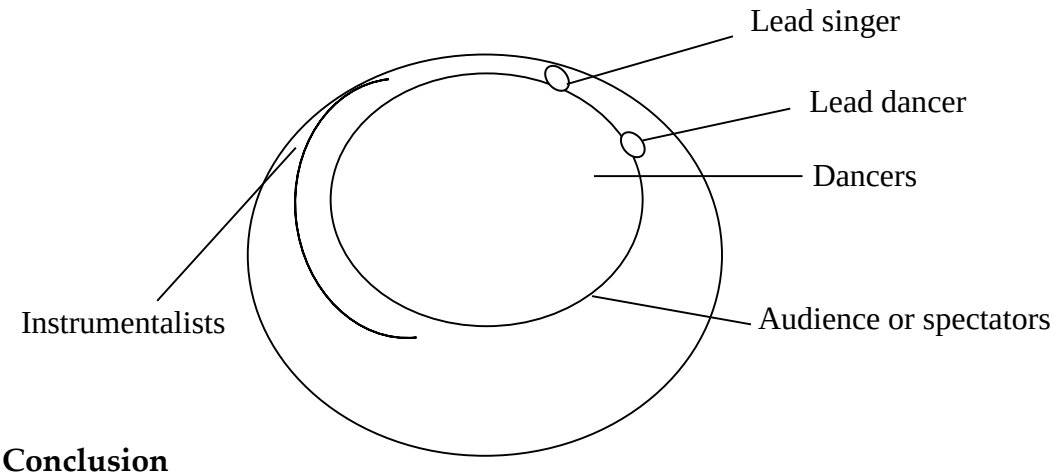
The organizational structure of Ema dance is usually in rectangular or circular. In most cases, it comprises of three stage ring. The first is the innermost ring formed



The above musical examples were sourced from Abugu, P. T (2010).

Uvwie	**Translation**
Vwa vwogho ke Ovie	Honour to the King
Umogu, Ovie	Our King, our King
Wan vwo gho ke Ovie	Honour the king

The lead dancer (*Osu Igbe*) and the lead singer (*Eboenu*) take the lead, while the drummers occupy a side of the stage, and the audience or spectators occupy the outer most ring of the stage. See an example of the circular structure of *Ema* Dance.



Conclusion

The paper applied the descriptive method to discuss some key features of *Ema* dance, including rhythm, costumes and performance techniques. *Ema* dance mostly utilizes four major instruments, namely: *Eldhe*, *Akiagie*, *Tidi* and *Akpere*. The dance is mainly associated with the Okpe, Uvwie and Urhobo cultures of Delta State. As has been mentioned elsewhere (see Ogisi 2015:223 and Igbi 2016), the 'upsurge in religious extremism…' has had its unfavourable toll on aspects of dance and various traditional musical practices. This has led to fears among scholars and practitioners that some dances and songs stand the risk of going extinct. Although such fears are understandable given the realities of the times,

Ogisi (2016) believes it is unlikely, for if it were so, traditional music would have been totally eroded by now. For example, *Ema* dance still features prominently in conferment of chieftaincy titles and coronation of kings in the areas under study. It is also performed during other celebrations by chiefs or kings. For example, during the tenth anniversary celebration of the Orodje of Okpe in 2016, the *Ema* dance troupe of the palace featured prominently during the weeklong carnival. Although through this study, a new reference material for *Ema* dance is added to the scanty existing literature, it is recommended that more in-depth researches be carried out on the dance, so as to fill the gaps that this research and others carried out so far on *Ema*, could not fill.

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