

The Ikenike, Ovenren and Gbogoniyian Dance of Ughievwen of Western Delta, Nigeria: A Historical Interrogation

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Abstract: *The arrival of man on the planet, earth was characterised by his membership of one society or another. Such societies were either the ones he was born into, or the societies that existed where he grew up. Which ever of this two suppositions, man acquired from the society its culture. In Ughievwen land of Western Niger Delta, the Ikenike, Ovenren and Gbogoniyian Dance group was one important aspect of the people's culture that gave order and meaning to the social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious modes of organisation and as such distinguished them from their neighbours. African culture like other cultures of the world is dynamic, but this will not imply outright extinction or obliteration of the cultures. To worsen matters colonial historiography has tended to portray African culture as not worth studying. This perception has made many cultures in Africa including Nigeria, to pale into extinction. This paper examined the Ikenike, Ovenren and Gbogoniyian Dance of the Ughievwen group of western Delta of Nigeria as a way of refuting the fallacious Eurocentric perception and in the conclusion, it called for the revival of the Ikenike, Ovenren and Gbogoniyian Dance which is part of the Ughievwen people's culture for better developmental strides.*

Keywords: *Gbogoniyian, Historical interrogation, Ikenike, Ovenren and Ughievwen*

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture remains the cornerstone of the past of people in any society. It entails the custom, arts and social institutions of a particular group or nation and thus the totality of the people's way of life (Maigoro, 2011: 62). In fact, since the attainment of political independence by most African states from their colonial masters, peoples of the continent, including Nigeria, have remained trapped between two worlds: the heritage of the African past and the imperatives of contemporary living derived from western experiences (Ayoade, 1986). However, there is the possibility of mutual co-existence and accommodation between elements of tradition and modernity. From a recent study, it has been shown that aspects of institutions of different historical origins actually co-existed and interacted (Whitaker, 1970:14).

An important aspect of the culture of the Ughievwen people from early times was the Ikenike, Ovenren and Gbogoniyian Dance group. Although, the origin of these dances appear not clear, nevertheless, they expressed individual and collective feelings of the people. Dance, to Africans, was not just a road side or biological urge, but a process of exposure and training as it represented important occasions in society. As Miller put it:

African dance has traditionally played an essential role in the culture of the tribes. Much more than entertainment, dance communicates emotions, celebrate rites of passage and help strengthen the bonds between members of the tribe as a whole (Miller, 2000: 40).

Pre-colonial Ughievwen society had dances that portrayed their rich culture. Apart from Udje dance which has been researched into, (Darah, 1982), others like Ikenike, Ovenren and Gbogoniyian have received less historical attention.

The point must be made that cultural studies of Nigerian societies seem to have received less attention from scholars. This perhaps may have been due to the perceptions that culture is inimical

to development (Douglas, 2004). This view was anchored on the belief that culture is an irrational force that generates inertia and culminates in economic backwardness (Maigoro, 2011: 64). This perception appears too straight-jacketed and should be jettisoned because culture, no matter how it is branded, offers a tool for moral education, mirrors the past of a people and reveals a lot about people and their institutions that could influence development. Relationship between groups and individuals often produce a balance which is a basic requirement for development.

This paper albeit providing information about Ughievwen geographical setting, examined the concept of culture within the Nigerian context, the historical development of the Ikenike, Ovenren and Gbogoniyen Dance groups of the Ughievwen people, their organisation vis-à-vis the importance of dances as a vital element of culture and called for a revival of these dances before they are completely dwarfed or obliterated by modernism. The life of tomorrow must draw from the experiences of yesterday, nurtured by those of today to serve as useful guide for the unknown tomorrow. Any community which seeks development and wants to have it must not say the times are hard, but must employ every known trick in the book to have it (Maigoro, 2011: 62). Culture is therefore vital to development. Western dance culture must not be allowed to obliterate our Nigerian dances.

Dances played a major role in the social cohesion of Ughievwen society before 1900. As mentioned earlier, Udje dance have been researched into, by G.G. Darah and that study showed that it was common to the Ughievwen and Udu people. This was predated by J.P. Clark's article "Poetry of the Urhobo Dance, Udje" (Clark, 1965: 283). However, in modern times, the Udje dance appear to be restricted to traditional occasions such as burial ceremonies and confined to the elders of the society since the younger generations seem not keen to learn and practise it. Ikenike, Ovenren and Gbogoniyen dance flourished in the 1930s and 1950s to the extent that they were organised in the form of social clubs with officers such as President/Chairman, Secretary etc. (Koyor, 2009). What led to the sudden abandonment of these dances seems enigmatic and as such, their revival is necessary.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the historical method of research. It utilized information derived from oral interviews and the intelligence report on the Ughievwen people compiled by S.E. Johnson in 1932. It also made use of the few existing secondary sources by scholars who have written about the people. The study showed that dance constitutes a vital element of the Ughievwen culture. Thus, in the conclusion, the study calls for ways of preserving the Ikenike, Ovenren and Gbogoniyen dance of the people. To achieve this, the Urhobo Progressive Union has a lot to do in this direction.

3. GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING OF UGHIEVWEN

The Ughievwen are found in Ughelli South Local Government Area of Delta State of Nigeria. The sub-culture area has its administrative headquarters at Otujeremi. Its territory is bounded on the south and south-east by the Okpare or Ekiagbodo creek; on the west by the Gbekebo creek; on the North and North-west by the Saba creek in the Udu Local Government Area of Delta State, on the North-east by the Agbarho clan; and on the East by the Ughelli clan (Johnson, 1932: 3–5). The area is a contiguous landmass generally plain and low-lying land of about 6 metres above the sea level with an intricate network or meandering creeks, interconnected rivulets and a tidal river, with the River Forcados as the major body of water (Pippah, 1999). The area lies wholly in the tropics and could be located roughly at 5, 12N and 5, 80E. The area also occupies about 279 square kilometres (Pippah, 1999).

Ughievwen land is situated in the rainforest region of Nigeria. The area, as with the rest of the Niger Delta, has a humid climate that is sub-equatorial with a long wet season lasting from March to October (Aweto, 2005: 684 – 685). This alternates with a shorter dry season that lasts from November to February. The climate is influenced by two prevailing air masses – the South-west monsoon wind and the North-east trade wind. While the former prevails during the wet season, the latter prevails during the dry season. The South-west monsoon wind originates from the Atlantic Ocean and is associated with the wet season, being warm and moisture-laden. The North-east trade wind, on the other hand, originates from the Sahara deserts. Its effects are most

noticeable in Ughievwen land between December and February during which it ushers in dry and dusty harmattan (Aweto, 2005: 685).

The annual rainfall in the Ughievwen area, like other parts of Urhoboland is high usually up to 2500mm (Aweto, 2005: 685) while the average sunshine hours are 1800. The implication of this is that on the average, there is active sunshine for forty-two percent on daily basis (Oyaide, 1991: 1). The beginning and the end of the west season are usually marked by intense thunderstorms on short duration, often accompanied by strong winds which may blow off roofs or buildings and cause destruction of property. Prolonged and gentle showers usually lasting several hours or a few days, are more characteristic of the middle of the wet season. The rainfall regime is double peak, the two periods of peak rainfall being June/July and September, which are separated by a relatively dry period in August. Annual temperature in the area, like other parts of Urhoboland is 27°C with no marked seasonal departure from the average temperature as the annual range of temperature is quite low, rarely exceeding 3°C (Aweto, 2005: 686).

Also, the soil within the Ughievwen area is deeply weathered and nutrient deficient, especially within the Ukpédi part of the area. In well-drained areas, the soil is mostly oxisols according to the United States soil taxonomy (Soil Survey Staff, 1996) and they are called ferralitic soils. They are predominantly sandy. The proportion of sand in the top 10cm of the soil may be up to 90%. As a result of this, the soil is loose and poorly aggregated as it contains very low level of clay and organic matter. The entire Ughievwen area is said to have been occupied by four main families that sprang from the four children of Ughievwen, the eponymous founder. They are Orhowe, Owahwa, Ukpédi and Uvburie. Even though there are dearth of written works on the early history of the Ughievwen people, recent research shows that the area now occupied by the people may have been occupied by them within the beginning of the 18th century (Oghi, 2013). Upon settlement on the area, the people practised their culture, related amongst themselves harmoniously before the advent of colonialism in the 19th century. Aspects of the people's culture that marked and will continue to easily distinguish them from their neighbours was the Ikenike, Ovenren and Gbogoniyán dances. Was this still the case with the advent of colonialism and even the post colonial period?

4. CULTURE: ITS CONCEPT AND THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

As earlier stated, culture refers to the totality of people's way of life. However, for the African its meaning is clearer when the question of who culture is for, where and how it is expressed and why (Andah, 1982: 8) is looked into. Therefore, for society to be properly organised, the people's 'expression' and the ways by which the expression occurs is crucial. Expression of culture occurs in two ways – by socialization and enculturating new members of the society (Ademiluyi, 2011: 469). The new born children of the society learns the techniques and ideas of the society via formal and informal ways of social relationships. What is learnt determines their needs. This comes through habituation and is usually influenced by each person's social and historical circumstances. The personality of the individual is thus influenced by society's 'expression' and the way individuals encountered the experience. The possession and expression of social relationship in human societies requires persons who can handle the culture and play their role in these social relationships (Ajayi, 1990: 15).

History has shown that culture is dynamic and for Africa, her peoples' cultural outlooks were influenced by several factors such as Arab imperialism, slave trade, western colonialism and imperialism. In spite of these influences, there are countries that have been able to build viable nations without detracting from their culture. Illuminating examples are America, Russia, China and countries that make up the western cultural unit. These countries did not accept new ideas by being critical of their own cultures, rather; they did and continued in their various ways to appreciate their own culture. In this way, these countries developed socio-cultural system geared to their need and aspirations, at least as perceived by them at the particular time and for the future (Andah, 1982: 12).

Culture, conceptually viewed is made up of material and non-material components. While the former consists of all objects, physical traits, instruments, tools that are used by people in various aspects of their community, the non-material culture refers to ideas, attitudes and ways of doing

things which constitute the people's way of life (Idowu, 2011: xv). Non-material culture has two variants which are the cognitive and the normative aspects. The cognitive consists of the ideas, knowledge, attitudes, values, beliefs and patterns of expression and communication prevalent among a given people. The normative aspect on the other hand, consists of the rules, norms, morality and other accepted ways of doing things in a particular society. Therefore, the Ikenike, Ovenren and Gbogoniyani Dance group of Ughievwen of Western Delta, Nigeria which is the focus of this discussion formed part of the cognitive aspect of Ughievwen culture. The dynamism of culture, as is the case for African culture does not imply extinction or outright obliteration.

5. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF IDENTITIES AMONG THE UGHIEVWEN PEOPLE

Various traditions exist concerning the settlement of the Ughievwen in their present abode. These traditions are complicated because of the intertwined nature of the stories of waves of migrations from various directions in the course of their search for new homes. While some claimed to have migrated long distances, others moved only within a geographical region as evidenced in the movement of Owahwa from Otughievwen to found Owahwa (Nukueye, 2003: 13). Some were people fleeing from events in larger societies such as Benin, while others came for reasons of the quest for safety and security (Usore, 2008). As a result of the complex nature of the stories, a recent study streamlined them into four traditions of state formation (Oghi, 2013). These are: Hamitic hypothesis, exodus from Benin, the Niger/Benue Confluence hypothesis and the Ijo tradition.

The study analysed the traditions of origin and settlement of the Ughievwen people and dismissed the oriental tradition (Middle East claim) as perhaps, a search for noble ancestry or part of the discredited hamitic hypothesis. The exodus from Benin tradition, was argued to be a generalisation from the Urhobo and not particularly for the Ughievwen. This corroborates M.Y. Nabofa's claim that "Urhobo do not trace their origin to a common ancestor nor did any military force appear to wield them together with force" (Nabofa, 2005: 370). The Niger/Benue Confluence area idea, was also dismissed because there seem to be no plausible explanation for deriving the Ughievwen people from the confluence area. However, the tradition of origin linked to the Ijo (Ogobiri) finds historical basis in the long social ties between the Ughievwen and the Ijo. Although from the analysis of E.J. Alagoa, the period of settlement of the Ughievwen people on the area was suggested to be in the seventeenth century, (Alagoa, 2005: 193), this recent study, relied fairly on the king-list of one of the royal families, Uvburie, and an approximated mean of thirty years reign, to suggest an arrival period within the beginning of the eighteenth century.

In pre-colonial Ughievwen society, the family, lineage or kindred and the village were the cultural units of administration, while the basic institutions were Okpako Orere, Aden/Igbun title society, Ahware Oworho, Uvbie and Ewheya. The whole of Ughievwen clan, with an eponymous founder called Ughievwen had common practices that held the people together. The Ughievwen situation was similar to that of Uganda where "there had never been room for individualism or impersonal governorship requiring equally impersonal regulations to service them" (Karigure, 1980). The clan, (Ughievwen) by virtue of sharing the same ancestor had a common identity and consequently the same form of administration. The clan system which the effect of modernity is fast eroding need to be embraced and practised in view of its importance to societal growth. There were intermarriages with neighbouring Udu people and those who were assimilated adopted the practices of the villages into which they were married (Okpohie, 2008). As the Ughievwen people intermingled, people learnt new ideas and cultural practices, not known to them before. It is suggested that in all probabilities, as a result of this intercourse with peoples such as the Ijos, Itsekiris and the Edos, cultural diffusions could have taken place.

6. IKENIKE, OVENREN AND GBOGONIYAN DANCE AMONG THE UGHIEVWEN PEOPLE

The origin of Ikenike and other dances are fairly remembered (Yavwaru, 2011). It was a still dance in which the performer tied his feet to a pair of stils and with the assistance of colleagues, stood up to walk and danced stylishly to the rhythm of drums. The performer bent his body and exhibited all sort of styles in order to entertain spectators. He could also choose to dance on a rope or on a bottle or even on top of any object. Most Ughievwen elders believed that Ikenike was a dance of the gods of the land. Consequently, they claimed that all professionals who practised the dance were taught its secrets and expertise by the gods (Okpohie, 2008). The truth of this claim

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seems questionable because the informant could not explain further. However, considering the agility and the possibility of a person being able to dance on stils as shown in the picture below, the explanation behind its performance must be mystical.

Picture showing Ikenike Dance of Ughievwen



Source: Nukueye, J.E. (2003), *The Ughievwen Kingdom: Cultural Antecedents*, Effurun: Chams Publishers, 47..

Closely associated with the Ikenike dance, was the traditional dance called Ovenren. It was peculiar to the Ughievwen and Udu people. Information as to which of these group first practised seems not forthcoming because in my fieldwork, both the Udu and Ughievwen lay claim to being the first to practise it. However, for the Ughievwen, it is said to have been invented by a group of young men and women. Its main purpose was to entertain members of the public during festivals and other important occasion. Few existing literature lend support to this claim. Ovenren dance, remarked Nukueye:

... is the fastest and most vigorous traditional dance in Ughievwen land. This was why membership of this cultural troupe was restricted only to very agile and able-bodied young men and women". (Nukueye, 2003: 47).

Like the Ikenike dance, Ovenren was highly diabolical and spiritual. A cult was dedicated to the performance of the dance. Rituals were made that bound members initiated into the cult (Okpohie, 2008). As a result of the diabolical bond of inseparability among members of the cult, in later years, the troupe gradually faded into oblivion. For instance, it was claimed that members of the troupe became so infatuated with each other that the ladies among them could not break the spiritual bond with men of their choice outside the group (Nukueye, 2003: 47). Those who dared were forced back by the diabolical powers of the Ovenren cult. However, the issue of freedom of choice of men notwithstanding, the group helped to portray the culture of the Ughievwen people. It could even be argued that if marriage is a life-long contract, such freedom ought to be exercised before membership and where the choice was otherwise, then membership of such group was even a way of promoting fidelity.

As stated earlier, there was also Gbogoniyán dance. The dance was said to have been introduced into Ughievwen land by few individuals who travelled out to other lands from where they copied it (Nukueye, 2003: 48). It was performed by men and women. Like the Ikenike and Ovenren dance, the purpose of the dance was to entertain the public during festivals and other cultural celebrations. It was a type of dance in which men wore attires of women, improvised breasts, put on earrings, lipsticks, wigs, skirts and blouses. However, the coming of western culture appears to have diminished the popularity of this dance in the Ughievwen area. In fact, since the 1980s, there

has been no performance of the dance (Koyor, 2011). The consequence of this neglect has been the gradual extinction of these dances. This development is unfortunate because there is no way society can progress without memory of the past. Neglect of culture could also be detrimental to the upbringing of children in modern times. This was adroitly captured by S.I. Akenzua when he said:

... that all the anti-social activities we are witnessing today stem from the fact that the so-called western education has led our society to throw over-board our customs and traditions ... young men nowadays believe that these are now things of the past and that they have no effect..." (Akenzua, 2013: 26-27).

Ughievwen dances like Ikenike, Ovenren and Gbogoniyan remain part of the people's culture that should not be allowed to go into extinction.

7. DANCE AS A VITAL ELEMENT IN CULTURE

In different clime of the world, dances form vital part of socio-cultural life. In order to understand the social structures and life of people, studies in this area need to receive the attention of scholars. This is because the knowledge of an ethnic movement vocabulary is more meaningful and further enhanced when accompanied by knowledge of the purposes, occasions, condition and social-cultural contexts in which they occur (Arnold, 1991: 4). In the typical African setting, dance is appreciated on the strength of its potency of communication. This factor of communication explores the origin of such dances not only in form, but also in the style and content. It is the form and style that constitute the socio-environmental problems that is shown through body movement to be answered while being entertained (Akas, 2012).

For Africans, and indeed the Ughievwen people of western Delta of Nigeria, dances represented important occasions in the society. Apart from the general purpose of entertainment which it served, there were other occasions such as marriages, circumcision rites and even death, when their performance was needed. Generally, dances, was a language through which people shared each other's pain and accomplishments (Nasser, 1993: 6). For the Ughievwen people, dance represented and will continue to be pointer to their traditional beliefs and custom, hence it is part of their culture.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the Ikenike, Ovenren and Gbogoniyan dance of the Ughievwen people. These dances evolved out of the intermingling between the Ughievwen and their neighbours upon their arrival in the area by the eighteenth century and thus formed part of their culture. As it were, apart from entertainment, they were vital tools for social, religious and communal harmony. Regrettably, these valuable "bride" of the Ughievwen people now seem dwarfed by western dances as most youth (boys and girls) no longer seem to show interest in them. There is urgent need to revive these dances because they constitute the "Africanness" of the people. In fact, if twenty-first century African states must extricate themselves from the daunting challenges of under-development, one area that must receive attention is cultural rejuvenation, and for the Ughievwen people, the dances discussed above must not be allowed to die. It is thus incumbent upon the leadership of the Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) and the Government of Delta State to ensure that the culture of the Ughievwen nation and cultures of other ethnic groups in Delta State are preserved in whatever form as it could influence development.

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