

THE DECAY OF CULTURAL PERFORMANCES IN EKPEYE LAND: A FOCUS ON NWOKOLOGBO DANCE

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Abstract

The place of culture in human society cannot be underestimated. Culture is the nucleus of a people's life. It establishes everything about them: Their language, food, dress pattern, arts, value system, occupation and general ways of life. In Africa, culture and the people are inseparable entities with symbiotic relationships. None of which exists without the other. Recent developments around African landscape have however resulted in the decay and general extinction of many rich cultural values. One of the most affected in Ekpeye Ethnic Nationality of Rivers State, Nigeria is the *Nwokologbo* Dance; An age long cultural dance performance which the people find deep expression in. This study adopted both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to investigate the previous and recent performances of *Nwokologbo* dance to arrive at its results. After a copious analysis of available data, it was discovered that apart from a recent performance of *Nwokolobo* dance in 2016 and 2018 by *Ogbo* community on the invitation of Total E &P, *Nwokolobo* dance has not been in practice in Ekpeye land for over 35 years. There is also no significant attempt at reviving the dance culture. The study examined western dynamism and lack of succession plan as some of the causes of extinction of this revered culture. The study recommended that, the Supreme Council of Ekpeye Traditional Rulers and Chiefs, as well as the elites should plan to re-introduce and regulate the modus operandi of *Nwokolobo* cultural dance in Ekpeye land as to avoid extinction. It is also recommended that the Nigerian government at various levels and other critical stakeholders in Nigeria should take deliberate steps at making the *Nwokologbo* culture to be internationally competitive.

Keywords: Decay, cultural, performances, Ekpeye, land

Introduction

Most origins of a people are based on oral traditions told by the elders and historians in a community. Alagoa and Kiebel (1989) in Oguzor (2011) opines that, tradition of origin means, those stories told in any community by its historians as accounts of how communities came to be what they are". That many communities in Africa defined themselves through their traditions of origin, which served as instruments for unity, and the strength of such traditions lies in the common acceptance by ordinary people as authoritative information gotten from the ancestors. The authoritative information is not mere invention, but relates to real historical experience and installed as equipment, which many communities today used to determine who they are.

Based on the assertions of Alagoa and Kiebel, the most popular tradition of origin of Ekpeye is oral account of Akalaka who is believed to have fled from the ancient Benin Kingdom to found what is now known and called Ekpeye. One of the Ethnic Nationalities in Rivers State. In addition,

Nwuche (2024) asserts that the man called Ekpeye was the first son of the Great Akalaka who migrated from the ancient Benin kingdom and later settled first at Odieroke, a shore near the River Orashi and finally settled at Ula-ubie, now the ancestral home of Ekpeye people. That, the exit of Akalaka from the Benin kingdom to now Rivers State was due to infighting within the Benin royal family and Akalaka perhaps, fled amidst the rumors of his death because of his noncompliance to unlawful proscription under the reign of Oba Awuarre.

Besides, Ajugo (2020) has a contrary view of Ekpeye history and says, the land and people called Ekpeye today situated at the eastern upland of Niger Delta until 1550 CE were called Akalaka and after 1600 CE the name “Akalaka” went completely out of use. In furtherance of his account, Ajugo explained that between 5000 and 6000 years ago, there had formed a cultured community around the River Niger, just about the confluence within River Benue. From there, various groups drifted in different directions and as they did so, they gradually become differentiated in language. The group that went westward later became the Igala, Yoruba, Itshekiri. Those who left to southwest later developed Edo, Esan, Urhobo, Isoko languages; and those who moved southeastward are the Igbo of today. Ajugo concluded that, the group that went straight to the southward down the River Niger and off into the river Orashi to settle at the edge of Niger Delta became the Akalaka-Ekpeye.

Notwithstanding, Ajugo’s contention is in disagreement with Isaac (1993), Oguzor (2011), Nwuche and Oguzor (2011), Ekine (2017) and Amadi (2018). Both agree that the majority of the Ekpeye, Ogba and Ikwerre settlements have their roots traceable to Akalaka and the Benin Kingdom, while Iwhurohna or Ikwerre is known as the third son of the Great Akalaka that migrated from Benin and finally settled in a new abode called Rivers State.

However, the Ekpeye people constitute an ethnic group in Rivers State of Nigeria that lies between the Latitude 4 46’ N and 5 15’ N and Longitude 6 26’ E and 6 46’ E. Ekpeye has common boundaries with the Ikwerre speaking tribe to the west, the Ogba speaking tribe to the north, the Abua speaking tribe to the south and Engenni speaking tribe to the east; bound by two popular rivers; Orashi and Sombriero that link up to the Atlantic Ocean (see figure 1.1). Ekpeye Ethnic

Nation has six recognized clans called Ubie, Akoh, Igbuduya, Upata, Ehuda and Ugbobi, and each clan has a tremendous influence on its people in terms of culture and religion etc.

Apart from farming and fishing, the major hobby of Ekpeye people is arts and culture in variety linking the people with the spirit world. Few of Ekpeye cultural heritages include masquerades, cultural dances and musical displays which play important roles in promoting cohesion and identifying the people culturally among other tribes in the Niger Delta. Thus, *Nwokolobo* culture granted Ekpeye people a crystal identity of what they are; about their present and past.

In promoting Niger delta culture, *Nwokolobo* dance is not left out because of its usefulness in the area of entertainment, religious profession and physical training etc. At this point, this study would assist the people's consciousness in the conservation of their rich cultural values. The study is predicated on the current state of near extinction of this rich cultural value of the Ekpeye people due to western influence over the people and eminent lack of interest amongst successive generations after the demise of its original adherents. The young females of nowadays have stopped active rehearsals, performances and general participation in activities concerning *Nwokolobo* dance for about three decades both in schools and community festivities. What is now left of the *Nwokologbo* culture is the debris. Even more problematic to this is the lack of visible documentation on the subject of *Nwokolobo*. It is believed that the current western acculturation across African sub-Saharan regions led the inferiority complex and syncretism that make Africans see their culture as inferior, savage and primitive compared to others (Ihuaoba, 2013). This perhaps makes most Africa people; especially Ekpeye to re-interpret or revitalize their own cultures to suit European's modern decency. It is therefore, against this background that this research was motivated. This study aims at analyzing the practices of *Nwokolobo* cultural dance of Ekpeye people from the past to the present time and to examine the extent of changes that affected the dance-style, costumes and leadership structure of *Nwokolobo* cultural group. The study would further examine the spiritual inclination attached to *Nwokolobo*. The conclusion of this study would therefore enlighten the general public the historical perspective of *Nwokolobo* cultural dance of Ekpeye people and as well as the practices and symbolism as basis of re-proving *Nwokolobo* as one of the socio-cultural organizations in Ekpeye land borrowed from Igbo extraction.

Historical Perspective of *Nwokolobo* Dance in Ekpeye

Nwokolobo cultural dance originated from Owerri-Igbo, now Imo State of Nigeria, into Edeoha community in 1920 by Okpara Enetani, a man who had lived many years. Okpara Enetani was a local singer and dancer who spent all his life in Igbo land and later returned home with a borrowed cultural dance from Igbo. Initially, the dance was fondly called “Nweyi-kolobo.” Parents were approached to allow their maidens learn chest-dance different from the original Ekpeye waist-dance style. The chest-dance style training was achieved after Okpara Enetani had engaged male adults or players of local musical instruments like gourd trumpets and flutes, wooden gongs, and drums and rattles (sound producers) etc (Nwuche, 2016 and Godpower, 2023).

In 1930s, the practice of *Nwokolobo* dance became more popular in Edeoha, Ehuda, Ogbo, and Ubeta and spread to other parts of Ekpeye communities include Okporowo, Ogbele, Ochigba, Ozochi, Abarikpo, Ihugbogo, Ubio, Ubarama, Oyigba etc after protracted negotiations and patronages by Chief Sergeant China, Chief Ekpahuru Imo and Jeremiah Okirigwe of Ehuda and Elder E. Nwuche from Ochigba. They championed the course of allowing *Nwokolobo*, a foreign cultural dance to exist in the Ekpeye land because of their positions they occupied as warrant chiefs recognized by the colonial government. The enthusiasm was based on promoting Igbo-Ekpeye culture and to encourage the girls participate in *Nwokolobo* dance group. The patrons also sponsored the provision of *Nwokolobo* costumes in a manner that portrays elegance as truly African maidens (Nwuche, 2016). Apart from *Nwokolobo* dance, they were major sponsors of foreign cultures in Ekpeye land such as *Egbukele* masquerade and *Ikpafu* dance from Abua, *Okani-pele* masquerade dance from Arochukwu, Abia State. Others are *Ewele*-show and *Okwigi* dance, *Ugbo* and *Awheleja* dance were original cultures of Ekpeye people.

Between late 1950s and early 1960s, another sponsors of cultures into Ekpeye land emerged They were Isaiah Ikah of Edeoha, Amadi Ikpe and Orlu Joshua Nwuche of Ehuda became the patrons of *kokoma* dance that originated from Egbema axis. Also, Eze Chinedu Unwomela Ideozu and Chief Cheta Tom Imo of Ehuda were the major sponsors of *Emekemeke* musical dance from Kalabari-Ijaw where Okpara Joshua was the lead vocalist, while Chinyere Ekpeta was the instrumentalist playing *Idu sabu* (seven clay pots). During 1970s Okpara Joshua slightly escaped from been jailed on defamation of character by Chief E.E. Ihua. Another sole promoter of *Ugbo*

dance and Ugbokolo boat regatta were Chief James Ashiaga Apia of Ehuda and Eze Ashrim Edmund Unoshi of Ihuaba after the demise of Isaiah Ishiaki and Ekpahuru Imo. Victor Uwoh of Ehuda and Okirima of Ihuaba were the chief vocalists of Ugbo musical dance. The famous *Okwabele* masquerade and *Obu-mini* dance of Ehuda were single handedly sponsored by Eze C.U. Ideozu after the Nigerian civil war. The pioneer members included: Idoke Ude, Chinyere Ekpeta, Ugbuluma Ewoh, Okpara Joshiah, Ogo *Okodu*, John Ogolomatubu, Wheye Owelu, Whoyawhoya Ideozu, Okomadu Ajuwulu, Godday Ideozu and a few to mention with few women. But, today the above mentioned cultural organizations no longer exist due to lack of patronage by Ekpeye chiefs and elites.

However, *Nwokolobo* dance is a communal anthology of Ekpeye people that promote both cultural and social affairs among the maidens. *Nwokolobo* dance is a symbolic traditional entertainment that is performed during Ekpeye New-Yam festivals (Ogwu Ekpeye), burials, marriage and other public functions or ceremonies, Oguzor (2011). *Nwokolobo* is a chest-dance usually performed by females and the best dancer is promoted with a title called *Ezenweyi*. During *Nwokolobo* dance, *Ezenweyi* is admired by onlookers when dancing on the platform through the displayed ladders (*Utopo*). Oguzor further explains that, as the dance progresses, the *Ezenweyi* will begin to display her special free dance steps elegantly with other maiden dancers who dance out to wipe off her face with white handkerchiefs signifying humility and motivation with the support of talking drums, trumpets and flutes made out of gourds.

The rhythm of the lead trumpet ushers *Ezenweyi* to dance to the platform while entertaining the crowd unconsciously for a period of time. Then the lead dancer *Ezenweyi* will dance sagaciously until she sits at the top of the platform (*Utopo*) while admiring herself with the use of a mirror placed by at the side of the platform. She dances backwardly down to the ground when she is believed to have fully possessed by the spirits. An *Ijele* textile is tied on the waists and other parts of the body of the dancers (Godpower, 2023).

Although *Nwokolobo* dance is spiritually inclined at every period of display particularly when libations and incantations are been performed by the group head or scepter holders invoking the spirits in the dancers. The purpose of this in most communities in Ekpeye is to identify the

celebrants with gift items, while regarding them as evoked spirits of the ancestors. At certain stage, the dancers also become intoxicated or possessed when dancing, while their relatives applaud them with pleasantries or gifts. During this period, men and women of integrity do come out to initiate their female children into the cultural group. The initiations are done with ritual songs to engage the spirits because of the non members.

But, today *Nwokolobo* cultural dance is no longer traced or practiced anywhere in Ekpeye because the supposed custodians of this tradition are all dead or have been shying away from it. Besides, *Nwokolobo* practice has been rejected over 35years ago due to the advent of Christianity and civilization. Thus, the last known *Nwokolobo* outing took place between 2016 and 2018 when Total E&P invited *Nwokolobo* group of Ogbo community to feature in their organized workshop or functions. During these aforementioned periods, there were noticeable changes created in the *Nwokolobo* dance due to extinction or influence of modern life. During their 2016 and 2018 outings, the female dancers wore different costumes against distinctive costumes approved for the dance (Godpower, 2023).

Symbolism of Dancing Styles and Costumes of *Nwokolobo*

George, Nwuche et al (2022) agree that religious presumed culture reflects the exercise of human will and mankind where rules and values operate together to build human faith and survival through festivity. It also relates to our actions since cultural dance represents the realities of stability to regulate social life and culture of a people. In the same vein, Nwuche and Adausi et al (2013) supported the above view that cultural practices allow people to fix their convictions on symbolic representation as a means of survival or worship. In spite of this, people believe that symbolic objects are the subject of myths in which the gods, even human beings use objects to declare their convictions resulted from man's curiosity. George and Nwuche et al believe that Eyaal-Abuan culture of Abua people upholds the same symbols like *Nwokolobo* to portray the belief system and adulations that are connected to spiritual beings.

However, *Nwokolobo* dance brings inhabitants together and functions in solidarity of their belief system. It is believed that these values help in expelling evil spirits away from Ekpeye land (Nwuche, 2013). The waist-dancers always appear with decent costumes that distinguishes Ekpeye

cultures from the others with the help of costumes and instruments (Naibi, 2021). The costumes and instruments include aweleka (Don bell), Ehubele (Indian bell), Utopo (Base-ladder), *Ijele* (native cloth), Onyo (mirror), Kappa (top red dress), Oji (drum), Ekwe (wooden drum) and Odu (local trumpet) etc. *Aweleka* - is held on the hands by the lead dancer to demonstrate or dance, while *Ehubele* is tied on the breast to produce variety of saccharine sounds to alert the spirits and the dancers as well. *Utopo* platform - is attached with *Onyo* and a seat at the top for the lead dancer to climb by the support of *Oji* sounds (the drums). Though, *Nwokolobo* dance was not only meant for entertainment alone, it is practiced for uniting the people. Below are modern *Nwokolobo*



Figure 1. Don bell. Note. Held by dancer to produce sound. Culled from. “*Aweleka Nwokolobo dance of Ogbo*” By Godpower, 2023



Figure 2. Indian bell. Note. Ewhubele tied on the breasts of the dancers to produce Sounds. Culled from. “*Aweleka dance of Ogbo*” By Godpower, 2023



Figure 3. Utopo platform. Note. Platform for climbing by dancer when possessed by the spirits. Culled from. “*Aweleka Nwokolobo dance of Ogbo*” By Godpower, 2023



Figure 4. *Ijele* textile. Note. Fabrics to cover dancer’s waist. Culled from. “*Aweleka Nwokolobo dance of Ogbo*” By Godpower, 2023



Figure 5. *Red costume.* Note. Fabrics used for covering dancer's body.
Culled from. "*Aweleka Nwokolobo dance of Ogbo*" photograph by
Godpower, 2023



Figure 7.
Maiden dancer with normal costumes. Note. Complete
Nwokolobo outfits. From. "*Aweleka Nwokolobo dance of Ogbo*"
By Godpower, 2023

Figure 6. *Local musical instruments.* Note. Instruments
used to produce sounds.

Culled from. "*Aweleka Nwokolobo dance of Ogbo*" By
Godpower, 2023



Figure 8. *Modern platform.* Note. Dancer on top of
the platform with symbolic waist-dance. Culled
from. "*Nwokolobo dance of Ogbo*" By Godpower,
2023

Conclusion

Nwokolobo cultural dance has been influenced by Western dogmatism. From the analysis above, the recent performance of *Nwokolobo* cultural dance by Ogbo people reveals that the entire performance has been significantly abridged from what it used to be. A lot of its rich values have been lost. It is therefore part of the recommendation of this study that intentional measures should be put in place to revive and promote *Nwokolobo* dance. This would

Recommendations

Based on the above study, these are recommendations in order to rejuvenate the modern practices of *Nwokolobo* cultural dance in Ekpeye land:

- i. The Supreme Council of Traditional Rulers and Chiefs in Ekpeye should re-introduce and regulate the modus operandi of *Nwokolobo* cultural dance to help with the preservation of the culture and save it from going into extinction.
- ii. Proper sensitization for maidens to realize the importance of *Nwokolobo* culture dance for public entertainment and

- iii. *Nwokolobo* cultural dance should be reenacted and performed in universities and other theatres within and outside Nigeria as a means of boosting its popularity and acceptance beyond the limited local Ekpeye area of its current operation.

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Oral Interviewees:

Okpara Joshua (81years old) interviewed in 2000 at Owbor Village-Ehuda

Edema Okon (85 Years old) interviewed in 1994 at Ahoada town

Idoke Ude (78 years old) interviewed in 1992 in Ahoada town

Chidi Odoyi (48 years old) interviewed in 2010 in Edeoha

Michael Ogbele Joe (57 years old) interviewed in 2004 in Obumeze