

Achieving Community and National Unity through the *Odjema* Incarnate Spirit Dance of Eghwu-Urhobo

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Abstract

This paper upholds the opinions of J.P. Clark (1981) and Onyejekwe (2008), who contend that drama is inherent in the incarnate spirit performances of African traditional festivals. These performances are rich with music and various elements of drama. Findings show that there are religious as well as social dramatic performances in Urhobo festivals. The *Odjema* annual festival of Eghwu kingdom is an example of the presence of drama in traditional dance performances among the Urhobo people of Nigeria. The paper also posits that beneficial culture can be secularized and distinguished from traditional religious acts and beliefs that cause acrimony and crises among people of differing faiths. Such culture can be transmitted without religious affiliation in order to promote unity. When the aesthetic and literary features of culture are separated from the religious, such elements can serve as programmes for community and national unity among people of different religions.

Key Words: Incarnate Spirit, dance, *Odjema*, Eghwu-Urhobo, unity, cultural transmission.

Introduction

This paper presents the elements of drama in *Odjema* festival of Eghwu-Urhobo (also known as Eghwu, Eghereka) and highlights how these elements can be harnessed towards community and national unity despite the decline of the festival because of the influence of Christianity and Western education. Much of Urhobo culture in general and Eghwu in particular, are transmitted through oral tradition. Moreover, as competent native speakers of this culture die, the younger generations are left with little or no knowledge of the culture. J.P Clark (1981), Tanure Ojaide (2003), G.G. Darah (2005), amongst others have documented some aspects of Urhobo cultural drama.

The need to bring unity to Eghwu-Urhobo community is one of the motivating factors that prompted this research work. The documentation of *Odjema* dance in video, audio and photograph is traditionally considered a taboo and thus prohibited. Moreover, non-indigenous people are forbidden from witnessing or

participating in it. Therefore the only means of acquiring knowledge of the *Odjema* dance is either by firsthand experience or through oral narration by an eye witness who is brave enough to narrate the events. Thus this work is based on firsthand experience of the researcher from childhood until 1994 in addition to series of interviews with veteran as well as serving actors in the various dramatic dances of Eghwu festival.

As a result of the limitations surrounding the performance and documentation of *Odjema* dance and the impact of Christianity and education, it is presently facing serious decline. The decline of *Odjema* performance was intensified when the chief custodian of this culture, the *Ovie*, king of Eghwu kingdom professed conversion to Christianity. This, combined with other issues, led to a sharp controversy between the king and the house of *Abanwma*, the traditional kingmakers. The division between the king and the kingmakers put the annual performance of *Odjema* on hold for three years, between 2008 and 2010. The effects of this acrimony remain in the community even a decade after. There are still divisions among the various cultural quarters and between the two religions (African Indigenous Religion and Christianity) in the community. The atmosphere of acrimony in the community is reminiscent of that at the national level, where there are geo-political and religious divisions in the Nigerian polity.

Historical Background

Eghwu is one of the twenty-four kingdoms that make the Urhobo nation in southern Nigeria. Oral traditions surrounding the origin of Eghwu show a kin relationship with the Izon (Ijaw) (Nabofa 2003), the Irhobo (Itsekiri), and others who share a common migratory history from Aka (ancient Benin). Eghwu kingdom is made up of many towns, villages, and hamlets, including: Oto-Eghwu, Orere, Egbaregolo, Omosuomo, Asa, Alagbabri, Ogoda, Otefe, ErhuruIgbedi, Okuama, Frukama, Olodiana, Oghwrughwru, Ekameta, Ugbakemu and others.

According to an anonymous elder from the community, the ancient people of Eghwu brought the *Odjema* and the *Urete* from EghwuRiver. He was the traditional drummer who beat the *Urete* drum from 1961 to 2003. The *Urete* drum was coated with *eromwo* (brass) because they belonged to the marine deities. He narrates that women from several Urhobo and Isoko kingdoms made the discovery of the *Odjema* dance and the artworks of the dance. A woman each

from Eghwu, Ughwerun, Iyede and Evwreni who were married in Omosuomo (a village of Eghwu) and were living there discovered the river spirits performing (*wanra*) at Eghwu river. One day, these women went out to fetch firewood. By the bank of the river, they saw a goddess queen and other fourteen incarnate spirit singing, dancing and playing different musical instruments. The spirit queen called *Ojoghwu*, was seated, with an *Usheri* (crown) resting on her laps. One of the water deities was beating a drum called the *Urete*. Another was beating a hollow slit-drum called *Odjema*. These were coated with brass. The women were highly entertained by the performance.

These women would visit the place from time to time in order to watch the performance. However, for a very long time they did not see the deities again. Unknowingly to them, the performance was an annual festival of the deities. After a long watch out and observation they understood many things about the deities and their festival. They had two periods for the performances. The first was a preliminary mini performance called *Irherbedjo* which was usually performed a few days before the Great *Edjo* dance called *Odjema*.

On the days of the performances, the queen and the other deities would come ashore with their musical instruments and artistic emblems of each of the fourteen spirits. The *Odjema* drummer carried the *Odjema* drum from the river and set it on the stage by the bank. The one that beats the *Urete* brings it down too. The deities would perform libations and spirit dance in honour of the *Usheri*, which the queen carried, and in honour of the emblems of the fourteen spirits. The drummers would beat the *Odjema* and the *Urete*. The fourteen spirits would dance and the performance would begin. After careful observation, the women felt that they needed to take the information about the performance to their respective clans. So they returned to their homes.

The woman from Oto-Eghwu was from *Abawwa* quarters of the village. On arrival, she requested that a message be proclaimed for the whole village to assemble. She said that she had an important message for the people. At the assembly, the woman told the story. The people were interested in the dance performance, so they agreed to go and capture the *usheru*, *odjema*, *urete* and other emblems of the spirit dance. The woman who had observed the festival of the deities for a long time advised them to be careful. Knowing that the women of Ughwerun, Evwreni, and Iyede had also gone home to invite their kinsmen, she told her people to go first for the *Usheri*, the emblem of kingship which was

usually held by *Ojoghwu*, the queen deity. She also advised the people that those going should go with coffins in which they should keep the items for safekeeping.

Eghwu selected the delegates to go on the epic journey. As there was no road in those days, they went by canoes. On arrival, they settled down. Delegates from the other clans also came, and when it was time for the performance, they hid themselves to avoid being seen by the spirits. After they had observed the performances, they decided that they needed to observe again in order to be able to master the songs, the dance steps and every performance. Since it was an annual event, they had to settle down for three years in order to observe the events properly. During this time, the people at home thought these men were already dead, so their wives were given to their kinsmen in accordance with tradition.

After they observed the performance of the third year, they decided that they had known enough of how to beat the drum, sing the songs and how to perform the dance, so they decided to act. They had kept their canoes away from sight, so they went straight for the crown, the musical instruments and other items for the *Odjema* performance. The delegates from Eghwu got the *Usheri*, *Urete*, *Odjema* drum and the *ushovwiedjo*, badges of the spirits. In keeping with the advice of the woman informant, they kept all the things in the coffins they had taken along. As they seized these things, the spirit queen and the deities jumped into the river and disappeared.

However, as each clan group sailed away with their catch, the items seized by the Ewwereni, Ughwerun and Iyede groups began to jump mysteriously off their canoes and into the river. It was only Eghwu group that could sail home safely with their catch because these were securely kept in the coffin. When Eghwu group reached home, they shared the captured items according to street and quarters divisions in Oto-Eghwu. Ahavwa got the crown and became the king makers because it was their daughter that discovered the spirit festival and brought the information. Akeke family of Ekrisheri Street took custody of the *Urete* drum. The *Odjema* slit-drum was kept at the shrine of *Urhienu*, one of the community marine deities, at Esavwiyere Street.

The roles of characters were also assigned to different persons. Those who would play the role of the spirit dancers were called *emedjo* (small deities). To each one was given an *ushomwiedjoor ushedjo*, (head of a deity) a mask taken from the water spirits. This was their symbol and power for performance as incarnate spirit. Each of the fourteen *emedjo* also had a character name. There are also men who play the role of spirit chiefs. These are called *Idigborhomre*. After a while, however, crisis arose in relation to the *Odjema* Dance performance. The people began to observe the frequent deaths of the actors and other sons and daughters of Eghwu. Through oracle, these deaths were attributed to the river spirits and deities whose property they had stolen. As a way of resolving the crisis, they made wooden replicas of all the brass items stolen from the deities, and then they returned the original ones to the river. According to oral tradition, it was at this time that death stopped troubling the community. Henceforth, *Odjema* became an annual festival of Eghwu kingdom.

Theoretical Framework

There are basically two schools of thought concerning drama. The evolutionists adopt the European idea that holds African festivals as containing only dramatic elements, which are capable of future development into full-bodied drama. However, Clark (1981) and Onyejekwe(2008)are of relativist scholars of African theatre who are in agreement on the existence of drama in African theatre,because the traditional festivals fulfill the same aesthetical and social functions as the modern stage plays. From an analysis of the dramatic elements in African music, dance and festival, this work safely takes the relativist view as a model. Urhobo traditional drama is mainly unwritten, but it is as practical as any street troupe in Europe.

Some of the various elements of drama in African festivals are as follows:

Imitation and Possession:In African festivals, music and dance as performed by musicians and incarnate spirit dancers are considered imitations of the actions of the deities and spirits to whom these performances are dedicated because they are believed to have performed these acts in some remote past time. In the *EgwuAmala* dance drama of riverine Igbo, for example, the characters not only imitate, but are also aware of spirit characters such as the marine deity called “Mamiwota” and two maids who attend to her (Onyejekwe 2008). J.P. Clark (1981:67) identifies “possession” as another feature of

Nigerian drama. This, he says, “is the attainment by actors in the heat of performance of actual freedom of spirit from this material world, a state of transformation which has been given the rather sniggering name of “possession” or “auto-intoxication” by those outside its sphere of influence and sympathy.”

There is a high degree of imitation in most of the performances in *Odjema* festival. In the *Odjema* dance, all the musical instruments are imitations of the ones used by the river deities and spirits. The wooden replicas of the brass slit-drum *Odjema* and the skin drum *Urete* and the *Ushovniwedjo* are all imitations of what the people observed while the the river deities performed. The ritual songs and dance are also imitations. The dominance of chants and words of uncertain meaning in the *Odjema* dance songs testify to this. During the performance, the spirit of the deities whose *Ushovmi* (“head”) the *emedjo* carry do possess them as they reach the climax of the songs, drumbeats and performance.

Character and Characterization: In Western drama, there is the flat or predictable character, the round or more realistic character, and the foil character that is the exact opposite of the main character and therefore serves to magnify certain characteristics of the main character. In African traditional drama, the lead dancer is the flat character. His roles are predictable, for other characters look to him for direction. Other flat characters include the drummer whose definitive role is to play the drum and the dancer or the incarnate spirit whose role is to perform the dance steps. Moreover going by the *Egwu Amala* example, Onyejekwe (2008) classifies African characters broadly into human and spirit classes.

The characters in *Odjema* festival vary according to dance group. Those who perform the *Odjema* dance are mainly fourteen *emedjo*(incarnate spirits). Other characters play secondary roles such as drumming. The dramatis personae include: The lead incarnate spirit; the incarnate spirit who calls the roll of all incarnate spirits; the one who was originally the only incarnate spirit that does the ritual flogging of audience dancers; and the one who enters the market on the day after the *Odjema* dance to seize whatever he likes for his deity. There were also the one who “uproots” the incarnate spirits, and nine others.

Those are the main characters or actors and actresses, however, their drummers and assistants also dress to fit the occasion. In case of the *Odjema* dance, only

“Spirit chiefs” called *Idigborhimre* can beat the drums. The *Idigborhimre* also appease the deities in preparation for the performance. Other characters are the *Onie* who act as ceremonial head, the *Idigborhimre* among whom are the drummers, the *Akeke*, who is the custodian of the *Urete* drum, and service boys who take custody of the *Ushovwiedjo* while the *emedjo* are dancing and flogging.

Action: Roger A. Hall defines drama as the imitation of an action and goes on to say that action is one of the building blocks of all drama (Hall 1991). African traditional drama in the form of festivals is full of action. Akama (2001) discusses several forms of action that are prevalent in the *Owbo'yede* Annual Festival, and can be identified with other African communities. Darah (“Aesthetic Socialization”, 2005) went further to mention forms of action that can be found in Urhobo youth and children drama. These forms which can occur in both secular and ritual contexts include:

- Festival processional dance
- Sex dance which concluded the annual festival of female rite of passage (*emeteyawwon*)
- Children’s games such as wrestling, water wrestling, (*ochu*), and archery (*aluke*).

Action is the spirit of drama. Action appears in various forms in African drama in general and

Urhobo drama in particular. Olori (2011) rightly identifies *Odjema* as the big annual festival of the Eghwu people. The action-packed festival lasts for weeks and is held in the month of September. Although the name *Odjema* has been used interchangeably with the festival itself, the *Odjema* is actually the dramatic dance that lasts only a night and a day during the festive period. Other dances such as *EhaEmete*, *Odudu*, and the *Igbu* (warriors) display are also featured during the festival.

Audience: The audience in African drama usually participates in the action of singing and dancing as they enclose the main actors in a circle in the arena. Thus, Onyejekwe (2008) identifies Igbo traditional drama for example, as a communal affair. Another form of audience participation in African traditional drama takes place in various forms of Urhobo dramatic dance performances- the presentation of gifts. At a point in the drama performance, the drama is

“interrupted by the coming and going” of spectators into the stage to present gifts to the actors (Darah, *Battles of Songs* 2005:55).

All the performances of the *Odjema* festival involve communal effort. In this way, the audiences do have adequate view of the performances and do participate. The audience usually stands in a circle, enclosing the performers in the middle of the arena. Some in the audience who are too short to view the performance do stand on chairs, tables, and uncompleted buildings or even climb trees nearby.

Dialogue: Since songs are also elements of African traditional drama, it is in them that dialogue manifests in the form of “call –and-response” singing. Both Merwe (1989) and Adedeji (2012) agree on the responsorial form as the alternation of a musical phrase between a singer and his accompaniment or between a solo and a chorus.

In most of African traditional drama, dance and music are inseparable. Both the incarnate spirits and the audience, usually a crowd, dance to the sound of music. In this regard, Bebey (1975: 92), states that “it is scarcely necessary to emphasize the importance of drums in African music.” The slit-drum is specifically used to accompany dance in *Odjema*. It produces two musical notes, but because of the melody of the songs and other accompanying musical instruments, the spectators are moved to join the incarnate spirits in the dance and in the songs. Atuu (1995: 41) agrees with this when he notes: “Folk music shares the characteristics of folk dance and both are often performed in the same context. The popular appeal of folk music is one of the features that attract the people to get involved whenever a performance is in session. ” Thus, the dramatic elements and stylistic features of the songs and performance of African traditional drama are usually intertwined. Finnegar (1970) opines that unlike European drama, traditional African dramatic performances do not lay emphasis on dialogue.

However, a form of dialogue takes place during singing and performance in *Odjema*. This is referred to as “call-and-response” singing. For instance, at a point during the *Odjema* incarnate spirit dance, the audience has the freedom to participate in singing. At this time, one spectator stands and sings songs of rivalry against his enemies while the general audience responds. Below is *ibedjo*, a responsorial song of *Odjema*:

Soloist: These that sleep with their brothers' wives

Audience: Oho!

Soloist: This is how we see things

Audience: Grandmother!

Soloist: They have committed a lot of havoc

Audience: All of this is pain!

Costume: African traditional drama is rich with colourful costume. Dancers may take on expensive ancient clothing, white or red wrappers tied around the chest, with hand fans, handkerchiefs, etc. Incarnate spirits may put on gowns made of young palm frond and wooden masks of various shapes. There are also bells and *evian* (leglets) which give chiming melody during dancing. The costumes of the performers of *Odjema* festival also vary according to dance group. The *emedjo* of the *Odjema* dance make their own gowns from oil palm fronds. A ring of strong rope is made, with the palm fronds hanging on it. They wear these raffia gowns on their shoulders, making one end of the palm fronds to droop loosely to the ground. The incarnate spirits tie sackcloth around their waists under the gown of palm fronds. They wear their *Ushovwi-edjo*, “the head of the gods” which is fixed to a piece of sack on their hand and hold the new brooms meant for ritual flogging.

Performance Stage: The concept of performance stage in African traditional drama is unlike the Western type. The Igbo, Isoko, Urhobo, amongst other African societies share the same concept of the open air space where spectators surround the central area in which the actors perform. All the performances of *Odjema* festival are street dance troupes. Therefore, the performance stage is usually traditionally selected open arena along the major community road. The troupes dance and walk along the road, but at each of these arenas, they stop and perform before they move on to the next stage.

The four performance stages at Eghwu are situated at strategic parts of the town, each named after a quarter, except one, the *Afiede* (the big arena). The

Afiede is not wider than the others, but is thus named because that is where the *Odjema* dance performance first takes place before movement to the other performance stages. The stages are:

Afiede

UnyarbaAbawwa

UnyarbaEkerisberi

UnyarbaEsamwiyere

These four performance stages are the traditionally compulsory stages for the *Odjema* incarnate spirit dance performance. However, non-spirit dance troupes may also perform in these four and any other open arenas they find along the road.

Preparations for the Festival

Depending on economic factors, the *Odjema* festival could last for between three and nine market days. Each market day or traditional week is made up of four days. Each year, *Akeke*, a spirit chief and a spirit town crier usually announce the duration and start date of the festival. If it would last for more than four market days, it is usually called the Great festival. The incarnate spirits, *Abawwa*, priests, *Idigborhimre* and the *Ovie* collectively do the planning, arrangement of the calendar and preparation for the festival.

The *Odjema* festival comprises many performances, each with its own significance. There are the *Odjema* incarnate spirit dance, *ebaemete* (maidens dance), *igbere* (Ighovwan) satirical dance, *odudu* (circumcised maidens) dance and others. However, the scope of this paper covers only the *Odjema* incarnate spirit dance. Since there are different kinds of performances in the festival, there is usually no single form of preparation for them all. Each group of actors and actresses do their own separate rehearsals according to their group's role in the festival.

The incarnate spirit actors for the *Odjema* dance usually appease their personal *emedjo* then they collect young oil palm fronds and new brooms from the bush.

With these, they design their costume and the incarnate spirit's broom used for the ritual flogging of participant audience. The process of collection of these palm fronds is known as *e siemanwwe*, "the pulling of palm fronds." During this preparatory point, the singer *emedjo* also rehearses the names of all the *emedjo* and the roll call song with which he would call them to perform. It is believed that if he makes a verbal mistake while singing and making the roll call, he would die within that year.

Music And Performance In *Odjema* Festival

Due to the fact that the performance of dance and the singing of songs take place simultaneously, both are treated together here. Looking at the festival generally and all the performances involved, there are many different kinds of musical instruments used by the various performance groups. These can be best classified according to their use by the performers. The two major musical instruments for the *Odjema* incarnate spirit dance are the *Urete*, the long drum which is covered with the hide of an antelope, and the *Odjema*, a slit-drum carved from the log of a cam wood tree. Others are combination of cowries and other small objects that are tied to the *Ushovwi-edjo*. This one is shaken by each *emedjo* to produce a rhythmic rattling.

Performance and Audience Participation

The performance of *Odjema* dance takes place in the form of five scenes in the four performance stages earlier stated.

Scene One: *Edjo E Ghwie*

This scene is titled *Edjo E Ghwie*, the "uprooting of the incarnate spirits". The stage is the *AfiabaAbawwa*. One veteran participant in the dance narrates how this scene is performed. It opens with an audience surrounding the *Idigborhimre*, incarnate spirit chiefs, and other actors. Each *emedjo* incarnate spirit is called to the centre stage and asked to *bro emu otɔ*, that is, to "cut and drop food". He takes a few dance steps, steps on the lower parts of his palm frond gown and lets them pull off to the ground. By this, the incarnate spirit is being "uprooted". The incarnate spirit takes these dance steps and "cuts and drops food" three times. Then he runs off to *Afiade*, the big stage, to wait for the other *emedjo*. This is done for each and every one of the fourteen *emedjo*.

While each *emedjo* is being uprooted, the *Une e wvoghwieedjo*, song for uprooting the incarnate spirit, is raised by *Ine*, the *idigborhimre* in charge of singing, and the name of each *emedjo* forms part of the song:

<i>Ine:</i>	This is <i>Abamma</i> performance stage!
Audience:	Yes!
<i>Ine:</i>	<i>Urivwame</i> (Name of an incarnate spirit actor)
Audience:	Yes!
<i>Ine:</i>	He who owns land takes land!
Audience:	Yes!
	We dance
	Yes, we dance
	Yes, Aja o!

This is a “call-and-response” song in which the audience participates as each *emedjo* is called out to dance briefly and to do the ritual of *bro emu otɔ*, “cutting and dropping of food” before running to *Afiede* performance stage.

Scene Two: “Owa”

This scene is performed at *Afiede*, the big stage, where the first actual incarnate spirits dance takes place. This performance is usually titled *Owa*. The scene opens with the king seated, with his *Ilorogun*, chiefs seated by his side. The *Idigborhimre*, masquerade chiefs are also present. These are surrounded by a crowd of audience. There are usually two performances at *Afiede*: the *Edjoerbare*, and the *Edjoopbraghwa*.

The *edjoerbare*, is dedicated to men who are old enough to marry but are still unmarried. This performance is usually very short because nobody wants to be associated with the derogatory name of *orbare*(singular for *erbare*).

The *Edjoopbraghwa* is dedicated to the youths. During this performance, the drummers begin to beat the *Odjema* and the *Urete* drum. *Ine* raises the *Owa* song

and the fourteen *emedjo* begin to dance around the stage rhythmically to the drumbeats. At this point, the youths, wearing protective thick attires and hood join the dance with the incarnate spirits. After a period of combined dancing by both incarnate spirits and audience, the drumbeats and the song fade away gradually. At the last beat of the drums, the *emedjo* begin to flog the audience-participants. Members of the audience usually wear several clothes or very thick protective attires because of the flogging. However, the *emedjo* do not flog those who stand behind the seated king. After a moment of hide and seek and flogging race by the audience and the *emedjo*, the music resumes its course. Everybody assembles again, in a form of a circle and begin to dance with the *emedjo* again. The round of music, dance and flogging takes place seven times, then the performance at *Afiede* is ended.

Movement

After the performance in each *Afieba*, the actors walk to the next *Afieba* in a dance parade. They follow a traditional route, the original path that served as the road for the town in ancient times. The *Ovie* leads the parade while the *Idigborhimre*, the *Ilorogun*, the *emedjo* and the audience follow.

Scenes Three to Five:

These scenes have no titles. The movement from *Afiede* takes the actors back to *AfiebaAbamma*, where the ritual of *e ghwieedjo* was earlier performed. At each of scenes three (*AfiebaAbamma*), four (*AfiebaEkerisher*), and five (*AfiebaEsavviyere*), they repeat the audience participatory ritual of *Owa* dance-song that was performed in scene two.

The performance begins around midnight or 1:00 am, immediately after the moon stops shining. However, by the time the performance reaches the third *afieba* it is usually daybreak. At the close of the seventh round of the dance at *AfiebaEsavviyere*, everyone disperses and goes home to rest until evening when one incarnate spirit enters the market to steal and another one performs a daytime solitary spirit dance from *afieba* to *afieba*, flogging people as he does so.

***Odjema* Spirit Incarnate Dance and Division in Modern Eghwu Community**

This paper had earlier attributed the decline of *Odjema* festival to the clash between Christianity and African Indigenous Religion, which eventually brought about a three-year pause in the performance of the spirit incarnate dance. Derogatory terms have been developed to distinguish between *Odjema* dancers as *egedjo* (Satan worshippers) and Christians as *egoghene* (worshippers of God). The division is usually heightened in September during the *Odjema* festive period. The exposure of the people of Eghwu to western education and Christianity has greatly reduced the fame of the traditional festival.

Moreover, Western education is still playing a major role in the liberation of the people from traditional religious fraudsters who attribute their own evil practices to the acts of the deities. It has also served to debunk the many superstitions attached to the festival by the custodians of the community traditions. In 2006, some members of Eghwu community produced a movie titled, *Ejumuemuvwo* ("Let Us Stop Evil Deeds"). The movie featured *Odjema* dance and broke the taboo forbidding the documentation of *Odjema*. One of the actors of this movie narrates how the production was thereafter trailed with fear of attacks by the deities and custodian spirits of the community's *Odjema* dance. Two of the actors died within two years of the production of the movie. Oracle consultation purportedly revealed that the *Odjema* deities had killed them for contempt and that those actors who were still living should offer sacrifices of appeasement or face death. One of the key actresses that was interviewed during this research said she refused to appease the deities and resorted to Christian prayers and fasting in case her human enemies should initiate some sort of attacks which would later be attributed to the deities. Fourteen years after the production of the movie, majority of the actors and producers are still alive, even without appeasing the gods. In addition, there is the belief that those who sing the *Odjema* masquerade songs at any other time except during the annual performance usually faced serious consequences from the deities. All these have been proven superstitious. One former *idighorhimre* who had converted to Christianity was able to narrate the origin of the *Odjema* and to sing the songs to this researcher because of his confidence in the protection that Christ offers against all evil attacks. The division between those who believe in the indigenous deities and those who believe in Christ is induced by fear on one side and confidence on the other side. While, custodians and followers of the indigenous religion live in fear of the deities they believe in, Christians profess confidence in the protection of Christ.

When the Church Missionary Society (CMS) came to Eghwu in 1911, they claimed a piece of land which belonged to the deity *Echodi*. It was an evil forest. The community allowed the CMS to take it, expecting that *Echodi* would destroy them. An *ehaemete* (maiden dance group) song was composed to express this expectation and the eventual disappointment after *Echodi* failed to destroy the church.

Echodi wails

Church, you have hurt me

Yearly, my people sacrificed to me

The church has taken

The generation of their children

They planted plantain

They planted cassava

Tomatoes and pepper also.

This is wonderful

You have become enemies

The church people will die.

The song laments the loss of the farmland and the indigenous worshipers to Christianity, as well as the loss of the yearly sacrifices, and thus expresses the enmity between followers of the traditional deity and Christians. The expectation of practitioners of the indigenous religion is that the Christians would die. However, nothing happened to the Christians, so conversions from indigenous religion to Christianity increased. By the year 2003, even the core actors in the *Odjema* dance were converting, chief among them was an elderly man who was the *Odjema* drummer from 1961 until 2003. Moreover, as earlier noted, partly due to the influence of Christianity, controversies arose which led to the failure to perform the *Odjema* annual festival for three years. The Christians celebrate this as the triumph of Christ over *Ojoghwu* and the other

deities of the indigenous religion. Therefore, the community remains divided over cultural and religious differences. This portion emphasizes the impact of Christianity on the community as one of the major reasons for division in the community, hence the need for a common ground for unity; one, which, sports can offer.

***Odjema* Dance, Cultural Integration and Community Unity**

Ironically, the tension between the two religions could be alleviated by adopting *Odjema* dance as sports for cultural integration for practitioners of both religions. This can be achieved if the dance in the festival could be developed and modernized, devoid of religious activities. In that case, the dramatic dance could be performed as sports for people of both religions, and all sports-loving members of Eghwu-Urhobo community can be brought together annually to celebrate it as indigenous sport. The Olympics was originally a Greek religious festival, which the Christian Emperor Theodosius I banned when he destroyed the shrine of Zeus in 426 AD. Zeus was the traditional Greek deity to whom the Olympics were dedicated. However, in 1890, Pierre de Coubertin established the Union des Societes Francaises de Sports Athletiques (USFSA), and began a campaign for the revival of the Olympic Games. By 1896, the games were restored, no longer as a religious festival, but as a secular game. It has become a symbol of international integration, friendship and unity, bringing together people of all faiths from around the world. Practitioners of African Indigenous Religion from Africa and Brazil; Muslims from Iran; and Christians from the United States and other parts participate in Olympic Games, without recourse to what they would have called “pagan” religious background. However, if it were still a religious festival, most Christians and Muslims would not agree to participate.

Likewise, if the dramatic performance in *Odjema* dance is revived as a form of secular sport, it would unite the people of Eghwu, irrespective of their religious affiliation. The reason that this paper takes much space to highlight the dramatic features of *Odjema* is to enable a reenacting and transmission of the cultural practice as a secular sport for the reunification of Eghwu community without recourse to religious preference. Other communities in Nigeria could also adopt the culture as a model and develop it for national integration of practitioners of African Indigenous Religion, Christianity and Islam. In order to accommodate people of all faiths, the revival need not include the religious

aspects of the traditional *Odjema* dance, but promote it as a non-religious indigenous cultural sport. In this way, the performance may become acceptable to Christians and Muslims who would otherwise regard it as “pagan” and idolatrous.

Conclusion

This study has established that there is drama in the various aspects of performance in *Odjema* traditional festival of Eghwu-Urhobo. However, community members who perpetuate evil practices against their neighbours use indigenous religion as camouflage for their practices. When they poison and kill their enemies, they attribute it to the acts of the divinities that the victims had supposedly offended. It is therefore recommended that proper education should be provided to distinguish between cultural heritage and harmful superstition with transferred magic. This paper also recommends the adoption of *Odjema* dance as a non-religious cultural performance that should be directed towards national integration and unity of people of all religions.

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