OVUM DANCE AND THE CHALLENGES TO CULTURAL STABILITY OF ELELE-ALIMINI IN EMOHUA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF RIVERS STATE

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Abstract

This study which focuses on the *Ovum* Dance and the Challenges to Cultural Stability of Elele-Alimini in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State, explored the historical background of the *Ovum* dance, its origin, musical instruments, as well as its membership. Primary data were gathered through observation and oral interviews, while bibliographical evidences served as secondary data. This study revealed that Christianity, education and urbanization played a strong role in the sustainability of the group. The *Ovum* dance group instead of increasing in number, decreased due to its traditional belief of using ancestral figures during their dance display which was condemned by the Church, Finally, as a way forward, the authors presented some recommendations.

Background of the Study

Music is a cultural expression; every culture has its own music. Musical activity is an integral and functional part of the Ikwerre people. Music is very essential in all human activities and practices, as it expreses their emotions and feelings. Each music has its own cultural content such that one man's sound could be another person's noise. All through the life of the Ikwerre people, public performances take place during social occasions, festivals, coronations, cultural dance groups, burial ceremonies; all these are marked with music. Akpabot (1986) asserts that "one of the chief characteristics of African traditional music is associated with social and ritual ceremonies" (p. 1). Agu (2007) agrees that "each ethnic group has provided adequate musical activities and

training for its community; consequently, the lives of the people are surrounded with music and music making" (p. 20).

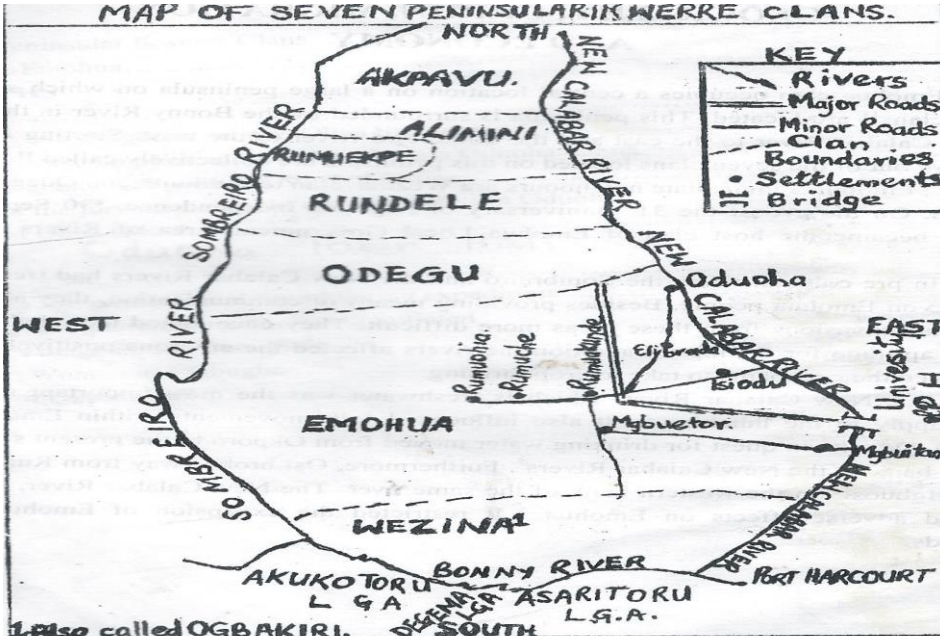
Traditional music can be described as songs and sounds which represent the cultural heritage, aspiration, norms and values of a group of people. There is no culture without music, they work together to make the society a better place and this make up the society. Agu (1990) affirms that "traditional festival anywhere is celebrations of the continuity of culture" (p. 17). Anolobi, et al (2015) confirms that:

> *No community, society, ethnic group that does not practice one type of music or the other. Music is so common that it is part of human life. As an important part of culture (a way of people's life), it features in many activities of man from birth till death (p. 103).*

Music is used for religious activities, festivals, ceremonies, teaching and learning and in other activities of man. Music serves not only as a medium for entertainment and social relationship but as an intricate part of development of the mind, body and soul. It is assumed that the laws of the land, history of a tribe and accepted behavioural pattern in the society are assimilated through music and dance.

Historical Background of EleleAlimini

EleleAlimini is currently located in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State of Nigeria. This can be seen in the diagram below.



Map of Emohua showing EleleAlimini community

The town share common boundaries with many towns and villages. In the east Elele-Alimini, in the West Ekpeye tribe in the North with Akpavu people and in the South the Rundele people. Their major languages are Ikwerre language and are professional Farmers. They have many cultural heritages which includes Ozurumba cultural dance, new yam festival, wrestling festival and ovum dance group etc. A legendary story claims that the founder of the town was a warrior and great hunter named AnyiaWobeme who conquered other communities and settled in Elele-Alimini.

The *Ovum* Dance Group of EleleAlimini

The group is made up of both male and female from the community. In Elele-Alimini, culture is popularly known as *Omenali*and that is why they usually host the *Ovum*dance group every year in order to unite the community because this is a culture that involves and practiced by both Christians and traditional religion worshippers. The people of Elele-Alimini cannot forsake their culture because of the love, peace and socialization it has brought to the community. Ibekwe (2011) confirms that "music is a product of human activities, behaviours and

experiences, that music provides an enabling ground for the transmission of formidable cultural traits" (p. 36). Ovum dance is one of the cultural dances of EleleAliminicommunity; there is a legendary story about the advent of Ovum cultural dance in EleleAlimini. According to Wakirika (2016), Ovum dance originated from Rundele community in the year 1964. Historically, Ovum dance originated through a mad-man who hailed from Rundele community. This mad-man was an orphan who usually hit his hand on his chest like a musical instrument.

One day he was moving along the community he began to beat his hand in the usual manner (beating his hand on his chest like a musical instrument). He began to sing a melodious song *ovum mawele-weh aye* (my heart is passing). This draws the attention of the people within the scene. This mad-man usually consoles his self with this music. After a while some youth who witnessed the event began to practice the song of the mad-man. Laterthey formed a cultural group in Rundele community and also one of the most famous cultural groups in the clan.

The inhabitants of EleleAlimini usually visit the Rundele community during the display of this culture which normally takes place on 31st December of every year. In one of the visit from the EleleAlimini to Rundele community, they saw the gymnastic display by the dancers and drummers, the people of EleleAlimini saw the importance of the culture, so they have to copy this dance and brought it to their kinsmen and it was unanimously accepted by the people of EleleAlimini in general. The cultural dance was first performed in EleleAlimini on 5th of March 1964 at Mr. Mbar's compound in Mgbu –anyem village. Onuorah-Oguno and Nwamara (2014) affirm that:

> *The present generation can learn a lot about the past life and values of his community by listening to and taking part in folklores. Through folklores, proverbs could be taught and better appreciated in schools because*

> *examples are drawn from the child's immediate environment (p. 116).*

Membership

At the formation of the group in 1964, membership was open to young men and women of the community who are of marriage age and represent their family's ancestral beliefs. Libations are poured for these idols in their family shrines before using them for any performance. Admission into this group was free, only a bottle of hot drink was required of the intending members. Rehearsals take place once a month at Mr. Mbar's compound in Mgbu-Anyem village of Elele-Alimini but the performance proper takes place on 31st of December every year at the market square. In the organizational structure, they have the president, secretary and treasurer. The appointed executives take care of the affairs of the group in order to maintain law and order and for the growth of the group.

Musical Instruments of the *Ovum* Dance Group

Before the introduction of African musical instruments in the groups, empty containers were used as musical instruments. The most vital part of this culture is the musical performance which includes the instrumentalist and the singers. Ovum dance does not have particular singers both the instrumentalists and the dancers sing while performing. The sound of the musical instrument motivates the spectators to dance. The musical instruments used include Rattle (*Oyo*), Xylophone (*Ngelege*), Bass drum (*Nkwa*), and slit wooden drum (*Okwo*). Vidal (2012) emphasizes that:

> *Musical instruments are used to make music, to recite people's praises, to signal danger, to warn people of curfew and to announce the arrival, departure or death of important personalities and the commencement or conclusion of important events including festivals (p. 51).*

Musical Instruments of *Ovum* Cultural Dance of EleleAlimini

Two Bass Drum (*Ikenkwa/Eseni*)

They are single headed membrane drums made from coconut tree hallowed at the centre and closed at one end by a membrane stretched across its rim and fastened with pieces of wood in nail-like form. They are two in number big bass drum (*Ikenkwa*) and small bass drum (*Eseni*) it has a cylindrical shape. It plays alongside the leading instrument in *Ovum* cultural dance of the Elele-Alimini people. The drums are played with bare hands. Chukwu (2011) states that "the membrane drum plays both melodic and rhythmic roles, hence, the membrane drum play is a melo-rythmic instrument. African membrane drum is normally used as a singing or talking musical instrument" (p. 1).l



Two Bass Drums (*Ikenkwa/Eseni)* of *Ovum* Cultural Dance kept on a plantain stem

Xylophone (*Ngelenge*)

It is classified under idiophone family made frompalm tree which is shaped into different sizes and placed on top of two log of plantain sucker to produce different sound or tone. It is the lead instrument in *Ovum* cultural dance. It cues in other instruments during performance and also guides every other instrument to produce a harmonious sound. The slabs of the xylophone are kept on the stems of plantain which serves as a resonator in order to produce a better sound when the

instrument is played. A long stick was also used to clip the slabs to the plantain stems so that the slabs would not shift from its position.



Xylophone (*Ngelenge*) of *Ovum* Cultural Dance

Slit Wooden Drum (*Ikwirikwe*)

It belongs to idiophone family. It is also carved from palm tree to produce sound. It is played along with the bass drum in accompanying the xylophone which is the lead instrument. The instrument is also placed on plantain stem to produce a melodious sound.



Slit Wooden Drum (*Ikwirikwe*) of *Ovum* Dance

Ichaka (Usara) Baskets Rattle

It also belongs to Idiophone family, a basket made rattle which contains pieces of concrete. They are two in number tied together like twins. They are held by a player which is usually shaken to produce musical sound. The rattles are usually played together with the bass drum, slit wooden drum and the xylophone.

The rhythm produced by these musical instruments spurs the *Ovum* dance group into action. The dancers bend forward, thrust their buttocks and shake their waist region and the buttock vibrates. Kansese and Abray (2013) supports that:

> *A skillful dancer accomplishes these movements with so much ease as if the waist and buttocks are moving on their own accord without the dancer's effort. While these movements are going on, other parts of the anatomy like the shoulders, hands, face are seen executing other contrasting movements (p. 327).*

The rhythm of the music also attracts people from neighbouring communities to visit the community, watch their performance and also participate in the dance.

Ovum Dance Performance

Ovum dance is performed once a year on the 31st December of every year. Dances are displayed or performed when a song that is connected to the spirit they represent are sung. The dynamic style of Ovum cultural dance is what makes it unique among the cultural dances in Elele-Alimini. Formalized dance is the main dance pattern of the *Ovum*dance group. The *Ovum*dancers usually display their dance one after the other by holding an ancestral figure (gods they represent) while dancing. The carved figures represent gods and goddess this include, *NwababyNeh-riakara* (A maiden eating akara), *Odah-chaneluh* (rapped fruit) *womami* (Rivers godess), *OgechiNukwe* (Worn bead), *Niri-Nwerelagos (*city lady), *Asor-durawhu -gbakuru,* (Run for your

life), *ogba-ochinukwe* (bare foot dancer the rapper) these carved objects is usually held by the dancers on their hands to perform one after the other. The *Ogbaochinukwe* is the lead dancer who usually performs last. Before his arrival, pieces of clothes are usually spread on the path way with his bare foot he performs to entertain the audience.



Ovum Ancestral figures

Ovum is a tool of consoling sorrows though one major significant of music is to console sorrow. If one is depressed, by listening to music can help in to remedy such depression. Dance implies movement of the body more than the feet. One of the most important aspects of dance is that it is a form of communication between dancers and musicians, between singers and drummers, instrumentalist between performers and audience and between communities and ancestors, the supernatural beings upon whom their human welfare and survival depends.

Challenges of *Ovum* Dance

Christianity

The ovum dance is purely an African traditional culture, their dancing styles and singing pattern is similar with other cultures in African

society. Although before introduction of ovum dance majority of *EleleAlimini* people worship ancestral figures,gods/goddess such as *Amadi-Oha, Ojuku, Igwekala* respectively.During the days of their forefathers, sacrifices of animal/human are usually made to thank the gods/goddess of the land for their protections and long life especially during *Ovum* display period. This is the main reason why they accepted the ovum cultural dance because it is in line with their faith, the ovum cultural dance has ancestral figures which represent gods and goddess of different family in EleleAlimini. Sacrifices of animal such as fowl, goat and dog are performed in the bush to appease the gods of the land for peace among the members of the Ovum cultural dance. After which all the members both old and young cook and eat the remains from thesacrifices, this exercise was enjoyed by the people of EleleAlimini in those days.



Founding Members of the*Ovum* Cultural Dance on 31st of December 1964and each member holding the ancestral figure which represents the gods of each family

When the Christian religion began to expand in EleleAlimini, they preached against ovum ancestral figure. According to the holy Bible, (Leviticus: 26:1) you shall make for yourselves no idols and erect no graven image or pillar and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land, to bow down to them, for I am the LORD your God.Because of

this verse in the Bible which the preachers emphasized on*ovum* cultural dance lost most of their members, spectators, *Ovum* dance and its significance and popularity reduced. The remaining members abolished the ancestral figure because everyone has joined the Christian religion and people no longer value *Ovum* cultural dance only the old members who are alive still value the culture. The youths and children no longer have interest in the cultural dance. Those who embraced Christianity conceive*ovum* cultural dance negatively and regard the dance as performance performed by pagans. The teaching of the scripture by the indigenous ministers in the community has sunk deep into the people that many cultural practices and beliefs of the people are now abandoned for the sake of the gospel. Gberegbara (2005) confirms that "as Christianity spread, the converts continued to receive spiritual teaching that really affect various traditional beliefs and custom of the people" (p. 142). At this juncture, there is need to look at some of the basic Christian teachings that affect the *Ovum* Cultural Dance.

Education/Urbanization

Education enlightened them in many fields of endeavor and many moved from rural area to urban area. Today in the community many have grown up to occupy high positions in both public and private sector. Onuorah-Oguno (2011) posits that:

> *Today, there is a shift of people to the cities, those that still reside in the rural areas no more engage in the moonlight activities as a result of what we term civilization, television and cable networks have taken over (p. 203).*

Many sons and daughters of Elele-Alimini are now educated and occupy different positions in government parastatals.

Education is the bedrock of every society. Christianity and education came together. During the missionary era, they used secular education as a strategy for conversion. Many sons and daughters of Elele-Alimini availed themselves of the opportunity offered by the Christian

churches to attend school and this exposure assisted them to be educated and confident to read and write also, to read and interpret the bible. Fafunwa (1974) in Gberegbara (2005) supports this fact that:

> *The primary objectives of the early Christian missionaries was to convert the "heathen" or the benighted African to Christianity via education, knowledge of the bible, the ability to sing hymns and recite catechism as well as the ability to communicate both oral and in writing were considered essential for a good Christian (p. 167).*

Ovum Dance Group Songs

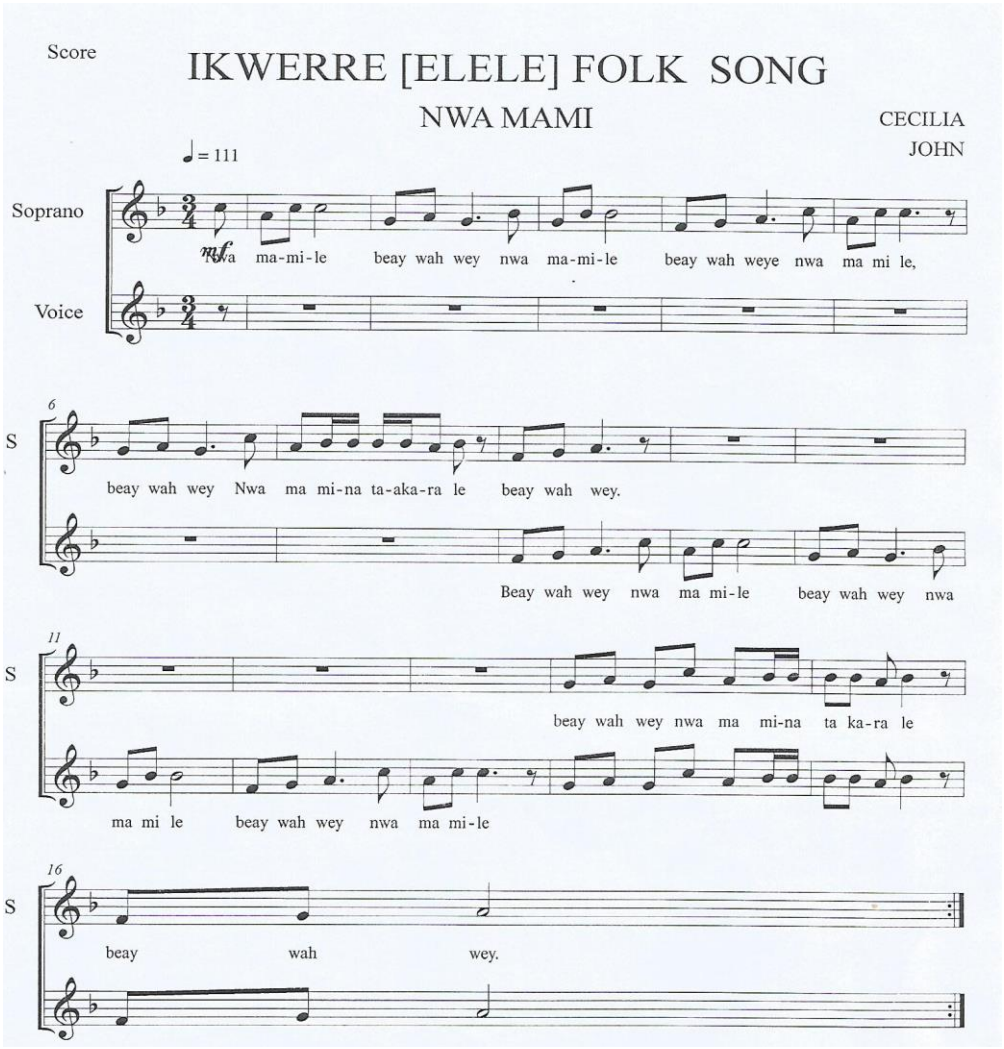
1. *Ovum Ma*

Folk song	English translation
Ovum-Ma *Ovum-Ma-whelewey a-eh*	My heart is passing My heart is passing



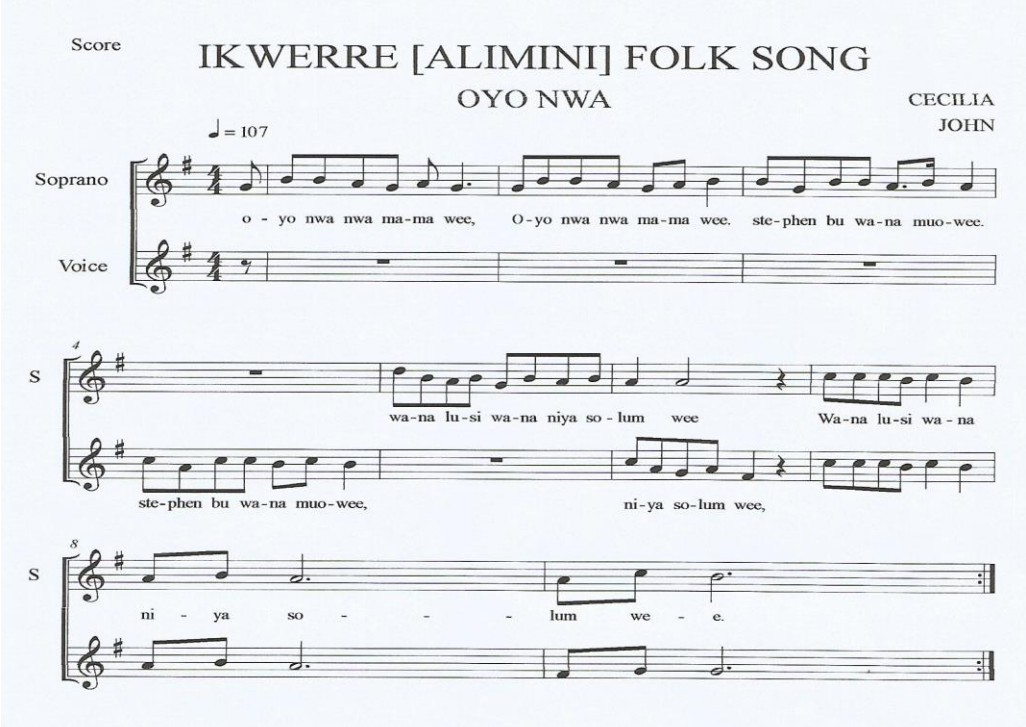
2. *NwaaMami*

Folk song	English translation
NwaMami lee biawawey (3x) *NwaMammyna-ta-akara lee biabiawa wee*	Marine spirit is coming (3x) Marine spirit that eats akara is coming.



3. *Oyo Nwa*

Folk song	English translation
Oyo nwanwa mama lee *Oyo nwanwa mama lee* Stephen*bu-wanamuoOwee*(2x) *WanalusiWananiyah saw* *Lum wee.* *Wanalusiwayaniyah saw* *Lum wee* (4x)	Handsome boy of the mother (2x) Brother cannot marry The sister, he would have marry me. Brother cannot marry the Sister he would have marry me.



Summary

Ovum dance past and present can be compared with, the spectator, drummers, members population has been reduced drastically. When *Ovum* dance was introduced, people from neighboring communities (Rundele and Rumuekpe) usually visit EleleAlimini to watch the

performance, but with the introduction of Christianity; people have lostinterest in *Ovum*dance group.

In the present day, to host ovum cultural dance has become a problem, the founding members are aged both men and women, young men/women (youth) are not interested to join the cultural group for continuity. Modern civilization has seriously brought about some social changes in Ovum cultural dance. More so the coming of Western civilization has brought some changes in the society in which Ovum cultural dance is found just as every other part of the society is affected. The society and Ovum dance in particular has been so affected because the society is dynamic rather than static and so changes become inevitable.

As of today, the response of people to this great cultural dance is no longer the same as it used to be in the past. Some parents no longer attach any value to this unique festival. As a result they find it very difficult to allow their sons and daughters to participate in the festival. This is so because of the intrusion of "western civilization" and its religion, which has robbed us of our cultural heritage.

Conclusion

Ovum cultural dance benefit the people of EleleAlimini in so many ways such as entertainment, religion worship, exercise and recreation. It also helps to transmit the norms and value of the land from one generation to another. During this festive period, the members usually meet at the chairman's house to discuss the welfare of the dance group. Also, refreshments are shared to the members according to seniority ranging from the oldest member to the youngest member.This current tradition has been transmitted to the younger generation of the Elele-Alimini community.

This cultural dance and the music has contributed immensely to the development of the EleleAlimini as such should adequately be

recognized in other to maintain its standard. The culture should remain the pride of EleleAlimini people.

Recommendations

In view of the above findings, the authors recommend that *Ovum* cultural dance should be revived in order not to go into extinction. The youths should take up the challenge to join the few members that are alive and the musical instruments used in the cultural performances should be well preserved. We further recommend that the Emohua Local Government Chairman should support the group and help to ensure that the advent of Christianity through education should not be allowed to destabilize the group and also that the ancestral figures representing different families should be accommodated in some way, rather than their total rejection.

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