Dimensions of Ema Cultural Song and Dance Performance

By

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Abstract

The Urhobo society is abound with various forms of cultural dance which are performed based on social contexts. Although scholars have explored forms of dance deployed during musical performances across Urhobo land, the new dimension of Ema cultural dance has not received significant attention. This study, therefore, examines physiotherapeutic functions of the Ema cultural dance among the Urhobo of Nigeria with a view to promoting this unique primordial heritage of the Urhobo. The research adopts the ethnographic design that focuses on cultural materials and their utilitarian functions in society. Oral interviews and non-participant observation were the instruments adopted by the researchers to gather data or information. Respondents who participated in Ema dance were granted interviews at different sessions while the researcher keenly observed the physical movements of dancers' hands, legs and entire body in response to the songs and recorded the performance. The research reveals various cultural dances in Urhobo society which are

performed by the *ehweya* (womenfolk), *emete* (maidens), *eshare* (men) and *iphraghwa* or *ighele* (youths) depend on the occasions for the performance of the cultural dance. Prominent among the dances include *ema*-dance, udje dance, *egbada* dance, emedjo dance, ikenike and midaka dance. These dance patterns are capable of restoring health through physical intervention. They involve both mental and physical energies and so they serve as channels to discharge of excessive waste products from the body of dancers. They also function as means of entertainment and diversionary therapy to the audience.

Keywords: Ema dance, culture, physiotherapy, health, performance

I. Introduction

Every society has its various ways of communicating thoughts, feelings, perceptions and worldview to the public. One of these ways is through cultural songs and dance which are performed occasionally at different settings. Hawkins (1988:3) notes that "dance is one of man's oldest and most basic means of expression. Through the body, man speaks senses and perceives the tensions and rhythm of the universe around him, and using the body as the instrument, he expresses his feelings and responses to the universe." In Urhobo communities, creative dances are done by the *ehweya* (womenfolk), *emete* (maidens), *eshare* (men) and *iphraghwa* or *ighele* (youth) depend on the occasions for the performance of the cultural dance. It has been observed that dance performances are contextual-based, hence they are deployed at ceremonies such as funeral rites, traditional marriage, coronation, chieftaincy conferment, protest and war, to mention a few.

Traditional Urhobo society is characterized with various forms of dance which include *Ema* royal dance, Udje dance, *Egbada* dance, Odjoboro dance, Oyegheyeghe dance, Evwaron/Emedjo dance, Upiri dance, Ikpeba dance (of Okpe), Ovenren and Gbogoniyan dance (of Ughievwen), Mamuge dance of Midaka (from Okpe), eha re emete (maiden dance), eha re ophovwi (war dance), egbada and so on. These dance patterns are stimulated by song performance usually rendered by a leader of the group and chorused by other dancers and members of the dancers. Ogbeide (2021:229) investigates the Ikenike, Ovenren and Gbogoniyan dance of the Ughievwen people of Delta State. The study reveals that the above types of dance

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. They serve as means of entertainment, tools for social, religious and communal harmony. Urhobo also has the Ovenren dance, which Nukueye (2003: 47) describes as "the fasted 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." Among the Egwu people of Ughelli South, there are still forms of dance which have not received scholarly attention. Diffre-Odiete (2020:295) finds that 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 Ushovwiedjo are all imitations of what the people observed while the river deities performed." The scholar further reveals that in this unique performative art, "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 Ushovwi (head) the emedjo carry do possess them as they reach the climax of the songs, drumbeats and performance." This cultural performance is capable of activating nostalgic reflections and also serves as a means of promoting indigenous cultural beliefs and practices.

Another form of dance performance is the Ikenike which is mostly performed by Ughievwen people who are assumed to be spiritually powerful. Oghi (2024:96) describes Ikenike dance, thus: "the performer tied his feet to a pair of stills 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 of these dances are performed at ceremonial occasions while others are often done at the end of the year or harvest seasons. It is worthy of note that dance and movements among the Urhobo are sometimes associated with certain gender or categories of people. For instance, there are dance performances attributed to *emete* (maidens) *ewheya* (womenfolk), *iphraghwa* or *emeha* (youths), *igbu* (warriors), *ehovworen/ilorogun* (traditional chiefs), *ephan* (cultural brides), and so on. In most

communities, the venues for cultural dances include market squares, river bank, mangrove forest, town halls, palace or royal courtyards. Dance performances in the above settings are also contextual because they are showcased for special purposes at such places. They are often described as dramatic performance because of the elements that people can visualize, practice and employ as means of entertainment in socio-cultural settings. Ene (2019:1123) observes that, "as a performative art, dancing is one of the numerous modes adopted by man to communicate messages, tell stories, showcase culture and reveal emotions. Invariably, through the rhythmic and artistic movement of the head, torso and limbs, man is able to formulate meaning about the nature of the world he lives in. Thus, dance reflects society – its beliefs, values, struggles, and experiences." Egorov, *et al* (2019:277) find that, "dance reflects the culture of a concrete historical period in its integrity, which is an important source for studying the native culture and mentality of its people." The findings of the research conducted by the above scholars further reveal that, "dance is a kind of model that connects a person with the world around him. The genre of folk choreography particularly reveals the axiological and aesthetic values of dance. Proceeding from this, it can be argued that folk dance, like any other art, has a historically developed sphere of life creation." Dance is a primordial physiotherapeutic activity that reveals ethno-cultural practices of people which must be transmitted to successive generations.

Cultural dances are therefore nonverbal means of expression or communication that cuts across ethnic nationalities, including Urhobo. Unuabonah (2010:62) notes that this "nonverbal communication is concerned with the process of sending and receiving messages through wordless and visual medium which aid verbal language. Thus, communication can be carried out through gestures, touch posture, and facial expression." The view of Unuabonah is corroborated by Romain (2002:23) who observes that "traditional African dances were made to bring people together and express a sense of joy. By using dance only as a tool for gaining power, the fun and joy in dance could be lost. Instead, dance like other art forms can be used as a point of recognition." This current study however deviates from previous research by investigating the new dimensions of Ema dance performance in socio-cultural settings. It is designed to establish the cultural value of this unique dance pattern.

Methodology

This ethnographic research focuses on the new dimension of *Ema* dance performance in socio-cultural Urhobo settings. As a descriptive and field research, several instruments were adopted to gather the relevant information and data required to achieve the aim and objectives of this study. The researchers visited some communities and attended cultural ceremonies where *ema* dance performances were held. The communities were purposively selected due to their proximity and information received from assistant researchers. They are Agbarha-Otor, Okparabe, Otor-Ogor, Agbarho and Ovwor-Olomu. The research instruments employed in this study are in-depth interviews and non-participant observation. The information was recorded with photo camera, audio-visual and audio recorders. The oral data are transcribed and translated from Urhobo language to English version, and qualitatively analyzed.

Literature Review

Over the decades, there are various scholarly works on dance with no significant attention on the new dimensions of this expressive therapeutic performance. Kuwor (2017:47) notes that "dance in African societies is a holistic art form that serves as a pivot around which collective community life revolves. Dance with its music as an art form has significantly become involved in the process of self-reflection and identity construction in Africa." Romain (2002:9) asserts that "dance has always brought people together, forging a place where mind and body, interacting with one another, take precedence over all other things. Dance is a time when a person may forget all of their worries and concentrate on the here and now." The scholar further states that, "it is through dance when any community comes together and shows its solidarity. It is within dance that social interactions are made and where the community springs to life. It is with dance where people affirm their beliefs as a community and come together in praise of life, God, death, etc." Similarly, Opoku (1965) states that "Dance is life expressed in dramatic terms. The most important events in the community have special dances to enhance their meaning and significance." Dance performance as Opoku implies are numerous with immeasurable societal values. The scholar maintains that "to us the Dance is a language, a mode of expression, which addresses itself to the mind, the heart through heart, using related, relevant and significant movements which have their

basic counterparts in our everyday activities, to express special and real life experience in rhythmic sequences to musical and poetic stimuli."

Also, on the importance of dance in society, Opoku, (1965) established that "for a deeper insight into our way of life – our labors, material culture, aspirations, history, social and economic conditions, religious beliefs, and disbeliefs, moments of festivity and sadness – in short, our life and soul, and the realities, perceived, conceived or felt, that make us the people that we have been and are at present, and revealed to other serious seeker in our dance." Akpan and Ekong (2017:10) acknowledged Ufford who finds that "Dance expands on the cultural values and norms of a community, their religion, their clothing, their occupation, their context and desire. Without culture, there is no dance." Ufford's research also shows that, "Dance is the expression of the inner desires of man to celebrate or to transform his society, using his body as a tool in communicating with the vocabularies of the society to put across his philosophy through a performance milieu. Dance is the language of the soil." Dance and folkmusic are inseparable in socio-cultural settings because both are deployed naturally as means of expressing thoughts, emotions and worldview of the people. Romain (2002:18) asserts that, "Traditional music and dance was declared as unbarbaric and in the same reasoning African culture was being declared unbarbaric." In advancing his argument, Romain states that "By holding true the arts of music and dance the independent African churches would serve as an example for smaller movements that sought to fight against the spread of Western culture and re-affirm the legitimacy of traditional Ghanaian culture." Akpan and Ekong (2017:11) note that "dance is as old as man and has been conceptualized in several ways. It is performative in nature, and ranks among the first forms of the arts. It is a form of body language, which expresses emotions, aspirations and goals of a people." The research of the scholars further reveals that, "dance is a symbolic artistic expression, which reveals the inner vision of its creator and is presented to the audience performance medium as an art form. Dance shares information with the audience." Apart from being deployed as means of entertainment in socio-cultural settings, studies have also shown that through this expressive art, people convey indigenous knowledge and practices to audience. through this channel of communication, "a dancer transmits his or her message to the audience through the universality of such movements, which enables the

audience to share in the experience" (Akpan & Ekong, 2017). The significance of dance and movements as expressive art is further emphasized by Georgios (2018:105) who acknowledges Lykesas *et al.* (1999) that, "the traditional dance represents society itself as it provides artistic/dancing expression, entertains, teaches and nurtures through the dynamics of rhythmic movements." In expanding the foregoing, the scholars assert that, "By participating in dance movement activities, individuals discover their rhythm, reveal their expressive improvisational and creative skills, cultivate and improve their interpersonal relationships, communication and collaboration not only with other participants in these dance activities but also with the broader social environment." The above research depicts the interpersonal and also the intrapersonal benefits of dance performance as communicative art in society.

Dance performance therefore involves movements of the physical human body and internal organs to promote general wellbeing of individuals. Akpan and Ekong (2017:11) conclude that, "Non-verbal movements differ in terms of meanings from one community to another. The dance designer must be very familiar with different movement vocabularies of a particular community, which his dance is set before using them in his dance enactment." The performance of cultural *Ema* dance across Urhobo communities are designed and presented to the psychologically expectant audience which constitutes both indigenes and guests from various walks of life.

Evolution and Contexts of *Ema* Dance

Ema royal dance is popular and primordial because the origin has not been ascertained. There are divergent views that the expressive art originated from Olomu Kingdom in Ughelli South and Oteri in Ughelli North. However, it has been observed that this royal dance and movement performance is associated with people of Ughelli, Agbarha-Otor, Eghwu, Olomu, Agbon, Effrun-Otor, Ovwie, Okpe and so on. Idolor (2001:86) describes Ema dance performance as "a vocal dance music type accompanied by Ekaigen instrumental ensemble. Its origin dates back to the beginning of the traditional rulership institution of the Okpe and hence, it is strictly associated with the activities of royalty."

Ema dance is also performed among the Uvvie as in other parts of Urhobo land. Abugu (2018:254) establishes that among the Uvwie, "Ema is an elegant, graceful and rigorous traditional music which provides epoch of traditional history while depicting the memory of its earliest origin, inter-ethnic warfare, valour and bravery." This unique performative art has evolved a great deal over the years. Ogbeide (2021:229) observes that among the Urhobo, "music making and dancing are significantly integral as well as inseparable. The Urhobo people have many musical genres and performing ensembles amongst which are Udje, Ikpeba, Opiri, Adjuja, Midaka, Ijurhi, Igoru, Soso, Ighovwan and Ema." The dramatic performance of Ema was initially deployed for the entertainment of traditional rulers and chiefs at ceremonial occasions. It was also performed to honour and also entertain august visitors apart from showcasing the cultural heritage of the people.

Ogbeide (2021:229) acknowledges Idamoyibo's (2006) whose research reveals that among the Okpe people "Ema music is performed as a traditional rite to celebrate the affluence, greatness and royalty of distinguished titled men. The performance takes place in Chieftaincy ceremonies (burial or title taking) only." The traditional dancers are known for their white cloth costumes tied round their waists with the group leaders dressed in red attires. In recent times, the dramatic characters are energetic and agile young men and women who have become skillful dancers in this expressive therapeutic art. After the coronations of traditional rulers in Urhobo kingdoms, selected palace chiefs often perform *Ema* dance to express their gratitude and honour to the newly installed monarch. Idolor (2001:86) affirms that among the Okpe, "it is performed during coronation, title taking, burial and funeral ceremonies of the ruling class. Of particular significance of the music is the authentication of the status of the newly installed Okakuro (chief) or Orodje (king)" while Ilor (2008:1) establishes that *Ema* dance "demonstrates the attributes of honour during coronation or conferment of chieftaincy on an individual." The public performance of *Ema* dance requires spacious arena for easy sideway movements (from left to right and right to left) done repeatedly with facial expressions that depict emotional feelings of happiness.



Royal Ema Dancers in a Performance Mood during a Chieftaincy Conferment at Okparabe Town in April 2024

The dance patterns also involve forward and backward movements with horse tails held firmly and used to clear the air as the tempo of the drumming increase. It therefore involves exertion of both mental and physical energies, leading to excretion of waste products from the body through sweating. There has been a paradigmatic shift in *Ema* royal dance performance in the past decades from the traditional purposes of the dramatic art to commercial venture. In some Urhobo communities today, there are groups of dancers who are hired to perform at traditional marriages and funeral ceremonies. The dancers, comprising energetic young and middle-aged people, have become money conscious compared to the original motive of early dancers. The patronages have therefore shifted from monarchs and traditional chiefs to the wealthy individuals and political office holders in society.

Patterns and Functions of *Ema* Dance Performance

There are various basic components of the entire traditional *Ema* dance performance. These include the procession stage, eulogies/vocatives, main dance performance and recession.

Ema dancers who usually appear in white cloth tied around the loins by the men and the chest by the women proceed into the dance arena in cheerful manner. They dance with enthusiasm with the musical accompaniment produced with the *igede* (drums), *agogo* (gong) and *ogban* (horn) played by young men with enough stamina. The Ema ensemble comprises three ekaigẹn (double edged conical membrane drums with aesthetic pointed sticks around the edges), inawọri (metal flute) which is no longer is use, ọkro (animal horn) and ekperẹ (Elephant tusk)" (Idamoyibo, 2006). The performance is capable of stimulating the feelings of happiness and nostalgia among the audience who psychologically reflect on their youthful age when the Ema dance was mainly presented before the royalty.

Ema royal dance steps are of various forms during performance because of the prevalent forms of songs in Urhobo society. According to Olorogun Diamond Icheghe, a respondent and music minstrel, various dancing steps during Urhobo song performances include Oyegheyeghe, Odjoboro, Upiri, Ema and Udje, to mention a few. The patterns of dance and movements for the above songs range from gentleness to energetic, forceful and acrobatic displays. However, dancers are expected to move every part of their body according to the rhythms produced by the combination of the traditional musical instruments such as those mentioned earlier in this work. Interestingly, every pattern of dance has its peculiar costumes and horse whips. The costumes are captivating and enchanting, adding aesthetics to the dance and movement and provide diversionary therapy to the audience during performance.

In Urhobo society, traditional dancers sometimes wear *ewian* (rattles) which serve as belts or anklets. These rattling instruments produce rhythmic sounds that motivate dancers to demonstrate their skills. They dance according to the rhythms of the joint instruments but in some cases their steps or body movements are in conformity with the sound of a particularly instrument such as the *igede* (drum) and *isorogun* (thumb piano). Often times, the tempo of the rhythms produced by the musical instruments dictate the dance steps and movement of the hip, head twisting, limbs, arms, feet and of course the entire body structure. In fact, almost all the images of sense (visual, tactile, kinesthetic, tactile, and thermal) are affected during dance and movement therapy.

The *Ema* dance as an expressive art is characterized with vocatives and eulogies presented in form of greetings. In most socio-cultural settings where the guests include traditional rulers, chiefs and other dignitaries, eulogies accentuate the oral performance. The vocatives and eulogies are presented as interlude, thus:

Lead singer: Avwe ogho vwo ke-e
Chorus: E-eh!
Lead singer: Avwe ogho vwo ke-e
Chorus: E-eh!!
Lead Singer: Avwe ogho vwo ke ivie re avware na-ooo
Chorus: E-eh!!!
Lead singer: Avwe ogho vwo ke-e
Chorus: E-eh!
Lead singer: Avwe ogho vwo ke-e
Chorus: E-eh!!
Lead singer: Avwe ogho vwo ke ilorogun re avware na-ooo
Chorus: E-eh!!!
Lead singer: We jiro
Chorus: E-eh!
Lead singer: We jiro
Chorus: E-eh!!
Lead singer: We jire isu re avware na-ooo
Chorus: E-eh!!!

Lead Singer: Let's respect him
Chorus: E-eh!
Lead Singer: Let's respect him
Chorus: E-eh!!
Lead Singer: Let's respect our kings -ooo
Chorus: E-eh!!!
Lead Singer: Let's respect him
Chorus: E-eh!
Lead Singer: Let's respect him
Chorus: E-eh!!
Lead Singer: Let's respect our chiefs -ooo
Chorus: E-eh!!!
Lead Singer: Let's praise him
Chorus: E-eh!
Lead Singer: Let's praise him
Chorus: E-eh!!
Lead Singer: Let's praise our leaders -ooo
Chorus: E-eh!!!

The above expressive performance is deployed to eulogize mainly the *Ivie* (natural rulers), *ilorogun* (traditional chiefs) and other leaders present at a ceremony. It serves as psycho-stimulant to the addressees and the audience who momentarily show emotional feelings of happiness.

The performance of songs deployed during *Ema* dance are usually presented in the usual pattern of call and response. The song leader begins the rendition while the

chorus respond to him and this is done repeatedly until the drummers join with the traditional musical instruments. The atmosphere is charged at this point as the dancers and audience spontaneously respond to the rhythms of the traditional music instruments in excitatory manner. Some of the popular songs rendered by the Ema dancers are captured in this study as follows.

Song I: Oyivwaro (Daredevil)

Lead Singer: Oyivwaro-o, Oyivwaro-o;
Oyivwaro-o, Oyivaro;
Di diohwo yivwe ivie re avware-e
Oyivwaro-o!
Chorus: Oyivwaro-o, Oyivwaro-o;
Oyivwaro-o, Oyivaro;
Di diohwo yivwe ivie re avware-e
Oyivwaro-o!

Lead Singer: Oyivwaro-o, Oyivwaro-o;
Oyivwaro-o, Oyivaro,
Di diohwo yivwe ivie re avware-e
Oyivwaro-o!
Chorus: Oyivwaro-o, Oyivwaro-o;
Oyivwaro-o, Oyivaro;
Di diohwo yivwe ivie re avware-e
Oyivwaro-o!

Lead Singer: Di diohwo yivwe ivie re avware-e,
Chorus: Oyivwaro-o
Lead Singer: Di diohwo yivwe ivie re avware-e,
Chorus: Oyivwaro-o

Lead singer: Daredevil, Daredevil; Daredevil, Daredevil;
Who is that person that dares our kings Daredevil!
Chorus: Daredevil, Daredevil; Daredevil, Daredevil;
Who is that person that dares our kings Daredevil!
Lead singer: Daredevil, Daredevil; Daredevil, Daredevil;
Who is that person that dares our kings Daredevil!
Chorus: Daredevil, Daredevil; Daredevil, Daredevil;
Who is that person that dares our kings Daredevil!

Lead singer: Who is that person that dares our kings?
Chorus: Daredevil!
Lead singer: Who is that person that dares our kings?
Chorus: Daredevil!
Lead singer: Who is that person that dares our chiefs
Chorus: Daredevil!

Lead Singer: Di diohwo yivwe ilorogun re avware-e,	**Lead singer:** Who is that person that dares our chiefs
Chorus: Oyivwaro-o	**Chorus:** Daredevil!
Lead Singer: Di diohwo yivwe ilorogun re avware-e,	**Lead singer:** Who is that person that dares our Governor?
Chorus: Oyivwaro-o	**Chorus:** Daredevil!
Lead Singer: Di diohwo yivwe Governor?	**Lead singer:** Who is that person that dares our Governor?
Chorus: Oyivwaro-o	**Chorus:** Daredevil!
Lead Singer: Di diohwo yivwe Governor?	**Lead singer:** Who is that person that dares our kings?
Chorus: Oyivwaro-o	**Chorus:** Daredevil!
Lead Singer: Di diohwo yivwe ivie re avware-e	**Lead singer:** Who is that person that dares our kings?
Chorus: Oyivwaro-o,	
Lead Singer: Di diohwo yivwe ivie re avware-e	

The above song is often performed by the *Ema* dancers to demonstrate the respect which the Urhobo people have for their traditional monarchs, *ilorogun* (chiefs) and the dignitaries. The performance is meant to caution daredevils and other social deviants to desist from their evil-machinations to avoid disastrous consequences.

Song II: Orere Yovwi Ugo (Town Should Favour The Eagle)

Lead Singer: Orere yovwi ugo! Orere yovwu ugo!! Orere Ughelli yovwi ugo!!!	**Lead singer:** Town should favour the eagle! Town should favour the eagle!! Ughelli town should favour the eagle!!!
Chorus: Orere yovwi ugo	**Chorus:** Town should favour the eagle
Lead Singer: Orere Ogor yovwi ugo	**Lead singer:** Ogor town should favour the eagle
Chorus: Orere yovwi ugo	
Lead Singer: Orere Ewu yovwi ugo	**Chorus:** Town should favour the eagle
Chorus: Orere yovwi ugo	**Lead singer:** Ewu town should favour the eagle
Lead Singer: Orere Agbon yovwi ugo	**Chorus:** Town should favour the eagle

Chorus: Orere yovwi ugo
Lead Singer: Orere Ofuomo yovwi ugo
Chorus: Orere yovwi ugo
Lead Singer: Orere Olomu yovwi ugo
Chorus: Orere yovwi ugo
Lead Singer: Orere Uvwie yovwi ugo
Chorus: Orere yovwi ugo
Lead Singer: Orere Ephron yovwi ugo
Chorus: Orere yovwi ugo
Lead Singer: Orere Okpe yovwi ugo
Chorus: Orere yovwi ugo
Lead Singer: Orere Ughienvwen yovwi ugo
Chorus: Orere yovwi ugo
Lead Singer: Orere Evwreni yovwi ugo
Chorus: Orere yovwi ugo
Lead Singer: Orere Agbarha yovwi ugo
Chorus: Orere yovwi ugo
Lead Singer: Orere Agbarho yovwi ugo
Chorus: Orere yovwi ugo
Lead Singer: Orere Abraka yovwi ugo
Chorus: Orere yovwi ugo
Lead Singer: Orere Urhobo yovwi ugo
Chorus: Orere yovwi ugo

Lead singer: Agbon town should favour the eagle
Chorus: Town should favour the eagle
Lead singer: Ofuomo town should favour the eagle
Chorus: Town should favour the eagle
Lead singer: Olomu town should favour the eagle
Chorus: Town should favour the eagle
Lead singer: Uvwie town should favour the eagle
Chorus: Town should favour the eagle
Lead singer: Ephron town should favour the eagle
Chorus: Town should favour the eagle
Lead singer: Okpe town should favour the eagle
Chorus: Town should favour the eagle
Lead singer: Ughievwen town should favour the eagle
Chorus: Town should favour the eagle
Lead singer: Evwreni town should favour the eagle
Chorus: Town should favour the eagle
Lead singer: Agbarha town should favour the eagle
Chorus: Town should favour the eagle
Lead singer: Agbarho town should favour the eagle
Chorus: Town should favour the eagle
Lead singer: Abraka town should favour the eagle
Chorus: Town should favour the eagle

Lead singer: Urhobo towns should favour the eagle
Chorus: Town should favour the eagle

The above song performance depicts the hospitality and prosperous nature of various Urhobo kingdoms and their inhabitants to the symbolic creature, eagle. The Urhobo attach great significance to certain arboreal animals particularly the *ugo* (eagles) which they believe connote positive cultural emblem. It is widely believed among them that any tree that hosts an eagle is a great one hence various folkloric materials like fabrics, household items, walking sticks, sceptres and so on, bear the emblem of an eagle. The rendition of Ema songs is followed by the dance and movements by the performers in their usual white costumes. Miller (2000:40) observes that "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." The performance of cultural dance especially the Ema royal dance therefore serves as a unifying factor for both performers and the audience through social, physical and psychological involvement.

Setting and Functions of the Performance

The dance performance requires spacious arena where the dancers can demonstrate their physical and mental exercises in form of entertainment for the audience. Diffre-Odiete (2020:298) notes that "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." Therefore, the performance stage for *Ema* dance is devoid of obstructions to ensure free movements and dance performance. *Ema* dance is presented at various ceremonies that consist of mixed genders, age and social class. As a royal dance performance, *ivie* (the monarchs), *ilorogun* (chiefs) and dignitaries are entertained with this creative art.

Dance performance can be viewed as a means of self-expression or communication in socio-cultural settings. The performance is distinctively presented in a

dramatically in such a way that there are performers, message (dance performance) and audience (viewers). Georgios (2018:106) notes that, "the communication process begins when the dancer wishes to pass on information to the viewer/s. Then the dancer (transmitter) encodes what s/he wants to convey using a code of movements and forms a message." The scholar also reveals that, "through the dance act, s/he conveys the message to the viewer (recipient). The viewer then receives the message, decodes it, interprets it, and ultimately recognizes, perceives, understands, feels what the dancer wished to carry forward." The *Ema* dance performance is capable of alleviating psychic and emotional pains of audience as the activities shift the minds of , Idamoyibo (2006) notes that "The dance is vigorous, involving the swinging and pulling of one's arms towards oneself. The movement of the arms indicates that Ema dancers wish to be rich by pulling wealth to themselves" (cited in Ogbeide, 2021:229).



Ema Cultural Dancers at Funeral Ceremony in Agbarha-Otor

Dance therapy cannot be separated from song performances because whenever *ine* (songs) are being rendered by traditional oral performers, with or without the accompaniment of musical instruments, the body of the singer and the listeners

respond accordingly. This may increase mental alertness and mood of depressed individuals. During the Ema dance therapy sessions, the minds of the dancers possibly escape from their unpleasant memories to the sedative coping activity thereby alleviating the psychic and emotional pains being experienced by the patients. This confirms the view of Aluede (2012:78) that "music making in sub-Sahara Africa is a form of exercise in that musical activities go with dance, drumming, hand clapping or other forms of instrumentation." This implies that in every song performance in Urhobo land as could be found in other societies, there are professional dancers who respond to the rhythmic sounds produced by the integration of songs and musical instruments, not only during Ema dance but also other forms of cultural dance performance.

Ema dance performance is meant to ease tension and grief during funeral ceremonies or create euphoric atmosphere during coronation, anniversary, chieftaincy confermation and so on. At these occasions, dancers who are entrapped by the songs initiate some steps and sometimes carryout dramatization to sustain full attention of audience as you can see above. Cultural dancers are not restricted to only the young people in Urhobo society hence some traditional chiefs who are enchanted by the rhythm produced with the indigenous musical instruments join the dance performance. Urhobo traditional chiefs are known for Ema Dance which is a form of royal dance presented at rare occasions but this research found that these dancers (chiefs) could not suppress their strong feelings of happiness and excitement. The dancers, thus, in their happy mood showcase their skills in this unique form of performing art. Through this medium, they exercise their knees, waist, heads and of course their entire muscular systems as they dance to the rhythms generated by the drums, gongs and other traditional instruments utilized to bring the performance to life. The dance and movements serve as diversionary strategy to the dancers, drummers and the entire audience because during this expressive art, their minds are temporarily diverted from their psychic and emotional sufferings to the exciting and motivational moments.

New Dimensions of Ema Dance Performance

Ema royal dance has assumed new dimensions in the past decades which has not attracted significant attention of researchers. Findings have shown that there are

new trends in terms of Christianity, business venture, social status of dancers, patronage, context and content of performance. These are due to religious influence, economic hardship, modern civilization and so on.

(i) Christianization of Ema Dance Songs

In recent times, the Ema dance has become a part of religious activities deployed by Christians in different churches across Urhobo land. During annual festivals and thanksgiving programmes, women and children often carryout rehearsals and present Ema dance performance for entertainment, communicating their heartfelt gratitude to God and eulogize His unlimited power. Apart from annual harvest, church building dedications, anniversaries, love feasts, hosting of dignitaries and so on, are avenues for Christians to showcase their imaginative, creative and physical skills before the elated congregation. The dance song is being composed with modification to suit Christian religious purpose. Dance performers currently eulogize Almighty God, Jesus Christ, General Overseers (GOs) of churches, and other religious leaders instead of the traditional rulers, chiefs and dignitaries for whom the performance was composed in the past.

Like most African songs, cultural songs among the Urhobo contain narratives, descriptions and numerous poetic devices that intertwine and convey central themes that can provide therapy to listeners, including Christians and adherents of African traditional religion (ATR). It has been observed that *Ema* songs are characterized with short melodic lines repeatedly sung in solo and choral response form. Some of the texts made use of language expressions, dignifying and proverbial, depicting the royal institution with which it is associated (Idolor, 2001).

(ii) Ema Dance as Business Venture

The performance of Ema royal dance has shifted from the primary function of entertainment of traditional rulers and dignitaries to that of commercialization. There are cases of youths and some elderly women who organize themselves and visit certain occasions to perform. These dancers are often paid substantial amount of money by the celebrants of the ceremonies besides food and drinks provided for them to energize them throughout the events. In the past, the *ilorogun* (palace chiefs) voluntarily performed Ema dance to stimulate the emotions of the newly

installed monarch and the invited guests. In recent times, *Ema* dance groups have shifted their primary patronage from entertainment of royal fathers to commercial purpose due to economic situation of the country. The youths have seen the *Ema* dance performance as an opportunity to explore and discover their hidden talents in creative art for self-empowerment while also sustaining the entertainment which was the primary motive.

(iii) Social Status of Ema Dancers

Another dimension of the *Ema* dance performance observed during the fieldwork is the social status of the dancers. Unlike the traditional chiefs who mobilized themselves to pledge their loyalty and entertain the audience, most dancers currently comprise youths from low socio-economic background. However, the contemporary dance performers still demonstrate the non-verbal expressive skills, body movements, agility and composure like the traditional chiefs.

(iv) Patronage

In terms of patronage, *Ema* dancers now entertain whoever that can afford their requirements for performance at ceremonies. Although they perform with their primordial white costumes with red attires for the leader(s), the difference is clear when palace chiefs appear before the audience for entertainment. Religious leaders, politicians, businessmen and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), to mention a few, sometimes employ the services of *Ema* dancers to entertain their guests (audience) and also make the ceremony colourful.

Conclusion

This study has shown there are new dimensions of the popular Ema dance performance of the Urhobo people of Nigeria in recent times. Although the psychological performative art was originally meant for the entertainment of traditional rulers, chiefs and dignitaries, there has been a shift in recent times in terms of patronage, audience, context, content and commercialization of the therapeutic intervention. These supposed royal dancers currently travel around entertaining audience for financial gain. They attend both traditional marriages and funeral ceremonies of wealthy individuals where they render performance services. In some churches, especially during annual harvest and thanksgiving

service, Ema dance performance is deployed to eulogize the Almighty God, religious leaders and spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The song performances are predominantly characterized with devices such as metaphors, rhetorical questions, allusions, repetitions, parallelism, symbolism and other images. The integration of these linguistics resources into the song performances help to create mental pictures of events, characters, objects and things being described by the traditional Ema performers. They are employed to activate thoughts, stimulate emotional feelings and modify behavioural patterns of audience and dancers as well.

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