

## EMA DANCE PERFORMANCE AND THE ROLE OF SONG DIRECTORS IN URHOBOLAND OF DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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### Abstract

**E**Ma is a royalty music and dance performed by the people of Ughelli, Udu, Olomu, Effurun, Agbon and Uvwie clans amongst other Urhobo extractions including Okpe kingdom of Delta State, Nigeria. The artistic and exponential input of song conductors in *Ema* dance ensemble is very significant, yet not enough attention has been paid to their impact on the expressive musical performance. This paper examines the important contributions of song directors in *Ema* dance ensembles. It takes into cognizance the performance context of the dance, its performance structure, style and aesthetics, etc. Participant observation and interview were the instruments of data collection. Findings of the study reveal that song directors are usually the corner-stone of *Ema* performances.

**Keywords:** Ema, Dance, Performance, Role, Song Directors

### Introduction

Music is extremely essential and has positive impacts on humans such that it cannot be ignored in everyday activities and functions of individuals in the society. In this regard, Agu (2005: 113) states that "music serves as an intricate part of the development of the mind, body and soul." It is a powerful medium for the expression of feelings, values and ideas. In Urhobo land, the largest and most populated ethnic group in Delta State, and the 5<sup>th</sup> largest in Nigeria (Egere, 2012: 6), music

interwoven with dance is an indispensable tool to all activities in the society. It is also a soothing balm to listeners on different occasions such as marriages, festivals, funerals, coronations, naming ceremonies, birthday parties, independence anniversaries, etc. All these occasions are connected with the social, political and religious institutions of the Urhobo people, as every stage of life from cradle to death is associated with one type of music or the other. Idamoyibo (2021:15) notes that "music has served the human race effectively in identity symbolism, social, ritual, recreational, mental, moral, political, kinetic, therapeutic, and religious spheres". He states further that "it has functioned so much as entertainment, while providing education, counseling, enlightenment, and bringing corrigenda into correctitude in the society through generations". To 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 *Emá*. However, *Emá* is the focus of this paper.

### ***Emá Dance***

*Emá* is a royal dance performed during coronation of kings, installation of chieftaincy and funeral of the nobles or royalty. Idamoyibo (2006) states that amongst the Okpe:

*Emá 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 dance is vigorous, involving the swinging and pulling of one's arms towards oneself. The movement of the arms indicates that emá dancers wish to be rich by pulling wealth to themselves. The emá ensemble comprises three ekaigen (double edged conical membrane drums with aesthetic pointed sticks around the edges), inawori (metal flute) which is no longer in use, okro (animal horn) and ekperẹ (Elephant tusk).*

Ilor (2008:1) avers that *Ema* is a "dance that demonstrates the attributes of honour during coronation or conferment of chieftaincy on an individual". In the same vein, Idolor (2001:86) describes *Ema* 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. 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).*

The dance can be performed by both males and females and it is rigorous, involving the swinging and pulling of the arms towards the body. Much flexibility is required in body movement as well as footwork. Children are not allowed in the dance due to its vigorous nature. The range of membership is between twenty-five (25) and forty (40) people consisting of instrumentalists and dancers. However, membership composition of the dance varies slightly from one clan to another and from one kingdom to another.

### ***Ema* musical instruments**

Musical accompaniment is absolutely essential in *Ema* performance. This consists of rhythmic and melo-rhythmic figurations that are produced by four membrane drums, maracas (Akise), bell (agogo), whistle (Ogban) and a horn. These instruments are usually played by men who are well-versed on *Ema* rhythmic patterns. The horn is a peculiar instrument that portrays royalty and power during coronation or conferment. It plays the melodic role in a responsorial style to the songs and enunciates messages of praise which spur the dancers into worthier performance. It also provides accompaniment to the drumming and dancing during *Ema* performance. On the other hand, the

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drums and other instruments are percussively used in articulating and maintaining the stimulating rhythms of the dance performance.



**Plate 1:** Ema instrumentalists performing on stage  
*Source: James, E. F.*

### ***Ema* Performance Context**

The performance of *Ema* was originally confined to coronation and title conferment ceremonies of kings and chiefs among the Urhobo. "At the time, its performers were entirely chiefs while the drumming was done by either the palace drummers or trained drummers who accompany the chiefs to installation ceremonies" (Idolor, 2001:86). Over time, the performance context of *Ema* has enlarged to marriage ceremonies, funeral ceremonies, festivals, anniversary celebrations, and celebration of achievements, public reception and many other occasions of socio-political significance. Abugu (2018:254) posits 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.

## **Style and Aesthetics in Emá Musical Dance Ensemble**

During performance, members of the ensemble dance in procession to the stage in their elegant attire depicting royalty. These include coral beads worn around the neck and arms of both the male and female dancers and white apparel tied on the waist of the male dancers and on the chest region of the female dancers. The beads worn by the dancers are ornaments of dignity, while the white apparel signifies purity. Adding to the aesthetic of the performance is the holding of *Ujo* (horse wipe), *adjudju* (traditional hand fan) or white handkerchiefs by the performers.

The song director of *Emá* ensemble is usually identified by the colour of his attire which is red apparel tied on the waist. He selects a processional song from a series of *emá* songs to warm up the group and prepare the audience for the performance. Thereafter, he dances to the stage and performs a dramatic gesture by kneeling down and extending his arms to the audience in dance, while greeting the audience as follows.

Urhobo	English
<i>Wado mini wado,</i>	Thank you, I say thank you,
<i>Do, do, do, do,</i>	Thanks, thanks, thanks, thanks,
<i>Emo re Urhobo,</i>	Children of Urhobo,
<i>Mini wado.</i>	I greet you.

In response, the audience say 'eh' meaning yes, the greeting is accepted. The song director concludes by saying 'Ii', and everybody choruses 'i-yeh, a sort of ovation to conclude the opening greeting session. It is an exclamation that denotes joy and a way of paying obeisance to the king and chiefs. Thereafter, other members of the group go one after the other to greet the king and the chiefs, in order to receive blessings from them. The dancers are ushered into the dancing arena in array of two straight lines, both male and female facing each other with profuse drumming heralding the entry

vehemently. Sometimes they form a single straight line dancing forward. At the entry point, the dancers come in pairs moving seven (7) steps forward stylistically and three (3) steps backward with the song director taking the lead. The dancers repeat the same movement until they get to the middle of the stage where they move three (3) steps forward and backward with each dancer taking their turns in the dance until the last set and then a circular formation is employed with each dancer coming out to display his or her dexterity.



**Figure 2:** Photograph of *Emá* dancers performing on stage  
Courtesy of James, E.F.

Abugu (2012:43) while commenting on the performance of *Emá*, notes that "At the height of *Emá* dance, the scenario is akin to a dance drama, which gives meaningful participation to the entire dancers; at this point, the tempo of the singing, drumming and dancing assumes greater intensity and creates a panorama of panegyrics." *Emá* dance permits individual improvisation, even when group co-ordination is the goal.

### Performance Structure

The structure of an entire *ema* performance can be divided into three sections. These are the introduction, development and ending (Onwuka, 2012:30).

Introduction: In *Ema*, the beginning marks the introduction of the performance which involves the dance procession and the recitative.

Development: This refers to the main body of *Ema* dance performance, which embodies the actual dance execution. In this section, all the dancers' movements are properly exhibited in their logical sequences. It is within this section of the dance that the ideas, emotions, stories and patterns are expressed explicitly.

Ending: This section is the concluding part of *Ema* dance performance. It involves the withdrawal of the performers from the stage and the actual end of the performance. The dancers recess the same way they processed. The leader and two other dancers described as dance competitors remain on stage, while the other dancers leave. The three (3) remaining dancers display their individual skills to end the performance. At this point, the tempo of the singing, drumming and dancing intensifies and both the dancers and instrumentalists provide signal to end the performance at the same time.

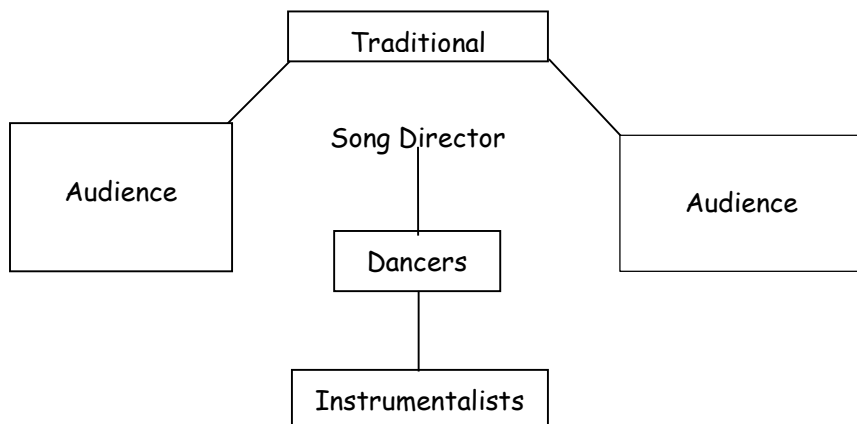


Fig. 3: A chart showing the structure of *Ema* performance

### **Expressive Input of the Song Director**

The role of an *Ema* song director is very significant. He directs the vocal aspect of the dance through his oral musical signals and controls the orchestral accompaniment through gestural signs or verbalized expression. This is a feature that differentiates the *Ema* director from those of the West. He is the lead soloist and the overall leader of the group. During every performance, he takes up his position in front or in the inner circle to lead the singing and dancing. The song director is usually a male singer who possesses a strong resonant voice, a good memory for easy recall of the song repertoire during rehearsals or performances and a creative improvisatory ability to create variations during performances. For example, *Ema* songs are usually in short repetitive forms. Thus, in most cases, a song director does not sing a repetition the same way, but often improvises the repeat sections. He raises the songs one after the other while the dancers respond in the chorus. The song director adopts several performance styles in *Ema* such as symbolism in song texts, sounds and rhythmic patterns of the different drums. Again, he blows the whistle to depict the climax of the performance. At this time, the singing stops while the drumming continues and dancing becomes frenzied.

Furthermore, the song director in *Ema* selects appropriate songs to suit every occasion and performance context. It is his duty and that of his group to impress the kings and chiefs with songs and new styles of dances that extol royalty. He is regarded as a composer and a teacher because of the roles he plays in fitting new words to old musical tunes and themes. More importantly, he composes on the spur of the moment the appellation of the royalty and important dignitaries who are present at the venue of performance.



### Forms and Texts in *Ema* Music

The texts of *Ema* songs are built on traditional materials, incorporating proverbs and praise names. The songs are structurally and basically in call and response form. Hence, Idolor (2001:90) state that: "*Ema* songs are characterized by short melodic sentences 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". Below are examples of some of the texts and forms of *Ema* music, vocal and orchestral accompaniments, presented in the transcriptions.

#### Urhobo

Eni  
E, eni-o,  
E, eni;  
OvieavwareK'eni,  
Ichivwi r'eni be vughee,  
not difficult to identify,  
E, eni-o,  
E, eni!

#### English Translation

Elephant  
Oh, Elephant,  
Oh, Elephant;  
Our king is an elephant,  
The footprints of an elephant are  
Oh, Elephant,  
Oh, Elephant!

Figure 4: Excerpt from Eni (Elephant) Transcribed by Eguriase James

The musical score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes the Song lead (Osu ru ne) and Backup singers (Ikwaya). The second system includes the Whistle (Ogban), Maracas (Akise), Gourd Maracas (Akise), Agogo, ukiri 1, ukiri 2, ebga drum 1, and ebga drum 2. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 200. The time signature is 12/8. The key signature has one flat (Bb). The Song lead part begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The Backup singers part is a blank staff. The Whistle part is a blank staff. The Maracas part begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The Gourd Maracas part begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The Agogo part begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The ukiri 1 and ukiri 2 parts are blank staves. The ebga drum 1 part begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The ebga drum 2 part begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat.

The musical score is arranged in a vertical system. At the top, the vocal line for 'Osu n.' is written in a treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The lyrics are: 'vie a\_\_ vwa re k'eni ki ri re r' e vu ghe re'. A second vocal line, 'Ikw.', is shown below it but contains no notes. Below the vocal lines are several instrumental parts, each starting with a double bar line and a repeat sign. From top to bottom, these are: 'Ogb.' (no notes), 'Aki. 1' (melodic line), 'Aki. 2' (melodic line), 'Ago.' (melodic line), 'Uki 1' (melodic line), 'Uki 2' (rhythmic line with eighth notes), 'Egba Dr 1' (rhythmic line with eighth notes), and 'Egba Dr 2' (melodic line). The score is divided into two measures by a vertical bar line.

4

Osu n.

Ikw.

eh e ni o eh e ni o

Ogb.

Aki. 1

Aki. 2

Ago.

Uki 1

Uki 2

Egba Dr 1

Egba Dr 2

**Urhobo**

OrereyoUgo  
 OrereyoUgo,  
 Orereri Nigeria Ugo;  
 Orerer' UghelliUgo,  
 OrereriDelta Ugo,  
 Orerer' AbrakaUgo;  
 Orere menaUgo,  
 OrereyoUgo!

**English Translation**

A golden Land  
 A golden Land,  
 Nigeria is a golden land;  
 Ughelli is a golden land,  
 Delta State is a golden land,  
 Abraka is a golden land;  
 My land is golden,  
 A golden land!

Figure 5: Excerpt from Orereyo, Ugo (A golden Land)  
 Transcribed by Eguriase James

The musical score is for the song 'Orereyo, Ugo' and is transcribed by Eguriase James. It features a tempo of 180 beats per minute and a 12/8 time signature. The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes the 'Song lead (Osu ru ne)' and 'Backup singers (Ikwaya)'. The song lead part has the lyrics 'o re re yo u' written below the notes. The second system includes 'Whistle (Ogban)', 'Maracas (Akise)', 'Gourd Maracas (Akise)', 'Agogo', 'ukiri 1', 'ukiri 2', 'ebga drum 1', and 'ebga drum 2'. Each instrument part is represented by a staff with rhythmic notation.

The musical score is arranged in a vertical stack of staves. At the top are two vocal parts: 'Osu n.' and 'Ikw.'. Below them are several instrumental parts: 'Ogb.', 'Aki. 1', 'Aki. 2', 'Ago.', 'Uki 1', 'Uki 2', 'Egba Dr 1', and 'Egba Dr 2'. The vocal parts include lyrics: 'go o re Ni ge\_ria u' for 'Osu n.' and 'o re re\_ yo ugo' for 'Ikw.'. The instrumental parts are written on staves with various rhythmic notations, including eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and bar lines. The 'Ogb.' part is a single line with a few notes. 'Aki. 1' and 'Aki. 2' have more complex rhythmic patterns. 'Ago.', 'Uki 1', and 'Uki 2' feature continuous rhythmic accompaniment. 'Egba Dr 1' and 'Egba Dr 2' provide a steady drum accompaniment.

## Conclusion

In this paper, it is observed that dance and music cannot be separated from the culture and tradition of the Urhobo. *Ema* dance which came into existence with the sole aim of honouring the nobles and royalty is a treasure in the socio-political and communal life of the Urhobo. *Ema* is a dance of royalty that is performed only on special occasions to honour revered dignitaries, people who are within the upper class in social stratification. The study concludes that the roles of an *Ema* song directors are very significant as he directs the vocal aspect of the dance through his musical signals and gestures which control the entire performance. The director is the lead soloist and lead dancer of the group whose position is in front or the inner circle of the dance formation, from where he leads both the singing and dancing. He usually blows the whistle to depict the climax of the performance as well as using it to provide signals that mark the end of performance sections.

For posterity sake and for the preservation of the rich cultural heritage of the Urhobo, *Ema* dance and other dance types in Urhobo need to be preserved through documentation and notation for future generations.

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### **Interviewees**

- Mr. Ehwre Ogheneruemu, Chief Technical Instructor, Department of Music, Delta State University, Abraka.
- Mr. Ejaita Clement Onakpoberuo, emá dance participant, Abraka.
- Mr. Egurase James, emá dance participant, Abraka.
- Mr. Iyasere John Oghenekparohwo, emá dance participant, Abraka.