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# Aspects of Ughievwen Culture of Western Delta of Nigeria and the Influence of Westernism

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The culture and tradition of a people represent their source of identity, pride and dignity. The Ughievwen people of Western Delta of Nigeria are no exception to this generalisation. However, the introduction of colonial rule to that part of Nigeria in the nineteenth century commenced a phase in the history of the Ughievwen, in which the people began to experience culture conflict. This eroding force gradually undermined the cultural values and practices of the people especially in areas of marriages and healing practices. These aspects of the people's cultural values and practices thus began an irreversible journey into the abyss of adulteration and extermination. This paper examines aspects of Ughievwen culture and points out areas of conflict with western culture and calls for the restoration of Ughievwen cultural pride. The papers also provide data for further academic research and suggests way forward.

**Key words:** Culture, Nigeria, Ughievwen, Western Delta and Westernism.

## INTRODUCTION

In every society, culture shows the way of life in that particular society. The culture of a society is the bedrock and pivot on which all relations stand (Ojo, 2011: 161). Societies of the world today, whether ancient or modern, had cultural variables that determined what they were and what they did (Ajetunmobi, 2005: 8). Thus, no society in the world can survive without culture.

The issue of culture transcend mode of dressing, dancing, music, morals, festivals and language because it involves the generality of human actions. The importance of culture lies not only in its intellectual spectrum, but also in the fact that it marks the missing link bet-

ween man and the lesser animals. It is the totality of human actions which is socially as opposed to genetically transmitted values from one generation to the other (Akinjogbin, 2002: 1 to 2). However, western Europeans in the continent (Adebayo, 2009: 98). This perception is derogatory. History shows that African societies developed like other groups in the world and that the emergent civilization was later spread and modified by other nations and groups (Ademiluyi, 2011). Africa is one of the most exploited as well as exploitable continent because of her rich cultures and resources that has been overwhelmed by foreign cultures (Idowu and Adegoke,

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2011).

In the light of the above, this paper discusses cultural aspects of Ughievwen people of Western Delta of Nigeria especially areas of marriage and healing practices in the pre-colonial times to show the extent to which the introduction of colonialism appears to have adulterated and exterminated them. It is therefore imperative that African and indeed, Nigerian culture needs to be preserved because it is the only link between the past, present and the future.

The entire Ughievwen area is said to have been occupied by four main families that sprang from the four children of Ughievwen, the eponymous founder. They are Orhowe, Owahwa, UkpEDI and Uvburie. Even though there are dearths of written works on the early history of the Ughievwen people, recent research shows that the area now occupied by the people may have been occupied by the same people as far back as at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Oghi, 2013). Upon settlement in the area, the people had their culture and related amongst themselves harmoniously before the advent of colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Aspects of the people's culture that marked and will continue to easily distinguish them from their peers are marriages and healing practices. This appears to have changed with the advent of colonialism and even the post colonial period.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was based on oral interviews and archival materials got from intelligent report compiled by S.E. Johnson on the Ughievwen people in 1932. Where these sources did not provide answer to the issues discussed, resort was made to secondary sources. The analysis of these sources showed that marriage and healing aspect of Ughievwen culture had challenges with the introduction of colonial rule. Attention is therefore drawn in the conclusion that there is need to preserve these aspects of Ughievwen culture.

### Marriages in pre-colonial Ughievwen Land

In Ughievwen land, like other African societies, marriage evolved out of the people's traditional beliefs and was therefore regulated by custom. As a result of this, marriages contracted which fell short of the traditionally accepted standard was customarily frowned at, and socially stigmatized by the people (Okpohie, 2008). For instance, couples who were not lawfully married under the traditional system were denied certain traditional and social privileges. First, the male was not regarded as son-in-law to the parents of the wife. Second, the male was not allowed to perform traditional burial rites if either parents of the wife died; third, the woman or wife was regarded as Osen (a concubine) or treated as prostitute (Opharien).

Traditional marriage in pre-colonial Ughievwen land was conducted in six stages. The first stage was courtship. This starts right from the time the man saw lady whom he liked and signified interest in her before the parents. At this stage, the man made occasional visits in the evenings to the parents of the would-be wife. The parents of the lady also used such opportunity to investigate the man's background. Once there was confirmation, the man was asked to pay a specified amount of money to the mother of the girl. This payment was called Igbo-Esheren. The suitor was also expected to buy a wrapper and blouse for the girl called Amwa-Esheren (Pippah, 1999). These requirements were expected to be fulfilled by the suitor before he was traditionally allowed to sleep with the lady. The amount of money paid was not fixed as it depended on the prevailing economic situation. However, as asserted by my informant, such amount was within the neighborhood of £1 or more (Okpohie, 2008).

The second stage was introduction and acceptance. At this stage, the man was asked to come with his relations for formal introduction to the in-laws. Kolanuts and native gin (called Ogogoro) were presented by the man to the family of the would-be bride and their purpose was made known to the bride's family via the oratory skill of a spokesman (Otota) brought for that purpose. Where the family of the bride accepted the proposal, the suitor and his family presented acceptance drinks referred to as Udi-merhovwenren. The quantity of this however, varied among villages, but in Owahwa village, it included a bottle of native gin, a plate of kolanuts with alligator pepper and the sum of twelve and half pounds (Okpohie, 2008).

The stage of introduction and acceptance was followed by Oko (bride wealth). A list of items to be presented by the suitor was made known by the family of the would-be bride to the suitor. In Owahwa community of Ughievwen area, these items included: two wrappers (Ileleji), two headgears, one umbrella, a pair of shoes, a golden necklace, wrist coral beads, a suitcase, one lamp, tubers of yam, two Otovwe fish and cosmetics (Okpohie, 2008). These items were compulsorily expected to be provided before the next stage called Udi-Eghiekuotor. It should be noted that while most of the items were meant for the bride, the consumables were shared by the parents of the bride among their relations.

The stage of Udi-Eghiekuotor preceded the payment of dowry (Emuebro). The basic things required at this stage were not significantly different from that of Udi-Eghiekuotor except that before the day of the payment of dowry, the son-in-law was expected to provide a hat, walking stick and a wrapper for the father-in-law, while the mother-in-law was expected to be given money for taking care of the bride, called Igbo-Gberharen (Koyor, 2009). Other payments expected to be made by the suitor was Igbo-Oyanvwen (money for circumcision), which was a token and the amount was not static and three bags of salt, one for the mother-in-law which she shared among her relations, the remaining two bags were

given to the Ewheya (married women of the extended family).

The last stage of marriage activities in Ughievwen area was called Aje-Esuo (escort). This took place only on certain days of the traditional week (Koyor, 2009). These days were known as Omamede and Edebi, which according to tradition, was to avoid other fresh and protracted arrangement. On the date of escort, the family of the bride (*Opha*, plural: *Epha*) delegates two or more responsible married ladies, joined by two or more ladies sent by the bridegroom, both of whom teamed up to bring the bride (*Opha*) home in a colourful ceremony.

### Healing practices in Pre-colonial Ughievwen

Pre-colonial Ughievwen had their herbal practices before the introduction of colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the area. It was believed in the community as in most African pre-colonial societies that illness could be natural, non-supernatural, psychiatric and social or preternatural and supernatural (Okpohie, 2008). Like the Yorubas of western Nigeria, the belief was that preternatural agents could cause or worsen natural or physical ailment (Dopamu, 1979). Social or preternatural diseases were associated with the activities of witches, sorcerers and evil eyes of enemies. Thus, in Ughievwen land, while a witch (*Orienda*) was one who resolved to do evil and whose activities were mainly executed during nocturnal operations, a wizard was believed to be one who used his/her power in healing and generally for the good of the society, known as *Adjele* (celebrated witch who had confessed his/her sins and resolved to do good) and in most cases, *adjele* were herbal practitioners (Esiri, 1988: 14). The therapeutic methods adopted in traditional healing in Ughievwen land varied. Mume states too, that Nigeria had the highest variety of therapies that placed Nigeria traditional medicine in a superior position to other countries (Mume, Nd: 49).

The therapeutic methods of healing in Ughievwen land were: the use of herbs, massaging, hydrotherapy, fasting, cupping or blood-letting, heat therapy, surgery, faith healing and divination. Herbalism, as a concept, constituted the oldest form of therapy. Its origin is associated with the evolution of mankind. It was used by the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Chinese and Romans. Ughievwen therapy displayed some mystical forces. For example, there were some that had occultic strength, some were *Ifue* (antidote) which counteracted diseases supernaturally caused, *Umu-Use* which could be directed telepathically to summon a mission person, while *Ekpofia* was used to divert bullets from the target person or spot. There was also massaging which was a method peculiar to the Ijos of the Niger Delta. It seems that the Ughievwen people, perhaps due to their historical ties with the Ijos could have learnt this art from them. This practice was called *Oma-Eghworo* (Okpohie, 2008). Massaging or *Oma-Eghworo* was used for ailment of the

nervous, muscular and osseous system. It was specially used for treating gynecological problems. By this method, there was physical manipulation of the muscles, joints and veins on the nude skin in a technical manner (Okpohie, 2008). In some cases, massage treatment could be applied to relax the muscles and veins, and to allow circulation of blood. This treatment was believed to aid stimulation of muscles and allowed circulation of blood. Other groups that also practiced this therapeutic method were the Isoko and Itsekiri peoples of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Hydrotherapy, called *Ame vwo nyoma* was also practiced as a healing method by the Ughievwen people. It involved the application of water of different forms and temperature for the treatment of ailment. Hydrotherapy equalized the circulation of blood in the body system and helped in increasing muscular tone and nerve force. It was also believed to improve nutrition and digestion thus facilitating activities of the respiratory glands (Okpohie, 2008). The hydrotherapeutic method made use of cold, hot, compressed and steam vapour baths. Cold and hot baths were used for the treatment of different diseases after adding some herbs. When fused in this way, the cold and hot bath were used as cure for fever, headache, rheumatism and general pains. The hot bath not only made the skin capillaries to relax but increased the activities of the sweat glands (Okpohie, 2008). The compressed bath on the other hand, comprised a piece of cloth wrung out of cold or hot water to produce the desired temperature. This method was specially used in treating ailments like pains, soreness, inflammation, rheumatic pains, and swellings by traditional midwives for women.

Fasting and cupping or blood-letting was also used by the Ughievwen people. Fasting, referred to as *Ohwevwechiro* by the people was mostly used for the treatment of constipation (*evurokere*), obesity (*ekpevu*) as well as spiritual diseases. Traditional Ughievwen medical practitioners prescribed fasting before patients were given some concoction (Igun, 2011). This treatment continued for days until the ailment was completely cured. Cupping or blood-letting on the other hand, called *Ubo emuo* or *Egho* involved abstraction of impure blood with the use of horns or cups. The method was also commonly used in the Northern part of Nigeria and could probably have been learnt from the Hausas, who S.E. Johnson in 1932, reported, were commonly found in the area. This was a method of healing widely used by the Indians and was common with Victorian medicine. Its efficacy as a measure of reducing placenta congestion and inflammation was long recognised during the Victorian age (Youngson, 1979:6).

Apart from the aforementioned healing practices, there was also the use of heat therapy. Known as *Oma evuvwo* in Ughievwen land, the therapy was effected by preparing fire with logs and when the smoke had reduced and charcoal burnt brightly, the patient was asked to expose the affected part of the body to the direct rays of the fire.

In some cases, clothing materials were removed from the body and the patient lay or slept beside the fire (Igun, 2011). This assisted in calming the nerves and regulates muscular contractions and adequate circulation thereby inducing sound sleep.

There was also native surgery practice called *Omaebere*. It was an operation used to extract bullets and poisonous noxious tissues from the body. Ughievwen traditional medical practitioners were adepts in the operation of intricate tissues that caused disturbance to patients. According to an informant, the area of the body that was operated on, was stitched together by technical application of pieces of calabash on the operated part and *Uhuvwun edri* (herbal concoction) was applied until the sore gradually healed. Before the *Uhuvwun edri* was applied to the operated part, the herbal concoctions were reduced to paste and this served as anaesthetic drug (Igun, 2011).

However, there were certain illnesses that required divination. Such illnesses included spiritual attacks which were associated with witches and wizards. Before treating such illnesses, their causes were divined and the necessary prophylactic diagnosed. From my interview with notable elders of Ughievwen communities, there seemed to be common practices on divination between the Ughievwen people and their neighbours of Edo State. The methods of divination were similar; namely, the use of seeded string of cowries and bones, bones and pebbles and the use of pieces of kolanut and mirror (Erhagbe and Ehiabhi, 2011: 121). Just like what is obtained in Ishan, the commonest and most popular was the use of seeded strings of cowries in Ughievwen land. This method was traditionally known as *epha* and was called *Oguega* in Ishan (Erhagbe and Ehiabhi, 2011: 125). Among the Ughievwen people, by this method, the person seeking divination touched his mouth with the cowries and returned it to the diviner, who thereafter threw the seeded strings of cowries on the piece of mat specially prepared for the purpose and interprets the message revealed. Findings at this stage determined whether the healing required was curative or preventive or both.

Curative healing required the use of herbs while preventive type took the form of preparation of magical charms or performance of rituals depending on the findings of the diviner. Where it was a curative medicine, the patient was told to bring some materials to prepare a herbal concoction and as soon as they were provided, prescription was given on how it was to be administered (Okpohie, 2008). However, where rituals were required to be performed, the items required were named and later used to appease the ancestors or the gods. Failure to do this, it was traditionally believed, elicited the wrath of the ancestors or gods (Okpohie, 2008).

Preventive healing on the other hand, was done to avoid attacks or afflictions. In Ughievwen land, this was used to thwart the activities of witches (*erienda*) which

was believed to be directed at family members. It was against this background that sayings like *Oruvuvwemi ruohwo ahwo ro rie ohwo oye rue ohwo* (it is the person who knows man that bewitches him), *Uwevbida rhovwe k' ohwo ko yere omamo akpo* (if one's family/house agrees for one to live good life then one can become prosperous) abounded. Thus, for most African societies as observed by Dopamu, "witches are held responsible for illness, death, sterility, ill-luck, unsuccessful harvest... In fact, all misfortunes which occur in the family and the whole villages are attributed to witches" (Dopamu, 1979: 39).

Persons accused of witchcraft in Ughievwen land, had the onus of proving their innocence by subjecting themselves to test. Such persons were taken to Kwale land (Okpohie, 2008). On arrival, if the accused or suspect survived the ordeal without any observed abnormality in behavior, he/she was believed not to be a witch, otherwise he/she was guilty. This method, corresponded with what obtained in Ishan land in the neighbouring present day, Edo State, where the sasswood (*Ohanki*) ordeal was common (Okojie, 1994: 101 to 102).

From the foregoing it could be seen that precolonial Ughievwen had closely knit cultural practices that served as source of identity, pride and dignity for the people before colonialism in the nineteenth century. However, the coming of colonial rule seemed to have adulterated, if not exterminated, these practices. No matter the degree of civilization a society attains, part of that civilization ought to be the preservation of the things that hitherto, held the society together and not otherwise. It is the preservation of such culture that defines the Africanness and not "hook-line and sinker" adoption of western practices.

### **Marriages and healing practices in colonial and post colonial Ughievwen**

An essential feature of colonial administration in Nigeria was the establishment of native courts. These native courts applied principles that only native customs and institutions that were not repugnant to British ideas of justice and morality had to be preserved. The chaos that followed this perception was a general phenomenon in the Southern Nigeria province. Many British officers attested to the changes which the native courts introduced to Nigerian societies. For instance, Mr. Palmer, a strong advocate of the Emirate system of native administration expressed the view that "the attempt to preserve native customs resulted in steadily destroying it... the government is steadily grinding the powder all that is native and transforming the people into Black English men" (Ojiefoh, 2002: 169 to 170).

In the area of marriage, precolonial Ughievwen marriage system no matter the shortcomings it had, laid

emphasis on betrothal and wives being inherited. The idea behind inheritance of wives was to keep the family intact and ensure continuity of the lineage. Where a woman committed adultery, the ancestors and the gods had the responsibility of ensuring that the culprits were punished. This was basically a traditional way of ensuring justice and nothing more. However, British political officers, drawing from their own culture, would prefer divorce. This western orientation, in itself, increased the cases of divorce in the Ughievwen area. The resident in Warri which had control over Ughievwen area had also stated that divorce became very common in the Warri area and other provinces and that subject to the refund of dowry, very little difficulty was placed in the way of petitioners (Wilkes, 1949).

One major factor that dislocated the tradition customs of the Ughievwen people concerning marriage was the introduction of Christianity. Hitherto, a man could marry as many as his income dictated (Okpohie, 2008). With the introduction of Christianity, monogamy was encouraged, shrine sacrifices and ancestral worships were condemned and this gradually repositioned the people's cosmology and social outlook. Records show that by 1931, the Christian missions in the western Delta to which Ughievwen belonged, had established over 289 churches with about 32,842 members and by 1953 church membership had risen to 123,989 (Erivwo, 2011: 459).

The introduction of colonial rule to Ughievwen land also challenged the healing practices of the people. The Christian missions condemned divination and other medical practices of the people like female circumcision, traditional immunization against poisons and evil forces, invocations and incantations. Even traditional healers who became Christian converts were required to destroy all visible symbols of their profession and make public declaration of their new faith (Mimiyerayen, 2011). This was the emphasis in the whole of Warri Province to which Ughievwen belonged before the area came under the control of Ughelli District. Witchcraft and its associated detection practice was condemned. All these innovations, did not however, completely obliterate some of these practices. The Ughievwen people, like other communities in southern Nigerian, still had confidence in their traditional medical practice. This implicit faith, generally among peoples of southern Nigeria, was observed by R.P. Heslop, the district officer of Aboh Division, when he said:

*Belief in witchcraft is implicit and universal even among the well educated and native Dibia (which sometimes effect quite remarkable cures) is preferred to the medical officer by the bulk even of the government and native administration staff" (Agubosi, 2002: 129).*

The salient question now is: should the Ughievwen people allow this seemingly gradual extinction of their

cultural values continue? Certainly not. It is against this background that, though the domain of history is not prescriptive, the following suggestions are made and conclusion drawn.

## SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

Every state in the world has its culture which is a practical reflection and demonstration of the people's history borne out of their experiences. Culture has continuous growth and therefore, ever changing via the acquisition of more traits through diffusion, acculturation or borrowing, but not extermination. Through culture, certain items that are no longer useful at a particular period can be discarded in favour of new ones (Akinjogbin, 1992: 13). This however, does not imply that the new one is superior. In precolonial Ughievwen society, the idea of justice, was influenced by culture. There were punishments for circumventing traditions and to avoid the wrath of the gods and ancestors and as such, traditions were strictly adhered to.

However, as soon as Africa was colonized, most practices were either Europeanised or discarded. Marriages in the colonial and post-colonial period began to experience strains because of the erosion of the traditional values on which they were instituted. Circumcision, which was a common practice among the Ughievwen people seems almost discarded in present times. Widow inheritance appears now replaced with marriages contracted through the internet. Diseases of imaginable proportion are now rampant through unhealthy relationship between persons of the same sex, all in the name of westernism. Much as it is accepted that some of the pre-colonial practices such as healing, may not be scientifically easy to prove, it does not totally obliterate their usefulness. Therefore, there is the need to rekindle and modify these practices to fit into present realities and challenges. Above all, since no other persons other than Africans can develop Africa, there is need to preserve African culture and Nigerian culture in particular, even though it may be argued that our history could have taken a different course had there not been any colonial interlude, the history of the people will continue to be influenced by colonial impact.

## Conflict of Interests

The author have not declared any conflict of interests

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