

Womanhood and Virgo Intacta: Form and Aesthetic Reconstruction in Ovia-Osesse Performance

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Introduction

In Africa, womanhood is essentially adored and revered. It is adored because of the positive values it projects and revered for its esoteric energy that transcends ordinary comprehension.¹ The significant aspect of these positive values, which is our concern in this paper, is the understanding that the woman body as a procreative centre, is nurturing receptacle for new life and goes through a lot of transformation and pains to gain life. It is for this reason that in most cultures across Africa, steps are taken to engender social control to safe-guard that procreative source that is so essential to human continuum. In Nigeria for instance, many examples abound and they come by different names like 'coming of age', 'rite of passage from teenage to adulthood; from adolescent/girlhood to womanhood' 'outing ceremony from the fattening room', 'maiden dance', 'coming-to-meet', etc. In Cross River State, *Mbopo* ritual outing ceremony for girls from the fattening room exists, *Ejiji* ritual coming of age ceremony is to be found amongst the Ikwere of River State and the *Igogo* festival of Owo in Ondo State. *Nkpu* ceremony at Awka, *Iria* ceremony of the Kalabari and the Benin's *Irovbode* ceremony are other examples (Negri, 1976:2,17,62-67).

From one culture to another in Nigeria, similar rites exist in different modes. Among the Ebira for instance, there is no elaborate concept of coming-of-age ceremony for adolescents, but the idea is an aesthetic sculptural motif found prevalent in the traditional stools of traditional titleholders, lineage heads and elders in the land (Picton, 1991:40-41,44). The belief of the Ebira in the sanctity and purity of womanhood and their answer to promiscuity is expressed in *Isihu* (rite for growth) or the *Ekehi'sihu* (money for making grow, in other words 'virginity fee') which is demanded from a groom who meets his bride, a virgin, and deflowers her during their wedding ceremony.² It is a corporate shame for a family whose daughter failed the virginity test this way and also an embarrassment for the groom. Apart from losing the virginity fees, the added implication is that prospective suitors shall avoid other maidens from this household for fear of similar occurrence, thereby stigmatising and signposting the family and relatives as people of easy virtue and cheap moral values. For these reasons, almost every parent and even the young girls themselves consciously maintain a state of *Virgo Intacta* before marriage, knowing the enormity of indignity stigma involved.

The cardinal focus of these various ceremonial practices is to ensure the sanctity, purity and chastity of womanhood; ethics and moral alertness, endurance, courage and thorough grounding in home management, philosophy and worldview of the society before legal betrothal into marriage. Sofola (1987:25) finds equivalence for this African concept of rite of passage in the European Debutante rite of passage. She reasons that:

It is the whole complex within this stage of transition that the Europeans developed into what we now know as formal education from Europe. It should also be observed that its celebrative passing-out ritual is what is

performed at convocation ceremonies at the institutions of higher learning today, though with greater celebrative fanfare...(sic).

Unfortunately, it is this formal education that formed the arrowhead of the factors that forced the African concept of rite of passage to yield ground for reformation, while some of the ceremonies have been completely eroded. The creative tension that Western civilisation has imposed on the celebrative format of these ceremonies is what this essay examines, using the *Ovia-Osesé* of the Ogori in Kogi State, Nigeria.

Origin of *Ovia-Osesé*

The people of Ogori observe and celebrate the *Ovia-Osesé* maiden dance ritual, a practice that is also prevalent among the Akoko Edo people who are next-door neighbours to the Ogori. As a language, it is among the three unclassified languages among the Niger Congo languages (Hansford, Bendor-Samuel and Stanford, 1976: Fig. 5).³ The land is about five kilometres at the shortest point from the boarder line between Kogi and Edo States. According to colonial records, the town is located on the intersecting point of longitude 6°13'E and latitude 7°27'N on the map of Nigeria and C.R. Nivea's 1925 map of Kabba province, Northern Nigeria. The town is bounded by Ebiraland (Igbirra division) to the South-West corner, (Apata, 1975:1), a land also in Kogi State to which Ogori is administratively attached until the creation of Ogori-Mangogo Local Government Area in 1993.

Many origin traditions of *Ovia-Osesé* exist and therefore locating the actual source has become largely speculative. One origin story has it that the rite of passage ceremony was a celebrative response of a woman to mark the pronouncement of the oracle confirming her daughter a virgin, earlier thought wayward. Another position is based on the theory that, Ogori, as part of Akoko-Gbangiri

clan must have collectively practised Ovia-Osese together before their detachment in 1918 as recorded by (Akerejola, 1973:71). Culture flux arising from neighborhoods, social relations, trade and dispersals is yet another view, which is linked to similar practices in Owo, Benin and among the Ibibios. Examples of coming-of-age practices in these lands have already been cited above. Ogori scholars have actually placed the origin date at 1927 (Sofola, 1987:25), which probably refers to the modern consciousness of Ovia-Osese practice. If the people actually detached from Akoko-Gbangiri clan in 1918, what then happened to Ovia-Osese between then and 1927? Perhaps this is a question which lies outside the domain of this performative discourse.

The Performance Form of Ovia-Osese

Ovia-Osese is a rite of passage event designed as an educational bridge that Ogori female adolescents must cross into adulthood. It is a maiden ceremony that openly extols the virtues of womanhood while celebrating the purity, chastity, undefiled, untainted, untouched and unexploited physical and emotional conditions of young girls of marriageable age. The nude display of the essential biological features that can attest to a woman's gynaecological conditions is for communal affirmation and approval without any iota of doubt and not "uncivilized display of nudity" as often misconstrued (*Nigerian Herald*, 1974:6). This very act further reinforces in the consciousness of prospective initiates that there is no hiding place and no cutting of corners to transit into adulthood. Hence, the event serves as a vital social check on sexual promiscuity and the abuse of the female body before marriage. It is also a reaffirmation of the collective faith of a people in a tradition designed to protect the female gender, the veritable source of life sustenance and race continuity. One time traditional head of Ogori and a historian, the late Gab Bawa Akerejola, Eminefo III,

Ologori of Ogori, captures the essence of Ovia-Osesé (initially known as Oke festival) and the performance mould this way:

As for womenfolk, when she attains the age of puberty at 15 to 16 years, her parents signify this by going out to the market and public places with songs and dances, firing of guns and scattering, in Oke festival, of money. This is only the beginning of the festival. She has to undergo several other ceremonies during the year including the tattoo of the belly, face and back (shoulders), reshaping of her teeth and remaining indoors throughout the year. She could be taken to her husband after undergoing several disciplinary measures during (Oke) festival. This varies from village to village in Akoko. Part of these measures are to ascertain whether the would-be bride [*sic*] had yielded to the temptations of young men and therefore been defiled, etc. (Akerejola, 1973:16).

In the same work, Akerejola (1973:32) describes Oke festival as an event meant for "girls in particular...who attain the age of puberty (14-17 years of age)" who have now "reached the stage of becoming housewives the following one or two years." This claim negates the earlier puberty age put at 15-16, which probably suggests flexibility in the age consideration of those, eligible to participate in the initiation rites. Perhaps physical attributes and maturity of mind of the prospective initiates could have been part of the determining factors that sometimes influenced the reduced emphasis placed on age. However, the overriding import of Akerejola's latter submission is that maidens go into marriage one or two years after performing the rites. This is understandable given the fact that in the olden days, early marriage was in vogue and also an extension of

the Ovia exercise. This can be interpreted to mean that after the rite of passage is performed, a woman should still not be open to sexual abuse before marriage. Unfortunately, the current practice permits girls less than 14 years-old, with no corresponding physical attributes of womanhood, to undergo the Ovia-Osese experience and end up not fully comprehending the essence. It is also now being done by proxy in the absence of some of the initiates. Young girls who have committed serious moral and sexual atrocities would certainly find the latter option very attractive. This crucial deviation from the original form is now taken as licence by many parents to initiate their daughters early enough when their features of womanhood are yet to develop, and thus not attractive to men enough to engage them in sexual temptation. Parents are less concerned about their moral conduct thereafter. This notion has also eroded the value of self-restraint and sexual discipline the Ovia concept seeks to engender. For the young girls now, the successful performance of Ovia-Osese is the attainment of unlimited freedom to vigorously explore the sexual world before wedlock.

Ovia-Osese is not an enactment of history or story but an expression of a people's desire for a sane and healthy humanity. Organised purely under observances of rites and festive conditions, the event is not associated with frivolity and *paidia*. As a theatre performance, it is not a drama but a festival *as drama*. It is not mimetic or representational of fictional creation but an autonomous form of dramatic rendering, which is a "generous combination of high seriousness, religious energy and fun" (Echeruo, 1994:145). This, in our view, is the general nature of African festivals which therefore calls for urgent reappraisals of how African festivals are analysed as drama forcing parallels between African performance idiom and that of the West. The performance mechanics and the underlining values of African festivals have the capacity to sustain their own uniqueness as theatre pieces. Projecting this uniqueness as part of world theatre culture should engage scholarly and performative attention more

than trying to lean on the Western canons to validate African theatre.

Taken in its ethnographic past, the performance form of Ovia-Osesé festival can be structured into three movements: *Iviasi*, *Opa-Obubwe*, and *Oke*.

Movement One: *Iviasi*

The main performance characters involved in this movement are Iyodina (Chief and Head of Female gender in Ogori), her council of female inion leaders, and Asigiri (Ivia-Isiya (oracle) diviner). Iyodina by her position is the head school (usually situated in her house) for training young maidens. Parents on behalf of their children apply to this school for admission to undergo Ovia-Osesé ritual process. Iyodina and her council of chiefs consider each application before applicants are either offered or denied admission. Every applicant must be an indigene of Ogori either through paternal or maternal parentage. A key factor in the screening process for eligibility for admission into the Maiden School is the consultation with Ivia-Isiya. The services of Asigiri, the diviner, is engaged to consult oracle (Ivia-Isiya) to determine the following on each candidate:

- i. peep into the destiny of each candidate and reveal what the future holds for her. This process offers opportunity for corrective alteration where critical obstacles are identified standing between a candidate and blissful existence.
- ii. to affirm the sexual virtue of each candidate. Anyone not found intact as a virgin is not only disqualified but also punished either by death or banishment from the land. The effect of this negative discovery is not only a reflection of the immoral configuration of the candidate but also a heap of social stigma

on her family. Other candidates that passed the Ivia-Isiya test are consequently admitted into the Maiden School, and their parents are expectedly extremely happy, especially their mothers. It is only after this Ivia-Isiya Virgo Intacta test that Iyaodina enrolls the successful candidates into the school.

However, the possibility that some maidens failed the tests in the past and faced either death or banishment is very remote as most of the accounts on Ovia are silent on this. It could be inferred therefore that generally, almost everyone that applies passed the test with very slim exceptions, which further suggests high student enrolment every year being a communal performance experience. Sofola (1987:27) puts the range of graduates at "50 – 135". Given the present rapid population growth in Nigeria and the leverage of performing the ritual by proxy the figures of graduates could have more than doubled, say 180 – 300.⁴

It should be stated that Ivia-Isiya (Iviysiya) is a distinct performance on its own but integrated with the Ovia ritual process. Akerejola (1973:31-37) actually categorised it as one of the festivals celebrated in Ogori. This could suggest that some other sub-festivals exist as part of the ritual process that culminates into a grand finale as Ovia-Osese. Also given the fact that the training period before this grand finale took three years, the activities involved in the main festival must have therefore been spaced out as distinct performance structures.

Movement Two: *Opa-Obubwe*

This is the camping and training period for the enrolled maidens in the school located in Iyaodina's compound. The training period spans three Ukepe festivals which Akerejola (1973:31) informs is "the beginning of Ogori calendar year"; that is three years, as earlier mentioned.⁵

The Iyaodina, her chiefs and any other co-opted persons commence the training of the maidens into well-groomed educated women/adults. The training syllabus cover philosophy, vocational knowledge, special career interests like medicine, creative arts, etc, matrimony and love ethics, home economics and management, child care and motherhood.⁶ The grooming period is completed with the making and application of indigenous cosmetics for beautification. These generally include *Iburu* (camwood) and *Ikokori* (ink for body tattooing: the face, shoulders, stomach and back of an ovia). Other beautification processes and items include the reshaping of the maiden's teeth, the use of the nickel bangles made of ivory and beads (*Odolo*, *Ebele* and *Isu* beads). The *Odolo* beads are arranged in wide layers around the loins of the maiden as cover (pants) - this appears to be the only form of costume accessories worn at the time; the *Ebele* and *Isu* are used to decorate the ovia's hair styled into *Ogogorogo* type.⁷ Actually, "the last three months of the training period was devoted to grooming the maiden for her role in life as a woman, a wife and a mother" (Sofola, 1987:29). It must be added that the training and ritual process of Ovia-Osesé does not include circumcision or incision. There is no form of vaginal mutilation involved.

Movement Three: *Oke*

Activities that would culminate in the passing out of the graduates are mostly concentrated upon at this stage. These include the teaching of music (lyrics, songs and instrumentation) in which the history, philosophy and worldview of Ogori people are encoded. Also emphasised are dance steps and their meanings, chants and poetry of the community that elevate womanhood.⁸ It is from this repertoire that songs, chants and dances are selected for the grand finale (*Oke*). This stage also witnesses series of assignments and tests to evaluate how much the maidens have learnt from the Ovia training programme; Iyaodina also dishes out last minute instructions regarding

the entire programme and post-Ovia moral bearing of the candidates; then a technical and dress rehearsal takes place a night to the festival proper. This takes place at Oyara (arena), the venue designated for the festival. It is here that all the maidens arrive and engage in ritual dance of transition from adolescence to womanhood in innocence and purity on the d-day. Sofola (1987:30) captures this ritual highpoint this way:

The maidens, in those days, processed semi-nude to display health, beauty of pure womanhood, their adornment in beads, delicate body tattooing, and enhanced skin tone with camwood. Their coiffeur was said to be exquisite. Proud parents and relatives would flutter in utter delight and joy as festivities mounted from the eve of the graduation day to the day after passing-out ceremonies.⁹

Form and Aesthetic Reconstruction

As is the case with the traditions and culture of many African societies, Ovia-Osese is rapidly being stripped bare of its meaning and essence. In its present form, the event emphasizes entertainment more than observances of rites directed toward the sanctity of womanhood. Western civilization, education, the technological revolution, and the presence of Christianity and Islam in Ogori land with large adherents are the often-cited reasons for this rapid decay in the original performance and functional concept of the festival.

We should however remind ourselves that culture is dynamic. It is not static nor fossilized in time—it is perceptive to the currents of change that manifest in society. To survive and fit into the ever-changing social order, it has to continuously re-invent itself as Wagner (1981:53) posits. Of necessity, culture borrows and appropriates from other cultures it contacts to assume a

new form as either a hybrid or a syncretic typology. In this new form, how much of the original values can the culture still transmit? The answer to this crucial question shall become apparent as we consider the form and aesthetic reconstruction in Ovia-Osesé foisted by cultural contacts and modernism.

On a general note, the following conceptual changes have occurred in Ovia-Osesé in order to accommodate the tension and exigencies of modernism: age qualification for participation originally put at between 14 and 17 scarcely has any limitation anymore as girls of nine and ladies of 21 are now admitted to participate; the role of Asigiri and Ivia-Isiya has been eroded and replaced with fasting and prayers (the *Virgo Intacta* of participants is now questionable); the compulsion of personal participatory presence has been relaxed to accommodate participation by proxy (only names and personal data are required for this purpose); training period gradually reduced from three years to three months and now three days with concentration on songs and dance steps mainly for the *Oke* at *Oyara* (no more dress and technical rehearsals also); *Oyara* is also now restricted to the Town Hall instead of an open arena, thereby constricting the flamboyance and free expressiveness of African performance idiom; the singing and dancing procession of old women from one *ovia's* house to the other is now organized according to age groups of mothers (only members of such groups are visited); celebration once handled by local musicians with indigenous instrument is now thrown wide open to incorporate foreign musicians with hi-tech equipment; locally brewed drinks are now overshadowed by modern spirit liquor and beer like Guilder, Guinness, Star, etc; thanksgiving services on Sunday and on Friday for the Christian and Muslim *Ovias* respectively are now organized after the festival (this has also been turned into an avenue for generating money for places of worship); what was essentially a communal affair now attracts gate takings from audience participants and

spectators alike; certificates of participation are also now issued in place of moral self-identity, etc.

On the artistic plane, aesthetic reconstruction is quite obvious in the various processional performances, dance performance design, costume and make-up, music and songs.

Processional Performances

Iyaresen – In the morning of the eve of Ovia-Osese proper, mothers of Ovias dance round the town with individual group members singing in honour of the maidens and their parents. A common song that accompanies the processional dance is:

- (i) Ovia ka mase
Ima soreka
Ovia ka mase ro

Translation

I'm performing my child's Ovia
Not somebody else's child
I'm indeed performing my child's Ovia.

Thereafter, they retire to the celebrant's home to wine and dine and also to receive gifts of money.

Eregba – During the evening of the same day the Ovia's parents dance with the father's age group while praise songs are also rendered in their honour. This event could sometimes last till dawn.

If the maiden happens to be the first offspring of a family, at the dawn of the Ovia-Osese day, hunters assemble round the house of such a maiden and shoot three times into the air. This is another honorific rite for the girl and her parents.

Oke – For the Ovia-Osese proper there is another procession into the *Oyara* (arena) involving all the participating maidens for the ritual dance of transition into adulthood. They file out accompanied by *Iyaodina*

and *Okitoroko* players from a structure specifically constructed at the arena to serve as their dressing room and backstage. Before this appearance, the performance form has been reconstructed to accommodate an opening glee by the Ogori Women Association which Sofola (1987:32) referred to as Alumnae Association of Ovia-Osese School for Maidens. This inclusion is for purely aesthetic enhancement of the festival. Also, being a very strong organisation in Ogori it is as well that they have a role in the most important ritual process relating to womanhood in the land. Otherwise their relevance in the performance design is not apparent.

Dance Performance Design

The major point of structural and aesthetic reconstruction to note here is the introduction of *Ivia Egben* (maidens' children). These are little girls of about seven to ten years old, whose *Virgo Intacta* is hardly questionable. They usually perform first the ritual dance of chastity at the centre of the arena before the real maidens. This is probably reconstructed to capture the core essence of the event (chastity) which many of the maidens may have lost. It is this reconstruction that clears and cleanses the ritual space of any adverse effect on the defiled maiden-participants. With this, the event is refocused with its original values and authenticity. After the *Ivia Egben* cleansing rite, the maidens now file out to perform the same ritual dance with more vigour and colour. It is a circular dance that emphasizes femininity, grace and elegance.

The dance entertainment performance of the Kogi State Council for Arts and Culture is also a modern inclusion to serve as a teaser to the main performance. It has no bearing with Ovia-Osese, but essentially introduced to charge the festive environment.

Costume, Accessories and Make-up

These are areas Ovia-Osese has witnessed dynamic transformations and aesthetic reconstruction. From mere beads as costume accessories (to cover the genital parts while the maidens' trunks are left bare), exotic fabrics as costume have been introduced. Costuming has moved from semi-nudity to vital concealment. Ogori traditional attires like *Esa owuwo* (hand-woven special type of *aso'ke*) are now donned full length from the bust line down beyond the knees, with modern shoes, bags and jewelry to match. Significant emphasis is still placed on coral beads. Apart from the initial *Odolo*, *Isu* and *Ebele* beads, new forms have been introduced to complement the limited presence of these old types. Some of the new types include *Egweyin Egbolo*, *Asasa* and *Ofun*. It is possible to conceive the present concealment of female physiognomy as an acceptance of pre-modern deficiencies in culture, but the change is more of cultural reaction to other cultures and widely accepted norms of feminine decency rather than primitiveness.

Make-up has also assumed new dimension. Weaving of the traditional *Ogogorogo* hairstyle has largely been replaced with perming, jerry curls, fixing of weave-on, etc. Body toning with camwood and other traditional make-up for body adornment and decoration have been somewhat abandoned for modern cosmetics to enhance their beauty and physical attributes. Only the *Ivia Egben* (maidens' children) still richly adorn *Iburu* (camwood), *Opereto*, and the three original beads. Clothing in the festival has also assumed competitive dimension as parents see this as an opportunity for wealth display. This is one way in which Ovia-Osese has become an exhibitionist funfair.

Music and Songs

Music and songs sustain the general performance design of this festival. The ritual import of these is located in the key and sole musical instrument called *Okitoroko*.¹⁰ Played only by women on this occasion, it accompanies the

entrance song of the maidens into the performance arena and ceases to accompany other maiden (Ovia) songs to be rendered here. No other instrument is also played. It seems to be a metaphorical statement on having the event with just God's given natural attributes – the human body in its pure state. *Oke eguru* (Oke songs) are the Ovia-Osese songs that actually symbolise the successful completion of the initiation rites into womanhood. According to Akerejola (1973:33), "the songs are all pregnant with meaning which are very historical, depicting various stages of development". One of such songs recorded by Sofola (1987:33) reads:

- (ii) We have come of age,
 We have come of age,
 Let all, let all our age-mates,
 Get their maiden bodies dressed,
 We have come of age;

Put on the black 'IKOKORI' stripes
 Put on the red 'IBURU' powder,
 Put on, round the waist,
 Your "EBELE" of pride because,
 We have come of age;

Can't you hear the 'EWERE RO'
 Chanting the praises of our ancestors?
 Can't you see mother and father,
 Leading the 'IVIA EGBEN' and others,
 All hurrying towards 'OYARA' with gladdened
 hearts?

Can't you see and feel the rising breeze,
 Of the great 'OMONEYEN' and the 'AGADA'
 hills,
 Give their utmost and everlasting support?
 Our fore-fathers are all awake to the 'OKE'
 For we have come of age.

This song essentially manifests the essence of the festival while stating the ritual accessories involved in the performance. Some of the obvious characteristics of Ovia-Ose songs are that the songs most times end with "e" ("aye", "eeee", "eh) sound and also often patterned into overlapping call-and-response style, with very short lines. This format makes audience participation in the performance very effective as the songs come in very short sequences. The following songs are offered as examples:

- (iii) Call: Ibuse po pa
 Response: eh eh eh
- Call: Etaga welo
 Response: eh eh eh
- Call: Ibuse ma ka na no
 Response: eh eh eh
- Call: Eh eh eh eh eh.

Translation

- Call: Wayward girls are forbidden to
 come along
 Response: Eh eh eh
- Call: Forget your cosmetics
 Response: Eh eh eh
- Call: Wayward girls are forbidden to
 come with us
 Response: Eh eh eh
- Call: Eh eh eh eh eh.
- (iv) Lead: Ayi busu kase asase ro
 Ayegbaminaye aye ye ro
 E rimomi ki busu ko Ogido we owe
 E rimomi keta ko Ogido we owe

Obisina obiso kpin kpin ro
Obisina obiso te erege eminosema

Chorus: Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee 2x

Lead: Aye damina damina damina
yamina yamina
Aye damina damina damina
gboina gboina
Ireku oyanu bale mowe
Ekumo ya mue, ekumo yanue
ekumodede

Chorus: Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee 2x

Lead: Oposuda se mosogbaee

Chorus: Osemoso gbaee

Lead: Oposuda se mosogba fa

Chorus: Osemoso gbafa

Lead: Awigi loye roye

Chorus: Awa mo note lofele

Lead: Awa mo note lote

Chorus: Awigi loye roye ro

Lead: Ona mopa mide

Chorus: Ona me lomide

Lead: Asukuru re mi re

Chorus: Aso gbodo re mi remi

Lead: Egberuwa me joke

Chorus: Ogberuwa me joke

Lead: Osibu soke se ma

Chorus: Osibu so gbafa

Lead: Ewuru udi ewure

Chorus: Ewuru asa ewure

Translation

Lead: Mother went in search of
ornament
In order to rescue us
Got stuck at Ogido river
She could not cross Ogido river
Kindly release her, goddess of the
river
Show kindness so that we can
celebrate.

Chorus: Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee 2x

Lead: She wandered and wandered
She wandered and wandered
Her mission was to trade and not
to steal
This is the earnest plea of a
motherless child

Chorus: Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee 2x

Lead: Elders intervene to rescue me

Chorus: Come to my rescue

Lead: Wise ones, please help me

Chorus: Please help me

- Lead: Offer me a tuber of yam each
- Chorus: Donate a pot each
- Lead: Offer me a pot each
- Chorus: Give me a tuber of yam each
- Lead: Include food stuff
- Chorus: Include ingredients
- Lead: May the royal staff of the chiefs
- Chorus: and the heads of elders accompany me
- Lead: I am glad I can celebrate
- Chorus: I am excited that I can at last celebrate
- Lead: God be with all maidens
- Chorus: God bless us all
- Lead: May it be well with us all
- Chorus: May it be better for us all.

Song (iii) is a satirical piece directed at the girls who were not found worthy to participate in the Ovia-Osesé on account of moral and social recklessness. It therefore raises general consciousness on the need for moral probity in order to avoid such public ridicule. We apprehend a narrative song in (iv). The story, which is very explicit, underscores the filial bond between mother and daughter; the sacrifices parents make to define a worthy

path of livelihood for their children; and of course the plight of an orphan. The rendition of the song itself is emotion-driven and *Oyara* often goes quite as those who understand the language are compelled to reflect on its pungent message. Music being an embodiment of universal language, even non-Ogorians are equally gripped by its moving solemn tide. The maidens usually join hands in a wide circular formation to sing this song, which also symbolically suggests that both the "haves" and the "haves-not" need one another to pull through the challenges of existence.¹¹ It should be stated also that new songs are composed annually and added to the repertoire of Ovia-Osese songs. Expectedly, most of these new songs yield to the influence of church or Islamic melodies while also embodying religious constructs as if seeking performance validation from these religious bodies. Consider these two examples below:

- (v) Oboro itie, oboro itie
 Ogbona ami ma m'esu deji
 Oboro itie.

Translation

Goodness is my portion
 Since I don't transact business with Satan
 Goodness is my portion.

- (vi) Ekena Iduma sie nemo
 Ena maka gan ye baa?
 Ekwintee
 Eeee.

Translation

What the Lord has done
 With what shall I thank Him?
 Except to kneel.

Some of the other musical instruments used during Ovia-Osese performance include *Osa* (rattle gourd often played

with both hands), *Opagigigi* (gourds filled with little pebbles), *Ogenge* (metal gong). They are played during the festivities and not for the core Ovia-Osese performance. They are used for instance to accompany the opening glee of Ogori Women Association, the hunters dance and sometimes the *Ivia Egben's* dance before the core ritual dance. Only *Okitoroko* has ritual significance in the ritual dance.

Conclusion: Strains of Change and Continuity

It was Wagner (1981:53) who identified a dialectical tension between convention and invention as the nucleus of cultures. He explains that 'invention' changes things while "convention resolves those changes into a recognizable world". Using this premise Adinoyi-Ojo (1996:379) assesses the African situation and concludes that "the tension is often between rational modernism and traditional beliefs and practices". This tension is of course very present in the performance idea of Ovia-Osese which embodies an age-long belief in the sanctity of womanhood through which a sane and healthy humanity can be sustained. The form and aesthetic reconstructions already discussed are products of this dialectical tension. However, the Ogori have amply exhibited a genuine sense of tradition in Ovia-Osese in their struggle to accommodate and integrate social change into a "recognizable world". It is this strife for cultural harmony and unique identity that is largely responsible for the continued existence of the performance and the sustenance of some aspects of the performance in its original form. For instance, performance elements that are still extant include the original songs (even though new ones are being introduced), musical instruments, processional dance of the women folk from one homestead to another, shooting of guns by hunters in honour of a first born ovia, the dance structure is still intact and Iyaodina is remains the Chief Producer and Artistic Director of Ovia-Osese.

In spite of its diluted and modified contents, Ovia-Osesese remains a cultural symbol that embodies a pre-historic idea from which Ogori people continue to chart their moral bearing. That every woman with Ogori blood flowing in her still goes through the ritual experience either physically or by proxy (negligible few?) is a vibrant testimony to a living culture. The people should however be reminded that as the Ovia-Osesese ritual continues to reinvent itself, drawing from antiquity and the new social order, the end product must add utilitarian values to the celebrant's world or it becomes a hollow cultural exhibition.

Notes

¹ Picton (1991:94) for instance, records that "the capacity to create life as mothers and to destroy life as witches, in Ebiraland metaphysical tradition, predicated of womanhood."

² A rite of virginity test is performed by arranging a bed with white bedspread on which the bride and groom makes love for the first time. The crowd outside waits patiently for the results – the painful cries of the bride to the ritual process and the eventual public exhibition of the bloodstained bedspread, confirming the breakage of the hymen by the groom. This is applauded. It is to be noted that this ritual is also a convert test of the masculinity of the groom, for an impotent or a man with weak erection cannot go through this ritual successfully. In present time, probably because of the dense social transformation that has fostered high level sexual engineering amongst our youths, the world over, *Ekehi'sihu* has been eliminated from the list of bridal wealth demanded from suitors and the ritual is no longer performed to avoid wanton negative results that are feared to be the likely output of virginity test in this age. Before this elimination of *Ekehi'sihu*, it was also widespread that some maidens who had lost their

virginity found an answer to passing the virginity test which now cast questionable shadows on who is really a virgin (the answer was the use of potash solution to contract the vagina, which makes penetration very difficult to achieve; it ends up hurting and bleeding, when penetrated).

³ The other unclassified ones are Ukaan and Akpes.

⁴ It was difficult getting the current enrolment figure (usually printed in Ovia-Osese Programme note) because the last Ovia-Osese was only marked and not formally celebrated due to date coincidence with a national programme – the General Elections in Nigeria that held in April – May 2003.

⁵ The Ogori calendar year starts from the last week of August or the first week in September, as against the familiar worldwide calendar year that starts from January, according to Akerejola (1973:32).

⁶ See Sofola (1987:28) for detailed syllabus contents.

⁷ Special women with ancestral tutelage make this hairstyle; it is most difficult for just anyone to plait. *Ogogorogo* hair style is patterned into three parts – the central part is plaited commencing from the temple to the back of the head together with *Isu* beads, while the other two parts join the plaited hair at the centre to the opposite sides of the face. *Isu* is pink while *Ebele* is blue in colour. These beads could be likened to the Yoruba *Iyun*. They are also quite costly and heavy in weight, including *Odolo*. It is also important to know that the *Isu* beads are sacred and forbidden to touch the ground. They have the capacity to disappear when they do. It would take ritual performance and incantation by Asigiri in due consultation with Ivia-Isiya for the beads to reappear on the seventh day.

⁸ See Sofola (1987:29) and Ajerejola (1973:33, 38-40) for more information on this. Akerejola actually states that the maidens have to learn how to play at least one or more of the following traditional musical instruments: “Agidigbo, Iko, Ota, Ogenegen, Okengan, Obo Agele” and of course Okitoroko.

⁹ Ovia-Osesé day is not reserved for parents alone to celebrate the graduation of their daughter, they are also joined by relatives and friends which explains why Ogori land bursts out with life on this great day. As the Ovias (maidens) perform their ritual dance at the Oyara in elegance, they also win admirers from the crowd especially, the men and prospective suitors. The merriment that follows the end of the ritual process offers unlimited food to eat and locally brewed wine – *Ade* or *Pitto* (and other forms) to drink. Some special delicacies usually prepared for this event include *Akara* (beans cake), *Ekpase* (moi-moi – steamed scaled beans), *Okpete* (a mixture of fried beans and powdered roasted maize), peas, pounded yam and meat. The woman folk in Ogori land, form dance procession from house to house with songs mainly in praise of the new ovias who are joyfully welcome with both arms by all the women folks in Ogori land. The strength of this ceremony is a metaphorical admittance of the new Ovias into womanhood. For this reason, a girl of yesterday is considered as a woman today with full privileges of elders and can partake in decision-making process of the community.

¹⁰ The sound this instrument produces is the source of its name (Okitoroko). It is played by gently moving the iron ring or wood inserted in a three feet long and rough wooden staff with cylindrical turning edges. A calabash is tied to the end of the staff. It is either played standing or sitting with both hands. Metal rattles/rings are worn on the left hand. The right hand moves up and down the inserted ring in the staff, while the left hand simultaneously strikes the calabash. Okitoroko fits into the class of idiophone musical instruments. As a solo instrument, it functions as chordophone. Ten people and above participate in the production of Okitoroko music. The equipment is not reserved for Ovia-Osesé alone but can also be used for other social functions like wedding ceremonies, title-taking events, and even Christian

ceremonies.

¹¹ Towards the end of the song, the maidens disengage their hands and transit into clapping and stamping of their hands and feet, respectively. At intervals the maidens move into the centre of the circular formation in pairs to exhibit dance virtuoso.

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