

## **Oguega Divination Poetry In Edo State, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Oguega is a divination apparatus which is in common use among Esan people of Edo State, Nigeria. Oguega diviners are consulted irrespective of religious leanings in this culture. The use of this divination apparatus is concomitant with exclamations, songs, narratives, chants and poetry. This study investigates a handful of its poetry and discusses them as they relate to contemporary tendencies and dynamics in this culture. This paper employs a mixed method approach in eliciting information from three diviners each from the five local government areas in Esan. Although Oguega terms are esoteric, one notices that the poetry which goes with the codified language is worth examining so as to emplace its relevance in contemporary scholarship. It is thus thought that a study of this sort is likely to enrich studies on the connection between the indigenous and the modern in African studies.

### **Introduction**

Recently, the School of Arts, Media and Culture of Trinity Western University, Langley, British Columbia, Canada organized its seventh Verge conference themed Arts+ Narrative. Found very intriguing is the conference blurb in which it was said that the conference was poised to interrogate:

Stories, personal, religious, national and global identities, creative myths about who we are, our relationships to others, and our place in the world. It says further that today just as in the past, the arts play a key role in telling and creating the stories that shape culture. They then asked: What is the role of the arts in the formation of community narratives (family, nation, culture) today and historically? In what ways do the arts contribute to the narratives of what it is to be human? How do art disclose narrative differently from other forms of narrative? How do arts contribute to political narratives? How do artistic narratives intertwine with personal identity?

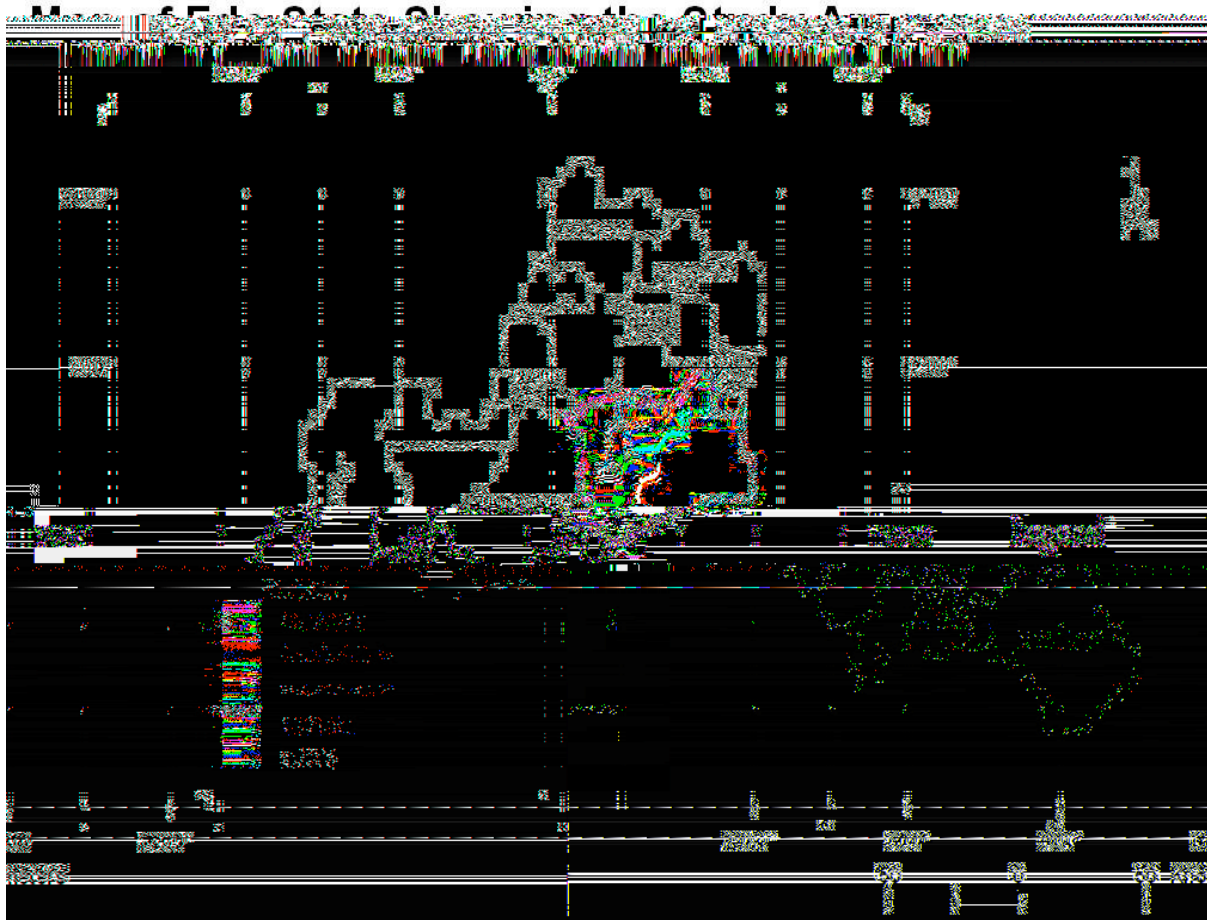
If arts is being critically examined in far away Canada in this manner with so much novelty in investigative techniques, it means that Africans need to do a rethink of what the arts is in this present epoch. It is within this nexus that this paper analyzes ten Oguega poetries in relationship to Esan philosophy and further relates it to other spheres in African thought.

## **Materials and Methods**

This study relied on mixed method approach in the collection of its data. Much of traditional arts of this people are under-documented. Consequently, to elicit information for this study, a design was put in place. This design entailed research techniques such as active participant observation on the part of the researcher, interviews and focus group discussion. Three diviners were selected from the five local government areas in Esan, and a research assistant who proved to be highly skilled in *Oguega* divination and Esan orthography. In order to keep information within track, the question guide was partly used as an inspiration for free interview. This method was germane in this study in that it provided respondents avenues to clearly define their positions on issues.

## **Who are the Esan people?**

Esanland is located in the Edo central Senatorial District of Edo State. The term Esan is ambidextrously applied to a geographical locale and the same time the language spoken by a people living in five local government areas within the Edo central senatorial district and they are: Esan South - East, Esan North - East, Esan Central, Esan West and Igueben. To date, exactly how Esan evolved remains unclear. Although their origin may partly be traceable to the exodus from Benin Kingdom, Socio-culturally, the thirty- five towns in Esan are autonomous. All Esan towns share common cultural affinity. They practice patrilineal inheritance with every first son being the principal inheritor of both the father's and mother's legacies. Esan is essentially a gerontocratic society where there is so much respect for elders and their views. Though autonomous, all Esan towns share common cultural affinity.



## **What is Oguega?**

Although *ab initio* in this work Oguega, is referred to as Esan divination apparatus, we cannot say that this divination apparatus is peculiar to this people alone (Aluede, 2005). *Oguega* divination technique is partly akin to the Ifa of the Yoruba. *Oguega* is *Epha* in Urhobo (Nabofa and Elugbe, 2005) and also *Oguega* in Benin (Omozuwa, 2010). *Oguega* as a divination tool has sixteen seeds on a row of four in one. It is used by traditional doctors in making inquiries into the past, present and future of clients; diagnose the etiology and remedy to ailments. In this presentation, no attempt will be made to examine its origin, construction materials or to investigate under what circumstance this tool was first used. It is considered inconsequential to do so granted that initial attempts have been made at this. Below is a photograph of Oguega.

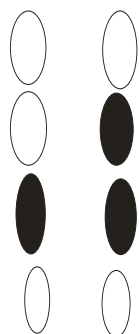
### **Some Selected Oguega poetry**

Poetry could be defined as literature in verse: literary works written in verse, of high quality, great beauty, emotional sincerity or intensity, or profound insight (Encarta, 2009). Similarly Oguega poetry is beautifully crafted, and has themes which border on the Esan worldview. As we have seen from the photograph of Oguega, it is made up of sixteen seeds. These sixteen seeds have two hundred and fifty-six interpretations. This is arrived at by simply multiplying sixteen by sixteen. It needs to be immediately mentioned here that in Oguega divination, the seeds are read like Arabic letters. That is the presentations in the apparatus are read from right to left. It is considered vital to mention here that Oguega also has narratives or anecdotes that go with it. However, this paper is restricted to its poetry alone. This study therefore attempts to on one hand interrogate selected Oguega poems by textually and contextually examining them and on the other hand, domiciliate such poems by inferring their relevance in contemporary Esan construct. In what follows below, ten divination poems will be discussed and they are:

1. Odin- Ete
2. Ogbi- Ighiten
3. Erokhua- Oba
4. Ose-Ogbi (Osogbi)
5. Akho+Akho (Akwuonabe)

6. Erokhua- Ohun
7. Okan-Ohun
8. Erokhua-Ose (Erokhuose)
9. Erokhua- Eghale (Erokhueghale)
10. Ose+Ose (Osenabe)

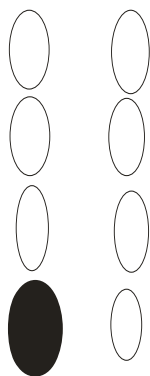
These poems will be discussed one after the other in sequence. So as to vividly grasp what is to be deliberated on, ten related diagrams with their poetries are aptly presented and teased within Esan context.



**Odin- Ete (Odiete)**

<i>O khue kede</i>	The drummer
<i>Khue no 'ba</i>	drummed for the Oba
<i>Khue ne 'zomo</i>	drummed for Ezomo
<i>No kire khue oso le</i>	but before drumming for self,
<i>Ebi da lo</i>	night fell

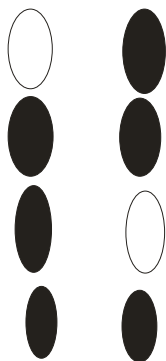
In Esan collective enterprise is highly respected. This in itself explains why music, dance and other related arts are communally owned. Within this frame of unity, individuality is also emphasized. For example, it is believed in this culture that in the face of danger, one thinks of self first before one's kids or siblings. "The drummer drummed for the Oba drummed for Ezomo, but before drumming for self, night fell" That the drummer drummed for monarchs and noble men without remembering self in good time is no mark of wisdom, rather of foolishness. Any venture worth engaging in ought to be beneficial to the engaged. Put simply, there should be a balance in whatever one does.



**Ogbi- Ighiten (Ogbighiten)**

*Unu uro i khiene*    The door post does not travel

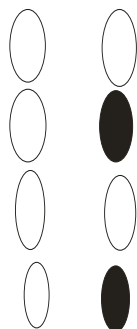
It is a normal thing to go through the door to access a room and an abnormal thing to use the window instead. The door does not travel and it is unthinkable to construct a room without a door and if the door is not open, the room cannot be accessed. Any venture worth engaging in ought to be beneficial to the engaged. And besides, that the doorpost does not travel strengthens the fact that there are certain constants in the society. The rising of the sun and its roosting are constant and if by any chance altered, it means there is a natural challenge.



**Erokhua- Oba**

*Onyemen- a su uki*    When the moon is joyous  
*Okí bha na bhu 'wa*    it shines into the house

In this text, it is believed in Esan that the moon is joyous when it is full. When it is full, its brightness and its intensity is always felt. It shines even to the extent of casting shadows. If related to mundane human activities, much good is done and benevolence is shown when one is happy. Of course one cannot be moody and be benevolent.



**Ose-Ogbi (Osogbi)**

*Odafen di 'gbon*

A rich man bought a slave

*Igbon da de Elo*

the slave also bought Elo<sup>1</sup>

*Igbon da ye ole mo emi obole* the slave then said he has his own property

Sometimes, people forget easily. The slave may at times forget the history of his origin. This forgetfulness may be deliberate perhaps in the wake of the abolition of slavery and anything associated with it. This is of course why such persons may be seen as poor historians. In native law and custom, the slave and all his possessions are the wealth of his owner. In contemporary Nigerian legal system, there is this often-cited Latin maxim: *quid quid platato solo solo cedit* –He that owns the land owns everything in it. There appears to be a coincidence in thought if put side by side the Esan Oguega perception of issues and that of the English man.



**Akho-Akho (Akwuonabe)**

*Iribhi 'jankpa*

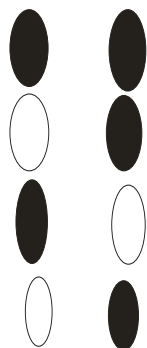
Being in one place

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<sup>1</sup> Elo is a traditional Esan alternative to a knife. Its major feature is its triangular shape with a pointed edge where a wooden handle is placed and a flat base which is sharpened for the sake of pilling or cutting.

<i>Omen ni Ojie</i>	is good for the king
<i>Oimen no Oka</i>	it is not good for corn
<i>Oi men ni Enyan</i>	it is not good for yam

It is a mark of honour to always meet a reigning monarch in his palace. It is by doing so that all his subjects will continuously run to him for refuge so that he could preside over matters and settle disputes which border on intra and inter community relations. But being in one place may be seen as stagnation for if the corn and yam planted in due season do not grow to yield new crops, hunger and starvation will overrun the people. Contrastingly, in one place, the palace, the king sits and gets all kinds of favours and gifts.

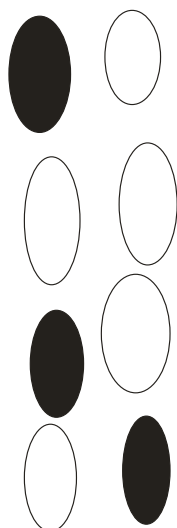


### **Erokhua- Ohun**

<i>Ukpon no fua</i>	The white cloth
<i>O le le ejie bha akun</i>	is the king around waists

In Esan worldview, the white cloth is a sign of purity and authority. This is why most religious devotees, votaries, monarchs and personages wear white clothes. It is in this connection that it is said that the white cloth is a king among all clothes worn around the waist. Without doubt, in Esan perception, to be clad in a white robe infers royalty, nobility or religiosity. Of course, no one can put on a white robe and indulge in dirty duties which could smear one's immaculate white.

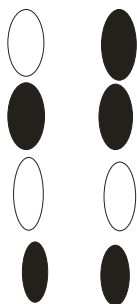




**Okan-Ohun** (Okanohun)

Ohu a re Anyon	When wine is angry
Oki si bhe 'bha re	It foams out of its calabash

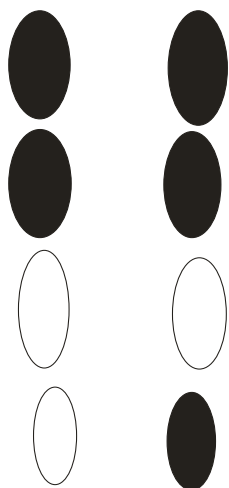
Quite often, one wonders why in anger mortals go destructive. Anger can never yield good fruits. Anything done in anger is more likely to be malevolent. This Oguega poetry captures aptly this scenario when it says that when wine is angry it foams out of its calabash. For example, when wine foams out of the calabash, it soaks the table and perhaps the carpet. The room is likely to be left with a lasting offensive odour. Physiologically speaking, anger is not good. It destroys the inter mechanism of all mortals by causing all manners of sicknesses. It is therefore encouraged that we be evenly tempered in our conducts.



**Erokhua-Ose** (Erokhuose)

<i>Aje bha kon</i>	With the teeth open, we laugh
<i>Udu ria kua</i>	but our minds are bitter
<i>Oron ibi</i>	the bereaved is not black
<i>Emi no ruelen bi</i>	it is her clothes that are black

The holy bible is replete with hard heartedness, filthiness and wickedness of the human mind. And it goes further to preach love. Early in time, Oguega poetry has also spotted that although we laugh with our white teeth openly displayed, our minds are dark and bitter. Oguega by this preaches a lesson that every mortal should not be deceived by smiles or laughter but that we should be careful in what we do with and how we perceive of others.

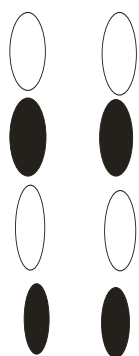


**Erokhua- Eghale (Erokhueghale)**

*Osankan sankan  
a nye man wa le  
osomukpon-imose se  
na ha lo bhu nu*

It is without finesse  
that a dog's food is prepared  
No matter how beautiful and neat a rag is ,  
It is never eaten.

Keeping pets is an age-old human activity. However, while the occident may like to have their dogs kept within their houses and possibly live with them and care for them medically as though they are human beings, in the traditional Esan society, pets are not fully accepted into the mainstream of the family. This segregation could be discerned from the ways they are treated, catered for or fed. In most homes in this research area, dogs are fed with rancid meals or poorly prepared okro soup. Put in mundane English, their means are prepared anyhow. The second sentence in this group leads us into elements of hygiene in Esan. “No matter how beautiful and neat a rag is, it is never eaten”. Children in their formative years are often admonished as soon as they are sighted chewing their cloths. It is considered a very dirty habit to do so. Indulging in this kind of poor health habit could lead to being infected with dysentery, diarrhea and other related diseases.



**Ose-Ose (Osenabe)**

*Elo na ze mi Ekpen*  
*Ole aze mi Uron*

The eye that is used to see the tiger,  
is also the eye used to see guinea fowl.

This poem stresses the idea of circumspection in whatever we do. The guinea fowl is beautifully made and so is the tiger. However, while the guinea fowl is harmless and maintains omnivorous feeding routine, the tiger is carnivorous and thus very harmful.

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

In this presentation, ten oguega terms and their poetries were examined and they are: Odin- Ete, Ogbi- Ighiten, Erokhua- Oba, Ose-Ogbi (Osogbi),

Akho+Akho (Akwuonabe), Erokhua - Ohun, Okan-Ohun, Erokhua-Ose (Erokhuose), Erokhua-Eghale (Erokhueghale) and Ose+Ose (Osenabe).

Although it is generally accepted that Oguega terms are esoteric, one notices that the poetry that goes with the codified language is worthy of analysis. In these ten poetries, one can discern that although a traditional society whose records are orally kept, the Esan of Edo State have for many centuries, retained their philosophy and mores in codified forms almost akin to the Indian Kama sutra and Egyptian hieroglyph. In this perhaps pivotal study, ten poems out of two hundred and fifty-six were examined. Put mathematically, 0.256% of oguega poems were studied. In them, we gather that:

1. Any venture worth engaging in ought to be beneficial to the engaged.
2. The door does not travel and it is unthinkable to construct a room without a door and if the door is not open, the room cannot be accessed.
3. Good is done and benevolence is shown when one is happy.

4. In Esan native law and custom, the slave and all his possessions are the wealth of his owner.
5. Being in one place may be seen as stagnation. Contrastingly, in one place, the palace, the king sits and gets all kinds of favours and gifts.
6. No one can put on a white robe and indulge in dirty duties.
7. Anger can never yield good fruits.
8. Mortals should not be deceived by other people's smiles or laughter but that we should be careful in what we do with and how we perceive of others.
9. No matter how beautiful and neat a rag is, it is never eaten.
10. We should be never be reckless in whatever we do rather we need to be cautious.

From the ongoing, it could be seen that although this is divination apparatus, it teaches Esan native law and customs, personal hygiene, wisdom, civics, etc. It is therefore considered pertinent to call for proper investigation into oguegalogy so that its relevance in contemporary scholarship will be emplaced. If this work has provoked further probing into Oguega studies, then the aim of this work is gradually being achieved. This to me will greatly enrich studies on the connection between the indigenous and the modern in African studies.

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