# Ritual Contents in Ikwerre Wrestling Festival: An Example of Elimgbu Egelege

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## Abstract

*Wrestling is one of the most celebrated cultures of the Ikwerre people, especially in Elimgbu community of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State of Nigeria. Wrestling is dialectically known as "Egelege" both in Elimgbu and Otah and other parts of the Ikwerre communities. It is one of the physical calisthenics that tend to foster unity amongst the people. The idea is to situate the (Egelege) wrestling contest as a typical traditional theatre. This work goes into the study of rituals and wrestling festival in Ikwerre land, but with a focus on the theatrical dimension in Elimgbu wrestling festival in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. The work looks at such relevant aspects as the performer and performing styles, dialogues, music, dance, movement, and performance area. The study identifies the problems and prospects of wrestling festival in Ikwerre clan and its attraction to tourists. The work concludes that there is a mutual relationship between ancestors and performers, and that ritual and performance are in harmony before metamorphosing into entertainment. Finally, it is recommended that the festival be given greater relevance as a tourist based project.*

## 1. Introduction

African communities are flooded and unique with several festivals and ceremonies which are tied to their cultural activities and their upbringing. These celebrations are fundamental aspects of the lives of the people, hence assimilated as a pattern of life which has informed a better part of the people. The thrust of this paper is to study the traditional indices of wrestling festival with a focus on rituals thereof. Wrestling is one of the most celebrated cultural activities of the Ikwerre people in Elimgbu community of Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State of Nigeria. Wrestling is dialectically known as "Egelege" in Elimgbu and it is one of the physical calisthenics that tends to foster unity amongst the people.

The aim of this research is to situate the (Egelege) wrestling contest as a typical traditional theatre. Africa, like other regions of the world, is not devoid of this collective expression of life which ignites a sense of communal existence and togetherness in Africa. Thus, there is a serious need for a definitive acknowledgment of the place of the cosmos in their lives and a sensitive expression of their will to communicate with the natural forces. The ritual, which can be seen as performance cannot be left out. This is a theatrical experience to serve as a reliable tool to project the people's culture to the outside world. These activities are presented on stage, street, aquatic etc. Therefore, theatre in this regard is a place where theatrical activities take place. It is a vital institution of the human society which by its very nature means a place of communication.

The theatre is not only the building but the presentation of artistic forms for edification and entertainment. It, therefore, presupposes the presence of four (4) elements or units. In this direction, there is the play. Also, the play in most cases is called

drama and this is derived from the Greek word "dromenon" which means (doing). The play element has psychological and religious or magical functions. Simply put, man was first a farmer and a hunter reacting to his physical environment, he began to develop a religious disposition i.e. by becoming aware of certain virtual forces in his environment which provided his specific. Ayakoroma in Burn defines theatre thus:

An arena in which it is possible to study manifestation of the social values, forms, and conventions of society, also the images of social reality, which people of different kinds at times have construed for themselves. (4) The basic objective of the arts is to typically present both outer and inner experience through speech and action.

## 2. Historical Background of Elimgbu

Eze G.W. Uche, the Royal Highness of Uchecheolu community in Elimgbu clan in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, volunteers in an oral interview that Elimgbu is the last son of Igwe whose real name is Mgbumsulem. Mgbumsulem abbreviated his name as which remains till date as Mgbu. Mgbu afterward founded the community that was named after him which was later called Elimgbu, meaning Mgbu's land towards the end of 17$^{th}$ century. He reveals that Mgbu is the son of Igwe, Igwe, son of Esara, Esara is the son of Evo, Evo, the son of Obio and Obio the son of Ihoruoha which was later nick named "Ikwerre".

The people of Elimgbu were predominantly farmers, fishermen, and hunters. These occupations have remained significant as basic means of livelihood in Elimgbu. The farmlands are located within the communities and apportioned among adults who have been initiated into age grades. The people basically earn their livelihood through agricultural produce.

Human societies are satisfactorily characterized by one form of ritual activity or another, which can be further stressed as a theatrical activity or another. The main reason is to give a form of recreation and by extension preserve the people's history and culture.

## 3. Theoretical Framework: Antonin Artaud's The Theatre of Cruelty

There are hodgepodges of classical and modern ritual theorists in history as postulated by different scholars. For instance, Victor Turner (1920-83) theorized *Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?*(1989), Peter Brook (b. 1925), *The Holy Theatre: Happenings* (1968), etc. This study adopts Antonin Artaud's theory of *The Theatre of Cruelty,* (1932). In this theory, Artaud postulates that:

> We cannot go on prostituting the idea of the theatre, whose only value lies in its excruciating, magical connection with reality and danger. Stated this way, the question of the theatre must arouse general attention, since theatre, because of its physical aspect and because it requires *expression in space* (the only real expression, in fact), allows the magical means of art and speech to be practiced organically and as a whole, like renewed exorcisms…(89) (qtd. In George W. Brandt).

### 3.1. Historical Overview

The theatre is also the offshoot of the people's festival from every civilization in the world, the theatre is said to have originated from ritual worship-festivals. In fact, Greek dramatic developments were found in connection with festivals in honour of Dionysus in Greek mythology, was the god of wine and vegetation who showed

mortals how to cultivate grapevines and male wine. The worship of Dionysus probably originated in Assyria of Thrace (in the near east or Asia mirror). Oga submits that:

> It is the festival of the city Dionysus that drama was first presented in an organized in 534 BC. It is an important one because it marks the beginning of a real organization that developed drama into theatrical phenomena. (6)

In African context, theatre and drama are likewise claimed to have been originated from ritual worship, which Rozik has observed that the Cambridge school of anthropology as represented by such scholars as Jane Harrison, Gilbert Murray and Francis McDonald Comfort uphold that ancient Greek drama originated from ritual worship, citing the Dionysian propitiatory rites of the sixth century B.C.

Obuh asserts that:

> Beyond the reference to the Dionysian ritual originating theatre, the Cambridge school, perhaps, due to the assumption that ritual is tied to primitive worship, the shamanist theory to demonstrate the transitional route of ritual to drama. (112)

Therefore, the school claims that it is only when Sherman's rite loses its religious/spiritual potency that the act becomes an art. Put differently, it is only when a communal performance de-emphasizes or discards its propitiatory content that it can evolve into the theatre. By assuming this critical position, the Cambridge school is clearly concerned with extricating the so-called sophisticated European culture as embedded in their theatre from primitive happenings' presumably encoded in rituals.

To corroborate these theories, Brockett states that:

> Primitive rituals contain gems of drama because music, song dance, masks, and costumes were almost always

> used. A suitable site had to be provided for the performance of such rites and when the whole tribe did not partake in the performance, it's clear division was normally made between the actual performers and the gendered community. In addition, the actual performers were necessary, since mistakes were to be avoided in the enactment of rites so as not to invite the wrath of the gods. These early performers were the priest's attendants who wore masks, imitated men, animals, supernatural beings and mind the designed effects. (58)

African traditional theatre evolved from ritual festivals. It is an expression of the people, institution and experience of the communal society. Therefore, African theatre like the Greek theatre is a creation of man's social and historic experience that attempts to explain the relationship between man, gods and the environment. Wrestling is a form of theatrical experience in Ikwerre context. It is in its totality a traditional festival that unites the people together. Wrestling contributes to the high level of social interaction that exists amongst the people. It is, therefore, one of the vibrant forms of Ikwerre culture and by extension Elimgbu festivals that entertain, inform and educate its audience.

Simply put, wrestling is a sport in which two opponents try to pin each other's shoulder to the floor. The performers use maneuvering techniques called holds to grip their opponents and control their movements. However, successful wrestling demands strength, speed, accuracy, coordination, balance, physical conditioning and knowledge of the body movements. Furthermore, whenever a traditional wrestling festival is organised in Elimgbu, there often exist myths which link it and its innovator to a stage in the people's history and development. In different parts of Ikwerre, various versions of the same myth are told from one village to

another. Also, in areas where no origin myth exists, noteworthy ancient events which help to explain the evaluation of the people's world are recalled, reconstructed and retold as stories and even passed on from one generation to another.

Obuh reveals that:

> In places like Omagwa, Diobu, Ogbakiri, Elele and environs where this research was undertaken two creation myths are common and popular. The first has a hunter as the founder of traditional wrestling. The hunter is said to have encountered a gorilla (the totem animal of these communities) during his expedition. When the hunter dares to shoot the gorilla, the gorilla latter signaled frantically to stop the hunter. In return for sparing its life, the gorilla promised to teach the hunter an art of self-defense (46).

In the wrestling context that ensured between the gorilla and the hunter, the hunter was felled three times by the gorilla. In the fourth round, however, the hunter hurled the gorilla down having learned the technique of wrestling from experience. The gorilla exhorted the hunter to teach the act of wrestling to others. That injunction was obeyed and this signaled the spread of wrestling to other areas.

According to Obuh, the second myth seems to be the invention of people in the border areas of Ikwerre which are constantly raided by marauders, especially during the notorious slave trade which occurred between the 16$^{th}$ and 18$^{th}$ centuries in the West Coast of Africa. This second myth links the development of wrestling to the needs to train people who could ward off the incessant raids at the community(s) borders. Elechi Amadi's *Isiburu* is a dramatization of Ikwerre wrestling festival. In the play, he creates a powerful protagonist in place of Isiburu Eperito

portray the most powerful wrestler in the society of the play. In the play, *Isiburu Eperi*, the crab, who swings across Obaji (the ocean) is the greatest wrestler in Ikwerre Ochichi for six years, who has beaten all his rivals – Ota Achara of Aluu, Okpokolebe of Igwuruta, Azo Dimgba of Isiopko and Osimiri of Ibaa and needs to beat them again in the seventh year in order to be declared the indisputable champion of Ikwerre Ochichi.

In fact, to achieve this act, sacrifices are offered since "he who wants great things always must for a necklace, wear the jawbone of an elephant". Again, complications set in when the priesthood of Amadioha Ozuzu, the god of thunder and of the skies falls on *Isburu* the seventh year. It is, therefore, left for *Isiburu* to choose between his life's ambitions (being the champion of Ikwerre) and serving Amadioha as the success of Agbarakwe. *Isiburu* agrees to serve Amadioha only after winning the championship because the high priest of Amadioha should be a man whose name is mentioned with respect in the reception hall. To affirm this, he asks "shall a man toil for six years and the seventh, the harvest year, stay home and fold his hand? Disaster seems to strike when Uzo, a slave destroys *Isiburu's* plot of life thinking that the blood of his proposed slave wife Mbeke has been spilled by *Isiburu* to get the championship. To this end, death claims *Isiburu* and Uzo but as event turns to a dramatic twist, Amadioha breaks through the dividing fence of death. In the end, *Isiburu* rises from the dead after three days to reign as the champion wrestler of Ikwerre Ochichi and high priest of Amadioha Ozuzu.

Egbeyor observed that in *Isiburu*, cultural indices such as traditional songs, dances, proverbs, the use of charm, magic, incantations, invocation, rituals, sacrifices, legends, the world of trance, dreams, symbols and burial rites are sufficiently infused.

While Njoku is of the opinion that: "Wrestling contest involves rhythm and harmony, singing, drumming, dancing and vocalization etc. spent in preparing, refurbishing or hiring the instrument" (18). Time and energy are expended in preparing and learning the songs and music of the Sports. In this direction, we find a profound affinity between wrestling and orders for every participant would appreciate an orderly conduct of wrestling festival.

Krama classified traditional theatre into the sacred and the secular forms. Sacred forms of theatre are tied to ceremonies of worship and context of origin. It, therefore, ranges from rites of passage and propitiation. It also serves the gods as well as entertains the community. Put differently, the secular forms of African Theatre comprises of those rituals, ceremonies of worship and activities that serve dual purposes.

The attempt to capture the essence of life through ritual and festivals assumed dramatic expressions. These rituals and festivals also serve very important functional purposes and were therefore result-oriented. In this belief, traditional festivals in Africa are a communal affair. The priest and the commoners come together to celebrate and seek the help and protection of the deities. Such festivals contain all the pre-requisites of drama and theatre i.e. dramatized story, performance, a performance area, and an audience. The fact that performances at such traditional festivals are not scripted does not strip them of these elements of drama. In fact, they were in most cases myths and legends often known to most members of the community and the essential story remain unaltered.

More so, the function of traditional theatre is very important to the study of African tradition theatre (festivals). It helps to transform the society; it also focuses on shared feeling and a medium of socialization. Also, it serves as a mark of cultural

identity to the people, as it provides information, education, and entertainment to the people.

Very importantly, traditional African theatres are both ritual and religious based. It is on this score, that scholars in African culture have come to accept the view that African drama and theatre are basically the outcome of the religious inclination of the people; an inclination which has a firm root in the form of ritual practiced in the various societies in the continent.

Okome explains that:

> These rituals sometimes assume the colour of elaborate pigments. The rituals and festivals celebrate the working of the universe of the people; celebration which captures all that constitutes their very existence. (3)

This attempt to capture the essence of life through rituals and festivals assumed dramatic expressions. These rituals and festivals also served very important functional purposes and were therefore result-oriented. The magnitude of this degree of attachment to religion and notwithstanding, the African sees in these festivals and rituals integral and very dynamic aspects of their lives to which they react spontaneously.

### 3.2. Rituals in Egelege (Wrestling) Festival

Rituals itself cannot be separated from life; Krama asserts that rituals are those repeated activities that produce desired results. For example, we brush our mouth every morning to avoid tooth decay or smelling mouth, the act of brushing our mouth automatically is a ritual, because it is done base on the desired result. In wrestling, there are many kinds of ritualistic elements. Wrestling in quote, conforms to the sacred and secular kind of rituals according to Karma:

- Sacred rituals are based on religious rites and ceremonies, which manifest in magic displays, cults, worships, masquerades and myths. Some festivals and rites of passage also fall under sacred rituals

- Secular rituals are rites that have been separated from sacred or propitiations. Some secular rites involve daily processes and events such as age grade dances, meetings, installations and political activities. (22)

Rituals are action taken in other to relate with supernatural powers through worships, incantations, enchantments, use of sacrifices, magic and spiritual means so as to exert control over situations, as well as acquire power and fame.

### 3.3. Identifying the Rituals in Ikwerre Wrestling Festival

For a clear understanding, in identifying rituals in Ikwerre wrestling festival, Amadi's play *Isiburu* volunteers the sacred part of the rituals in Ikwerre wrestling festival. The play *Isiburu* holds that wrestling in Ikwerre land is far beyond the mere gazing at Isiburu Eperi, the greatest wrestler in Ikwerre Ochichi as he displays his wrestling prowess, beating all his rivals for six years and the need for him to still beat them again in the seventh year in order to be declared the indisputable legendary champion of Ikwerre Ochichi. To achieve this feat, sacrifices are offered to the gods. Wrestling in Ikwerre culture is not just a display of strength, but entails incantations, enchantments and the use of supernatural powers of the highest order to exert control over the situation and acquiring of power and fame, "if wrestling was a thing of a mere bone, I will fear no man" (18), Isiburu Eperi asserts. In Elimgbu wrestling festival, the wrestlers in their personal way, exert control

over the situation as well as acquire power and fame from the supernatural realm which amounts to ritual. Some of the wrestlers deprive themselves of sexual pleasure throughout the period to the wrestling festival. Some wrestlers even go as far as depriving themselves of eating any food prepared by a woman while others sleep in the graveyard in order to have communion with the spirits. Some wrestlers dance around the playground at night for seven days while others make charms with animals such as cat, both wild and domestic in order for them not to suffer defeat of any kind. The settings of the drums and the drummers are static; as it does not change from how it has been from generations past, generation present and generations yet to come.

### 3.4. Secular Rituals

Secular rituals are those activities that have been separated from sacred performances; these include the regular washing and sanitizing of hands to prevent contacting germs, brushing our teeth, etc. The secular rituals in wrestling performances are those activities done by the wrestlers and the referees which include the symbolical washing of the hands with sand before the commencement of the wrestling with another. When a wrestler runs around the playground, ringing his bell or he runs around with someone with a bell or a group of persons or wrestlers to arouse his spirit. When a wrestler runs to touch the drums and touches his chest in return, some wrestlers touch the ground and their chests in the process. Even when the referee wipes the wrestlers' hands and buttocks to get them started for the wrestling, all these amounts to secular rituals in Egelege (wrestling) festival.

### 3.5. The Theatrical Dimensions of Egelege (Wrestling) Festival of Elimgbu

The Egelege wrestling festival of Elimgbu is a full blown theatre because it embodies all the artistic arrangements and theatrical elements. The full elements of creative and artistic exigencies on stage are realized on Egelege festival, especially as it serves as a means of recreation for the people. To this end, the Egelege festival uses the theatrical and dramatic elements to enhance its performances.

**3.5.1. The Performer:** The performer popularly known as Nye-Egelege or Ele-Ota is very crucial to the performance of Egelege (wrestling) festival, just as the actor is crucial to any theatrical performance. In Elimgbu Egelege (wrestling) festival; the performers use their bodies and voices to entertain the audience, the performers' entire purpose is to creatively arouse recognition and wonder in the on-looker. Johnson submits that: "The actor is a visional of tripartite lineages. He is somewhat a professional bastard with three professional strings pulling him in different directions, while he finds it near – disloyal to identify with one". (83)

The above mentioned is a clear picture of the combination of creative inputs that the performer (actor) assembles in order to interpret his role correctly. In the Egelege (wrestling) festival, the wrestlers become the performers. This element assumes the theatrical element in the festival.





**Figs. 1 &2: Pictures of Wrestlers in a serious Wrestling Combat**




**Fig. 3: Picture of Wrestlers in a Wrestling, sizing each other**

**3.5.2. Costumes:** The Ikwerre people (Nigeria) to which Elimgbu belongs, have a wide range of dress as identified by gender considerations as well as their functional roles. For men, we have dresses such as the shirt-like Etibo. The jumper – like chieftaincy and the flowing gown type known as Don. These are worn either with a king-size wrapper or trouser and are complemented with such costume props as the walking stick, hat and shoes usually sandals or slippers to match.



**Figure 4: A wrestler set for the business of the day, well costumed**



**Pictures 5 &6 show the people's costumes on display**

Thus, we find a collection of these costumes in Egelege (wrestling) festival. However, they are found to reflect the festive mood as they carry a feeling of newness and also stand out in being colourful, with jewellery and other accessories. The wrestlers appear in loincloths worn in toga form without a top dress. However, their bare bodies particularly the eye, back and chest areas are usually decorated using Nzu (native chalk) or any other kind of white powder that can produce the same effect. These designs fluctuate and serve some aesthetic purposes. The loin costume of the wrestler which appears like the Roman toga is so designed for the ease of movement. Usually, it is a two-yard-piece of wrapper which may either be a George or Printed wax fabric, folded in a triangular shape and tied round the waist. For those who wear a short underneath, the triangular point is left to hang down at the back side; the triangular pointed part is pulled through,

between the laps and tied to the waistline, wrapped below the navel. Sometimes, wrestlers wear only shorts or knickers, although the wrestler's costume is not standardized, they are packaged for ease of movement. The knee, for example, is often shielded to protect the wrestler from kneecap injuries. The referee may wear a white singlet or T-shirt over a printed wax fabric. Quite often they dress like the wrestlers themselves. The referee's trademark is the local bell known as Ngbinigba with which he controls the wrestlers.

He also wields a whip, woven out of fresh leaves, with this; he manages the team and sometimes, the restive audience following the set practices.



**Fig. 7: Picture of the Wrestlers, Referee, and the Audience**

### 3.5.3. Costume and make-up are vital theatrical elements

In the Egelege festival of Elimgbu, the costume forms the outward regalia or clothes used during festivals. The costumes are for a specific occasion, though they may be used for daily activities. In traditional Egelege(wrestling) festival, costumes may range from wrappers, raffia, leaves, feathers, small bells, palm fronds, animal skins, etc and the make-up may also range from body painting with charcoal or clay, chalk tattoo, and scarification.

The costumes and make-up in the Egelege(wrestling) festival helps to transform the human body into a form of artistic expression and beauty in conventional theatre practice. Costume and make-up are used in other theatrical performance to justify the status of a character or disguise, it is also used in Egelege(wrestling) festival of Elimgbu. The use of clothes in everyday life serves the same purpose for which costume is used in the theatre. It is this consideration that Bernstein stated that:

> The costume of the actor heightens the dress of everyday life. It is the selection from the vast store of actual material of what is suitable, beautiful and helpful to the portrayal of character (14).

Apart from physical character portrayal, costumes equally reflect the psychological disposition of the wearer. Also, costumes can be used in expressing such character traits as heredity, temperament, personally, race, environment, mood, health, sex and socio-economic status. The Egelege festival in Elimgbu explores various kinds of costumes and make-up to enhance characterization – the performers choose carefully the appropriate make-up and costumes that will help them deliver the performance to the delights of the audience. These sets of costumes range from George clothes, handkerchief, towels, palm fronds, headgears, shorts, etc make-up,

on the other hand, includes; the use of chalks, clay, powder, scarification.

Quite often, costumes and make-up in Egelege(wrestling) festival, are packaged to send esoteric signals as a way of instilling fear into opponents thereby making them diffident for example the loin-clan of the wrestler, if it's red in colour, its symbolizes danger and if it also displays the sign of a human skull it creates more fear in the opponents mind and fear brings defeat.

Related to costume is make-up, the application of cosmetics (paints powders and rouge) the face and body in terms of age and the special facial features associated with ethnic origins, the key function of make-up in Egelege(wrestling) festival in Elimgbu is to help the performers, personally and embody the role he is playing. Costume and make-up help the performer define his role.

**3.5.4. Dance**

This is another serious theatrical element in the traditional Egelege festival in Elimgbu. The dance which expresses emotion is expressed through time sequence and space patterns to create rhythms.

Ugolo explains states that:

> Every dance is about something, be it traditional or modern. The dance must be based on an idea or concept. This is what motivates the movement and transforms itself as the vehicle and message of expression. (2)

The theatrical dance is a creative expression entirely for entertainment. Dance forms part of the shared symbols of African theatre and reveals feelings that can never be fully communicated by the spoken word. However, dance in the traditional wrestling festival is carried out by the performers to express aesthetic feelings. In summation, while dance in a conventional theatre is

solely done by the actors, dance in Egelege festival is participatory in nature (the performers and the audience are involved in dancing).

In the Elimgbu traditional Egelege (wrestling) festival, the audience constitutes the greater part of the ceremony. There are those who come to watch the wrestling match as a communal responsibility. In the theatre, the audience is seen as a special component of the theatre that comes to share in the theatrical experience. They could be defined as a body of people who left homes, businesses and any other pre-occupation, for the theatre to watch a performance on stage. The audience is the most important element of the performance for obvious reasons. They are the consumers of the theatrical product.

The audience exerts a considerable influence over the theatrical experience Johnson reveals that:

> Several reasons have been preferred on why audience goes to the theatre. Paramount desire is to be entertained. Entertainment in this implies relaxation of tension, a feeling of wide satisfaction and renewal… (58)

The audience will always be present in all traditional Egelege (wrestling) festival, no matter the nature of the performance. The audience is the final consummation of the performance. The audience in the Egelege (wrestling) festival are active participants. They can freely go on to the stage to participate in the performance. In the conventional theatre, however, the audience is not allowed to participate in the performance on stage.

### 3.5.5. The Stage

This is the performing area or performance space – a space accommodating enough for a particular performance to be possible from the perspective of theatre, there are different kinds of stages;

the proscenium, the thrust and the arena stages etc. The Egelege (wrestling) festival takes place in the arena kind of stage, also known as a theatre in the round. This is actually a preferred stage type for traditional Egelege (wrestling) festival in Elimgbu. In this stage type, the audience sits around the performers. In Africa, the audience seats around the performing area in most performances. Africans are used to encircling their performers for an effective relationship in that situation, if the performance is good, they can identify with it to the point of "characterization" –meaning, some of them can join the actual performers to perform along with them. If they dislike the performance, they do not hesitate in booing, making a mockery and even physically pulling out the lazy performer from the circle of performance. Egelege (wrestling) festival is presented on a typical African stage – arena.

**3.5.6. Scenario**

It is an imaginatively constructed plot upon which a performance is based, it is like an improvisational type, although the performers have long become used to it. It is not written down but a concept held in the realm of the imagination, interpreted and acted on stage. Both the script and scenario are raw material for the performance. In this direction, for any theatrical performance to take place, there must definitely be an idea which could be documented in the form of a script, a scenario, a musical score or dance creation. The traditional Egelege festival has a story that surrounds it. However, this story is embedded in the songs or music that the performers or referees render to the audience.

Also, it is within the context of the story line that the theatrical activities unfold. Song and music are the major theatrical dimensions in the Egelege (wrestling) festival in Elimgbu. Music

gives aesthetic pleasure to the performance; it helps to create mood and pace to the wrestling activities.

**The Egelege (Wrestling) Songs in Ikwerre Language**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Egelege Ozi nu Elia<br><br>Mo Wuru Nu Anya Nkweru Wey<br>Owey<br>Mo Wuru Nu Anya Nkweru Wey | Is there wrestling in this land<br>Seeing is believing<br>Seeing is believing |
| 2. | OvurulemOganNkwo (2x)<br>Ovurulem | Clutched it the hawk has clutched it |
| 3. | Ogba ley - - - - - - - - -<br>Ogba ley - - - - - - - - -<br>EgelegeZi oh -- - - - - | Ogba<br>Ogba<br>There is wrestling |

The songs in Egelege (wrestling) festival help to invoke the spirits of the ancestors (gods) into action. The songs also help to motivate the wrestlers into action. Most of the songs only cast for the wrestlers (performers) to get ready for the competition.

### 3.5.7. Movement

A perfect theatrical performance achieves its purpose via movement of the actors. The movement must be artistic and creative to enhance aesthetics to the performance. Movement helps the actors to change directions on stage. It also gives the actors opportunity to exit and enter through various aisles. This is a purely artistic mechanism that creates a transition of the position of the actors, for instance, an actor can move from upstage right to downstage left. Egelege is characterized by various artistic movements. The performers in this festival through their preferred

movements on the performing stage help them to pin down or outwit their opponent.

### 3.5.8. Space

This is another vital techniques or mechanism that separates an actor from another on stage. The creation of space between the actors is almost always enhanced by the movement of the actors. Space is simply defined as an allowance that exists between the actors on stage. The spacing of the actors gives a free flow of the performance. It helps to reduce stage accidents that could occur by the sudden clash of the actors on stage. In a typical Egelege festival, space between the performers and audience is observed. There is enough space in this performance hence it is done on the arena to enable performers to move freely in their style of wrestling techniques.

### 3.5.9. Time of the Performance

Every theatrical of performance has its own. The time of presentation for the Egelege (wrestling) is 3.00 pm. The performance starts at 3.00 pm and ends at 6.00 pm. Unlike theatrical performances which are usually at night, the Egelege Festival is an afternoon activity.

### 3.5.10. Props

It is of great importance for the actors to master the use of their stage properties. Props are those artistic materials used by the actors on set. In the Egelege festival, one of the stage properties used by the performer is the bell. This singular situation suggests that as much as there are stage props in the conventional theatre, there exist props in the Egelege (wrestling) festival.

### 3.5.11. Competition in Egelege (Wrestling) Festival

Egelege itself is a competitive sport. It gives room for talented males to compete in the festival. During this period, communities engage in a wrestling competition in other to emerge winners. The competition of the Egelege (wrestling) festival is divided into two folds, inter-competition, and intra-competition.

- **Inter-Competition:** The inter-competition holds between communities. In this wise, communities are bound to invite others for a wrestling competition. This is another way of fostering peace and unity with each other. Again, it is through this means that champions are made.
- **Intra-Competition:** This type of competition is communal based. It, therefore, exists amongst a community. Through this kind of competition; young men are trained and rehearse their wrestling performances. They also do this to determine the "local" champions who will represent the community during the inter-community competitions.

### 3.5.12. The Referees (Nyebuoga Ota)

The referees in the wrestling (Egelege) festival are likened to the directors in the theatre; their cardinal roles are to rehearse the performers to master their roles. This is one of the theatrical dimensions in the Egelege (wrestling) festival. The referees also help to control the audience.

## 4. Egelege (Wrestling) as Traditional Festival of Elimgbu

Egelege is a typical traditional festival in Elimgbu community. It is tied down to the worship and belief of the people. It is an event that is marked by festivities and other forms of procession, showmanship and the display of pomp pageantry. Egelege festival is a predominantly men's sport in Elimgbu that brings various

communities together in a healthy competition. However, as a cohesive force, Egelege makes men conscious of themselves and other members of the community.

Egelege as a traditional festival is an annual event that holds between August and October yearly. The festival is done in the village square. This period is characterized by the festive atmosphere. The environment is kept clean while food and drinks are prepared for entertainment. This form of the festival has both the sacred and secular elements. This position agrees with Krama when he asserts that festivals may be formalized rites that may have lost potency or taken out of the original context. Such a festival serves for entertainment and can be performed out of context, the Egelege festival promotes the peoples' ego and enhances their social status and provides entertainment. Also, for the average Elimgbu man, the period of Egelege festival is a time of great festivities.

### 4.1. The Social Functions of Egelege (Wrestling) Festival in Elimgbu

Theatre and drama are an imitation of life, and life is a social reality. Therefore, the dramatist is a member of the society with specific social status and is recognized socially. However, when we look at the Egelege festival in Elimgbu from a sociological perspective, we are looking at it from the point of view of its function in defining; examining and understanding the society.

The Elimgbu traditional Egelege (wrestling) festival is pre-occupied in creating a social interaction amongst the people. The Egelege festival focuses its dramatic trust in bringing the people of Elimgbu together and also encourages them to live in peace, love, and unity. It also serves as a mark of cultural identity to the people.

Also, it serves as a cultural festival to the people of Elimgbu in particular and Ikwerre in general.

The traditional theatre could be referred to as an indigenous theatre that is owned by the people and practiced by the people. It is a culturally identified traditional theatre; it is also tied down to the people's belief and religion. The traditional festival has been part and parcel of one exhilarating experience, the essence of life being the main thrust. The people's culture has not been found wanting in providing a veritable platform for a synthesis of this artistic evolution.

The traditional theatre is rooted in secular and sacred rites which exist as a festival, myths/legends, and short stories. This view agrees with Krama that traditional theatre has no specific origin but however, thrives on the assemblage of the diverse components of communication, entertainment as well as integrate the various components of art. The traditional society has robust festivals composed of elements that can be recognized in every part of the world. However, each of the elements is a part of the celebration and is always treaded artistically.

**4.2. Problems and Prospects of the Egelege Festival of Elimgbu**

The problems that face the Egelege festival in Elimgbu are many, and they include: finance, lack of fund remains a very important factor that contributes to the problems that befall Elimgbu Egelege (wrestling) festival performance. Generally, inadequate funding of any theatre group may affect the developmental drive of such theatre business. In this direction, the performing artistes in Elimgbu Egelege festival have been subjected to abject poverty. To curb this problem, therefore, it is advisable that adequate fund should be given to the artiste to minimize their sufferings and elevate their living standards.

Youth restiveness, cultism, communal disturbances and hostage taking are serious problems confronting the Egelege (wrestling) festival. The threat to life and other security issues have become disturbing factors that militate against the development of the Egelege (wrestling) festival. These phenomena's have scared the young men from partaking in the festival for fear of intimidation, kidnapping, and killings. Artists are yet to be recognized in Elimgbu, some people do not see the performing artiste's profession as reasonable and worthy of recognition. His role on television and stage are seen as jobs done out of leisure or because of lack of anything to do. This derogatory impression of the actor by members of the public has only succeeded in discouraging some interested wrestlers/performers.

The performing venue of the festival needs to be upgraded, as most areas where the Egelege performances take place are in deplorable conditions. The government should provide modern facilities to enhance the performance. Also, the Egelege performers need professional training and skills to enhance their performance.

### 4.3. Lack of Sponsorship/Adequate Costumes

The Egelege performers are not sponsored by the government. This singular development discourages the performers. Poor financial gains deter the young men from participating in the festival. It is this belief of the researcher that by curbing the problems mentioned, the Egelege festival of Elimgbu will record the best among the festivals in the world. The prospects of the festival cannot be overemphasized. It will serve as the people's cultural identity, thereby attracting tourist to the people. It will also generate income for the people. To achieve a perfect production, therefore, adequate costumes must be provided to the performing artiste in order to depict a mood, status, psychological state,

cultural background, and historical backgrounds and also to provide a good scenario for the entire production. Improper costume contributes greatly to the low artistic performance in the Elimgbu Egelege (wrestling) festival.

### 4.4. Cultural Relevance of Egelege (Wrestling)Festival

The Egelege festival of Elimgbu clan is in itself a culture. Its cardinal purpose is to present, preserve and promote the people's way of life; the cultural relevance of the festival is to ensure that the cultural heritage of the people is mentioned. It is also a mark of identity for the people, for instance, if the Egelege (wrestling) festival is performed out of context. The essence of the Egelege contest is to showcase or rather preserve the people's festival. However, such a festival serves for entertainment and can be performed out of context. The Egelege (wrestling) festival is an expression of the people, institutions, and experience of the communal society.

The Egelege festival is a typical example of the indigenous African theatre which is a very vital economic social and cultural institution that plays a key role in both human as well as material mobilization. The Egelege thrives on the assemblage of traditional forms of entertainment and therefore serves as a cultural medium of expression. The Egelege (wrestling) festival uses songs, dances, myths and all other forms of communication prevalent in traditional societies. It also serves as a medium of socialization, cohesions, and integration. It is important to note that the Egelege (wrestling) festival is a voice of liberty for expression of a denigrated and loathed culture.

The cultural policy for Nigeria is a national policy on the regulation, production, and consumption of culture. The policy recognizes culture as the totality of the way of life of a specific

group of individuals in a particular environment evolved over a period of time. The idea of culture is not limited to customs of the past or reference of cloths alone; it encompasses the attitude of a people to the future of their traditional values. Therefore, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, good management and national identity are characteristics of culture. The essence of the cultural policy is to ascertain the continuity of the people, their life processes, and institutions. This is exactly what the cultural relevance of the Egelege (wrestling) festival of Elimgbu is portraying in the lives of the people.

**4.5. Economic Relevance of the Egelege Festival of Elimgbu**

In pre-colonial era, before the introduction of trade in forest products, the people were engaged in various economic activities, such as farming, palm produce processing and raffia tapping, fishing, hunting, and trading. To make for effective relaxation and entertainment, the people resort to wrestling. This Egelege (wrestling) festival has to a great extent contributed to the economic growth of the people. The people of Ikwerre are known nationwide courtesy of the Egelege (wrestling) festival. During the festive period, economic activities boom as there is a lot of buying and selling in the town.

People come from far and near to watch one festival, thereby generating income per capital to the business of the people. At this period, there is sufficient food and drinks for the people and visitors. At this point, the festival becomes a tourist attraction. This singular development created avenues of trade for the people. The performers of this festival could be paid and sponsored by the government. Economically speaking, the people of Elimgbu are not lacking in this direction. The Egelege (wrestling) festival has

enhanced their economic status as the festival becomes economically viable when properly used.

## 5. Recommendations

### 5.1 Recreational Facilities

To enhance an effective performance of the Elimgbu Egelege (wrestling) festival, adequate recreational facilities should be provided for the performance. The arena should be provided with modern structures to accommodate the audience. In this direction, a good amphitheater should be provided to prevent the sun and the rains from affecting the performers (wrestlers) and the audience.

### 5.2 As an Annual Festival

Very importantly, we recommend that the Rivers State and the local government authorities encourage the Egelege (wrestling) festival in Elimgbu as an annual festival to continue flourishing. Therefore, the Egelege (wrestling) culture should be revived and the culture made more articulate. When this is done, to a large extent it will reduce the ravaging youth restiveness and its attendant consequences in Niger Delta.

### 5.3. Documentation of the Festival

We recommend strongly that the Elimgbu Egelege (wrestling) festival be properly recorded and documented as the people's culture so that generations yet unborn will practically understand their culture.

### 5.4. Provision of Sponsorship Scheme

It is advisable to recommend that sponsorship scheme to the performers (wrestlers) be set up to enable them complete with the outside world. Sponsorship scheme will also encourage and

motivate talented youths to actively participate in the Egelege (wrestling) contest. Also, as a sporting activity or exercise, interested youths should be encouraged by establishing a free scholarships scheme to further their higher studies, particularly, those that intend to make traditional wrestling a career. We equally recommend that traditional wrestling should be taught or incorporated into the physical education curriculum in both primary and secondary schools in Rivers State. This singular development will further enhance the tradition and culture heritage of the people, as well as showcase it to the outside world. If the above recommendations are implemented, the traditional Elimgbu Egelege (wrestling) festival will continue to record huge success in theatrical, economic, social and traditional contexts.

## 6. Conclusion

This work has in detail discussed and analysed rituals and wrestling festival in Ikwerre land, with emphasis on Elimgbu wrestling festival in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. However, prominence was made on the theatrical dimensions; the use of costumes in the festival. Also, this researcher has made deliberate efforts to discuss the various theatrical and dramatic elements in the festival. As an Egelege (wrestling) festival, the apparition of this research effort is to make it amongst the best tourist attraction in the state and in particular in Elimgbu community.

It has expatiated in its totality that the Egelege (wrestling) festival is a typical African traditional theatre; it is total in its essence, hence the performers (actors), the stage, audience, the scenario, songs costume/make-ups are inclusive. This paper has in detail analysed and discussed rituals and wrestling festival in Ikwerre land. This study equally discussed the historical

background of Elimgbu people where the festival was located. The immediate limitations and challenges to the Egelege (wrestling) festival of Elimgbu such as lack of sponsorship, lack of related literature and the influence of Christianity have also been discussed. Most Christians called the festival evil, thereby refusing to patronize it. The research also engaged in proffering possible recommendations to the problems that hinder the effective performance of the festival. Furthermore, the social relevance of the Egelege (wrestling) festival of Elimgbu has also been discussed, hence it attempts to foster social integration, Love, and peace among the people. Other recommendations proffered are the provision of recreational facilities, sponsorship scholarship schemes, its inclusion in the school curriculum and the recording and documentation of it for publishing for future generation.

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