



Myth and Reality of Echina Cult in Oguta, Imo State: A Historical Overview

Anene, Chidi Pensive

Department of History and International Studies, Imo State University, P.M.B. 2000, Owerri

Received 20-09-2022	Abstract: The network system in African tradition holds so firm that culture is the life wire of the people of Africa. This also holds true for the people of Oguta. Though seen as a very proud people, the Oguta people, however, cherish community solidarity to which their culture advances. One of the cultures considered historical by the people is the Echina cult phenomenon. However, understanding the mythic and cultural realities of this cultural and phenomenal enthrail of the people of Oguta, especially in a christian dominated region, has continued to elicit discourse interests not only by those alien to Oguta but also among its present indigenous population. By adopting the historical method of data collection, which involves primary and secondary sources of data gathering, this study examines the mytho-cultural realities of the Echina cult phenomenon, its origin and associated practices as cherished by the Oguta people. The main focus here is a discourse analysis of the cultural significance and ritual implications associated with the Echina cult in relation to an Osere-elect (Echina Priest) who, in the view and belief of Oguta people, is considered cut off from the tumult of the world and as well regarded as dead on the day of his installation as priest and thus simultaneously necessitating his burial rites.	Keywords: Echina cult, Osere, Oguta, Mytho-cultural, Revisiting
Accepted 10-10-2022		
Published 28-10-2022		
Copyright © 2022 The Author(s): This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 (CC BY-NC 4.0) International License.		

INTRODUCTION

It may be necessary to point out that the Owu is the only aspect of Oguta culture that does not permit any discrimination between the freedom and the so-called slaves. It is a binding wire holding Oguta people together. History has it that it was a slave from Oguta that seized the Owu. The Echina an ancestral shrine for the Ikwa muo cult. The Echina of Ugwunta division is situated at Umuopu village and that of Ugwu-ukwu division is situated at Umunnarukwu. In Oguta eelieest time, there was three Echina including Obeagwa but this has long become extinct. Each of the Echina is headed by a chief priest Osere who also hails from the village where Echina is situated. The status of the Echina Priest (Osere) occupies a prominent position in Oguta Echina culture.

The work is organized into four sub-topics. The Echina cult, origin, Ikwa muo initiation, Owu , Agbata-ani Ishi iji ceremony. The place of Osere in Echina cult, the proceeding at the Owu Agbatani assembly and the Owu as an institution in Oguta. These topics would be appreciated as indebt research is made in the people's history. Some terms would be explained in this work to reveal the rich and cultural heritage of the people of Oguta.

A Brief Historical Analysis of Oguta Community

Oguta is a community on the east bank of Oguta Lake in South East Nigeria. it was one of the first territories used by the British to advance into the Igbo hinterland. It is divided into two townships, separated by its popular Lake Oguta 1 and Oguta 2. The community is allocated at the

North-West tip of Imo State Nigeria. The town is linked with Delta State at its western flank and with Rivers at the south.

Oguta as a community have rich and fairly unalloyed tradition. regardless of her early contact with the Europeans and the Kalabaris, and in particular, her openness to other communities, there has been little or no influence of foreign culture on the people of Oguta apart from the Christian religion. There is hardly any Oguta person who is not conscious of his or her roots and does not embrace the tradition oriented kingship system, age grade system and the "Owu" (as an institution) on which most of the towns tradition is hinged.

Traditionally, the people of Oguta have farming, fishing and trading as their occupation, supplemented with hunting. Suffice it to remark that much earliest than the present modern era, most Oguta people lived and worked in the farm land (ubi). Oguta traders used to trade along the reverine areas, covering up to the present Delat and Rivers States. This practice is minimal these days following the contemporary global trends with advancement in educational and technological development and a reverse change in educational structure of Oguta people.

Apparently, the Oguta kingdom and kingship pattern was established in like manner of that of the Benin Kingdom. This is why some historians have ascertained the Oguta people migrated from the ancient Benin Kingdom. According to these assertions, the administration

set up titles and common names of the Oguta people to have similarities or resemblance to those of Benin people. Albeit, the people of Oguta do not refer to their King as "Oba" as done by their Benin counterpart, both kingdoms have Iyase, while in Oguta it is termed Iyasara, there is Ogin in the Benin and Ogana in Oguta. Palm oil and plantain are called Ofigbo and Ipa in both Edo language and Oguta dialect to this day. Although the Oguta people speak a dialect of the Igbo language, some of their words are unmistakably of Benin origin. The traditional ruler of Oguta, is called the Eze-Igwe. He governs through a council of ministers called Oririnze.: chief of which is the Ogana which is the speaker.¹

The Echina Cult

It would be appropriate at this juncture to consider all the social institution not so far discussed that exist in the town. According to Oshiji Ozoemena, the Echina is a social structure and machinery through which Oguta society organizes, directs and executes the multifarious activities required to satisfy cultural needs. According to him, in Oguta, social grouping occupies different positions in life and are expected to perform certain roles.²

ORIGIN

Echina is a socio-economic secret in which members of the society are initiated. As one of those pagan structures it has a religious bias and forms of most important part of the people's institutions. The origin of the institution is traced to the period the ancestors of Oguta people arrived at Oguta town. Tradition holds it that traders were the first people who sponsored the introduction of Echina and Owu from Onya (a town in Delta State of Nigeria). It is said that when the women traders went to Onya to trade in those days they saw and admired the beautiful Owu (masquerades) of the people of Onya. When they came back home they reported to their husbands about the masquerades and even requested them to introduce them to in the town. It is certain that the earliest town life was dull and unpleasant since there were no social institutions which activities would alleviate the sufferings of the people. It became necessary that the men yielded to the women's request and travelled out with the women to Onya to collect the masquerades. According to the history, the men arrived at Onya on the market day and laid ambush for the Owu dancers. At an agreed time the men attacked the Onya Masquerade dancers, disorganized them and removed their masquerades

together with their "Institutional seal" or staff of office called Echina. The person who brought the seal or Echina was a slave from Umuayata village Oguta. Despite the fact that people from other villages collected different parts of the Owu, Echina and Owu were the prerogative of the people of Umuayata. The reason is not far to seek. He, who held the seal of authority, had the institution. But the religious tint which was given to Echina came afterwards simply to give prestige and honour to the institution. Echina from then became a secret society which was open only to the male members of the society. Women only enjoyed the institution but were not initiated. Echina become a secret society for males whose father were dead.

The Echina priest was and is called Osere. According to pagan belief since the man who brought the Echina was a slave, therefore, the Osere became synonymous with the institution and was likened to "Osu" (a person sacrificed to the idol). The Osere became the Osu of Echina from that time and was regarded as being consecrated to the Echina. And as such the Osere was symbolically buried alive with special funeral rites. Today it is a tradition that an Osere-elect on the day of his installation is accorded some burial rites. That is, he has been cut off from the tumult of the world and is regarded from that day of his installation as dead. When he actually dies, he will be unmourned for, buried without any other further ceremony. In fact, he will be buried like outcast or a beast, for he will be wrapped with a mat and thrown over the roof of the house in the night where he will be buried privately in the distant bush.³

According to Ndupu, there have been some modifications in the private burial because of the recent changes in the people's way of life. He observed that the people of Umuayata do not hold right of Echina and Owu. They lost that institution a very long time ago. According to the people's tradition, a member of the Echina cult in his official regalia (Igbo or Okoroshi) flogged to death the son of one Enechi Ejinike of Umuopu village sometime ago. The father of the child though a slave demand the Echina and Owu as a compensation for his dead son. The people of Umuayata lost their Echina and Owu to Umuopu village. And therefore the right to Owu Echina and Owu belongs to Umuopu today. The people of Umuayata shout weirdly (after the tune of an Okoroshi) during any burial ceremony to remind them of their lost institution. Apart from the fact that Echina and Owu belongs to the people of Umuopu now, there are two Echinas in the town.

The split arose in the distant past when the two sections of Oguta (Ugwunta and Ugwu-ukwu) disagreed because of money to maintain the institution. The people of Ugwu-ukwu had to set up their own Echina. Although there are two Echinas in the town yet they are one and the same thing. The only difference is that Ugwu-ukwu Echina contains a juju as they say which is called "Unyi" and which may kill Ugwunta Echina member who happens to enter the house. It is traditionally believed that if an Ugwunta Osere meets with the Ugwu-ukwu Osere that the former will eventually die. This is superstitious indeed. But it has become a dictum in the town that the two Oseres never meet for life. It is now believed that Ugwu-ukwu Osere at times walk out without juju in order to lessen the suffering which his partner may sustain.⁴

Ikwa Muo (Initiation)

Two major aspects of the Echina cult are the initiation of the males into the secret society which is called "Ikwa Muo", and the control of the Owu festivals. Ikwa Muo is the secret initiation of a male person into the Echina cult in the Echina house. The initiation is open only to males whose fathers are dead. Ikwa Muo signifies the sharpening of the ancestral spirit or one's dead father's spirit. This cult is a socio-economic society as well as a religious one. The only exception to the rule of initiation is the granting of a man whose father is alive to be initiated into the cult. A father makes this permission to his son if he feels that he is debarred by the bad spirits to be initiated. It is only there and then a son may be initiated into the society. This privilege is not regarded as an advantage of course. Ikwa Muo dominates the social life of the people. It is an enticing social group in which the various stages of the title are not often attained in one's life time. The stages of this title have earned the Ikwa Muo a name which signifies an endless title (akwacha na akwacha). In this social group a full fledged member is called "Nze" and the non-member is called "Ofeke". Every member belongs to his dead father's former social group called "Agbanta". A member in his official costume ties a long piece of cloth over his head (Ikpu Igbo) and covers the head with a cap and is therefore called "Igbo" or "Okoroshi". He has the right according to tradition to dance and shout around the town weirdly and pleurably, and when he confronts individuals who are not members of the society and who fail to respect him, he may beat them slightly or threaten them. This causal flogging of the Ofeke is a reminder to him that he is supposed to make the title especially if his father is dead. However

when an Okoroshi confronts a fellow member of the society he shouts in the usual manner in order to find out if the person is a member. Then the member has to say the following phrases:

- (i) Nde ogu Osere (Warriors of Osere)
- (ii) Achara mma (Active demonstrator)
- (iii) Ibo na ebo ma (As people die other enroll)
Osimire na asha
- (iv) Okpo na ara nwainea (A member who never gives details to
na egwe aba his relation so as
to get his own share)
- (v) Ibu okwujo adi mma oyori (Inactive
demonstrator is never liked)
- (vi) Akwacha na akwacha (A title
with endless stages)
- (vii) Ndaka ekpe (A phrase
used as many times as the
Okoroshi demonstrates, putting
one leg after the other).

These are the accepted norms of salutation which are often recited by a member of the Muo group when he meets an Okoroshi. But in case an Nze (unmasked titled man) meets his Agbanta or any other Agbanta eating or drinking in a comrade's house, he salutes the group in this manner: "Agba Yiwu ni" (meaning: I am a member) and members reply thus: "Yie" (yes) and he concludes with "A-a-ani" (Am I not?) and members say: "A-a-a-a" (You are a member). A member salutes in this way if he has performed what is called "Igbo Awaya", that is, a stage in the society which enables one to say the aforementioned phrases. It is in this manner that "Igbo awaya" becomes one of the most important stages in the Ikwa Muo.

Titled members who have not reached this stage are called "Am...Ma" (a displeasing phrase to humiliate the member). A member who contravenes the established rule by saying "Agba Yiwu ni" when he has not done anything to claim the right will be fined. Usually the Agbanta will kill a goat for him to pay or ask him to pay a certain sum of money. If the defaulter refuses to comply, then he will be suspended.

The various principal stages in the muo society after the initiation are as follows: Aka mgbu, Igbu awaya, Ife ishi nwanyi, Igbu efi agbanta, Ishi iji. These grades or stages in the title only enables a member have social and also entitle him to different social benefits. Apart from these major stages or grades in the title which earn a member social benefits, these are also countless uneconomic performances which give one maker nothing but prestige when dancing. For example, a member may feast his Agbanta by killing a goat on a mortar or a pen as the case may be. When he dances then he is called "Ogbu na Ikwe" or "Pen" (a killer on a mortar or a pen). In fact this endless ambition to make more titles or reach various grades in the same title makes people say that Ikwa Muo is an endless title (akwacha na akwacha). One can rightly say that a few members of the social group reach the peak of the major stages or grades before they die.⁵

Owu Agbata-Ani

As stated earlier the Ishibe village forms the boundary between the two divisions and is commonly referred to as the Agbata-ani. Similarly the Ugwunta and Ugwu-ukwu divisions are referred to as "Animene" and "Nnamuorie" respectively and are regarded as two distinct but contiguous "States" for the Owu Agbata-ani. As far as Owu is concerned Oguta can be regarded as confederacy.

The Owu Agbata-ani which marks the beginning of Oguta traditional years can be regarded as an assembly of Oguta people, especially members of the Ikwa muo cult from two contiguous "States". Non-members of this cult (Ofeke) attend the assembly only as observes and can express their opinions through any member of the cult (Ndi Nze). Like in parliament, whatever is said in Owu Agbant-ani is privileged according to the custom and so cannot be a subject of legal action in Obi Eze. The assembly sits once every year usually on Afor day after the Ishi-Nze of Umuorima village has performed the Ikponyita Owu ceremony (calling up the spirit of Owu) on Eke day in the second week of March. However, in any year the ceremony of Ibu Igbudu (The Kings funeral effigy) would be observed. The sitting of the assembly is usually delayed until after the Ibu-Igbudu.

The delay is to make it possible for the Udom (regent) of the late Eze Igwe or Iyasara to be first person in that year to be initiated into the Ikwa

Muo cult. By the custom of Oguta his initiation into the Ikwa muo cult is free of charge. There is no aspect of human life, their ancestors did not take care of. They felt that it would not be proper not to protect any person who has occupied the highest position in the town (as a Regent) from disgrace, humiliation and scorn after leaving office. Therefore, they put the observation of the King funeral effigy (Ibu-Igbudu) at the time the first stage of the Owu festival would start, so that immediately after the Ibu-Igbudu the Udom would be initiated into the Ikwa muo cult before the Okoroshi masquerades who molest people (Ofeke) start to appear.⁶

At the assembly major policy decisions affecting the community are taken and certain obsolete or dehumanizing cultures could be reviewed. Often times laws are enacted at this assembly that is reasonably necessary in the interest of public safety, public order, public morality or public health of the community. The Agbata-ani (Ishibe) people provide the drinks, kolanuts and nto-ani for the entertainment of the members of the assembly-Nde Nze.

Ishi-Iji Ceremony

The most significant and attractive stage in Muo society is "Ishi-Iji" ceremony (cooking yams). After an Nze or titled man has completed the other four main stages in Ikwa Muo to his Agbanta, then he has the opportunity to perform the "Ishi-Iji" ceremony to the Oshiri Iji society. Members of this Oshiri Iji society even though they belong to different Agbanta, constitute themselves into an "Inner circle" or special group of the Echina cult. Ishi-Iji therefore is the highest rank any member of Echina cult can attain in Ikwa muo. Hence Oshiri Iji society is one of the two most recognized cultural societies in Oguta. The other is the Igbu society which is not an off-shoot of Ikwa muo.

A prospective member has to undergo six stages before he becomes a full member of the Oshiri Iji society. These stages include application for membership, notification ceremony (Ikpa aka), Udo-amani, Itu mmaya ceremony (libation), banquet ceremony, and initiation ceremony ("Nju aka"). When a candidate is fully initiated, he becomes an "Oshi Iji Ogbaji Nma and enjoys all the rights and privileges of this title. He is expected to carry an "Oji" ("Talking Iron Walking Stick") during Oshi Iji ceremonies. By right of that title an Oshi Iji is duty bound by custom to build a masquerade (Owu) every year during the Owu

festival until he dies. In case he defaults then he is fined by the Owu council. Another peculiar thing at this stage of Ikwa Muo is that, except at death, an Oshiri Iji masks himself (Ikpota Igbo) for the last time in his life during the initiation ceremony). By this initiation into Oshiri Iji society, an Oshiji has been twice initiated into the Ikwa Muo in Echina cult. By virtue of this privilege or right, an Oshiri Iji regards an Okoroshi as an "Ofeke" and could flog him if he were permitted to mask himself during the Owu festival. But in order to avoid this ugly situation, the Oshiri Iji is debarred by custom to mask himself as long as he lives.

An Oshiri Iji has certain patterns of life which he should maintain. He is not expected to eat food at night especially after the fowls have gone to their roosts. And also to eat cooked yams that were not peeled (Iji afufuru). Since an Oshiri Iji's body is regarded as 'Sacred', no one should place things on the roof of a building under which an Oshiri Iji sits without telling him, or else the offender is penalized. By custom an Ofeke member of an Oshiri Iji's family is forbidden to cry weirdly as an Okoroshi before an Oshiri Iji. In case he does so, he will be punished. Neither has an Okoroshi the right to flog any member of the Oshiri Iji's family inside that compound. An infringement of this customary rule could make an Oshiri Iji unmask the Okoroshi. The symbolical filling of the "grave" 'Ikpochi Ini' of an Oshiri Iji is performed when the man is alive, so that when an Oshiri Iji dies his children will not perform the secret ceremony again. Unfortunately some of these age-long traditions seem to die away with time.

Ikwa Muo as a socio-economic title enriches the holder socially and economically. The benefit one derives from the title depends upon the different stages one must have attained. Many old men depend solely on this title for their old-age maintenance until they die. It is here that one can imagine the brain that created this social institution. You can only reap the benefits of your labour (that is the level of your attainment). The most difficult burden created by this title is seen when a member dies. The relations of the titled man spend much money in his burial ceremony. This double spending makes people feel reluctant to be initiated into the Muo society. Furthermore, the relations of the deceased member lose the man's title (Ekpe eriozo). Despite these difficulties many people aspire to become members of that society. It is the most attractive and most widely enrolled social institution in the town.⁷

The Place of Osere in Echina Cult

Osere is the chief priest of the Echina and Owu. Being the head of Owu, the Osere presides over every ceremony concerning Owu in the Echina and during the Mgbaru ceremony of a dead Nze. He is also the chief law enforcement officer of the town and so he is called "Agu Negbu Ewu" (Lion that kills goats).

There are two Oseres in Oguta, namely Osere Ugwu-ukwu and Osere Ugwunta. Umuopu village produces the Osere Ugwunta whilst the Osere Ugwu-ukwu comes from Umunnarukwu. There used to be the third Osere. The Osere Obeagwa for the villages of Obutu, Obeagwa and Amozua but this has become extinct. The Echina Ugwu-ukwu is owned jointly by the three brother villages of Okichi, Umuosuma and Umunnarukwu. Okichi is the head of the three-brother villages, and that is why when a goat is slaughtered in the Echina, Okichi takes the head. However, Umunnarukwu produces the Osere (The Chief Priest).

An Osere is not installed as such by any person, he installs himself when the office of Osere become vacant, steps would be taken to install a new Osere within seven native weeks (Izu Asaa) and the person to occupy the office must be the oldest male in the Osere lineage. Before the installation some preliminary ceremonies take place. Firstly, the prospective Osere would invite all the Umu-ishi and Nde Nze of his village to his house when they have gathered, he pours libation of his ancestors informing them of the impending installation and praying for their guidance and protection. Every member of the Umu-ishi present must be given a kolanut with which he would make offering to the ancestors. The prospective Osere would then fix a date for the installation ceremony which must be within the limitation period earlier stated. Secondly, the prospective Osere would give a formal notice (Ikpa-aka) to his age grade, his relations and any other group involved in the date fixed for the occasion, all the persons and groups invited assemble in his house and his age grade would accord him the last funeral rites usually accorded a dead person. People would then dance and are entertained as is done in any funeral ceremony. The age grade would then divide a piece of cloth (George) into two, giving one part to the Osere and keeping the other part. This division of cloth (in Oguta) is very symbolic as it marks the final severance of relationship between the Osere

and his age grade. From thence, he is regarded as a dead person and can no longer dance to music of his age grade nor sit on the same bench or chair or mat with anybody.

On this occasion, all activities of funeral ceremony including Age Grade dancing, Ewu-Amara, Ikpota-Akwa (bringing of cloths by relations and friend) etc are present here. However, in this particular case, the Ewu-Amara which is normally given to the age grade alive is slaughtered there, cooked and eaten together. Moreover the relations and friends are required to bring money in lieu of clothes.

On the morning of the following day, the new Osere dresses in his full regalia and remains in his bedroom while waiting for the Nde Nze of his village as they gather in his sitting room. When they have all gathered and the person next to him in age is now present, the Osere then comes out and assumes his seat. Then that person next to the Osere in age would stand up, bow and salute him "Omodi" two times. The rest follow suit according to their ages. The Osere Ugwu-ukwu is saluted "Ajie". It appears that if the person next to the Osere in age is absent for any reason, then the oldest person present would start this salutation process. The Osere then pours libation and they drink, after which the Osere goes into the Echina shrine accompanied by others.

After the completion of the ceremony at the Echina, people then go to pay homage to the new Osere in his house. There are some peculiar features in the office of the Osere that make people hold him in awe and also mark him out as different species of mankind. One peculiar feature in this aspect of Oguta culture is that the Osere is the only person in Oguta and perhaps in the whole world whose funeral ceremony is performed while he is still alive.

Another peculiar feature is that the two Oseres do not meet face to face. If however they meet, the Osere Ugwunta would die. This happened several times in the past and it was discovered that what caused the death of the Osere Ugwunta was the "Unyi" (Juju) which the Osere Ugwu-ukwu wears on his foreheads as part of his traditional regalia. Our fore-fathers therefore decided that both Oseres should not meet and so it has remained. It is on account of this that the two Oseres do not attend the meeting of the Owu-

Agbanta-ani despite the fact that they are the heads of Owu in their respective areas.⁸

At Death

The body of a deceased Osere should not be seen by members of the public especially the non-initiates of the Ikwa Muo cult (Ofeke) and so cannot be laid in state. Consequence upon death, the body is secretly removed and buried at night. In the distant past, the body is removed through one roof top at night and buried but this practice has long been changed and the corpse can be removed through the gate. Upon his death, the members of the classes of Oke-ishi and Oshiji are promptly notified of the death of the Osere. This is to enable them prepare their Owu masquerades on time. The following morning, the Owu masquerades would dance in honour of the dead Osere in front of his house. The Okonko, accompanied by some Okoroshi masquerades make a brief appearance. Then the Nde Nze present would dance to the tune of the Oda music.

This is followed by entertainment in the form and manner done during the Ikwa ozu-uchichi ceremony of an Nze except that in this case of Osere's. it is done in the day time.⁹

Proceedings at the (Owu Agbata-ani) Assembly

The proceedings of the day start at about 2pm after the participants had taken seats. Usually the people from Animene (Ugwunta) and Nnamuorie (Ugwu-ukwu) respectively sit at their own side of the town with the Agbata-ani (Ishibe) people sitting between them to mark the traditional boundary between the two "States".

Matter or bills to be deliberated upon are sponsored by individual members and can originate from either of the two "States". Apart from matters arising from the previous meeting which are discussed together and any speaker is thus expected to stand before the Agbata-ani and speak to the hearing of the two division, the assembly does not debate any matter or bill together. Usually the sponsor of a bill presents it before his own side of the assembly and is deliberated upon and decision taken. He then moves to the Agbata-ani, salutes them and goes over to the other side of the assembly, salutes them and presents the bill (the agreed version). He then goes back to the Agbata-ani, salute them and returns to his own people, saluted them and resumes his seat.

The other side of the assembly would now deliberate upon the bill just presented and take a decision on it. Their spokesman then goes to the Agbata-ani, salutes them and moves over to the other side from where the bill originated, salutes them and presents their decision on the matter.

If the decision agrees with that of the originating arm of the assembly, the bill is then passed into law. So it goes in every matter discussed in the Owu-Agbata-ani. This is where and how Oguta people make laws and reviews old ones. It should be noted that the manner of salutation varies with each division and it is as follows:

At the Animune (Ugwunta) you salute - "Nze Zuani"

Response - "Ani Ezuana"

At the Nnamuorie (Ugwu-ukwu) you salute - "Yowuni"

Response - "Yee"

Again - "Aani"

Response - "aa"

At the Agbata-ani (Ishibe) you salute - "Nze Zuani"

Response - "Aani Ezuana"

Salute - "Yowuni", Response - "aa"

Again - "Aani", Response - "aa".

The reason why the salutation at the Abata-ani is a combination of the salutation at the Animune and Nnamorie is to show that the Agbata-ani is the bridge linking the two states. At the end of the meeting both sides return to their respective Echina for Itu-Nze ceremony. The Ishibe people provide seating for the two segments of Owu during Owu Agbata-ani and they are titled Ogbama-Agini (Those who spreads mats). They are highly respected for that.¹⁰

Owu as Institution

Owu is an institution on which most of Oguta culture is hinged. It can be described as the corner-stone of the town's tradition, a law making body and a law enforcement agency. Oguta has twenty-seven (27) villages and for the purpose of the Owu, these villages are grouped into two primary segments. Ugwu-ukwu and Ugwunta. Ugwunta is made up of seventeen (17) villages namely, Ngegwu, Abuta, Umuamam, Umudei, Umuosu (Now Umundanike), Obutu, Umotogwuma, Obeagwu, Umuajoma, Ogwuma, Umuopu, Umuigbo, Umunsoha, Umuoyata,

Umuorima, Umuenemanya and Ishibe. Even though the Ishibe village is part of the Ugwunta segment, it forms a bridge (Agbata-ani) between Ugwunta and Ugwu-ukwu divisions.

On the other hand, the Ugwu-ukwu division is made up of ten villages and these include: Okichi, Umuosuma, Umunnarukwu, Umunkwu, Umunkwokoshi, Umuenu, Umunduruowoku, Amozua, Umunkwocha and Umuachishi. Although the Owu festival is done simultaneously, each segment keeps to their own Echina and administers their "Ikwa Muo" and "Ishi Iji".

Each of the two divisions has an Echina (an ancestral shrine for the Ikwa Muo cult). The Echina of Ugwunta division is situated at Umuopu village and that of Ugwu-uke division is situated at Umunnarukwu. There used to be the third Echina. The Echina Obeagwa but this has long become extinct. Each of the Echina is headed by a Chief Priest (Osere) who also hails from the village where the Echina is situated. The status of the priest (Osers) occupies a prominent position in Oguta culture.¹¹

Explanation of Terms

Osere: Echina Priest

Culture: The people's way of life, mode of dressing, singing, eating, language, and religion etc.

History: The study of man's activities in the past in area of socio- cultural, religion, political and his environment etc.

Owu Agbata-ani: It marks the beginning of Oguta traditional year and can be regarded as an assembly of Oguta people especially members of the Ikwa Muo cult from the two contiguous states (Ugwunta and Ugwu-ukwu)

Echina Cult: It is a social-economic secret society in which members of Oguta society are initiated into.

Ugwu-ukwu: Nnamuorie, made up ten villages of Oguta.

Ugwunta: Animene, made up of seventeen villages of Oguta.

Ikwa Muo: An initiation into the Echina cult.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Echina and some aspects of Oguta cultural heritage has been unveiled and examined in this work. It is expected that further research work be carried out by other scholars on these aspects of the people's history.

I also therefore, urge the Osere (Echina Priest) to jettisoned every fetish aspect of the Echina cult and encourage every member of Oguta community irrespective of their religious inclination to embrace and participate actively in the Owu practice.

REFERENCES

1. Anene, C.P. (2014). Traditional Political Institution as Instrument of Peaceful Coexistence in Communities: A Review of Ezeship Tussles in Oguta, Imo State in Kpakpando. *Journal of History and International Studies IMSU*, 1(2), 148-149.
2. Oral interview with Oshiji Ozoemena Nwokocha, 72 years, on 22/06/2020, community leader, title holder, local historian residing at Abatu village, Oguta.
3. Oral interview with Oshiji Ndubuokwu Okoronkwo, 81 years, on 22/06/2020, community leader, title holder, local historian residing at Ogwuma village, Oguta.
4. Ndupu, A. O. (1972). *A Short Cultural History of Oguta*. Onitsha: Varsity Industrial Press.
5. Ndupu, *A Short Cultural History of Oguta...* 235-336.
6. Azogu, A. N. (n.d.). *Oguta Cultural Heritage and Practices: A Handbook for the New Generation*. N.d, Oguta.
7. Nwobi, E. (2001). *People with Cultural Heritage: Oguta in Perspective*, (Enugu: Global Publication Ltd.
8. Azogu, (n.d.). *Oguta Cultural Heritage and Practices...*, 97.
9. Oral interview with Ogana Ayola Mazi, 76 years, on 24/06/2020, king's spokesman, Echina cult member, residing at 22 Echina Road, Oguta.
10. Oral interview with Emma Ossai, 77 years, on 15/06/2020, retired principal, local historian, and Echina cult member residing at Ishibe village, Oguta.
11. Oral interview with Augustine A. Azogu, 80 years, on 25/06/2020, A historian, community leader, and retired teacher residing at 14 Bishop Nwedo Road, Oguta.