

## NEO-JAHILLIYAH ACTIVITIES: THE PROBLEM OF SYNCRETISM AMONG MUSLIMS IN EBIRALAND

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### ABSTRACT

For every society or community, there are always indigenous cultures and traditions which may, on the long run, either be influenced by the wave of religion or that of secularism, and sometimes both; the case of Ebiraland is not an exception. This research set out to investigate the presence, practice and mixture of cultures with the religion of Islam among the Ebira people of Kogi state. It is often noted that either intentionally or otherwise, some Muslims in Ebiraland do not practice pristine Islam, rather; they inject traditionalism and to a certain and significant extent, Christianity. Adopting qualitative research method, the research relied on interview as its tool for data collection. This however did not prevent the researcher from consulting literatures on the subject matter. The findings of the research revealed majorly that while a good number of Ebira people are aware of the practices that nullify monotheism, others do not understand that *Tawheed* is the determinant of success on the day of judgement, which accounts for the reason they mix their Islam with traditionalism. The research concluded that the practice among Ebira people today is a sign that the ways of pre-Islamic Arabs have not been totally forgotten or eradicated, as monotheism and other Islamic values were seen as threat to combat their indigenous cultures.

**Keywords:** Culture, Ebira people, Islam, Monotheism, Traditionalism.

## Introduction

For every society, there is always a uniquely adopted way of life that makes them different from others either positively or negatively, such way of life as earlier mentioned is known as culture. Before the advent of religion, the people may live a life style for decades and even centuries, but with the advent of religion, such traditions, beliefs and cultures may fade away over time – taking gradual processes, depending on the efforts put in by the emissaries or missionaries of the new faith. Ebiraland is not an exception to this existing phenomenon, as the extant and crumbs of their predecessors have shown that the people were never living in disorderliness, rather; they did have their own ways of life too which shall be discussed on the long run. The battle between the cultural beliefs and Islamic monotheism is what this research seeks to unveil, where much efforts have been made and where more is required.

*Takhlit* (syncretism) is one of the challenges that bedevil every society that Islam has tried penetrating including Ebiraland. It is the mixture of tradition and Islam by the new reverts and sometimes the old ones either by mistake or ignorance, especially those traditions and beliefs that Islam militates against (Lemu 2013). Sometimes in the early period of Islam the companions of Prophet Muhammad would take oath or swear with the pre – Islamic Arab idols mistakenly, until they were asked to proclaim ‘no deity worthy of worship except Allah’ (laa ilaaha illalLaah) as a means of expiation (Isma’eel 2004:4859). Majority of the Ebira people are still in the oblivion with regards to association of partnership with Allah and Islamic monotheism. They still do not know the adverse effect and consequence of not relying on Allah alone. People still embark on the ways of their ancestors by holding some of the traditions firmly.

Ebiraland constitutes one of the ethnic groups in the Middle Belt zone of Nigeria. It however, did not evolve a centralized form of leadership until the advent of the British colonial authorities, which brought together the various Ebira groups under the leadership of Attah Omadivi in 1902. The year 1902 therefore marked the evolution of a monarchical form of administration and the gradual development of central administration in Ebiraland (Edo 2008:13). According to the 2006 census, the population stood at 844,774. Ebiraland proper consists of five local government areas in the Kogi Central senatorial district, namely Adavi, Ajaokuta, Okehi, Okene and Ogori-Magongo. The current research is focused on investigating the practice of Islam in Ebiraland, with special emphasis on syncretism, which is the mixture of traditionalism with Islam. The research wishes to lay bare the dangers of syncretism to Islamic monotheism, which is the fundamental background or

principle of the religion of Islam. While doing this, the research does not intend to name or shame individuals or groups, it rather aims expose the dangers and proffer solutions on how the people could be safe from doom on the day of judgement.

### **The Ebara People: A Historical Overview**

Ohiare (1985) linguistically defined Ebara as those who speak the language or dialect called Ebara or those who recognize themselves as one but have lost touch of the ability to speak the language as a result of some historical development. Describing their location, Ozigi (2004) said that Ebaras are predominantly in the Niger–Benue confluence area and scattered in locations as Okene, Okehi, Adavi and Ajoakuta. These are the Ebara Tao group of the central senatorial District of Kogi State. There are also the Ebara kotos. They are found in Koton Karfe area of Kogi Local Government of Kogi State. There is the Ebara Mozum of Bassa Local Government area of Kogi State. There are large Ebara settlement in other areas apart from Kogi State as found in Umaisha, Toto, Lafia District of Nassarawa State and Federal Capital Territory.

There is also Ebara Agatu in Benue State, Ebara Etuno in Igarra area of Edo State. The concern of this research is the Ebara Tao group. Historically, the people belong to the Kwararafa group of the middle belt region. Among the other ethnic group in the Kwararafa region are the Jukuns, the Igalas, the Idomas, the Langtangs, Kajes etc. The tradition of origin of the Ebara Tao first started in the Gongola Basin and ended with their migration to the lower Benue valley. The Ebara took their name from the lower Benue valley. They described themselves as people from Ebara. Tradition collected from among the Idoma says Ebara were already in the area of Abinse down to the area of modern Agatu district when Idoma ancestors met them. This was about the 15th and 16th centuries as claimed by Ohiare (1985). This indicated that the Ebara presence around the Benue valley was about the 14th Century. It was from here that the wave of migration dispersed the Ebara and other associated groups to the confluence area. From here also the people migrated to Ebara opete and the Okehi hills. Several reasons were given for this migration. They were succession disputes, outbreak of epidemics, and flight from punishment which the people considered as unjustified and oppressive.

There is yet another period of Ebara historical development. This began with their migration across the Niger at Itobe to the right bank of the Niger around the present location of Ajoakuta. This place was known as Ebara opete. The Ebara had to move further from the Igala territory for obvious reasons of succession. It was a common practice in the royal circle of Idah that the losing

side in succession dispute was always obliged by tradition to move out of the capital to the inland and sometime beyond the boundaries of the Kingdom (in this case, the Ebira belonged to the losing side and so had to move). According to Ozigi (2004), the dominant theme in the struggle of the Ebira opete settlers was to secure political independence of Attah in Idah. So, it was their desire to be rid of Idah's political influence. This forced the people to begin gradual westward. Some settled in Okehi and Upai hills and others in Igarra (Etuno) area. From Opete, the Ebira moved gradually in families, lineages and clans to the hills of Okehi, Upai and Eikaoku, a compact area chosen for security purposes.

The main clans and sub clans in Ebira settlements were Okovi (Asuwe, Adobe, Ehebe, Omavi, Ure and Omoye as sub clans), Agada (Akuta, Avi, Ogu, Esusu, and Ohimoroko as sub clans), Eika (Ihiaga, Iyewe, Avasa, Eyire, Epoto, Anchi, Iheme, Agiri, Ubobo, Uhuodo and Ogu as sub clans) Adavi (Aniku, Uhami, Uka, Upopo uvete as sub clans), Ihima (Emani, Ure, Ohueta, Odumi, Ohionwa and Oha as sub clans), Eganyi (Eheda, Onoko, Esugu, Ogodo, Onogu, Ede and Ogu as sub clans). These clans were very important in the socio-political life of the Ebira people. They were the basis of authority and social relations in Ebira traditional community (Suleiman 2010). By the mid-19th century, about the 1860's the Jihadists invaded the Ebira settlement and distorted their socio-political organization. The Jihadists, under the leadership of Madaba from Bida, first incursed into the Okene area by way of raiding, and for the first time, the Ebira were faced with formidable and a united force under a purposeful and dynamic leadership that could challenge these Jihadists. These leadership traits were found in Ohindase Ukpai and he did put very strong resistance in this direction. In the second incursion, which came about the 1870's, was a combined force of Bida, Ilorin and Ibadan under Nupe leadership. With a determined and united Ebira under the Leadership of Ohindase Avogude, the Ebira resisted once again. It is quite impressive to note that none of these Jihadists' incursions in Ebira was successful. It is also noteworthy that these incursions had set the people on the way to central Leadership. Under colonial rule, the people of Ebira lost their sovereign right. The existing structures were dismantled and replaced with new ones. There was imposition of colonial agents through whom the colonialist communicated with the people. Suleiman (2010). There was the imposition of poll tax (Ekehi irehi or house money); there was forced labor to construct rail lines, road network, etc. The people resisted patriotically colonial imposition in various ways. Ibrahim (1985) identified that there were military resistance against the colonialists in such places like Ikuehi, Kuroko and Okene. These various oppositions to colonial imposition led to the Oyibo Arimo

crisis of 1924 and 1926. It was these series of crisis that culminated into the formation of Igbira Tribal Union (ITU) that constituted a major political force in the post independent era.

#### **Economic Life of Ebira People**

Economically, the clan head held in trust for the clan, part of the income from all the clan lands, such as the produce from palm oil and locust bean trees, during the pre-colonial period. Also, the leg of whatever game that was killed was given to him, which he shared with the kindred heads (Edo 2008, Ibrahim 1974). Apart from fishing and hunting, which complemented farming, the Ebira economy also to a remarkable level, depended on local industries and craft production like palm oil, animal husbandry, iron technology and blacksmithing, textile dyeing, wood carving and basket, mat and raffia weaving. Because of its unique nature, the textiles industry requires a brief discussion. Cotton, the main raw material of the industry, is a crop of antiquity with the Ebira. The Ebira had migrated with the crop and with the knowledge of its production to their present location, the soil of which was fortunately very favourable for its commercial cultivation. An exclusive female preserves the distinct technique employed by the Ebira textiles producers was vertically mounted single loom system, locally called *Oguntoro* (Okene, Ochi 2013).

According to Brown (1970:60), Ralph Willis (1972:51), Picton and Mack (1979: 17, 82), the Ebira cloth weaving had undergone series of styles, patterning and specialization that made it excellent and one of the best in the Western Sudan before the advent of the British rule. In the same vein, Henry Barth noted in 1851 that Ebira woven cloth favourably rivaled those of other areas in terms of pattern, colour, decoration and texture. Indeed, Barth did observe the superiority of the Ebira woven cloth compare to other regions in the Kurmi International Market, Kano when he visited the city during the same period (Okene, Ochi 2013). Indeed, during the Nigerian Civil War when the Nigerian Army ran short of imported textile materials, the Ebira textile and woven cloth came to their rescue. According to Ahmadu Buruja Adoke who served as a War Correspondence with Second Division of the Nigerian Army commanded by Colonel Murtala Muhammad, Ebira cloth and textile stuff were patronized by the Military to produce Army belts and covering material. The Federal Government of Nigeria was to later patronize the Ebira woven cloth in the immediate post-Civil war Nigeria era (Suberu 2008:92-93).

#### **Socio Political Life of Ebira People**

The Ebira were part of the decentralized political communities of central Nigeria. The people were governed based on family, clan, and lineages. According to A. Y. Ibrahim each head of an *Ohuoje* or an *Ovovu*

exercised strict administrative discipline over members of his family. He determined all questions of marriage for his sons, daughters, and grandchildren. He was the judge of all disputes between the members and he presided over all important occasions. Disobedience to him was considered as disobedience to the ancestors and people feared this because the ancestor punished for such guilt (Ibrahim 1968).

Traditionally in Epira land, elders were exclusively in control of the entire factors of production as well as the production system within the family structure: land, farm produce, and general activities of the clan. On this, Ibrahim further stressed thus: "The administration of all clans constituting a clan group lay on the hands of the elders, influential individuals and the priest chief (Ohiniyo Oto). The group of elders consisted of the clan heads, kindred heads, and other people whose age maturity and wisdom commended themselves to the other elders. The composition of this group was more or less constant because if the representative of a clan died, his place was taken by another (elderly) member of the same clan. For this reason, the group may in fact be termed as the council of elders." (Ibrahim, 1968:45)

The elders in Epiraland determined and controlled the entire activities of their family members. The male before getting married was required to remain in the family compound and to work for his parents in farms until he attains forty years of age. In this way, it was taboo for any male member of the family to settle outside the clan's compound. The socio-political hierarchy of the society could be summarized in the following: *ohi-ohuoje*- head of family, *ohiku*-ancestor, *Abara*- unified family units/ lineage, *ohi-Abara*- head of lineage, *Iresu*-the clan, which comprise two or more *Abara*.

#### **Advent of Islam in Epiraland**

The introduction of Islam into Epiraland coincided with the inception of colonialism in the area. The reputed malam to have been the first to introduce Islam and Islamic education in Epiraland was Alfa Abd as-Salam (popularly known as Alkali Abd as-Salam) who came from Agbaji quarters in Ilorin about 1903 as an itinerant malam (Mohammed 1984: 117). Alfa Abd as-Salam opened the first Qur'anic school in Epiraland at Okene-Eba, which was the first headquarters of the new colonial administration in the area during the first two decades of the 20th century. Abdullah (1999: 19) has it that Epira people first came in contact with Islam through the wars of *jihad* that Ilorin waged on them in 1856. Abdullah (1999), quoting from Sheikh Ahmad Omoikokoro's *Ta'lif Akhbar al-Qurun*, reported that the third Emir of Ilorin, Shittu, was said to have sent an army to Epiraland with the support of Ibadan and Bida armies, but was met with strong resistance. However, some people were captured and taken to Agege in Lagos and Ilorin where they embraced Islam and were later

on set free. Upon their return home, they started practicing Islam and from then, the religion started to spread across the land. While the report of the 2006 national census is silent on the percentage of Muslims and Christians, local sources put the Muslim population of Ebiraland at about 70%, Christians at about 25% percent and others at 5%.<sup>2</sup>. (Jimba 2012:5-6).

The 1930s was a period of unprecedented Religion and the New Roles of Youth in Sub-Saharan Africa, conversion to Islam and challenge to traditional Ebira religion and culture, championed by Atta Ibrahim, the paramount Chief of Ebiraland (reigned 1917-1948), and while the 1980s was the apex of religious rejuvenation led by Abubakar Gumi and his disciples. The two periods were important landmarks in the socio-religious transformation of northern Nigeria wherein the youth featured prominently. (Bunza, Ashsafa 2013). The massive conversion to Islam of the youths among the Ebira from the late 1920s and 1930s marked the beginning of the end of the old order. The centralization of authority in Ebiraland started in 1917 with the appointment of Attah Ibrahim as the Native Administrator (N.A.) for the Ebira District and was later upgraded to be the sole Administrator for the newly created Ebira Division in 1924, in spite of stiff opposition from the older generation, which viewed the prospect of a young man of Attah's age ruling over them as taboo. Under the replica of the warrant chief system introduced in Igboland during that period, the British policy of articulation (bringing changes in the colonies in line with the views and interests of the colonial world) aimed to use Ibrahim to unite the various segments of Ebira clans for effective colonial governance.

Already, at the age of thirty, Attah Ibrahim had attained both Islamic and Western education and was in the service of the British officials on tours as an interpreter, being a fluent multilingual speaker of Ebira, Hausa, English, and Yoruba. He was quick to realize the potential role of Islam in establishing the centralized administration the British were desperate to establish among the Ebira. As the chief, he tried and used many tactics to convert people to Islam, and as many converted simply because it was the religion of the chief and they expected to receive certain official favors by so doing. Up to the early 1930s, Islam was limited to those close associates of the Attah. However, from the late 1930s onward, some young Ebiras graduated from primary schools with new ideas at a time the area had been transformed into a centralized polity based on the colonial indirect rule system. The number of converts had begun to increase significantly, when at the same time Christian Missionaries became attracted to the area because of the opening of new roads and other factors. This was to generate serious competition for the allegiance of the Ebira youth. The Ebira youth, many of whom were converted

to Islam through the vigorous efforts of the Attah, became radicalized when they took offense to the Christian competition for converts, especially from the 1950s when the latter showed great zeal in opening schools and colleges and succeeded in winning converts based on a “catch-them-young” approach. This success is attributable to the fact that people in the area were becoming more and willing to attend Western schools as a means to enhance their status in the colonial, social and administrative system to which indigenous educated people were being appointed.

#### **Impact of Islam on the Beliefs and Attitudes of the People**

A thinker in the right direction, having compared the previous Ebiraland, before 1930s to the present would appreciate the Islamic order in the region. We must firstly acknowledge the individuals who made frantic efforts in this regard. Prominent of them is the Attah Ibrahim, the Ohinoyi of Ebiraland, who according to Bunza, Ashafa (2008) brought Islam in the 1930s. He sponsored the construction of Okene Central Mosque, beside the Okene Local Government secretariat, adjacent the shopping complex in the heart of the town. He is also said to be the architect of the lone burial ground (oganya) where the Muslims are buried in Okene till date. (Alhaji Adai Motion)

Another personality to be mentioned is Mallam Yahya Tajuddeen, a migrant from Ilorin who fortunately became the first chief Imaam of Ebiraland. After his demise, his body was buried in Okene; his son succeeded him and reigned for five years. Afterwards, Imam Musa Galadima Abdullahi took over after series of tribal inclination and tussles to determine the imaamship between him and Shehu Ahmad Rufai. Oral tradition has it that from the conduct of the test to determine the most qualified candidate for the imaamship, Shehu Ahmad Rufai was said to have been the most successful of either of them by the assessment.

However, the people refused him, considering the fact that his brother, Alhaji Sani Omolori was the Ohinoyi (king) as at then. They claimed that he cannot be an Imam, while the brother is the king, two vital positions in the region. Imam Musa Galadimah was appointed in the end and Shehu Ahmad Rufai was supposed to deputize him to which he objected. It became a serious matter, which metamorphosed into clannish sentiments, making either of the clans, to which either person belongs, engage in tantrum throwing and sometimes assault. This brought about the establishment of another Jum’ah mosque in idoji, where Sheikh Ahmad Rufai was the Imam. It soon became one of the causes of division among the people, some advocating and pledging their unalloyed support for the newly appointed Imam, while others for Shehu, especially the people with whom they belong to the same clan, or the same tijanniyah order. Shehu was one of the earliest



individuals to have established Islamiyyah for Qur'anic studies in 1959. (Malam Micheal Suleiman)

Within these periods, one could hardly differentiate or separate the new reverts from the traditionists, because each group participated actively in the processes of Islam or traditional ceremonies, beliefs and cultures. While they observe their basic pillars of Islam, they also submit to the integral parts of the culture which are against the Islamic principles. This is either because the Muslim scholars then had wanted to be gradual in their unfolding of Islamic principles and doctrines for reformation, or they do not have the knowledge of prohibition of syncretism in Islam at all. In the late 80s, the Young Muslim Mujtami'ah (YMM) was formed under the leadership of Malam Abdul Hamid, the son of the Chief Imaam Musa Galadima Abdullahi, and was flourishing, with the aim of presenting the pristine Islam to the people. For political reasons however, there was an internal conflict that led to the group breaking into factions. Consequently, a new group was formed by the faction that broke away, and it was called the Muslim Ummah, under the leadership one of the stakeholders, popularly known as Abdullahi Raji. (Michael Suleiman). Within the shortest time, mallam Raji subscribed to tijaniyyah Sufi order, thereby making his followers to find him unworthy to continue the leadership and was disengaged in favor of another mallam Abdullahi. This group flourished in its activities, and soon became known to be different from others, because of their unique dress code in white regalia and Imaamah (turban). They were and are still called 'Muslim brothers' by the people.

As early as 1995, the group Ansarul Islam, under the leadership of Sheikh Luqman Imam, one of the sons of the Chief Imam Musa Galadima was formed. He also made efforts which include the establishment of the then 'Ma'had ad-Diraasaatul Islaamiyyah wal 'Arabiyyah' (Institute of Arabic and Islamic studies) in Ateba Agassa Okene, now *Madrasatu daarul arqam al 'ulya* (Darul arqam High School). The school has brought about proficiency in Arabic speaking amongst youths in Ebirland. The alumni without doubt, have become graduates of premier universities in Nigeria and even some notable Islamic universities in Africa, while some others have been built in the capacity of holding public lectures in the ta'leem (learning circles). His ta'leem (learning circle) holds on Sundays 2 to 4pm in Okene central mosque, where he engages in the exegesis (tafseer) of the Qur'an.

The activities of the group spread like wild fire and soon alarmed the entire Ebirland, and authorities who alarmed the security agents expressing their surprise, amazement and threat of the group. There was an occasion that brought about burning the mosque of the group. His public lectures were considered to go against the Tijanism and traditions, to which ninety percent

of the Ebiraland people subscribed. He encouraged supplications (azkaar) from the Sunnah of the prophet against evils, from the pamphlet 'hisnul Muslim' (Citadel of the believer). He was the brain behind the establishment of the first ruqya (exorcism) center, a relief center that caters for healing processes from spiritual and medical influences, through prophetic medicine and herbs, such that diverted the people's attention from seeking a shirk (partner association with Allah) infested medication from the idols and false deities. Tribute to whoever it is due, whether an individual or a group, the general overview on the impact of Islam could be outlined from the social, spiritual and economic behavior of the people. If the past and the present are both subjected to the test of comparison, it would be apparent that so many things have faded away and a lot of falsifications have been exposed. The elders now address in a public gathering considering the audience. They are now ashamed to be proud of certain aspect of the traditions and cultural beliefs.

The spiritual impact of Islam can affirm through the total stoppage or reduction to the barest minimum of some of the traditions, whether belief or action that affects tawheed (Islamic Monotheism) in the past. The preachers, in their first approach, organized ta'leem (Islamic learning) centers, prominent amongst them which are that of the Ansarul Islam, with its major activity holding in the Okene central Mosque on Sundays, two to four pm, and Markaz Ahlissunnah Wal Jama'ah (MASWAJ), with its activity holding on Fridays (the Jum'ah session), the ta'leem (Islamic learning) classes on Thursday four to six pm at Iruvucheba, Okene, Friday four to six pm at Ihima, Saturdays, eight to ten am, in the same venue in Okene. Through this means, most of the traditions that go against fundamental Islam are discouraged and condemned with irrefutable textual proves. The people have improved a lot from the usual prevalent *isara* (sacrifices) that rocked every junction, nooks and crannies of Ebiraland in the 1990s. They have stopped swearing with false deities and our grandparents hardly prepare apapa (beans bread like Moi - Moi) for Masquerades again during Eku - Echi (Masquerade) festival. This development brought about the evacuation of two deadly shrines, Ori Abo and Ori Okumbeku by malam Mustapha, the first Ameer (leader) of Markaz Ahlis - Sunnah wal Jama'ah on, the records and footages of which are available. The impact of the burning of these deadly shrines was that it exposed to the people the nothingness and the zero value in these shrines they have accorded much reverence and thought were solutions over the years.

#### **Syncretism vis a viz Cultural Practices that are still found among Muslims in Ebiraland**

Despite the efforts of Muslim scholars, especially in recent times, to eradicate or at least, reduce the concurrent practice of Islam and

traditionalism among the Muslims in Ebiraland, syncretism is still a widespread phenomenon. Either planned or unplanned, aware or unaware, some Muslims are found in Ebiraland consulting fortunetellers, engaging in hero-worshipping, attending churches or prayer centers belonging to Christians, donating alcohol to in-laws etc. Ancestral worship for instance, reached its peak in the nocturnal *ekuechi* festival during which the dead were believed to be resurrected and returned to earth as *eku* to give advice to the people. A particular attention was given to women during the feast, who were told to be good and obedient to their husbands, as children were also told to obey their parents, while the wicked people and spirits in the society were warned against any evil doing (Ibrahim 1968:32). What was apparent in Ebira religious rituals was the absence of a particular form of worshipping God if removed from the ancestor cult rites (*eku*). The religion therefore, revolves round the ancestor, and each community corresponded with its own ancestors in its own way through the *eku*. The religious conception and rites were confined to the family and people affiliated to this geographical entity. Thus, the environment influenced the religious as well as the cultural practices of the Ebira. Horton aptly identified a connection between religion and environment that appropriately fit the Ebira situation, which contrasts strongly with the universalistic outlook of Islam and Christianity (Horton, 1975:219-235).

#### **Ekuechi (Masquerade) Tradition**

Generally, in Africa, theories of autochthonous origins for masquerades are often propounded through oral traditions as Horton (1963), Adedeji (1969) and Njaka (1974) demonstrated in recording the myths that established the origin of masquerades in Kalabari, Yoruba and Igbo cultures in Nigeria respectively. The Ebira example is not too different. There are few accounts of how *Ekuechi* concept started. However, the differences in these accounts are not fundamental. Generally, *Ireba Ekuechi* (masquerade cult) was believed to have been formed under the divine instruction of God to check the excesses of women, apart from serving as a medium of ancestral contact.

Myth has it that after creating man and woman as husband and wife, one day God sent for the man but he was too busy to honor the call. Instead, he requested his wife to heed God's call on his behalf. God gave her *Irakwo* (an egg-like object that contains the secrets of life and has the capacity to manifest supernatural powers) for her husband. Having discovered its contents and being fascinated by them, she hid it in her uterus and later swallowed it without giving it to her husband. She thereafter became quite powerful, performing supernatural feats like turning into any animal and changing back to a human being. She could instantly grow wings to fly around

in planetary travels, and also capable of all sorts of mysterious transformations. Her husband became envious of her powers. In sympathy, God enabled the husband to create the *Ekuechi* masquerade cult from which women membership is strongly discouraged, as a counterforce to the powers the women possess (Ododo 2001:96).

Corroborating the notion of *Ekuechi* as a counterforce to witchcraft, the Adeika of Eika, the traditional Chief of Eika clan in Ebiraland in an interview recorded by Adeiza submits that: Eika is the senior clan in Ebiraland and *Ekuechi* originated from them. The real origin of the festival is a traditional secret. *Ekuechi* originated from necessity, for when witchcraft crept into Ebiraland it was the women who reigned supreme in the cruel craft and they cheated men by it. Many people were being killed by them especially men. In retaliation, men also set up the *Ekuechi* cult to dread the women. Women are made to believe that *Ekuechi* who perform during *Ekuechi* are ancestor spirits raised from the dead to come and admonish, warn and punish evil doers in their songs and ritual (Adeiza, 1994). Ibrahim (12) further corroborates this position by revealing that “the masquerade executed recalcitrant women (witches)”. This is one of the major reasons women’s participations in the night performance (*Ekuechi*) is highly forbidden. According to Ogunba (2004), in many African cultures women are not admitted into the secrets of the masking art; indeed, they are often the favourite target of masking and satirical ridicule, the assumption being that they live a more poetical life than their menfolk, have secret powers, are more of spirits than human beings, and therefore are object of fear or veneration.

### **Ekuechi Performance**

The key icon in most masquerade performances is the mask, but this is absent in *Ekuechi* performance. Paradoxically, it is the mnemonic (extra-terrestrial) value of the mask that contextualizes and defines *Ekuechi*. The *actual absence* and the *virtual presence* of the mask in *Ekuechi* is what Picton (183) describes as a redefinition occasioned by “common knowledge about events and performers”. Another point to note is the absence of another vital icon in *Ekuechi* celebration – women. The important space women occupy in Ebira cosmology has been established. They are the repositories of *Irakwo* (witchcraft), an elemental equipoise to *Ekuechi* (masquerade). They also weave *Ekuechi*’s costume, clean the surroundings, household and the inner chamber in readiness to receive visiting ancestors; they prepare the feast with which the ancestors are hospitably received, yet their *presence* is negated by the *absence* of a mask.

### **‘Eche-Ane’ (Maiden festive) Tradition**

'Eche' literally means festival while 'ane' is the plural of 'One' which means woman. Technically, it is defined as the maidens' festival. This is an annual masquerade festival celebrated in rotation from one district to the other in Ebiraland for nine days (between April-June). In the past, it was only during the period of the festival that betrothed girls were given away in marriage to their suitors. That is why the festival is called 'Eche-ane' (women festival). Masquerades, though carried long canes, came out primarily to entertain people and received gifts in return. It is regrettable that this very popular and interesting festival has been bastardized and now a source of constant breach of peace.

#### **'Eche-Ori' (New Yam Festival) Tradition**

'Eche Ori' is a new yam festival celebrated only in two districts in Ebiraland. These are Ihima and Eganyi. During the festival, traditional worshippers make sacrifices in the secret groove of 'Ori' (deity) high up in the mountain to show gratitude for its protection and provision of bounteous harvest. Eche Ori (new yam) festival, its celebration of which is limited to two towns, Ihima and Eganyi, is one made to approve the eating of the new yam for the individual, and no one is expected to go his way to consume the new yam without the approval which is issued by the festival. Therein, some designated women referred to as *onoku* are dressed in white garments completely, or on a wrapper and a head tie. In the past, these women, in order to be hyper active in their functions do not marry, or engage in copulation, as opposed to the present times. (Sabburat uthman). The worshipers carry long canes with which they whip one another in turns without anyone exhibiting any sign of pain. This is a mark of strength or manhood. Another important attraction of the festival is the delightful 'Echori' music in which female singers feature prominently. Only after this festival can one eat or sell new yams in the market as it is a taboo to do so before the festival in Ihima and Eganyi.

#### **'Eva-Ozi' (Child's Care) Tradition**

In relation to a new born, the Ebiras believe in reincarnation, and as such one of the dead paternal or maternal relative must have reincarnated. This calls for the search of birth marks on the body of the new born, should it coincide with any of the deceased's, from his paternal and maternal relative, such person is said to have reincarnated. Afterwards, there is usually a fortification process that requires paying homage to the family of the deceased to whom the new born is likened. In the end, the fortune teller appeases the gods for the protection of the child, against whatever factor is responsible for the death of the person on behalf of whom the child has reincarnated, throw words of caution into the child's ear to be obedient to his parents. A necklace, made of rope and sticks or coin pendant; bracelet, anklet

or sometimes waist bands made from usually ash color rope is worn round the neck, wrist, waist or even ankle, this process is called *eva Ozi* (Ozovehe 2023)

#### **'Ogugu Oku' (Burial Ceremony) Tradition**

Worthy of note amongst other Ebira cultures is the burial rites and arrangements, and procedures which also involve masquerading, although not for every individual, but for an icon or an elder statesman. This is done by parading the masquerade around the towns, with women holding the enlarged photo of the deceased in the mammoth crowd up to early 1990s. This ceremony is called *Ogugu* and by it, the deceased is believed to have been laid to permanent rest. It could be done shortly after the demise of the deceased or later, but it is preferable if done earlier so that the deceased's spirit rests (Khadijat 2023).

#### **Ebira Traditional Marriage (Ohigi)**

In the event of traditional marriages, when a man sees a lady, he intends to marry, he discusses his intentions with her, who, if interested, tells him to bring his people to express his intentions to her parents. In respect to the Ebira tradition, the man does not walk to the parents of the woman to disclose his intentions; his parents or elders; mostly the women do this by going to the lady's parents to introduce themselves and also to inform them of their reason for coming to the house. After this is done, the parents of the lady then conduct a thorough investigation on the upbringing, background, family history and so on, of the intending groom to unravel any history of madness, terminal diseases or criminality in the man's family. This is with a view to deciding whether or not to give their daughter's hand in marriage to a family with a tainted reputation in the society. After the research, if their findings are appreciable, an approval is given to the man to visit the bride – to – be from time to time to further get to know themselves properly. A date is later picked for the formal introduction of both families and this is called "Ise Ewere" which literally means what has been in secret is now in the open.

During the celebration, there is usually the presentation of gift items from the groom's family to the bride's. The gift items usually include; about 42 tubers of yam, dried fish or bush meat, 10 liters of palm oil, a bag of salt, assorted wines and kola nut. The groom may also decide to present two wrappers to his would – be bride but this is optional. On the day of introduction, it is not necessary that the man attends the occasion as his family members do the necessary things on his behalf. The bride's family in turn, entertains the groom's with food and drinks. The families interact with one another and formally introduce every member of both families.

After this is done, the date for traditional marriage is then fixed. The tubers of yam and other items brought are distributed to neighbours and members of the extended family no matter how small. Much significance is given to this to ask for their prayers for a happy marriage as well as to ensure the acknowledgement of the community that the lady now has someone she intends to get married to. The amount to be collected as bride price is also agreed upon by the parents of the bride and it depends to a large extent, on the financial strength of the man. Apart from the bride price, there are other things like "ozemeiyi" that is "I am attracted to her" which a certain amount of money is attached to, and "otanuvogei" that is "joining hands together".

There is also "idoza" that is "farming price" paid to the bride's family because Ebiraland people are predominantly farmers. In the olden days when every young man had to farm, the groom and his friends appoint a day to farm for the father of the bride but these days because most young men don't farm any longer, they pay money instead. On the day of the traditional marriage, women in the man's family are seen singing and dancing carrying tubers of yams on their heads to the lady's house. The singing and dancing continue at their arrival at the lady's house where the ceremony kicks off. Other items to be taken are cans of palm oil, groundnut oil, dried fish, some clothing materials in some boxes, jewelries and other things for adornment of the lady. In a personal conversation with malam Nuhu Zubair, he mentioned that the collection of these items in the past was used to determine the groom's occupation. The would-be groom, if he forwarded tubers of yam showed he farms, a fisherman if he presented fish and a hunter if he presented bush meat etc. but by the passage of time, the groom is now asked to provide all the items without necessarily considering his occupation. The ceremony is usually colorful with display of dances by maiden groups mostly the bride's friends and by women groups. A traditional head and the parents of the couple offer prayers for them to bless their marriage. The lady is thereafter, escorted by her friends and other women to her husband's house with her belongings.

### **Conclusion**

One very strong dimension of violence in Ebiraland is the manipulation of masquerade festivals by the elite for political end. Before 1979, the institution of masquerade was under the control of farmers and the rural folks, who arranged festivals when there were no much farming activities. Since masquerades were considered as the representatives of the ancestors' spirits on earth, the emergence of a masquerade was only possible following the death of a powerful clan elder or clan chief. Initially, masquerade institution could only be identified with specific households or individual, who

could be held responsible for any violence during festivals. During the colonial era, singers and masquerades could only perform after request for permit, with a guarantor who could be held liable for breach of peace (Tenuche, 2002). The reason for this may not be far-fetched because some of the masquerades appeared violent.

Adinoyi, (1996) noted for instance that some of them use cane to flog, while some drink water others prefer palm wine, beer, local or imported liquor. Obviously, eku that drinks beer, local or imported liquor will misbehave. A particular Eku (masquerade) is noted for strapping cutlass around its body to mow down anybody who stood in its way. A masquerade called eku-echichi at times succeeds in getting past the restrainers in order to beat spectator-participants. Some eku-echichi (masquerade) mostly made up of boys move around the town or village on their own looking for people to beat. A distinction may also be commonly described as one between the ruling class and the subject class. The ruling class is composed of members of the ruling dynasty or the aristocracy, while the subject class is the rural peasants, workers and the toiling masses. This class character was entrenched in the Ebira politics of the early fifties between the then ruling aristocrats and the masses.

### Recommendations

1. It is obvious that the people still battle with Islamic monotheism, the reason for which good acts are accepted, it is recommended that the Muslim preachers discuss more often in their sessions, the merit of Islamic monotheism and the demerits of partner association with Allah. In line with this, it is pertinent that special attention be given to *Tawheed* (Islamic monotheism) as a subject in the Islamic oriented institutions at primary and secondary levels.
2. Furthermore, the Ebira people should be told the aspects of their cultures that are in contrast with the foundation of Islamic principles. As much as Islam approves of cultures or traditions, they are such that do not negate its basic tenets.
3. The internal wranglings amongst the salafis should and must be resolved, if the rapid progress and development of pristine Islam is the ultimate goal. These various organizations on their own parts have caused setbacks to Islam on the other hand, because of their repetitive political tussles that have culminated into hatred and animosity for almost a decade now. They must be reminded the consequence of disunity on the people they call.



4. It is equally recommended that further studies, detailing the account of the lives of the personalities who have contributed to the development of Islam in Ebiraland be carried out.

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**LIST OF INTERVIEWEES**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Town</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Date</b>
Alhaji Siaka Adaava	Idojivo	Community leader	102 years	10 <sup>th</sup> February, 2024
Alhaji Bello Umar Onoru oyiza	Idojivo	Deputy Chief Imam II, Ebiraland	68 years	20 <sup>th</sup> February, 2024
Malam Nuhu Zubair	Lafia, Okene	Local Malam	43 years	21 <sup>st</sup> February, 2023
Malam Musa Zakariyya	Ajaokuta		52 years	15 <sup>th</sup> March, 2024
Liasu Abdurafiu Anakobe	GRA Okene	Lecturer, Kaduna State Polytechnic	29 years	18 <sup>th</sup> March, 2024
Hajia Salamatu Bello	Idojivi, Okene	Teacher, ECSS Okene	55 years	20 <sup>th</sup> March, 2024
Hajia Khadijat Zubair	Idojivo, Okene	Widow	59 years	20 <sup>th</sup> March, 2024
Sabburat Usman	Inike, Okene	Student	26 years	2 <sup>nd</sup> April, 2024
Umar Musa Ozovhe	Oro, Okene	Teacher	35 years	3 <sup>rd</sup> April, 2024
Mariam Bello olowu	Idojivo, Okene	House Wife	52 years	10 <sup>th</sup> April, 2024
Alhaji Adai Motion	Dutse Abuja	Retired	75 years	10 <sup>th</sup> April, 2024
Malam Michael Suleiman	Ozuwaya, Okene	Teacher	52 years	12 <sup>th</sup> April, 2024