

# Ovwuvwe Festival Songs: Context and Performance

**Benjamin Obeghare Izu**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5314-7215>

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

benjaminizu@gmail.com

## Abstract

This article focuses on the context and performance of Ovwuvwe festival songs performed during the Ovwuvwe festival celebration among the Abraka people in Delta State, Nigeria. The songs, used at different stages of the festival, serve entertainment and ritualistic purposes. With its deep socio-cultural roots, the songs' text gives the audience entertaining mental pictures that convey meanings simply and effectively. This article enumerates the various stages of the songs' performance during the festival. It further examines the role of the songs in the festival culture. Oral interviews were the primary source for data collection. Secondary sources included publications and recordings. Unstructured research questions formed the basis for the study. A brief note on the Ovwuvwe festival and the Abraka people is provided, and the texts of some of the festival songs were transcribed and translated into English for analysis and discussion.

**Keywords:** traditional songs; rituals; Abraka; Ovwuvwe festival songs

## Introduction

Music has long been a significant part of indigenous African culture. Historically, every activity that the Africans took part in had a music aspect to it (Nzewi 2010, 1–2). This article examines the context and performance of Ovwuvwe festival songs. There are different songs used at different stages of the festival that serve entertainment and ritualistic purposes. The songs have deep socio-cultural origins, and the text of the songs creates entertaining mental images for the audience, which help to express meanings more clearly and efficiently.

This article discusses Ovwuvwe festival songs as an important avenue for the communication of cultural values to the Abraka people. It further analyses and discusses the different stages in which Ovwuvwe festival songs are performed in Abraka. To this end, the article examines the context and performance of the songs in the culture of the Ovwuvwe festival, the themes emanating from the texts of the songs, the structural forms of the songs, the general performance practice, and the significance of the songs in the celebration of the Ovwuvwe festival.

## Background

Music is not only a medium of artistic expression, but also provides a path for communities to express themselves through festivals and rituals. In the Abraka community, for instance, the Ovwuvwe festival is an avenue for expressing personal thoughts and feelings as well as community sentiments. *Ovwuvwe* refers to the traditional god of the Abraka people. The festival is celebrated to mark the magic feats of the Ovwuvwe god. The festival celebration involves numerous musical performances, which include drumming, singing, and dancing to promote ritual activities and to maintain contact between the humans and their gods.

Music is an essential ingredient in most traditional festivals. A festival without music is not complete because music is part of the daily lives of the African people (Izu 2012, 3). Music forms an integral part of the Ovwuvwe festival. Ovwuvwe festival music is grounded in participation; through face-to-face contact and distinct connection it is repeated and ritualised. Although made in the context of the past, the social connection produced through enacting the music and responding to the minute shifts and intense variation of the musicking creates a suspension of time, leaving the participants in the present (Turino 2008).

There are a variety of songs in Africa in which almost everyone participates. The songs highlight cultural values and tradition. The list of songs in vocal music is extensive, and includes songs of praise, festival songs, and ritual songs (Ngcobo 2020, 1). The significance of many of the songs lies in their role as sources of information about the way of life of the people. According to Ravignani, Delgado, and Kirby (2016), an insight

into the full meaning of the songs is obtained only when the song is viewed in its socio-cultural milieu.

There is no doubt that music in both its production and consumption can be an important influence in shaping the typically hybrid uniqueness of people and places, in engendering a sense of place and deep attachment to place. In this sense, it can contribute in important ways to the well-being of people and places, and this is not without practical significance as music can have a positive impact on peoples' lives. In Barton's (2018) view, it is evident that culture impacts the ways in which music is learnt, taught, and performed. Indeed, Radocy and Boyle (1979, 27) state that "culture clearly affects musical behaviour, and that music may influence the culture in which it is produced."

There is hardly any literature on Ovwuvwe festival songs, even though some literature exists on the Ovwuvwe festival. This article is therefore a pioneering work that contributes detailed knowledge about Ovwuvwe festival songs, their context and performance. The significance of this pioneering work is to preserve the songs' original texts and performance details. This has become necessary because of the modification or adulteration that Abraka indigenes from urban centres are causing. Some Abraka indigenes who have left for urban centres to get white-collar jobs return to Abraka to celebrate the Ovwuvwe festival with foreign musical ideas such as Western musical forms, which may alter the original songs as previously performed. There is therefore a need for documentation so that future generations will gain insight into how the actual festival songs were performed.

## The Ovwuvwe Festival and the Abraka People

The Ovwuvwe festival is a re-enactment of the sojourn of Avwaeke,<sup>1</sup> the founder of the Abraka kingdom. It is a yearly celebration ensuing from the triumph over the Benin<sup>2</sup> royal forces that drowned in the Ovwuvwe stream, thereby making it possible for Avwaeke, the ancestral father of the Abraka people, to establish his settlement with members of his family in Otoro-Abraka.<sup>3</sup> Avwaeke believed that his victory over the powerful hands of his brother-turned-rival the Oba<sup>4</sup> of Benin kingdom was a result of the compassionate spirit of the Ovwuvwe god. To appease and offer sacrifice to the god and goddess of Ovwuvwe as a form of remembrance was the original rationale for the festival and this tradition has been upheld to the present day.

The festival is a period of thanksgiving among the Abraka people for finding a peaceful settlement at last. Ovwuvwe is a god of war and harvest who protects the Abraka people from danger wherever they may find themselves. The wider Abraka community makes

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<sup>1</sup> The founder of the Abraka kingdom.

<sup>2</sup> The people of the Benin kingdom in southern Nigeria.

<sup>3</sup> The traditional headquarters of the Abraka kingdom.

<sup>4</sup> The traditional ruler of the Benin kingdom.

elaborate preparation for the Ovwuvwe festival, with each village in Abraka making its own arrangements for the celebration.

The Ovwuvwe festival was previously scheduled for the sixth month of the year (June), but was moved due to incessant rainfall. Presently the festival is celebrated in May every year. Although the duration of the festivities associated with the celebration cover a period of about three months, the actual celebration covers a period of about 14 days marked with different rituals and other ceremonies.

The Abraka people are descendants of the Urhobo people located in southern Nigeria. They are the major ethnic group in Delta State. The word *Urhobo* refers to a group of people to which the Abraka belong rather than a territory. The Abraka people speak Urhobo<sup>5</sup> and they are predominantly peasant farmers.

## Methodology

This article focuses on the Ovwuvwe festival songs, their contexts and performance, which allowed the researcher to understand the Abraka people in terms of their own definition of the world (Roberts, Smith, and Pollock 2004). Interviews and participant observation provided the necessary information for an area of study concerning the Abraka people that has not previously received scholarly attention. For the purpose and nature of this study, interdisciplinary data collection methods were used in gathering data. Primary data was gathered from interviews and participant observation. Secondary data entailed the use of libraries and the internet.

Besides formal interviews and participant observation, informal interviews were also conducted. During informal conversations there were always questions that would come up or information that would surface. In addition, the author found it more effective to listen and observe in informal settings rather than in formal ones.

## Theoretical Framework

Researchers have made numerous attempts to examine African traditional songs as they exist in culture, proposing theories based on how the cultures under investigation are conceptualised, contextualised, and thematised. These theories are important to reveal the true cultural phenomenon, especially since some early writings on African traditional songs were presented through inaccurate terms and theoretical constructs (Idamoyibo 2006, 1–19).

As a result, this research used Nettl's theoretical paradigm of linguistic models and culture's own cognitive mapping. Linguistic models concern linguistics and vital transformational grammar(s) of music, while culture's own cognitive mapping

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<sup>5</sup> The language spoken by the Abraka people.

considers recognised views of the culture, its groupings, social roles, and other behaviours and identities (Nettl 1976, 14–16).

### Ovwuvwe Festival Songs: Context and Performance

Music is a form of language; it is used at gatherings to show emotions such as happiness or unhappiness. The singing and playing of musical instruments create an organised rhythm for the performers to follow. Nortey (2009) explains that traditional music is often associated with African societies of the pre-colonial era. It is music that has survived the influence of the forces of Western methods of acculturation, and is therefore quite distinct in lyrics and orientation from modern popular music.

Over the course of the Ovwuvwe festival celebration, music is used in almost all the activities characterising the celebrations. Local musical instruments such as the *agogo* (gong or bells), *igede* (drums), bamboo clappers and rattle are used by celebrants. During processions, these instruments are used to raise songs for the performances.

In performing, for example, the Ovwuvwe festival dances, the rattle or the gong begins the song, followed by the drums. The moment the drums join in, the participants automatically respond to the total music. The drums feature prominently in the performance and the drum is the main instrument stimulating the festival performers. The drummers skilfully develop a rhythm by placing emphasis on some of the beats. The repeated rhythm creates a specific pattern to dictate the performers' rhythmic movements (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Ovwuvwe festival celebrants performing with drums

The rhythmic patterns created by these instruments rhyme with the songs during the performances. These songs, which are rich in sarcasm, are mostly sung in the indigenous

(Urhobo) language. They are characterised by regular timing of melodic repetition that is linked with a rhythmic solo influencing the celebrants and many others performing their traditional obligation. The instruments used in the performance can also be used by social groups within the community, but the songs are restricted to the Ovwuvwe festival period.



**Figure 2:** Ovwuvwe festival celebrants

Ovwuvwe festival songs have certain distinctive traits and are an integral part of the Ovwuvwe festival culture. These songs have no known composer, and no formal organisation is accorded the responsibility of composing new songs. They are developed from the ones passed on from time immemorial by the ancestors and no one can take credit for the songs because anyone can add or omit any phrase if it befits the theme of the festival.

These songs are performed at different stages during the festival, but they all serve entertainment and ritualistic purposes. There are some phrases that are reserved for the

Ovwuvwe festival period alone. I will now proceed to enumerate the stages of the songs' performance.

### Pre-Festival Songs

Before the commencement of the main festival activities, at specified times the *Asua* (priestess of the Ovwuvwe god) sings seven songs to work herself into the state in which she can communicate with the Ovwuvwe gods for the acceptable date for the festival or to release herself from the trance.

The set of pre-festival song types is peculiar to the Ovwuvwe shrine that serves as the centre of traditional worship. These songs have the traditional priestess as their focus. According to my informants, these rites take place in a pavilion close to the shrine of the Ovwuvwe god. Before this rite takes place, the singers and the drummers begin drumming and singing to invite people to the scene. During the singing, people who can dance to the tune of the song are at liberty to dance while others stand and watch the excited singers and dancers.

As soon as the priestess enters the dancing arena, she is welcomed by an intensified singing and this may increase the excitement of the assembled people, mostly the chiefs and elders of the Abraka kingdom. The seven songs sung by the priestess link her to the spiritual world to enable her to act as a medium. The seven songs are rendered as follows:

#### **Song 1**

##### **Urhobo**

*Aware Rh' Enenano*

*Aware Rh' Enenano*

*Ovie R Avwraka Brede Rore*

*Uri royenaOmuru*

*E UrhinaOmuru*

*KoyeEcherourena*

##### **English translation**

We've come to make an inquiry

We've come to make an inquiry

Did the King of Abraka fix a date for the festival?

Is this law binding?

Yes, his laws are binding

That is to say, we shall be doing this festival.

#### **Song 2**

##### **Urhobo**

*Enum'iyere*

*Enum'iyere, mi yerenukereEweri*

*Kere Oka ovevuroKpanavweUrhie*

*OkekporoOgiso*

##### **English translation**

It's up that I am climbing

I am climbing up as a monkey does,

Like a pregnant snake crawling by the river side

He could not meet up with time.

#### **Song 3**

##### **Urhobo**

*EheEheMevweR 'Odekpaveivie*

*Ye OmarayemeR 'Okpori*

*Okpaveivie me ghwe re yo*

##### **English translation**

I, who bought wrapper beads for the

personal use of my wife, who left me,

both the wrapper and beads that I retrieved from her,

*MevweR'odekpa*

have been used to buy decent wrapper and beads for my personal use.

**Song 4**

**Urhobo**

*Osho- e, Osho- e*

*Oko re owo kore ke Ore*

*Ohoroovo*

**English translation**

Penis-o -o hey! Penis -o-o hey!!

Your entire human endeavours and life savings are for the sake of vagina only?

**Song 5**

**Urhobo**

*Anamaruyotetele*

*Anamaruyotetele*

*Anamaruyotetele*

*Anamaruyotetele*

*Oghwroko*

**English translation**

You are assuming too many airs, with your bogus head

You are assuming too many airs, with your bogus head

You are assuming too many airs, with your bogus head

You are assuming too many airs, with your bogus head

Shame on you

**Song 6**

**Urhobo**

*Obuheke Oyo mue emu na*

*OvwuvwekeoyeEdjo re esirina*

*R' osivviihwo*

*Obuhekeoyemwe emu na*

**English translation**

Obuhe is the person who caught the bug

And so, the Ovwuvwe is the good and faithful god that cures the sick people

So, Obuhe is the person who caught the bug

**Song 7**

**Urhobo**

*Enyo- o Enyo – o Enyo – o E-he*

*Enyo- o Enyo – o Enyo – o E-he*

*Ugboshor'ode re Orhoro*

*ObeEgodo re Okhumeshi*

*Oda die Efiamevworore*

*OvwuvwekeOseri me*

**English translation**

Eh-o Eh-o Eh-o Eh-o

Eh-o Eh-o Eh-o Eh-o

The king-size penis that is extraordinarily big

Is at the premises of Okumesi (Ovwuvwe stream)

If I am telling a lie

Ovwuvwe is my witness.

## *Ikerigbele* Songs

Following the singing of the seven songs by the priestess of Ovwuvwe and the offering of sacrifices, the next step or form of song that will pervade the air in the community is the *Ikerigbele* songs, which are songs used by men and women to ridicule and caricature each other's private parts. These songs will continue to fill the air until the main festival day arrives.

Each day after work, small groups form bands to dance around the kingdom, brandishing caricatures of male and female organs and mocking each other. The air is

filled with the sounds of *agogo* and *igede* (gongs and drums), as well as other local traditional musical instruments. This is a signal that the great day is approaching.

The community's feelings are heightened by the fact that the great Ovwuvwe festival is just a few days away. The majority of the songs in this group are typically obscene, and everyone can sing them during this time without being criticised.

Some examples of the *Ikerigbele* songs include the following:

### **Song 1**

#### **Urhobo**

*Avware Keni,*  
*Avware Keni Eni-, Eni, oo e*  
*Emora Abraka Keni*  
*Ichivwi reni*  
*obevughee*

#### **English translation**

We are elephant  
 We are elephant  
 We the children of Abraka are elephant  
 The footprint of the elephant  
 Is not difficult to identify.

### **Song 2**

#### **Urhobo**

*Ohoro rie bee jo ridi ro sho*  
*ohoro rig bee jo ridi ro sho x2x3 x4*

#### **English translation**

The vagina is an illiterate  
 And it wants to read what the penis writes.

### **Song 3**

#### **Urhobo**

*Eyia le chief lo oro na*  
*Osho uyovw vio go*  
*e chief o gbela siebe*  
*osho uyovwi vio go*

#### **English translation**

All the chiefs' wives in the town  
 Penis should point to their vagina direct  
 so Ovwuvwe let the chiefs sue Ovwuvwe god  
 Penis should point to their vagina direct

### **Song 4**

#### **Urhobo**

*Egwhare mre egwhare jie*  
*Q be godo ro cheshe e*  
*O die fia me viohro re,*  
*Ovwuvwe Ki, sereme e yooo*

#### **English translation**

Wisdom has seen wisdom  
 In the compound of the high priest  
 If I am telling a lie  
 The gods are my witness.

### **Song 5**

**Urhobo**

*Orho ro bête na,  
me tere rire  
wa je rio- ee me tere rire,  
orho ro bete na  
emo ra Abraka to re rire  
wa je rio- ee me tere rire*

**English translation**

That town that is difficult to reach  
We have gone there and returned  
Come and see we have gone there  
That town that is difficult to reach  
The children of Abraka have gone there  
Come and see we have gone there and returned.

***Ede-ore* (Festival Day) Songs**

The festival day (*Ede-ore*) is better seen than imagined. The day before, the entire kingdom is engulfed in dancing, drumming and celebrations, and most importantly, war dances with cutlasses and dangerous weapons by men to display their bravery and readiness to defend the kingdom in the event of war. Cutlasses are thrown into the air and caught in their teeth by men of valour. Some men even parade their extraordinary spiritual powers by standing in front of others to cut their bare backs with cutlasses and axes without any effects whatsoever.

The Abraka people strongly believe that these feats are made possible by the prowess and mysterious powers of the Ovwuvwe god. In short, the saying goes that “no true son of Abraka ever dies in a war.” Cutlasses, guns, and swords are not for the Abraka man, thanks to the potency of the Ovwuvwe god’s protection.

The day proper starts as early as 6am. Apart from the *Ewheya* (married women) who may be in the kitchen cooking, the streets are crowded with men and the youth in warlike dances and songs in praise of bravery, honesty, and their god (Ovwuvwe). At around nine o’clock, thunderous sounds of *igbani* (cannons) are heard from the waterside. The deafening sounds are the traditional announcement of the hunters’ arrival from their week-long expedition in the forest as part of the Ovwuvwe festival tradition. As soon as the cannon sounds are heard, the waiting crowd gathers their instruments of war and proceeds to the riverside to team up with the returning hunters. The meeting of both parties is characterised by martial dance steps, the shooting of cannons and a display of expertise in the use of cutlasses in war situations. It can be a frightening scene to the naïve or strangers, but it is entertaining to the Abraka people.

Suddenly, the mammoth crowd breaks into a walking dance towards the palace of the *Ovie* (King) of the kingdom. Many dried meats of various animals and birds captured by the traditional hunters that are sent to the forest before the festival day are hung on sticks and held above the heads of the people. The revered *Ovie* (duiker), a rare breed of antelope, is wrapped in leaves in the centre of the crowd, surrounded by the chief hunter and his assistants. Long feathers of great birds decorate the heads of the chief hunter and veterans of war in the kingdom.

Now and again, singers can be heard singing:

**Song 1****Urhobo***Enotuwaghoyokokoya**Olovwoomosie so mo**Bruje ma rile***English translation**

Elders please don't be upset

All parents should call his/her child to order

And counsel them for we have arrived.

The song above illustrates the sacredness of the hunter's role in the community. The song is used to inform parents to guide and caution their wards because during the processions to the festival ground, the hunters who are also called warriors are at liberty to discipline anyone. This song also alerts the community members of the arrival of the traditional hunters from the forest.

The march continues until they arrive at the palace of the king. His royal majesty is traditionally required to welcome the people to his palace and reward the hunters with drinks and money for "capturing" the rare animal (duiker) used in the festival. Thereafter, every able-bodied person is expected to join the procession for the more than 10-kilometre endurance walk to the ancestral home of the Abraka people (*Ughere* or *Otorho-Abraka*), where the priests of the Ovvuvwe god offers prayers and libations for good health, prosperity, bumper harvests, and peace for the Abraka people.

Native chalk from the Ovvuvwe shrine is given to the indigenes to symbolise the presence of the benevolent god wherever they may be. There are uncountable testimonies of how this mysterious native chalk has saved the lives of many persons. The king, chiefs, and reputable persons from all walks of life converge at the ancestral square of the great people of the Abraka kingdom to participate in this famous festival. Some of the songs sung on the main festival day as the crowd proceeds to the Abraka traditional headquarters (*Otoro-Abraka*) are as follows:

**Song 2****Urhobo***Oyi Vwa ro, Oyi Vwa roo**Ono yi vwo, Ovie me oo**Oyi Vwa ro, Ono Jdo oyom r'uvu***English translation**

A daredevil, a daredevil

Who can dare my King oo

A daredevil, who can assail bees in the day.

**Song 3****Urhobo***Eravwe ro be muo na**me muro rire wa je rioee me muro rire**Eravwe ro be muo na**me muro rire wa je rioee me muro rire**Eravwe ro be muo na**Emo ra Abraka mu ro rire**wa je rioee mu ro rire.***English translation**

The animal that is difficult to catch

we have captured it successfully

That animal that is difficult to catch

we have captured it successfully

That animal that is difficult to catch

The children of Abraka have captured

successfully

Everybody can come and see it.

**Song 4**

**Urhobo**

*Amo no yivvi sa kpre kpre,  
oyi vwi sa kpre kpre,  
ono yi vwi sa kpre kpre,  
oyi vwi sa kpre kpre.  
Emo ra Abraka yi vwi sa kpre kpre  
oyi vwi sa kpre kpre.*

**English translation**

Who are the brave ones?  
We are the brave ones  
Who are the brave ones?  
We are the brave ones  
We the children of Abraka are the brave ones  
We are the brave ones.

## Analysis and Discussion

Below are excerpts from ethnographic interviews with the chief priest of the Abraka Kingdom who presented the meaning of the songs in his own words. Like many other features of Ovwuvwe festival songs, the meaning of the songs seems designed to have different interpretations.

Ovwuvwe festival songs have three distinct structures: they are dialogical; they have speech-melody; and they offer narration, all with varying textures. These structures reflect the Abraka community's religious and cultural beliefs. The compositional roles of the songs also include providing continuity of the festival theme, unifying the community, and aiding in the clarification of song themes.

Ovwuvwe festival songs are repetitive in nature, and can be performed with or without the accompaniment of musical instruments. Even though the rules governing the song performance may not be written down, they are orally transmitted through beliefs and controlled through the form of taboos communicated in proverbs.

## The Songs

The songs are often brief, topical, and secular in nature, and they are performed to ridicule human private organs, among others. There is no formal group tag with the responsibility of composing new songs; anybody in the community is at liberty to compose songs, as long as they suit the festival's theme. The songs are not notated in any form.

The pre-festival songs are made up of seven songs that the priestess of the Ovwuvwe god uses to perform rituals and pray for the festival's success. The songs inform the general public that the king has set aside a date for the festival.

Song 1 in the pre-festival category, for example, emphasises the king's position as the Abraka people's traditional ruler, and it is up to him to set an appropriate date for the festival celebrations. The text *Ovie R Avwraka Brede Rore* (Did the King of Abraka set a festival date?) demonstrates the importance that the people bestow on the king, and his words are law in the kingdom as enumerated in the song text *Uri roye na Omuru* (Is this law binding?) with the unison response *E Urhi na Omuru* (Yes, his laws are binding), *Koye Eche roure na* (That is to say, we shall be doing this festival).

The king (*Ovie*) has the duty of uniting all indigenes of the kingdom, both living and dead, nobles and commoners. The text of Song 2 in the *Ede-ore* category below shows how the people revere the king:

*Oyi Vwa ro, Oyi Vwa roo* (A daredevil, a daredevil)  
*Ono yi vwo, Ovie me o* (Who can dare my King oo)  
*Oyi Vwa ro, Ono Jdo oyom r'uvvo* (A daredevil, who can assail bees in the day)

However, the *Ikerigbele* songs are the most widely performed songs in the Abraka community during the festival. The *Ikerigbele* song performers, especially the singers, are young; a good number of them are young men or women. This is probably because the adult women are mostly concerned with customs. The songs are essentially music for mimicking, as the text of Song 2 in the *Ikerigbele* category demonstrates below:

*Ohoro rie bee jo ridi ro sho* (The vagina is an illiterate)  
*ohoro rig bee jo ridi ro sho* (And it wants to read what the penis writes)

The lyrics of the song mock the female private parts and it is usually sung by both male and female performers. It is not difficult to find the theme of the Ovwuvwe festival songs because it is revealed by both narration and song. The theme is about mockery and the idea of mockery is highlighted in different songs and in different versions of the same song, which always repeat the same theme of vulgarity.

The *Ede Ore* (festival day) songs can involve instrumental accompaniment. The accompaniment takes the form of call and response with instruments: the bell, gourd rattles, drum, and rhythmic handclapping. Large groups can use additional bells and drums in their performances instead of a single bell and a single drum. These are good examples of a new trend in the performance of Ovwuvwe festival songs.

### Ovwuvwe Festival Songs as Forms of Social Communication

The Ovwuvwe festival songs have an important function of communicating cultural values to the Abraka people. According to Rabothatha (1987,79), songs communicate messages in a way that no offence will be taken. The pre-festival songs sung by the Ovwuvwe priestess are associated with the gods and incorporate the living with the dead. The Ovwuvwe priestess claims to have the power to communicate with the ancestors, as demonstrated by the following lyrics from Song 4 in the *Ikerigbele* category:

*Egwhere mre egwhere jie* (Wisdom has seen wisdom)  
*Q be godo ro cheshe e* (In the compound of the high priest)  
*O die fia me viohro re,* (If I am telling a lie)  
*Ovwuvwe Ki, sereme e yooo* (The gods are my witness).

The performer of the above song is a diviner who believes that her role during the festival is ordained by the gods. In this song she communicates her role as the wisest person in the community and acceptance of her role in the festival. She also expresses how the gods can bear her witness as the wisest person in the kingdom.

### Ovwuvwe Festival Songs as a Form of Entertainment

The Ovwuvwe festival songs are also used as a form of entertainment during the festival ceremonies. In most cases, the meaning of the songs is not considered. The audience gets carried away by the non-verbal elements of the song. Visiting guests are entertained with various songs from the Ovwuvwe festival song repertoire. See the below example from Song 1 in the *Ikerigbele* category:

<i>Avware Keni,</i>	(We are elephant)
<i>Avware Keni Eni-, Eni, oo e</i>	(We are elephant)
<i>Emora Abraka Keni</i>	(We the children of Abraka are elephant)
<i>Ichivwi reni</i>	(The footstep of the elephant)
<i>obevughee</i>	(Is not difficult to identify)

The song above is intended to entertain the guests. It is a way of helping the visitors to relax and feel welcome. As a result, the main function of this song is to entertain. There is a need to break up the monotony of events and entertain guests with song and dance during the festival celebration, which is normally filled with rituals and other activities.

### Solo Singing

This style of singing is normally done in a strophic format, with a single line repeated many times. This repetition is frequently with minor variations, as seen in Song 4 in the *Ede-ore* category below:

<i>Amo no yivwi sa kpre kpre?</i>	(Who are the brave ones?)
<i>Oyi vwi sa kpre kpre?</i>	(Who are the brave ones?)
<i>Ono yi vwi sa kpre kpre?</i>	(Who are the brave ones?)
<i>Oyi vwi sa kpre kpre?</i>	(Who are the brave ones?)
<i>Emo ra Abraka yi vwi sa kpre kpre</i>	(The children of Abraka are the brave ones)
<i>Oyi vwi sa kpre kpre?</i>	(Who are the brave ones?)

A slight variation during the repetition is noticeable in the fifth line with the introduction of “children of Abraka” to indicate who the brave ones are.

### Group Singing

The Ovwuvwe festival songs performed in a group are often in an antiphonic form; for example, the soloist and the group alternate in singing. The soloist is a key performer since he/she takes the lead in singing. He/she is the one who decides to start singing and

stops when he/she feels like it. Variations in the lyrics of a song are introduced by the soloist. This is illustrated in Song 3 in the *Ede-ore* category below where the soloist varies the phrase “we have captured it successfully” with “The children of Abraka have captured it successfully”:

<i>Eravwe ro be muo na</i>	(The animal that is difficult to catch)
<i>me muro rire wa je rioee me muro rire</i>	(we have captured it successfully)
<i>Eravwe ro be muo na</i>	(That animal that is difficult to catch)
<i>me muro rire wa je rioee me muro rire</i>	(we have captured it successfully)
<i>Eravwe ro be muo na</i>	(That animal that is difficult to catch)
<i>Emo ra Abraka mu ro rire</i>	(The children of Abraka have captured it successfully)
<i>wa je rioee mu ro rire.</i>	(Everybody can come and see it)

The following lines taken from Song 5 in the pre-festival category illustrate the antiphonal pattern, which is a simple call-and-response form. In this case the co-participants echo every phrase sung by the first:

Leader: <i>Anamaruyotelele</i>	(You are assuming too many airs, with your bogus head)
Chorus: <i>Anamaruyotelele</i>	(You are assuming too many airs, with your bogus head)
Leader: <i>Anamaruyotelele</i>	(You are assuming too many airs, with your bogus head)
Chorus: <i>Anamaruyotelele</i>	(You are assuming too many airs, with your bogus head)
Leader: <i>Oghwroko</i>	(Shame on you)
Chorus: <i>Oghwroko</i>	(Shame on you)

### The Themes Emanating from the Texts of the Songs

In Ovwuvwe festival music, song texts are extremely significant. This is how the people of Abraka show their complete participation in the festival. The songs’ main themes, which often involve mockery, revolve around the festival and traditional beliefs that are of general interest to the Abraka people. The song texts provide context for the songs being performed. Song 5 in the *Ikerigbele* category below expresses perseverance and determination:

<i>Orho ro bête na,</i>	(That town that is difficult to reach)
<i>me tere rire</i>	(We have gone there and returned)
<i>wa je rio- ee me tere rire,</i>	(Come and see we have gone there)
<i>orho ro bete na</i>	(That town that is difficult to reach)
<i>emo ra Abraka to re rire</i>	(The children of Abraka have gone there)
<i>wa je rio- ee me tere rire</i>	(Come and see we have gone there and returned)

During the Ovwuvwe festival, songs are intended to entertain, praise, warn, insult, and inform the audiences. The song texts may address the kings, chiefs, individuals, and other eminent persons for their good deeds towards others. In some Ovwuvwe songs the

cantor may praise, criticise, or ridicule certain known personalities. Song 3 in the *Ikerigbele* category below is used to ridicule chiefs in the community during the festival:

<i>Eyia le chief lo oro na</i>	(All the chiefs' wives in the town)
<i>Osho uyovw vio go</i>	(Penis should point to their vagina direct)
<i>e chief o gbela siebe</i>	(So Ovwuvwe let the chiefs sue Ovwuvwe god)
<i>osh o uyovwi vio go</i>	(Penis should point to their vagina direct)

The themes of the Ovwuvwe festival songs capture all spheres of community life, including the philosophy and belief systems of the Abraka people. In several African cultures, there is hardly a festival without the presence of musical content. This evidence can be seen in the Ovwuvwe festival, in which its musical content, songs, dance patterns, costumes and ritual proceedings have been passed on to present generations through the oral tradition.

Ovwuvwe festival songs present a body of text that contains a great deal of information about the festival. They express the festival themes and references that need little clarification to be understood. Both historically and currently there are strong links between Ovwuvwe festival songs and the Abraka people's culture, which include the costumes, instruments, and texts of the songs.

The study of Ovwuvwe festival songs cannot disregard the texts of the songs because they perform major roles in the festival. Merriam (1963, 187) posits that one of the most effective ways to understand human conduct in connection with music is song text. In this regard, Agordoh (2002) states that song texts in Africa are sometimes a reflection of the cultural concerns of which they are a part. They serve as a direct social control, that is, they are sometimes used, through admonition, ridicule and in some cases even more direct action, to effect actual changes in the behaviour of erring society members.

### Structural Forms of the Songs

The structural form of all the selected songs is predominantly call and response. In music, call and response is a technique where one performer sings a phrase and a second performer or singer responds directly to the call. Call and response functions as a way of distributing text and tune among performers during the Ovwuvwe festival celebration.

The songs are not designed to be sung by one person alone. On the contrary, the musical sociability between the lead singer, singing group and the audience is essential to the experience of the Ovwuvwe festival and establishes oneness among the people. In *Ikerigbele* song performances, a song's lead part is sung by a song leader and other song members or the audience as a group. The song leader is responsible for starting a song. Once the song is under way, the song leader may rest while another person in the group or audience takes over the active role of singing the lead part.

The song is used differently in each of the stages of the festival and the length of the repeated song ranges from 6 to 79 seconds at each repetition. The average duration of the repetition of each song is 25.1 seconds. All the songs are repeated at least once, except for *Ikerigbele* songs, possessing the most repeats (as many as possible). The repetitions show huge inconsistencies based on encouraging comments by the audience to the performers.

## General Performance Practice

The song, like the text, is realised through its performance and is performed as part of the Ovwuvwe festival's history. The songs are usually accompanied by clapping, which is designed to bring out the beat. Everyone present is expected to participate in the performance. The most common performance strategy has the lead singer introducing the song and in so doing inviting the other participants to perform with her or him. In the performance of the song the performer and the other participants become one. This collaboration heightens the spirit of oneness in the Ovwuvwe festival. Usually the song is repeated several times, though on some rare occasions a song is sung only once, as in the case of the pre-festival songs. The reasons for repetition and non-repetition are varied and include the following:

- To bring the performance to a climax;
- To emphasise the message of the song;
- For the fun of performing the song;
- To arouse the spirit of the participants.

Components of Ovwuvwe festival demonstrations and performances are harnessed to represent the theme of the Ovwuvwe festival songs, which is to unite the people and appease the gods of the land. In most cases, the lead performer does not need to prompt the other participants before starting or ending a song.

The complete songs are sung through by the lead singer or anyone who takes up that responsibility, who is then joined by all the participants in the call-and-response format. The songs are performed to mark the significant points of the Ovwuvwe festival celebration and to encourage all to participate. The songs are repeated over and over, as are both the drumming and dancing. The repetition extends the song and is repeated three times on average. A general observation is that the songs seem a natural part of the knowledge structure of all the people observed in this study.

## Significance of the Songs

In general, Ovwuvwe festival songs are immersed in the customs of the Abraka people. The songs are emotive narrative pictures painted by the performers and participants. The sound is important because it draws the participants away from ordinary living into

the temporary state of the festival. The melody, as well as the text, arouses feelings of the festival.

Spiritually, these songs are performed specifically as a part of the celebration of the Ovwuvwe festival among the Abraka people. During this festival, the good deeds of the gods are recounted. When the period of the festival is over, the *Ikerigbele* songs are discontinued.

Economically, during the performance of the *Ikerigbele* songs in the festival ceremonies, the performers receive gifts of cash from the chiefs or the public and well-wishers. Those who make the musical instruments receive money when the instruments are sold.

Because the *Ikerigbele* dance is a communal property and approval is not sought from anybody to organise the dance, the public takes turns in the open dancing arena. Dancers may dance in pairs or alone. In the past, girls and married women were required to be careful during the fourteen-day period of *Igbere* of jabbing, singing, dancing and free use of indecent language because there were no punishments to compensate those indecently assaulted during this time. Punishments and claiming of damages for rape, unpermitted romance and fornication were waived as a mark of respect to the god.

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that context and performance cannot be overlooked in the study of Ovwuvwe festival songs. Context brings out the true meaning of the songs performed because the performer brings in linguistic traits that reveal the meaning of the songs, while the potency of the songs is explained by the elements of performance, which include the function of the songs and the language.

This article will contribute to African indigenous music scholarship in terms of language preservation and the documentation of cultural practices by projecting the picture of the songs as they appear in different aspects of the Ovwuvwe festival culture. There are more characteristic features of African indigenous music that must be discovered. While it is important to add to existing knowledge of the already discovered cultures, the relatively unknown ones too should receive attention.

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## Oral Interviews

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