

TRADITION OF THE EJAGHAM QUA IN CALABAR – By Dr. Kadimo Oqua

The Qua people were and still are very good traditional musicians and dancers and they communicate through music and dances among themselves. This made some Abo Ekan (Age grades) specialised in traditional song and dances. These traditional dances vary in functions, costumes and participation. They may function to entertain, advertise, purify, correct social ills and deter moral decadence.

Below is a compendium of some Ejagham Cultural Expressions which was practiced in Calabar by the Quas before imitation by their neighbours. Some traditional dances are now extinct but till date, some are still being practiced by both the Ejagham Qua in Calabar and environs.

1. **Akparankpa - *None Masquerading. (Extinct)***

Akparankapa is an all-male dance staged for entertainment. They are either organized at age grade levels or at the instance of the community for general entertainment.

2. **Angbo/Agbot Akata - *Masquerading. (Nearly Extinct)***

Angbo, or Angot Akata, a minor branch of the Mgbe cult, is an Ejagham night minstrel. It is usually staged in front of the Mgbe hall on the last days - one hand for entertainment and on the other, to highlight the ills and vices in the community.

In the performance, Akun Obo, (Angbo's interpreter), who is usually positioned outside the Mgbe shrine, interprets all of what is said by Angbo to the seated audience in the towns square, in a shriek voice. Apart from its entertainment aspect, *Akata* shows the influence of the Qua culture and language on its neighbours in Calabar.

3. **Ase Mmi - *None Masquerading. (Extinct)***

Ase Mmi (moonlight plays) are plays like *Ayo* and *Ewe*, involving both sexes played under the moonlight as in the then popular National TV programme, "Tales By Moonlight." This may have gone extinct due to Western civilization brought about by the advent of electricity, computer and the internet.

4. **Ayo - *None Masquerading. (Extinct)***

Amid singing and drumming, *Ayo* is a game made up of two teams, (one of females and the other males), standing facing each other distance

apart. The play reaches the climax when the females are supposed to dance from their position to the males,' and touching the male she admires on the forehead, each girl was expected to bring the male to the centre to dance with her.

5. **Besen (Wrestling) - *None Masquerading*. (Extinct)**

Besen was organized at age grade levels to determine the grade's champion. At times, they were also organized as inter clans or inter-tribal contests. At the inter-tribal level, the Ejagham Qua used to have challenges from the Ijaw people, and vice versa, with whom they had long standing trade links. The Ejagham Qua inter-tribal *Besen* ended in Calabar in the 1920's when a champion of the visiting team was brought down rather heavily, making him sustain serious injuries from the medium size bells tied to his waist. Till date, the Ijaws never returned for a rematch and the Quas lost interest in the game.

6. **Eban - *None Masquerading*. (Extinct)**

In Eban, as a traditional play, no songs were required. It was usually staged early hours of the morning. The masquerade of the day consisted of numerous baton-like relay pieces of sticks, in separate groups and arranged in front of the town's square.

By the striking of each single solidarity note of the drum from the masquerader once in a while, the pre-arranged batons would move, un-aided, stand one on top of the other until they make very high columns of those short sticks grow higher than a house. By day break, the site of the performance was cleaned and cleared as sunrise was not to meet the player.

7. **Efen – *Masquerading/none masquerading*. (Not Extinct)**

After successful cropping, a community within a clan spends the interval between then and farm weeding period for recreation. The same applies to the period between the harvest and the next farming season.

During this period, games and traditional plays (already mentioned here), are staged for entertainment as seen in new yam festivals of some hinterlands.

8. **Ekonbi – *None Masquerading*. (Nearly Extinct)**

'*Ekonbi*' are two Ejagham words, (*Ekon na Ebin*), which means "sing and dance." It is an all-female dance which over centuries, was used as the

preliminary and warm up dance steps preceding the more rigorous Nkim in the Moninkim ceremonies.

However, it is now used as a recreational dance. The dance is usually done by women to the drumming of men retained for that purpose. Apart from its entertainment aspect, Ekonbi also shows the influence of the Ejagham Qua culture and language on its neighbours in Calabar.

9. **Ekpa - *None Masquerading*. (Nearly Extinct)**

Ekpa is a female cult dance which is staged by them, once in a while, (anytime of the day) as a cleansing agent when a calamity befalls a particular community; or a curse to a male folk who degrades a woman. Men, who get initiated could join the women to play but are usually only retained to drum.

Ekpa also shows the influence of the Qua culture and language on its neighbours in Calabar. This may have been what was used in the 1920 Aba women's riot.

10. **Eta Mbe Mbe - *Masquerading*. (Nearly Extinct)**

Though *Eta Mbe Mbe* is similar to *Eban*, *Eta Mbe Mbe* is clothed in a circular form. The mechanism, which rests on a special wooden seat, is concealed from the audience. Unlike *Eban*, it is also played during the day. The clothed wooden circular mechanism can rise and attain the height of a roof top before gradually reducing to its normal height. It has the ability to even flatten out on the ground and later resuscitate itself. This is another influence of the Qua culture on its neighbours in Calabar.

11. **Ikadim - *Masquerading*. (Extinct)**

In those days, *Ikadim* usually accompanies *Nsibidi*, and *Ukwa*, the all men traditional war dances. The function of *Ikadim* was to act the ritualistic aspect of the initiation after which it will simulate by having intercourse with the *Ete Ukwa* (totem pole).

12. **Ikpo - *None Masquerading*. (Nearly Extinct)**

In *Ikpo*, the principal dancers have covered hoops (ekap) around their waists with headgear held in position by draping head ties. The dancer holds on two of the head ties while dancing to keep the headgear in position. However, when the hoop and headgear are absent, it is called *Ikpo Ekpagha*. *Ikpo Ekpagha* is exclusively to royalty and is rarely staged.

Like *Ekonbi*, *Ikpo* is a predominantly female dance which menfolk are retained to drum and it is now played for general entertainment.

13. Mgbe - *Masquerading*. (Not Extinct)

Mgbe functions generally as an esoteric club which caters primarily for its members. The Mgbe masquerade, which is most popular amongst all Ejagham Cultural Expressions activities, can be viewed both as a society and a traditional play.

14. Ukwa - *Masquerading/ None Masquerading*. (Not Extinct)

The Ukwa is a ceremonial war dance which had its origin first linked up with Totem pole (Ete Ukwa) that religiously served as a medium to the universal deity that protects the Akpa during war periods. The Ukwa dance was often played by great Quas at the beginning and at the end of any war fare. At the beginning, it involved sacrifice at the spot where the Totem Pole stands.

Ukwa was also played at the end of war fares throughout the Qua cities. It was danced with the act of displaying human skulls which were some of the war booties. The gallant Qua warriors, dressed in a traditional war-like fashion, with the skulls of the killed enemies on their heads or in their hands, would be displaying some traditional military tactics as used by the Qua native army during the battle as dance steps. The whole dance ceremony would finally be rounded off in front of the totem pole where the human heads and other booties would be kept after the necessary rituals. As part of the entertainments, the Ukwa dance is accompanied by masquerades or Esinjom. This masquerade wears an extra-large black gown, to allow free movement. On its head is a human skull and in one hand a sisal plant while in the other, a double-edged knife.

Ukwa is played primarily to initiate young men into manhood and secondarily prepare them for war. Ukwa is played with swords and it is a dance which includes fencing.

Like the Mgbe, Ukwa had been subject of various claims. Nevertheless, Rev. Thompson had informed Baikie of native swords manufactured by the Ejagham Qua in Calabar long before the advent of Europeans.



The only Ete Ukwa (Eto Ukwa) in Calabar located in Big Qua Town play ground

Big Qua square today still stands the totem pole (Ete Ukwa totem pole) dedicated to Ukwa play which is part of war dance. As a way of dousing the claim of Ukwa ownership, it is worth noting that the prelude to Ukwa songs is the Ejagham Qua phrases:

Ke - sak! Ke - sak!! Ke - sak!!! Nsibdi koi? Koi! - (2 times)
Omenghe ngha ayama nku; omene ngha a1yama mbe.
Omenghe ngha ayama mbe; omenghe ngha a1yama nku.

which translates “when things are bad, Nsibidi is difficult? It is difficult! If you know how to cook rabbit, then you should know how to cook rat” and vice versa

For entertainment, Ukwa is opened to both sexes but when fencing would be involved women are excluded. And the male participants will have to undergo some ritual before the play.



Ejagham Qua women in Ukwa display in 2019

In recent times the Ukwa dance which is more ceremonious for entertainments and amusements has its dancers dressed in the native army uniforms of singlets and loins. They dance in traditional war-like fashion with crown of lichens on their heads and long swords in their hands.