



## East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion

[ejtr.eanso.org](http://ejtr.eanso.org)

Volume 6, Issue 1, 2023

Print ISSN: 2707-5362 | Online ISSN: 2707-5370

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-5370>

**ENSO**

EAST AFRICAN  
NATURE &  
SCIENCE  
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

## Indigenous Deity and Religious Myths Surrounding Palm Trees in Esaba of Ughievwen

Eyankuair Moses Darah<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Delta State University, P.M.B. 1, Abraka, Nigeria.

\* Author for Correspondence ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4291-4524>; Email: [dara4delsu@yahoo.com](mailto:dara4delsu@yahoo.com)

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtr.6.1.1041>

**Date Published: ABSTRACT**

05 January 2023

**Keywords:**

*Indigenous Deity,  
Religious Myths,  
Esaba,  
Owahwa,  
Ughievwen,  
Urhobo,  
Edje Okpa.*

The Esaba people in the Ughievwen kingdom of Urhobo were conscious of indigenous deities and religious myths as the oldest, most powerful, and most integral form of seeking protection and provision from Osonobrugwe (God) for a day-to-day living before the new beliefs occasioned by modernisation, education, Christianity, civilisation, technology, quest for liberation and laziness have led to the abandonment, negligence, swap, and modification of the once cherished practice (Darah, 2016:45). Nevertheless, palm nut collectors still profess the ideology of sustaining the religious ideals and values surrounding edje okpa palm trees in Ughievwen. This paper investigates various religious myths surrounding edje okpa palm trees of the Esaba community in Ughievwen. Using Levi-Strauss' structuralist theory of mythology, five palm-nut collectors were randomly selected and interviewed using an android phone recorder to solicit responses on their knowledge of the edje okpa palm trees of the Esaba community. It was revealed that palm-nut collectors obey the symbolic laws of edje okpa and violators are severely punished. The work submits that the practice be sustained for the total wellbeing of palm-nut collectors, bountiful harvest, and revitalisation of the dying aspect of traditional worship in Urhobo culture.

### APA CITATION

Darah, E. M. (2023). Indigenous Deity and Religious Myths Surrounding Palm Trees in Esaba of Ughievwen *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion*, 6(1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtr.6.1.1041>

### CHICAGO CITATION

Darah, Eyankuair Moses. "Indigenous Deity and Religious Myths Surrounding Palm Trees in Esaba of Ughievwen". *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion* 6 (1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtr.6.1.1041>.

### HARVARD CITATION

Darah, E. M. (2023) "Indigenous Deity and Religious Myths Surrounding Palm Trees in Esaba of Ughievwen", *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion*, 6(1), pp. 1-7. doi: 10.37284/eajtr.6.1.1041.

**IEEE CITATION**

E. M. Darah, "Indigenous Deity and Religious Myths Surrounding Palm Trees in Esaba of Ughievwen", *EAJTCR*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 1-7, Jan. 2023.

**MLA CITATION**

Darah, Eyankuaire Moses. "Indigenous Deity and Religious Myths Surrounding Palm Trees in Esaba of Ughievwen". *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion*, Vol. 6, no. 1, Jan. 2023, pp. 1-7, doi:10.37284/eajtr.6.1.1041.

**INTRODUCTION**

The existence of indigenous deities and religious myths in the Esaba community of the Ughievwen kingdom could be estimated to be more than 1000 years of settlement by Urhobo clans in the interior of Urhoboland (Ekeh, 2006). Worshippers treasure art as the most powerful force in the social, religious, and cultural life of society. Nabofa (2005, p. 37) opines that in the Urhobo worldview, the cosmos is composed of two inseparable realms: the visible, tangible world of the living (*akpo*) and the invisible realm of sacred, otherworldly forces-gods, divinities, spirits, and ancestors, collectively called *erivwin* – that influence human affairs. Although the two cosmoses are interwoven, the total wellbeing of the people in *akpo* depends very much upon the goodwill of the forces in *erivwin*. The *edjo okpa* deity is of the second category.

Growing up in the Esaba community of the Owahwa clan in Ughievwen kingdom, Ughelli South Local Government of Delta State in the early 80s, *edjo okpa* was one of the most dreaded gods. A palm tree was transformed into *edjo okpa* as an object of religious symbol and endowed with religious importance for palm-nut collectors. The researcher was one of the baby-palm-nut-collectors, but children were not permitted to participate in the serving of the *edjo okpa*. There are also dreaded tales told on various myths surrounding this indigenous deity owned by the entire community. No one was permitted to get near the shrine which was well-fenced with *erhua* sticks and palm fronts. However, *edjo okpa* was not the most fearful among the gods. The mention of *akpobrisi*, the tree warrior of the gods in the forest sends fear into the minds of everyone. In fact, no other tree gets close to it, as it lives in isolation.

*Edjo okpa* is like the muse (*uhanghwa*), the god of music which serves as the spirit that inspires and protects musicians. Okpako (2011:150) agrees that the *uhanghwa* inspires and protects all who engage in *udje* (songs), protects performers from invisible attacks launched at them by enemies who are scandalised by the incisive satire of *udje* lyrics; protects the participants physically during the performance and also ensures that they can stop when the performance ends. In the same vein, the *edjo okpa* enables the palm-nut collectors to climb the tall palm tree to collect ripe palm nuts safely; protects them against attacks from reptiles, bees, and other wild animals; prevents them from accidents such as the collapse of the tree or rope slippery; provides bountiful harvest and prevents poor harvests. Uyovbukerhi (2003:96) adds that besides shielding the artist, the *uhanghwa* also provides inspiration, supplies the poet with ideas, words, and tunes for composition.

The collectors are required to diligently rely on, worship, follow, and obey the laid down rules of the *edjo okpa*. Similarly, Paul-Choudhury (2019) notes that in poorer societies, you might pray for good fortune or a stable job. The "prosperity gospel" is central to several mega-churches, whose congregations are often dominated by economically insecure congregations. But if your basic needs are well catered for, you are more likely to be seeking fulfilment and meaning. This explains why every palm-nut collector strives hard to obey these rules because it is believed that failure to abide is considered taboo and has serious consequences. With the help of the *edjo okpa* as protective assurance, the collector can use his rope to climb the tall palm-nut tree without any fear of casualty. The task of palm-nut collecting in Urhobo is masculine in nature as only men are permitted to climb the tree

while the women play supportive roles of carrying the palm-nut bunches and processing palm oil. Accordingly, only men are mainly involved in the worship of *edjo okpa*. In this study, expressions associated with worship are examined. The goal is to unearth some beliefs associated with the worship of the deity.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Five male palm-nut collectors were randomly selected and interviewed using an android phone recorder to solicit responses on their knowledge of the *edjo okpa* palm trees of the Esaba community. Females were not interviewed because they do not participate in the activities of *edjo okpa*. Efforts were made to elicit data from the respondents on their beliefs in the *edjo okpa* deity. The uniformity in responses is an indication that the respondents understood the interview questions very well. They demonstrated adequate knowledge of the various aspects of *edjo okpa*. Responses that contain the origin, taboos, ritual sacrifice, annual appeasement, functions, benefits, and punishments for defaulters from the different respondents were interrogated using the structuralist theory of mythology which attempted to explain how seemingly fantastical and arbitrary tales could be so similar across cultures.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Indigenous deities and religious myths according to Mark (2018) are parts of every culture in the world and are used to explain natural phenomena, where a people came from and how their civilisation developed, and why things happen as they do. Africa is home to many great cultures and thousands of languages. Nevertheless, the spread of Christianity and Islam has weakened the indigenous deities, traditional religions, myths, and legends of the African people. Fortunately, the belief in the worship of *edjo okpa* in Esaba has not totally disappeared. Uyovbukerhi (2003, p. 94) describes the gods or divinities as very important elements in

the belief system among the Urhobo and other parts of the country with emphasis on the *uhanghwa*, the god of music and creativity. According to him, “no poet or musician worth his salt can practise his art without the inspiration and active support of *uhanghwa*.” There are multiple deities in the Esaba community. Darah (2004, p. 54) identified *olokun*, *edovie*, *oghene pole*, *edjo oto*, *edjo okpa*, *uhrude*, *iphri*, *agharode* and *agbragha* as the deities with functional shrines in Esaba that constitute the arsenal of forces and metaphorical agencies which ensure the community’s safety protection and wellbeing.

Foss (2001) quoted Kerr’s intelligence report of 1929 on Ukpe-Sobo which provides the first detailed documentation of the cult *edjo okpa* as the fertility of the palm bush. According to the report,

*edjo okpa is always regarded as the head of the palm bush, worshipped and a dog is sacrificed to it. A young man and woman are selected by the village and they become priest and priestess. They stain their bodies with cam-wood and wear cloths of red and white colour. The palm tree is decorated with red cloth. A dance, in which the actors wear masks of rams, fishes and crocodiles, is performed and the whole village gives itself up to rejoicing. The festival lasts for about three months and hospitality is offered to strangers on a generous scale during the period (p. 29).*

The above description of *edjo okpa* by Kerr in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century has undergone a series of modifications. In Esaba, dog is not required as one of the sacrificial items for the annual worship of the *edjo okpa*. A female priestess is not also appointed because women are forbidden from entering the *edjo okpa* shrine. Presently, the annual worship lasts for only two weeks instead of three months and no special mask is used by the priest.

The *edjo okpa* was prepared by the *Owahwa* people at the request of *Emoghwe*, the founder of *Esaba*, to prevent reptiles, bees, and other dangerous animals from attacking the collector on top of the tree. It was

first located far away from the community at the boundary between *Emoghwe* and *Ekrun-Itine* Quarters, but as a result of its importance to the community, it was later transferred to its present location near the St Joseph Catholic Church, Esaba. In the relocation process, a new palm tree grew from the ground and the old one died off. *Erhua* sticks are used to provide a fence to stop unnecessary encroachment. Whenever the collector encounters such reptiles and animals, he can just use his cutlass to cut them to pieces. The safety of the collectors and bountiful annual harvest of palm nuts are credited to the *edjo okpa*.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this section, some expressions associated with *edjo okpa* are examined in such a way as to reveal beliefs and practices associated with the worship of the deity in Esaba. It will be shown how the practice and belief in *edjo okpa* worship are similar in some ways to Christian belief. In what follows, three expressions associated with *edjo okpa* are presented and discussed.

(1) *Iye ego kukpekukpe re edjo okpa ghwa erhuvwu cha*

*Ritual performance annual of deity palm-produce brings fortune come*

*'The performance of annual sacrifice brings fortune.'*

The expression above presupposes that there is an annual *iyē ego* 'sacrifice', which is a prerequisite for progress, possibly in the business of palm fruit collection. A vivid description of the sacrifice includes the requirement for all palm collectors to observe two weeks stay at home during the rituals last. The exercise often takes place after the *Egba* festival of Owahwa. During this period, no one is expected to climb a palm tree. Villagers source nuts from under the trees for their domestic needs. New raffia palm fronds and red cloth are weaved round the tree. The *erhua* sticks are properly trimmed and the surrounding grasses are cleared. The collectors

voluntarily donate the required sacrificial materials such as the best produce of palm oil (*abiala*), yam (*one*), native pot (*evwere*), gin (*ogogoro*), kola-nut (*evwe*), cock (*ogborhuane*), and red cloth (*abosu*). The yam is matched in the palm oil to make pounded yam (*emaren*), and the cock is slaughtered for pepper soup (*ukodo*) after sprinkling the blood on the trunk of the tree. The red cloth is used to decorate the tree; the food is served and eaten in front of the *edjo okpa* palm tree, while the other items are shared by all present.

The sacrifice is aimed at soliciting for the protection of both the indigene and non-indigene palm collectors by the deity. The act suggests that they are confident that when they climb the tall tree and there is a slip or any danger, at the mention of the name *edjo okpa orho*, there will be instant rescue or deliverance. This trust can be likened to the Christian belief in the name of Jesus Christ as recorded in the book Acts 2:21 "whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved". It is also like the *uhanghwa* and *aridon*, the *Urhobo* gods of inspiration and memory for musicians. All palm-wine collectors must go to the shrine of *edjo okpa* to pay homage during the *iyē ego*, the same way the lead singer and his troupe must do before setting out for performance. It may also be inferred from the expression in (1) that the annual sacrifice brings progress and prosperity in the craft of palm fruit collection.

(2) *A sa reyo ohoro re urię na kua orere*

*It can used bark of tree the sack town*

*'The bark of tree can be used to sack a town'*

Apart from the protective and productive functions of *edjo okpa*, the bark of the palm tree can also serve as a defensive tool during a crisis against enemies. The myth surrounding the efficacy of the bark was narrated by the respondent during the oral interview of the research. A more recent event narrated was the sacking of the dreaded Fulani herdsmen from the Ughwerun kingdom in Ughelli North Local

Government Area. The Fulani *herdsmen* attacks on Ughwerun farmers took an alarming dimension ranging from the destruction of crops to the raping of women and killing of farmers. The farmers are compelled to pay levies to the herdsmen before gaining access to the farmlands. Records show that in the last few years, the Fulani herdsmen had killed not less than 50 people in the community and taken over their lands. Physical efforts to combat them failed as they were aided by soldiers. In one such attack, not less than 14 persons were feared dead and the police said the number could not be verified as they were yet to see the corpses of those killed. The corpses were later given mass burial. A general boycott of cows in Ughwerun had little impact.

The Ughwerun people consulted Esaba community for help. When the Esaba community received the Ughwerun delegation seeking help to wipe out the herdsmen from their kingdom, they thought it would be a physical battle, but it was a different ball game entirely. They were asked to clear the surroundings of the gods in Ughwerun, put a bottle of gin each in the entrance and inform them that Esaba gods would be visiting. Farmers were barred from farming for two weeks and not to answer any distressed calls from their enemies. *Edjo okpa* in collaboration with *olokun*, *edovie*, *oghene pole*, *edjo oto*, *edjo okpa*, *uhrude*, *iphri*, *aghwarode* and *agbragha* were consulted for the task at hand. The *edjo okpa* bark was then extracted alongside other herbs. This was meant for the spiritual visitation of Ughwerun. It is reported that on a daily basis, the enemies began to lose their cows and herders, just like the plaque that resulted in the death of Egyptians' first sons as recorded in Exodus 12:29, "At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well". In three months, the entire Ughwerun kingdom was free of the herders and their cows. In appreciation, the Ughwerun people presented five goats, a ram, a cock, twelve wrappers, tubers of yam and

ingredients in fulfilment of the vow made with a promise to repeat it annually.

(3) *O vwo egha sansan re a gha ren edjo okpa*

*It has taboos many of that forbid for edjo okpa*

*'There are different taboos that must be observed for edjo okpa'*

Like in any religious belief system, there are taboos in the worship of *edjo okpa*. As already noted, two weeks are set aside for the celebration of the annual festival and no palm-nut collector (including Christians and non-indigenes) is permitted to collect palm nuts during this period. Also, it is taboo for collectors to collect unripe nuts. The inability of the tree to produce well the following harvest season is always attributed to the cutting of unripe nuts. Invariably, breaking a specific taboo has its corresponding negative outcome. In order to prevent such occurrences, serious disciplinary measures are taken against defaulters. This includes fining. To enforce the punishments against an offender, other palm-nut collectors ensure that a substantial amount of money is collected from the offender. This will be used to perform cleansing sacrifices in the shrine of the *edjo okpa*. Given that breaking any of the taboos associated with the worship of *edjo okpa* has serious consequences on one of the main sources of livelihood, every member of the community serves as a watchdog. It is expected that all inhabitants of the community be patriotic enough to report anyone who breaks any of the taboos to the appropriate quarters, and failure to do so, the persons are considered accomplices.

In addition, women are forbidden from climbing tall trees. No woman is permitted to collect palm nuts. Apart from the patriarchal nature of the Urhobo family, based on the supremacy of the man, the ban on women from collecting the nut was reported to be instituted by *Oghene* (God) in the early period of creation. Ifesieh and Darah (2013, p. 574) agree with this sociocultural milieu, "if anything, women alone cannot forbid themselves from 'climbing tall

trees', although many may commonsensically shy away from such tasks". There are two myths surrounding the ban stopping women from climbing the palm-trees. It is believed that greed was the first factor. In the beginning, the first woman to climb the tree made several attempts without success because whenever some nuts dropped in the process of cutting the palm fronts, the woman would climb down quickly to gather the nuts to prevent any passer-by from picking them. Secondly, women are traditionally expected to wear wrappers. Implicitly, it is not possible for a married woman to climb up, as it will make passers-by men commit adultery. Despite the strong advocacy for the emancipation of women in this 21<sup>st</sup> century for improved opportunities for education, employment, and equality in sociocultural and political participation, which now enable women to become pilots, ministers, professors, and politicians nowadays, the women have seemingly abandoned any effort to challenge this naturally assigned role to the men.

Furthermore, palm collectors are not permitted to collect nuts on market days (*ede eki*). There are four days in the traditional Urhobo calendar. The day after the *ede eki* 'market day' is *omamo ede*, two days after the market day is *ede uhre/ure* and three days after the market is *ede ebi*. Although the two major occupations of palm-nut collection and farming play important roles in the sustainability of the Urhobo society, worshipping and honouring deities was also a very big part of creation and development among the Urhobo people. The practice of not collecting palm nuts on *ede eki* is premised on the belief in Urhobo mythology that the market days of which each community has a day assigned to open its markets are sacred and reserved for the gods and deities as well as for *erivwin* to farm. The calendar is universal and synchronised, so various communities across Ughievwen and Urhobo observe a uniform Sabbath day of the week or even year.

It is also expected that no one should collect palm nuts from the *edjo okpa* palm fruit. Although the

*edjo okpa* tree produces the best nuts, it is forbidden to collect its fruit. This is because it is sacred, thus it is dreaded by everyone. There is no unauthorised entry into its shrine. No stubborn collector has ever made an attempt to collect nut from its tree in the history of formation. The priest who is selected among the collectors can only visit the shrine after a special notice and approval of the community. In some cases, the priest is appointed every year.

## CONCLUSION

*Edjo okpa* is one of the deities in the Esaba community in Ughievwen kingdom, Ughelli South Local Government of Delta State. It is one of the very few deities that are still served among most of the inhabitants of the community, especially by palm nut collectors. In most African cultures, traditional worship systems and practices are going into extinction. This is occasioned by modernisation, education, Christianity, civilisation, technology, quest for liberation and laziness have led to the abandonment, negligence, swap, and modification of the once cherished practice (Darah, 2016, p. 45). In particular, these practices are seen as a fetish. This study has shown that some of the practices in our traditional worship system are similar to Christian beliefs and practices. More importantly, it has shown that the practices associated with *edjo okpa* have been sustained owing to the 'benefits' of continuing in it.

## REFERENCES

- Darah, E. M. (2016). Reconstructing the home: A panacea for the preservation of indigenous knowledge system in Urhobo culture: *Abraka Humanities Review. A Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Delta State University, Abraka*, 7(2), 45-53.
- Darah, E. M. (2014.) The proverbs of inheritance in Urhobo culture. *Abraka Humanities Review. A Journal of the Faculty of Arts Delta State University, Abraka*, 6(2), 233-241.

Darah, G. G. (2004). Shrines of Esaba. In P. Foss (ed.), *Where gods and mortals meet: Continuity and renewal in Urhobo art*. New York: Smock Publishers.

Ekeh, P. P. (ed). (2006). *History of the Urhobo people of Niger-Delta*. Lagos: Urhobo Historical Society.

Foss, P. (2001). *Where gods and mortals meet: Continuity and renewal in Urhobo art*. New York: Snoeck Publishers.

Ifeieh, E. C., & Darah, M. E. (2013). Women forbidden from “climbing tall trees”: insecurity and biological asymmetry in Urhobo sex proverbs. *Sino-US English Teaching*, 10(7), 573-582.

Mark, J. J. (2018). Mythology. *Pribavljeno*, 28(4), 2020. <https://www.worldhistory.org>

Nabofa, M. Y. (2005). Akpo: Urhobo ontology of life and the universe. *Studies in Urhobo Culture*. Buffalo: New York: Urhobo Historical Society.

Okpako, D. T. (2011). *Kpeha's song: ethics and culture in Urhobo udje poetry*. Ibadan: Book Builders.

Paul-Choudhury, S. (2019). Tomorrow's Gods: What is the future of religion? Accessed online: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190801-tomorrows-gods-what-is-the-future-of-religion>.

Uyovbukerhi, A. (2003). The role of uhanghwa in the udje-drama of the Urhobo. In G. G. Darah et al (eds.). *Studies in art, religion, and culture among the Urhobo and Isoko people*. Port Harcourt: Pam Unique Publishing Coy. Ltd.