

## The Significance of the Traditional Ceremony *Ummemo*, among Swazi

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**ABSTRACTS** The objective of this paper was to define and outline the traditional ceremony called, *Ummemo* which is practised by most Swazi chieftaincies in South Africa. It is an annual ceremony where each chief calls for the preservation of cultures, traditions and customs, which are vital for unity and development within the communities. This is a ceremony that is backed up by the monarch of the nation. The relationship between the chief and his subjects is evident. The roles of warriors, regiments, headmen and senior officials are noted during this ceremony. The qualitative research method was used in this paper by systematically collecting evidence, defining concepts, procedurally answering the research questions and producing findings on cultural values and traditional practices.

### INTRODUCTION

The word, *ummemo* is a 'noun' derived from the 'verb' *mema*, which means 'to invite' or 'to make a call.' It is a call whereby all different ethnic groups, stakeholders and dignitaries are invited together to practice and celebrate the Swazi culture and traditions. The ceremony *ummemo* was initially meant for the Swazi people sanctioned by the *Ingwenyama* (king), but because of changes, integration and socio-multiculturalism in our societies, invitation is extended to everyone, irrespective of beliefs, modes of operations and background.

*Ummemo* is an annual call for unity and the preservation of authentic cultural values and traditions which is vital to enhance development within the communities. It was a privilege of the few chieftaincies and backed up by the king's delegates. Nowadays, it is scheduled and meticulously planned for all traditional leaders to perform this ceremony. This ceremony is part of the entire culture of the nation. Culture is a total way of living which is adopted by the nation. It is a set of values, norms and beliefs which are deeply rooted in history, tradition and customs of a nation. In order to support this, Warren (1996) talked about the Indigenous Knowledge System, acquired by people through the accumulation of experiences, informal experiments and understanding of their environment in a given

culture. Culture emphasizes beliefs and values which are deeply rooted in history and traditions. It is the custom of people and it included language and religion. Stebbing (1999: 313) contended that culture is the totality of nation's values that members acquire through socialisation and learning. It includes language, religion, values, mythology and history.

The role of this ceremony is to provide broad knowledge about this fundamental truth about the history of the nation. It helps the whole nation to understand its past, present and future trends, and modes of operations as well as the fundamental principles of human life. However, *Umntfwanenkhosi* (chief) as the leader and unifying symbol is the only person allowed to make the *Ummemo* call. People are humbly invited, but not compelled to attend this event. Invitation is extended to any person through the media, in particular radios: *Ligwalagwala FM*, *INKomazi*, Barberton and other local radio stations. In the community *tindvuna* (senior officials) are sent out to do so, making an announcement saying, "*Uyeva na! Ummemo ucalile!*" this process also includes *ndvunankhulu welutsango* (senior official of the woman). *Ummemo* is not solely used for bringing people together only; it also goes beyond that. It is also considered as a sacred practice and a religious gathering of the Swazi people where they would venerate to their ancestors.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research method was used to analyse the detailed information which was collected through the interview of four representatives from the following traditional councils: *Embhuleni*, *Emjindini*, *Lomashiyo* and *Mpakeni*. The rationales for choosing the above-mentioned traditional councils are their historical background, source and origin from King Mswati II. Qualitative research methods will be used in this research, as most of the procedures that will be used to collect data rely on social interaction and the studying of cultural practices. According to Bernard (1995), qualitative research is identified by the following characteristics.

- Research questions that are linking well with the objectives of the study.
- Techniques of planning on how to handle the questions.
- Substantiation and validation of problem statement, objectives and research questions.
- Conclusions, results and recommendations.

It is a brand of social sciences, which broadly studies cultures and practices of selected populations. Studying traditional practice is an integral part in trying to understand the culture of people. Qualitative researchers study and observe the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and populations. Qualitative research can be successfully achieved by interviewing people to get more facts.

### The Origin and Significance of *Ummemo*

*Ummemo* started from time immemorial. It can be traced back to the period of the Swazi's arrival in Southern Africa. It was soon after the Eastern Sotho tribes were defeated in the area. The king built his royal residences as a buffer zone to protect the kingdom. Therefore, the *libutfo* (regiment) also built its own houses around the royal residence. This was done to protect *bantfwabenkhosi* (the chiefs) from being attacked by Eastern Sotho inhabitants of the area. Other inhabitants came to the royal residence through *kukhonta*, or to pay allegiance to the leader. The ceremony came into being as a memorial event to those Swazi heroes who participated and died during the wars. Therefore, these fallen heroes are commemorated, where an annual event is held in the royal residences.

The *ummemo* ceremony is very significant in the sense that it represents the original philosophy of life of the Southern African nations, particularly the *Nguni* groups. This is one of the most significant rituals that are universal among the Africans. It is very common among the Swazi speaking people. It is the best way of showing respect to the ruling *umntfwanenkhosi* (chief). It is honorary volunteer work done by the nation which involves the building and the renovation of the royal residences and the cultivation of the fields. These are done as a ritual. Swazi cultures, customs and respect are very important at this occasion. Participants in this ceremony are warned to behave themselves, because if they do not, curses can befall those who defy the rules.

## RESULTS

It is also noted that cultural practice dominates during *ummemo* (annual ceremony). Burton and Dimbleby (1995: 130) defined culture as follows:

*Any of the custom, worldview, language, kinship systems, social organization and other taken-for-granted day-to-day practices of a people which set that group apart as a distinctive group.*

Cultural elements play a major role during this event Martin and Nakayama (2013: 100) emphasized the centrality of cultural values as follows:

*They are the most deeply felt beliefs shared by a cultural group. They reflect a shared perception of what ought to be and not what is. They refer to the belief that all humans are created equal, even though we must acknowledge that, in reality, there are many disparities, such as talent, intelligence or access to material goods.*

The event serves as a unifying force, especially in South Africa, a country of diverse cultures.

The organization of age classes is important in most ceremonies, especially during *ummemo* (annual ceremony) where the regiments are evident. There are regiments of *emajaha*, (males of 17 – 27 years), with their distinct outfit and bead ornaments. *Emadvodza*, (males of 28 – 60 years), have their special active roles in *libandla* (council), to promote unity, peace and harmony in the whole nation. The success of the nation is measured through their efforts. *Emachegu*, (grandfathers) are above 60 years and their role are supervision, management and advisory services to all tribal and national structures.

The female regiments are those of *ingcugce*, (females' of 17-22 years), *bomake*, (females of 24 – 55 years) and *bogogo*, (grandmothers) from 56 years upwards. The divisions into *ticheme* (squads) and *emachiba* (platoons) are apparent in the organization of the classes. Sometimes there are rivalry and resentment between the platoons or squads, but the regiment has a rule to control any hostilities. The leader of the regiment flourishes an emblem of its solidarity and unity. During the ceremony, the national dress is distinctive and their ornamentation is noticeable. The ornaments worn by men and women reflect the age classes of the participants.

### DISCUSSION

#### Ummemo Ceremony

It is a cultural ceremony that reflects the entire life of the nation. Dodd (1991: 41) defined culture as follows:

*The total accumulation of beliefs, norms, activities, institutions and communication patterns of an identifiable group of people.*

This is an annual celebration which used to take about two weeks. It is held at different times. At the *Embhuleni* Royal Residence, preparations start during the month of *Indlovana* (February) and at the end on the first week of *Indlovu lenkhulu* (March). The last Saturday and Sunday of the last week of March are marked as the significant events of the ceremony. Many of the cultural activities take place at the royal residence. During the ceremony, cows are slaughtered, traditional food and African beer is prepared in advance. *Emaswati* love their culture and come in large numbers to attend the ceremony.

It should be noted that, Christians would also gather at *Indlunkhulu* (a royal sacred house), a place where his Royal Highness and elders communicate with the ancestors to open the ceremony officially by performing a certain ritual and ask for the success of the ceremony from God and the ancestors. A cow would be slaughtered to complete the ritual performed at a royal sacred house. It is then that the Royal Highness would declare the ceremony officially opened. Christians and Pastors from different denominations would hold *umlindelo* (a night vigil), at the Royal residence to officially open the ceremony with a prayer. This prayer usually takes place on a Saturday night. The prayer was meant

to ensure a smooth running of the ceremony. Christians would be given a go ahead to proceed with their prayer until the next morning. The ceremony would run until the first week of *Indlovu lenkhulu* (March).

During the period of the ceremony, people come from different places to build their shacks or temporary structures. This is done for business purposes, where people will be selling food and *buganu* (types of African beer) and other African products. Different Government structures and private stakeholders are also allowed to build their stall, to provide different services to the community. What is noticeable during the ceremony, are the following:

#### **Cultural Implements: Basketry, Pottery, Wood and Iron**

During this ceremony, participants display basketry, pottery, wood and iron implements. There are also small, medium-sized and large-sized baskets made of grass and palm-leaves for serving and holding vegetables or maize. There are sleeping, sitting and eating mats. The pottery is represented by large and small conical earthenware vessels. The iron implements which are displayed include the native axe, barbed-assegai, native hoe, large-bladed assegai and the short-bladed assegai. Various designs of war, hunting, dancing and courting shields are also displayed.

#### **Traditional Food: Dishes, Vegetables, Fruits and Berries**

The foods that are prepared and served during the ceremony include *sidvudvu* (porridge made of maize or millet meal and mixed with pumpkin), *imbasha* (roasted maize on a clay pot), *emancobo* (boiled whole dry maize); *tindlubu* (ground beans) *tinhlumayo/ mngomeni* (legumes) and *sikhutane* (red pumpkin). Some of the vegetables or wild herbs that are used either alone or mixed with other vegetables are *emathapha* (edible tubers), *emakhowe*, (mushrooms) and *imfe* (sugar reed) or *sorghum sacharatum*. The fruits and berries that are served are *emajikijolo* (blackberries) or *rubus rigids*, *umgwenya* (African plum) *harpephyllum*; *umkhiwa* (wild fig) and *ematfundvuluka* (wild meddler tree with brown fruit).

### *Ummemo Dance*

The *ummemo* dance usually takes place at intervals from morning until sunset. People perform different dancing activities. Many traditional songs are sung and frequency modulation radio stations are a valuable part in this celebration. The dance takes place at *enkhundleni* (at the field). The types of dance are *sibhaca*, *ummiso*, *kuhlehla*, *indlamu* and *lutsango*. They are given names according to their performances which are spectacular, acrobatic, warlike antics, receding and leaping about and over. At this event, dancers are well-dressed in their traditional Swazi attire. The male headpieces in particular are quiet elegant. The senior traditional leader is the prominent and unifying figure dresses in a more unique, historic and ritual attire. People behave in a manner that is befitting the entire event.

Most of the dancing activities take place during this ceremony. Different community groups participate during this ceremony, but dancing is more intensive towards the end of the ceremony for entertainment purposes. Different groups are given an opportunity to perform with an aim of educating and entertaining the nation. Activities would run from morning to sunset. During this event *lutsango* (a female regiment) will also teach young girls how to dance and behave in a proper Swazi way.

Regiments are divided into sub-groups as follows:

- (i) Libutfo/Emabutfo (Warriors)
- (ii) Lutsango/ (Female regiment)
- (iii) Imbali/Tingabisa (Girls regiment)

The ceremony is blessed with cultural dance and music from various regiments that add beauty and attraction to the event.

Hall (1998: 165) explained that *sibhaca* is a type of dance that reflects Swazi cultural expression. He asserted that this dance is amazing because not all members of the audience are on their seats; others will fling themselves towards the dancers or shout praises before them. Some will join dancers and throw in money. Women take out their handkerchiefs and wave over the dancers. There will be excitement for every person where the *sibhaca* is performed. The sound of the drums and the songs that are sung excite the audience. There is continuous ululation. Dancing becomes more intensive, the beating and the sound of the drum bring forth remem-

brance of one's cultural origin. When dancing *sibhaca*, the males wear their Swazi traditional attire. The attire is tied below the knees and around the upper arms. *Emabhoko* are mainly made of goat fur. The dancers hold a stick on the one hand when dancing. There will be a moment where they will line up their sticks as if they are pointing guns.

Hall (1998: 168) added that *sibhaca* is not meant to have moral guidance at all. Everyone participates. He further explained that the dancers are similar to warriors and they assume preparatory positions in the battle, where they lie still prior to an attack; He says that the step is the stomping of the foot on the beat. The drum beaters stand hunched over open-ended cowhide drums, and beat the drums on both sides simultaneously. The performer's foot must be stomped exactly on the drummer's beat. *Sibhaca* is a type of dance that is performed by the dancers or performers in front of the audience. The performers wear colourful attires that are solely made for the occasion.

The programme starts in the morning before sunrise, around 05h00. *Umntfwanenkhozi* (chief) and *tindvuna* (senior councillors) gather with selected *libutfo* (regiment) and move straight to the cattle byre, to assemble there. When they reach the byre, they would slaughter a cow. One of the specially selected senior men talks to the national ancestors and gives thanks to the gods for making the ceremony a success. The senior traditional leader is then escorted back to his *lilawu* (traditional hut).

In the morning, the regiments that are still in their *emalawu* (male huts) will come out singing. *Lutsango* (the women's regiment) also joins them. These two groups join the first group. At this event the women do not stand on the same side as the warriors, but stand in the opposite side of the warriors (*emabutfo*), who are in front of the cattle byre. During this dance, they stand looking at each other. This dance will take about 15 to 30 minutes. Thereafter, they return to their places and have breakfast. The chief will be escorted by the warriors to the site of the ceremony. The nation applause when the chief is approaching the field. The chief and his special warrior perform a traditional dance before ascending to the place where he will be seated with the other dignitaries.

On this day, there is an appointed programme director, since there are various activities taking

place. The guests are introduced. The senior officer from Swaziland, is sent by *ingwenyama* (king), is given an opportunity to address the nation. In most cases this part is done by the senior headman from Swaziland. He usually encourages people to adhere to the Swazi culture and passes a message from the King to the entire Swazi nation in South Africa.

However, it is never forgotten that this is a religious ceremony during which the Swazi chief becomes a reverend medium for direct communication with the Royal ancestors of the Swazi tribe. The chief pleads with the national ancestors and dedicates the entire nation to them. After a few performances, some dignitaries at the event are given an opportunity to talk to the Swazi nation, then the chief as a keynote speaker, presents his speech to the nation nobody may speak to the nation after he has done so. The entire nation is encouraged to honour their customs and to be loyal to their chief. He blesses the Swazi nation and gives them hope for the future.

### *Lutsango Activities*

*Lutsango* is constituted by group of adult women. This group is well-respected in any Swazi community. *Lutsango* (women's regiment) does not discriminate; even young newly-wed women are also accommodated in this group. The word, "*lutsango*" literally means "a security fence" or "hedge". A *lutsango* is used for fencing a homestead. These women also play a significant role in the nation during the *Ummemo* ceremony. When the ceremony is approaching, the *Lutsango* or *indvuna yelutsango* (women's regiment or headwoman) goes out and gives orders: "*uyeve na?*" (Can you hear?). The chief says: You are invited! In this way the invitation is extended to all women of that particular domain to prepare for the ceremony. These women go out to cut reeds and selected grass with sickles and return home with them. They wait for the men to cut *tintfungo* (poles), for the renewal of *emaguma* (enclosures) and huts. Women take the reeds and arrange them together so that they would be able to build reed enclosures. The cutting of reeds happens during winter the month of *Inhlaba* (June) and *Kholwane* (July). Shrubs and selected grass are gathered. This grass is plaited to form ropes.

When preparing for the ceremony, *lutsango* (women's regiment) is also responsible for *kusindza*, (to prepare the floor) in the houses by using cattle dung. They also sweep the *libala* (yard). It should be further noted that on the Saturday, which is the day even of the ceremony, *lutsango* teaches *bomakoti* (newly-weds) and *timbali* (young girls) how to dress and dance for the occasion. Queens (*tindlovukazi*) are also taught how to dance. Different Swazi songs are taught on this day. The common dance is for the final day of the ceremony. The women's regiment is presented with an ox which is slaughtered.

### *Libutfo Activities*

During this ceremony, warriors perform significant duties. At the beginning of the ceremony, the warriors meet prior the celebration. During this period, they stay at *emalawini* (warrior's huts) and at *etihoncweni* (regimental compounds). The *indvuna yelibutfo* (regimental head) makes announcement and gives some orders of what is to be done the next day. However, most of the activities take place on the next day. The activities will take almost four weeks. These men are the temporal conscripts, performing a mandatory national service. This service continues until the beginning of *ummemo* dance. This national service includes the cultivating and weeding the royal field. The regiments are rewarded for their service: cattle are slaughtered, traditional beer and food is served.

### *Dress Code During Ummemo Ceremony*

#### *Imbali Traditional Attire*

It is a Swazi custom for *Imbali* or *Ingabisa* (Girls regiment) to dress-up in traditional finery for any special occasion, especially for royal ceremonies. Attires worn by girls during this occasion differ from those that are worn on other days. This attire has a significant meaning to anyone who wears it. Girls' dress code differs according to the type of ceremony that is being held at that particular moment, for instance the reed dance, first-fruit, wedding and other ceremonies. At such ceremonies, dress codes are different.

*Imbali* regiment wears *indlamu* costume and *umgaco* (long beads necklace) hanging and passing over the shoulder and beneath the opposite

arm. They also put on *lihiya*, (cloth-covering) worn by males under the *lijobo* (loin-skins). It is also worn by females on the top of *sidvwaba* to cover the upper part cloths underneath and tie them on the right hand side. Another piece is *umhelwane*. This is found on the top part, and is tied on the left hand side; other girls wear it the traditional way. *Umjijimba* is usually worn on the right hand side of *indlamu*. During the ceremony, these girls can be seen in beautiful red colours. It is a very long robe that stretches from the waist to the feet and is attached to the *indlamu* costume. It has a huge black tassel at the bottom. *Indlamu* costume is made of blue fabric. This costume is decorated with thousands of beautiful beads sewn together. It is a very expensive outfit because of the beads that have been used in preparation of this outfit. Girls usually wear this outfit during the ceremonies. Leggings known as *emafahlawane* (rattling dancing ornaments) are tied on their ankles, which make a uniform sound when the girls dance. They do not put any shoes on their feet.

#### Woman Traditional Attire

In a Swazi society a woman is only referred to as *make* (a married female). The most important feature of a married woman and which distinguishes her from other females, besides the dress code, is the smearing of red ochre, which is a symbol that she is no longer a girl, but has ascended to the next stage of adulthood. However, the smearing of red ochre has a unique symbolism other than mere adulthood. The smearing of ochre is accompanied by a proper way of dressing. Girls and women of marriageable age are expected to change their style of dressing. A married woman wears *sidvwaba* (skin skirt) and puts *sidziya* (skin apron) on top. This is the African apron made from a goat skin. A Swazi woman has to dress herself in a more respectable manner. Short skirts that are above the knees are not permitted. During the ceremony, a woman puts on skin skirt, *lihawu* (sheild) on the right hand and an *umhelwane* (a large fabric with a knot at the shoulder) is tied on the left hand side. This is done as in the reed dance ceremony.

#### Young Boys' Dress Code

A Swazi young man has a unique way of dressing; he does not dress just anyhow. At adulthood, a young Swazi man wears an *emajo-*

*bo* (loin-skin) and an *umncadvo* (a genitals cover). Above the waist, some men do not put anything. They become topless. Kasenene (1993: 115) supported that males wear *emajobo* (loin-skins) and adults put on *lihiya* (cloth covering) underneath and loin-skin on top.

#### Men's Attire

Men are considered to look more spectacular and respectable in their African attire. This becomes more significant during a Swazi traditional ceremony. Their attire distinguishes men from women. It also shows the different age groups. Men usually put on loin-skins which are made of various animal skins. Kasenene (1993: 115) further stated that *emajobo* (loin-skins) are not similar. Some are called *emabheh-ha*. This kind of attire is made of a big animal skin. They cover the front and the back, reaching to the knees. When men wear an *emabheh-ha*, they do not put on a cloth covering underneath. Other types of loin-skin are *timbece*, *tintwayi* and *emagogo*.

Old men put on cloth covering underneath the loin-skin and remain topless. Kasenene (1993: 115) added that when the weather is severe, as in winter, a man may wear another skin called *sinokoti* (blanket made up of lion skin), made of antelope or cow hide skin or *siphuku* (goat skin). He added that old men also wear *umbhodze* (head-ring), made of bee wax and a root of a specific plant. The head-ring identifies him as an old and wise enough man to be approached for advice on matters pertaining to social and political life. A man removes this head-ring when his wife dies and puts it on again when the mourning period is over.

#### Language

The cultural implements, traditional food and types of dance are enriching the language. Language is viewed by Mutasa (2006) as human essence and multidimensional phenomenon which incorporates political, social, institutional and cultural factors. Ndlovu (2013: 13) reiterated Mutasa's views when he defined language as follows:

*It is one of the significant aspects of any educational system. It is a unique human attribute that enables human beings to learn, think creatively, define reality and share meaning.*

The terminology and vocabulary that are used during this ceremony are significant for the development of Siswati language at various levels.

### CONCLUSION

It is evident that the *ummemo* is a significant ceremony which touches on the lives of all members of the communities, societies and settlements, irrespective of whether they are paying allegiance or not. Activities and rituals of male and female inhabitants, of various stages of growth are highlighted. Unity, respect and cultural values are upheld. A sense of belonging to a specific regiment is emphasized in every individual. The regimental structures serve as institutions for informal education, skills and values.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the *ummemo* ceremony be supported due to its objectives of promoting cultural values and emphasizing unity in the whole nation. The historical background, religion and cultural dynamics of the nation need to be related, redefined, interpreted and described. The differences and similarities of concepts and activities during *ummemo* and other ceremonies, such as *umcwasho* (fertility ritual), *umhlanga* (reed dance) and *incwala* (first-fruit

national ritual) need to be identified, distinguished and highlighted. It is necessary to note that the ceremony is socio-cultural and religious-political in nature. It symbolizes and promotes social solidarity, collective existence and shared beliefs.

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