

## **Ibiekumah Nojie: Iruokpen Deity of Power and Authority among the Iruokpen People of Esan Society in Edo State, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

*In the ancient community of Iruokpen in Esan society of Edo State, exists the deity that personifies strength, power and prosperity. The deity in question is the Great Mother Ibiekumah Nojie. She is the goddess of fruitfulness and fertility. She is a water deity or goddess, which people today attributes as 'Elimin No Ruwe khe Ede' (Mammy Water). The source of the Great Ibiekumah Nojie generates itself from a powerful river, not just any river, but her own River of Life, Power and Protection called Ede Ibiekumah, that functions as the deliverer of Ekunma now known as Ekpoma. The Ede Ibiekumah is the one sure source of spiritual and physical water for the Iruokpenians. Only few favoured Ohens (priests) and few opportune visitors and worshippers of the deity have ever felt her physical presence. The Great Mother Ibiekumah is today still celebrated, venerated and worshipped in Iruokpen and some parts of Esan communities. The society of people in faithful dedication worshipped and gave their services to the great river goddess until foreign elements under the powerful arms of Western Christianity and its attendant Western values and ideas brought in socio-cultural pollutions and distortive values into the traditionally dedicated community. However, in spite of numerous challenges, the Great Mother Ibiekumah being one of Iruokpen's ancient deities overcame relegation and denigration from foreign influences. This epical and realistic life tale is re-enacted to tell the world that Iruokpen (an Esan tribe, in Edo State, Nigeria), socio-religious, cultural and indigenous practices refuses to bow to pressures and dictates of the West (the Europeans). This paper, therefore, examines the significance of the great personalities of Mother Ibiekumah Nojie in Iruokpen entire Institutional frameworks. It examines the great personality of the Great Mother Ibiekumah Nojie and her power of protection, preservation, healing, socio-religious and moral sanctity of Iruokpen people and the community at large. The main sources for this study will be primary and secondary sources. The primary sources constitute documents, oral traditions, and field notes. The secondary source is a work of historical reconstruction based on the interpretation of primary sources. Examples of secondary sources include scholarly journal article, encyclopedia, dictionaries, interpretation of a diary, biographies, newspapers, published dissertations etc.*

**Key Words:** *Iruokpen Deity, Ibiekumah Nojie, Power and Authority, Esan Society, Edo State, Nigeria*

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## Introduction

In a bid to have better understanding of the significance of the power and authority of the Great Mother Ibiekumah, it is succinct and imperative to examine its geographical location, climate, and pattern of settlement and at least a version of Iruokpen numerous origins.

Iruokpen is an Esan society, which is located along the Southern tip of Ekpoma chiefdom where it shares boundaries with Ehor in Uhumwonde Local Government Area. Iruokpen from the geographical view is bounded in the West of Ozalla in Owan West Local Government Area, and in the East by Uhumwonde River, called '*Ede Ibiekumah*', the deliverer of *Ekunma* now known as Ekpoma (Intelligence Report on Iruokpen Community 12). To the North of Iruokpen are her sisters and friendly neighbours in the nomenclatures of Ujemen, Idumebo, Uke and Ihumudumu. The history of the Ibiekumah River is deeply intertwined with Esan's and Nigeria's heritage, spanning centuries (Intelligence Report on the Ekpoma 9).

Iruokpen since ages are hospital and generous people, harmonious and industrious in their pursuit for growth and development (Odiagbe, Personal Communication). This was why the first British European Christian missionary to set foot on the land, Father Clement Barnwarth asserts that:

The people of Iruokpen among her Ishan neighbours are people bequeathed with great and large hearts filled with kindness of spirits, love and honesty. In them, you could never find hate and bitterness. They are peaceful and easy going in the pursuant of their socio-cultural, religious and economic life. One thing I found in them was that restless zeal and quest for education, their own model of indigenous learning which visibly radiates in them. The children are ready to learn and obey ethical norms, spiritual and morals because the drive and yearnings to learn deeply imbibed in them. The elders are tireless in teaching them new innovative ideas so far it adds positively in aiding them to be better persons. The girl child moral education was practically adopted. From deep research and understanding, I found out that Iruokpen mothers played role which our women [Britons] back home could not play on the social and moral welfare of our daughters (N.A.I. Ishan Division 19).

This harmonious, flourishing and prosperous community of people lives seventy kilometers north of Benin City in the present day Edo State of Nigeria. It is the first part of Esan West Local Government Area as well as first Esan speaking community along the Benin-Auchi highway from the East. It is situated on a plateau with an altitude of 200 feet above sea level. It is a community assumed to have been founded prior the Oba Ewuare's the Great era in the fifteenth

century. This happened, according to historical deduction after the Mass Exodus of Esan people from the Benin Kingdom (Egharevba 23).

Iruokpen like every other society in Esan and other climes has two major climatic seasons, as is the case throughout the rain forest belt. These are the Wet (rainy) and the Dry Harmattan (*Okhuakhua*) seasons; the former normally last from the month of March to October in the same year (Akinbode 3; Intelligence Report on the Ekpoma 9). There is, however, a brief spell, which normally occurs about the month of August, known as ‘August Break’. The dry season, on the other hand begins roughly in November (though there occurs intermittent drizzling throughout the month) until February or early March. In the mid-dry season, a harsh dry dust and cold wind called the harmattan ‘*Okhuakhua*’ in Iruokpen sets in. A dry effect is felt throughout and during the dry season while the chill sets in at dusk and throughout the night to late morning (Akinbode 5).

In addition, from a geographical view, Iruokpen is the largest of all the Eguare-Ekpoma community in terms of its landscape and landmark, including population density. Out of the 22, 193 people in Ekpoma Chiefdom by the 1953 and 1963 Population Census figures (Okojie 76), Iruokpen was 5, 200 (Okojie 67). In the 1991 and 2006 Population Census figures, Iruokpen was rated on the high side (Population Censuses 1991 and 2006). The influx of foreigners from other climes has inflated the figures in the listed communities of Emaudo, Uke and Ujemen campuses due to the bustling and booming Ambrose Alli University established campuses.

As regards settlement patterns, there are twelve quarters in Iruokpen and these until the present day include Idumeke, Idumebo, Abia, Idumehonle, Ebokpe, Idumegbede, Idumoza, Idumogo, Idumemalua, Ogbomoide, Ughodin and Ikhin. Ever since the early times, the people of Iruokpen have lived and still lives in a harmonious accord with mutual understanding in their pursuits. They ancestrally believed to have evolved from the same ancestral parentage (Odiagbe, “The Early Iruokpen History” 12). Within these quarters, there exist sub-divisions, which the people referred to as mini-quarters, the origin of each quarters is traceable to highly venerated ancestors who the people accept as the intermediaries between them and *Osenobulua* (God) (Odiagbe, “The Mythical Power of Iruokpen Ancestors” 44). These ancestors act as the spiritual protectors and guidance of the people and they (ancestors) occupies permanent place in the religious lives of the people. The evolution and development of these twelve quarters though not well analyze by historians and researchers, hopefully, subsequent researchers will deal with it.

### **Iruokpen Theory of Origin**

On a large scale, there are numerous versions about the origin of Iruokpen. The Benin version deduced that the people directly or indirectly emigrated from Benin Kingdom. Often times, the claim has been based principally on some observed similarities in language and customs of the Esan and Benin (Bini) people (Okojie 3; Ben 11). This is where the concept of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary methodology comes to play. Enato and Oseghale’s rigorous research findings and field works asserts that;

The Esan people, whom Iruokpen as a homogenous community of people emerged from, had always been in existence prior the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and that the Oba Ewuare's version of Iruokpen migrating from Benin in the period of his reign was fallacious and subjective. They vehemently support the fact that the Iruokpen, fondly called the Leopard people have always lived where they were (11-12).

People had existed in the Esan geographical area of which Iruokpen society is inclusive, and that these people have had deep knowledge of themselves according to Esan extant traditions. Moreover, when the exodus occurred, Bini immigrants fled or moved to various places in what was Edo land and therefore the eventual settlement of these Bini immigrants was not peculiar to Esan (Esene Esene's Diary 11). The Oba Ewuare's version of Iruokpen origin of Esan society from Benin may mean the origin of organized political institution in the area and a phase of radical societal restructuring, due strongly and largely to increased migrations from Benin into the already existing area. It still does not qualify it appropriate viewing it in terms of the origin of all that is the Iruokpen entity (Esene Esene's Diary 12). It is in this wise that Odiagbe asserts that, "Iruokpen, a community grouped under the Esan society is said to have lived in organized polity in the area from about half a millennium years ago before the assumed Oba Ewuare's theory of fleeing theory from Benin" ("We Are Our Own Origin" 3).

Another tradition is the magical version of Iruokpen theory of origin which speculates that the community evolved from the mysterious and magical powers of Ehi Ehi Ehichioya, a powerful, mentally sound and supernaturally ordained man who was said to have descended from the high heaven, precisely out of the full moon (Enato "Myths, Legends and Folklores" 12-15). He was said to have descended with a glittering gourd full of eggs, twelve eggs precisely of different sizes, shapes and colours with names spiritually endorsed on the eggs – the names of the twelve quarters that later came to be (Enato "Iruokpen Traditions of Origin and Evolution" 10).

On getting to the site as directed by the supernatural forces in the moon, he spat fire and water out of his mouth to the ground and took a dance step, which lasted for exactly twelve minutes and twelve seconds. Ehi Ehi Ehichioya further smashed the twelve eggs at twelve spots on the earth. In addition, immediately he did that, humans began to spring out of the smashed eggs (Enato "Myths, Legends and Folklores" 21). At first these humans came in twos' from each egg, and later, increased in numbers to twenty each within a short space of twelve hours. He smiled and danced seeing his good work and shout out saying, 'Oh my heavenly sender! Oh *Osenobulua* my Maker! Oh my Soul Maker! I have fulfilled that which you sent me to do. Have I not done well my Maker? Yes, I have done well in bringing into fruition your heavenly instructions! You souls of heavens and of the Moons spring forth into multiple blessings. Be you peaceful, humble and love yourselves. Love yourselves oh brothers and sisters of one Maker! Be the peace and joy of your world! (Enato "Iruokpen Traditions of Origin and Evolution" 23).

The smashed eggs became until date the twelve quarters of Iruokpen community. The mysterious Ehi Ehi Ehichioya hit the earth twelve times with his staff and laughed for twelve days nonstop. He blessed Iruokpen and wadded off enmity from amongst the people. He cried out in extreme joy on the twelve day saying, 'Oh Iruokpen, hear me my sons and daughters of one

parentage! Unity is what made the throne of your parents and so embrace unity to the end of time' (Odiagbe "The Mystical and Mythical Powers" 35). Ehi Ehi Ehichioya lifted up his hands in hilarious excitement and immediately, a beautiful leopard appeared from the sky smiling and wriggling its tail. The leopard represents the dignity, honour and sacredness of the land. Ehi Ehi Ehichioya on the spot ordered the people never to kill a leopard in and outside the community because from henceforth the leopard has become sacred and revered to everyone having blood link with and to the land of Iruokpen ("The Mystical and Mythical Powers" 37-38).

Ehi Ehi Ehichioya established the political, religious, socio-cultural, moral and ethics, and judo-administrative institutions presently prevailing in Iruokpen community. He rained rain upon the land and blessed crop yields. He cursed famine and drought and blessed the entire twelve quarters for abundance of everything. Idumeke quarters was made the headquarters of the community. This was Ehi Ehi Ehichioya first appearance in Idumeke. Secondly, Idumeke produced the oldest man when the eggs were smash on the ground. He humbly and prayerfully stayed with the people for 144 days before his eventual ascension to the Moon, to meet with his father (*Osenobulua*) who sent him (Odiagbe "The Mystical and Mythical Powers" 42-44).

From speculations, it is believe that other Esan chiefdoms, especially Ekpoma political and social institutions sprang out of Iruokpen ancient systems, though still under controversial debates and serious criticisms from professional historians and ordinary scholars of Esan and Nigerian history. Seen here, it is under assertion that the origin of Iruokpen is shroud in myths, mysteries and legends. To point it to a particular direction is automatically doing injustice to it. Overall, some comments are pertinent here: Iruokpen had being peopled since and before the eight century A.D; and ever since, migrations from different directions had increased the population of the community. In addition, since its foundation, administrative machinery had evolved which sustains the stability and advancement of the community.

Of great importance, a prelude towards a plausible study of Iruokpen origin must embrace the migration theories and the aboriginal factors. In addition, each available evidence and documents must be meticulously weighed. Popular traditions, which propounded the Ewuare version, rather than been considered in isolation, must be complemented not only by linguistic studies but also by totemic practices and general cultural peculiarities of the Iruokpen and probably other Esan people. Archaeology and other applications of interdisciplinary approach must be indelible assets (Okoduwa 13; Oseghale 30-32).

In spite of the above analyses, several traditions of origins further postulate in the author's book "A Recaptured History of Iruokpen People in Esan Society of Edo State, Nigeria" on the account of how the Iruokpen inhabitants came to their aboriginal and present abode. How the aboriginal inhabitants did coin the name 'Iruokpen' they now bear? Who were their aboriginal parents? How and when Iruokpen do become established as organized community? Was their evolution theory interwove to that of Ekpoma and other Esan communities or they simply evolved on their own without outside interference? These are pertinent questions scholars and socio-cultural researchers of Esan history should put into cognizance when investigating about the



history of the Irukep people. However, due to time and space, this is how brief this segment can say about the origin of the Irukep people.

### **Ibiekumah Nojie in Her Mortal State**

In her mortal state, Mother Ibiekumah is said to have gone to a dance festival in Idumeke quarters hosted by the powerful, vibrant and energetic Odionwele of the vast community (Osaro, Personal Communication). The Odionwele (Head Chief) was a seer and a great medicine man popularly patronized by other Enijie (Kings) in Esan society and beyond (Osarodion, Personal Communication). Ibiekumah, then a beautiful young woman whose grace and physical elegance endeared her to the Odionwele found favour before him and after the dance festival, he invited her, wooed her and the rest was history (Osas, Personal Communication). Ibiekumah became the second and last wife to the Odionwele and his favourite wife. He advanced her spiritual career (Enato “Ibiekumah Nojie: Irukep Goddess of Fruitfulness” 23). The marital connection between both yielded advanced spiritual and moral development in the community. According to Pa Eromosele of Ikhin Quarters, “the combination of these two powerful couple catapulted Irukep into its socio-religious, moral and cultural limelight. It was the era Irukep spiritually and socio-culturally advanced far ahead of her Esan communities and chiefdoms” (Personal Communication).

As a great priestess, Ibiekumah was in charge of the river, which then was merely termed River *Oto-Oke* (Osato, Personal Communication). She carried out several river sacrifices on behalf of the people, ensured the river was neat, healthy, and fit for worship. She had maidens who acted as apprentices and same time adopted them as her children (Oseghale, Personal Communication). Her house cleaners or servants made up of women mostly between the ages of fifteen (15) and forty (40) live in a line of several room apartments along the side of the Odionwele palace, the royal house of the Irukep head chief 2 miles north of the grove and river (Esene, Personal Diary, 14).

These servants or maidens left behind everything from their secular lives, including marriages, to serve both the goddess and the Odionwele and the Onojie of Eguare (Odedenokhua, Personal Communication). They had little interaction with outsiders, allowing them to devote themselves fully to the goddess, whom they worship daily at a shrine tucked deep inside the grove. They wore flowing white gowns symbolizing the purity the river represents. The women carried out various tasks for the goddess from dawn to dusk, from overseeing sacrificial offerings, mostly life animals (pure white) and drinks, to carrying out cultural activities in the *Oto Oke* Rivers (Itolor, Personal Communication). Some said the goddess heals them of afflictions when they drink or bathe in the river, and others said she could provide wealth and fertility (Edes, Personal Communication).

One great and unforgettable *Ohen* (Priest), and whom Irukep chronicle cannot forget in a hurry said, as contained in his diary, that:

The River of Life brought him and his family fame, wealth and peace of health. It brought his third wife children after six years of barren state of life. Now the mother

of children intends to remain forever devoted to the river and the goddess (Enato's Diary, Author's Paternal Grandfather).

The river communicated to her and she only was the sole hearer of the river (Itolor, Personal Communication). She carried out ablution and sacrifices on behalf of the people. Her husband, the great seer and medicine man often assist her in areas of her spiritual ignorance and weakness (Oseghale "The Oguese Worshippers" 19-21). In her lifetime and every fortnightly, on Eguare market days, the people in need of prayers and spiritual requests assembled at the bank of the river to seek the face and blessings of the river. They received blessings and answered prayers because the great river was full of purity and spiritual righteousness (Oseghale "The Oguese Worshippers" 19-21).

At the precise age of sixty-two, as found in the chronicle of Agbator, the paternal great great grandfather of the writer Ibiekumah woke up in an early hour of the morning feeling cold and bodily weak with a pang of headache (Agbator "Iruokpen and Her Relationships with her" 31-33). She summoned a servant and instructed her to prepare her river items for prayers and ablutions. She went inside the sacred grove and prayed. She spent thirty minutes in the sacred grove praying and came out sweating. She asked for the attention of her husband, who unfortunately was at the *Okoughele* (market square/town hall) hosting the *Edionihilon* (*decision maker*), *Ekhaemons* (*Senior Chiefs*), *Edions* (*Senior Elders*), *Igene* (*men of advance age*) and *Idianagbohans* (*active youths*) groups on pressing issue relating to bush burning (Agbator "Iruokpen in Love with her Great Ibiekumah's Deity" 11-12).

An hour after waiting her husband came and together they left for the bank of the River *Oto Oke*. At the riverbank, she explained to him that her time was up (Philip "Ibiekumah Nokie" 4-5). The Odionwele smiled and heaved, as he knew that his lovely beautiful wife would become a deity of everlasting worship. He prayed for her and held her tight to his bosom before she in tears dissolved as salt in form of water element and flowed inside the River-*Oke Oto*. Immediately she flowed inside the river, the heaven opened up and poured out water for hours in the entire Esan and beyond (Philip "The River of Life is Smiling" 6-9). The Odionwele walked back home drenched and dolorous in mood as the seven servants/maidens who escorted his wife and himself to the River *Oto-Oke* consoled him. Henceforth, the River *Oto-Oke* became known as River Ibiekumah or *Ede Ibiekumah* (Philip "The River of Life is Smiling" 11).

Ibiekumah became the first woman recognized as a deity (Itolor, Personal Communication; Odedenokhua, Personal Communication). In her lifetime, Ibiekumah later became the deity of wisdom and divination (Odedenokhua, Personal Communication).

### **Worship and Rituals**

Ibiekumah Nojie is the deity of the river, modernly refers to as 'Mammy Water'. Her devotees leave her offerings and perform ceremonies at the body of her water and in her sacred grove. She is associated with the colour white and not other colours (Edes, Personal Communication). As the deity of financial and spiritual life, she is termed the 'Woman of Purity'. This referred to white as always being the most valuable metal and objects use in worshipping her.

She is a symbol of sensitivity and morality and is identified by smiling and laughing and always surrounded with children in her deity form (Itolor, Personal Communication). The worship of Ibiekumah involves a range of rituals and ceremonies conducted by traditional priests and priestesses. These rituals seek Ibiekumah's favour and blessings for various aspects of life, including peace, fruitfulness, fertility, and protection from adversity (Edes, Personal Communication).

The items needed for the worship of the River Ibiekumah are; cowries, white traditional chalk (*ere*), full pumpkin, palm wine, market food, forest food (fruits), traditional ornaments, white cock, white piece of clothes, male and female images, mirror, small gourd, sweet food, white beads and necklaces, white pigeon, pigeon feathers, eagle feathers, parrot feathers, mashed white yam (*aha*), sugar cane, sweet drinks, and other prayer items (Odiagbe, Personal Communication).

### **The Great Mother Ibiekumah Nojie and Her River of Life**

Ibiekumah Nojie is an *elimin Osi-amen*, a deity, a water goddess/ water supplier that reflects herself like the famous Osun River, one of the manifestations of the Esan/Ishan Supreme Being in the Esan oral tradition and Esan based religions of Nigeria and West Africa (Oseghale-Uche "The Oguese Worshippers in Mutual" 14). She is one of the most popular and venerated deities in Esan and Edo. Ibiekumah Nojie, the great Mother among mothers is an important river deity among the Esan and Edo cosmology. She is the goddess of divinity, femininity, fertility, beauty, elegance, happiness, provision, and love amongst others (Odiagbe, Personal Communication). She is in connection to destiny and divination (Oseghale-Uche "Ere Usage in the Worship of Ibiekumah" 12).

The river was at a place known as 'Oto Oke' (valley around a hill), a boundary between Idumoza and Abia quarters. In it lies everything good anyone could think of (prosperity, peace, divine health, protection, provision amongst others) (Butcher, Intelligence Reports on Egoro 25). The River Ibiekumah does not drown her worshippers, and neither has she taken anyone's life because she respects the existence and sanctity of life (Butcher, Intelligence Reports on Ekpoma 17-19). In the words of the writer as told by his paternal grandfather:

My paternal grandfather, who was a great worshipper and *Ohen* (priest) in charge of the River Ibiekumah, told me when I was a little boy that the great river does not drown her worshippers. All she does is preserve life, heal and answers prayers presented before her. He once took me to the river and gently pushed me into it while I struggled to swim out. It was in the depth of the river I found myself. As I struggled to find my way out of the fast flowing river, an unseen hand, say spiritual hand dragged me softly out of the river while my paternal grandfather merely smiled and thanked the Great Mother Ibiekumah for safeguarding and protecting me his grandson (Enato, [Paternal Grandfather] Personal Communication).

The River Ibiekumah cures sicknesses that are beyond the understanding of human knowledge. Again, sicknesses such as typhoid, elephantiasis, cholera, epilepsies, and heart related diseases amongst others are taken care by the efficacy of the Great River Ibiekumah. The potency



of the river cures bareness, infertility and revives back, in most cases a dying and dead person. Everything good is what the River Ibiekumah, popularly called 'Ede Ibiekumah' by its owners provides for her children (Enato [Paternal Grandfather] Personal Communication). The Ede Ibiekumah is actively alive. It flows and produces water of life to her children. The Great Mother Ibiekumah merely transferred her location far away from Iruiekpen to another abode due mainly to the spiritual ignorance of the earliest inhabitants of the community (Information from the Council of Elders).

The Great Mother Ibiekumah, according to Pa Agbator, the paternal great-great grandfather of the writer succinctly puts it that:

During the life of the mortal Ibiekumah, she served as a priestess. The then river never bears her nomenclature until after her demise. The river was rich and well blessed to the extent that a mere fetch of its water was a blessing to all and sundry. Healthy fish, and crayfish are in surplus abundant in it and it was like a shrine to everyone in need of her presence. The river is life itself as children who go there to fish, bath and fetch its water are blessed. It cures ailments and gives children to the barrens and impotents (Agbator, "Iruiekpen and Her Relationships with her" 38).

She in her life of mortality served as queen consort to the Odionwele of Iruiekpen who hailed then from Idumoza quarters. Following her posthumous deification, she was admitted to the Iruiekpen/Esan pantheon as an aspect of a primordial divinity with the river immediately converted to her name. The Great Mother Ibiekumah is the mother of all deities. She is the superlative water priestess from whom the rest of the world taps strength and powers. The Hausa traders, in spite of their die-hard Islamic culture bowed before the deity of Ibiekumah (Itolor, Personal Communication). The Great Mother Ibiekumah is a mother of grace, peace and elegance (Itolor, Personal Communication). She is truly the goddess of fruitfulness and fertility.

Ibiekumah, the beautiful wife of the great Odionwele of the time is the patron saint of the important river in Iruiekpen-Eguare Ekpoma and Esan, which bears her name. The river has its source in Iruiekpen in Edo State, in the South-south of Nigeria, and passes through Ujemen down to Ebutte and run through the Ambrose Alli University campus, which is the University and Iruiekpen-Eguare Ekpoma only source of water supply. In Iruiekpen, down to its present location, is where the Sacred Grove, which is the principal sanctuary of the deity, is located (Enato, "Ibiekumah Nojie: Iruiekpen's Goddess of Fruitfulness" 27). Ibiekumah Nojie is honoured at every forth nightly at her shrine in Iruiekpen, precisely in Idumehonle quarters and at her Sacred Grove on the banks of the River Ibiekumah (Enato "Ibiekumah Nojie: Iruiekpen's Goddess of Fruitfulness" 29). Ibiekumah Nojie is one of the many Esan gods in Esan and Nigeria at large.

In Esan cosmology and thought, God is known as *Osenobulua*. *Osenobulua* is the Lord over all Esan divinities and human beings because He created the divinities and all other beings (Greene 32). The Esan believe in one Supreme God, *Osenobulua*. Esan (Iruiekpen) people honour *Osenobulua* and recognize Ekpen (founder of Iruiekpen) as the arch ancestor of the Iruiekpen people (Information from the *Ohens* (Priests). *Osenobulua* exists in the thoughts and minds of every Esan (Iruiekpen). *Osenobulua* has many similarities with the God of other religions. Sandra Greene has

argued that African thoughts and practices of a Supreme Being change from time to time and from one tribe to another (42). Unlike divinities, *Osenobulua* does not have a day or month to worship Him. All ordinary divinities have special days of worship and festival. However, in Esan (Iruokpen) thought, every time people honour divinities, they are indirectly contacting *Osenobulua*. He deals directly with human beings.

Ibiekumah Nojie is one divinity through whom the Esan (Iruokpen) relate to God (Odiagbe, Personal Communication). The other members of Ekpen (deities/divinities) are Okpe, Ohanibhie, Oghonokpe, Ovia, Ohanmhen, Oto, Uda, Iserumun and Ojoli (Enato and Oseghale 3). All deities owe their existence and personhood to *Osenobulua*, God in Esan (Iruokpen) cosmology (Odiagbe, Personal Communication). From the onset, all deities/divinities originated from heavens where God resides (Ehimare 11-12). *Osenobulua* is the father and mother of the deities/divinities (13). All deities/divinities function and serve as *Osenobulua's* emissaries. Each deity/divinity has special priests, temples, religious communities and seasons of worship (13)

In religious festivals, such as the Ibiekumah Nojie, the religious elements mentioned are means of informing, educating and promoting the belief of deity/divinity in the communities. Divinities, nature and social institutions are embodied in God (Ehichioya 21). Nevertheless, the Esan (Iruokpen) God cannot be represented in any form or image.

### Meaning and Spellings of Ibiekumah

Ibiekumah is an Esan Word, which had various spellings in the modern times. The question then is; what is the right spelling? 'Ibiekumah' is an Esan (Iruokpen) word. She is a feminine deity/divinity and is closely tied to *Ekunma* (Ekpoma). Her name is spelled in different forms because of the 'I' sound that is 'E' in Esan (Iruokpen) pronunciation. It could be spelled Ebiekumah with a dot on top of the 'E' as in Esan language spelling, or in any of the following forms: Ebiekumah, ebievhuma, or Ibiekumah (Agbator, "Iruokpen and Her Relationships with her" 38).

The word 'Ibiekumah' means '*Ede Ibiekumah*' known as the deliverer of *Ekunma* now known as Ekpoma (Agbator, "Iruokpen and Her Relationships with her" 38). Spelling variations are less significant because Ibiekumah is never known to have existed in any other clime. Ibiekumah Nojie is later known and honoured in other Esan communities/chiefdoms. The River Ibiekumah is a physical representation of life and existence in Esan society. Ubomi (consultation) Oracles and the practice of divination aided people in different parts of the Esan/ Edo in remembering Ibiekumah Nojie (Ehichioya 34). Ubomi divination is practiced not only by the Iruokpen, but also by the inhabitants of Edo, Esan, Afemai and Etsako. Ibiekumah, as a special divinity of Idumehonlen quarters in Iruokpen community rules and protects the people from dangers and wars. Unlike most other divinities, Ibiekumah is not a seasonal goddess (Ehimare 18). She is active all year round. On the contrary, Sango the god of thunder and lightning is active only during the rainy season. A Yoruba proverb says, *eniknn ki bu Sango leru*, meaning 'no one invokes Sango during the dry season' (Bamgbose 80-86). He would not respond or act on behalf of the devotee during the dry season.

### Ibiekumah's Leadership Power and Authority

The constant communication that goes on between the earthly and the supernatural beings as depicted in Ibiekumah, make serving deities/divinities a necessity for the indigenous Esan and Iruokpen people (Enato, "Significance of Ibiekumah River" 4). It is said that as the goddess of fertility and fruitfulness, she care for all the existing lives in Iruokpen, Esan, Edo, and beyond (Enato, "Significance of Ibiekumah River" 4). Ibiekumah's involvement in the affairs of the society demonstrates that women are powerful in keeping men and fellow women together in harmonious peace and unity (Odedenokhua, Personal Communication).

As widely known, Ibiekumah is one of the earthly deities/divinities in Esan (Iruokpen) language as Iruikhide, the mysterious founding Mother of Iruokpen Community (Ediale 38-41). Ibiekumah Nojie is the last of the deities/divinities (Information from Ikhuo-Idimu):

Succinct to know is that, even though Ibiekumah was the last of the deities/divinities who came to the earth at the period of creation and earthly advancement, she speedily and dynamically became the most influential one by demonstrating to the other deities that without her 'Awase' (power of life and authority over mortals), their mission could not go beyond earthly status. Ibiekumah is probably this same Mother of all Rivers whose spiritual force and might over water affairs transcend beyond ages, time and space (Information from Ikhuo-Idimu).

As earlier said, Ibiekumah is one of the early divinities known in Iruokpen community and Esan society. Other Iruokpen divinities who are involved in the creation of Iruokpen and the Esan world and people are *Idigun* (Ogun), Zaiki Nojie, Eziza, Aizenu, Oto, Okpe, Ohanibhie, Oghonokpe, Ekpen, Iruikhide, Ovia, Ohanmhen, Uda, Iserunmun, and Ojoli (Enato and Oseghale 3; Itolor, Personal Communication). Collectively, their mission on earth is to organize the earth and to rule over the affairs of people and the spiritual world. The occasional and annual sacrifices such as the Ibiekumah's day of worship are of significance to the Esan people in Iruokpen. For each divinity values the specialization of the counterparts in maintaining orderliness in Iruokpen and Esan (Itolor, Personal Communication).

Iruikhide and Ibiekumah deities are great women, filled with supernatural powers beyond the comprehension of mortals (Ehichioya 29). Ekunmah in Esan oracle states that Ibiekumah Nojie is one of the Esan deities with charismatic ability and supernatural power that all Iruokpen people honour, respect, and certified as genuine throughout the world (Ehimare 16). Ibiekumah represents womanhood and motherhood (Odiagbe, Personal Communication). Among the Iruokpen deities/divinities, Ibiekumah has a special mission for the world (Itolor, Personal Communication). Like her Osun counterpart, she has power over fertility and fruitfulness (Adewale 42-45). She cures sicknesses and diseases. She has control over stillbirth and she hears the cry of the oppressed. Today, as it was then, Ibiekumah monitors the activities of witches and wizards (Enato, "Ibiekumah Nojie: Iruokpen's Goddess of Fruitfulness" 23). She recognizes and regulates the activities of sorcerers, medicine men and diviners (24). Iruokpen people appeal to Ibiekumah to forestall the threats of *azen* (witches) over themselves and their relatives (Itolor, Personal Communication). Ibiekumah has the ability to distort the plans of other deities/divinities especially

Esu who do not comply with the cosmic and social orders (Abimbola, “Ifa Dvination” 37). She believes in the peaceful co-existence of the divinities (Abimbola, “Yoruba Culture” 41).

Ibiekumah does not favour injustice among the Iruokpen and Esan people (Itolor, [Personal Communication]). Ibiekumah is one of the deities that wards off the evil activities of witches and sickness in the community (Itolor, Personal Communication). She constantly fights the enemies of her devotees. She represents her clients in the matter of their welfare, and pleads their case before other deities/divinities. Barrenness, accidents, premature death, nightmares and wars are some of the evils that Iruokpen and Esan people fear (Odiagbe, Personal Communication). As gods and ancestors have power over Esan communities, so do demons, principalities and familiar spirits. Supernatural powers can be malevolent or benevolent, offend or defend people in the community (Ajayi and Smith 6). Ibiekumah is the head of *azen* ‘witches’ (Philip Odekhian, Personal Communication). *Azen* can turn human and natural events to their advantage, but Ibiekumah makes sure that justice prevails in Iruokpen and Esan. For protection against evil, women are encouraged to bring their children to the shrine and riverbed to pray and offer sacrifices.

### **Ibiekumah Nojie, the Goddess of Fertility and Fruitfulness**

Ibiekumah Nojie is continuously recreating lives, or at least giving children to barren families (Enato, “Ibiekumah Nojie: Iruokpen’s Goddess of Fruitfulness” 15-16”). Ibiekumah’s source of power is *Osenobulua*. All deities/divinities derive their special power from *Osenobulua* too. Ibiekumah has a special power of granting children to women. Having a child is a necessity in Esan society. In the spirit world, Ibiekumah must release unborn babies to the earth. Any family that needs children often consults the *Ohens* (priests) to appease Ibiekumah (Enato “Ibiekumah Nojie: Iruokpen’s Goddess of Fruitfulness” 11-14). Having power over fertility, fruitfulness and protection gives Ibiekumah honour in the history of Iruokpen/Esan people. As a mother, she was a pretty woman and a symbol of beauty with huge beautifully structured breasts. She was one of the wives of a great Odionwele (Enato “Ibiekumah Nojie: Iruokpen’s Goddess of Fruitfulness” 19).

The concept of beauty in Nigeria/Africa is of two dimensions: the inward and outward beauty (Adewale 42). The latter is less significant than the former; to Iruokpen people inward beauty is the most desirable. It is called *Ose-Ekpen* meaning character or right attitude. The test of the aesthetic is more of action, inaction and reaction in all circumstances (Adewale 44). In Iruokpen's eyes, appearance is deceptive but character is more desired in a woman. Character is like smoke; it always reveals itself. For an Iruokpen person, black is beautiful, but a light person is more admirable, but one's attitude matters most (Itolor, “The Great Mother Ibiekumah” 21, 25, 28; Odedenokhua, Personal Communication). Some think that showering regularly can lighten the complexion. For this reason, some of her devotees think Ibiekumah is light in complexion because she is a goddess of a river (Odedenokhua, Personal Communication). In Iruokpen, like the Yoruba belief, no matter how beautiful a woman might be, not getting a husband is a shame for her and her family. Ibiekumah was married to the strong powerful Odionwele who was with her through thick and thin in her lifetime (Odiagbe, Personal Communication).

### **The Motherhood of Ibiekumah Nojie**

It is very difficult to get information on Ibiekumah and Odionwele's marriage historically. However, Irujekpen myths say that Ibiekumah cures infertility of womanhood and that power accorded her the honour of being called the mother of the childless (Itolor, "The Great Mother Ibiekumah" 43). She is a 'Mother' among Mothers who answers the prayers of the barren and impotent people. Ibiekumah knew the agony of being barren and the joy of being a mother because in her marriage she knew the joy of motherhood and the beauty and happiness children connote in marriage (Okaima, Personal Communication).

Barren women and impotent men, most especially women, often approach Ibiekumah for children. When they have children, these children are known as *Omo Osi Ibiekumah* 'Ibiekumah's children' (Enato, "Ibiekumah Nojie: Irujekpen's Goddess of Fruitfulness" 15). Ibiekumah's invaluable role in the production, reproduction and protection of children is cherished by the Irujekpen/Esan (Okaima, Personal Communication). Even at the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, Ibiekumah still cares for her "children" (Adewale 51). She is actively involved in reproduction as she gives her devotees the water of life (Beier 29-30; Okaima, Personal Communication). Any barren woman who drinks from her water becomes pregnant with strong supernatural faith. Iruikhide, as her co-divinity, moulds human images and put them in Ibiekumah's womb (Odiagbe, Personal Communication; Okaima, Personal Communication). Every human being born in land has to pass through her womb (Beier 30; Okaima, Personal Communication). Ibiekumah is a very beautiful person and all her children are beautiful in character and in appearance (Itolor, Personal Communication). For the Irujekpen/Esan and Yoruba, outward and inward beauties mirror the sacredness of the divinity (Beier 31; Okaima, Personal Communication). Ibiekumah's fertility is an important subject in keeping her history alive in the Irujekpen community and Esan society. It is a thing of joy to have a child who would inherit one's possessions. An Irujekpen proverb says "*omo nigho, omo pon no ne Uwa*" which connotes the idea that "having a child is greater than having money and wealth, so also a child/ or children is/are mightier than the palace" (Odiagbe, Personal Communication).

Ibiekumah had great wealth; she is called "a mother of riches, wealth, gold and diamond, "but her joy at being a mother made her important to the community (Itolor, "The Great Mother Ibiekumah" 32, 34 & 40). Ibiekumah is a hard-working mother. As mothers provide for and protect their children, Ibiekumah cares for hers too. One of the Esan sayings states that "*Aba Ole yan emi reweghan*" "father owns the world and all the children" in a polygamous family. This proverb indicates that each mother is responsible for the well-being of her own biological children in such a setting. Ibiekumah protects her children with all her powers. She protects her children from the most fearful group of killers known as *azen* 'witches'. Ibiekumah is the leader of *azen* 'witches, just as Christ Jesus is the head of every principality and, rulers of darkness in high places' (Itolor, "The Great Mother Ibiekumah" 42). Ibiekumah does not condole injustice, therefore, she punishes the wicked *azen* who do "havoc over the children or their parents" (Itolor, "The Great Mother Ibiekumah" 42). The people publicly mock any *azen* who kills children indiscriminately in the community (Odedenokhua, Personal Communication; Okaima, Personal Communication). This belief has enhanced the moral standards of the community.



Nobody can hide under the influence of spiritual power to perpetrate evil on innocent people. Ibiekumah acts on behalf of *Osenobulua*, to promote peace and harmony in the community (Oseghale-Uche “The Oguese Worshippers in Mutual” 19). Ibiekumah removes her protection from anybody who allows Esu ‘devil’ to use her against the innocents (Okaima, Personal Communication). Ibiekumah maintains checks-and-balances, injustice and equity among the people. Leadership, responsibility and accountability are closely link in the Iruokpen/Esan community. In short, Ibiekumah proves herself a true mother who possesses a spiritual force over human and spiritual beings (Itolor, “The Great Mother Ibiekumah” 51). She is responsible for protecting not only children but also pregnant women from a premature death (Odiagbe, Personal Communication). Miscarriages are not treated as normal occurrences for women. A spirit or a person is thought to be the cause of it (Itolor, “The Great Mother Ibiekumah” 11).

Ibiekumah is the goddess of "the Waters of Life" and spiritual guidance of Iruokpen, but her authority extends across Iruokpen and far beyond Esan society (Enato, “Significance of Ibiekumah River” 39-41). Ibiekumah's mysterious power is preserve in myths, songs, music and histories throughout Iruokpen and Esan society (Philip “The River of Life is Smiling” 16). One important institution that made Ibiekumah's fame spread beyond Esan is slavery. Slavery spread myths about Ibiekumah beyond Esan. So now Ibiekumah is known in some parts of the continent (Philip “The River of Life is Smiling” 19). However, Iruokpen and Esan worship strongly sustained Ibiekumah worship throughout Esan.

### **Socio-Cultural and Moral Significance of Ibiekumah Nojie to Iruokpen’s Advancement and Development**

It is pertinent to know that the significance of the deity of Ibiekumah Nojie in the overall socio-cultural and moral advancement and development of Iruokpen community is worth re-examining and re-evaluating. Ibiekumah’s socio-cultural significance runs deep within Iruokpen and the entire Edo identity and heritage. It is pertinent to know that, like her other sisters’ deities/divinities, such as Osun and Ovia, Ibiekumah Nojie never have specific period of festivity or celebration where everyone comes to dance and merry before her (Odiagbe, Personal Communication). A devotee needs no particular period to serve her. However, there is special and particular day of worshipping and celebrating her under the charge of the *Ohens* (priests).

The socio-cultural and moral significance of Ibiekumah Nojie in Iruokpen and the entire Esan region is well grounded to the extent that centuries after; her fame, power and might still spread all over the region. According to indigenous beliefs, Ibiekumah Nojie, was a virtuous and morally upright and pious woman. Beautifully born a virgin, and divinely born to be the source of life to her people. In her lifetime, she preached and taught her devotees, especially young girls about the sanctity of emotional purity and self-contentment (Philip “The River of Life is Smiling” 31-32). To her, virginity of a woman before marriage is the yardstick of respect and honour of a wife before her husband (Itolor, Personal Communication; Okaima, Personal Communication). In the market place, in the shrine, at the riverbank, in every festive gathering, she preaches purity and righteousness of the heart and mind. People thronged to her shrine and home because of her gentle and soft manners in dispensing information and knowledge (Enato, “Ibiekumah Nojie: Iruokpen

Goddess of Fruitfulness” 62). Virtue, ethic and moral are ever on her lips (Itolor, Personal Communication; Okaima, Personal Communication). Mothers in her lifetime, both old and young loved and respected her. The younger children surrounded her, jumping in joy and excitement at the sight of her (Odedenokhua, Personal Communication).

The cultural symbolism of the Ede Ibiekumah is so significant that Iruokpen and Esan cosmology wrapped it around a myth. The river is called, the ‘River of Life’ (Mallam, Personal Communication). The river was originally at a place called *Oto-Oke*, a boundary between the present Idumoza and Abia quarters before it later relocated to its present abode (Enato, “Ibiekumah Nojie: Iruokpen Goddess of Fruitfulness” 90-93). In the river lies everything good anyone could ever imagine. According to Esene Esene, the author’s paternal great-grand father, as depicted in his diary:

The Ede Ibiekumah cures sicknesses such as typhoid, elephantiasis, cholera, epilepsies, heart related diseases, flu among others. The potency of the river cures barrenness and revives back a dying person. Everything good is what the Ede Ibiekumah gives to us (Personal Diary 14-15).

The Ede Ibiekumah is still forever alive (Esene Esene, “Personal Diary” 17). It still flows and produces water of life for her children. The Great Mother Ibiekumah merely transferred her abode far away from Iruokpen due to ignorance and negligence of the people’s ancestors and ancestress.

The Great River Ibiekumah cures all manners of problems to the extent that Iruokpen became the beehive of socio-cultural and economic activities and land of tourism in the period of full effective activities before the era of colonial administration (Enato, “Western Education and Socio-Economic” 56-58). Persons of other Esan villages and towns journeyed into Iruokpen to seek help in matters concerning their spiritual needs. Farmers visit the grove to pray and request for high crop yield and bounteous harvests. Barren married women request for children from the Great Mother Ibiekumah. Single women request for husbands. Hunters pray for good hunts (Odiagbe, Personal Communication). The Ede Ibiekumah at the time until date attract people into the community, people of curious mindedness, people bedeviled with life problems and who need cures and healings. Iruokpen local friends and neighbours visited, neighbours from Yorubaland, Etsako, Benin, Ugbuyaya, Irrua, Uromi, Uhumudumu and Ora amongst others to feel and taste the supernatural presence and power of the great River Goddess (Enato, “Western Education and Socio-Economic” 61; Ediale 38-41).

Socio-politically, Iruokpen flourished and the land became blessed with enough food, rainwater and spiritual protection. The children born in that period received higher blessings because of the Great Mother Ibiekumah’s love and kindness for her children. The institutional frameworks of Iruokpen became blessed and tranquil to the point that her closest neighbours of Ozalla sent ambassadors to go study the modalities and concepts of governance of Iruokpen political and administrative systems (Odiagbe, Personal Interview; Enato, “Western Education and Socio-Economic” 63).

On the economic plane, the deity of Ibiekumah had serious effect on the people and society in general. Every specify days, the *Ohens* (priests) of Ibiekumah from Idumehonlen and Idumogo quarters assembled at the bank of the great river to offer sacrifices and ablution to the Great Mother Ibiekumah (Enato, “An Economic and Social Institutional” 209-211; Odiagbe, Personal Communication; Odedenokhua, Personal Communication). It is found as true that the water goddess appears in flesh to the priests and other favoured worshippers. The visit to the great river for sacrificial worship at *Oto-Oke* at Idumoza and Abia boundaries continued for over three hundred years before a strange happening transpired (Odiagbe, Personal communication; Osarodion, Personal Communication). The river without giving them a second chance, probably to test the people’s loyalty began to move away from her ancient original abode and position to far away Ebutte axis along Benin road (Enato “Ibiekumah Nojie: Irukep’s Goddess of Fruitfulness” 45-47). Market booms because of the booming activities of the river. Sacrificial items such as; white pigeon (*Inekuku*), white cock (*Okpa*), white piece of clothes, *ere* (cowries), parrot feathers, pigeon feathers, eagle feathers, mashed yam (*aha*), full pumpkin, sweet drink, market food, farm food, sugar cane, candle light amongst others were and are sort after by practitioners and visitors who seek the power and support of the Great Mother Ibiekumah. Market women prosper and farmers soar in wealth. The river held profound spiritual significance. Local folklore abounds with tales of the river deities and spirits, with rituals and ceremonies performed along its shores to appease and seek favour from these supernatural entities (Oseghale-Uche “Ere Usage in the Worship of Ibiekumah” 31).

According to Agbator, the paternal great-great grandfather to the author asserts that:

Trade in the colonial times flourished along the river’s bank, connecting inland communities with coastal trade routes. The Ibiekumah River became a crucial conduit for commerce, facilitating the exchange of agricultural goods and crafts. The riverbanks bustled with markets and trading posts where spices, hides and skins, pottery, ivory and exotic materials exchanged hands, attracting traders from distant regions. Irukep in this period boomed in all ramifications before the eventual drifting of the river from its original abode (Personal Diary 3, 4, 6, 9 & 12).

## Conclusion

From all intent, Ibiekumah Nojie is traditional deity worship, centered among the Irukep and Esan people. The spiritual potency, power and might of the deity/divinity have not lost its values and significances especially in Irukep and in the whole of Esan in Edo State Nigeria, and indeed the world over. The worship of the Great Mother Ibiekumah influences sense of cohesion, integration and solidarity into its adherents, thus resulting in the unity, which prevails in Irukep in particular, and the good neighbourliness it enjoys with other towns and villages at large. As a deity of local, national and international standard which, the people can identify with, the grove should be develop into a tourist center thus, fetching Irukep and Esan lots of foreign and attractive international investors into the community and society.

The teachings and values associated with Ibiekumah's practices and activities continue to influence Irukepken and Esan society, emphasizing harmony, prosperity, fruitfulness, fertility, and stable communal well-being. Ibiekumah's legacy is observed in various aspects of Esan culture including indigenous arts, music, rituals, marriages, learning and folklores.

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