

The Environment and the Cultural Festivals of the Opobo Kingdom in the Eastern Niger Delta

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Abstract

This work examines into the historical trends of the Opobo kingdom's cultural milieu, this study embarks on an illuminating exploration of its celebrated festivals, resonating with the very essence of the environment. Through a meticulous blend of primary and secondary data sources, it unravels the intricate interplay between the indigenous Ibani-Ijo cultural festivities and the surrounding milieu, including the Fungu/Owu festival, the Orukoro festival, and the Gig Regatta parade festival. At its core, this research endeavours to unveil the pivotal role of the environment in shaping the cosmological landscape of the Niger Delta people, particularly within the Opobo Kingdom. It seeks to not only underscore the environment's profound influence on cultural activities but also to meticulously document and preserve this invaluable heritage, imperilled by encroachments from foreign faiths. Remarkably, these cultural spectacles, deeply rooted in the fecund soil of the Niger Delta, exhibit a remarkable resilience against external challenges, manifesting their enduring socio-economic and political impact. Even cultural imports like the Amiwo and Nwoatam festivals undergo indigenous modifications, harmonizing with the local environment and thus bolstering their sustainability. Moreover, this scholarly work contends that these festivals transcend mere entertainment, serving as spiritual conduits that foster unity, peace, and progress within the kingdom and beyond. In light of the inseparable nexus between religion, culture, and environmental stewardship, the study advocates for collaborative efforts between governments and communities to safeguard these invaluable cultural legacies against the encroaching tide of foreign religions, thereby ensuring the preservation of Africa's rich heritage for posterity.

Keyword: Culture, Environment, Festival, Niger Delta, Ibani-Ijo, Owu, and Opobo

Introduction

Opobo is one of the two Ibani-speaking Ijo communities in the eastern Niger Delta. The people eluded their ancestral home, Bonny, in 1869 and founded the Opobo kingdom in 1870 (Oko-Jaja, 2020). The kingdom is located on the eastern fringe of the Eastern Niger Delta, at the estuary of the Imo River. The kingdom, like other Niger Delta communities, has a natural ecology and physical environment characterized by low-lying, flat, swampy terrain crisscrossed by a myriad of rivers and creeks, aggravated by excessive rainfall of about 4000 mm/year, which falls over nine of the twelve months of the year. (Dagogo & Fubara, 2005) The myriad of crisscrossed saltwater rivers and creeks made the kingdom an island, which also explains why fishing and salt-making became the economic preoccupation of the Opobo people.

The area is bounded in the south by the Atlantic Ocean, in the east by the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State, in the west by the Andoni (Western Obolo) and Nkoro, and in the north by the Ogoni people. From the location of the area, through the left, the community spread out under thick foliages of fresh water forests along the one-way direction of the Imo River; the run of the river covered hinterland sections of the Ogoni, Ndoki, Ibibio, Annang, Etche, and Ngwa, and to its right, the kingdom followed the tidal sweep of the Atlantic Ocean. The Atlantic Ocean enabled the Europeans to have access to the area in the pre-colonial epoch, thus enhancing inter-group relations between the people of Opobo and the hinterland communities through the Imo River highway. (Tuonimi, 2022: 17-32)

Like other communities in Sub-Saharan Africa, the environment in which Opobo is located influences her cosmology and, consequently, determines the nature of her festivals, such as the Fungu/Owu festival, the Orukoro festival, and the War Canoes parade festival. In the same vein, some of her borrowed cultures, such as the Nwaotam and Amiwo festivals, had undergone modifications over the years aimed at blending with the environment of the area, which had enabled their sustainability.

The Owu dance and the Orukoro activities are not peculiar to the Opobo alone or the Ijo people of the Eastern Niger Delta, but they went beyond these areas because the festivals are environment-oriented, and so many communities with similar environmental values also practice these festivals, though in a different pattern. The Owu and the Orukoro festivals of the Opobo people have to do with the gods and goddesses of the Opobo River. The root of these festivals lies in a particular notion of reality that runs through African culture. The unseen is as much a part of reality as that which is seen; in other words, the spiritual is as much a part of reality as the material, and there is a complementary relationship between the two, with the spiritual being more powerful than the material. (Kofi, 1978: 8)

Like many African communities, the Opobo people believed that there are deities inhabiting their water (great and small), and they are beneficent deities, which are crucial to their existence. The area enjoys the benefits of the ocean (Ebezi), river (Toru), and creeks (Okoolo), and the Adum is believed to be the god superintending over them, and it has salt water as its symbol. However, it is feared by all because it is a merciless god. It is believed that all kinds of fish, crustaceans, and animals in the salt water are his messengers.

Adum is seen as the leader of other deities, especially those he housed, and is therefore regarded as too powerful. Many saltwater deities are regarded as his wives, children, servants, and friends, such as Tololo, Okolobeibo, Adumta, Ikpali, Ojekurutu, Obolodo, Alamina, Kurokondo, and Owu Awo (Asara). Others are Simingi, Aduru (Ahim), Owu Egelegbe, Opuala, Tolofari, Ikuba, Owuekpe, Aya-Deearu, and Ebiji, among others, and they have their totems. (Abinye, 2020:39-47). These salt water deities, according to Opobo tradition, have the tendencies of being benevolent and malevolent in character. And since the economic mainstay of the Opobo people in the pre-colonial and colonial eras revolved around their water and beyond for trading activities with the hinterland people and the Europeans, efforts were made to whittle down the malevolent characteristics of the water deities and enhance their benevolent nature through sacrifice-oriented festivals aimed at appeasing them for good fortune from their river economic activities, which are crucial to their survival. Against this backdrop, many festivals since pre-colonial times have cropped up for this purpose and sustained themselves till recent times, such as the Owu/Fungu festival, the Orukoro festival, and the War Canoe Parade Festival.

Also, Opobo tradition is of the view that these festivals were sinequa non for Opobo economic development and sustainability in the pre-colonial and colonial periods. However, with

the collapse of the Egwanga Opobo sea port in the 1950s and the relocation of European firms to Port Harcourt sea port areas, as well as the rising European economic system predicated on western civilization, the festivals began to abandon their main purpose of establishment to a new trajectory for sustainability since river activities no longer occupy a prime place in Opobo's economic survival and development (Tuonimi, 2020). In the same vein, the adherents of the Christian religion introduced by the European missionaries and assisted by African freed slave converts from Sierra Leone into the Easter Niger Delta, particularly Bonny, in about 1864, waged a continuous war against these festivals aimed at obliterating them, but their resilience now lies on the new trajectory, which is mainly for entertainment.

The work will further a detailed study of the above indigenous festivals of the people of Opobo and underscore the role of the environment in the formation and sustainability of the festivals over time, vis-à-vis the economic survival and development of the area in the pre-colonial and colonial periods. Furthermore, the study will critically analyse sub-titles such as abstract, introduction, Fungu/Owu festival, Orukoro festival, War Canoe Parade Festival, and conclusion.

Fungu/Owu Festival

The Fungu, or Fongu, was a period in pre-colonial time in the Opobo kingdom during which the water deities were appeased through different Owu masquerade dances by the Ekina groups. The Ekina is the secret unit of the Owu Ogbo society (Abinye: 30). The Owuogbo society is a group of people, experts in the Ekina activities in their various houses, selected to perform special functions for the kingdom through the Owuogbo Dabo, appointed by the Amanyanabo. And the functions are such as the police of the town, custodian of the spiritual activities of the town, including the activities of the Owu (Spirit) masquerade dance, and among others.

The Fungu period falls between August and September every year. During this period of the year, the water is turbulent with different degrees of waves and, as such, not conducive to any activities in the river (Tuonimi, 2020). Opobo tradition is of the view that during this period, the water deities are displaying their Owu dances, and that was probably the reason why the river was turbulent, probably to prevent disturbances from human beings through their various activities in the water. Be that as it may, it worked for them as the people will stop every one of their water activities by deciding to set aside that period to display the Owu masquerade dances in the physical world as a sign of being in consonance with the water spirits and their activities, which symbolizes a deep respect for them and, as such, attracts benevolent rewards when they resume their water economic activities such as fishing.

The Ekina activities in Opobo started during the period when they were in Bonny. It began with the Oloma people, who are part of the Ibani (Bonny) aborigine that left Bonny in the early period of their settlement to Bille and later Ke and settled for years, but later migrated back to Bonny. They are specialists in the service of the water deities (Abinye: 49). However, with their mastery of the activities of the water spirits and since the Ekina Sekiapu dances of the Ke people have to do with the water spirits, they quickly mastered the activities of the Ekina Sekiapu, which are preoccupied by the Owu masquerade dances. On their return to Bonny in about the 17th century, they displayed, among other Owu masquerade dances, the Owu Mgbila, Bile Na Agiri, Ploba Owu, Owu Mbele, Sibi Na Mgbila, and Owu Asawo or Asara (Abinye: 30).

The Owu (spirits) are of different grades, and they have symbols and totems. It is their symbol and totem that is carved into a mask, and the masquerader is decorated with the mask, which he displays in a manner like the totem. In Opobo, there are many water spirits whose totems or symbols are carved into masks and displayed as masquerades, such as Aduru (Ahim),

Egbelegbe, Opuala, and Owu Ekpe (Ijuruma Okondo), among others. Like the Opu Ala, its totem is a dog, and the Owu-Ekpe's totem is a ram.

As noted, fish, water animals, and crustaceans are also carved into masks and displayed as masquerades, such as Otopo (hippopotamus), Oki (a species of shark with a barbed snout), Abah-Ofirima (hammer headshark), Mbe (tortoise), Agbara (a red snapper), Ofirima (a great white shark species), Doh-ru (Barracuda), Atabala (Tilapia), Ciki (Crocodile), Eke na Egurugu (python snake), Dibia Otopo Rhinoceros), among others. The masquerades are classified mainly into two: the Kiri Owu and the Ala Owu. The Ala Owu are predominantly water spirits; their costumes are fantastic as they are adorned with fascinating regalia of splendour, signifying reverence in the physical world. Ala Owu is a big masquerade, and as such, it does not go along. It goes with the crowd that keeps eulogising him with special songs and appellations. The masquerade is played by the Ekina of the different war canoe houses of the kingdom during the Fungu festival, supervised by the Owuogbo society.

The Owuogbo society also has its own calendar for masquerade activities in Opobo, and it is within the Alali period, which is an annual festival that occurs from January 1 to the end. Within this period, the Owuogbo masquerade began on January 2, and every War Canoe House must participate with their respective masquerade on a day assigned to them by the Owuogbo society at the King Jaja Monument playground. According to Opobo tradition, in the Owuogbo masquerade activities at the level of Kiri Owu, all the War Canoe Houses in Opobo must participate by presenting a masquerade of that kind to dance alongside others, while at the level of Ala Owu, the Owuogbo society assigns each of them to War Canoe Houses, and every War Canoe House must present theirs to perform on a day assigned to them by the society, and other houses must then present each of the Kiri Owu that dance alongside the Ala-Owu. For instance, the Agiri is assigned to the Oko-Jaja War Canoe House, Ijuruma Okonda is assigned to the Waribo Uranta War Canoe House, Ofuruma is assigned to the Black Fubara War Canoe House, Egbelegbe is assigned to the King Jaja War Canoe House, and so on.

The Owu festivals are strong, reminiscent of the environment and the history of the Opobo people. However, some of the songs that are sung during the festival are appellations made, as well as what the drummers say, particularly the talking drum, which serves as a mnemonic of the encounters between the founding fathers of Opobo and the water spirits, especially as it concerns their socio-economic survival and development. In another development, the Owu-Ogbo masquerade activities portray the unifying socio-political forces of the kingdom. The masquerades that come from all the war canoe houses in the order they have been arranged represent a show of loyalty to the monarch and a sense of oneness. The festival is one avenue that brings the people of Opobo together, unifies them, and fosters a sense of brotherliness that enhances the development of the area. Also, the festival is a playground for artistic talent to be nurtured and celebrated by the community. However, in contemporary times, the festival serves mainly as entertainment for spectators during the New Year festival. Also, the fungu masquerade activities, which are now left for the Owu cultural club as the Ekina of the War Canoe Houses are no longer active.

EGBELEGBE MASQUERADE



OFURUMA MASQUERADE



Source: Nengia, 2024

Orukoro Festival

The origin of this festival in Opobo is traced to Bonny, their ancestral home, through the Oloma people. As noted, the Oloma people were masters of the water spirit activities in Bonny, and through them, the knowledge of most water deities was known in Bonny in the 18th century and beyond. Orukoro or Owuamapu (people possessed with water spirit) festival is connected with the water spirit Ebiji, claimed to be the wife of a powerful male water deity, Simingi, with 'lighting' as its symbol (Abinye : 41) Simingi, a resident of Adum (saltwater), is claimed to be Adum's friend and has many children and servants, such as Tolofari, his first son, Opu-Ala, his second son, Aduru, and Egbelebe, his servants (Abinye : 39).

Ebiji, the wife of Simingi, is assumed to be the mother of all the water spirits related to Simingi, and as such, she was seen as a very powerful female water deity, with many other water spirits paying loyalty to her. This underscores the reason for the voluntary association of Orukoro people organised in her shrine annually to celebrate Adum and Simingi (Abinye: 43).

In the Opobo kingdom, the celebration began with the founding of the kingdom, as the shrines of these deities were moved from Bonny to Opobo when the Opobo section eluded Bonny in 1869 and established Opobo in 1870 (Oko-Jaja, 2020). As noted, the Orukoro people who established this celebration are people possessed by water spirits. They are predominately women, and they claimed that the water spirit is their spirit husband. This fact corroborates the claims by most Pentecostal church pastors that some of their members with spiritual challenges, especially the female folks, have water spirit husbands.

They usually prepare a special room in their apartments for the spirit husband. Some malefolk are also possessed by this water spirit, and for them, it is their spirit wife. The spirit visits them often, and when it comes, they behave in a strange way, seeming to be transported into a different plane because they speak in many tongues, particularly mainland Ijaw, with fluency. This development underscores the fact that the act of speaking in different tongues is not peculiar to the Christian faithful alone.

They organise their festival in Opobo every first Friday in January at the Ebiji shrine, which is located in the Dappaye Amakiri section of Opobo. During the celebration, they all dressed in white attire and sang different songs in Ibani-Ijo, inviting their water spirit husbands and wives. When they arrived after sacrifices had been made to the water spirits through the priest of Ebiji, they possessed them one after the other, and they began to dance and speak in strange ways and put up strange appearances as they entertained their guests in the arena. Interestingly, during the celebration, some of the spectators at the arena, especially the female folks, are usually caught by the water spirits and possess them as they begin to behave in strange ways.

It is important to note that members of the Orukoro society also observe the Amaiwo ceremony. It is a ceremony observed to welcome the seasonal crops, particularly the new yam and corn. It is celebrated between the months of July and August (Manilla, 2018). In the celebration, many of their members who cannot visit the Ebiji shrine observe it in their homes, while others assemble at the Ebiji shrine, and a ritual is performed with the new crops and other items at the river. The sacrifice is a sign of respect to the water spirits, i.e., by feeding them first with the new crops before them in the physical world can begin to eat the crops. It is their belief that, having performed this ritual, the water spirits will be happy and bless them with good fortunes for the year (Manilla, 2023). Also, for the sacrifices to be accepted, as noted in the aspect of the yearly festival during the Amaiwo celebration, they appear in white attire together with the basin that contains the items for the sacrifice, which is also pure white and covered with white cloth. This signifies purity, as the water spirits are seen to be. Some members of the Orukoro society are Friday Fubara, Amakiri Fubara, and Ada Oju Iwabere Fubara. These persons had served in different times as the priests of Ebiji. Other members are: Difini Jungo Manilla, Nwayiuku Ogbonna Fubara, Rose Oju Fubara, Madam Ure Uranta, Madam Justina Opusunji, Monday Tom-Brown, Esu Sam Epelle, Adonye Gogo, Aya Idiriya Eze Oko-Jaja, Atonye T. Eze Oko-Jaja, Madam Nwayinta Stewart, and Madam Erebie Oko-Jaja (Manilla, 2023).

These sets of people are regarded as special people with special gifts. They are revered, and they serve the kingdom as seers. With their spiritual powers, they assist in solving spiritual problems and healing people with strange ailments. With this development, people came from far and near to seek spiritual assistance that could help solve their problems. This contributed to enhancing Opobos' economy. In fact, the presence of these special people and their ability to offer solutions to many strange illnesses in the Opobo underscores the reason why, in the early period of the advent of Christianity in the Opobo, most of the indigenes embraced Christian denominations that incorporated some sort of African tradition in their churches, such as Garric Sokari Braide Christ Army Church, First African Church, and the Apostolic Church, among others.

The establishment of these African churches in Opobo and the inclusion of people with these special gifts as members propelled the establishment of spiritual prayer houses and ministries in Opobo by these people. These developments and the attacks from mostly adherents of Pentecostal churches contributed to the diminishing of the activities of the Orukoro festival in Opobo.

ORUKORO FESTIVAL



Source: Nengia, 2024

The War Canoe Gigs Parade

The environmental history of the Ibani-Ijo speakers of the Eastern Niger Delta revolved around rivers since about AD 1,000, when they left their kith and kin in the central Niger Delta to settle in an area close to the mouth of the Imo River (Horton, 1997). These proto-Ijo aborigines of the Eastern Niger Delta ferried from the central Niger Delta Area across many rivers to the Eastern Niger Delta Area. Their mastery of river activities, including canoe paddling, enabled them to discover the Imo River highway, hence the establishment of intergroup relations with the hinterland people of Igbo Annang, Ibibio, and others in pre-colonial times (Oko-Jaja, 2020).

The experts of the Ibani people on canoe activities, due to their environment, began the tradition of canoe gigs. The arrival of the Europeans on the Eastern Niger Delta coasts began the enhancement of trading activities between the Eastern Niger Delta communities and the hinterland communities for European trading interests. As a result, canoeing activities increased in the Eastern Niger Delta Rivers and beyond (Oko-Jaja, 2020). However, the increased activities of canoe movements in different rivers to and from the hinterland communities along the Eastern Niger Delta coasts for commercial activities contributed to the establishment of war canoes by different Eastern Niger Delta (Ijo) communities such as Bonny and Opobo for protection of their trading canoes against bandits and pirates who could bomb the communities, thereby threatening her territorial integrity as well as her economic interests (Epelle, 1970: 26).

Indeed, the serious hobnobbing between Bonny and the Europeans on trade engagements in the 17th and 18th centuries took a new twist due to the size of the dugout canoes, which ranged from small trading canoes of about 3 to 4 feet long to huge commercial-modelled canoes that contained about 150 people, including their goods (Ogolo: 2020). The establishment of the War Canoe House system from the Douwari system and the introduction of legitimate trade in Bonny later in the 19th century opened a new chapter in the canoe regatta exercise. Against this backdrop,

for a house to be recognized as a war canoe house, the founder must launch a war canoe of a very huge size that could contain about 150 trained warriors, canons, other arms and ammunition, and Ekerefare (a set of seven wooden gongs of different sizes and bases).

However, as the number of war canoe houses increases, the number of war canoes also increases in Bonny within the period. This explained the reason for the high number of war canoe houses that left Bonny to establish the Opobo kingdom. In Opobo, King Jaja understood the importance of war canoe activities following his Opobo section war with the Fubara Manilla section in Bonny, which contributed to his section exodus from the ancient kingdom. On this account, he encouraged the establishment of more war canoe houses in the Opobo kingdom. His administration equally set aside a date for the war canoes full military parade to showcase their military prowess by entertaining the audience (Cookey, 1974: 82). This perhaps was to enhance their physical and mental alertness as well as to be acquainted with new military developments and equally to infuse fear on their neighbouring and trading hinterland communities since the parade goes beyond Opobo territories. This explains the origin of the War Canoes gig parade tradition in Opobo.

In the same vein, the administration of King Jaja was instrumental in the establishment of the regatta gig system to be owned and manned by every war canoe house, especially when it was discovered that most of the war canoes always escorted the trading canoes, thus leaving the kingdom and the chiefs vulnerable to attack. The crew members of the regatta were responsible for communicating with their respective war canoes, and they equally served as bodyguards to their chiefs (Cookey, 1974). In fact, this development, since the colonisation of Opobo and the disarmament exercise of 1888, has metamorphosed into a regatta gig ceremony, which, since then, has taken the place of the war canoe gig parade festival and is being enhanced by the Nwaotam groups' canoe regatta ceremony held every 31st December in Opobo.

The War Canoe House regatta gig ceremony is one ceremony that is peculiar to the Eastern Niger Delta (Ijo) communities due to the establishment of the house system and, more importantly, their environment. In recent times in Opobo, the ceremony has been held during kingship coronation and burial, as well as chieftaincy installations. Note that for chieftaincy installations, it is only the war canoe house regatta that performs with the chief in the canoe, signifying his authority over the war canoe and members of the house. In the case of the king's coronation, all the 67 war canoe houses with their chiefs or representatives of a chief will be on board their war canoes, as the king will equally be on board the king Jaja war canoe (Omuaru), thereby signifying his authority over all the war canoes, including the chiefs and the people. Also, these ceremonies are performed on special dates in the kingdom and during the visit of dignitaries to the kingdom. The ceremony helps to bring Opobo sons and daughters far and near home and fosters unity and brotherliness among them, as well as loyalty to the traditional leadership of the kingdom.

The Opobo War Canoe Gigs Parade



Source: Nengia, 2024

The Contribution of the Study: This study delves deep into the intricate relationship between the environment, cultural festivals, and economic activities in Opobo. By examining how indigenous festivals are shaped by the local belief systems and economic practices, the research sheds light on the crucial role played by the environment in the kingdom's existence. This contributes to a broader understanding of the symbiotic connection between culture, environment, and economic survival in Opobo, offering valuable insights for scholars, historians, and policymakers alike.

Key Findings: The study reveals several key findings that underscore the significance of indigenous festivals in Opobo. Firstly, it highlights the ritual-oriented nature of these festivals, particularly the Owu and Orukoro festivals, as essential mechanisms for maintaining a harmonious relationship with water spirits. The study also emphasizes the impact of external influences, such as Christianity, on the decline of these festivals, especially the spiritual aspects. The demise of the Orukoro festival and its subsequent repercussions on the spiritual well-being and economic dynamics of the kingdom emerge as noteworthy findings.

The Research Methodology: In the pursuit of understanding Opobo's intricate cultural history, our endeavour was guided by a comprehensive research methodology. Drawing from the wisdom of various scholars, our approach was multifaceted, intertwining primary and secondary research, intimate dialogues with local sages in Opobo community, and keen observations in the field. As Geertz (1973) aptly noted, 'Culture is not a thing, it is a process,' and thus our methodology aimed to capture the dynamic interplay of historical, cultural, and economic forces shaping Opobo's identity.

The utilization of diverse methodological tools, as advocated by Denzin and Lincoln (2018), allowed for a rich, layered exploration of Opobo's cultural landscape. Through primary and secondary sources, we delved into the annals of history, unearthing forgotten narratives and elucidating the roots of cultural practices. Concurrently, our engagement with the living memory of the community, in line with Van Maanen's (1988) ethnographic sensibilities, provided invaluable insights into the contemporary manifestations of tradition.

By embracing this triangulation of data sources, we adhered to the principle of methodological pluralism, as championed by Guba and Lincoln (1994), thus fortifying the robustness and trustworthiness of our findings. Indeed, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) underscore, 'The credibility of a qualitative study hinges on the systematic triangulation of data.' In doing so, we navigated the labyrinth of Opobo's cultural complexities, illuminating its essence with scholarly rigour and sensitivity.

Implications of the Study: The findings of this study hold significant implications for both the local community and broader societal contexts. The decline of indigenous festivals, especially those with spiritual significance, has resulted in a spiritual vacuum in Opobo. The migration of individuals seeking spiritual solutions elsewhere adversely impacts the local economy. These implications underscore the need for cultural preservation and the revival of festivals as a means of sustaining both cultural heritage and economic well-being.

Recommendations and Suggestions: In light of the study's findings, several recommendations and suggestions emerge. Firstly, there is a pressing need for concerted efforts by the government and local authorities to revive and sustain indigenous festivals. This involves supporting traditional practitioners, ensuring the transmission of cultural knowledge, and fostering an environment conducive to the practice of rituals. Additionally, initiatives should be taken to integrate these cultural festivals into economic development plans, attracting investors and tourists to Opobo. Such efforts not only contribute to cultural preservation but also stimulate economic growth, providing opportunities for the local youth.

Therefore, this study provides a comprehensive exploration of Opobo's cultural landscape, emphasizing the interconnectedness of environment, festivals, and economic activities. The findings underscore the urgency of cultural preservation efforts for the benefit of present and future generations, both spiritually and economically.

Conclusion

The foregoing explanations underscore the fact that the environment where Opobo is located played a major role in her existence, such as her cultural festivals, economy, and cosmology. The indigenous festivals of the kingdom discussed so far are a reflection of the belief system of the people pivoted by the environment and orchestrated by the economic activities they engendered in the area.

In Opobo, like most other African communities, the people believed that their environment, which provided their economic means of survival, was under the influence of some gods, and to reap bountifully from the rivers that dominated their area, they must be in a good relationship with the water spirits, hence the need for these ritual-oriented festivals that are aimed at appeasing and propitiating the water spirits. The ritual characteristics of the Owu festival are a way of communicating with the water spirits for the purpose of maintaining a cordial relationship so that the spirits will continue to provide a good fishing environment, make fishing exercises successful, or increase the supply of fish. For the Orukoro festival, the ritual behaviour of its members is aimed at continuous enjoyment of the goodwill of the water spirits for good health, prosperity in their career, an increase in fertility, and a gift of more powers to enable them to solve more of the spiritual problems in their community and beyond. In the same vein, the ritual exercise in the War Canoe Houses gig parade tradition is meant to appreciate the potency of the powerful deities in the existence of the kingdom and to keep enjoying their support in times of war with neighbouring

communities, as well as to provide a good tide that will enable successful and robust commercial transactions in the Opobo River and beyond.

These cultural festivals were sine qua non to the existence and economic survival of the kingdom in the pre-colonial and colonial eras. The post-colonial era witnessed a massive exodus of Opobo people into diaspora for other economic activities such as white collar jobs, especially after the collapse of the palm oil trade. These developments and the influence of Christianity in the kingdom began to whittle down the activities of these festivals, especially the ritual aspects, thereby repositioning the festivals only for entertainment galore during the New Year period and other important days in the kingdom.

However, the Orukoro festival, which is purely a spiritual activity, has been obliterated in the kingdom in recent times following attacks from Christianity, the demise of their able members, such as the priest of Ebiji Shrine, and the unwillingness of anyone within the family to succeed him, as they all ran to become adherents of Christianity. This situation had created a serious spiritual gap in the area, and people with spiritual problems or strange illnesses are now moving elsewhere outside the kingdom to seek a solution. A fact that is impacting adversely on the economy of the kingdom.

Furthermore, efforts should be made by the government at all levels to help revive and sustain these cultural festivals, which depict the true identity of our history and our traditional belief system, for the benefit of present and future generations. It can also be harnessed for economic purposes by way of attracting investors and tourists all over the world to Opobo, as the development will help create jobs for the teeming youths of the area and beyond, thereby sustaining the festivals and projecting the kingdom, the state, and the country on the global map.

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