

**SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE OVIA RIVER TO THE BENIN  
PEOPLE OF EDO STATE**

**BY**

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND  
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## **CERTIFICATION**

This is to certify that this project work was carried out by **WISDOM OSASOGIE ORUMWENSE** in the Department of History and International Studies University of Benin, Benin City under my supervision.

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**Mr. O. G. Ekhaton-Obogie**  
**Project Supervisor**

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**Dr. Frank Ikponmwonsa**  
**Ag. Head of Department**

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**DATE**

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**DATE**

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to God Almighty for His infinite mercy and grace, who is the Alpha and Omega, to Him be glory both now and forever.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background of the Study**

Water is essential not just for life but also for the comprehension of landscapes. Water covers around 70% of the Earth's surface, with the majority (97%) residing in ocean basins.<sup>1</sup> nevertheless, only a minor portion of these fluids directly influence the topography of the land. Wind-driven waves and saline waters have significantly influenced coastal zones, both historically and currently, while sea level serves as a base level for many rivers. However, shallow groundwaters and runoff, constituting only 0.6141% of Earth's total water, predominantly shape the land surface, particularly at medium and small scales.<sup>2</sup>

Rivers predominantly influence the formation of the Earth's continental topography. The configuration of river patterns, namely the spatial arrangement of channels within the landscape, is influenced by topography and geological structure. At both site and sector scales, channel morphology exhibits spatial and temporal variability; nonetheless, river patterns and drainage texture, defined as the density of streamlines per unit area, collectively influence the complexity of the terrain. Most river patterns develop through natural selection. Slope generates patterns such as parallel, radial, and distributary, whereas structure results in straight, angular, trellis, and circular configurations. Once established, patterns generally endure.<sup>3</sup> However, at numerous

locations, typical patterns have been disrupted, resulting in anomalous configurations regarding slope and structure due to diversion, tectonism, volcanism, glaciation, mass movements, and anthropogenic activities; as well as through antecedence, superimposition, inheritance, or under printing; by the persistence of deeply eroding rivers encountering foreign structures; and by climatic change. River patterns offer insights about the foundational structure and the sequence of occurrences. They have also demonstrated considerable importance in the exploration for minerals.<sup>4</sup>

The Ovia River, located in Benin City with coordinates of 05°54'36"N 05°16'12"E covering a length of 120 km (75 mi) with a basin size of 2,500 km<sup>2</sup> (970 sq mi) and Discharge average of 42 m<sup>3</sup>/s (1,483 cfs) flowing through Edo State in Nigeria, holds profound socio-cultural significance for the Benin people, renowned for their rich history and vibrant traditions. This river is not merely a geographical entity; it embodies the spiritual, economic, and historical essence of the Edo people. The intertwining of the Ovia River with the cultural identity of the Benin community is deeply rooted in their mythology, rituals, and daily life, making it a vital component of their heritage.<sup>5</sup> The historical backdrop of the Ovia River is closely linked to the ancient Kingdom of Benin, which flourished from the 14th century until its annexation by British colonial forces in the late 19th century.<sup>6</sup> The river served as a lifeline for the kingdom, facilitating trade and agriculture. Its fertile banks supported the cultivation of essential crops such as yams and cassava, which were staples in the local diet. The river also provided a means of

transportation, connecting various communities and enabling cultural exchanges that enriched Benin's social fabric

The legend of Ovia, a beautiful maiden whose tears transformed into the river, encapsulates the cultural significance attributed to this waterway.<sup>7</sup> According to local lore, her story symbolizes sacrifice and transformation, serving as a reminder of the spiritual dimensions that rivers hold in many African cultures. This narrative not only highlights the river's physical presence but also underscores its role as a source of inspiration and reverence among the Benin people.<sup>7</sup> In Edo cosmology, rivers are often seen as sacred entities inhabited by deities and ancestral spirits. The Ovia River is no exception; it is associated with Ovia, a deity revered for her blessings of peace and prosperity. The worship of Ovia involves intricate rituals conducted by traditional priests and priestesses who seek her favor for various aspects of life, including fertility and protection from adversity. The annual Ovia Festival celebrates this deity through vibrant processions, music, dance, and offerings that foster communal unity and spiritual reflection.<sup>8</sup>

The festival's rituals are steeped in cultural prohibitions that reinforce social cohesion. For instance, women are traditionally barred from participating in certain rites to honor Ovia's sanctity. Such customs reflect broader themes of gender roles within Edo society and highlight how cultural practices surrounding the river serve to maintain social order and reinforce communal identities.<sup>9</sup> Economically, the Ovia River has been instrumental in sustaining local livelihoods. Its waters support fishing activities that

provide both food security and income for many families. Additionally, the fertile lands along its banks have historically facilitated agriculture, which remains a cornerstone of the Edo economy. The river's role as a trade route during pre-colonial times further accentuates its importance; it enabled the exchange of goods between different communities and contributed to the wealth of the Benin Kingdom<sup>10</sup>

The colonial period introduced new dynamics to the economic significance of the Ovia River. British colonial administrators recognized its strategic importance for trade and transportation, leading to infrastructural developments that altered traditional practices. Despite these changes, the river continues to be a vital resource for local communities in contemporary Edo State.<sup>11</sup> The socio-cultural significance of the Ovia River extends to its role in shaping Benin identity. It serves as a symbol of resilience and continuity amidst historical upheavals such as colonialism and globalization. The river's presence in folklore, art, and ritual practices reinforces a sense of belonging among the Benin people. Artistic expressions inspired by the river are prevalent in traditional crafts such as mask-making and sculpture, reflecting deep-seated beliefs about ancestry and spirituality.

Moreover, communal gatherings during festivals centered around the river foster intergenerational connections among community members. These events not only celebrate cultural heritage but also serve as platforms for passing down knowledge and traditions to younger generations. The Ovia River is an integral aspect of life for the

Benin people of Edo State. Its historical roots provide context for understanding its current socio-cultural significance. As a source of sustenance, spirituality, and identity, the river embodies the values and aspirations of a community deeply connected to its past while navigating contemporary challenges. The continued reverence for this waterway speaks to its enduring legacy within Edo culture—a testament to the intricate relationship between people and their environment that has persisted through centuries.

The Ovia River is not only a geographical feature but also a cultural and spiritual cornerstone for the Benin people. This river, which flows through the ancient Kingdom of Benin, has been integral to the socio-economic and cultural development of the region for centuries. Understanding the Ovia River's background involves exploring its historical significance, cultural narratives, and the socio-economic roles it has played in the lives of the Benin people.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The Ovia River, while celebrated for its cultural, spiritual, and economic significance to the Benin people of Edo State, faces a multitude of challenges that threaten its integrity and the well-being of the communities that depend on it. Despite its historical importance as a lifeline for agriculture, trade, and cultural identity, contemporary issues such as pollution, urbanization, and socio-economic changes have begun to undermine the river's role in local life.

One of the most pressing problems is environmental degradation. The Ovia River has increasingly become a victim of pollution due to industrial activities, agricultural runoff, and improper waste disposal practices. As communities expand and urbanize, the river's banks are often encroached upon, leading to habitat destruction and water quality deterioration. This pollution not only affects aquatic life but also poses significant health risks to local populations who rely on the river for drinking water and other domestic uses. The degradation of the river's ecosystem threatens traditional fishing practices that have sustained families for generations.

Economically, while the Ovia River has historically been a source of sustenance and livelihood through agriculture and fishing, current trends indicate a decline in these activities. The introduction of modern agricultural practices and competition from external markets has marginalized local farmers who traditionally relied on the river's fertile banks for crop production. Additionally, fishing communities face challenges due to overfishing and changes in fish populations linked to environmental changes. These economic pressures contribute to food insecurity and increased poverty levels among communities that have long depended on the river's resources.

Culturally, the Ovia River is intertwined with the identity and traditions of the Benin people. However, globalization and modernization pose threats to these cultural practices. As younger generations migrate to urban areas in search of better opportunities, traditional knowledge related to the river—such as rituals, festivals (like the Ovia

Festival), and sustainable practices—risks being lost. The decline in participation in cultural festivals can lead to a weakening of communal bonds and a diminished sense of identity among the Benin people.

Despite its significance, there is a notable lack of empirical studies focused on the socio-cultural dynamics surrounding the Ovia River. Existing literature often overlooks comprehensive analyses that integrate environmental science with cultural studies. This gap hinders effective policy-making aimed at preserving both the ecological health of the river and its cultural heritage. Furthermore, community voices are often marginalized in discussions regarding development projects that impact their environment.

In summary, while the Ovia River remains a vital resource for the Benin people, it faces significant challenges that threaten its ecological health, economic viability, and cultural relevance. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes environmental conservation efforts, economic support for local livelihoods, and initiatives aimed at preserving cultural heritage. This study aims to explore these dimensions in depth, investigating how they interact with one another and identifying strategies for sustainable management of the Ovia River that honor both its natural and cultural significance

### **Aim and Objectives**

The primary aim of this study is to explore the socio-cultural significance of the Ovia River to the Benin people of Edo State, Nigeria. This investigation seeks to

understand how the river influences various aspects of life within the community, including cultural practices, economic activities, and environmental sustainability. By examining these dimensions, the study aims to highlight the integral role of the Ovia River in shaping the identity and livelihoods of the Benin people. While the objectives include

1. To assess the historical importance of the Ovia River in relation to the development of agricultural practices and trade among the Benin people
2. To investigate the cultural narratives and spiritual beliefs associated with the Ovia River
3. To evaluate the current environmental challenges facing the Ovia River, including pollution and habitat degradation
4. To examine the socio-economic impacts of changes in river health on local communities.

### **Scope of the Problems**

The socio-cultural significance of the Ovia River to the Benin people of Edo State is intertwined with various challenges that affect its role in community life. These problems can be categorized into environmental, economic, social, and cultural dimensions, each impacting the river's health and the traditions associated with it.

## **Environmental Challenges**

One of the most pressing issues facing the Ovia River is pollution resulting from industrial and agricultural activities. The river has become a dumping ground for waste, leading to deteriorating water quality that poses health risks to local communities. As a primary source of water for drinking, bathing, and fishing, the contamination of the river directly affects the health and livelihoods of the Benin people. Studies have indicated elevated levels of heavy metals in aquatic life within the river, raising concerns about food safety and ecological balance (Iwemi, 2024). These environmental challenges threaten not only the physical health of the community but also undermine traditional practices that rely on a clean and sustainable river ecosystem.

## **Economic Impacts**

The economic significance of the Ovia River cannot be overstated; it has historically been a vital resource for fishing, agriculture, and transportation. However, as pollution increases and fish populations decline due to contaminated waters, local fishermen face diminishing returns. This decline affects food security and income for families who depend on fishing as their primary livelihood (Ovia River - Wikipedia, 2024). Additionally, agricultural practices along the riverbanks are threatened as soil quality diminishes due to runoff from polluted waters. The loss of economic opportunities linked to the river can lead to increased poverty and migration as families seek better prospects elsewhere.

## **Social Dynamics**

Socially, the Ovia River plays a crucial role in community cohesion through festivals and rituals. However, environmental degradation has led to tensions within communities as they grapple with declining resources. The annual Ovia Festival, which celebrates the river's cultural heritage, faces challenges in maintaining its significance when the river itself is under threat. The need for prohibitions during rituals—such as restrictions on women participating in certain rites—can create divisions within families and communities. Furthermore, as traditional practices are disrupted by modern pressures and environmental issues, younger generations may become disconnected from their cultural heritage (Yakubu, 2024).

## **Cultural Heritage at Risk**

Culturally, the myths and legends surrounding the Ovia River are integral to Benin identity. The story of Ovia—a maiden whose tears became the river—symbolizes sacrifice and resilience. However, as modernization encroaches upon traditional lifestyles, there is a risk that these narratives may fade. The younger generation may prioritize contemporary values over traditional beliefs if they perceive little relevance in maintaining cultural practices associated with an increasingly polluted river (Obomeghie, 2024). This disconnection can lead to a loss of cultural identity and heritage that has been preserved through generations.

## **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in its comprehensive examination of the socio-cultural importance of the Ovia River to the Benin people of Edo State, Nigeria. Understanding this relationship is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, the Ovia River has historically served as a lifeline for the Benin community, providing essential resources such as water, food, and transportation. By exploring its historical context, this study aims to highlight how the river has shaped agricultural practices and facilitated trade, thereby contributing to the economic development of the region. This understanding can inform contemporary discussions on sustainable resource management and economic planning.

Secondly, the cultural narratives and spiritual beliefs associated with the Ovia River are vital components of the Benin people's identity. The river is not merely a physical entity; it is embedded in local folklore and rituals that foster community cohesion and continuity of cultural practices. By investigating these cultural dimensions, this study seeks to emphasize the importance of preserving traditional knowledge and practices, which are increasingly at risk due to globalization and urbanization. This aspect of the research can contribute to efforts aimed at cultural preservation and revitalization within the community.

Furthermore, the study addresses pressing environmental concerns related to the Ovia River, including pollution and habitat degradation. As urbanization and industrial

activities increase, understanding how these factors impact both the river's ecosystem and local livelihoods becomes critical. By highlighting these environmental challenges, the research aims to advocate for sustainable practices that protect the river's health while supporting the communities that depend on it. This focus on environmental sustainability aligns with global efforts to combat ecological degradation and promote conservation.

Additionally, this study will fill a significant gap in existing literature by providing empirical data on the socio-cultural dynamics surrounding the Ovia River. Much of the current research tends to overlook comprehensive analyses that integrate environmental science with cultural studies. By addressing this gap, the study will contribute valuable insights that can inform policy-making and community engagement strategies aimed at enhancing both ecological health and cultural heritage.

Lastly, by identifying strategies for sustainable management of the Ovia River, this research will serve as a resource for policymakers, community leaders, and stakeholders involved in environmental conservation and cultural preservation efforts. The findings can guide initiatives that seek to balance economic development with ecological integrity while fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility among local communities. In conclusion, this study is significant not only for its exploration of the Ovia River's multifaceted role in Benin society but also for its potential contributions to sustainable development, cultural preservation, and environmental management in Edo State. Through a holistic approach that considers historical, cultural, economic, and

environmental dimensions, this research aims to enhance understanding of how natural resources can be managed effectively while honoring the rich heritage of indigenous communities.

### **Scope of the Study**

The scope of this study encompasses a comprehensive exploration of the socio-cultural significance of the Ovia River to the Benin people of Edo State, Nigeria. It aims to investigate various dimensions, including the historical, cultural, economic, and environmental aspects associated with the river. The research will focus on how the Ovia River has shaped agricultural practices, facilitated trade, and influenced cultural rituals and beliefs within the community. Additionally, it will assess current environmental challenges impacting the river's health and how these challenges affect local livelihoods.

The study will primarily target communities along the Ovia River, gathering qualitative and quantitative data through interviews, surveys, and observations. It will also involve a review of existing literature related to the river's ecological status and its cultural significance. By integrating both historical context and contemporary issues, this research aims to provide a holistic understanding of the Ovia River's role in the lives of the Benin people.

However, there are several limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. Firstly, due to time and resource constraints, the research may not cover all communities along the Ovia River comprehensively. This limitation could lead to a lack of

representation of diverse perspectives within the Benin population. Additionally, access to certain areas may be restricted due to geographical or socio-political factors, potentially impacting data collection efforts.

Another limitation is related to the availability of empirical data on environmental conditions and socio-economic impacts. While some studies exist regarding water quality and ecological assessments, comprehensive data specifically addressing the socio-cultural dynamics surrounding the Ovia River may be limited. This gap could hinder a thorough analysis of how environmental changes directly influence cultural practices and economic activities.

Furthermore, there may be challenges in obtaining accurate information from community members due to varying levels of awareness regarding environmental issues or cultural practices. Participants might have differing interpretations of their relationship with the river based on personal experiences or generational knowledge, which could affect the consistency of data collected.

Lastly, while this study aims to provide insights into sustainable management strategies for the Ovia River, it is essential to recognize that implementing such strategies often requires collaboration among various stakeholders, including government agencies, local communities, and non-governmental organizations. The effectiveness of proposed solutions may be influenced by external factors such as political will, funding availability, and community engagement.

In summary, while this study seeks to contribute valuable knowledge about the socio-cultural significance of the Ovia River and its associated challenges, it is essential to consider these limitations when interpreting findings. Acknowledging these constraints will help contextualize the research outcomes and guide future studies aimed at addressing similar themes in different contexts.

## **Methodology**

To do justice to this research, we shall adopt historical methods to describe the socio-cultural significance of the Ovia River to the Benin people of Edo state. Also, Primary sources like, textbooks, interviews (oral tradition) were consulted and secondary sources like journals, texts, online materials, and unpublished books, the internets and websites were also consulted in the course of this study.

## **Literature Review**

The Ovia (Osse) River rises in the Apata Hills of the Yorubaland plateau, characterised by gently undulating terrain and rolling hills, situated west of the Niger-Benue confluence and north of Kabba, inside the contemporary Ekiti and Kogi states of Nigeria. This local watershed serves as the origin for several other rivers in the region, notably the Ogun and Osun rivers. The river subsequently flows southward, initially traversing Kogi State, then delineating the boundaries between Ondo and northern Edo State, before re-entering southern Edo State, where it is joined by its principal tributary,

the Ogbese River, before discharging into the lower mouth of the Benin Estuary in the Gulf of Guinea.<sup>12</sup>

The Ovia River holds profound cultural and spiritual significance for the Edo people. According to local beliefs, the river is named after a beautiful maiden, Ovia, who transformed into the river. This narrative is deeply embedded in the cultural identity of the Benin Kingdom, symbolizing peace and providence. The river serves as a site for various rituals and festivals, notably the Ovia Festival, during which strict customs are observed, including prohibitions on women entering sacred areas. The Ovia River has historically been crucial for economic activities in the Obazuwa community and surrounding areas. It provides essential resources such as fresh water for domestic use, fishing opportunities, and transportation routes for trade. The river's banks have supported agricultural practices by providing fertile soils enriched by seasonal floods.<sup>13</sup>

According to wand, (2021)<sup>14</sup> the Ovia River holds cultural and spiritual importance in the region. Local myths state that Ovia, a lovely woman, was converted into the river, rendering it the biggest river in the kingdom of Benin. She is venerated in numerous cultures, however stringent customs are enforced. Women are prohibited from entering her holy groves. During the Ovia festival, a crucial aspect of the river's cultural legacy, the majority of men in the town retreat into the groves around the shrine for durations spanning from one week to three months. They don masks and periodically emerge to perform dances, frequently in ornate costumes. Everyone dancer embodies the

souls of former devotees, and everyone personifies their most direct male ancestor. These entities are thought to inhabit the boundary between the tangible world and the sacred domain.

The celebration is marked by numerous prohibitions and rites, with the community adhering to restrictions on sexual relations and disputes throughout this time. Women are prohibited from contacting the masqueraders or engaging in their activities. The Ovia Festival showcases dances, backed by the rhythmic banging of Ikpasa sticks, clappers, and music. The event concludes with the obodo, a platform for acrobatic displays. The festival serves as an occasion for the community to unite and demonstrate solidarity. During the festival, the blessings and curses solicited from Ovia are seen as especially powerful. Upon the festival's conclusion, the women of the community execute the Agbala dance, symbolising the men's reintegration into the tangible world. The event culminates in a ritual of reconciliation between the genders, emphasising the significance of collaboration within the community.<sup>15</sup>

The Ovia River watershed has been the origin of indigenous cultures and tribes for aeons. The lush banks witnessed the ascendance and decline of numerous ethnic groups, particularly the Bini and Esan peoples. These communities founded settlements, depending on the river's resources for nourishment. The Ovia River served as the essential foundation for agriculture, with its fertile soils enriched by annual inundations, promoting the cultivation of yams, cassava, and diverse foods that maintained local

communities. The river possessed deep spiritual importance. Local folklore is rich with narratives of river deities and spirits, accompanied by rites and ceremonies conducted along its banks to placate and solicit favour from these supernatural beings. Commerce thrived along the river, linking inland settlements with maritime trade routes. The Ovia River emerged as an essential channel for trade, enabling the distribution of agricultural products and artisanal handicrafts. The riverbanks thrived with markets and trading centres where ivory, spices, and unusual goods were exchanged, drawing traders from far-flung areas.

According to Yakubu, (2014) she indicates that women play significant roles in the worship of Ovia despite restrictions during certain rituals. The dynamics of gender within these practices reflect broader societal values regarding femininity and spirituality among the Edo people.

To Ovuede & Okpevra, (2024)<sup>16</sup> the arrival of European colonial powers significantly altered the socio-cultural landscape surrounding the Ovia River. Colonial administrators recognized its strategic importance for trade and transportation, leading to changes in governance structures that affected traditional practices among the Benin people.

The Ovia River, flowing through Edo State in Nigeria, holds immense cultural significance for the Benin people. This river is not merely a geographical feature; it is a vital part of their identity, spirituality, and daily life. The cultural practices associated

with the Ovia River are deeply rooted in the history and traditions of the Benin Kingdom, reflecting a rich tapestry of beliefs, rituals, and communal activities that have been passed down through generations.

One of the most prominent cultural practices linked to the Ovia River is the Ovia Festival, an annual celebration that honors both the river and its associated deity. This festival is a vibrant expression of community spirit and cultural heritage. During the festival, men traditionally withdraw into sacred groves for a period of seclusion, engaging in spiritual reflection and preparation for their roles in the festivities. This seclusion underscores the importance of spiritual purity and communal harmony during this sacred time. The festival is marked by lively dances and music, with masqueraders representing ancestral spirits. These performances are not only entertaining but also serve to reinforce social bonds and cultural identity among participants.

The deity associated with the Ovia River embodies peace and prosperity, serving as a central figure in various rituals. Worship practices involve offerings made by traditional priests who seek blessings for the community. These rituals often include prayers for protection from misfortune and requests for fertility, both in agricultural endeavors and family life. The narratives surrounding the Ovia deity are integral to the community's understanding of their relationship with nature and the divine. The story of Ovia—a beautiful maiden whose tears transformed into the river—symbolizes sacrifice and divine favor, reinforcing the belief that the river is a source of life and sustenance.

Economically, the Ovia River plays a crucial role in the livelihoods of the Benin people. It provides fresh water for domestic use and supports fishing activities that are essential for food security. Fishing along the river is not only an economic activity but also a culturally significant practice that fosters communal ties. Traditional fishing methods are often employed during communal fishing events, where community members come together to celebrate their shared heritage while engaging in sustainable practices that respect their environment.

Agricultural practices around the Ovia River are also influenced by its seasonal cycles. The river's flooding enriches the surrounding soil, making it fertile for farming. Consequently, harvest festivals are celebrated to give thanks for bountiful yields, further emphasizing the river's role as a life-giving force. These festivals serve as occasions for communal gatherings where stories are shared, songs are sung, and traditional values are reinforced. In addition to these practices, rituals performed along the banks of the Ovia River reflect deep-seated beliefs in fertility and prosperity. Women often partake in ceremonies aimed at seeking blessings for childbirth and family well-being. These rituals highlight the river's nurturing qualities and its association with motherhood and community cohesion. The observance of these customs not only strengthens familial ties but also fosters a sense of belonging among community members.

The artistic expressions inspired by the Ovia River further illustrate its significance in Benin culture. Various forms of art—ranging from music to dance and

visual arts—draw on themes related to the river, celebrating its beauty and importance in everyday life. These artistic representations serve as a means of preserving cultural narratives while educating younger generations about their heritage.

In conclusion, the Ovia River is a cornerstone of cultural identity for the Benin people of Edo State. Its influence permeates various aspects of life—from spiritual beliefs to economic activities—shaping community practices that have endured over time. The river not only serves as a physical resource but also as a symbol of unity, resilience, and continuity within Benin culture. Through festivals, worship practices, agricultural activities, and artistic expressions, the Ovia River remains an enduring source of inspiration and connection for the Benin people.

## Endnotes

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## CHAPTER TWO

# HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL OVERVIEW OF THE BENIN PEOPLE AND THE OVIA RIVER

### Introduction

The Benin people, known for their rich history and vibrant culture, inhabit a region that has undergone significant transformations over the centuries. The Kingdom of Benin flourished from the 15th to the 19th century and was a powerful entity in West Africa, renowned for its sophisticated governance, artistic achievements, and complex social structures. The kingdom's capital, Benin City, became a hub of trade and cultural exchange, particularly with European powers such as Portugal.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, the Benin Kingdom was founded around the 12th century. It was initially ruled by a series of kings known as ogisos, but it was under the reign of Oba Ewuare the Great (1440-1473) that the kingdom truly expanded and solidified its power. Ewuare transformed Benin City into a formidable military fortress, complete with impressive walls and moats. His reign marked a period of significant territorial expansion and cultural flourishing, as he established hereditary succession to the throne and promoted arts and craftsmanship, particularly in brass and ivory.<sup>2</sup>

The economy of Benin was heavily reliant on trade. The kingdom engaged in commerce with various regions, exchanging goods such as palm oil, ivory, and textiles.

The arrival of Portuguese traders in the late 15th century opened new avenues for trade, although it also led to darker aspects of commerce, including the slave trade. By the 16th century, Benin had established itself as a major supplier of enslaved people to European markets.<sup>3</sup> Despite these exploitative practices, the kingdom maintained its political autonomy and cultural identity until colonial incursions intensified in the 19th century.

The Ovia River plays a significant role in both the geography and mythology of the Benin people. Flowing through Edo State in Nigeria, it is not only a vital waterway for agriculture and transportation but also steeped in local folklore. According to legend, the river is named after a princess named Ovia who transformed her tears into a river following her unjust disgrace. This narrative imbues the river with spiritual significance, symbolizing sacrifice and resilience.<sup>4</sup> The Ovia River basin has historically supported diverse communities that relied on its fertile banks for sustenance through agriculture—particularly yams and cassava—while also serving as a conduit for trade between inland settlements and coastal markets.

The above was further corroborated by an interview by Omorogie where he stated that ‘In our culture, we believe that the river is not just a physical entity but also a spiritual one. There’s a beautiful legend that tells of a woman named Ovia who was transformed into the river. This story is significant to us because it emphasizes the connection between nature and our identity. The river is seen as a nurturing mother, providing sustenance and life to our communities. This was also a result of the oral

testamentary standpoints in the interview conducted by the researcher on Osaigie where he further stated that ‘The Ovia River is truly a lifeline for us, both physically and spiritually. We must continue to honor and protect it for future generations.’

Confort<sup>5</sup> stated that Ovia murmurs resonate through Benin City's cobblestone alleyways, where ancient myths still linger like morning mist. Ovia, a peace and providence deity, appeared during disturbance to offer calm and harmony. Weary of war, the people built shrines to Ovia and offered her ripe fruits, fragrant flowers, and soothing songs. Ovia in return gave the kingdom abundant harvests, safeguarded it, and promoted harmony. In Benin City's bustling markets, her influence is still evident in the beautiful beadwork, vivid textiles, and harmonising dance. Ovia reminds us that serenity is a choice, a harmony with ourselves and the planet, even in uncertain times. Life reflected Ovia's impact. Ovia was prayed to at royal coronations to grant the new ruler justice and wealth. Harvest festivals were dedicated to Ovia to celebrate the land's bounty and thank the deity for a good year. The Benin people, strongly connected to nature, knew true riches went beyond financial wealth. It meant community harmony, environmental harmony, and deep connectivity. Ovia's beauty and unshakeable personality attracted suitors from far and wide. Brave warriors offered ivory, gold, and rare animal skins to win her attention. Rich merchants in silks gave her things from abroad. Ovia stayed put. She was unmoved by wealth or fleeting adoration. Her heart desired a noble monarch who would rule the realm with knowledge and kindness.

Ovia's perseverance was legendary. As a symbol of power and self-worth, she inspired young women to pursue their aspirations and never settle. Her narrative reminds us that genuine love is an intentional choice based on one's principles and goals. A distant king, the king of Oyo, heard whispers of Ovia's appeal. The idea of making this remarkable woman his queen excited the king, known for his wisdom and kingdom's prosperity. He was driven by ambition, a worthy companion to love. Ovia's parents accepted the marriage, honouring the king's proposition. However, their daughter was more than a prize. Her wise and caring father gave her three special gifts to prepare her for this journey. This intricately carved, ancient magic-infused pot never ran out. She associated it with plenty and her homeland. A quick and intelligent dog, blessed with an unusual sense of danger, was entrusted to Ovia as a defender and a companion. This feathered oracle, with its vibrant plumage and sharp wit, was a source of wisdom and amusement. The parrot, it was said, could foresee the future and offer guidance in times of need. With these precious gifts and the blessings of her family, Ovia embarked on her journey to the Oyo kingdom, her heart a mixture of excitement and apprehension. Her future was unknown, but she had her spirit, her elders' wisdom, and the confidence that love, like the mystical water pot, would always sustain her. Ovia felt comforted by the water jug, which symbolised abundance and independence. It symbolised her home, roots, and self-sufficiency. With this certainty, and the everlasting loyalty of her canine companion and the wise counsel of her parrot, Ovia proceeded on her trek to the distant Oyo kingdom.

At the luxurious palace, the monarch, true to his word, supplied Ovia with a chamber adjacent to his own, a gesture that said volumes about his intentions. This proximity incited envy among the king's wives, powerful women who wanted to keep their rank. The shrewd and experienced elder wife planned to damage Ovia's reputation. She collected her wife for a leisurely snail hunt. Each wife brought a dish to collect the precious molluscs. Ovia declined, protecting the mysterious water pitcher in her white robe. Fate appeared malicious. Even though Ovia tried, the snails' slimy residue soiled her cloth as the women walked through the palace gardens. The plotting spouses used the stain, an unattractive spot on the beautiful silk. After returning to the palace, Ovia was unfairly accused. Ovia's conniving spouses used the stain to murmur about a "infection," a disease they claimed were on her. These whispers, like wildfire, swiftly spread throughout the court, culminating in a public shame for the young queen. Ovia retired to her quarters, heartbroken by betrayal and injustice. Her tears flowed like a river. Her tears filled her father's magical water pot as she cried. Ovia's tears, a sign of her anguish, became a powerful river. The flood reached her father's remote home, proving her feelings' strength. As the river ran, Ovia sent her father a solemn edict using water magic. "Safeguard my secrets," she said, "from women's prying eyes." In her grief, she believed that her fellow women's envy and scheming had driven her from her husband's home, a catastrophe that had forever changed her life.

Ovia became a Benin goddess of peace and providence due to her sacrifice and miraculous transformation. Because of her tears and spirit, the people made her a god. To

honour her, an annual festival was established to remember and celebrate. A unique festival tradition banned women from witnessing the rites. This constraint, resulting from Ovia's shift, was a heartbreaking reminder of the difficulties of female relationships and the significance of understanding and harmony. Traditional priests and priestesses perform Ovia rituals and ceremonies. Fruits, vegetables, and drinks are offered to the deity along with prayers and songs to benefit the community. The Ovia shrine, imbued with the deity's presence, is usually in a bush clearing a km from the hamlet. This remote area offers peace and quiet for spiritual communion. The shrine's centrepiece is a revered mud altar. This shrine holds a variety of jars with different uses, artistically sculpted chalk, dazzling cowry shells, and a brass Eroro clapper-bell whose tones are thought to summon the deity. Ukhurhe sticks, Ovia's most powerful sign, are laid on the altar before sacrifice. These roughly 120-centimeter-tall, beautifully carved sticks depict Ovia masquerades with the deity's power. Ovia is said to enter these Ukhurhe when called upon by the priests. Priests sit on two circular dried mud chairs on either side of the altar, a constant reminder of our relationship to the divine. A major Ovia event is the annual Ovia and Ugie Ododua Festivals, a time of celebration and spiritual rebirth. The celebration promotes solidarity and spiritual contemplation through colourful processions, traditional music, and beautiful dancers. Folklore, packed with tales of Ovia's wisdom and kindness, continues to be passed down from generation to generation. Edo society's stories emphasise peace, justice, and the human spirit's resilience.



### *The Ovia River*

In terms of cultural practices, music and dance are integral to Beninese identity. Traditional festivals often feature vibrant drumming and performances that celebrate both historical events and religious beliefs. The Voodoo religion, which has roots in Benin's spiritual practices, remains an essential aspect of cultural life. It influences various ceremonies that are deeply embedded in community life.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, oral traditions are vital for preserving history among the Benin people; stories passed down through generations recount tales of heroism, spirituality, and moral lessons.

Artistic expression is another hallmark of Benin culture. The famous Benin Bronzes intricate brass plaques and sculptures are emblematic of the kingdom's artistic prowess. These artworks not only serve aesthetic purposes but also document historical events and royal lineage.<sup>7</sup> The craftsmanship seen in wood carving and textile production further illustrates the sophisticated skills possessed by artisans within the kingdom.

The impact of colonialism on Benin cannot be understated. In 1897, British forces invaded Benin City, leading to significant destruction and looting of cultural artifacts. This invasion marked the end of the independent Kingdom of Benin as it was incorporated into British colonial rule. The legacy of this period continues to affect contemporary society in Benin today.<sup>8</sup> Despite these challenges, modern-day Benin has emerged as a politically stable nation with a commitment to preserving its cultural heritage while navigating the complexities of globalization.

In conclusion, the historical and cultural overview of the Benin people reveals a tapestry woven from resilience, artistry, and profound spirituality. The interplay between their rich past marked by grandeur and tragedy and their present-day identity continues to shape their society along rivers like Ovia that have nourished them for generations. As they honor their traditions while embracing modernity, the people of Benin remain a testament to the enduring power of culture in shaping human experience.

### **Benin People of Edo State: An Overview**

Benin is a historic African kingdom situated in present-day southwestern Nigeria. It is one of the oldest and most sophisticated kingdoms in the African hinterland, founded before 1000 AD and enduring until its colonization by the British Empire in 1897. The core of the ancient Benin kingdom is inhabited by a populace that identifies themselves, their capital, the kingdom, and their language as Edo, while 'Bini' was employed by early Europeans as a descriptor for the predominant ethnic group and their language. The Edo

are a segment of a broader linguistic category identified by ethnographers and anthropologists as the 'Edo-speaking' group of people. The Edo-speaking peoples occupied a region ranging from the rugged hills adjacent to the Igbirra and Igala communities in the north (currently within the Nigerian states of Kogi, Kwara, and Benue) to the periphery of the mangrove swamp in the southern coastal area, where they bordered the Urhob, Ijaw, and Itsekiri (present-day Delta and Rivers states of Nigeria). To the west, the Benin Kingdom bordered the Yoruba-speaking populations of contemporary Ondo and Ekiti states, while to the east, it adjoined the Igbo-speaking communities of southeastern Nigeria, with the River Niger serving as the demarcation line.<sup>9</sup>

The Benin people, primarily associated with the Kingdom of Benin, have a rich historical and cultural heritage that dates back to the early medieval period. The origins of the kingdom can be traced to the Edo people, who settled in the rainforests of West Africa around the 900s. Initially organized into small family groups, these communities gradually coalesced into a more structured political entity known as Igodomigodo. By the 12th century, the kingdom was under the leadership of a series of rulers known as Ogisos, which translates to "rulers of the sky." However, it was during the 13th century that significant changes occurred when the Edo sought assistance from Prince Oranmiyan of Ife to restore order, leading to the establishment of a new ruling dynasty with Eweka I as the first Oba (king) of Benin.<sup>10</sup>

The Kingdom of Benin reached its zenith between the 15th and 19th centuries under a succession of powerful Obas. One of the most notable rulers was Oba Ewuare the Great, who reigned from approximately 1440 to 1473. His reign marked a transformative period for Benin, characterized by military expansion, economic prosperity, and cultural flourishing. Ewuare is credited with establishing hereditary succession to the throne and significantly expanding the kingdom's territory. He also undertook extensive urban development projects in Benin City, fortifying it with impressive walls and moats that showcased both architectural ingenuity and military strategy.<sup>11</sup>

Economically, Benin thrived on trade, particularly in palm oil, ivory, and textiles. The arrival of European traders in the late 15th century—most notably the Portuguese—opened new commercial opportunities for Benin. The kingdom became an essential hub for trade along the West African coast, engaging in both legitimate commerce and the slave trade. The latter had profound implications for society, leading to increased militarization and social upheaval as communities were often raided for captives. Culturally, the Benin people are renowned for their artistic achievements. The famous Benin Bronzes intricate brass plaques and sculptures—are among Africa's most celebrated artworks. These pieces not only serve as aesthetic expressions but also document historical events and royal lineage. The craftsmanship in wood carving and textile production further highlights the sophisticated skills possessed by artisans within the kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

Despite its prosperity, the Kingdom of Benin faced challenges in the 18th century due to internal strife and succession disputes that often erupted into civil wars. These conflicts weakened central authority and led to a decline in economic stability. The situation worsened with the suppression of the transatlantic slave trade in the mid-19th century, which had previously been a significant economic driver for Benin.

The British invasion in 1897 marked a critical turning point in Benin's history. Following a punitive expedition that resulted in widespread destruction and looting of cultural artifacts, including many precious bronzes, Benin was incorporated into British colonial rule. This invasion not only dismantled centuries of political autonomy but also had lasting effects on cultural identity and heritage.

Today, although diminished in political power, the monarchy remains a symbol of pride for many Edo people. The current Oba serves primarily an advisory role within Nigeria's political framework but continues to be revered as a custodian of culture and tradition. The legacy of the Kingdom of Benin is preserved through various cultural practices, festivals, and art forms that celebrate its historical significance.

### **Historical Background of the Ovia River**

The Ovia River, located in Edo State, Nigeria, has a significant historical and cultural background that intertwines with the traditions of the Benin people. This river is not only a vital natural resource but also a symbol of cultural identity and spiritual significance within the region. Historically, the Ovia River is believed to have emerged during the early days of the Kingdom of Benin, which flourished from the 15th century

onward. The river is associated with the deity Ovia, who represents peace and providence in Edo mythology. According to local legends, Ovia was a beautiful woman who faced numerous challenges and injustices, ultimately leading to her transformation into a revered goddess. Her tears, shed in sorrow over her plight, are said to have formed the Ovia River, symbolizing her resilience and sacrifice.<sup>13</sup> This narrative underscores the river's importance as a source of spiritual sustenance for the Benin people and highlights its role in their cultural practices and ceremonies.

The Ovia River has played a crucial role in the economic development of communities along its banks. It serves as a primary source of fresh water for domestic use, including drinking, bathing, and cleaning. The river supports various economic activities such as fishing, sand mining, and transportation, making it essential for local livelihoods. Additionally, it has become a hub for recreation and tourism, attracting visitors interested in experiencing its natural beauty and cultural significance. Despite its many benefits, the Ovia River faces environmental challenges. Pollution from domestic waste and other sources poses health risks to local communities. Efforts to address these issues are ongoing as residents seek to balance economic development with environmental sustainability.

### **Role of Rivers in African Traditional Societies**

The work titled "Overview and Future Prospects of African Rivers Research" discusses the critical roles that Africa's river systems play in addressing the continent's

water and energy needs, particularly in the context of climate change and sustainable development. The authors analyze the potential for hydropower generation and the management of water resources across major African rivers, including the Congo, Zambezi, Niger, and Nile.<sup>14</sup> The authors emphasize that by the end of the century, low-cost hydropower could significantly contribute to meeting Africa's energy demands. They explore various challenges and opportunities associated with each river system. For instance, they highlight that while the Zambezi River has substantial hydropower potential, its usage is primarily limited to a few countries. The Niger River presents a more complex scenario with varying hydrological conditions along its length, necessitating tailored solutions for water management and energy production.<sup>15</sup> The Nile River is discussed in detail due to its intricate geopolitical landscape involving multiple countries. The authors point out that the Nile basin faces significant pressures from increasing populations and climate variability, which necessitates cooperative management strategies to ensure sustainable water use.

In a personal interview with elder James Ebohon on how Ovia River has benefited it neighboring communities. Firstly, Elder James Ebohon stated communities along the Ovia River, starting with their local government. Ovia North East is home to communities like Okokhuo, and Uhiere. Also Ovia South West which includes communities such as Iguobazuwa and Unuama. According to Elder James stated that these communities benefited from the Ovia River as it served as a source of water supply;

for drinking and other domestic use. For fishing and it provide a means of income and aided consumption. For agricultural purposes, transportation.<sup>16</sup>

Rivers play a vital role in African traditional societies, serving as essential resources for sustenance, cultural identity, and spiritual practices. They are not only physical entities that provide water for drinking, irrigation, and transportation but also hold deep symbolic and spiritual significance within various cultures across the continent.<sup>17</sup> Historically, many African civilizations have developed along major river systems such as the Nile, Niger, and Zambezi. These rivers have provided fertile floodplains that supported agriculture and enabled communities to thrive.<sup>18</sup> The cyclical nature of river flooding has shaped settlement patterns, with populations gravitating towards these water sources for their life-sustaining properties. Rivers have thus been integral to the development of social structures and economies in traditional African societies.

Culturally, rivers are often embedded in myths, legends, and folklore. They are depicted as sacred entities that connect the physical and spiritual realms. For instance, in many African cultures, rivers are believed to be inhabited by spirits or deities that require reverence through rituals and offerings. Water from rivers is used in purification rites, blessings, and other ceremonial practices that reinforce community bonds and individual identities. These rituals often occur at specific natural sites such as rivers, lakes, or

springs, which are considered sacred spaces where adherents can communicate with spiritual beings.<sup>19</sup>

The spiritual connection to rivers extends to the belief that human conduct impacts environmental health and water availability. Many African communities hold the view that moral and spiritual offenses can lead to droughts or poor rainfall patterns. Consequently, ensuring the health of rivers and surrounding ecosystems becomes a communal responsibility, often overseen by local leaders who perform rituals aimed at restoring the balance between humans and nature. Additionally, rivers have historically facilitated trade and migration, acting as conduits for cultural exchange among different groups. They have enabled the movement of goods and people across regions, contributing to the socio-political dynamics within traditional societies. The economic activities associated with rivers, such as fishing and transportation—have fostered specialized communities with unique cultural practices related to these livelihoods.

### **Cultural Practices and Beliefs Associated with the Ovia River**

The Ovia River, particularly in the context of the Edo people of Nigeria, is deeply intertwined with various cultural practices and beliefs that reflect the community's values and traditions. Central to these practices is the deity Ovia, who embodies concepts of peace, providence, and fertility. The river itself is considered sacred, with oral traditions attributing its origin to the tears of a woman named Ovia, who transformed into a goddess symbolizing sacrifice and resilience. This narrative underscores the river's significance as

a source of spiritual sustenance and community identity. One of the most notable cultural practices associated with the Ovia River is the annual Ovia Festival, which celebrates the deity and promotes communal unity. During this festival, vibrant processions, music, dance, and offerings are made to seek Ovia's blessings for peace and prosperity. The rituals are conducted by traditional priests and priestesses who play crucial roles in invoking the deity's favor for various aspects of life, including fertility and protection from adversity. The festival not only reinforces spiritual beliefs but also serves as a platform for social cohesion among community members.

Additionally, the Ovia Osese festival is significant for its role in marking the transition of young girls into womanhood. This rite of passage emphasizes values such as chastity and moral discipline within the community. The festival fosters a sense of belonging and identity among participants while also addressing contemporary social issues. Despite facing challenges such as declining youth participation due to modern influences and religious changes, the festival remains a vital expression of cultural heritage. The worship practices surrounding Ovia also highlight gender dynamics within Edo society. Women often form the majority of adherents to Ovia-related rituals, particularly those seeking fertility blessings. This reflects broader societal expectations regarding women's roles in family and community life. In an interview was conducted with Mr John Izevbizua on the cultural significance of the Ovia River to the Benin people. Mr John Izevbizua stated that the Ovia River holds a profound cultural significance for the Benin people. It has influenced their culture, which has positive impact in the

people's life. Economically, the river, has been a source of livelihood to the people. Izevbizua also mentioned its spiritual significance on how the river has been seen as a sacred body, a deity including the river goddess Osese. Mr Izevbizua expatiated that the river is an integral part of the Benin kingdom's rich cultural heritage and traditional values. He also mentioned the Osese festival which is celebrated annually; the celebration is dedicated to the river goddess Osese, and it's followed up with music, dances and rituals.<sup>20</sup>

### **Symbolism of the Ovia River in Benin Culture**

The Ovia River holds profound symbolism in Benin culture, particularly through its association with the myth of Ovia, a revered figure who embodies themes of sacrifice, beauty, and resilience. According to local legend, Ovia was a beautiful woman from Uhen village who vowed to marry only a king. Her story culminates in tragedy when she faces unjust accusations that lead to her public disgrace. Overwhelmed by sorrow, her tears are said to have transformed into the Ovia River, symbolizing her sacrifice and her transformation into a goddess of peace and providence within the community. The river itself is regarded as sacred, with strict customs governing its worship. Women are traditionally prohibited from entering its sacred groves, reflecting the cultural norms surrounding gender roles and spiritual practices in Edo society. The Ovia River is not just a physical entity but a spiritual one, representing the connection between the community and their ancestral beliefs.

The annual Ovia Festival is a significant cultural event that celebrates this symbolism. During the festival, men participate in rituals that involve seclusion and masquerading, embodying ancestral spirits. This period is marked by various prohibitions, including bans on sexual relations and quarrelling, emphasizing communal harmony and respect for the sacredness of the river. The festival culminates in performances that reinforce community bonds and express gratitude to Ovia for blessings received. In addition to its spiritual significance, the Ovia River has historically served as a lifeline for agriculture and trade in the region. Its fertile banks have supported farming communities for generations, making it integral to the sustenance of local populations. The river's role as a source of life further enhances its symbolic importance within Benin culture.

Overall, the Ovia River symbolizes not only the physical sustenance it provides but also the deep cultural and spiritual connections that shape the identity of the Benin people. It embodies narratives of resilience and community, serving as a reminder of their rich heritage and the values that bind them together.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE OVIA RIVER

The Ovia River, flowing through Edo State in Nigeria, holds profound socio-cultural significance for the local communities, particularly among the Edo people. Its importance is deeply rooted in mythology, cultural practices, and the economic life of the region. According to local beliefs, the Ovia River is named after a beautiful woman who was transformed into the river. This mythological figure symbolizes sacrifice and transformation, revered as a goddess of peace and providence within Benin culture. The story narrates how Ovia's tears filled a mystical pot, creating the river as a testament to her sorrow and resilience. As a result, she is worshipped in various communities along its banks, with strict customs governing her sacred groves—most notably, women are prohibited from entering these areas.<sup>1</sup>

The Ovia Festival is a significant cultural event that celebrates this mythology. During the festival, men engage in seclusion within sacred groves, donning masks and performing dances that represent ancestral spirits. This ritual not only honors Ovia but also reinforces community bonds and spiritual reflection. Prohibitions during the festival, such as bans on sexual relations and quarrelling, further emphasize communal unity and respect for tradition. The festival culminates with performances like the Agbala dance by women, symbolizing reconciliation between genders and marking the end of the men's seclusion. This event serves as a platform for expressing solidarity within the community and seeking blessings from Ovia.

Economically, the Ovia River has been integral to local livelihoods. Its waters support agriculture through annual flooding that enriches surrounding soils, enabling the cultivation of crops such as yams and cassava. The river also serves as a vital transportation route for trade, connecting inland communities to coastal markets. Historically, it facilitated commerce in goods like palm oil and rubber during colonial times when steamships navigated its waters. In addition to agriculture and trade, the river supports fishing activities, contributing to food security and local economies. However, challenges such as pollution from sewage disposal threaten its health and sustainability.<sup>3</sup>

In modern times, festivals like Ovia Osese serve dual purposes: they promote cultural heritage while addressing socio-economic issues within communities. These festivals foster dialogue on important topics such as development and social cohesion among residents. They also highlight the interplay between tradition and contemporary values, including religious tolerance among diverse faiths within the community. The Ovia River stands as a symbol of cultural identity for the Edo people. Its socio-cultural significance is reflected in its mythology, festivals, economic contributions, and role in fostering community unity. As both a natural resource and a cultural landmark, it continues to shape the lives of those who inhabit its banks while preserving their rich heritage for future generations.

## **Religious Significance of the Ovia River to the Benin People**

The Ovia River is deeply intertwined with the religious beliefs and practices of the Benin people, particularly through the veneration of the deity Ovia. According to local mythology, Ovia was a beautiful princess who, after suffering mistreatment in her marriage to a Yoruba king, transformed herself into the river. This act of transformation symbolizes her sacrifice and resilience, leading to her deification as a goddess associated with peace and providence in Benin culture. The river itself is viewed as a manifestation of her spirit, embodying both her sorrow and her enduring presence among the people.<sup>4</sup>

According to Pa Clement Uwaifo talks about the effect of social crisis of Ovia. The spiritual effect of the river instills fear on the people especially to punish defaulters of the law. This spiritual implication has helped to curb social vices in the communities as people are scared of its implication.<sup>5</sup>

Ovia is worshipped through various rituals conducted by traditional priests and priestesses, who seek her blessings for peace, fertility, and protection from adversity. The annual Ovia Festival is a prominent event that celebrates this deity. During the festival, vibrant processions, music, dance, and offerings are made to honor Ovia. Notably, women are prohibited from witnessing certain rites during this festival, underscoring the sacredness of the rituals and the reverence held for Ovia. The Ovia cult plays a crucial role in community life, fostering unity and spiritual reflection among participants. The deity is invoked during significant ceremonies such as royal coronations and harvest

festivals, where her blessings are sought to ensure prosperity and harmony within the kingdom. The rituals associated with Ovia not only reinforce cultural identity but also serve as a means of connecting with ancestral spirits.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, the Ovia River is situated within a traditional forest reserve that holds sacred significance. This area is preserved for spiritual practices, where hunting and fishing are forbidden to maintain its sanctity. The river's waters are seen as vital for both physical sustenance and spiritual nourishment, highlighting its dual role in the lives of the Benin people. In summary, the Ovia River holds profound religious significance for the Benin people as a symbol of transformation and resilience. Through worshiping Ovia, they express their cultural identity while seeking blessings for peace and prosperity. The rituals and festivals surrounding this deity serve to strengthen community bonds and preserve their rich spiritual heritage.

### **Role of the Ovia River in Festivals and Rituals to the Benin People**

The Ovia River plays a pivotal role in the cultural and spiritual life of the Benin people, particularly as it relates to the worship of the deity Ovia and various associated festivals. This river is not only a physical waterway but also a symbol of peace, providence, and fertility, deeply woven into the fabric of Benin's mythology and communal identity. The legend of Ovia narrates that she was a beautiful maiden whose tears transformed into the river, symbolizing her sorrow and sacrifice. This narrative has established the Ovia River as a sacred entity within Edo cosmology, representing both the

struggles and resilience of women in Benin society. The river is believed to flow from her emotional turmoil, thus embodying themes of maternal essence and the protective nature of women in their communities.

Central to the worship of Ovia are significant festivals that celebrate her influence and seek her blessings. The Ovia Festival is an annual event marked by vibrant processions, traditional music, dance, and offerings. This festival serves as a time for communal gathering, spiritual reflection, and renewal of cultural ties among the Edo people. During this festival, women are traditionally prohibited from witnessing certain rites, emphasizing the sacredness of the rituals performed by male priests. This practice reflects deep-seated beliefs about gender roles within the spiritual context of Benin culture.<sup>7</sup>

Another key event associated with the Ovia River is the Ugie Ododua Festival<sup>8</sup> which also highlights communal unity and reverence for ancestral traditions. This festival involves elaborate ceremonies where community members come together to honor their heritage and seek blessings for prosperity and fertility. Both festivals not only reinforce spiritual beliefs but also serve as platforms for social cohesion and cultural expression among the Edo people. The rituals surrounding these festivals often include offerings made to Ovia for peace, fertility, and protection from adversities faced by individuals and the community at large. Traditional priests perform intricate ceremonies that are steeped in symbolism and history, connecting contemporary worshippers with their ancestors.

In addition to its religious significance, the Ovia River has practical implications for agriculture in the region. It supports farming activities that are crucial for sustenance, thereby intertwining economic well-being with spiritual practices. The river's health is seen as reflective of community harmony; thus, its preservation is vital for both ecological balance and cultural continuity. In summary, the Ovia River is integral to the identity of the Benin people as it embodies their spiritual beliefs and cultural heritage. Through festivals like the Ovia Festival and Ugie Ododua, it serves as a conduit for communal expression, reinforcing values of peace, providence, and unity while celebrating the enduring legacy of women within Benin society. The river stands as a testament to their history, spirituality, and ongoing connection to ancestral traditions.

### **Economic Impact of the Ovia River on the Benin People**

The Ovia River is a vital economic resource for the Benin people, influencing various aspects of their livelihoods, trade, and agricultural practices. Its significance extends beyond mere geography; it has historically served as a lifeline for communities along its banks, shaping their economic activities and social structures. Historically, the Ovia River has been central to agriculture in the region. The fertile floodplains nourished by the river's annual floods have supported the cultivation of essential crops such as yams, cassava, and maize. These crops not only sustain local populations but also contribute to trade with neighboring communities. The introduction of new agricultural techniques and crops, particularly during the era of European contact, further enhanced agricultural

productivity. The Portuguese, for instance, introduced crops like maize and cassava in the 15th century, significantly boosting local diets and economies.<sup>9</sup>

Trade along the Ovia River has been a cornerstone of economic activity for centuries. The river served as a crucial transportation route that facilitated commerce between inland communities and coastal ports. Markets flourished along its banks, where traders exchanged goods such as ivory, spices, and other valuable commodities. This vibrant trade network was integral to the economic prosperity of the Benin Kingdom, allowing it to thrive through interactions with various cultures and economies.<sup>10</sup> In the colonial period, the strategic importance of the Ovia River was recognized by European powers, particularly the British. They established settlements along its banks, including Benin City, which became a hub for administrative and commercial activities. The river was navigated by steamships that connected inland areas to coastal ports, enabling the export of palm oil, rubber, and timber. This development marked a significant transformation in the region's economic landscape, as infrastructure such as ports and warehouses were constructed to support these activities.<sup>11</sup>

In an interview with Mrs Precious Okoro also contributed on the Economic purpose of the Ovia River. She stated that the Ovia River has boosted the economy of the people and neighbouring communities. It attracted the Ijaws to Benin. the Ijaws coming all the way from the Niger Delta to trade and also make a means of livelihood. They built canoes in which they used for transportation to aid movement across the river.<sup>12</sup>

In contemporary times, the Ovia River continues to play a crucial role in local economies. It supports fishing activities that are essential for food security and nutrition among the Benin people. Fishing not only provides sustenance but also serves as a source of income for many families. Additionally, recreational activities around the river attract tourism, contributing to local economies. However, rapid urbanization and industrialization have introduced challenges that threaten the river's health and economic viability. Pollution from domestic waste and industrial runoff poses risks to water quality and aquatic life, which could impact fishing and agricultural productivity in the long term. Efforts are being made by both government agencies and local communities to address these environmental issues through conservation initiatives aimed at protecting this vital resource.

In a tone of finality, the Ovia River is indispensable to the economic fabric of the Benin people. It underpins agricultural practices, facilitates trade, supports fishing livelihoods, and continues to shape community interactions with their environment. As such, it remains a critical asset that requires sustainable management to ensure its benefits for future generations.

### **Social Functions and Community Life around the River**

The Ovia River is a central element in the social fabric and community life of the Benin people, deeply influencing their cultural practices, communal interactions, and social structures. Its significance extends beyond its physical presence; it embodies

spiritual beliefs and serves as a focal point for various social functions. The river is intrinsically linked to the worship of the deity Ovia, who is revered as a goddess of peace and providence. This connection fosters a sense of identity among the people, as they engage in rituals and festivals that celebrate her legacy. The Ovia Festival is particularly noteworthy, as it involves elaborate ceremonies where community members come together in a spirit of unity and reverence. During this festival, men often enter seclusion in sacred groves, engaging in rituals that symbolize their connection to ancestral spirits. This practice reinforces gender roles within the community, as women are prohibited from participating in certain rites, highlighting the sacredness attributed to these traditions.<sup>13</sup>

The festival serves not only as a religious observance but also as a means of reinforcing social bonds. It is a time when communal solidarity is emphasized, with prohibitions against quarrelling and sexual relations during the festivities. Such restrictions are believed to enhance the spiritual potency of the blessings sought from Ovia, making this period vital for community cohesion. The culmination of the festival features dances and performances that celebrate both the return of men from seclusion and the reconciliation between genders, further solidifying communal ties. Beyond religious observances, the Ovia River plays a crucial role in daily life and economic activities. It provides essential resources such as fresh water for domestic use, fishing opportunities for sustenance, and fertile land for agriculture. The riverbanks are often bustling with markets where goods are exchanged, fostering economic interactions

among community members. These economic activities contribute to social dynamics, as they create spaces for interaction and collaboration among residents.

The river also serves recreational purposes, with locals engaging in activities like swimming and leisure outings along its banks. Such interactions contribute to community life by promoting socialization and cultural exchange among residents. The natural beauty of the river and its surroundings enhances its role as a gathering place for families and friends. However, the health of the Ovia River is increasingly threatened by pollution and environmental degradation due to urbanization and industrial activities. These challenges pose risks not only to the ecosystem but also to the social structures that depend on the river for sustenance and cultural practices. As communities recognize these threats, there is a growing movement towards conservation efforts aimed at protecting this vital resource.

In an interview with Mrs Josephine Osagie elaborated on how fishing in Ovia River has helped bring socio-cultural relations. The Ijaws who resides in Benin were known for fishing and trading as they are good at it. They fished in large quantity and sell for income. The natives also partook in fishing activities as it also benefited them. The Ijaws who came from far way land for this purpose. They pay homage to village heads and elders of the community before embarking on their quest.<sup>14</sup>

In summary, the Ovia River is more than just a physical landmark; it is integral to the social functions and community life of the Benin people. It shapes their cultural

identity through rituals and festivals while also providing essential resources that sustain their livelihoods. The interplay between spirituality, economy, and social interaction around the river underscores its importance in fostering community cohesion and cultural continuity among the Benin people.

### **Ovia River as a Cultural Heritage Site**

The Ovia River is not only a critical natural resource for the Benin people but also a profound cultural heritage site that encapsulates their history, spirituality, and communal identity. This river, intertwined with the legend of the goddess Ovia, serves as a symbol of peace and prosperity, reflecting the values and beliefs of the Edo people. The Ovia River is deeply rooted in the mythology of the Benin Kingdom. According to local lore, Ovia was a beautiful maiden whose tears transformed into the river, marking her as a deity associated with sacrifice and maternal strength. This narrative elevates the river beyond its physical presence; it embodies the spiritual essence of the community. The river is revered as a sacred site where rituals and festivals are conducted to honor Ovia and seek her blessings for fertility, peace, and protection. The Ovia Festival, held annually, is a vibrant celebration that showcases traditional music, dance, and offerings. This festival not only reinforces spiritual beliefs but also serves as a communal gathering that fosters unity among the people.

Historically, the Ovia River has played a pivotal role in the development of the Benin Kingdom. Its banks have been witness to significant events, including royal

coronations and harvest celebrations. The river facilitated trade and communication between communities, contributing to economic prosperity. The oral traditions surrounding Ovia have been preserved through generations, ensuring that her legacy remains integral to Edo identity. The river's historical significance is further emphasized by its association with various cultural practices that have evolved over time. As a cultural heritage site, the Ovia River serves multiple social functions within the Benin community. It acts as a gathering place for families and friends who come together for recreational activities such as fishing and picnicking. These interactions foster social bonds and reinforce communal ties. Additionally, the river's presence is felt in everyday life; it provides essential resources for agriculture and sustenance, thus underpinning the social structure of the community.

The rituals associated with the river often involve prohibitions against conflict during festivals, promoting harmony and collective well-being. Such practices reflect deep-seated values of cooperation and mutual respect among community members. The river also plays a role in gender dynamics within Edo society; certain rituals are exclusively conducted by men, emphasizing traditional roles while simultaneously creating spaces for women to engage in other aspects of communal life. Efforts to document oral histories and traditional practices associated with the river are crucial for ensuring that future generations understand its significance. By fostering awareness about the importance of preserving both the ecological integrity of the Ovia River and its cultural heritage, community leaders aim to strengthen ties between past traditions and

contemporary life. In conclusion, the Ovia River stands as a unique cultural heritage site that encapsulates the essence of Benin identity. It serves as a spiritual symbol rooted in mythology while also functioning as an economic resource that sustains livelihoods. The river fosters social cohesion through communal activities and rituals that reinforce shared values among the Edo people. As challenges arise from modern pressures, ongoing efforts to preserve both its environmental health and cultural significance will ensure that the legacy of the Ovia River continues to thrive for generations to come.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION ON THE SOCIO-CULTURAL ROLE OF THE OVIA RIVER

#### **Introduction**

The impact of modernization on the socio-cultural role of the Ovia River has been profound, reshaping its significance in the lives of the Benin people. Historically revered as a sacred entity and a vital resource, the river's role has evolved amidst the pressures of urbanization, industrialization, and environmental change. Traditionally, the Ovia River has been central to the spiritual and cultural practices of the Benin people. It is associated with the goddess Ovia, whose legend underscores themes of sacrifice and maternal strength. Festivals such as the Ovia Festival have historically served to reinforce community identity and cohesion through rituals that honor this deity. However, modernization has introduced a shift in focus from these traditional practices to more contemporary cultural expressions. As urban development encroaches upon the riverbanks, there is a growing concern that these sacred rituals may diminish or transform into more commercialized events, losing their original spiritual significance.

The rapid urbanization surrounding the Ovia River has led to significant environmental challenges. Industrial activities and agricultural runoff have resulted in pollution that affects water quality and aquatic life.<sup>1</sup> This degradation poses a threat not only to the river's ecosystem but also to the cultural practices tied to it. Traditional fishing

and farming practices that rely on clean water are increasingly jeopardized, leading to economic strain for communities that depend on these activities for their livelihoods. As pollution rises, so does the risk of health issues among residents, further complicating their relationship with this once-sacred waterway.<sup>2</sup>

Modernization has also altered the economic dynamics associated with the Ovia River. While it continues to serve as a source of water for domestic use and agriculture, increased demands from urban populations have strained its resources. The river is now viewed not only as a cultural symbol but also as an economic asset subject to exploitation for industrial purposes such as sand mining and construction. This shift can lead to conflicts between traditional uses of the river and modern economic interests, challenging community cohesion and altering long-standing social structures. The socio-cultural interactions around the Ovia River have changed significantly due to modernization. Historically, it served as a communal gathering place where families engaged in recreational activities such as fishing and picnicking. However, with urban expansion, access to these communal spaces is becoming limited, impacting social interactions among community members. The riverbanks that once fostered community bonding are increasingly lined with industrial developments, reducing opportunities for leisure and cultural exchanges.<sup>3</sup>

In response to these challenges, there are ongoing conservation efforts aimed at protecting the Ovia River and its surrounding environment. Local communities are

becoming increasingly aware of the need to preserve their cultural heritage alongside their natural resources. Initiatives focused on sustainable practices aim to balance modernization with ecological preservation, ensuring that future generations can continue to engage with the river in culturally meaningful ways.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, there is a growing movement within communities to document and revive traditional practices associated with the river. This cultural resilience reflects an understanding that while modernization brings change, it does not have to erase historical identities or spiritual connections.

In conclusion, modernization has significantly impacted the socio-cultural role of the Ovia River for the Benin people. While it presents challenges such as environmental degradation and shifts in community dynamics, it also offers opportunities for cultural adaptation and resilience. The river remains a vital symbol of identity and heritage; thus, ongoing efforts to protect its ecological health while honoring its cultural significance are essential for sustaining both community life and historical traditions in an ever-evolving landscape.

### **The Influence of Westernization and Urbanization on the Ovia River**

Westernization and urbanization have significantly impacted the Ovia River, altering its role and significance within the Benin community. Traditionally, the Ovia River has held immense cultural, spiritual, and economic importance. It has been revered in local folklore and religious practices, serving as a source of water for domestic use and

agriculture. However, the forces of Westernization and urbanization have introduced changes that challenge these traditional roles.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most noticeable influences is the growing detachment from the river's cultural and spiritual significance. As Western education and religion spread, local traditions and beliefs associated with the Ovia River are gradually being abandoned. This cultural shift has led to a decline in traditional ceremonies and the veneration of the river, which were integral aspects of the community's identity. Urbanization has also had environmental implications for the Ovia River. The expansion of urban areas has led to increased pollution from industrial and domestic waste, negatively affecting the water quality and biodiversity of the river. Deforestation and land use changes in the river's catchment area, driven by urban development, have disrupted the ecological balance, causing erosion and sedimentation.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, economic activities linked to urbanization, such as sand mining and over-extraction of water, have strained the river's natural resources. The demand for construction materials and water for urban settlements has exacerbated the degradation of the river, threatening its sustainability.<sup>7</sup> The combined effects of Westernization and urbanization highlight the need for integrated efforts to preserve the Ovia River. These include fostering environmental awareness, promoting sustainable development practices, and reviving cultural values associated with the river to ensure its protection for future generations

## **Changes in Beliefs and Practices Associated with the Ovia River**

The Ovia River, historically central to the cultural and spiritual life of the Benin people, has undergone significant changes in its associated beliefs and practices due to various socio-cultural and environmental forces. These shifts reflect the interplay between traditional values and modern influences, such as Westernization, urbanization, and globalization. The Ovia River was traditionally revered as a sacred entity, embodying the spirit of the goddess Ovia, a powerful deity in Benin cosmology. Rituals conducted along the riverbanks included offerings, prayers, and festivals designed to honor the deity and seek blessings for fertility, prosperity, and protection. These practices underscored the community's spiritual connection to the river and reinforced societal cohesion. The river was also governed by taboos and ecological practices that ensured its sustainability. For instance, certain days were considered sacred, prohibiting activities such as fishing and farming, thereby allowing the river's resources to replenish naturally. Such traditions were deeply intertwined with the community's ecological understanding and spiritual values.

The arrival of Western missionaries introduced Christianity, which often dismissed indigenous beliefs as pagan. Over time, traditional rituals and the veneration of the Ovia River were stigmatized, leading to a gradual decline in their practice. Schools and churches played significant roles in promoting alternative worldviews that further alienated younger generations from these ancestral traditions. Urban expansion in and

around Benin City has physically altered the Ovia River, leading to its degradation. Sand mining, deforestation, and pollution from industrial and domestic sources have diminished the river's natural beauty and utility. The transformation of the river into a resource for urban development rather than a sacred entity has further eroded traditional practices. Globalization has introduced new cultural norms and economic priorities, emphasizing modern lifestyles that often conflict with indigenous traditions. Younger generations, influenced by global media and technology, are less likely to participate in or even understand the rituals associated with the Ovia River. The shift from subsistence-based economies to monetized systems has also de-emphasized communal rituals tied to the river.

Despite these changes, remnants of traditional beliefs persist. Festivals and cultural events sometimes incorporate symbolic references to the Ovia River, though these are often more performative than deeply spiritual. Efforts to preserve and revive these traditions are emerging, particularly as part of cultural tourism and environmental advocacy. Some local leaders and activists are working to reframe traditional taboos as tools for modern environmental conservation. By linking indigenous practices to sustainability goals, these efforts aim to restore the ecological health of the Ovia River while rekindling its cultural significance. The changes in beliefs and practices associated with the Ovia River highlight a complex narrative of loss and adaptation. The decline in traditional rituals has weakened the community's cultural identity and indigenous ecological knowledge. However, the resilience of cultural practices and the possibility of

their reintegration into modern environmental management offer hope for a balanced coexistence between tradition and modernity.

## **Environmental Challenges Affecting the Ovia River**

The Ovia River faces several environmental challenges that significantly impact its health and the communities that depend on it. These challenges stem from a combination of urbanization, industrial activities, agricultural runoff, and pollution, all of which threaten the river's ecological integrity and the socio-economic well-being of the Benin people.

### **1. Pollution from Urbanization and Industry**

As urban areas expand around the Ovia River, increased human activity has led to substantial pollution. Industrial sites near the river contribute to water contamination through the discharge of untreated waste and effluents. Studies indicate that these industrial activities introduce harmful substances into the river, including heavy metals and hydrocarbons, which can have detrimental effects on aquatic life and human health.<sup>8</sup> The presence of coliform bacteria in water samples is a particular concern, as it indicates contamination from human and animal waste, often linked to inadequate sanitation facilities in urban areas.<sup>9</sup>

## **2. Agricultural Runoff**

Agricultural practices in the surrounding areas also contribute to the degradation of the Ovia River. The use of fertilizers and pesticides in farming leads to runoff that enters the river during rainfall. This runoff can increase nutrient levels in the water, promoting algal blooms that deplete oxygen levels and harm aquatic ecosystems. The introduction of excess nitrates and phosphates from agricultural sources poses a significant threat to water quality, making it unsuitable for drinking and recreational purposes.<sup>10</sup>

## **3. Impact on Aquatic Life**

The ecological health of the Ovia River is closely tied to its biodiversity, particularly its benthic macro-invertebrates, which serve as indicators of water quality. Research has shown that while some areas of the river maintain a diverse community of these organisms, pollution levels can significantly affect their abundance and diversity.<sup>11</sup> The decline in aquatic species not only disrupts local ecosystems but also impacts fishing activities that are vital for food security and economic stability for many families.

## **4. Groundwater Contamination**

The urbanization surrounding the Ovia River has also raised concerns about groundwater quality. As surface water becomes contaminated, there is a risk that pollutants may seep into groundwater supplies used by local communities. This

deterioration in groundwater quality can lead to long-term health issues for residents who rely on these resources for drinking and irrigation.<sup>12</sup>

## **5. Community Response and Conservation Efforts**

In light of these challenges, there is an increasing awareness among local communities about the need for conservation efforts. Initiatives aimed at improving waste management practices, reducing industrial discharges, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices are being advocated to mitigate pollution. Community-based programs focused on environmental education are essential for fostering a culture of stewardship towards the Ovia River.

Moreover, local leaders are calling for stricter regulations on industrial activities and better enforcement of environmental laws to protect this vital resource. Collaborative efforts between government agencies, NGOs, and community members are crucial for developing effective strategies to address these environmental challenges.

Conclusively, the environmental challenges affecting the Ovia River are multifaceted and require urgent attention. Pollution from urbanization, industrial activities, agricultural runoff, and groundwater contamination pose significant threats to both the river's ecosystem and the livelihoods of the Benin people. Addressing these issues through concerted conservation efforts and community engagement is essential for ensuring the sustainability of this critical resource for future generations. The health of the Ovia River is not only vital for maintaining biodiversity but also for preserving

cultural heritage and supporting economic activities within the region.

## **Government Policies and Their Effects on Cultural Sites**

Government policies play a crucial role in shaping the preservation and management of cultural sites, including those associated with rivers like the Ovia River. These policies can significantly affect the socio-cultural landscape, influencing how communities engage with their heritage and how effectively cultural sites are protected.

### **1. Legal Framework for Cultural Heritage Protection**

Effective government policies often begin with a robust legal framework that outlines the responsibilities of various stakeholders in preserving cultural heritage. Such frameworks are essential for protecting sites from degradation caused by urbanization, industrial activities, and environmental challenges. For instance, in many countries, laws are enacted to safeguard archaeological sites and cultural assets from destruction, ensuring that both natural and man-made threats are addressed. The lack of effective legislation can lead to the neglect of cultural sites, resulting in irreversible damage and loss of heritage (Ahmad, 2022).

### **2. Cultural Impact Assessments**

The implementation of cultural impact assessments is another critical aspect of government policy that affects cultural sites. These assessments evaluate how public policies—such as urban development or infrastructure projects—impact local cultures

and heritage. By considering the cultural implications of development projects, governments can make informed decisions that protect cultural sites while promoting economic growth. For example, UNESCO promotes cultural impact assessments to ensure that the social value of culture is integrated into policy-making processes, thereby enhancing community engagement and support for heritage preservation.<sup>13</sup>

### **3. Tourism Policies and Economic Implications**

Tourism policies also significantly influence the performance and preservation of cultural heritage sites. In Nigeria, for instance, tourism policies aim to enhance the country's natural and cultural heritage while promoting economic growth through tourism. However, the effectiveness of these policies often hinges on their enforcement and the involvement of local communities in decision-making processes. When tourism is prioritized without adequate protections for cultural sites, it can lead to over-commercialization and degradation of these important assets.<sup>14</sup>

### **4. Community Engagement and Participation**

Government policies that encourage community participation in the management of cultural sites tend to yield better outcomes for heritage preservation. Engaging local communities fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility towards their cultural heritage. Policies that support education and training for community members regarding the significance of their cultural sites can enhance awareness and advocacy for protection

efforts. Conversely, top-down approaches that exclude local voices may result in resistance or apathy towards preservation initiatives.<sup>15</sup>

### **Challenges in Policy Implementation**

Despite existing frameworks, challenges remain in effectively implementing policies designed to protect cultural heritage. Issues such as inadequate funding, lack of enforcement mechanisms, and insufficient stakeholder engagement can hinder progress. For example, even when laws exist to protect cultural sites, without proper resources or commitment from governmental bodies, these laws may remain ineffective.

Conclusively, government policies have a profound impact on cultural sites like the Ovia River by shaping the legal framework for protection, guiding tourism development, and fostering community engagement. While effective policies can enhance the preservation of cultural heritage and promote sustainable practices, challenges in implementation often undermine these efforts. It is crucial for governments to prioritize the integration of cultural considerations into policy-making processes to ensure that heritage sites are preserved for future generations while also benefiting local communities economically and socially.

### **Efforts to Preserve the Socio-Cultural Heritage of the Ovia River**

Efforts to preserve the socio-cultural heritage of the Ovia River are multifaceted, reflecting the river's significance in the lives of the Benin people. These efforts

encompass community engagement, cultural festivals, environmental conservation initiatives, and advocacy for recognition as a heritage site.

## **1. Community Engagement and Local Initiatives**

Local communities play a crucial role in preserving the heritage associated with the Ovia River. Initiatives often begin at the grassroots level, where community members actively engage in dialogues about the cultural value of the river and its surrounding areas. For instance, projects like Edo|cation have focused on documenting and mapping significant cultural sites along the river, enhancing awareness of their historical importance. This documentation not only aids in preservation efforts but also serves as a tool for advocating for the river's recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which would provide additional protections and resources for its conservation.<sup>16</sup>

## **2. Cultural Festivals**

The Ovia Festival is a key event that underscores the socio-cultural heritage linked to the river. This festival involves elaborate rituals, including men entering seclusion in sacred groves to perform dances that honor ancestral spirits. These practices reinforce communal identity and spiritual beliefs while fostering social cohesion among participants. The festival also serves as a platform for discussing important socio-cultural issues, thereby enhancing community solidarity and cultural pride. However, there are concerns about declining youth participation and the need for more inclusive decision-making processes regarding festival activities.<sup>17</sup>

### **3. Environmental Conservation Efforts**

Recognizing the environmental challenges faced by the Ovia River, various conservation initiatives have been implemented to protect its ecosystem. Pollution from industrial and agricultural activities poses significant threats to water quality and biodiversity. In response, local communities, supported by government agencies and NGOs, are advocating for sustainable practices that mitigate these impacts. Efforts include promoting responsible waste management, restoring natural habitats along the riverbanks, and conducting educational campaigns to raise awareness about environmental stewardship.

### **4. Digitization and Documentation**

Advancements in technology have also contributed to preservation efforts. The use of digital tools for mapping and documenting cultural sites enables more efficient monitoring of their condition over time. Aerial imagery and 3D modeling are being utilized to create detailed records of the river's cultural landscape, facilitating better planning and management of heritage resources <sup>1</sup>. This approach not only aids in conservation but also enhances public engagement by making information accessible to a broader audience.

## **5. Advocacy for Recognition**

Advocacy for recognizing the Ovia River as a UNESCO World Heritage Site is a significant aspect of preservation efforts. Such recognition would elevate its status on an international level, attracting attention and resources necessary for effective conservation. The local community's involvement in this advocacy is crucial; their narratives and experiences can highlight the river's cultural significance and foster support for its protection. Conclusion, efforts to preserve the socio-cultural heritage of the Ovia River are characterized by community engagement, vibrant cultural festivals, environmental conservation initiatives, technological advancements in documentation, and advocacy for formal recognition. These combined efforts reflect a deep commitment among the Benin people to safeguard their cultural identity while addressing contemporary challenges posed by modernization and environmental degradation. As these initiatives continue to evolve, they play a vital role in ensuring that the rich heritage associated with the Ovia River is preserved for future generations.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

### **Introduction**

The Ovia River holds profound socio-cultural significance for the Benin people of Edo State, serving as more than just a body of water. Its importance transcends economic and ecological contributions, encompassing spiritual, religious, and traditional functions that have shaped the identity of the Benin people for generations. Throughout history, the river has been deeply embedded in the cultural heritage of the region, playing a pivotal role in the spiritual beliefs, traditional rituals, and communal activities of the Benin people.

### **Summary of Findings**

One of the most striking aspects of the Ovia River is its religious significance. The river is revered as a sacred entity and is believed to be the abode of powerful deities and ancestral spirits. Traditionalists and worshippers often perform rituals and sacrifices at the river to seek divine intervention, protection, and prosperity. The Ovia deity, which is associated with the river, is widely respected and worshipped, particularly by those who seek spiritual guidance and blessings. This enduring belief system highlights the river's role in preserving indigenous religious practices and reinforcing the spiritual connection between the people and their environment.

Beyond its religious importance, the Ovia River plays a crucial role in traditional festivals and ceremonies. Several cultural celebrations and rites of passage are conducted along the riverbanks, reinforcing communal unity and continuity of cultural heritage. These festivals serve as platforms for storytelling, oral traditions, and historical preservation, ensuring that younger generations remain connected to their ancestry. The river is also central to purification rituals, fertility rites, and other ceremonies that mark significant life events within the Benin society. Thus, it functions as a cultural hub that fosters social cohesion and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Furthermore, the river has historically contributed to the economic sustenance of the Benin people. Fishing and farming are major economic activities facilitated by the river, providing a source of livelihood for many families. The fertile lands along the riverbanks support agricultural production, while the abundance of aquatic resources sustains the fishing industry. Additionally, the river serves as a means of transportation and trade, linking communities and enabling economic interactions. Despite modernization, the Ovia River remains a vital economic asset, reinforcing its multifaceted significance in the daily lives of the people.

From an ecological perspective, the Ovia River supports a diverse range of flora and fauna, making it a crucial component of the local ecosystem. The river's biodiversity provides food, medicinal plants, and natural resources that have been harnessed by the Benin people for centuries. However, in recent times, human activities such as

deforestation, industrial pollution, and urbanization have posed significant threats to the river's sustainability. The degradation of the river not only endangers its ecological balance but also threatens the cultural practices and traditions that depend on it. Therefore, efforts to conserve and protect the Ovia River are essential to preserving its cultural and environmental significance.

In conclusion, the Ovia River is a vital symbol of the socio-cultural identity of the Benin people of Edo State. Its role in religious worship, traditional ceremonies, economic sustenance, and ecological balance underscores its indispensable nature in the lives of the people. While modernization and environmental challenges pose threats to its continued significance, proactive measures must be taken to preserve and sustain the river for future generations. Awareness campaigns, environmental conservation efforts, and governmental policies should be implemented to safeguard this cultural and natural treasure. The Ovia River is not just a water body; it is a living testament to the rich heritage, traditions, and spirituality of the Benin people, making its protection a collective responsibility.

## **Conclusion**

The Ovia River holds deep socio-cultural significance for the Benin people of Edo State, serving as a vital source of livelihood, spirituality, and cultural heritage. This research has highlighted the historical importance of the river, its role in traditional practices, and the challenges it faces in the modern era. The river is not just a physical

entity but a revered symbol interwoven into the fabric of Benin traditions, influencing religious beliefs, economic activities, and community interactions. One of the key findings of this study is the spiritual relevance of the Ovia River. The river is believed to be the dwelling place of a powerful deity, Ovia, who commands deep reverence and is central to various religious ceremonies. Annual festivals and rituals are performed to honor the river goddess, reinforcing a strong cultural identity and continuity of indigenous beliefs. These religious practices have also fostered social cohesion, as they bring people together in communal worship and celebration.

Economically, the river serves as a vital resource for fishing, agriculture, and local commerce. Many communities depend on it for their daily sustenance, as fishing provides food and employment opportunities. The fertile lands along the riverbanks also support agricultural activities, further enhancing its economic importance. Additionally, the river facilitates trade and transport, playing a crucial role in the local economy of Edo State. Despite its significance, the Ovia River faces several contemporary challenges. Pollution from industrial and domestic waste threatens its ecological balance, posing risks to aquatic life and the health of dependent communities. Unregulated human activities, such as deforestation and sand mining, have also contributed to environmental degradation. Climate change has further exacerbated the situation, with rising temperatures and irregular rainfall patterns affecting the river's flow and sustainability. To preserve the socio-cultural and ecological value of the Ovia River, it is imperative to implement sustainable management strategies. Government agencies, local communities,

and environmental organizations must collaborate to enforce policies that protect the river from pollution and over-exploitation. Public awareness campaigns should also be promoted to educate residents on the importance of maintaining the river's health.

In conclusion, the Ovia River remains a vital aspect of the Benin people's identity, embodying their cultural heritage, spiritual beliefs, and economic livelihood. While modernization and environmental threats pose challenges to its sustainability, proactive conservation efforts can ensure that future generations continue to benefit from its resources. Preserving the Ovia River is not just about protecting a body of water; it is about safeguarding the history, traditions, and livelihoods of the Benin people.

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Precious Okoro	51	Trader	Benin City	27/02/2025
Clement Uwaifo	78	Civil Servant	Benin City	27/02/2025
James Ebohon	69	Clergy	Benin City	28/02/2025
Josephine Osagie	60	Trader	Benin City	28/02/2025

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