

**SOCIO-POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ABA FESTIVAL IN IGARRA**

**BY**

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**CERTIFICATION**

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **ESHOMOMOH OSHOMAH SAMUEL** in the Department Of History and International Studies University Of Benin, Benin City under my supervision.

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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my Mr and Mrs Eshemomoh, and Mr and Mrs Igwemma, who made it possible for me to pass throughout my time in school, God bless them.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My utmost gratitude goes to God Almighty for the gift of life, good health, wisdom, knowledge and understanding.

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I am grateful and highly indebted to my family, most especially my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Eshemomoh, for their love, prayer, financial support and continued words of encouragement, God bless them.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

#### **Introduction**

Festivalisation understood as a development of festivals and their influence on people and the surrounding space is not a new phenomenon. It is closely connected with the development of human culture, which dates back to the historical roots of the human kind.<sup>1</sup> Due to the close relationship between festivals and culture, it was decided to start the chapter by precisely defining the latter.

*Aba* festival is a channel through which the *Etuno* people showcase their culture to the entire world. Culture is the learned behaviour of members of a given social group. It is the learned, socially acquired traditions and lifestyles of the members of a society, including their patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Taylor sees culture as that complex whole, which include knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities acquired by man, as a member of the society.<sup>2</sup> Culture can be seen as the whole way of life of a people, which include their customs, habits, beliefs, religions and crafts, language, technology, dance, etc. It includes the rules and regulations that govern the behaviours of people in a given society. Society is known by its culture.

Culture is all that man has added to nature. According to Gertz, cited in Taylor, culture is a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.<sup>3</sup> thus, the *Aba* festival is a channel of transmitting and preserving the culture of the Etuno people of Akoko Edo Local Government Area of Edo State. A people without culture will not be able to stand the test of time in society, as the people will not be known. Thus, the *Aba* festival is celebrated to reveal the cultural of Etunos as a people, thus, during the celebration, people (celebrants) appear in white.

More so *Aba* festival is celebrated to commemorate the defeat of the original settlers, (*Anafuas, the Dwarf*). The final site where celebration of the festival, is called *Ofuamomo site*, along *Oshomorika* road, *Igarra*. The festival is celebrated among the Etuno people as a means of transiting from one age group to another. This is because it is used to know the end of age group, as people transit from one age group to another. And it is done by the age group called *Azebani*, meaning the *Big Men*.<sup>4</sup>

It is within this context that this study examines the socio-political and economic significance of the *Aba* festival of the people of *Igarra* in Edo state.

## **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this research is to examine the socio-political significance of *Aba* festival. To achieve this aim, the follow objectives are;

- i. To examine the historical background of the Igarra people
- ii. To examine the origin of *Aba* festival
- iii. To examine the cultural activities of the *Aba* festival
- iv. To examine the socio-political significance of the festival
- v. To examine the economic significance of the festival

## **Scope of Study**

The scope of study is focused to the origin, nature and manifestation of *Aba* festival. Also to examine some of its vital socio-political and economic significant of the *Aba* festival to the people of *Igarra*.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts the historical approach to research, utilizing both primary and secondary sources.

Primary Source which were utilized in the course of the research will be obtained from the interview with scholar, traditional rulers, elders, opinion leader and academia knowledgeable about *Aba* festival during the course of this research work.

Secondary source which were consulted in some university and public libraries across the country, included textbooks, Journals, articles, newspaper and online sources.

These sourced materials helped to provide information for a critical analysis for this research.

### **Literature Review**

Nigerian is a country endowed with a lot of cultural heritages sourced from its multicultural communities. Contemporary status of most Nigerian cultural heritages (both material and non-material) is best described as endangered. Cultural heritages can be defined as the sum total of the people's cherished arts, customs, festivals, sacred or worship sites, norms, values, ideologies, dress and dress-patterns, traditional monuments and architectures, technology and technological sites and other artifacts which are cherished and conserved for their historical, political, educational, recreational and religious significance among others. Cultural heritages are therefore the sum total of material and non-material cultures of a particular society transmitted across generations.

There is numerous works on festivals in Nigeria, but there is little literature on the *Aba* festival among the *igarra* people. To get a better understand of the *Aba* festival is to first of all get the conceptual definitions of festival. In antiquity, festivals were an emanation of the culture and religion of primitive

tribes. Later, they developed and became more diversified as a result of cultural advancements, among other things.

A. Falassi, book on “Festival: definition and morphology” wrote that festival are events which accumulate and represent social rebellion and protest. They may be qualified as a particular kind of events organised by the people against the establishment and the social order it represents.<sup>5</sup> The problem with this definition is that festival is a disorderly event against a organised society, this is clearly a Eurocentric event against Africans cultural festival.

C. Davies in his book titled “Festive Cities: Multi-Dimensional Perspectives” wrote “Festivals are distinctive because they take people outside their normal behaviours in time and space. They provide unusual activities and evoke feelings and emotions that are very different to the regular and material routines of the workday. Traditionally most took place in spaces that are either normally used for other activities such as roads or were empty spaces, but later become the exclusive sites for the period of the event—sites usually temporarily transformed by decorations and events that add to the sense of occasion and the separateness of the experiences gained in that space”.<sup>6</sup> Also in B. Quinn’s book “Festivals, Events and Tourism” defined festivals as “formal periods or programs of pleasurable activities, entertainment, or events having a festive character and

publicly celebrating some concept, happening or fact”<sup>7</sup>. Both Davies and Quinn gave a detail definition of festivals in Nigeria which will assist in this research.

The festival celebrated among the *Igarra* people of Edo State is known as the *Aba* festival, since this *Aba* festival is celebrated by the *Igarra* people, who are the *Igarra* people?

According to O. Pita and O. Femi in their book titled *Igarra*, wrote that, *Igarra* people migrated from the Kwararafa confederacy of the Junkun kingdom of Wukari in the present Taraba state of Nigeria in about the 21st century to Idah, in the present Kogi state.<sup>7</sup> They lately migrated from Idah about the year 1400. They were led by Ariwo Ovejijoh, who is said to be a disappointed claimant to the post of Atta of Igala land, having co-inhabited with the Igala/Okpoto union with his followers, for over three centuries.<sup>8</sup> After Idah, Ariwo Ovejijoh and his followers were said to have stayed briefly at Ajaokuta before migrating west wards from there to the present place called Etuno. However, some of his followers remained at Ajaokuta settlement, but lately came to *Igarra* Etuno as families to join their Kit and kin.

Pita and Femi book focuses on the culture of the *Igarra* people; it analyses the various ceremonies, celebration and religious initiation prevalent in the *igarra* society. This will help in understading the cultural signifinance of the people of *Igarra*.

Also, Ogumah, in his book, *The Igarra traditional rulership: Facts and fiction*, traced their origin to a single man called “Uno”. He further said that,

They were headed by a man known as “Uno”, these people were the aborigines of Etuno kindred. Most of them were later exterminated by Igarra people warfare while the remaining few ones fused into some kindred and pledged their loyalty to the Igarra king.<sup>9</sup>

Ogumah book centered on the traditional socio-political settings of the people of *Igarra* community. Since the origin and ancestral home and leader have been established, the next is the origin of the *Aba* festival.

On the Origin of the *Aba* festival, Prof. Bamidele Sanni in a publication by the Opaze Ometere Age Group titled, “2011 Irepa Festival” wrote that;

in The origin of the *Aba* Cultural Festival is almost lost to memory due to lack of historical records. It is originally a celebration of victory by the hunters over the initial settlers of the land now known and described as Igarra-Etuno. That is why most of the songs are the original hunter’s songs of victory.<sup>10</sup>

He further wrote that

On the day of the event, no other person is allowed to wear any white attire except the celebrants (the graduating Opoze) who would all climb a sacred Opoporiku Hills, the community’s Cultural Headquarters. This special day is preceded in the evening of the previous day by the shooting of ceremonial dance guns and cannons, first in the compound of the ODOVIDI i.e. the leader of the Age Group who must be the oldest celebrant from Eziakuta Opoporiku family by 2pm and followed by all the other celebrants by 4pm.<sup>11</sup>

This publication will help to get an insight into the *Aba* festival and its socio-economic importance to the *Igarra* people. Also various interview conducted will help in the course of this research.

It is against this backdrop that the above literature reviewed will be useful in examine the socio-economy importance of the *Aba* festival to the people of *Igarra*.

## **Chapter Outline**

The work is divided into five chapters which are presented as follows:

**CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND TO STUDY**, this chapter contains the introduction, aim and objectives, scope of the study, methodology and literature review.

**CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND OF IGARRA PEOPLE**, This chapter is to examine the historical origin of the *Igarra* people of Edo State.

**CHAPTER THREE: THE ORIGIN AND ORGANIZATIONAL OF ABA**, Nigerian is a country endowed with a lot of cultural heritages sourced from its multicultural communities

**FESTIVAL IN IGARA**, this chapter examines the different forms of foreign aid to Nigeria and the impacts they have on the Nigeria polity.

**CHAPTER FOUR: SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ABA FESTIVAL**, This chapter focus on the socio-political and economic significance of the *Aba* festival on the people of Igarra, also how this contributed to their socio-political.

**CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**, this chapter conclusion study.

## Endnotes

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12. *Ibid*

## CHAPTER TWO

### BACKGROUND OF IGARRA PEOPLE

#### **Introduction**

This chapter is to examine the historical origin of the *Igarra* people of Edo State.

This chapter will focus on the historical origin, socio-political structure, economic and cultural activities.

#### **Geographical Origin of Igarra**

Geographically, the area of study is Igarra (Etuno) in Akoko Edo Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. Igarra is a town located in the Northern outskirts of Edo state, Nigeria; a place very peaceful and unique for her customs and traditions. It is the administrative headquarters of the Akoko Local Government Area of Edo State. The distance from Benin City, Edo state capital, to Igarra is about 160 kilometers. Its topography is mountainous and situated on the lee-wind side of the Kukuruku Hill, with rocky terrain. Igarra has both Christians and Muslims and traditional festivals are always celebrated.<sup>1</sup>

Igarra people migrated from the Kwararafa confederacy of the Junkun kingdom of Wukari in the present Taraba state of Nigeria in about the 21st century to Idah, in the present Kogi state. They lately migrated from Idah about the year 1400. They were led by Ariwo Ovejijoh, who is said to be a disappointed

claimant to the post of Atta of Igala land, having co-inhabited with the Igala/Okpoto union with his followers, for over three centuries. After Idah, Ariwo Ovejijoh and his followers were said to have stayed briefly at Ajaokuta before migrating west wards from there to the present place called Etuno. However, some of his followers remained at Ajaokuta settlement, but lately came to Igarra Etuno as families to join their Kit and kin. Igarra is a word corrupted from "IGALA" whom were inhabitants of IDAH between the 12th and 14th century.<sup>2</sup>

When Igarra people migrated to this present place originally known as Etuno, they met a group of people called ANAFUA, ANIVA and ANDAKONI. They were headed by a man known as "UNO", these people were the aborigines of Etuno kindred. Most of them were later exterminated by Igarra people warfare while the remaining few ones fused into some kindred and pledged their loyalty to the Igarra king. Etuno means the land of "UNO" it is a derivative name from the said leader of the aborigines "UNO". Ete means land in Igarra dialect while UNO was the name of the leader of the first occupiers of aborigines of Etuno land. It is a common practice that a place is named from a physical feature or after a person as first occupier, settler or the leadership in the place. The Igarra people settled first at the root of the Kukuruku Hills, but later moved to the ridge and caves of the hills, because of intertribal war. Some of the people moved down to the present site in 1911 and the remainder in 1917, when the intertribal wars were ended.<sup>3</sup>

In Igarra there are numerous kindred each known as UNNA. Members of kindred's are males and females having one ancestral blood relation called ANDA(Family). Some kindred have over five thousand members while some has less. There are fourteen (14) individual kindred's in Igarra namely; *Andede, Eshinagada, Eshinogu, Eshinavaka* and *Andiba* kindred's. They are known as *EZIEZUH* (Sons of Tiger).They are d descendants of OTARU ARIWO-OVEJJO and the ruling houses in Igarra. We also have d *EZIODU,EZIAKUTA* and *EZIOGA* Kindreds Know collectively as the *EZIOBE* (sons of Hunter). While the rest which are few in numbers are the ONA,ANONYETE, ANOVEREWA, ESHIMAZOKO, EZIAKOZI and ANOSERI. Each kindred is non political, non religious and do not antagonize on another. Everything within kindred is shared according to men age group. During the migration, the Igarra people brought with them their king's regalia and relics as follows:

- Traditional drums – ARIGEDE
- Metal gong – ISUHE
- Scepter – OFAH
- Trumpet – OPANI<sup>4</sup>

These insignia are said to have been used in the authority of the Otaru Ariwo-Ovejijoh. The Igarra culture is derived from the traditions carried by the Igarra people from their original land coupled with aspects of the ETUNO and

IDAH cultures. The political structure of “age-group men” has been adopted by the aborigines.

### **Political Organization**

Historically, the Head of the Igarra is known as the *OTARU*, the name is derived word from the *ATTAH* of Igala, it is a royal and leadership title. This was stress by a report in 1940, according to R.L.V. Wilkes report of 1940;

‘The descendants of the village’s founder are now divided into five families, *Ayinded, Ishinagada, Ishinogu, Ishinavaka and Andigba* which in turn provide an *Otaru*, which was the founder’s title or is a corruption of it. Records show that the senior *Otaru* was recognized as village head in 1911 by the District Commissioner”<sup>5</sup>

The *Otaru* is supported by the Igarra Town Council which is made up each Heads of Kindred’s *Okomayin Odovidi* (Eziezueh Royal Family), *Idowoh* (Eziobe Kindred), *Ozokuh Ukanah*(*Eshimozoko* Kindred), *Iguretin-reyin* (*Anoyente* Kindred), *Otukoin-koin* (Anona Kindred), *Ozokuh Emmah* (Anoseri Kindred), *Ozokuh Anoverewa*(Anoverewa Kindred). The *Otaru* is the chairman of the Council

### **Hierarchical Order**

First – *Otaru* (His Royal Highness)

Second – *Okomayin* (Next in Importance)

Third – *Ukanah* (Crowing King-maker)

Fourth – *Oseh* (Elderst Oseh in Eziakuta)

Fifth – *Emah* (Eldest Emah of Single kindreds)

Sixth – *Azebani* (Council of Elders)

Seventh – *Opoze* (Administrators Councillors)

Eighth – *Opa Etete* (Junior Age Group)

Nineth – *Ayehne* (All Females)

Another sensitive title is that of *The OSHOWU* (Town Crier). The *Oshowu* is usually appointed by the *Otaru* of Igarra. It is a life time appointment and he is chosen from any kindred. The town crier is the traditional information officer or Announcer who proclaim any message from the *Otaru* across to igarra community.

### **Kindred**

The kindred's of Igarra are groups of families who share the same ancestral bloodline known as "Anda". Some kindred's have over five thousand members. There are two main groups of kindred's who share common traditional/customary rites, the EZIEZU (meaning sons of Panther) and EZIOBE (meaning sons of Hunter).

The EZIEZU group consists of the following kindred's: ANDEDE, ESHINAGADA, ESHINOGU, ESHINAVAKA and ANDIBA. They are the Great Descendants of the Otaru Ariwo-Ovejijoh and are the ruling houses of Igarra.<sup>5</sup>

The EZIOBE group consists of the following: *eziodu*, *eziakuta*, *ezioga*, *anoverewa* and *aziakozi*. They are the custodians of IDOWO (a wonder masquerade) and the *ASAU* deity.<sup>6</sup>

The single kindred families are namely the *anona*, *anoyente*, *eshimozoko* and *anoseri*. These single kindred's perform their own independent customary rites and celebrations.

In Igarra, age is revered and the eldest man and woman in a kindred group are identified and hold special privileges and powers. They are given gifts, tokens and proceeds from traditional ceremonies as a form of recognition and as their right as the elders.

The eldest male in each kindred holds all meetings and also is in possession of the kindred's relics. Female elders are known as *opashi* within their kindred and are free to attend any social gathering of their kindred.

The kindred groupings are only related by blood are not considered a political or religious organization and the structure is not set in a way to allow any antagonizing behaviours. This structure is based on the "men age-group" within the kindred and throughout Igarra.

### **Opa Administrative**

Traditionally and customary there are seven men-age-group known as OPA in Igarra at any given time. Each group is representative of every house and kindred at large. They take charge of various roles and responsibility as demanded by native law and customs for the day to day wellbeing and good government of

Igarra community. The various age group graduate from lower age group to the senior. It is just like classes in a school system, the tenure of an age group in any position is six years (Roman calendar). Age group activities usually culminating into celebration of IREPA festival when the 7<sup>th</sup> (Senior) age group (OPOZE) has completed their tenure and graduating in preparatory to take the AZEBANI (Elder Title). The first men-age-group were initiated into manhood in the year 1765 and were know a ARIMOKO age group. They celebrated the Irepa festival in the year 1795 to become the first Azebani in Igarra. Azebani is not an age group, all the age group usually graduate into the council after their tenure and are conferred with the Azebani

### **Beliefs in Igarra**

The belief of any African society is what make them different or similar to each other, in examining the belief of the igarra people is to have a better understanding on the cultural practices of igarras and how it has shaped their society.

### **Religion**

“Religion is the strongest element in traditional bavground and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned”<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the statement by John Mbiti is more truthful among the Igarra community than any other African ethnic group. The sky, the hills, the forest, the heavenly bodies and even man is a testimony of the existence of *Oshomoshi* (The Almighty God). As such the igarras acknowledge His presence in lighting, thunder and storm. When lighting dazzles the sky, it is an opportunity for the igarras to praise *Oshomoshi* invoking His protective influence against the destructive nature of thunder and lightning.

*Oshomoshi* come first in the consciousness of the Igarra. This is followed closely by a belief in the ancestors, the gods, witches and wizard, the force - *Irakwo* and *Azeeshi* and also reincarnation. For Igarra believe in the constant interaction between the living and the dead. The igarras do not have a formalised religion in the sense of Christianity, Islam or Buddhism where there are altars or temple erected to gods, where people gather once a week to give thanks, make request or offer prayers. They believe that religion is a thing of the mind and an all-time affair. Therefore, religion is to be seen in the day-to-day activities of the igarras in their festival and their moments of sorrow.<sup>8</sup>

## **Marriage**

The first marriage of any young man in Igarra is the sole responsibility of the parents. It is a debt they owe their son and such, they make all the arrangements for the marriage. Sometimes the young man only gets a slight hint o

the arrangement. The determining factor of any marriage between two young people is the family background. The father of the young man ensures that there is harmonious relationship between his family and that of the would-be in-law. He also ensure that the parents of the bride to-be are hardworking, sincere, kind-hearted, peace-loving, and most often economically independent. When these are ascertained, the father of the groom holds discussions with his wife who in turn discloses it to the parents of the bride. The parents of the groom begin to pay frequent visits to the home of the bride to sue their consent. If approval is given, the young man collects his age-mate from the immediate *Irenwuopo* and visits the father-in-law's farm for the first time. Young girls (mostly of the bride's age-group) from the groom's *Irenwuopo* are mobilised to visit the bride. The virtue of this visit is to show the size of the groom's *Irenwuopo* and to prove that the bride will be adequately catered for. The young man's father then pays the bride price. At this point, there is a second visit the groom to the father-in-law's farm with age mate. Then followed by the presentation of pounded yam to the husband, this is the first meal taken from the wife. The husband from this point on steals the wife's place to sleep and if perchance he meets her virgin, he pays some compensation to the parents who had taken good care f his wife.<sup>9</sup>

## **Divorce**

There are two types of divorce in Igarra. The ordinary divorce and the widow's divorce. The ordinary divorce is the parting of ways between a husband and a wife; if they discover that they can no longer stay together. This kind of divorce does not require any ceremony and the processes are clearly laid down. Where a woman is being ill-treated by the husband, she moves out of the house to her parents' home. The parents of the woman look for a man of the same age group with the husband to take the wife back to the husband. If the woman is really fed up, she resists all moves. This process is to determine the cause of her running out of the husband's house when it is discovered that she is unwilling to go back. The parents of the wife now ask members of the husband's age group to go to the husband and find out why their daughter should come back home. From then on the parents await the husband to come seeking the wife. Where the husband refuses to come looking for the wife, the wife waits for three months after which she becomes another man's wife. If she then gets married, she repays the bride price which the husband paid on her. On the other hand, if the husband comes asking, the dispute between the two is settled with judges drawn from the husband's and wife place of abode.

In the case of a widow, after mourning and it is discovered that she is not willing to marry from the husband's *anda*, she is left to go back to her parents.

From there, she gets married and repays the bride price as if she has been divorced from the living.<sup>10</sup>

The History of the Igarra people is far from being complete without mentioning the Aba festival, a festival celebrated every seven (7) years. The last Aba festival was celebrated in 2011,so u calculate when next it's coming up. The Aba festival attracts lots of attractions within and beyond. The most synonymous thing about the festival is the Aba drum which is brought out every seven years, it was seized from the Anafuas whom the Igarras met when they first settled on the hills. There are lots of displays during d Aba festival like the colourful masquerades who come out to dance and some males who dress up in female attires just for entertainment.

## Endnotes

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## CHAPTER THREE

### THE ORIGIN AND ORGANIZATIONAL OF ABA FESTIVAL IN IGARA

#### Introduction

Nigerian is a country endowed with a lot of cultural heritages sourced from its multicultural communities. Contemporary status of most Nigerian cultural heritages (both material and non-material is best described as endangered. Cultural heritages can be defined as the sum total of the people's cherished arts, customs, festivals, sacred or worship sites, norms, values, ideologies, dress and dress-patterns, traditional monuments & architectures, technology and technological sites and other artifacts which are cherished and conserved for their historical, political, educational, recreational and religious significance among others. Cultural heritages are therefore the sum total of material and non-material cultures of a particular society transmitted across generations.<sup>1</sup>

#### Origin

The origin of the Aba Cultural Festival is almost lost to memory due to lack of historical records. It is originally a celebration of victory by the hunters over the initial settlers of the land now known and described as Igarra-Etuno. That is why most of the songs are the original hunters' songs of victory. Eziakuta Family hunting expedition made them fearless, brave and bold. No wonder therefore that their role in the migration of ANETUNOS from Kwararafa (Junkun Kingdom) in Wukari, through Idah and other places to Ebira land and finally to

Akoko-Edo is most undoubted. Apart from being reliable, even when fighting against the European colonial masters, they are owners and custodians of most Igarra rich cultures, among which is the famous Aba Festival.

The Aba Festival is the most spectacular/singular event in the celebration of Irepa Festival. It is the highest crowd-pulling of all the Irepa Festival events. Available records show that the event was first celebrated in 1789, even though we have a trace of it to 1678, long before the arrival of the Europeans and the creation of modern day Nigeria. It is an age-long and internationally acclaimed festival adjudged as the sixth most indigenous festival in the whole of West Africa<sup>2</sup>.

The celebration of Aba festival in Igarra marks the commencement of Irepa/Azebani title ceremony. And it takes place every seven lunar or six global calendar years and usually on the third day after the ENU – the New Yam Festival of the same Irepa year, and which is usually in the month of August. The New Yam Festival is an annual event.

### ***Aba Festival and Opoze Age Group***

The Opoze Age Group is unique in the sense that it is always the center of attraction during the festival because having been at the helms of affairs of the town (making laws and enforcing same) for six years; its members are the Chief

Celebrants of the occasion. In an interview with Mr. Emmanuel Daniel Owolabi,<sup>3</sup> Mr. Micheal Bayo Ojo<sup>4</sup> and Mr. Fatimbi Ayo<sup>5</sup>, gave me a detail analysis of the Aba festival activities

On the day of the event, no other person is allowed to wear any white attire except the celebrants (the graduating Opoze) who would all climb a sacred *Opoporiku* Hills, the community's Cultural Headquarters. This special day is preceded in the evening of the previous day by the shooting of ceremonial dance guns and cannons, first in the compound of the ODOVIDI i.e. the leader of the Age Group who must be the oldest celebrant from Eziakuta Opoporiku family by 2pm and followed by all the other celebrants by 4pm.<sup>6</sup>

The morning of the Festival day is usually heralded with tremendous entertainment of food and drinks, usually prepared by the major celebrants, the graduating Opoze Age Group. A major delicacy is the pounded yam, which every celebrant prepares for members of his family and kindred. Assorted drinks and bush meat go with these, not to talk of drinks and this continues until everyone is exhausted. After this, it will be time to 'let the steam off' by each family member accompanying his celebrant(s) to 'Ofumamo', the cultural headquarters. While Ugbogbo celebrants gather at the junction leading to the venue of the celebrations, their colleagues from Utua and Uffa will meet them at the junction, so that together, they process, magnificently to 'Ofumamo' the cultural centre. By noon

the celebrants clad up in immaculate white Agbada, white shoes and cap to match – assemble at designated places to dance to Ofumamo at Opoporiku along Somorika road, Ugbogbo. Celebrants from Uffa will gather at Uneh, enroute to Ofumamo who are joined by their Utua colleagues and move in the same convoy to Ugbogbo. At Somorika junction (Ugbogbo Central Market) they are joined by the Ugbogbo people then the “Great trek” to Ofumamo begins.<sup>7</sup>

It is pertinent to note that the celebrants usually dress in immaculate white Agbada attire with bells/white horsetail, cap and shoes to match. As a mark of honour to these revered celebrants, no other person, (no matter how highly placed) is allowed to wear anything with a trace of white on that day.

At Ofumamo, in Opoporiku, the (Cultural headquarters) of Igarra the Aba drums which must have been set ready at the Iretuba – a stone at the centre of Ofumamo, by the owners and custodians (Eziakuta Opoporiku family), are beaten for the celebrants to dance from where they are specially gathered. They are followed by Opoga the celebrants successors who had specially stayed on the Agidibobo rock. The celebrants dance and descend from where they stand, which symbolizes their relinquishing of their Legislative, other roles, powers and duties to their successors. This confirms the ascension of each of the other age group into the age group system of the community. At this point, the Azebanis (Council of Elders) will send message to the celebrants to pay the Irepa fees, and they will

respond by paying the fees. This payment qualifies them (celebrants) to take the Azabani/Irepa titles from their various family heads at a later date.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, it gladdens the heart to know that from time immemorial traditional heads (Oshidu, Otaru, Oshemdase and Oshemi) do not go to Ofumamo to grace the Irepa-Aba celebrations because they do not have any spelt out traditional rites, roles or functions to perform at the Arena. In fact, no person or persons including the Head of Onubeji Household has any role or function to perform at the Arena of the festival. It is however on record that the first time in the history of Igarra a traditional head ever attended the occasion was in 1987 when HRH Late Okuo Iluse II, the Otaru of Igarra, attended it in his 25 years of reign. He attended it because of the high tension generated then, due to some rift within the Abara Onubeji household in particular and Eziakuta Opoporiku family in general. His attendance dust down the tension and the festival was very peaceful. During his reign, Aba festival was celebrated four times in 1975 by his own age group, Opa Egeremi, 1981 Opa Ibajumo, 1987 Opa Gomina and in 1993 Opa Awo and he attended only once.<sup>9</sup>

The forthcoming celebration is the 38th in the history of the peace-loving and highly amiable Igarra community. Igarra people from all walks of life, nooks and crannies of the globe with friends and well-wishers will come home either to witness or take part in it. The festival has witnessed a huge upsurge in the

member of tourists attending the festival particularly the last edition; the 37th series witnessed over three hundred and fifty thousand local and international tourists.

### ***Aba Festival Activities***

*First Irashi Upine:* This is the imposition of false fines on the members of the 2nd Age group who have been doing Orupa Ojiji clearing of the road for the past six years when they graduated to this age group; which incidentally coincided with the period of entry into Opozeship position of Igarra. The fines are to test their maturity, patience, resilience and tolerance.

*Itutunanebe Dance (Dance of the Youth):* It is to heralded the celebration of Irepa Festival and it takes place three days after *Irashi Apine*. This is a vivacious energy sapping dance accompanied by various forms of demonstrations that are done in turns, in the three quarters of Igarra at intervals of four months. It is done by the members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Age Group of Igarra.<sup>10</sup>

*Ojirekushi Enu:* After the Ugbogbo Age Group has done its Itutunanebe Dance on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day there is the Ojijirekushi Enu which is done same day throughout the length and breadth of Igarra. Essentially, this Festival is celebrated for dual purposes and determination of major events; the celebration of New Yam

Festival and Determining the date for the famous, vital all-embracing *Aba Dance* for celebration of the Irepa ceremony.

*Orupa Ojiji*: This means clearing the road and keeping the street clean. As soon the date of the New Yam festival is fixed, the members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Age group down the ladder of Igarra Age group hierarchy do this in their respective quarters in turn.

*Enu (New Yam Festival)*: This is one of the most commonly and yearly celebrated festivals in Igarra because its celebration is not restricted to Irepa festival alone. It is normally used as a Calendar to calculate years and particularly for years of Irepa at Igarra.<sup>11</sup>

*Aba Dance*: This is the most spectacular and singular event in the celebration of Irepa Festival. It is epochal and is the climax of the celebration of Irepa Festival. It is the most crowd pulling festival nowadays because during the celebration, Antunos from all walks of life from all nook and crannies would come to Igarra either to witness this seven years festival or take part in it. It takes place three days (Ude) after the celebration of the New Yam Festival (Enu). In the evening of the day preceding its celebration, its activities begin with singing, dancing in family groups and booming of guns, there is general merriments. Some of the songs sang are “*Opoponimi Aiyego*”, “*Oni mi Aiyego*”, “*Oyin Ekeshi Osiome yimi, Oyin Ekshi Osieme yimi*”, “*Unu pere ge opereged*”.

In the early morning of the “D” day people again assemble to dance in family groups with the celebrants who wear specially knitted dresses with bells in hand saying the “O tu mi no” (It is my turn).<sup>12</sup>

Oshishi-rida(stone climbing): This is usually performed by members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Age Group that will graduate to 3<sup>rd</sup> Age group after the AB Dance and their completion of all formal ceremonies connected with it, Itutuanene and Ezanova. They are led to climb the stones by their aged fathers in the previous night and are expected to stay there over night, singing, dancing and shooting guns, however, they will come down on the next early morning, where they do the communal work clearing the road.

Ezanova Dance: This is an adjunct of Oshishi-rida ceremony performed by the same age group that perform the rock climbing. After eating the pounded yam prepared for the families, this group will later in the noon assemble in their leader’s houses wearing the same dress and accompanied by their relations, dance the Ezanova round their quarters

Arido: Is a set of three drums owned by the following families; Eshinagada owns the biggest, Eshimozoko, the smaller one and Anoseri the smallest, which are used to perform the three stage of dance. They are still kept in one place in spite of the fact that they are owned by different families.

Eku-ku-shebe Masquerade: This is an integral part of the celebration of Irepa Festival but is gradually fading away as it left for young boys to perform. The materials used are made from Urena “Igenepe” rope which has been fermented in water to wash away its rough back and then woven into tassels. The masquerades add either shells or bells to it so that it can make a noise as they dance round.

Ibomi Dance: this is organised by the women of the different families and quarters particularly the celebrate wives and relations. They dance round the three quarters in turns, in specila dresses of gorgeous native attire, hold special spear-irons of about three to six feet, tied to it on the upper part is a piece of cloth or handkerchief.

Agagana Oziza: piece of Cactus are carried on the head by the members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Age Group in Ugbogbo quarters on behalf of their colleagues at Uffa and Utua quarters. They carry it to Upogo where they are planted to mark the commencement of Age group activities.

Ochi-online: means burying the stem of a tree or stick or stem burying. It is a secret burying of a ceremonial stick on Ireba mound at Uffa quarters towards Enwan road by leaders of Opoze at Uffa quarters.

Ofu-ofi-fu: this Etuno word Ofu-Ofifu means scattering the market. This marks the end of the other preliminary activities of Irepa Festival. It is done separately in the three quarters, with eight days intervals. There is an assembly of Azebanis of the quarter to whom Opozes or celebrants pay some money. This marks the end of the Opozeship of the celebrant.

Irepa reshi or Odombono: this is a relative quite ceremony done on the evening of an Ofusu day. It is an internally family ceremony which performed in the most elderly man's house by the various families. While physical farm produce were presented to elders in those days to share, these days the celebrant contribute sum of money to them in lieu of the products. Any celebrant can decided to make his favourite son an Odombono.<sup>13</sup>

Clearing of Ozirepa by Opoga: this clearing of Irepa road. "Okwikuoziropa" will be done by the age group that is next in rank to Opoze or that will be stepping into Opoze shoes.

### **38th *Aba* Celebration**

The *Aba* 2017 Cultural event, the fourth since the return to civil rule in Nigeria, promises to be the biggest, largest crowd-pulling and most spectacular festival ever as innovations and other activities have been introduced to the festival since it was first celebrated about three hundred years ago. With the new repackaging of the festival by Etuno Youth Association (EYA) and Edo State

Government endorsement as partner in the Aba project, Friday, 25th August, 2017, was, indeed, a day to eternally remember in the annals of Igarra, the headquarters of Akoko-Edo Local Government Area, Edo State, Nigeria as the much-talked-about 38th edition of the Africa's most crowd-pulling festival attracted a mammoth crowd of people in attendance which included the chief host, His Royal Highness, Oba Emmanuel Adeche Saiki II, Ariwo Ovejijo, the Otaru of Igarra; Philips Shuaibu, Edo State Deputy Governor (Representing Governor Godwin Obaseki); Mr. Osaze Osemwegie-Ero, honourable commissioner for Arts, Culture, Tourism and Diaspora, Edo State; Mr. Yekini Idaiye, honourable commissioner for Water Resources, Edo State; and a host of other top government functionaries.

Delivering his keynote address, Philips Shuaibu stressed the need for unity and co-existence as major recipes for the maximum development of Igarra community. He reinstated the state government's commitment to the fulfilment of its electoral promises. He also emphasized the need for the people to eschew all forms of bitterness if the enormous socio-economic, cultural, tourism and human potentials available in Igarra must be adequately harnessed.<sup>14</sup>

the Aba project, the number of tourists at the 38th series was well over seven hundred and fifty thousand people, as Opoze Age Group (Opa Avinebe) has over five thousand members as celebrants alone.

Aba Festival is becoming a huge tourist attraction and one can only hope that someday it could become something bigger and even more revered than the Iwude Festival, the Osun Osogbo Festival, the Argungun Fishing Festival, the Ojude Oba Festival with international clout and flavour. Therefore, plans are on by the Etuno Youth Association (EYA) to list the festival on the calendar of World Tourism Organisation (WTO) as well as on the World Heritage Festival of UNESCO.

***EZIAKUTA OPOPORIKU FAMILY: CUSTORDIAN OF THE ABA DRUM***



Source: <http://www.abafestival.com>

**OPOZE      AGE**

**GROUP**



Source: <http://www.abafestival.com>

## AGE GROUP PROCESSION



Source: <http://www.abafestival.com>

## Endnotes

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ABA FESTIVAL

#### **Introduction**

This chapter focus on the socio-political and economic significance of the *Aba* festival on the people of Igarra, also how this contributed to their socio-political activities.

#### **Socio-Political Significance**

The major socio-political significance of the *Aba* festival is the idea of the age-grade system in which the people of Igarra used to preserve their culture while politically to fill the administrative part of their society. Also the festival is to promote unity among the Igarra community and also with its neighbour.

Also the significance of the festival is greatly manifested in the activities lined up for the festival which centred on the socio-political heritage of the customs and tradition of the people of Igarra. The *Aba* festival is also known as the *Irepa* festival (Age-grade Festival). Among the igarras, age is highly revered. Everything that has been done revolves around age and the age group system. to igarras age is synonymous with wealth of historical experience hence seniority is

always highly debated. Both towards the individual and the group, age attracts reverence both in materials and in the ordering of societal life.

The Irepa Festival is the general age group festival in Igarra and it has several traditional and cultural activities lined up for the festival in preservation of their culture. The activities include some of the following: *Agagana oziza*, *Òyin Yapinè*, *Òshi-shirida*, *Ututalegbe* Dance, the beating of Aba Drum, the Ceremonial Chieftaincy Title for the graduating Opoze age group, etc. These activities are usually done at different times and month's interval. The Irepa Festival is a very great festival with various interesting activities that last for several months. However, the peak of the festival is the beating of Aba drum which brings about the popular name of Aba Festival thereby making the whole festival look like a single day thing. A festival that comes up every six Gregorian calendar years can't be a one-day event.

One of the socio-political significance that make the Aba festival tick is because of its tie to the age grade system which according to the Otaru of Igarra, HRH Oba Emmanuel Adeke Saiki II,<sup>1</sup> are seven in number.

*Opa-Operewun* (primary), who function as the youngest between the ages of 18-21 and seen during the new yam festival parading themselves to show fitness. The second group is *Opa-Ajorupa* (secondary) that takes the

responsibilities of clearing public places like market, foot paths and digging of grave of the dead.<sup>2</sup>

The next in line, the Otaru stated is the ***Opa-Enebete*** (Labour of Junior group) bestowed with the responsibilities of making arrangement for the interment of the dead. This is followed by ***Opa-Enetenioku*** (Foremen of Adult group) who dress the corpse for burial, carry the dead body to the graveyard.

Next in line is the ***Opa-Aturoga*** (Senior Group or Supervisors) who coordinate the activities of age group one to four which is below them in hierarchy, beside understudying and assisting the (***Opoga***) age grade number six in performing their legitimate duties and rights.

After that you have the ***Opa-Oga*** (Managers or Management team) saddled with the responsibilities to share what is to be shared in the community materially or devolution of functions. They also arrange sittings at any general meeting at family kindred and community levels, maintaining peace, law and order.

The last as gathered is the ***Opoze*** (Directors or Policy Makers group), they are the last age group in Igarra who take care of the day-to-day administrative duties. They enact and enforce laws in the community.<sup>2</sup>

It is this last group (Opoze) that graduates into the Elders' Council known as *Azebani* which necessitated the beating of the Aba Drum, making it the most prominent of all "Irepa festival". It heralds the initiation or transmutation of the Opoze Age group to a higher class in the society.

Apart from that, the ceremony is quite tasking as those who are initiated into Azebani (Elders Council) are required by custom and tradition to cook for members of their respective family. The food is usually pounded yam, with Ogbolo, Okro, Egusi soups as the case may be throughout the ceremony.<sup>3</sup>

This is usually done for four days beginning from the eve of the festival, to the day of the festival proper and beyond. At every circle, families gather in groups to be entertained by the celebrant within their respective and immediate families. The delicacy is usually pounded yam served in big serving plates in conjunction with varieties of soup and meat as big as the human head.

One striking thing about the consumption is that the food is also shared among the different age groups in the family who will take their portion to one corner and begin to dip hands jointly into one bowl of pounded yam and soup to eat. Thereafter, the meat is shared amongst them with excitement and admiration. "It signifies oneness and the bond that exists among members of that family,"<sup>4</sup>

To further show the importance indigenes of the town ascribe to the Aba festival, a United States of America-based Igarra citizen, Nasiru Adekoye who is also a celebrant, said he moved his family members home to be part of the celebration. He told me that “I was here six years ago as a member of the Opoze age grade. Today, I am very grateful to God for getting to this age (Azebani). Besides, I grew up here and I am a native, and so there is no way I will not come.”<sup>5</sup>

In furtherance of that oneness and happiness that pervades the land, family members file out to escort their relations to the venue of the ceremony where the initiates will be required to stay at a particular location waiting for the sound of the ‘Aba Drum’.

At the sound of the drum, they (the initiates) who all wore white materials, from their caps, dresses and shoes, symbolising purity file out singularly dancing and singing round a big rock (*agigibobo*), mounted by the drummers to the admiration of all which signified their initiation. As soon as this is done, they file out and are led back home by their relations to continue in the pounded yam merriment.

Explaining the rituals that accompanied the ceremony, the custodian of the Aba drums, the oldest from *Aziakuta Opoporiku* family, said before an Igarra man celebrates the Irepa festival which elevates him to Azebani (Council of

Elders), he must have served his community successfully in various capacities for at least 35 years.<sup>6</sup>

He said the Opoze age group is more unique because it is the centre of attraction in all the Irepa festivals for making the laws and enforcing them years later which he said called for celebration.

Explaining further, he said on the day of the festival, no other persons is allowed to go out on white attire irrespective of status in the society except the Opoze celebrants who will climb the sacred Opoporiku hills (community cultural headquarters).

According to him, this special day is preceded in the evening of the previous day the shooting of ceremonial dance guns and cannons, first in the compound the *Odovidi* (leader of the age group) who must be the oldest celebrant from *Aziakuta Opoporiku* family by 2p.m. and followed by other celebrants by 4p.m.<sup>7</sup>

Confirming this, Ajayi Avovome Alabi in her narration stated: “The morning of the festival is usually heralded with tremendous entertainment of food and drinks, usually prepared by the major celebrants, the graduating Opoze age group to Azebani, Council of Elders. The major delicacy is usually pounded yam, which every celebrant prepares for members of his family and kindred. Assorted

drinks and bush meat go with the eating. After this, each family member will escort the celebrant, Ofumamo.”<sup>8</sup>

Continuing, she said the celebrants and their family members clad in immaculate white ‘agbada’, shoes and caps to match will assemble at designated places to dance to Ofumamo. For instance, Alabi pointed out that celebrants from Uffa will gather at Uneh, enroute to Ofumamo who will be joined there by Utua colleagues before moving in the same convoy to meet their counterparts from Ugbogbo at Somorika junction at Ugbogbo for the great trek to Ofumamo, venue of the initiation.<sup>9</sup>

“It is mandatory that celebrants usually dress in immaculate white agbada attire with bells/white horsetail, caps and shoes to match as a matter of honour. At Ofumamo, the Aba drums which must have been set at the ready at *Iretuba* – a cultural stone at the centre of the area by the custodians (Eziakuta Opoporiku family), are beaten for the celebrants to dance from where they are specially gathered,” she narrated.<sup>10</sup>

In his contribution, the festival as told by Ozioruva Aliu, an indigene of the town, is as old as 228 years. According to him, the festival started as a celebration of victory by hunters over the initial settlers of the land who were dwarfs in nature in the land known today as Etuno (Igarra). He said the age grade

system was a derivation of the administrative system from the aborigines (midget) size settlers who were over powered by the warriors that founded (Etuno) Igarra.<sup>11</sup>

### **Traditional Functions of Each Kindred**

There are fourteen (14) extant individual kindreds in Igarra, each *Unna* (kindred) is spilt into *Irewunopo* (section) and down into extended family (*Abara*) with the most eldest man (*Adozorkuh*) of the kindred is the head of his *Unna*.

*Anded, Eshinagada, Eshinogu, Eshinavaka* and *Andiba* kindreds know as *Eziezu* (sons of tiger) Royal family and descendant of *OTARU* the Igarra founder's title. These kindreds provide *Otaru* as the ruler.

The *Ezioduh, Eziakuta* and *Ezioga* known as *Eziobe* (sons of hunter). They are the custodian of *Idowo masquerade*, the *Asau* deity and they in turn provide *Idowo* and *Oshi-obe* (Oshi). As their head and chief priest respectively.

The *Eshimozoko* kindred are the traditional crowing kingmaker and headed by the most senior *Ukana* who is solely responsible for the crowing of the *Otaru* on the installation day. They have *Okute* deity.

The *Anoyente* kindred moderate the weather and could make rain when mostly needed. They are the custodian of *Iyamah* deity.

The *Anona* kindred perform the beaten of drums for *Ofifuofu* (disperse the market) ceremony during the Irepa festival as part of the graduation ceremony of the Opoze celebrating Irepa festival.

The *Eziakuta* kindred perform the planting of quinea-corn (*Osiakumete*) to regulate the farming season and to allow the display of new yams publicly. They fix date of new yam festival.

The *Eziakuta* kindred is the custodian of Aba drums use for the graduation ceremony of every *Opoze* age group during six yearly *Irepa* festival and the originally owner of *Aiyo* relic in Igarra.

The *Eziakuta* kindred usually produce the first leader of each age group and the first to take the *Azebani* at every Irepa festival.

The *Eshinavaka* kindred produce the second leader of every age group and second to take the *Azebani* title at Irepa festival

The *Eshinogu* kindred perform the sacrifice of sheep at the *Agidigbobo* shrine to count for the annual *Orih* festival and the Irepa year. The exercise serves for the Igarra calendar.

The *Eshinagada* and *Eshimozoko* jointly own *Arido* drums with *Anoseri* kindred. The big drum in the ensemble is owned by *Eshinagada*, while the smaller one belongs to *Eshimozoko* and the smallest is woned by *Anoseri* kindred.

These division of is also a socio-political significance of the Irepa festival, this is done in order to protect and preserve their native laws and customs.

### **Aba Drum Significance**

Igarra monarch reveals significance: The Otaru of Igarra, His Royal Highness, Oba Emmanuel Adeche Saiki, explained: "We are celebrating the Irepa festival where the Aba drum dance takes place. The Irepa festival is celebrated once every seven years according to our local calendar, but it is six years in the normal calendar. And the Aba drum is one of the events that are the highlight."<sup>12</sup>

The significance of Aba drum is that Igarra is ruled through the age groups. It is during the Irepo festival where the Aba drum is played that a new age group comes up and all other age groups move to the next level. This Opoze age group members, who are the celebrants for this very Aba drum dance, will now graduate to the council of elders, then a new age group will come up.

Each of these age groups, they all have their responsibilities in the community. The senior is called the Opoze group and they are the ones graduating into the council of elders. The main duty of Opoze group is to control all other groups under them and also enforce any law passed by the community."<sup>13</sup>

Asked if sacrifices were usually made to herald the ceremony, HRH Saiki stated: "No sacrifice is made, but when we discover any problem or challenges in

the community, we embark on some sacrifices to stop such challenges. We immediately take actions that will appease our ancestors which is normal. I will say that the Aba drum is as old as Igarra itself. It has been long. The drum is special because all the age groups must dance to this drum.”<sup>14</sup>

The Akuta of Igarra, Chief Charles Shanu Aiyelabola, who is the chief custodian of the Aba drum, being the eldest son of the Eziakuta Opoporiku family, also told me: “It is a drum that signifies age grouping in the town. We have six age groups in the community. We have one between 19-21 years, we call the youths who belong to this category Obofafo, and they are errand boys.”<sup>15</sup>

“Another one, we call them the age groups that dig graves; the next one is the one that dresses the corpses, that is their duty. We have the Opoga group, when they are promoted, they call them Opoze. This Opoze are the lawmakers in this town and whatever laws they make are taken by all the groups. I started beating this drum in 2011. I am the custodian because I am the head of the family that keeps the drum.”<sup>16</sup>

Aiyelabola disclosed:” And you cannot beat the drum unless you are a bonafide member of the family. The protection of this drum comes from God, the drum is sacred. Nobody can bring out this drum before the six years interval. I feel happy that I am alive to witness it after six years. After it is beaten, it returns

to its home and nobody can see it again, only the custodians and the custodians cannot go there without any reason. Like I said it is a sacred drum.”<sup>17</sup>

At the 2017 festival, i observed that the thumping of the drum elicited wild celebrations as all the age grades danced to its pulsation. Only the custodians of the drum stood on the rock where the drum is beaten. It is a taboo for any stranger to get close to the drum. Chief of Staff to the Edo State Governor, Mr. Taiwo Akerele, who is a descendant of the Eziakuta Opoporiku family, said the event was significant to the people of Igarra, especially those graduating from one age group to another, adding: “The festival is a unifying event for the people of Igarra and the grand finale is the beating of the Aba drum.”<sup>18</sup> After dancing to the beguiling rhythms of Aba drum, every family in Igarra takes their friends and visitors home to eat pounded yam signaling the end of the festival until another six years.

To emphasise the significance of the festival to the people and Government of Edo State, Governor Godwin Obaseki who declared the festival open on August 25, 2017, said his administration would take advantage of the appeal of cultural events such as Aba festival to strengthen the existing unity among Igarra people and the state in general.

Obaseki who was represented by his deputy, Hon. Philip Shaibu, further said that the festival would receive more attention from his administration so that

it can boost the economy of the state. “This is a beautiful culture that needs to be celebrated by the people of Igarra as well as all Edo people and should be a rallying point for all of us so that we can collectively woo more tourists to come and invest in the state and enjoy our rich cultural heritage,” Obaseki said.<sup>19</sup>

In his remarks, the Chief of Staff to the Edo State governor, who is an indigene of Igarra, Mr. Taiwo Akerele, said the event was significant to the people of Igarra especially those graduating from one age group to another. He explained that the festival was a unifying event for the people of Igarra, adding that the grand finale is the beating of the Aba drum.

Akerele’s statement is an eloquent testimony that beyond the pavilion where the dignitaries such as legislators, state commissioners, traditional rulers, community leaders elders and other invited guests sat, one could see youths, women, children in different colourful costumes, singing, dancing, merry making, exchanging goodwill, expressing pride of those transiting from one age group to another at the sound of the Aba drums.<sup>19</sup>

Speaking on the festival also, Chairman Central Organising Committee, Obed Alli, explained that the festival was rated by energy giant, Total E&P in 2006, as the sixth most indigenous cultural festival in West Africa. According to him, ‘The uniqueness and distinct appeal of Aba festival have earned it a prestigious place on the country’s festival league table, as corporate bodies,

governments and individuals jostle to be a part of it and this year's is no different."<sup>20</sup>

*Aba* festival holds a strong socio-political significance to the cultural heritage of the people of Igarra and also a means to promote peace and unity both within and outside the community.

### **Economic significance of *Aba* festivals**

The *Aba* festival is the most spectacular singular event in the celebration of the Irepa festival. It is the highest crowd pulling of all Irepa festival events. It marks the climax of activities as it indicates the end of a seven-year traditional administrative tenure and the beginning of the new one.<sup>21</sup>

**Skills Development:** In the absence of vocational colleges and arts centres, festivals are taking on the role of developing the artistic, managerial and operational skills within the Creative and Cultural Industries, through internships, work experience, courses, master classes and mentorship. Festivals such as *Aba* Festival have artistic and technical development training programmes within their festival programme, which have become recognised and regarded as essential places to gain skills and knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

**Creative Industry Development:** Festivals are driving the growth of the creative economy in Nigeria by providing artists with a platform to find audiences,

make sales, develop their skills and enhance their knowledge. Artists and creative business not only benefit from direct sales but from exporting opportunities, as the festival platforms can provide international exposure. In terms of infrastructure, *Aba* festivals is also birthing much-needed venues and spaces that will support the growth and ongoing development of the creative industry. Based on the ability of the festival to quickly develop large and loyal audiences, festival organisers are starting to use their festival brands to develop their own buildings in order to house and maintain ongoing relationships with their audiences. These spaces range from performance spaces, such as live music arenas, art galleries and resorts to training facilities such as schools of music, film institute's and schools of hospitality, which ensure year-round income, a talent pool and skilled staff needed to sustain the festival.

Contributor to GDP: *Aba* Festival is growing in credibility as contributors to GDP. Festival environments create opportunities for small business owners to make substantial income. For example, over five days, the 2017 *Aba* Festival was attended by half a million people and generated significant additional revenues for small businesses in host communities in Igarra such as food traders and transport providers. Food vendors can make US\$1,000 in a weekend.<sup>23</sup>

Rise in Sponsorship: the *Aba* Festival sponsorship has increased considerably over the past three years with sponsorship accounting for up 40 -

70% of festival income; whereas the 2011 *Aba* festival sponsorship accounted for only 30 - 50% of festival income. The main sponsors across the spectrum of festivals appear to be telecoms and service companies who are attracted to the festival's ability to attract huge numbers of people in fun, interesting and engaging environments for them to reach their existing and potential customers.<sup>24</sup>

**Increase in Domestic Tourism:** Carnivals and festivals draw people from outside the town or city hosting the festival. In the case of the *Aba* festival, visitors attend from neighbouring states. The Festival in this case creates a great opportunity for domestic tourism.

**Inward Investment and Regeneration:** Festival organisers, government officials and local leaders have noted how the festival has increased the aesthetic value of host community. The *Aba* festival there is increasing requests for land acquisition by non-residents wanting to build country homes and resort locations. Income generated through land sales and rent lead to direct income to government at local and state levels, which can be used for local improvements such as road building and maintenance. In turn, these improvements made to infrastructure and local amenities alongside the positive brand of a festival to attract more investments. The 2017 Festival already have a positive impact on generating increased income for local venues that can be used for refurbishments and improvements.

Job Creation: the *Aba* Festivals are offering a great deal of employment to the host communities in the areas of printing, craftsmen, GSM call booths, marketing, transportation, tour guides, photographers, catering services, and so on. The universal nature of festivals attracts large crowds that have to be adequately catered for. This generates a variety of small businesses that provide needed services. Also, there are job opportunities for construction workers needed for roads and hotels, medical personnel in new hospitals and artisans, The *Aba* festival contributed greatly to the economic welfare of the igarras.

Igarra has untapped potentials and endless possibilities, it gives a clean slate and foresight to those who want to explore new market and increase revenue overtime. Presently, there is a huge land mass available for industrialization, access to intelligent work force, and investment friendly policies to encourage potential investors, good roads for accessibility and movement of goods and services, encouraging inter-state trade and bilateral exchange of commodities. Alternatively what you may call an open liberal economy that allows growth in a long term.

*Aba* Festival is becoming a huge tourist attraction and one can only hope that someday it could become something bigger and even more revered than the Iwude Festival, the Osun Osogbo Festival, the Argungun Fishing Festival, the Ojude Oba Festival with international clout and flavour. Therefore, plans are on

by the Etuno Youth Association (EYA) to list the festival on the calendar of World Tourism Organisation (WTO) as well as on the World Heritage Festival of UNESCO.

Speaking on the festival also, Chairman Central Organising Committee, Obed Alli, explained that the festival was rated by energy giant, Total E&P in 2006, as the sixth most indigenous cultural festival in West Africa. According to him, ‘The uniqueness and distinct appeal of *Aba* festival have earned it a prestigious place on the country’s festival league table, as corporate bodies, governments and individuals jostle to be a part of it and this year’s is no different.’<sup>25</sup>

Little wonder the corporate world was not left out in the celebration as some of them like Guinness Nigeria Plc and Nigeria Brewery Plc, mounted musical stands and other variety of shows, ostensibly to sell their products. Other vendors from within and outside the state were not also left out as they cashed in on the celebration to make brisk business.

For instance, all the hotels in and outside Igarra; from Auchi to Ibillo, Enwan, Ojirami Dam up to Dangbala and Ossoso ,were not only fully booked, but one way or the other, joined visitors to the rhythmic dance steps of Igarra people, their songs which the age-long sounds of the *Aba* drums symbolises.<sup>26</sup>

The major economic significant is that development is becoming rapid in Igarra due to the *Aba* festival. The people now utilize the event as a means to market their culture; in terms of their clothing and their cultural delicacies.

The *Aba* festival as brought economic development to Igarra, due to the world wide recognition of the festival by the United Nations under one of its umbrella agency (UNESCO)

This world recognition as put the people of Igarra on the world map as a distinct tribe that holds their tradition and custom within all manner of sacredness.

## Endnotes

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8. Interview with Ajayi Avovome Alabi, 66years, Trader, 23/02/2021
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## CHAPTER FIVR

### CONCLUSION

The concept of culture is the specific system of norms, beliefs, practices, techniques and objectives that the people of a given society have inherited from their fore-fathers, have invented or have adopted from other sources.

This study examines the Aba Festival and its significance to the people of Igarra and how this significance are manifested in the socio-political and economic of Igarra. This study give an historical background of the people of Igarra, then a general overview of the prestigious *Aba* festival, then the significances of the festival to not only the Igarra but also the people of Edo State.

The Irepa Festival is the general age group festival in Igarra and it has several traditional and cultural activities lined up for the festival which comes up every seven lunar calendar years. The activities include some of the following: Agagana oziza, Òyin Yapinè, Òshi-shirida, Ututalegbe Dance, the beating of Aba Drum, the Ceremonial Chieftaincy Title for the graduating Opoze age group, etc. These activities are usually done at different times and months interval. The Irepa Festival is a very great festival with various interesting activities that last for several months. However, the peak of the festival is the beating of Aba drum which brings about the popular name of Aba Festival thereby making the whole

festival looks like a single day thing. A festival that comes up every six Gregorian calendar years can't be a one-day event

For over two centuries, the people of Igarra has celebrated the Aba Festival, even before Nigeria gained independence, they have witnessed, fought and survived battles, colonization and territorial conflicts, vast and filled with dexterity. The People of Igarra understands the importance of diversity, its uniqueness and treasure those who appreciate such; with open arms, visitors are welcomed and treated like family such that a lot has considered it home.

Igarra is also known as "Etuno" the people are hospitable; they have great sense of humor and great food as well.

Protected by the positive energy of the Kukuruku Hills, renowned and known for her diversity, it is surrounded by neighboring communities who works together to foster economic growth and development.

Festivals are universally important for their social and cultural roles, and increasingly have been recognised for their economic impact. They have created jobs and boosted economies by generating revenue for airports, hotels, restaurants, taxis, car rental companies, craft vendors and other businesses, benefited the local populace in the area of sale of goods and services created by visiting local and foreign tourists, boosted the local economy through the dynamics of demand and

supply built around the festival locations and enhanced the development of structural amenities like roads, hospitals and telecommunications.

Aba Festival is significant and prestigious, it reiterates the importance of unity amongst the people, cultural values and heritage passed down from generations in celebrating the victories of our heroes, with sounds from the historic Aba drum, only drummed once every six lunar years or seven calendar year; it's an ancient gift left by the fore fathers of the land to celebrate the emerged Azebani chives.

Aba Festival is the 6th most celebrated festival in West Africa, and has since existed for over two centuries; disengage the mind and engage your sense to embrace and have a feel of new culture, the people and historic landmarks.

Igarra has untapped potentials and endless possibilities, it gives a clean slate and foresight to those who want to explore new market and increase revenue overtime. Presently, there is a huge land mass available for industrialization, access to intelligent work force, and investment friendly policies to encourage potential investors, good roads for accessibility and movement of goods and services, encouraging inter-state trade and bilateral exchange of commodities. Alternatively what you may call an open liberal economy that allows growth in a long term.

The major socio-political significance of the Aba festival is the idea of the age-grade system in which the people of Igarra used to preserve their culture while politically to fill the administrative part of their society. Also the festival is to promote unity among the Igarra community and also with its neighbour.

Aba festivals provide a serious social and economic boost to Nigeria, bringing about social cohesion, youth empowerment, community engagement, talent development, and tourism spend, taxable revenues and inward investment.

The best kept secret is in the culture and historic tales of the Igarra people, the heartbeat of Kukuruku hills, an ancient pride of the people, diversity in family coterie, an entire different culture scape without which the story of the Igarra people is incomplete.

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Emmanuel Daniel Owolabi	77years	Retired Teacher	Igarra	29/02/2021
Fatimbi Ayo	76years	Farmer	Igarra	29/02/2021
HRH Oba Emmanuel Adeke Saiki II	-	Otaru of Igarra	Palace, Igarra	27/02/2021
Micheal Bayo Ojo,	78years,	Retired Civil Servant,	Igarra,	29/02/2021
Nasiru Adekoye	68years	Doctor	Igarra	29/02/2021
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