

**THE ROLE OF FESTIVALS IN PRESERVING THE CULTURAL HERITAGE  
OF THE NSIT IBOM PEOPLE**

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND  
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE  
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## CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **JOHNSON Blessing Michael** with matriculation number **ART2100594** in the Department of History and International studies, University of Benin, under my supervision.

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**Date**

## **DEDICATION**

This project is dedicated to God Almighty for his grace, strength and constant help, to my family, friends and loved ones for their encouragement and support

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the role of festivals in preserving the cultural heritage of the nsit ibom people. The Ekpo Festival, one of the most prominent and ancient festivals in Nsit Ibom, is a classic example of how a traditional event can serve as a reservoir of cultural knowledge and identity. Ekpo, derived from ancestral spiritual beliefs, is not just a masquerade performance but a complex traditional system that embodies spiritual authority, moral instruction, community justice, artistic excellence, and social hierarchy. The masquerades, believed to represent the spirits of ancestors, appear during the dry season and are used to enforce traditional laws, entertain the public, and remind the people of their connection to the spiritual world. Each performance is laced with symbolic gestures, coded language, and historical references, which serve as a cultural textbook for the youth and a source of pride for the elders. The Ekpo institution is passed down through secret societies that initiate and train members in the meanings, functions, and codes of the tradition, ensuring that this sacred heritage is not lost over time*

## CHAPTER ONE

### BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

#### **Introduction**

Culture constitutes the foundational structure of any community, encompassing language, religion, history, beliefs, customs, values, morals, knowledge, and artistic expressions. It is inherited across generations and preserved, performed, and adapted through collective experiences. In traditional African societies, including Nigeria, culture plays a central role in shaping identity, guiding social behavior, and fostering unity among community members<sup>1</sup>. Within Nsit Ibom, a local government area in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, culture is embedded in traditional institutions, spiritual systems, art forms, and particularly in festivals. These festivals function as mechanisms for preserving, protecting, and transmitting ancestral values and historical consciousness across generations. In the context of globalization and rapid modernization, which threaten indigenous customs, the role of traditional festivals in safeguarding cultural heritage is increasingly significant. The Nsit Ibom people, predominantly of Ibibio ethnic origin, possess a rich cultural heritage that is expressed through rituals, dances, masquerades, religious practices, and oral traditions, most notably during festivals. These events serve as a means of cultural expression, the revival of collective memory, the reaffirmation of

identity, and the transmission of values, beliefs, and history to younger generations in communal settings<sup>2</sup>.

The Ekpo Festival, one of the most prominent and ancient festivals in Nsit Ibom, is a classic example of how a traditional event can serve as a reservoir of cultural knowledge and identity. Ekpo, derived from ancestral spiritual beliefs, is not just a masquerade performance but a complex traditional system that embodies spiritual authority, moral instruction, community justice, artistic excellence, and social hierarchy. The masquerades, believed to represent the spirits of ancestors, appear during the dry season and are used to enforce traditional laws, entertain the public, and remind the people of their connection to the spiritual world. Each performance is laced with symbolic gestures, coded language, and historical references, which serve as a cultural textbook for the youth and a source of pride for the elders. The Ekpo institution is passed down through secret societies that initiate and train members in the meanings, functions, and codes of the tradition, ensuring that this sacred heritage is not lost over time. According to **Chief Udo Ekanem**, a respected elder and Ekpo society member from Afaha Offiong village:

*“Ekpo is our father’s voice. When the Ekpo masquerade dances, it speaks of things only the old know. It teaches our children to respect our ways. Without Ekpo, our history would die.”<sup>3</sup>*

This oral testimony highlights the role of festivals as custodians of collective memory and heritage. Festivals such as Ekpo preserve the intangible cultural heritage of the Nsit Ibom people and foster community belonging, discipline, and unity.

Moreover, festivals in Nsit Ibom serve various cultural functions beyond religious or ancestral worship. They are used to mark seasons, initiate community development projects, celebrate agricultural milestones, and install traditional leaders. During these festivals, traditional music, language, dance, folktales, cuisine, and attire are displayed in full colour, thereby reinforcing cultural aesthetics and knowledge systems. It is during such festivals that young boys and girls learn indigenous songs, proverbs, and folklore, and are taught proper conduct, respect for elders, and the responsibilities expected of them within the community. Such festivals are also vital for reunions, as indigenes who reside in urban cities or abroad often return home to participate in the celebrations, thus maintaining a connection with their roots. According to **UNESCO (2003)**, intangible cultural heritage, including festivals, contributes to social cohesion and encourages a sense of identity and continuity<sup>4</sup>. In this light, Nsit Ibom festivals do not merely look backward in time, but actively shape present cultural realities and future generational identities.

However, despite their importance, these cultural expressions are under threat. The advent of Christianity, the spread of Western education, economic hardship, rural-urban

migration, and the growing influence of foreign media have all contributed to a significant decline in the appreciation and practice of traditional festivals among the youth. Many festivals have been demonized or labelled as "fetish" or "pagan" practices, causing younger generations to abandon them without understanding their cultural value. Additionally, there is a growing lack of documentation and academic attention to these festivals, which makes them vulnerable to extinction. In some parts of Nsit Ibom, elders complain that the number of trained Ekpo performers is dwindling, and many symbolic rituals are either forgotten or misinterpreted. Without structured efforts to document, teach, and promote these cultural events, they may eventually vanish, leaving a cultural vacuum in society. It is for this reason that this study becomes crucial. It seeks to investigate and document how festivals, particularly those celebrated in Nsit Ibom, act as a vehicle for cultural preservation, while also identifying the challenges they face and the strategies that can be employed to revitalize them<sup>5</sup>.

This project examines the cultural, historical, and social significance of festivals such as Ekpo and Afia Nsit, as well as other community based events. It utilizes oral traditions, participant observation, interviews with community elders, and scholarly literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of festivals in heritage preservation. The research is positioned as both an academic inquiry and a cultural responsibility, aiming to honor the legacy of Nsit Ibom and offer strategies for sustaining its heritage amid societal change.

## **Aim and objectives**

The aim of this research is to investigate the role of traditional festivals in preserving the cultural heritage of the Nsit Ibom people. By examining various festivals, such as Ekpe and Afia Ibom, the project highlights how these celebrations safeguard customs, beliefs, and history while promoting unity and cultural pride. It seeks to understand how these festivals pass down traditions to younger generations, keeping Nsit Ibom's rich cultural identity alive in the face of modernization. The ultimate goal is to emphasize the importance of these festivals as vital tools for cultural preservation.

While the Objectives are as follows,

1. To identify and comprehensively document the major traditional festivals celebrated in Nsit Ibom, with particular focus on their historical background, rituals, symbolism, cultural relevance, and the role they play in the social, spiritual, and political life of the people.
2. To explore and critically analyze the role these festivals play in preserving the intangible cultural heritage of the Nsit Ibom people.
3. To examine how festivals serve as instruments for intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge, focusing on how children and youth are introduced to cultural practices, moral instruction, history, and social responsibilities during the festive periods.

4. To assess how festivals promote social cohesion, community identity, and unity among the Nsit Ibom people.

5. To investigate the negative impact of modernization.

### **Scope of the Study**

This study examines the role of festivals in preserving the cultural heritage of the Nsit Ibom people, with a particular focus on both the pre-colonial and post-colonial eras. The research spans the period from the late 19th century, when oral traditions and indigenous institutions were still prevalent, through the early 20th century colonial era, and up to the contemporary post-colonial era. In the pre-colonial era, festivals such as Ekpo, Ekong, and Mbopo played a central role in governance, religion, and community identity. This study examines how these practices served as channels for cultural transmission. In the colonial period, the scope also includes how festivals were reshaped by missionary influences and administrative changes. Finally, the study extends into the post-colonial era, highlighting the revival and adaptation of festivals as a way of reinforcing cultural pride in the face of modernization and globalization. Geographically, the research is limited to the Nsit Ibom Local Government Area and its surrounding villages, without attempting to cover the entire Ibibio land.

## **Research Methodology**

This research employed a qualitative historical approach to examine the role of festivals in preserving the cultural heritage of the Nsit Ibom people from both historical and contemporary perspectives. The investigation relied primarily on primary and secondary sources.

### **Primary Sources**

Primary sources were collected through oral interviews with elders, traditional rulers, festival organizers, and cultural custodians in various Nsit Ibom communities. These interviews yielded firsthand accounts regarding the origins, meanings, and transformations of festival practices over time. The respondents were selected to represent different age groups and genders, thereby ensuring a balanced perspective.

### **Secondary Sources**

Secondary sources were sourced from books, academic journals, newspapers, government publications, and archival records relevant to the cultural history of Nsit Ibom. Local archives and community record keepers provided access to historical documents, photographs, and written accounts of festivals. Participant observation was conducted at selected festivals to directly observe rituals, performances, and cultural displays. This approach facilitated the collection of details not readily accessible through interviews.

The sources gathered was analyzed thematically, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns, cultural symbols, and historical continuities in the festivals. Cross referencing oral testimonies with written records ensured accuracy and reliability, while any discrepancies were resolved through follow-up discussions with knowledgeable informants. This methodological approach ensured that the study was rooted in authentic voices and lived experiences of the Nsit Ibom people, while also maintaining historical accuracy and scholarly rigor.

### **Literature Review**

Culture, as an embodiment of a people's way of life, encompasses their beliefs, customs, languages, rituals, festivals, and institutions. According to scholars, culture is not only inherited but is also practiced, adapted, and passed on through symbolic forms and social experiences<sup>6</sup>. One of the most significant media through which culture is expressed and preserved is the celebration of traditional festivals. Festivals, in African societies, are deeply rooted in the collective memory and spiritual consciousness of the people. They serve not only as moments of entertainment and reunion but also as institutional frameworks for the transmission of moral values, history, identity, and belief systems<sup>7</sup>. In this regard, the preservation of culture cannot be effectively discussed without considering the critical role festivals play in keeping traditions alive from one generation to another<sup>8</sup>.

Several scholars have examined the function of festivals in African societies. For example, Eyo (2004) argues that festivals function as ritual performances that are intertwined with the people's cosmology, communal values, and historical remembrance<sup>9</sup>. Through songs, dances, masquerade performances, and public rituals, festivals reinforce what the people believe in, what they celebrate, and what they wish to protect. These expressions serve as mechanisms through which social norms are maintained and indigenous knowledge systems are transmitted, especially in non-literate societies where oral traditions are the dominant means of knowledge preservation<sup>10</sup>. In Nigeria, each ethnic group has its own unique festivals that reflect its worldview and cultural priorities. Among the Yoruba, the Osun-Osogbo Festival celebrates fertility and water spirits; among the Igbo, the New Yam Festival marks the agricultural cycle; and among the Efik, the Ekpe festival serves as a spiritual and political system<sup>11</sup>. These examples reveal that festivals in African societies are never isolated from the broader cultural, economic, spiritual, and political life of the people.

Among the Ibibio speaking people of Akwa Ibom State, festivals such as Ekpo, Afia Nsit, and Ujai reflect the values of respect for ancestors, spiritual order, community unity, and moral instruction. Scholars such as Udo Etuk and Mfon Usoro have argued that the Ekpo festival, in particular, plays a symbolic role in maintaining social order and enforcing moral behavior through masquerade performances<sup>12</sup>. The Ekpo masquerade is believed to be the spirit of the ancestors, and when it appears, it speaks in coded language,

performs sacred dances, and delivers warnings or judgments to members of the community. This makes the festival not only a religious and social activity, but also a medium through which justice and ethical behavior are promoted<sup>13</sup>. Youth are initiated into the Ekpo society, during which they are taught the values, taboos, and spiritual truths of their people. In this way, the Ekpo festival functions as a cultural classroom where tradition is taught, memorized, and embodied<sup>14</sup>.

Furthermore, literature on cultural heritage emphasizes the importance of festivals in preserving intangible cultural elements, such as language, beliefs, music, and community rituals. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in its 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage, states that festivals are vital for ensuring the survival of cultural diversity, especially in communities vulnerable to globalization<sup>15</sup>. This position has been echoed by scholars like Akpan (2017), who notes that festivals contribute to the documentation and revitalization of endangered traditions, especially when younger generations are included in the performances and rituals<sup>16</sup>. In communities like Nsit Ibom, where modern influences such as Christianity, Western education, and urban migration are growing stronger, festivals serve as a counterbalance a reminder of indigenous identity and belonging<sup>17</sup>. However, as noted by scholars, there is a decline in festival participation among youths, many of whom view traditional festivals as outdated or unchristian<sup>18</sup>. This cultural gap, if not bridged, poses a serious threat to the preservation of indigenous values and customs.

Several studies have also examined the gender dynamics and intergenerational roles within traditional festivals. For example, Ayoade (1981) argues that festivals often reflect the gendered structure of African societies, with specific roles assigned to men, women, and children during various stages of the celebration<sup>19</sup>. In the context of the Ekpo festival, men traditionally take an active role in masquerade performances and initiations, while women support them through music, food, and rituals. Such roles, though unequal in some aspects, contribute to communal harmony and the successful transmission of culture through cooperation and participation<sup>20</sup>. Festivals also serve as important moments for socialization, particularly for children and youth who are exposed to stories, proverbs, dances, and ceremonial conduct that help shape their identity and worldview<sup>21</sup>.

Modern researchers have emphasized the need to document and promote festivals not only as cultural practices but also as tools for development and heritage tourism. Festivals, when well managed, attract visitors, generate income, and boost local pride<sup>22</sup>. According to Ukpong (2018), cultural festivals in Akwa Ibom have the potential to create jobs, build community resilience, and foster cultural education if supported by government and cultural institutions<sup>23</sup>. However, many traditional festivals remain undocumented or poorly understood by the general public, partly due to the lack of cultural education in schools and the declining interest among younger people<sup>24</sup>. Some researchers have advocated for the integration of indigenous festivals into formal education, museum exhibitions, and media programming as a way of keeping them alive

and relevant in modern times<sup>25</sup>. In Nsit Ibom, such interventions could help preserve the Ekpo festival and others by transforming them into not only cultural but also educational assets.

Despite the wealth of literature on African festivals, a gap remains in focused research on lesser documented communities, such as Nsit Ibom. Most academic attention has been given to larger festivals such as Osun-Osogbo or Argungu, leaving small, local festivals underexplored<sup>26</sup>. This study, therefore, fills a critical gap by focusing specifically on the traditional festivals of Nsit Ibom and how they function as tools for cultural preservation. It contributes to the growing discourse on how communities can sustain their heritage in the face of modernization, and how festivals can continue to serve as bridges between the past and the present, the old and the young, the visible and the spiritual<sup>27</sup>. This literature review supports the idea that festivals are far more than cultural events; they are living archives, sacred classrooms, and communal mirrors that reflect the soul of a people.

## **Chapterization**

### **Chapter One: Background Of The Study**

This research examines the role of festivals in preserving the cultural heritage of the Nsit Ibom people. It presents the introduction, aims and objectives, significance, scope, literature review, and methodology, highlighting how historical traditions have shaped

community identity, social values, and continuity from the pre-colonial to post-colonial era.

### **Chapter two: traditional festivals and their roles in promoting our cultural heritage in NSIT Ibom.**

This chapter examined the Traditional festivals in Nsit Ibom, rooted in the ancient customs of the Ibibio people, which celebrate cultural heritage through music, dance, and rituals. These festivals, such as Ekpe and Afia Ibom, promote cultural preservation, unity, and social cohesion while educating the younger generation and strengthening community bonds across generations.

### **Chapter Three: Traditional Festivals As True Identity Of The People Of Nsit Ibom.**

This chapter examined how Traditional festivals in Nsit Ibom reflect the true identity of the people, preserving their unique customs, beliefs, and history. Through vibrant celebrations like Ekpe and Afia Ibom, these festivals foster unity, cultural pride, and intergenerational connections, showcasing the rich heritage of the Ibibio community.

### **Chapter Four: The Negative Impacts Of Modernization On Our Traditional Festivals.**

This chapter examines how modernization has negatively impacted traditional festivals in Nsit Ibom by introducing foreign values and distractions, resulting in a decline in participation, loss of cultural authenticity, and commercialization. Younger generations,

often influenced by global trends, may neglect these important cultural practices, threatening the preservation of ancestral traditions.

### **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

This chapter concluded the study by presenting key findings on how festivals preserve Nsit Ibom cultural heritage, while offering recommendations to sustain, promote, and protect these traditions for future generations.

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## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS AND THEIR ROLES IN THE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN NSIT IBOM.**

#### **Introduction**

The role of festivals and cultural heritage in African societies cannot be overstated, especially within the context of indigenous communities such as Nsit Ibom, located in the southeastern part of Nigeria. Festivals, which are deeply embedded in the social, religious, and economic structures of these communities, represent a rich continuity of historical practices, belief systems, and social values passed down through generations. In Nsit Ibom, festivals transcend mere celebrations of communal events; they are essential cultural practices that shape the community's identity and its connection to the divine, the ancestors, and the environment. Understanding these festivals requires an exploration of the cultural heritage of the Nsit Ibom people, their historical evolution, and the profound relationship between these festivals and the community's sense of identity<sup>1</sup>.

#### **Understanding Festivals and Cultural Heritage in Nsit Ibom.**

In Nsit Ibom, festivals are not merely celebratory events but are deeply symbolic rituals that connect the present generation to the past. Festivals in the region are typically rooted in religious, agricultural, and communal practices. A festival, in its simplest form, marks an event of great significance, whether spiritual, agricultural, or social, that brings

the community together. These festivals are not only an opportunity for merrymaking but also serve as mechanisms for the transmission of cultural knowledge, ensuring the continuity of traditions and practices for generations to come<sup>2</sup>.

One of the most important festivals in Nsit Ibom is the Ibor Festival. The Ibor festival, held annually, is celebrated during the harvest season as a way for the community to show gratitude for a bountiful harvest. The festival is also an opportunity for the Nsit Ibom people to honor their deities and ancestors, acknowledging their significant contributions to the community's agricultural success. As part of the rituals, sacrifices of animals such as goats and chickens are made, while prayers and offerings are presented to ancestral spirits and gods for protection and prosperity in the upcoming planting season<sup>3</sup>. These rituals are performed with great reverence and are accompanied by traditional dances, songs, and the wearing of colorful regalia, all of which symbolize the people's unity with nature and their ancestors.

The Udo Nsit festival is another cornerstone of Nsit Ibom's cultural calendar. This festival is dedicated to peace, harmony, and the communal spirit that unites the people. During the Udo Nsit, families and clans come together to celebrate their shared heritage, with activities that include the reenactment of historical events, communal feasts, and dances. Central to this festival is the Idiom costume, which is worn to represent the different clans in the community. The attire is often made with intricate

beadwork and fabric patterns that reflect the unique history and traditions of each clan. The wearing of these costumes during the festival highlights the Nsit Ibom people's appreciation of their diversity and the unity that they derive from these differences<sup>4</sup>.

The cultural significance of these festivals is immense. Beyond their spiritual and social roles, they provide an avenue for educating younger generations about their heritage, instilling in them a sense of pride and responsibility towards their cultural inheritance. Through the performances, songs, and rituals, the youth are taught the community's history, including the struggles their ancestors faced, the values they upheld, and the myths and legends that shape their worldview<sup>5</sup>.

Cultural heritage refers to the collective body of traditions, practices, values, and artifacts that a community preserves and transmits over time. In Nsit Ibom, cultural heritage encompasses both tangible and intangible elements that reflect the community's identity. This heritage is expressed through a combination of oral traditions, religious practices, material culture, and social rituals. These cultural markers not only define the people's history but also shape the ways in which they interact with the world around them<sup>6</sup>.

Oral tradition is one of the most prominent forms of cultural heritage in Nsit Ibom. Elders in the community, who are the custodians of oral history, pass down stories, proverbs, and myths to younger generations. These oral accounts serve as both a

historical record and a guide to moral conduct. They tell the story of the community's origins, their migration patterns, and their relations with other ethnic groups. The Nso and Ikot Okoro stories, for instance, recount the community's migration from the Middle Belt of Nigeria, their settlement in the Akwa Ibom region, and their eventual establishment as one of the dominant groups in the southeastern Nigerian region. The oral tradition is also deeply interwoven with the people's spiritual practices, as many stories recount the roles played by deities and ancestral spirits in guiding and protecting the community<sup>7</sup>.

Another key aspect of Nsit Ibom's cultural heritage is its music and dance. These forms of expression are not merely for entertainment but serve a functional role in religious and communal activities. Drums, particularly the Abia drum, are central to many festivals, as they are believed to serve as a means of communication with the divine realm. The rhythmic beats of the drum invoke the spirits of ancestors and gods, establishing a spiritual connection during rituals. Traditional dances, such as the Okpoho dance, are often performed during these festivals to honor the gods and celebrate communal unity. The dances are not only a form of entertainment but also convey stories and traditions that have been passed down through generations. They often involve elaborate footwork and symbolic movements that represent natural phenomena, such as the changing seasons or agricultural cycles<sup>8</sup>.

Material culture in Nsit Ibom is another important facet of their cultural heritage. This includes the art of bead-making, pottery, weaving, and blacksmithing, which are practiced by skilled artisans in the community. These crafts are not merely for personal adornment or utility; they are also imbued with cultural and spiritual significance. For example, beads are often worn during festivals as a form of protection against evil spirits, and the intricate designs represent the wearer's clan or status within the community. Pottery, on the other hand, is often used in ritual practices, where sacred vessels are created to hold offerings for the gods<sup>9</sup>.

Religious practices are at the heart of Nsit Ibom's cultural heritage. The community's spiritual life is guided by a belief system that incorporates both animistic and ancestral worship. The Ikot Okoro shrine, situated in one of the Nsit Ibom villages, is an example of a sacred space where rituals and sacrifices are conducted. It is believed that the spirits of ancestors reside in these sacred places, offering protection and guidance to the living. The rituals performed at these shrines are essential for maintaining the harmony between the living and the dead, and for ensuring the continued prosperity of the community<sup>10</sup>.

The Nsit Ibom people are part of the larger Ibibio ethnic group, and their history is closely tied to the broader historical processes that have shaped the southeastern region of Nigeria. The origins of the Nsit Ibom people can be traced back to the 16th century, when

they migrated from the Middle Belt region of Nigeria to the fertile lands of Akwa Ibom State. This migration was part of a larger movement of ethnic groups in the region, including the Efik, Ibibio, and Annang peoples, who sought new lands for farming and settlement. The migration of the Nsit Ibom people is often described as a search for both security and prosperity, as they sought to establish themselves as a distinct group within the Ibibio speaking peoples<sup>11</sup>.

Once settled in the Akwa Ibom region, the Nsit Ibom people established a well-organized social structure based on a system of local governance. The Obong (village head) played a central role in this system, overseeing the administration of justice, land distribution, and the coordination of festivals and religious ceremonies. The Obong was considered both a political and spiritual leader, whose authority extended over matters of both governance and religious observance. The Nsit Ibom people were also known for their advanced agricultural practices, which centered on yam farming, as well as for their skills in pottery, weaving, and blacksmithing<sup>12</sup>.

The pre-colonial era for the Nsit Ibom was characterized by a profound connection to the land and its natural environment. Agriculture was the backbone of the community's economy, and the cycles of planting and harvesting were closely tied to the rhythms of their religious festivals. The Nsit Ibom people had a strong spiritual belief system centered on animism and ancestor worship. The worship of nature spirits, such as

river gods, forest deities, and ancestral spirits, was central to their religious life. These beliefs were expressed in various festivals, rituals, and sacred sites, such as the Ikot Okoro shrine<sup>13</sup>.

### **Major festivals in Nsit Ibom.**

Festivals in Nsit Ibom are central to the cultural identity and continuity of the people, serving as both sacred rites and social institutions. The **Ekpo festival** is perhaps the most significant, rooted in the belief that masquerades embody the spirits of ancestors. Traditionally, these spirits were said to return from the land of the dead to guide, discipline, and protect the living<sup>14</sup>. Percy Talbot, writing in the early twentieth century, observed that the Ekpo institution was deeply spiritual and political, with masquerades acting as both religious symbols and enforcers of communal laws<sup>14</sup>. Oral interview with Chief Udo Essien in Ikot Udo confirmed that during the Ekpo season, the community observed strict discipline, as defaulters of customs or moral codes could be summoned or punished by the masquerades, which reinforced the authority of traditional institutions<sup>16</sup>.

The **Mbopo festival** is another major celebration, distinctively tied to the initiation of maidens into womanhood. In this rite of passage, young girls approaching marriage age were secluded for weeks or months, given rich food to enhance beauty, and trained in domestic responsibilities and moral virtues before being presented to the public. Ekong explains that Mbopo symbolized chastity, fertility, and a woman's readiness to

uphold family and communal values<sup>17</sup>. Elderly woman in Nsit Ibom, Madam Ekaette Akpan described Mbopo as more than a festival; it was a cultural school where songs, dances, and proverbs were used to pass on wisdom to the younger generation<sup>18</sup>. Although colonialism and Christianity have reduced its practice, Mbopo is still celebrated in cultural exhibitions as a reminder of Ibibio heritage.

Equally important is the **Ekpe festival**, which was adopted through cultural interaction with the Efik but became an integral part of Ibibio and Nsit Ibom culture. Ekpe functions both as a judicial and religious institution, enforcing social order, regulating leadership, and preserving Nsibidi symbols. Offiong notes that Ekpe was regarded as the conscience of the Ibibio, using ritual performance and masquerade displays to uphold justice and communal values<sup>19</sup>. Oral account from Elder Aniefiok udom in Nsit Ibom confirm that the Ekpe festival also served as a leadership training ground, preparing young men for civic responsibility and communal authority<sup>20</sup>. Its secrecy, music, and dramatic performances continue to fascinate both locals and tourists, making it one of the most culturally enduring festivals.

The **Afia Ekong festival**, sometimes called the “festival of wealth and beauty,” is largely associated with women. It provided an avenue for women to showcase artistry, economic strength, and social pride through elaborate attire, coral beads, and graceful dances. Udo highlights that Afia Ekong reflected women’s important roles in the

household economy and social prestige <sup>21</sup>. Oral testimony from Madam Ime Etuk a women leader in Nsit Ibom stressed that the festival also reinforced women's dignity and independence, giving them visibility in a largely patriarchal society<sup>22</sup>. Today, the Afia Ekong festival continues as a cultural heritage event where women celebrate their identity and achievements, even if in modified forms.

The **New Yam Festival (Utuene Ekikere)** represents the agrarian foundation of Nsit Ibom society. As yam is regarded as the “king of crops,” their harvest is celebrated with thanksgiving rituals to ancestors and deities before communal consumption. Essien records that it was forbidden for anyone to eat of the new yam until sacrifices had been offered, after which feasting, music, and dance followed<sup>23</sup>. Oral source from Mr. Etim Udofia a farmer in Nsit Ibom emphasized that beyond rituals, the New Yam festival promoted unity, hospitality, and reconciliation, as it often became an occasion to resolve conflicts and renew social bonds<sup>24</sup>. Online records from the Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Culture describe it as one of the festivals now promoted as a tourist attraction, showcasing both Ibibio agricultural heritage and communal solidarity<sup>25</sup>.

Finally, the **Ndok festival** is a purification rite celebrated to cleanse the land of evil spirits, calamities, or misfortunes. It involves masquerades, ritual sacrifices, and symbolic performances intended to ward off spiritual forces that threaten the community. Akpan notes that the Ndok festival was essential for restoring harmony and ensuring

spiritual protection over the people<sup>26</sup>. Oral interview from Elder Okon Akpan reveals that beyond its spiritual meaning, Ndok reassured the community of the continued presence and guardianship of their ancestors<sup>27</sup>. Though less widely practiced today, it remains remembered as a vital part of Nsit Ibom's ritual calendar.

Together, these major festivals, which include Ekpo, Mbopo, Ekpe, Afia Ekong, the New Yam festival, and Ndok, form the backbone of cultural life in Nsit Ibom. They preserve ancestral values, transmit knowledge, strengthen communal unity, and reinforce both gender roles and social authority. Despite the pressures of modernization and religion, these festivals continue to define the cultural identity and heritage of the Nsit Ibom people.

### **The Cultural and Symbolic Roles of Festival**

Festivals in Nsit Ibom serve not only as entertainment but as profound cultural symbols that embody the worldview, values, and historical consciousness of the people. They are communal events through which identity is defined, traditions are re-enacted, and social order is reinforced. For instance, the Ekpo festival symbolizes the link between the living and the ancestors, as masquerades are believed to be ancestral spirits returning to guide and discipline the community<sup>28</sup>. Percy Talbot, writing in the early twentieth century, observed that such masquerade institutions represented the "voice of the ancestors" and reminded people of their obligations to both the living community and the

spiritual realm<sup>29</sup>. By staging Ekpo annually, Nsit Ibom society reaffirms that their past is alive in the present, and that ancestral authority remains a vital aspect of communal life.

The Mbopo festival likewise carries deep symbolic meaning. It is not only a rite of passage for maidens but also a celebration of feminine beauty, fertility, and chastity. In its symbolism, Mbopo reinforces the sanctity of marriage and the social expectation of moral purity that a woman must uphold before entering into matrimony. Ekong notes that the fattening and public display of maidens during the festival symbolized a community's investment in its future mothers and wives <sup>30</sup>. Oral testimony from Madam Ekaette Akpan an elderly woman in Nsit Ibom confirm that the Mbopo festival also symbolized continuity, since the songs and dances performed by the maidens were a direct transmission of ancestral wisdom to the next generation<sup>31</sup>. The symbolism of Mbopo, therefore, extends beyond beauty to embody social morality and the preservation of family values.

The Ekpe festival, borrowed but indigenized into Nsit Ibom culture, represents law, order, and authority. Its symbolic strength lies in the enforcement of justice and the preservation of secrecy through Nsibidi scripts. Offiong points out that the Ekpe institution was historically a symbol of power and authority, with masquerades acting as visible embodiments of invisible law<sup>32</sup>. Oral source from Elder Aniefiok Udom a clan Elder of Nsit Ibom affirm that Ekpe songs and rituals symbolized community vigilance

and cohesion, reminding both leaders and followers of their roles in maintaining harmony<sup>33</sup>. Thus, Ekpe functions as a symbolic guardian of tradition, justice, and moral conscience.

The New Yam Festival (Utuene Ekikere) is deeply symbolic in its agricultural and spiritual dimensions. It represents renewal, thanksgiving, and the triumph of life over hardship. The ritual of offering the first yam to the ancestors before communal feasting symbolizes gratitude to both the gods and forebears for ensuring the survival and fertility of the land. Essien emphasizes that no one could eat the new yam before sacrifices were performed, for doing so would symbolize disrespect to the ancestors<sup>34</sup>. An interviewed with Mr. Etim Udofia a Farmer in Nsit Ibom confirm that this festival is symbolic of unity and reconciliation, as it often becomes a platform to mend disputes and restore peace<sup>35</sup>. In modern times, the New Yam festival has also come to symbolize cultural pride and tourism, as noted by the Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Culture<sup>36</sup>.

Other festivals, such as the Afia Ekong festival, carry symbolic representations of wealth, status, and female dignity. Udo describes it as a stage for women to express beauty and economic strength through attire and artistic performance<sup>37</sup>. Oral testimonies highlight that this festival symbolizes the recognition of women as custodians of aesthetics and commerce, elevating their cultural standing in a patriarchal society<sup>38</sup>. Similarly, the Ndok festival, a ritual of purification, symbolizes communal cleansing and

the expulsion of negative forces. Akpan records that Ndok masquerades and sacrifices symbolized the community's collective desire to drive away misfortune and secure prosperity<sup>39</sup>. Oral accounts affirm that it assured people of ancestral protection and spiritual renewal<sup>40</sup>.

Taken together, festivals in Nsit Ibom are not mere celebrations but cultural texts encoded with symbols of identity, morality, authority, fertility, prosperity, and unity. They embody the living heritage of the people and function as ritualized symbols of social order. Beyond the rituals themselves, they convey values that remind individuals of their roots, duties, and sense of belonging within the wider community. Through their cultural and symbolic roles, festivals continue to serve as the foundation of historical memory and cultural preservation in Nsit Ibom.

### **The Social and Economic Roles of Festivals**

Festivals in Nsit Ibom play crucial **social roles, reinforcing** community bonds, fostering cooperation, and sustaining a collective identity. They are moments of reunion for families and clans, as people travel from distant places to participate in cultural rites. The social gatherings at the Ekpo and Ekpe festivals serve as platforms for intergenerational interaction, where the elderly transmit wisdom and the young reaffirm loyalty to their heritage<sup>41</sup>. Oral interview with elder Udo Okon reveals that festivals often serve as a means of resolving disputes by creating opportunities for reconciliation

through communal feasting, dances, and rituals. In this sense, festivals act as unifying forces that reduce tension and strengthen kinship ties. Scholars have argued that communal rites function as “social adhesives,” providing spaces for reaffirming belonging and values<sup>42</sup>.

Equally important are the **economic roles** festivals play in Nsit Ibom society. During festivals such as the New Yam Festival (Utuene Ekikere) and Afia Ekong, trade and exchange are significantly boosted. Local farmers, artisans, and traders display yams, palm wine, textiles, and traditional attire for sale, generating income for their households. The communal feasting encourages surplus agricultural production, as families prepare food not only for themselves but also for guests, ensuring that farming remains a valued occupation. Oral testimonies confirm that festivals encourage both subsistence and commercial agriculture, since the prestige of hosting visitors motivates households to cultivate more<sup>43</sup>. Modern scholars note that the commercialization of festivals has also created spaces for tourism, as visitors from neighboring communities and beyond Akwa Ibom State attend, contributing to the local economy through hospitality, crafts, and entertainment<sup>44</sup>.

Beyond their immediate social and economic impact, festivals in Nsit Ibom symbolize resilience and cultural pride. They serve as occasions for the community to showcase its artistic heritage through masquerades, dances, attire, and music, which in

turn become an attraction for cultural tourism and state recognition. Government agencies, such as the Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Culture, have identified these festivals as potential economic drivers, noting their role in generating revenue while safeguarding traditions<sup>45</sup>. Thus, festivals function not only as sacred rituals but as platforms for both social harmony and economic sustainability, bridging the gap between heritage preservation and modern development.

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## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS AS THE TRUE IDENTITY OF THE PEOPLE OF NSIT IBOM.**

#### **Introduction**

Traditional festivals hold a central place in the lives of the Nsit Ibom people, serving not only as occasions for celebration but also as true markers of their cultural identity and heritage. These festivals are deeply rooted in ancestral practices and serve as expressions of the people's worldview, moral values, and collective memory. In Nsit Ibom, festivals such as Ekpo, Mbopo, Ekpe, the New Yam Festival (Utuene Ekikere), Afia Ekong, and Ndok are not merely annual events; they are living traditions that reveal who the people are, what they believe, and how they sustain their connection to the past. For instance, the Ekpo festival embodies the connection between the living and the ancestors, presenting masquerades as spiritual messengers, while the Mbopo festival reflects ideals of beauty, chastity, and preparation for womanhood. These practices demonstrate that festivals are more than entertainment; they are cultural texts, performed year after year to reaffirm the community's sense of self. As Ekong argues, "festivals embody the collective identity of a people, binding past generations with the present and projecting their values into the future"<sup>1</sup>.

Moreover, these festivals are a unifying force for the Nsit Ibom, bringing together families, clans, and villages in a shared experience of rituals, dance, songs, and feasting. Through them, values of respect, unity, discipline, and reverence for tradition

are reinforced, creating a cultural bond that defines the people's social fabric. Oral interview with Elder Udo Etim emphasized that without these festivals, the cultural personality of Nsit Ibom would be at risk of fading, since they are the principal avenues through which traditions are remembered, enacted, and transmitted<sup>2</sup>. Thus, when one speaks of the "true identity" of the Nsit Ibom, it is impossible to separate it from their traditional festivals, for these rituals and ceremonies are not only celebrations of the past but also blueprints for preserving the community's identity in the present and future.

### **Cultural and Spiritual Heritage in Nsit Ibom Festivals.**

Festivals in Nsit Ibom are a reflection of both cultural pride and spiritual devotion, preserving a worldview in which the living, the ancestors, and the divine are in constant dialogue. Through an oral interview with Elder Aniefiok Udo, He reveals that the community views these celebrations not simply as entertainment but as a sacred duty that strengthens ties with the past while ensuring balance in the present. Through rituals, masquerades, and offerings, the people of Nsit Ibom have continued to preserve the essence of their cultural and spiritual heritage, making festivals a central aspect of their identity<sup>3</sup>.

Among the Nsit Ibom, ancestor worship is at the heart of traditional festivals. The belief that ancestors remain spiritually active after death is expressed through libations, sacrifices, and masquerade performances during key festivals. For instance, during the

Ekpo festival, masquerades are believed to embody the spirits of the departed, who return to visit their families, convey messages, and offer protection. This practice not only demonstrates reverence for the ancestors but also ensures that their authority continues to guide the living<sup>4</sup>. Talbot observed that for the Ibibio people, to which Nsit Ibom belongs, festivals served as “ritual spaces where the authority of the ancestors became visibly enacted,” reinforcing social bonds and respect for tradition<sup>5</sup>. Oral interview with Madam Ekaette Akpan, further confirmed that offerings such as palm wine, kolanuts, and animal sacrifices are still presented to the ancestors during certain ceremonies, highlighting the depth of continuity in this practice<sup>6</sup>.

Beyond the ancestors, festivals in Nsit Ibom also involve worship of local deities and spiritual forces tied to fertility, harvest, and protection of the community. The New Yam Festival (Utuene Ekikere), for example, involves ritual offerings not only to ancestors but also to deities believed to govern the land and agricultural cycles. Before the first yam is eaten, priests or custodians of tradition pour libations to earth deities, thanking them for fertility and appealing for continued blessings. These practices emphasize the interconnectedness of spirituality, agriculture, and survival<sup>7</sup>. In oral account with Chief Udo Essien, He affirmed that festivals serve as reminders that “the land is sacred and life depends on honoring both the ancestors and the gods”<sup>8</sup>. Thus, festivals function as vehicles of cultural transmission, embedding within them the recognition of a spiritual order that underpins human existence.

A unique aspect of Nsit Ibom festivals is the role of masquerades as both spiritual and judicial institutions. Masquerades such as Ekpo and Ekpe are seen not merely as performers but as enforcers of moral and social order. They embody ancestral spirits who descend during festivals to monitor the conduct of the people, punish offenders, and settle disputes. Offiong explains that masquerade societies historically acted as “visible symbols of justice and moral order,” functioning like traditional courts within the community<sup>9</sup>. In an Oral testimony with Chief Sunday Ukpong, He confirmed that individuals feared masquerades because they symbolized the inevitability of justice; wrongdoers who escaped human punishment were believed to face ancestral retribution through the masquerades<sup>10</sup>. In this way, festivals extended beyond spirituality into governance, embedding law and order into cultural celebrations.

The cultural and spiritual roles of festivals in Nsit Ibom cannot be overemphasized. They serve as repositories of memory, binding together the living, the ancestors, and the divine in a shared cultural universe. Through masquerade performances, libations, sacrifices, and ritual songs, these festivals preserve the values of respect, justice, and community solidarity. Even in the face of modernization, the symbolic weight of these practices remains central to the identity of Nsit Ibom. As the Ministry of Culture and Tourism notes, festivals are not only entertainment but “guardians of heritage and spirituality, sustaining values across generations <sup>11</sup>. Thus, cultural and spiritual heritage in

Nsit Ibom festivals represents a fusion of ancestral authority, divine reverence, and communal justice, shaping the people's identity and collective memory.

### **Social Cohesion and Community Bond.**

Traditional festivals in Nsit Ibom are central to the preservation of communal cohesion and identity, acting as unifying forces that bind the people together across generations. In an Oral interviewed with Elder Anietie, He affirmed that these festivals are not just seasonal events of celebration but are deeply embedded in the fabric of social life, fostering bonds among families, clans, and the larger community. During events such as the Ekpo and the New Yam Festival, the entire community gathers in a collective spirit, temporarily suspending divisions and reaffirming a shared sense of belonging. This gathering strengthens solidarity, reminding the people of their common ancestry, history, and values, which form the foundation of their cultural identity<sup>12</sup>. Oral account with Madam Ekaette Udo, She emphasized that even disputes within families or clans were often reconciled during festival periods, as the ancestors and deities were believed to frown upon disunity during sacred communal gatherings<sup>13</sup>. Such reconciliation reinforced trust, solidarity, and a collective identity that transcends individual or familial interests.

Beyond unity, festivals in Nsit Ibom also play a key role in reinforcing vocational identity, where individuals and groups express their crafts, trades, and professions in ways that strengthen communal pride. For example, traditional drummers, dancers,

carvers, farmers, and masquerade performers all find their space within the festivals, showcasing their skills and affirming their vocational heritage. This not only validates their personal identities but also demonstrates how every profession, whether farming, artistry, or music, contributes to the collective survival and prosperity of the community<sup>14</sup>. In this way, festivals become platforms for recognizing diverse talents, ensuring that cultural identity is not abstract but tied to the tangible roles and contributions of individuals to society. Ekong Ekong notes that the Ibibio, including Nsit Ibom, “located personal worth and social status within communal expressions such as festivals, where the dignity of one’s vocation was tied to the survival of the whole community”<sup>15</sup>.

The strength of festivals as agents of community bonding also lies in their intergenerational nature. Elders pass down oral histories, songs, dances, and ritual practices to the younger ones during these events, ensuring continuity of knowledge and tradition. The process of mentorship during festivals guarantees that younger members of the community are socialized into communal values and vocational roles while also fostering respect for elders and ancestral traditions<sup>16</sup>. Oral interview with Elder Anietie Udofia confirmed that during masquerade preparations or yam festival ceremonies, apprenticeships in drumming, costume making, farming practices, and even spiritual rituals are actively taught, thereby turning festivals into informal but powerful institutions of vocational and cultural education<sup>17</sup>. This intergenerational transfer not only

strengthens knowledge but also fosters bonds between age groups, ensuring the continuity of identity and community pride.

Furthermore, festivals reinforce collective memory by acting as annual reminders of the shared struggles, victories, and spiritual connections of the people. They embody narratives of origin, survival, and resilience, reminding the community of their uniqueness and distinctiveness among other groups. The Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Culture and Tourism describes these festivals as “living institutions of heritage, weaving together the social, economic, and cultural threads that make up the identity of the people” <sup>18</sup>. In the case of Nsit Ibom, communal participation in festivals ensures that identity is not only remembered but also enacted in ways that affirm unity and a sense of belonging. The communal dancing, masquerade displays, feasting, and rituals symbolize the spirit of oneness, where individuals see themselves first as members of a larger cultural whole before as individuals.

In sum, traditional festivals in Nsit Ibom serve as powerful vehicles of cohesion and community bonding, ensuring that identity is reinforced not only at the level of ancestry and spirituality but also at the level of vocation and everyday contributions to society. They remind the people that unity, mutual recognition, and shared heritage form the foundation of their cultural survival, thereby making festivals the true identity markers of the Nsit Ibom people.

## **The Art and Symbolism of Identity.**

Festivals in Nsit Ibom are richly layered with artistic and symbolic expressions that communicate the cultural identity of the people. Through symbolic attire, music, and culinary practices, the Nsit Ibom reaffirm their heritage, transmit values, and celebrate the uniqueness of their traditions. Attire during festivals is more than clothing; it is a powerful medium of identity, status, and spirituality. For example, during the Ekpo festival, masquerades are adorned with elaborate costumes made of raffia, carved wooden masks, and body paintings that symbolize the presence of ancestral spirits. These masks are not uniform but vary in size, design, and motif, representing different spirits, moral lessons, or social commentary. Oral testimonies reveal that some masks symbolize bravery, wisdom, or justice, while others mock immoral behavior, serving as tools of communal correction<sup>19</sup>. Ekong Ekong explains that the artistry of Ibibio costumes reflects not only aesthetic values but also the cultural philosophy that identity is inseparable from morality and spirituality (p. 201) .<sup>20</sup> Similarly, ordinary community members also dress in symbolic attire during festivals, such as the use of white wrappers to signify purity, beads to denote wealth or prestige, and body markings that connect participants to ancestral traditions.

Music is another critical dimension of identity during festivals. Traditional instruments, such as the ekwe (a wooden slit drum), obodom (a gong), udok (a

xylophone), and the talking drum, form the rhythmic backbone of celebrations. The beats are not random but are coded with meanings that communicate messages, summon spirits, and coordinate community participation. Oral accounts confirm that during masquerade processions, specific drumbeats announce the type of masquerade appearing, whether one associated with justice, fertility, or entertainment<sup>21</sup>. Music also unites the community in collective memory, as folk songs performed during festivals recount historical events, myths of origin, and ancestral achievements. Daniel Offiong notes that Ibibio festivals were historically “accompanied by music that served as both entertainment and historical record, ensuring that identity was both sung and remembered”<sup>22</sup>. In this way, music functions as both a cultural archive and a symbolic language of identity, reminding the people of their shared heritage.

Culinary expression adds yet another symbolic layer to the art of identity in Nsit Ibom festivals. Food is not simply consumed for nourishment but is offered, shared, and celebrated as a cultural emblem. The New Yam Festival (Utuene Ekikere) epitomizes this symbolism. The yam, regarded as the king of crops, represents life, prosperity, and continuity. Before it is eaten, rituals of thanksgiving are performed to the ancestors and deities, after which the yam is prepared and shared communally<sup>23</sup>. Oral traditions reveal that the act of sharing yams symbolizes unity and abundance, while refusing to participate was once seen as a rejection of communal identity<sup>24</sup>. Beyond yam, other communal identity<sup>24</sup>. Beyond yam, other delicacies such as ekpang nkukwo (pounded

cocoyam wrapped in cocoyam leaves), palm wine, and goat meat are prepared in large quantities, reinforcing values of hospitality and collective celebration. The culinary practices are also vocationally symbolic, as women display their culinary skills while men contribute through farming and hunting, showing that identity is not abstract but grounded in the daily labor that sustains life. The Akwa Ibom Ministry of Culture and Tourism highlights that “food, dance, and attire form the visible marks of cultural heritage, ensuring that festivals remain embodied experiences of identity”<sup>25</sup>.

In essence, the art and symbolism of Nsit Ibom festivals demonstrate that identity is expressed not only in abstract rituals but also in the everyday artistic forms, such as what people wear, what they hear, and what they eat. Symbolic attire reflects moral and spiritual values, music encodes memory and collective participation, and culinary practices symbolize unity, fertility, and prosperity. Together, these elements form a comprehensive cultural statement that festivals are not mere spectacles but living symbols of the Nsit Ibom identity, continuously reaffirmed through artistic expression.

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## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF MODERNIZATION ON TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS.**

#### **Introduction**

Traditional festivals in Nsit Ibom, once vibrant expressions of communal identity, spirituality, and cultural continuity, have suffered serious setbacks in recent decades due to the forces of modernization. One of the most profound effects is the erosion of traditional values and practices, as Western education and religion increasingly reshape worldviews. For instance, festivals that were originally sacred occasions for honoring ancestors and deities are now often dismissed by younger generations as mere superstitions, leading to declining participation and disinterest.<sup>1</sup> Equally, the rise of global entertainment platforms and modern leisure alternatives has made traditional festivities less attractive, particularly among urban-based youths who prefer concerts, clubs, or online events to community based cultural gatherings. Another challenge is commercialization: where festivals were once centered on communal solidarity and spiritual rituals, they are now at times reduced to spectacles designed to attract tourists, stripping them of their deeper cultural meanings.<sup>2</sup> Modernization has also contributed to the loss of symbolic practices such as masquerading, drumming, and oral performances, since imported music, fashion, and even processed foods now dominate celebrations, overshadowing traditional art forms. Additionally, rural and urban migration plays a critical role, as many able-bodied young people leave for cities, weakening the manpower

and vibrancy needed to sustain festivals in their native villages. The pressure of religious influence, particularly from Christianity, further complicates this decline, as many pastors openly discourage participation in masquerade rituals or ancestor veneration, labeling them as idolatrous.<sup>3</sup> This shift has led to tensions between elders, who still value the spiritual dimensions of festivals, and the younger population, who often see them as outdated. Ultimately, modernization has disrupted not only the authenticity of festivals but also their role as vehicles for intergenerational knowledge transfer, cultural preservation, and communal unity, leaving Nsit Ibom traditions vulnerable to erosion in a rapidly globalizing world.

### **Erosion of Cultural Authenticity and Significance.**

The erosion of cultural authenticity in Nsit Ibom traditional festivals has become one of the most critical challenges in the preservation of indigenous identity and heritage. Traditionally, festivals in Nsit Ibom, such as the Ekong, Ekpe, Udi, and Afan, were deeply rooted in ritual fidelity and sacred observances that linked the living with the ancestral world. These festivals were not mere entertainment; they carried profound religious and moral responsibilities. For instance, during the Ekong festival, elaborate masquerades performed ritual duties meant to cleanse the land and maintain harmony between the community and its deities. In earlier times, strict taboos governed participation, ensuring that every action had a symbolic meaning and reinforced cultural

norms. Today, however, many of these ritual practices have declined significantly, as younger generations participate without fully understanding their spiritual obligations, reducing the ceremonies to spectacles of music, dance, and costume.<sup>4</sup> This gradual dilution of ritual fidelity erodes the authenticity of the festivals and disconnects them from their original cultural essence.

Commercialization has further accelerated this loss of authenticity. Festivals that once emphasized communal unity and spiritual renewal are now often staged as revenue generating events. Local governments, cultural agencies, and private sponsors increasingly organize these celebrations to attract tourists and investors, sometimes prioritizing financial gains over cultural depth.<sup>5</sup> Sacred rituals are shortened or completely removed to fit media coverage schedules, while masquerade performances that once symbolized ancestral spirits are now presented as colorful entertainment for external audiences. A clear example can be observed during recent cultural exhibitions in Uyo and Nsit Ibom, where traditional chants were replaced by live bands, and elders' prayers were reduced to symbolic gestures for publicity purposes.<sup>6</sup> While modernization has created visibility for these festivals, it has simultaneously distorted their meanings, transforming them into products for consumption rather than cultural expressions rooted in sacred traditions.

Closely related to commercialization is the problem of revitalization, which, though intended to preserve festivals, sometimes contributes to their distortion. In several cases, cultural revival projects funded by state agencies selectively highlight “acceptable” aspects of traditions while ignoring rituals considered too “pagan” or controversial for modern audiences.<sup>7</sup> By altering the structure and sequence of traditional performances, these revitalization efforts present a sanitized version of culture that is divorced from its original context. What was once a sacred encounter between humans and the spirit world becomes a rehearsed performance designed to fit modern tastes. This selective preservation raises concerns about the authenticity of what is being passed down to future generations, since what is preserved is no longer the unbroken tradition of the ancestors but a reconstructed version shaped by external influences.

Another key area of erosion lies in the decline of indigenous languages and oral narratives within the festivals. Historically, festivals were accompanied by folk songs, proverbs, and chants performed in the Ibibio dialect, serving as powerful tools for transmitting collective memory and moral teachings. During the Udi festival, for example, women and elders performed songs that narrated community history, praised ancestral heroes, and reinforced moral codes.<sup>8</sup> These oral traditions were vital in sustaining the worldview of the people, as they carried ethical lessons and ensured continuity between past and present. Today, however, English and Nigerian Pidgin dominate most festival commentaries, while traditional chants are either forgotten or dismissed as outdated. This

linguistic shift not only strips festivals of their expressive richness but also contributes to the erosion of the cultural values embedded in indigenous languages. Without the language, much of the wisdom and symbolism carried by these festivals is lost, weakening their role as custodians of memory and heritage.

Taken together, the decline in ritual fidelity, the pressures of commercialization, the distortions of revitalization, and the loss of indigenous language paint a troubling picture of the erosion of cultural authenticity in Nsit Ibom festivals.<sup>9</sup> While festivals remain visible markers of identity, their original meanings and sacredness are under threat. This situation calls for a deliberate balance between modernization and tradition, ensuring that festivals are preserved not just as colorful displays for tourism but as living embodiments of the people's cultural, spiritual, and social values. Only then can they continue to serve as true custodians of heritage for future generations.

### **Socio-Structural and Community Fragmentation.**

Modernization has profoundly impacted the social fabric of the Nsit Ibom people, resulting in fragmentation that is most evident in the decline of traditional festivals. Once the binding force of communal life, festivals such as Ekong, Udi, and Nnabo were not simply events for merriment but were crucial in reinforcing social ties, cultural obligations, and communal responsibilities. Each family, lineage, and age group had a role to play, ensuring that festivals were not individual activities but collective

expressions of unity.<sup>10</sup> However, modernization, characterized by urban migration, wage labor, Christianity, and new social values, has steadily eroded these bonds, leaving festivals vulnerable to decline.

The first visible impact is the reduction in community participation and involvement. In earlier times, it was unthinkable for an adult or youth in Nsit Ibom to miss a major festival. These occasions demanded total community effort, from the construction of masquerade costumes to the preparation of communal feasts and the performance of rituals. Men took on organizational and protective roles, while women prepared food and trained younger girls in songs and dances. Youths provided the energy for drumming, acrobatics, and physical tasks.<sup>11</sup> Modernization, however, has redirected priorities. With many young people migrating to urban centers for schooling and employment, fewer return home for these festivals. Even when they do, their role is often passive, standing as spectators rather than participating in ritual practices.<sup>12</sup> Oral testimony from Elder Okon Udo reveals that the vibrant crowds and collective involvement of the past have dwindled, creating a sense of disconnection and weakening the solidarity that once defined Nsit Ibom communal life.<sup>13</sup>

A related problem is the widening intergenerational knowledge gap. Traditional festivals were once schools of culture, where the older generation passed down oral traditions, rituals, and symbolic performances to the younger members. During the Udi

festival, for example, women used songs and chants to transmit moral lessons and cultural wisdom, while masquerades in the Ekong festival were designed to teach discipline, bravery, and communal responsibility.<sup>14</sup> Today, these cultural “classrooms” are gradually disappearing. Western education, though valuable, leaves little room for indigenous learning systems. Young people, who are more comfortable with English or Pidgin, often lack fluency in Ibibio, making it difficult for them to grasp the metaphors, incantations, and chants embedded in festival rituals.<sup>15</sup> Elder Michael Udo, lament that youths neither understand nor appreciate the depth of meanings once carried in these songs and performances.<sup>16</sup> Instead of engaging with traditional knowledge, many prefer modern entertainment, reducing festivals to shallow, shortened events that lack their former richness.<sup>17</sup> This knowledge gap not only interrupts cultural transmission but also accelerates the erosion of identity, as younger generations increasingly see festivals as irrelevant to their lives in a modern world.

The most contentious form of fragmentation, however, arises from the conflict with modern religious beliefs, particularly Christianity. For centuries, festivals in Nsit Ibom were inextricably linked to religious practices, including libations, sacrifices, and ancestral invocations. These rituals endowed festivals with their sacred significance and reinforced their role in upholding law, order, and moral values within society.<sup>18</sup> With the arrival of Christianity, especially Pentecostalism, many of these practices have been condemned as idolatry. Pastors frequently preach against masquerades, ancestral

sacrifices, and the veneration of deities, framing them as incompatible with Christian faith.<sup>19</sup> This has produced a sharp division within families and communities. Younger Christians often refuse to participate in festivals, while elders insist that abandoning them amounts to betraying ancestral heritage.<sup>20</sup> Oral interview conducted with traditional custodian of festivals in Nsit Ibom confirmed that rituals once central to events have been abandoned or watered down, leaving only the superficial aspects of performance.<sup>21</sup> Some festivals now survive only as cultural showcases for tourists or government sponsored events, stripped of their religious depth.<sup>22</sup> This tension reflects a broader struggle over identity, as traditionalists and Christians clash over what it means to be authentically Nsit Ibom in the modern era.

In addition to these three main areas, modernization has also altered the traditional structures of authority and communal organization that underpinned festivals. Age grade associations, women's groups, and secret societies once coordinated roles and ensured accountability during festivals.<sup>23</sup> These institutions functioned as informal governance systems, teaching discipline, and promoting unity. Modernization, however, has fostered individualism, with many young people prioritizing personal achievement, careers, or church commitments over communal obligations.<sup>24</sup> This shift has weakened collective institutions and replaced them with fragmented identities, further eroding the socio-structural cohesion once reinforced by festivals.

## **Physical and Environmental Degradation.**

Modernization has dramatically transformed the way traditional festivals are celebrated among the people of Nsit Ibom. While some of these changes have brought conveniences, they have also resulted in physical and environmental degradation that undermines both the cultural essence and ecological harmony that once defined these events. Traditionally, Nsit Ibom festivals were celebrated in open village squares, sacred groves, and family compounds, spaces that were in direct contact with the natural environment. Materials used for decorations, attire, and performances were entirely organic raffia, palm fronds, clay, wood, and natural dyes. This ecological balance ensured that festivals left little or no permanent impact on the environment. However, the introduction of modern logistics, including sound systems, generators, motorized transportation, and artificial stage constructions, has created new environmental challenges. The loud noise from speakers and the emissions from power generators during festivals now pollute both air and soundscapes, while the influx of motor vehicles clogs small village roads and contributes to carbon emissions. Such disruptions contrast sharply with the quiet harmony that accompanied traditional celebrations, where music was created with drums, flutes, gongs, and rattles made from nature's resources.<sup>25</sup>

Additionally, the use of modern packaging and disposable items has contributed to a culture of waste during festivals. In the past, food was served on leaves or in clay pots,

and water was drunk from gourds or wooden cups. These items were biodegradable, disappearing harmlessly back into the environment after use. Today, however, plastic plates, nylon bags, bottled water, and disposable cutlery dominate the festival scene. After a single day of celebration, festival grounds are often littered with piles of plastic and synthetic waste that neither decompose easily nor align with the community's traditional ecological practices.<sup>26</sup> This has become a serious environmental problem, as most villages in Nsit Ibom lack formal waste management systems. The residue of these plastics ends up in streams, bushes, or is burned in open pits, releasing toxic fumes that further harm the environment. The careless disposal of modern waste during festivals not only pollutes the land but also undermines the spiritual significance of the events, as these sacred spaces were once seen as symbols of purity and order.

The physical transformation of sacred spaces has also contributed to environmental degradation. Ancestral groves and open squares, once reserved for masquerade appearances and communal dances, have been cleared or paved to make way for stages, viewing stands, or parking lots for visitors.<sup>27</sup> These alterations strip festivals of their traditional context, replacing natural environments with artificial structures that prioritize convenience over heritage. For example, masquerade festivals like Ekpo and Ekong were once performed exclusively in natural spaces tied to ancestral spirits. Today, in an attempt to accommodate large crowds and modern tourists, such performances are often staged in cleared or fenced areas that bear little resemblance to their original sacred sites.

The environmental costs of such modifications, including deforestation, soil erosion, and loss of biodiversity, contribute to the cultural loss that modernization brings.

Equally significant is the dilution of traditional aesthetics and attire, which once formed a vital part of the visual and symbolic identity of Nsit Ibom festivals. In earlier times, attire for festivals was deeply symbolic and ecologically sustainable. Masquerades wore raffia skirts, carved wooden masks, and animal skins, all of which were handmade and tied to specific cultural meanings. Women adorned themselves with beads, corals, and wrappers dyed with natural pigments, while men displayed status through traditional fabrics woven locally from cotton or raffia fibers.<sup>28</sup> These costumes not only showcased cultural pride but also demonstrated an intimate relationship with the environment, as every material was sourced sustainably and with ritual care. The process of making festival attire itself was a cultural education that youths learned from elders, including weaving, carving, and dyeing, thus ensuring the intergenerational continuity of skills.

Modernization, however, has led to a visible erosion of this symbolic aesthetic. Imported fabrics such as lace, polyester, and sequins have replaced raffia and cotton. Plastic beads and artificial ornaments have largely replaced corals and handmade jewelry.<sup>29</sup> While these materials are visually striking, they lack the cultural meaning and ecological harmony of traditional attire. A masquerade dressed in synthetic materials may appear colorful, but the attire no longer communicates the sacred symbolism tied to

ancestors, fertility, or social identity. Moreover, these synthetic materials contribute to environmental degradation, as they are non-biodegradable and often discarded after use. The result is a festival that appears appealing to outsiders but is stripped of its cultural essence, leaving behind waste that burdens the environment.

This dilution of attire has also weakened the vocational identity associated with the festival's aesthetics. Traditionally, craftsmen, weavers, and carvers enjoyed prestige in Nsit Ibom society because their skills were indispensable for festivals. With the rise of cheap imported alternatives, many of these artisans have lost relevance, and their crafts are disappearing.<sup>30</sup> As these traditions decline, the younger generation grows increasingly detached from the knowledge of how to create authentic attire, deepening both cultural loss and dependence on foreign materials.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

The role of festivals in preserving the cultural heritage of the Nsit Ibom people cannot be overstated. Festivals in this community remain deeply rooted in their history, spiritual life, and social order, functioning not just as moments of entertainment but as living traditions that embody the very essence of who the Nsit Ibom are as a people. They encapsulate centuries of ancestral wisdom, moral lessons, communal identity, and spiritual belief, all woven together in performances, rituals, and symbolic expressions. At their core, festivals serve as a bridge between the past and the present, linking generations through shared practices such as masquerade displays, ancestral veneration, initiation rites, and communal feasting. These celebrations have historically provided a framework for unity and identity, reinforcing cultural values and ensuring that each generation inherits not just the memory of their ancestors but also the responsibilities of maintaining continuity.

The findings of this project demonstrate that festivals are not merely periodic gatherings, but rather critical institutions for cultural preservation. They embody historical memory by re-enacting myths, legends, and histories that connect the living with their forebears. They act as guardians of traditional institutions, preserving the authority of village councils, lineage heads, and masquerade societies that once served as

instruments of law, morality, and social order. They also function as vehicles of social cohesion, bringing together different families, clans, and age grades in moments of collective participation and identity reaffirmation. In addition, festivals in Nsit Ibom facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer, as elders pass on songs, dances, proverbs, and ritual procedures to younger participants, ensuring that the culture remains both dynamic and preserved. Through symbolic attire, traditional music, and even culinary expressions, these festivals highlight both the tangible and intangible elements of identity, reinforcing the sense that cultural heritage is not something abstract but something lived and shared.

At the same time, the study recognizes that modernization has significantly altered the landscape of these traditions. Western education, urban migration, Christianity, and globalization have all posed challenges to the continuity and authenticity of Nsit Ibom festivals. Ritual practices that once held sacred meaning are now sometimes dismissed as superstition, while the rise of modern leisure and entertainment alternatives has led to a decline in participation among the youth. The commercialization of festivals, turning them into spectacles for tourism or economic gain, has also diluted their cultural essence, shifting the focus from spiritual depth to financial profit. Likewise, the intrusion of modern logistics, synthetic costumes, and amplified sound systems has weakened the environmental harmony and symbolic aesthetics that once characterized the festivals. Moreover, tensions with modern religious beliefs, particularly Christianity, have fostered

generational and ideological divides: while elders cling to ancestral traditions, younger members often resist participating out of fear of religious condemnation. This has led to a visible fragmentation within the community, reducing the ability of festivals to unify society as they once did.

Nevertheless, despite these challenges, festivals in Nsit Ibom have proven remarkably resilient. Oral testimonies from elders confirm that even when rituals are modified or simplified, the underlying meaning, honoring ancestors, reinforcing communal unity, and affirming identity, remains intact. Modern influences may have forced adaptations, but they have not erased the festivals' cultural essence. In fact, in some cases, modernization has provided opportunities for revitalization. The increased documentation of cultural practices, the promotion of festivals through state cultural agencies, and even the attraction of cultural tourism have offered new platforms for showcasing and safeguarding traditions. Yet, for these efforts to succeed, they must be balanced carefully, ensuring that festivals do not lose their spiritual depth and authenticity in the process.

This project establishes that festivals in Nsit Ibom are more than cultural events; they are powerful custodians of identity, heritage, and communal survival. They embody the living memory of the people, transmit values across generations, reinforce social structures, and celebrate the sacred bond between the living and the ancestral world. The

negative impacts of modernization cannot be ignored, but they also highlight the urgency of conscious preservation. To ensure the survival of these traditions, cultural custodians, community leaders, and policymakers must work together to safeguard festivals from dilution while promoting them in ways that resonate with younger generations. Festivals are not relics of heritage. By cherishing and sustaining them, the people of Nsit Ibom not only honor their ancestors but also secure their identity and cultural pride for future generations.

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Chief Etim Effiong	65	Trader and Custodian of Ekong festival	Ikot Ekpene, Nsit	September 8, 2025
Chief Etim Udo	60	Village head and fisherman	Afia Nsit	July 12, 2025
Chief SundayUkpong	67	Traditional ruler and Oral Historian	Afaha Offiong, Nsit Ibom	October 2, 2025
Chief Udo Ekanem	72	Village head and Carpenter	Afaha Offiong, Nsit Ibom	July 25, 2025
Chief Udo Essien	64	Village head and Fisherman	Ikot Udo, Nsit Ibom	October 2, 2025
Elder Aniefiok Udo	75	Clan elder and Hunter	Ikot Obio Nkan, Nsit Ibom	August 6, 2025
Elder Aniefiok Udom	65	Clan elder and an Arbitrator	Nsit Ibom	July 25, 2025
Elder Michael Udo	57	Farmer	Ikot Obio Nkan, Nsit	August 20, 2025

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Elder Okon Akpan	45	Chief Hunter	Nsit Ibom	August 3,2025
Elder Okon Udo	54	Cultural Ambassador	Afaha Offiong, Nsit Ibom	August 14,2025
Elder Udo Etim	67	Craftsman	Nsit Ibom	July 20 ,2025
Elder Udo Okon	56	Herbalist/ Traditional Healer	Nsit Ibom	July 20,2025
Madam Ekaette Akpan	50	Primary school Teacher	Nsit Ibom	July 25,2025
Madam Ekaette Udo	49	Farmer	Ikot Obio Nkan	August 3,2025
Madam Ime Etuk	52	Women leader and Trader	Ikot Obio Nkan, Nsit Ibom	July 10 ,2025
Mr Etim Udofia	64	Farmer	Nsit Ibom	August 12,2025

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