

Original Research Article

Adigbe Annual Fishing Festival of Ossiama kingdom Bayelsa State, Nigeria

Emmanuel E. Patrick^{1*}, Ebibotei D. Bunu¹, Beatrice Amah¹

¹Department of History and Diplomacy, Faculty of Arts, Niger Delta University Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State, Nigeria

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Abstract: The significance of history in shaping a people's cultural identity cannot be overstated. It provides a window into the past, present, and potentially even the future of a group, helping to cultivate a deeper understanding and appreciation of their traditions and cultural practices. This research critically examines the historical origins and development of Adigbe Annual Fishing Festival in the Ossiama Kingdom, tracing its journey from inception to the present day. The study offers a historical overview of the Ossiama people, detailing their origins, migration patterns, settlement, and geographical location. It explores the founding of the Ossiama community, attributed to "Asiyai" or "Ossi," one of Oyakiri's sons, who, following a dispute with his brothers, left and settled in the present-day Ossiama area. Today, the Ossiama Kingdom consists of four autonomous communities: Ossiama Town, Ogbopulo-ama, Awe-ama, and Ogbunu-ama, all of which make up the Kingdom. The research also delves into the ancient Adigbe Lake's origin and the festival's evolution, charting its growth from a rotational celebration held by each community to the current collective approach. However, in light of contemporary modernization, the study emphasizes the need for innovations to elevate this long-standing festival to the level of other renowned global events.

Keywords: Adigbe, Festival, Ossiama Kingdom, Asiyai, Sumun, Ijaw.

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INTRODUCTION

A festival is typically an event organized by a community to celebrate distinctive aspects of its cultural life. Festivals can involve cultural activities, celebrations, or entertainment organized by groups or organizations, often blending religious, historical, and cultural themes. According to the Encyclopedia of African History and Culture, Volume II, festivals have long been traditions in Africa, used to reinforce cultural values and unite communities around shared goals. The way festivals are celebrated differs across ethnic groups and nations, highlighting the cultural diversity between them. In Ijo/Ijaw Communities, festivals have been associated with harvest, fishing, merrymaking, and wrestling. Additionally, they serve social, economic, political, religious, and historical purposes, often commemorating liberation from wars or honoring the spirits of heroic ancestors.

The tradition of festival celebrations dates back to ancient times, as seen in Greek and Roman societies, where festivals were held to worship idols, celebrate victories, or mark significant events. Even in religious

texts, such as Exodus 12:14 in the Bible, the importance of festivals is emphasized: "This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord—a lasting ordinance for seven days." This passage underscores the divine origin of festivals, as God commanded the Israelites to observe an annual seven-day celebration. It also highlights the historical significance of festivals, as these events date back thousands of years. Moreover, festivals have universal appeal, with every ethnic group and nation celebrating their festivals for social, religious, political, economic, and historical reasons, as well as to commemorate individuals, events, or activities.

In this context, the origin and development of the Adigbe Annual Fishing Festival in Ossiama Kingdom followed a similar pattern. Oral traditions trace its origins to a woman named Sumun and her "seven grown-up daughters," who, in the 16th century, are said to have accidentally created the Adigbe fishing lake. Festivals hold great cultural significance for many people, particularly for the Ossiama community and the broader Izon Nation. In recognition of this importance, Prince Kainga made a notable statement on the subject.

*Corresponding Author: Emmanuel E. Patrick

Indonesia Language and Literature Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, Indonesia

“Festivals hold immense significance in Izon culture”.

Many communities celebrate festivals in various forms, incorporating activities such as harvesting, fishing, merrymaking, exchanging gifts, eating, drinking, dancing, and wrestling, among others. The Adigbe Fishing Festival of Ossiamia Kingdom has grown from a local kingdom-based event to an occasion recognized nationally and internationally.

In the course of this research, several books were consulted, but only a few proved significantly helpful in shaping this paper. These sources provided general information about the history of Ossiamia and briefly touched on the Adigbe Festival.

F.S. Braladei's book *Family Tree of Ossiamia-owe Kingdom* (2002) examines the origins, settlement, and location of Ossiamia. It traces the migration of the Ossiamia people from the old Benin Empire to their current settlement, though it provides limited details on the festival itself.

C.M. Emmanuel, in his book, *The Ossiamia-owe Kingdom* (2002), discusses the origins and location of the Ossiamia people and the Kingdom as a whole. This book attributes the founding of Ossiamia to a man named Asiyai (or Ossi), the tenth son of Oyakiri, who migrated from Toru-Ebeni and settled in the present location. It also touches on the origin of Lake Adigbe, how the festival has been celebrated among the four communities, and highlights the political, social, and cultural aspects of the Ossiamia people. It offers valuable insights into the cultural beliefs and practices surrounding the festival, but this paper seeks to add more detailed information, particularly regarding the history of Ossiamia and the Adigbe Festival.

E.J. Alagoa's *A History of the Niger Delta: An Historical Interpretation of the Ijo Oral Tradition* (2005) traces the ancestry of Asiyai, linking him to the migration from the old Benin Kingdom. While this book does not delve deeply into the history of Ossiamia, it provides additional context on the Ossiamia people and the Adigbe Festival.

B.D. Olologu's *Amassoma Fishing and Feasting Festival: Seigbein* (2007) focuses on the historical background and location of Amassoma and its fishing festival. Although centered on the Amassoma community, this work offered useful insights that helped enhance the present research.

Lastly, P.E. Kainga's *Amassoma in the Core of the Niger Delta and Izon Culture: Historical Perspective* (2009) outlines the Seigbein Fishing Festival of Amassoma, detailing its activities, timing, and the organization of the festival. Though the book focuses on Amassoma, it was instrumental in enriching this research.

Pa Nathan Alade, in oral interview in Ossiamia Town, said, “there was a married woman in the family of Akodi simply called Sumun, who went on a particular day to a forest known as Adigbe to get some food for her seven children. They discovered a shallow water under a tree with fishes “In the process of gathering what she could take home, she discovered beneath a tree many species of fish swimming in shallow water, and was confused on what to do to catch the fishes. She decided to go home and call her seven children to accompany her back to the spot she discovered the fishes. The next day, she and the seven children went to the bottom of the tree, which she saw the migrating fishes. On reaching there, they did not hesitate to catch the fishes,” he said. His words: “In the excitement of a great catch by the family of eight, but suddenly, they heard vibration and before they could realize, it was danger around them, as the spot they were catching the fishes was eroding in quick successions.” As the place they were standing started boiling and rumbling, they ran towards different directions to escape to safety. Their mother, Sumun could not take any of her seven children to safety, rather she ran for her own life. Pa Alade said the quake continued to chase them and in the end, none of Sumun's seven children survived, the mysterious depleting site swallowed the children that went for fishing expedition with their mother”.

Pa German Monday, in an oral interview, however, “stated that their mother succeeded in fleeing to a place now known as Apoi Creek, where Esoni and other communities are settled. Some villagers, who were paddling canoe saw her and took her to Ossiamia town, where she narrated what tragedy befell her seven children. Her story amazed the people. They followed her to Adigbe forest to confirm her story and saw the unbelievable. The place had turned a mighty lake adjudged the largest in Nigeria and West Africa. There are still traces of the points in the form of little streams, where the seven children of Sumun perished and the little streams are named after them as a memorial. They were children and mainly girls of age seven, who were not married”.

According to Pa Atika Flinton; in an oral interview, “the cause of the vibration and quake that resulted to a great lake was traceable to the handiwork of some spirits. He added that following the mysterious occurrence, crocodiles took over the lake and occupied it. Due to the carnivorous nature of crocodiles, nobody could fish inside the lake and this made Kurubiri and Tanyi families of Ossiamia to consult some spiritual powers, which they invoked on the crocodiles not to be harmful to humans when fishing, and really, since then the crocodiles have not been harmful to humans up till now”.

The 1,000 anglers-capacity lake could generate over N50 million in a period of four months of fishing using canoes and nets due to the depth of the lake. “It is

not only people from Ossiama who fish in the Adigbe Lake, but the entire Oboro Kingdom comprises Ossiama, Egbopuloama, Aweama, and Ogbonuama. However, due to the largeness of the lake, nobody steps into the water to fish; rather they use nets and canoes to fish.

Indigenes from the four communities in the kingdom all have their own thatch tent accommodations by the lake, where they stay for the period of the fishing that lasts even up to four months. People from different parts of Bayelsa state and Nigeria, do come to witness and buy fish, but non-indigenes are not allowed to fish at Adigbe Lake, but they could have a view of it and also buy fish.

SOURCES AND METHODS

This study was conducted in Ossiama Kingdom, primarily focusing on Ossiama Town, located in Sagbama Local Government Area, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The choice of Ossiama Town as the central location for the research was driven by the fact that the Adigbe Fishing Lake is situated on the western edge of the community. However, the research encompassed all four communities that make up the Ossiama Kingdom: Ossiama Town, Ogbopulo-ama, Awe-ama, and Ogbunu-ama—ensuring a holistic approach to the study.



Figure 1: 500-year Old Adigbe Lake

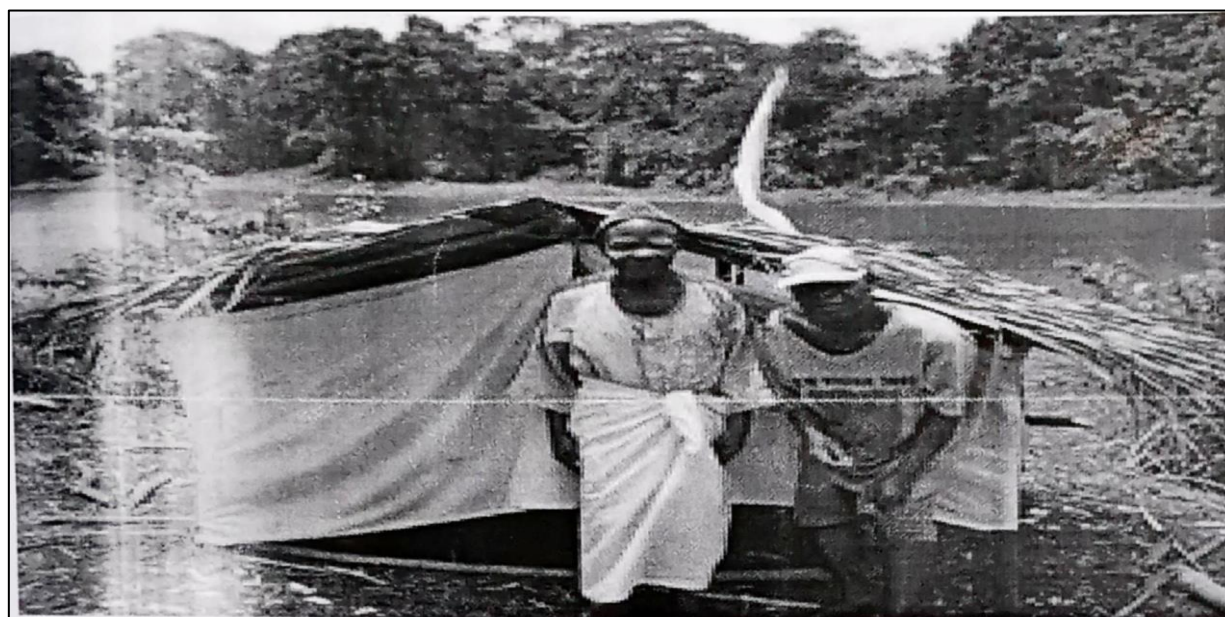


Figure 2: Chief Priest and assistant in front of a shrine erected for sacrifices to the lake god at Lake Adigbe. The Ossiama people carry out sacrifices in the shrine which are mandatory before and after the fishing festivities. (Source: E.D. Anwana)

The study primarily utilized observation as the method of data collection. The researcher attended the festival activities among the Ossiama people, documenting verbal exchanges using a digital audio recorder. This was a passive observation, where the researcher observed and recorded events without actively participating. The observation was deemed suitable for

this research because it allowed for the spontaneous use of language within the cultural context. According to O'Connor (2005), the rationale for participant observation is based on the belief that natural behaviors are more likely to reflect certain shared traits within a group, such as common perceptions or beliefs.



Figure 3: Fishing activities on Lake Adigbe of the Ossiama people in the Niger Delta region, Bayelsa State, Nigeria

In addition to observation, the study employed interviews as a data collection method. The researcher developed interview schedules to guide the process. Participants involved in the festival activities were interviewed to determine whether certain practices from the past continue to be embedded in the current festive proceedings.

The researcher identified a local community member well-versed in the Ossiama-Ijaw language to assist with expert interpretation and translation of the utterances made during the festival proceedings. After the festival, the researcher informed the participants that the events had been recorded and sought permission from the group leaders to use the recorded information. It was explained that the data, drawn from naturally occurring conversations, would be used anonymously and solely for academic purposes. The gathered data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis.

RESULTS

The study revealed that the Adigbe Annual Fishing Festival of the Ossiama Kingdom is a historic event that has been celebrated for over three centuries. However, significant changes have occurred in how the festival is conducted due to the influence of Christian

ideologies that have permeated the Ossiama Kingdom. Additionally, there is a noticeable disinterest among the younger generation in participating in the festival's activities.

CONCLUSION

The Adigbe Annual Fishing Festival remains one of the most significant socio-cultural events in the Ossiama Kingdom, held to honor the legendary founder of the lake, Sumun, and her seven children. Festivals, in general, play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage, fostering unity, and encouraging development within a community. The Adigbe Festival showcases the cultural heritage of the Ossiama people through traditional dances, masquerades, canoe races, and other artistic expressions. However, the festival has been influenced by Westernization and Christianity, which has led to the erosion of some of its traditional values. In particular, immoral behaviors, such as promiscuity during activities like the beach party, have become concerns.

Despite these challenges, the festival holds great potential for the future if the necessary steps are taken to improve its organization and appeal. The researcher suggests reintroducing traditional cultural activities and modernizing certain aspects of the festival

to attract tourists. By promoting the cultural heritage of the Izon people, the festival could gain recognition from international bodies such as UNESCO, and the Adigbe Fishing Lake could be developed into a major tourist center.

Furthermore, the researcher calls on the Bayelsa State Government of Nigeria; to recognize Adigbe Fishing Lake as a key tourist destination. Developing the lake could attract more visitors, generate significant revenue for the state, and reduce the need for fish imports. While the researcher's intention is not to criticize the festival's current organization, the concern lies in the loss of cultural ethics and values. Greater participation by indigenes and a renewed focus on cultural activities are crucial to restoring the festival's former prestige and ensuring its preservation for future generations.

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