DRAMA AND PHILOSOPHY: A STUDY OF SELECTED TEXTS WITHIN THE IJAW ORAL TRADITION

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

2019

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Table of Contents

Declaration for SOAS PhD Thesis ……2

Dedication ……6

Acknowledgments ……7

Abstract ……9

Introduction ……10

Methodology……10

Chapter One ……18

Setting and Imagery: A Reflection on Ijaw Environment and Cosmology ……18

The Spiritual Setting ……21

The Social Setting ……32

The Family Setting ……34

Figure 1. An old house belonging to a significant person from the lineage of Asimini. Notice the two canons under the name signifying European contact and its capacity to be a war canoe house ……36

Figure 2. A further description of the kind of people this house represents. ……36

The Economic Setting ……40

The Natural Setting ……44

Chapter Two ……47

Festivals Among the Ijaw ……47

Religious/Spiritual Festivals ……48

Opongi Festival ……49

Duminea Festival ……52

Odum Festival ……56

Iria Ceremony……61

Seigbein Festival ……63

Funeral Rites ……65

Regatta ……67

Chapter Three ……73

Masquerades Societies and Masks Among the Ijaw ……..…...73

Figure 3 A small group of young people making their own procession. They probably do not have the resources nor the status for elaborate designs but they make do with crude instruments such as bottles, metal scraps and discarded rattlers……..…80

Masks and Masquerades ……..……...81

Figure 4 A member of a masquerade club leading the masquerade procession on the streets of Bonny. He is carrying a device that produces a sound like a siren but seems a bit more eerie. This sound announces the masquerade and calls the rest of the procession together.....84

Figure 5 The masquerade which is the main attraction of the club. Notice the way the raffia is sewn in layers. This creates an expansive and rippling effect when the masquerade dances, jumps or runs during any performance. 84

Figure 6 A space allocated to one of Bonny's masquerade clubs with their deity in front.....89

Figure 7 A procession on its way to an event where the skill of its members will be tested against other groups in Bonny. 90

Figure 8 The Otobo (Hippopotamus) masquerade at the burial of late Chief Abbey-Hart. There are other Otobo masquerades present apart from this picture and they always perform in groups of seven ……91

Drum Language ……...95

Chapter Four…. ……102

The Storyteller Among the Ijaw; A Study of Different Means of Storytelling……..……..102

The Case of Okabou Ojobolo: A Study of Ijaw Narrative Techniques ……..…….105

Masquerades as Storytellers ……..……..117

Chapter Five ……...128

The Writer as a Product of Ijaw Cosmology: A Study of J.P Clark and Gabriel Okara……..128

The Need for a Writer ……128

The Dilemma of the Writer ……129

The Ijaw Cosmos as the Writer's Resource ……..…….135

The Writer Against his People ……..……...143

The Writer as a Custodian of Traditional Ideology ……148

Chapter Six ……...…….158

Themes in Ijaw Oral Tradition ……...……158

Vengeance ……..……...158

Struggle ……..……163

Family Tradition ……..……..171

Gender Hierarchy …….…..…….174

Conclusion …….……183

Bibliography……..…….189

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to God Almighty. If the Lord had not been on my side… If not for His mercies, I would truly have been consumed and this work would not have become a reality

To my late father, Professor Eldred I.I.T. Green whose commitment to the Ibani people first stirred my interest in the culture and whose footpaths cleared the way for me to follow in research, discovery and contribution to the Ijaw Oral Tradition.

To my mother, Justice Constance Green of whom the words “Priceless” and “Invaluable” cannot describe either her person or the support and motivation I have received from her even before and after the demise of my father.

To all the members of the Titus-Green and Josiah-Oki families. Examplary kinships to the world in Unity, Strength, Faith and Purity.

Acknowledgments

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge and thank my main Supervisor, Dr. Kwadwo Osei-Nyame Jr who taught me to fully express myself in an African way and whose infectious passion and belief for Africa, drove me to a more in-depth search for truth from my time as a Masters Student up till this point. My two other supervisors, Dr. Chege Githiora and Dr. Martin Orwin are not without praise as though they broadened my perspective during this research, they also drew my attention to important details needed to solidify my work. Dr. Seraphim Kamdem whose vast knowledge and experience guided the decisions I made and Dr. Kai Easton whose friendship and teachings, increased my desire for adventure in African Studies.

I acknowledge Professor E. J Alagoa who I would describe as my academic grandfather, having mentored my father. You were not only the first fountain of knowledge I encountered in this search sir, but you served as a major platform for me to encounter more.

I acknowledge Dr. Ebitare Obikudo whose directions at the beginning of my research, set me on my journey and who constantly encouraged me as I forged ahead. I also acknowledge other lecturers of University of Port Harcourt; Dr. Omeh Ngwoke whose contributions to my study can never be over emphasized. My father could neither supervise nor view your finished work as you stated in the acknowledgments in your thesis but you supported my research and will be able to view my finished work sir. I acknowledge Dr. Ikenna Kamalu who has always believed in me from my days as an Undergraduate in Covenant University.

To Mr. Opubo Dokubo who selflessly led me round Bonny, sourcing for information. My cousin Nengi Hart, whose commitment to my progress and family would need another thesis to describe. To my other cousin, Tammy Abbey-Hart who went to the lengths I could not get to for time constraint and contributed a wealth of resources; I hope this work will help to immortalise your father. To Amasenibo Vivian Brown, another wealth of knowledge whose brief meetings yielded so much. To Amasenibo Alfred Allison and Mr. Eric Jumbo, also reservoirs of history, knowledge and tradition whose contributions provided so much information and understanding to a culture I thought I already knew. To the members of Ibani Christian Fellowship (ICF) particularly Pastor David Wilcox who contributed in prayers and difficult translations, and Pastor Tonye Allison who through his resilience, finally connected me with Amasenibo Allison. I say a big thank you to you all.

To the lecturers at the Niger Delta University, Bayelsa; Professor Saviour Nathan Agoro, I am very grateful for your immediate willingness and contributions to my research as well as your

apparent concern for my wellbeing. Thank you also, for bringing Dr. Benedict Binebai and Mr. Kingsley Ineritei who provided an academic background, form and understanding to traditional Ijaw concepts.

To my parents, maternal and paternal family once again who are too many to mention but also contributed knowledge and much encouragement as I wrote this thesis.

Lastly, to my family in London - members of the “Old” & “New” Kings Cross and the wider Hillsong family. You make life worthwhile for anybody away from home. You all are rare gems.

The Lord bless you all!

Abstract

This dissertation, titled, Drama and Philosophy: A Study of Selected Texts Within the Ijaw Oral Tradition, aims to examine certain attributes and attitudes about the Ijaw, particularly the founding principles and core values rooted in their identity, which enables them to not only function effectively as a group but also to create a self-sustaining platform for continuity over a long period of time; values which are visibly present in their philosophy and which binds them together and keeps them as a cohesive unit, temporarily or permanently. The Ijaw people of Nigeria upon whom this study is concentrated have a huge reservoir of cultural philosophy that is affirmed in their life-work and other modes of existence. The dissertation aims to explore the various philosophical underpinnings of the Ijaw people as communicated, preserved and portrayed through their various forms of artistic production. This involves differing forms of performing arts such as dance and folklore, which are embedded in the theatrical performances which take place among the various sub-groups within this culture. The performing arts of the Ijaw people though very much projected in different forms would benefit from a continuous re-appraisal and explication as intended in this thesis for the benefit of posterity. While the different types of philosophy that the Ijaw people embrace has brought and bound them together over the centuries, drama is the ultimate defining mode and vehicle through which these philosophies and thought systems are articulated and communicated. Although, it will be a futile task to attempt to compound everything about Ijaw culture into a single thesis, drawing on and evaluating the selected texts within the oral tradition enables us to come to terms with the Ijaw worldview in a sustained manner and gives us some interesting insights into their worldview, material and spiritual cosmogony.

Introduction

The concept of Art from an Ijaw perspective is generally discussed more from an ontological definition rather than an epistemological one and a similar standpoint is taken for many other concepts among Ijaw people. The point is this – the Ijaws do not as much concern themselves with a satisfactory theoretical or rational knowledge or belief of a thing or concept (as in the case of epistemology) as they do with its purpose, existence and immediate function in its immediate environment which is what an ontological definition entails. This belief system is also apparent in the ways in which a few objects or concepts are named. Let us take for example, the word "Watch"; the device which tells the time. Devices like this and many more were brought to city states like Bonny through European trade but rather than call it "Watch" as the Europeans called it, it was called *Enekienye* meaning "the thing that counts the day".

This does not mean that the Ijaws took time to rename every single foreign object brought to them but it does drive home the point of function rather than abstraction among the Ijaws. The idea of function is key to understanding the importance of and reason for performances and actions alongside reasoning and deliberation rather than just abstract conceptual debates as found in a few other parts of the world. The use of Ijaw interpretation is critical to the understanding of this study and this is explained by the methodology used for this research.

Methodology

The aim while conducting this study, was to allow the text to speak for itself both in full expression and through the best means of communication possible. The eclectic methodology which comprises several forms of approach, was therefore considered the best suited methodology for the analysis of Ijaw oral texts. This is because at various points in this study, certain methodologies are more suited to express different aspects of the culture in a better way than other methodologies.

Under the eclectic methodology in regard to this study, the use of textual analysis is the most prominent as in most cases, the text is able to speak for itself if there is someone present to properly interpret it. There are also other approaches involved such as the use of critical theories and different methods of data collection. These methods include library research, an observation of Ijaw performances and a personal interview with ten different Ijaw indigenes.

A limitation to this research is the lack of presence of a dominant female voice in the narration of Ijaw oral tradition. The most popular Ijaw texts analysed in this thesis were produced by men either in the oral or written form and this limitation is also seen by a lesser presence of female academic output in this field. This has been ameliorated by a constant reference to the female voice within the texts where they are present. This will also be taken up further and explored in future research.

In regard to the concept of Art from an Ijaw perspective, it is obvious that there is really no clear parallel drawn in the Ijaw thought system for the term "Art for Art's sake" but there is a wealth of reference for the term, "Art for life's sake". As the term "Drama" falls under Art, the concepts applied to Art will also apply to Drama in one form or the other. These concepts will form a lot of the basis for the interpretation of the various life actions surrounding the drama and philosophy of Ijaw people throughout the Niger Delta region and anywhere else the Ijaws might have some form of cultural influence whether in Nigeria or abroad.

Concerning philosophy itself, it is the philosophy of a people that influences and determines their collective actions and motives. This means that attributes of their philosophy, will therefore be seen in whatever action is taken as the decisions made, will be traced back to a philosophy influenced stream of consciousness. The influences of a people's philosophy are usually established through their moral or ethical values, politics, socio-economic policies and any other activity which may affect the society. Asides the more socio-politically inclined platforms, these influences are also seen and expressed through other more literary or artistic means and the philosophical underpinnings of certain cultures are more prominent in the literary and artistic forms more than all the other means of expression. Ato Quayson speaking on African theatre, says that "Theatre in Africa is demonstrably a place of greater vitality than other literary forms. It is the locus of dialogic variation" (2004:46)

There is still a lot to be gleaned from a lot of Ijaw performances and by extension, a lot of other African performances. A lot of messages and subtle forms of information either often go unnoticed or are lost as the observer is either distracted by other supplementary aspects to the performance or is fascinated by the level of the performance in itself. Many of these forms of information or philosophical undertones if seen, are not always recorded in books for preservation but they are very much present and are compacted in various forms of artistic performance such as dance. Some of these significances are gradually being lost over time due to various mistakes and external factors. One cannot always assume that the younger

generation, especially in a post-modern era, will learn everything today in the same manner in which their parents learned or received them from previous generations. More deliberate and innovative methods have to be made to continue the sustenance of the culture.

Just as the most knowledgeable person about an invention is its creator, the most knowledgeable people about a philosophy are the people who originate or practice it. Philosophy deals with identity; both of the one who practices it, and that of the environment by which the practitioner is influenced. The various philosophies around the world come from the various identities of the people who practice them and the people who practice them are above all, able to set the terms of their philosophy, its identification, the rules by which its form of reasoning follows and the reformation of aspects of it, which seem less progressive or unsatisfying. These terms are not for an unfamiliar practitioner of another philosophy to set; even though there may be transference of ideas. It is rather the choice of the practitioner of a philosophy to continue to develop it through the best possible means in order to gain relevance to progress and lifestyle.

If philosophy should be seen as a way of life, it cannot then be isolated merely to contemplations and speech. This is moreso, when it affects a group of people who have decided to live according to a system of thought. Even today, corporations and establishments need to draw out rules and regulations by which they are established and sustained.

The dramatic performances in regards to the philosophy of the people which will be discussed in this study, are not only peculiar to the Ijaw but to many other ethnic groups in West Africa such as the Efik, Ibibio and Igbo of Nigeria and the Akan of Ghana. These performances have in the past and a bit of the present, been overlooked when it came to the definition of an African Drama much like the situation behind the definition of an African Philosophy. The criticisms behind both concepts have been created for very similar reasons; one of the frequent arguments by scholars in opposition is that there do not seem to be definite parameters by which the drama can either be defined or displayed at any point in time. A sub argument under this is; there does not seem to be a very defined set of rules which not only directs how a dramatic performance must be done, but also acts as a boundary to define what is and what is not Drama. To these statements, the retort is the same as that of the scholars for African Philosophy which is this; “Who has the authority to define what is and what is not Drama?”

This debate brings us to the relativist versus the evolutionist argument concerning African Drama and Isidore Okpewho speaks on this issue in some detail, using the Igbos as a case study. As there are a few similarities concerning the ritualistic aspects of the dramas of southern Nigeria, such an argument can effectively be applied to the Ijaw people. While speaking on Ritual Drama in his book, *African Oral Literature* (1992:261), Okpewho makes an assumption that the controversy of this particular topic was probably kindled by Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970) where she finds it difficult herself to define this form of drama. Finnegan says that it is difficult to speak on indigenous drama in Africa because "it differs from previous topics like, say, panegyric, political poetry, or prose narratives, for there it was easy to discover African analogies to the familiar European forms" (1970:485). Finnegan adds, "it would perhaps be "truer" to say that in Africa, in contrast to Western Europe and Asia, drama is not typically a wide-spread or developed form (485).

Finnegan does, however, slightly acknowledge its presence and says that "there are however, certain dramatic and quasi-dramatic phenomena to be found" (485) using an example of the celebrated masquerades in Southern Nigeria as a matter of great interest. The irony of using the Masquerades of Southern Nigeria is that they are a major pillar in the dramatic performances among the Ijaw and across the other cultures of Nigeria and their influence on drama is so large that they will be discussed across three chapters in this study. Statements like that of Finnegan according to Okpewho (1992:261), are shared by quite a few Nigerians like Michael Echeruo who complains that these sequences of events in the myth-induced dramas lack a coherence. Echeruo who himself is an Igbo man, tells his fellow Igbo people to forsake the Igbo ritual celebrations as they lead to a dead end but instead "do what the Greeks did: expand ritual into life and give that life a secular base" (1973:30). The retort of Ossie Enekwe, a fellow Igbo scholar is not only apt but creates a way into understanding the nature and purpose of drama as defined by the people of Southern Nigeria.

> …myth is not the essence of drama, that the structure of drama is determined by the function that theatre serves in a particular culture, and that, far from being a dead end, ritual can easily be transformed into drama. Because Igbo theatre has a different function and a dissimilar method from that of the Greek theatre, for example, it is wrong to demand that the Igbo should develop a form similar to the Greek's. What the Igbo used they have developed on their own tastes, outlook, and the resources available to them. There is no need to keep talking of evolving Igbo drama when it is already flourishing all over Igboland. (1981: 162)

Two key words to note in this quote are “function” and “resource”. It is a common understanding in Linguistics that subject matters and objects in many cases are defined or understood by their functions in whatever they are found in. African art as a whole, does not really embrace the classification of “art for art sake” in general and any dramatic sketch produced per time is produced either as a result of or looking towards the occurrence of certain phenomenon. These series of sketches however long or short they may be, coupled with the resources and ingenuity of the people when collected together, are called African or in this case, Ijaw Drama. Even the Greek framework which Echeruo tells his people to borrow from serves different functions according to their genres; functions which have been written by ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle and are still being examined today.

Analyses like Finnegan and Echeruo’s come from the perpetual issues arising in comparative literary analysis and translation studies where it is practically impossible to always find an exact equivalent or definition of a subject matter between two or more cultures. It is most likely the lack of an exact equivalence that causes scholars like these to see certain subject matters as present in one culture and absent in another. When examined with the functions of words like Tragedy, Comedy, Catharsis, Hubris and the likes, there is no reason to doubt the existence of an African or Ijaw drama whether they follow the same plot structure or not. These dramas are created with the aim of achieving the exact functions which ancient Greek Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle proposed should be the aim of drama.

These functions are ever present in Ijaw drama especially when these Greek dramas are believed to have originated along festivals honouring Dionysius, the god of wine, the same way a lot of Ijaw and African dramatic performances were created from festivals. This issue of a comparative definition, will be addressed a few more times in this study both as a statement, and also as a reminder to the approach taken during textual interpretation and analysis. The performances and happenings that are to be discussed, will be better understood in light of their functionality to the Ijaws and their surrounding neighbours, rather than from a purely conceptual basis.

Okpewho speaks on one of such situations that involves the Ijaws and their surrounding neighbours. Although it does not concern the Ijaws directly, the Ijaws have a part to play and this is documented by his former student, Yomi Akeremale, who in his undergraduate dissertation, writes on a ritual concerning the goddess Aiyelala of the Ilaje people of Ondo State in Nigeria. According to the story, an Ilaje man who was found guilty of committing

adultery had run away from his people but not without members of his community in serious chase. This man then found refuge with a neighbouring Ijaw settlement which offered to shield him from danger but this decision almost caused a serious clash between the two communities, however, through sensible communication, both communities took a decision to create and enforce peace, tranquillity and cordiality from that point on but they needed a human sacrifice to make such a vow so sacred that it would be immutable but the problem was that no side was willing to offer the sacrifice. This was resolved when a beautiful woman decided to become the sacrifice but before doing so, she laid down the various laws by which the people must live and promising protection if they followed suit.

The festival as a result, is one which enforces an ancient agreement and serves as an important reminder to the consciousness of the people about the systems involved and the cost of peace between communities. This is an example of how the philosophies of a people can be preserved and understood through their dramatic performances. As the Ilaje people are not Ijaw, the ritual will not be discussed here but Okpewho does a more extensive analysis on the dramatic techniques involved in this ritual in his already mentioned book, *African Oral Literature* (1992:262-264). Ritualistic performances alongside storytelling are the most common forms of drama among the Ijaw people and they project a lot of information concerning the history, thought systems and identities of the people.

The advent of colonialism as is always the case, brought a few variations in the production and study of different aspects of African literature mainly in the performative and written aspects. Lewis Nkosi explains that:

> African Literature as a university discipline, as a subject of numerous textual exegeses, or simply as an object of critical comment has only come into its own during the last twenty years or so… modern African literature as such can be said to have achieved its present status concomitantly with the maturation of the long struggle for political independence and the achievement of the modern state in Africa (1981:1)

Considering the time at which Nkosi's statement is published, this would put the "last twenty years or so" at around the time of Nigeria's independence on the 1st of October 1960 of which there is much to say as it creates a major effect and marks a different era on not just Ijaw literature but also on the Ijaw writer who will be discussed later in this study. This is moreso because this study comprises the analysis of Ijaw drama and philosophy in its pure expressive forms, which are also the same with some of the same features described by Nkosi.

This does not mean that African literature did not exist with features such as criticism and exegesis before colonialism and independence. Different cultures had their institutions for such things but the political transformation of Africa due to internal and foreign factors would also affect these institutions across Africa. Whereas separate cultures had their institutions in pre-colonial Africa, the socio-political and geo-political changes would slowly restructure these institutions and disciplines as part of wider ones in post-colonial Africa. As much as there could be many arguments concerning this matter, one thing is certain which is this; there would not be a continuity of these forms of tradition whether of orality or performance for several centuries and across numerous generations and dynasties if there were not institutions - however effective they might have been – in ensuring this continuity.

There also had to be various forms of intellectuality ascribed to both the systems and the institutions judging from the fact that many of the accounts of European merchants from as far back as the 15th century, talk of business deals with various kingdoms across sub-Saharan Africa. Historical accounts such as the likes of Alagoa & Fombo's *A Chronicle of Grand Bonny* (1972) and Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998) among others, report deals which involved long processes of negotiations, treaties and shrewd tactics of which their African contemporaries were able to reason at the same level, learn European languages and send their children abroad to learn European ways. Even now, the fact that a lot of these aspects of Ijaw people and other African cultures are still being uncovered and studied by many scholars around the world even after several decades of Africa's independence from colonialism is a testament to not only the depth of its presence but its influence even on modern Africa.

Abiola Irele speaks concerning the issue of orality in relation to intellectual prowess in Africa in his essay, *Orality, Literacy and African Literature.* He begins with the statement "There seems little doubt that the attention devoted to the oral tradition in Africa in recent times has contributed in no small way to the renewed scholarly interest in the question of orality and its relation to literacy." (2007:74). He also proposes three levels from which orality can be understood in relation to literacy (79).

The first as is common across all cultures, is the elementary or denotative level. The second which African orality usually delves into is the connotative level which contains those "figurative and rhetorical forms of language" which is common across African cultures and it gives "prescribed forms of discourse, which define what one might call a 'formulaic' framework for the activity of speech and even for the process of thought" (80). To further

emphasize this point, he draws on the power of proverbs which are one of the most frequent and potent linguistic tools in African discourse and in quoting Achebe's famous "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" from the novel *Things Fall Apart* (2001:6), he says that as much as this provides an aesthetic feature to this Igbo proverb, it also involves a recognition of its possibilities for mental processes and even for cognitive orientation". Irele himself gives a Yoruba variation of Achebe's proverb- *Owe lésin oro; bi oro ba sonu, owe lá fi nwa* meaning "Proverbs are the horses of thought; when thoughts get lost, we send proverbs to find them" (80). His view is that the subject of orality and literacy in Africa has largely been defined by two words, *Utterance* and *Text*. Whereas utterance seems a collective property, text is more of an individual accomplishment and seems at best, "merely a formal one that bears on the modality of expression rather than on the substance" (80).

This begins to make more sense when we consider the fact that the first generation of African writers were recognised only after they published texts containing the same oral literature which the "uneducated villagers/natives" had been telling for centuries. Chidi Amuta echoes a similar thought when he says that rather than being a definition, the problem is actually the "larger task of freeing knowledge about African literature from the constrictive embrace of bourgeois intellectual mystifications" (1989:106). Amuta also views the word "literature" as actually a popular term for "social practice" which:

> …consists in the creative exploitation of the social properties of human language for the mediation of social experience in a manner that approximates an apparent resolution of the contradictions of daily life, posting this resolution as an alternative world. (106)

Finally, one would like to draw from one more statement from Amuta which is synonymous with the last statement quoted by Irele:

> What has been changing across time is the mode of transmission, the content in terms of specific experiences as well as the system and standards of evaluation, not the fundamental fact of linguistically communicated fiction and its rootedness in social experience and psychology. (106)

It is paramount that an understanding of concepts as defined by a sovereign and autonomous group of people is established before further study and this introduction serves to prepare the mind of the reader for the beginning and subsequent chapters which will define and discuss these terms and concepts from an Ijaw thought system and setting.

Chapter One

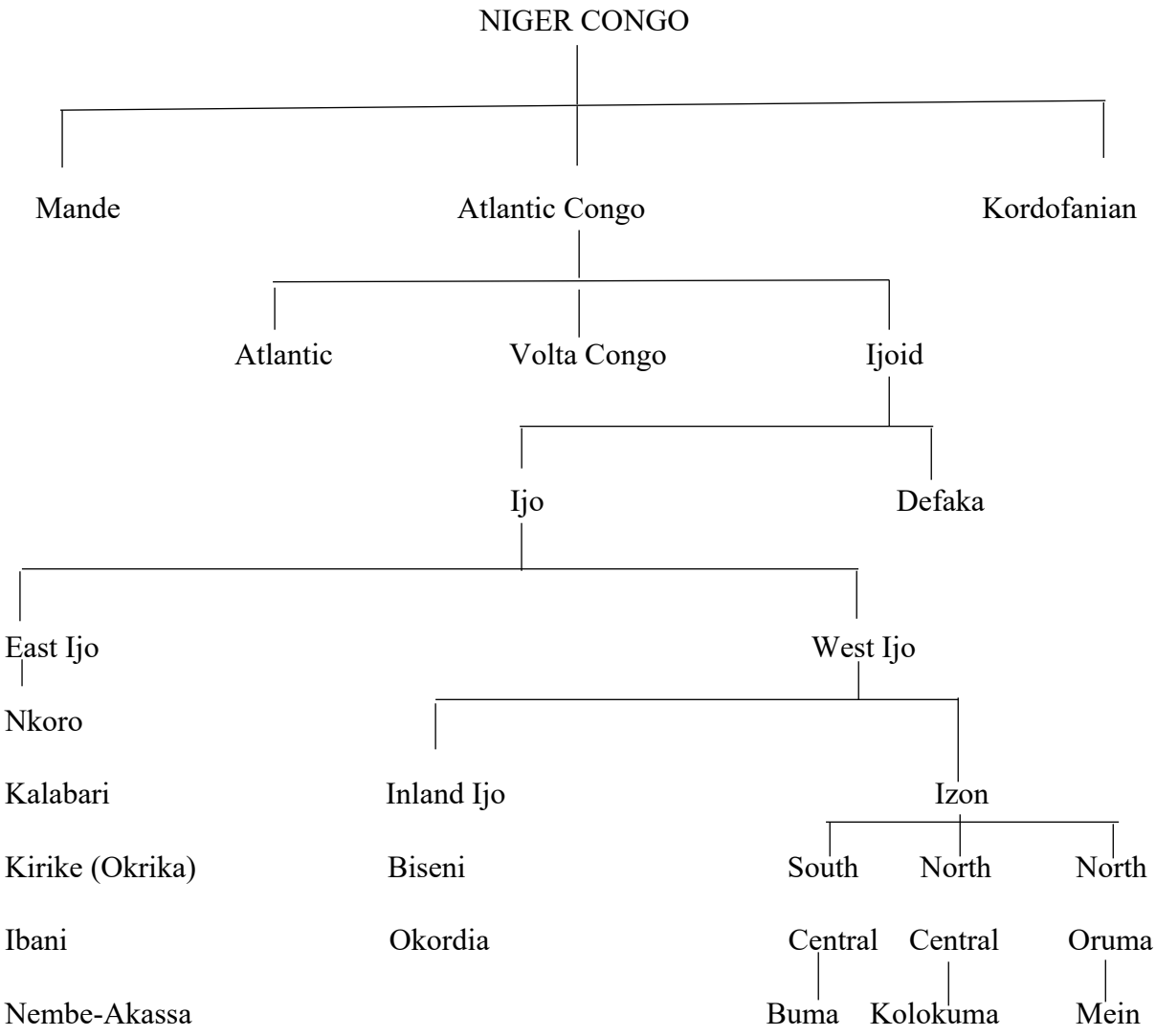
Setting and Imagery; A Reflection on Ijaw Environment and Cosmology

In order to understand Ijaw Philosophy in relation to its Drama, one must first understand the nature of the Ijaw environment and the factors from the environment which place an influence on the thought process behind its ideology and the creativity of its drama. In modern literary terms, the general environment of a performance is referred to as the setting. The setting of any dramatic piece, is very often one of the most important aspects of the performance because it usually provides an underlying base or structure for the various actions within the plot to take place. This underlying structure enables the reader or the audience to not only view the actions but to understand the realities or the structures in place that enable the plot to take place. As M.H Abrams suggests, it is "the general locale, historical time, and social circumstances … particular physical location in which it takes place" (1999:284). From this explanation, it can be agreed that the setting of any story contributes importantly to its weight, form and dimension. A brief description of the general Ijaw setting will be necessary in explaining the nature of the Ijaw environment which appears consistently in every Ijaw performance.

Like many other African worldviews, the Ijaw cosmic worldview as seen through the eyes of the Ijaw individual comprises of three worlds which are the Living, the Dead and the Unborn, where there is a collective synergy between gods, man and his ancestors. The world of the Living will of course feature more prominently in this study as dramatic performances and oral traditions are demonstrated by people who are alive but this does not in any way negate or downplay the importance of the worlds of the Dead and the Unborn as they are continuously featured in all aspects of Ijaw Drama and Philosophy and are seen to have a direct\indirect impact and also serve as a major determinant of the phenomena which takes place in the world of the living meaning that, everything done in the world of the living is done in view of a world beyond the tangible present. Due to the fact that an examination of all the dramas and performances used for this study are performed and viewed through the eyes of the living, the world of the living will also be categorized into three aspects which are the natural, social and spiritual. These aspects of course are not distinctly separate as might be found in some other cultures but they all intertwine to handle the different circumstances and situations in which the Ijaw wo/man might find him/herself.

Despite the fact that these three aspects are intertwined, it is very common to see one aspect take pre-eminence in any given situation but with careful observation, the other aspects usually either follow suit or take the background while the situation is being handled. An example of this occurrence takes place in J.P Clark's *Song of a Goat* which is one of the collection of his *Three Plays* (2009:43) where the protagonist Zifa goes through a ritual (Spiritual) to determine the truth of an affair between his wife and his younger brother (Social) which is caused by his own impotence (Natural). It is also very common to find these three aspects of the cosmology used in the same stream of communication to pass on the same idea. Such instances will be duly explored in the dramas which will be examined in the next few chapters.

These three aspects will therefore be explained briefly in order to set a foundation for further analyses of the performances which take place in the Ijaw setting. Before going on to explain Ijaw cosmology, it is important to understand that there are Ijaw dialectal variances mainly due to regional occupation within the Niger Delta and Ijaw landscape. These variations range from the phonetic pronunciation of the words to slight semantic or semiotic differences in the meaning of the same word or expression which in turn affect the perceptions in different communities and regions of certain Ijaw concepts. Some of these dialectic variations will once in a while, be referred to alongside the concepts put forward in this study but in the meantime, it is necessary to note the different dialects in place in order understand some of the different regions from which certain concepts stem from. In some regions, certain words are the same across dialects in that area but this is not always the case. Jenewari's classification in his article titled "The Niger Congo Languages" explains that the Ijaw are one of the sub-languages which belong to the Niger Congo Phylum Family. His diagram is reproduced below:



As seen in the diagram above, the Ijaw (also referred to as Izon/Ijo) comprises various dialects of the same ethno-nation with slight differences and variations in both language and culture. The dialects of East Ijaw family are very similar and close knit but as one begins to leave this region which is mostly Rivers State and partly Bayelsa, towards the West (Delta) state and vice-versa, these variations begin to widen and there are more profound differences both in language and culture. The similarities, however, completely outweigh the differences and it is these similarities in the scheme of their Drama and Philosophy that will be studied. Now that this has been established, we will explore the various settings of Ijaw literature.

The Spiritual Setting

A common feature of the Ijaw is a collective sense of identity and meaning. The word "Meaning" here does not just refer to the meaning of life or its purpose but the effect of actions taken within whatever context the Ijaw people find themselves. The Ijaw people by nature are so aware of everything surrounding their existence that they create not only a system of naming and classification as in the case of taxonomy, but also a direct form of interaction with the said concept as an entity in itself. This form of interaction transcends their animate and inanimate surroundings. In some cases, the interaction between the Ijaw people and their surroundings take place on a deeper or more intimate level than that of the normal human interpersonal communication. This happens because there is a consciousness in the culture that the cosmos is essential to the existence of the Ijaw and every single aspect of the cosmos no matter how little, has a significance throughout the lifetime and even in the death of every individual in the culture. The cosmos defines, instructs, teaches, warns, punishes and rewards them for any good individual or collective decision made. By reason of all this awareness and interaction, it is safe for one to say that the Ijaw setting and consciousness is highly animist. Going further into this study, a lot of beliefs, thoughts and system will be hinged on Animism because its presence is so great in Ijaw Oral tradition that even till today with the influence of modernism, there are still strong references to it either in a typical Ijaw mundane life or in cultural displays.

It is also important to note that because the Ijaw ethno-nation has several dialectic communities spread all around the Niger Delta and its outskirts, the variations in these dialects inherently overlap into the systems and beliefs of these several communities. It is common to have the same god addressed by different names depending on the Ijaw community and a prime example of this phenomenon is the attributes given to the supreme god of the Ijaws. According to Alagoa (1972:20),

> The supreme creator-god is a basic part of all Ijo religion. In the Eastern Delta, God is Ayiba (begetter as well as killer) or Tamuno (creator). In the poetry of the drum, God is Oloma, Ogina, or Oloman Ogina. In the Central and Western Delta, God is Woyin (Our Mother), Ayibarau (she who begets and kills), Oginarau, and Tamarau (creator). God is a female idea among the matrilineal Ijo.

The concept of the human also has a few varying degrees of interpretation as well and these concepts usually play out in the actions taken in relation to human existence. One of the most defined concepts of the human come from the Kalabari view which Ereks (1973: 21-27)

explains, saying that the human being is made up of four parts which are the body, called *oju,* the personality/soul called the *teme*, the spirit or fate/fortune called *so* and the corpse called *duein*. One might wonder why a corpse should be given any thought to as part of a human existence. This is because, the world of the dead and unborn are very much involved in the world of the living according to the Ijaw worldview and the burial of an Ijaw individual is seen as a very serious thing indeed. Even after the human dies, it is believed that the person's soul does not depart immediately, meaning that the corpse is instrumental in causing the individual to transcend beyond the natural realm. This is why there are a lot of rites which accompany the burial of the individual because the individual though dead physically is still alive in another realm.

Having understood the concept of the creator, we will take a few excerpts from the creation story of the Ijaw as narrated by Gabriel Okara, in *The Izon of the Niger Delta* (2009:135-146) who uses the Woyingi variation of the creator as is common to their naming and perception of the supreme being. This story is a good example of Ijaw cosmological belief because it is foundational to Ijaw explanations behind the causes of certain phenomena whether animate or inanimate. The name "Woyingi" is derived from two words, "Wo" ("Wa" among the Eastern Ijaw dialects) meaning "our" and "Yingi" (Inyingi among the Eastern Ijaw dialects) meaning "mother". The goddess of creation is seen as "our mother" and has become the archetype of the typical female Ijaw individual as both of them are heavily involved in not only the formation of new life, but also bringing that life into existence: Woyingi through her powers of creation and the Ijaw female through childbirth. Due to the creator being a mother and a woman, there are several other important roles ascribed to the Ijaw female as a woman and as a mother such as nurturing and setting the pace for lives to be lived. Okaba and Appah (1999:151) further describe her saying:

> The universe owes its existence to her great power … Her supreme qualities and attributes are reflected in some common names given to children. These include; Temearau agono emi (God is up above), Temerau preye (God's gift), Ayibanaghan (Thanks to God), Oginarau-ebi (God's kindness), Oyingi-Ogula (God's judgement).

Many of these roles are evident in this study as the roles of women in the society are consistently portrayed throughout several Ijaw literatures. According to the creation story as told by Okara, Woyingi descends to earth periodically and upon the "Creation Stone" she molds human beings, asks them to choose their gender, the kind of life they would live, length of life,

wealth, children and any other thing that pertains to human existence to which they each choose. Interestingly, Woyingi also asks them to choose the kind of death by which they would like to return to her and to choose a disease out of the numerous diseases that plague the earth. She then leads them to two streams; one being muddy and the other clean. Into the muddy one, she leads all the humans who have asked for all sorts of possessions including children while into the clear stream, she leads those who have asked for no material wealth or possessions whatsoever. (2009:135)

This action taken by Woyingi at this point in the story provokes some thought and raises quite a few questions. For instance; why would "our mother" ask her children to choose diseases like one would select clothes, food or anything that engages an individual's fancy? Why would she ask humans to choose a gender that they most likely do not have a previous knowledge or experience of? Why also would she lead the people who have chosen wealth and possessions (a sign of a good life in today's culture) into a muddy stream and then lead those who chose no wealth or possessions into a clear stream? There does not seem to be a singular method with which to interpret Woyingi's actions as interpretation in this case will heavily depend on the mindset and perspective of any individual who chooses to give this action some thought. As much as these actions might be difficult to understand at first, one begins to see the sense in them when one takes into account the happenings of the society both in pre-colonial and post-colonial times. These actions of Woyingi also serve to address some of the general philosophical questions which are termed as Existentialist howbeit from a removed and safer point of view rather than as a literal phenomenon which is a common feature of Ijaw thought systems.

These measures taken by Woyingi first of all bring into view, the concepts of actions and consequences which is a very strong theme in Ijaw culture. The very existence of a human being has consequences and life on earth has its consequences based on the activities of human beings. This is probably why Woyingi rather than imputing diseases on the people, asks them to choose what disease they want out of the same earth they toil from - diseases which they probably know nothing about yet until they begin life - while at the same time, passing them through a process which in some sense, might be viewed as both a cleanser and leveler of the hearts and status of her creation especially to the more selfish and ambitious mind. To the less ambitious, less materially minded or even 'humble' individual, these actions might make more sense as they would very likely be viewed from a place of acceptance and contentment but to

the more ambitious, materially minded and probably 'proud' individual, these actions might seem bizarre at first glance as the first set of people have not done anything yet to deserve being led into a muddy stream.

There are two presuppositions for the action involving the streams; the first is that Woyingi understands that certain lifestyles come with their own outcomes. The people who chose a lot of possessions would likely find their lives "muddied" by the hard work, pressure or sorrows involved in maintaining or creating more of those possessions such as wealth and children. This goes with an Ijaw proverb that says that "A man who thinks everything around him is sweet should remember that bitter leaves grow in the bush with oranges". Those who do not choose such possessions will relatively have a "clear" life in which they can experience other aspects to life apart from wealth, since they do not have much to maintain. This also translates into the conventional saying that no individual can have everything in life.

The second presupposition is that Woyingi has decided to use these two different streams to bring equity to both sides. The muddy stream might have been put in place to serve as a check on the rich and powerful. Just as swimming in muddy water blurs the vision of the swimmer, the wealth and possessions these people acquire probably create a blur to their sight and vision which gives the stereotypical view of the affluent as arrogant, narrow-minded and sometimes oppressive. This blur created by the muddy waters is very likely what leads them in their narrow vision, to make certain errors which usually end up in their downfall. Though there are tragedies with the poor and lower class, the biggest and most popular tragedies in Ijaw folktales and many other world literatures occur among the rich and affluent. In contrast, the clear stream gives the poorer people the advantage of a clear mind free from the malicious thoughts that come with wealth. This leads to another stereotype of the humility and wisdom of the poor.

As the story progresses, there will be an individual who in her ambition, will reject the choices she made and seek to change them; a choice which will yield serious consequences. The choice of gender is another example as in many Ijaw stories and folklores, men and women are found rebelling against the gender roles chosen for them by the society. It could be that they accidentally chose the wrong gender or that society has given the wrong definition of gender roles to its people, or that the individual has not acclimatized to the gender which it chose.

Another thing to be considered about this creation story is that although the cosmos plays a huge role in the existence of human beings, humans are responsible for the outcome of their

lives as the cosmos has given them each a chance to determine their fate which they end up either being satisfied with or regretting. Ijaw drama and folklore are littered with various instances where individuals are dissatisfied with their current situations or with the choices they made, and they resort to asking the cosmos for help. This can be seen in their prayers and sacrifices to gods and ancestors in apology and pleas for mercy. Later in the Ijaw creation story, we come across a woman Ogboinba who (unlike her friend that asked for children) asks for mystical powers beyond anyone on earth. Upon seeing her friend derive joy from her children, she decides to journey to see Woyingi in order to recreate herself but it is impossible to see Woyingi while she is yet alive. She resolves nevertheless to do so and she interacts with different aspects of the cosmos from certain territorial spiritual powers to the spirits behind flora, fauna, animate and inanimate objects. She even wins a contest against the sea and collects all the powers which influence the water as they lie exposed on the seabed after the sea has been defeated. She also kills different people on her journey to Woyingi and eventually finds and challenges her to a contest of powers when she comes out to do her usual routine of creation. Woyingi is displeased that she being the source of Ogboinba's powers is challenged by the lowly Ogboinba and she says:

> I know you were hiding in the buttresses of the Iroko tree, I saw you leave your town on your journey to find me. I saw you overcome all living things and gods on the way with the power that I gave you which were your heart's desire. Now it's children you want, and for that you have come to see me and to challenge me to a contest of powers. You have come to challenge me, the source of your powers, strong hearted Ogboinba. I now command all the powers you acquired on your way back to their owners (2009:146)

Ogboinba in fear for her life, flees from Woyingi's presence and hides in the eyes of a pregnant woman. Woyingi leaves her alone because she herself has ordered that no pregnant woman should ever be killed and Ogboinba remains hiding not only in the pregnant woman's eyes but in the eyes of all women and children. To this day, the person that looks back at you when you look into anybody's eyes is Ogboinba. During Woyingi's rebuke of Ogboinba, she is called strong-hearted and the presence of Ogboinba in all humans is representative of the strong-hearted will that causes humans to do evil due to their own selfishness. This draws us again to the previously discussed array of good and bad options which Woyingi makes all her children choose from. Such choices will serve to reveal the character and strong-heartedness of people like Ogboinba as their ambition clouds their sense of morality and reason even to the point that they challenge a supreme entity like Woyingi in a similar way that the muddy stream would cloud the vision of the people with possessions. Another question which might be raised here

would be; Why did Woyingi not punish Ogboinba immediately she resolved to leave her house or after she began her crimes but instead, observed and waited till Ogboinba came to challenge her before taking any action? The story does not tell us why she did this but as the creator is termed as "Our mother" and considering that she not only terms creation as her children but also watches out for pregnant women, one can assume that in her motherly nature, the hope that Ogboinba might have a change of heart might have been behind her tolerance in respect of such actions to different people over a period of time.

Apart from the supreme goddess Woyingi, there are other god-like manifestations of this power in different situations and these manifestations could be masculine or feminine. Manifestations like Adumu, Tau, Ako-oru deal with intelligence, wisdom and potency in different aspects of existence and cosmology respectively and are considered masculine. Manifestations like Sokari, Ayibara, Oruamina and Zibara deal with omnipotence, divine law and order, energy and form respectively and are considered feminine. There are also lesser spirits for many of the less significant aspects of the cosmos and for minute activities; some of these, Ogboinba is said to have captured on her journey to challenge Woyingi. Each of these spirits and manifestations are given prime attention at some point by the Ijaw people during a point of particular need, when the expertise of this force or power is needed. For example, many Ijaw people in the past and even some to this day, call on Ako-oru (also known as Egbesu) in times of war and quarrels with other people because this manifestation represents the offensive and defensive side of the supreme goddess and can also enforce law and order. These gods have underlying philosophies which serve as underlying platforms on which they must act and on which they must be called upon specifically.

During an interview with Professor S.N Agoro, Dr Benedict Binebai and Mr Kingsley Ineritei, lecturers in the Niger Delta University in Bayelsa State on the 19th of September 2017, Dr Binebai discussed the philosophy surrounding the Egbesu myth. According to Dr Binebai, the Egbesu philosophy emphasizes the non-infringement on the fundamental rights of all living things. The philosophy also emphasizes that all things function as a whole within the same space and time. As a result of this, Dr. Binebai said that the philosophy of the Egbesu is both anthropocentric and biocentric. It is little wonder why Egbesu is called upon when there is an infringement on any matter to enforce his philosophy in that situation. There is a popular saying among the central Ijaw and in a few non-Ijaw neighbouring communities that says, "Juju is the policeman of God". The term "Juju" generally stands for the invocation of a spirit to intervene

in the normal affairs of man where there is usually a situation or difficulty that surpasses human understanding or expertise. To the people who believe in this saying, Juju could be seen as "God's policeman" because where the perpetrators of certain crimes cannot be accounted for, this juju which comes from a spirit realm that influences and sees everything, will definitely know who the culprits are.

In some cases, the culprits are known but they are much too powerful to be confronted by certain individuals and so help is sought from a more powerful being. In viewing this saying, one might ask why God would employ a policeman instead of singlehandedly carrying out retribution. Firstly (and this is believed among a few other religions as well), many people believe that the work of the supreme being is too important to be bothered with issues in the day to day happenings of humanity which is why humans have minds to think for themselves. Secondly, let us be reminded that there are ranks in the cosmic worldview and as the creation story tells us, the supreme god who though is the most powerful and is the originator of all things including other spirits, is mostly seen as a/the creator and functions primarily in this role as seen in the repetitive process in the story. Between the supreme being and humanity are other spirits and forces assigned to deal with the happenings of creations; forces which are also different manifestations of the same supreme being. It is also important to note that the male manifestations of this supreme energy help to define the masculine and feminine roles of the society as Egbesu for example, deals with war and war is fought by men. In contrast, Ayibara for example, deals with a certain divine law and order. In many Ijaw homes, while the father is out fishing, farming or hunting to feed the family, the mother like Ayibara maintains law and order and a child who is rebellious to the mother then has the laws enforced upon him by the father just like Egbesu. Kofi Awoonor although Ghanaian, shares a very similar worldview to the one just described and also speaks of this kind of delegation of lesser duties to lesser gods in his book *The Breast of the Earth* where he says:

> Beneath the creator God is a host of minor deities. By the light of his own logic, the African assigns to the creator God a certain degree of distance and unapproachability, not because he considers Him unconcerned, but rather because he thinks of Him in his primal ancestral role as the supreme paterfamilias who must not be bothered with the petty details of the universe. He, Himself, appoints lieutenants and assistants who become overseers and guardians of various natural phenomena and faculties (1976:15)

This statement could easily be adopted as an Ijaw one and serves to explain why the Ijaw individual when in need or search for answers beyond common human occurrences would as

a first resort, interact with the perceived forces of his/her environment rather than the supreme creator. Robin Horton whose expertise is on the Kalabari Ijaw, expressly states that the supernatural might seem capricious to the "unreflective ordinary man". This according to Horton, is different from the religious expert, who:

> …charged with the diagnosis of spiritual agencies at work behind observed events, a basic modicum of regularity in their behavior is the major premise on which his work depends. Like atoms, molecules and waves, then, the gods serve to introduce unity into diversity, simplicity into complexity, order into disorder, regularity into anomaly. (1993:199)

As said before, it is believed that there is a Spirit behind everything in existence from the animate to the inanimate aspects of nature. It is also believed that these spirits play a part in the interaction between the individual and his/her daily communication with nature and primary assignment or profession. This ranges from a farmer with his hoe, a fisherman with his canoe or net or an artisan with his/her craft. Success in any field is attributed to hard work, favour and a right standing with the physical and spiritual forces of the environment while failure is more commonly attributed to laziness. Failure as a result of an unnatural happening or sequence of events results in the same individual questioning his/her right standing with the environment. The awareness of such cosmic happenings leads to the celebration of numerous festivals throughout the year where some particular aspect of the Ijaw cosmic system is appreciated for yielding good returns or in the hope and prayer that an incoming season would be favourable.

The belief in spirits and witchcraft to explain certain events do not take the place of logical reasoning, scientific achievements or technological innovations among the Ijaw people, neither do they take the place of intelligence and responsibility. Horton after a consideration of other African cultures, creates a scenario where an individual's illness is being treated by a diviner. (201-2). Horton explains that in similar cases among African cultures, the diviner apart from addressing the illness, often drew the patient's attention to tangible causes such as his/her misdeeds and certain actions which likely provoked the divine, causing punishment. Such people apart from being treated, were advised to make peace or correct whatever conflict they were in the midst of in order to fully recover. To make this argument more "scientific", Horton creates another scenario where an American layman sees a large mushroom cloud in the horizon and questions his physicist friend as to its cause (202). According to Horton, the physicist according to his field will likely describe a "massive fusion of hydrogen nuclei" and the "assemblage and dropping of a bomb containing certain special substances". Horton then

says, “Substitute ‘disease’ for ‘mushroom cloud’, ‘spirit anger’ for ‘massive fusion of hydrogen nuclei’, and ‘breach of kinship morality’ for ‘assemblage and dropping of a bomb’, and we are back again with the diviner” (202). In both cases, there was a breach in the relationship between people with the resultant effect being a disturbance. A continuous breach in understanding between two parties would lead to continuous nuclear wars in the same way, a continuous breach with the cosmos will cause disturbances in the physical world. Horton eventually says:

> To say of the traditional African thinker that he is interested in the supernatural rather than natural causes makes little more sense, therefore, than to say of the physicist that he is interested in the nuclear rather than natural causes. In fact, both are making the same use of theory to transcend the limited vision of natural causes provided by common sense. (202)

Though the Ijaws owe a substantial amount of their success to the presence of their environment and other external forces, they can also reject whatever they deem to be the source of continuous negativity upon them. As much as the gods are perceived to be wise, powerful and entities to be listened to, the Ijaws believe that at the end of their service and commitment to a certain deity, there should be some level of reasonable profit. Nimi Wariboko uses a scenario among the Kalabari people to explain instances like this:

> If the people have decided an issue in a way that is contrary to the revealed desires of gods, the Kalabari people would say, “what the people say the gods concur.” If a Kalabari god becomes too demanding or more dangerous than useful, Kalabari would say *agu nsi owi baka kuma, en k’o karare sin en dugo k ‘o piri ba* – “when a spirit becomes too furious, people will tell him the wood he was carved from”. That is, people can unanimously annul the power of a spirit by refusing to worship it. (1999:28)

There is a very similar saying among the Igbos as well; “*Arusi nyebe nsogbu, egosi ya osisi ejiri pia ya”* which means that “if a deity becomes unreasonable, it will be told the wood from which its symbol was carved”. This was written by Anayo Nwosu as he spoke of the naturally stubborn nature of Igbo people even to their gods in the online article, “Why No Igbo Person Would Ever Be A Suicide Bomber”. At the same time, the Kalabari saying that “what the people say the gods concur” is quite similar to the Latin saying *Vox Populi, Vox Dei* meaning “The voice of the people, is the voice of God”. The origin of this Latin saying, just like its Kalabari counterpart, cannot truly be established. Although these two statements are thousands of kilometres and probably centuries apart, the reasoning behind both statements seem quite similar as they both recognise the ability of a group of individuals to take initiatives in spite of their beliefs in the supernatural.

One also recalls the teaching of a former Igbo lecturer, Dr. Anya Egwu at Covenant University during the 2013/2014 session. In the course of his teaching, Dr. Egwu reminisced a period during his childhood where there was a sudden outbreak of sickness and death in his community. After taking the usual measures to prevent or accommodate sickness or death as the case may be along with the required sacrifices to the deity, the people got fed up with the deity that was supposed to serve as their protector and they destroyed the image which had been built for it, never to worship it again. Why did this happen? The people had done their part with the usual reverence and possible sacrifices given to it as well as personal responsibilities to prevent sickness and to them, the deity did not fulfil its own end of the bargain. In fact, it was even assumed that this deity was behind the deaths in this community and the people decided to put an end to both its relevance to them and their service to it. Although Dr. Egwu did not mention it, it is quite likely that the people might have found another deity to replace it and do what they had asked of it because this is the general nature of the Ijaws, Igbos and other southerners of whom it has been observed, are democratic in nature.

Chidi Amuta concerning this phenomenon says, "As it were, people said: let there be gods and proceeded to create them! In turn, they were imbued with humanistic attributes and accordingly assigned them duties within the emergent social concept of division of labour" (1989:39). He also gives a further analysis of this system saying that the gods have various "provinces" or "ministries" over which they take charge of affairs and these provinces are usually not under human control such as elemental forces and thus, they:

> …were and have remained terrestrial, rather than celestial; they can be felt (through their moulded or sculpted symbolizations), touched, carved, cursed, reproached and dismantled or starved to death in response to material exigencies of social existence which formed the basis for the existence of gods in the first place. (39)

There is yet another instance of this sort of incidence in the Ghanaian novel, *A Woman in her Prime* by Asare Kondu where the heroine Pokuwaa, grows tired of the different marriages, sacrifices and acts required of her to the god Tano for fertility as they have all ended in frustration. On one occasion, she becomes pregnant but has a miscarriage and is reprimanded by the medicine man for not making the adequate sacrifices. At some point, she is weary with all these requests and discards all of them choosing to trust only in the supreme God (1967:87). This time around, her desires come to pass and there is a lot of jubilation (97). In the three instances mentioned above which include the Ijaw, Igbo and Ashanti, the subjects of the story

rejected a particular aspect of divinity that did not favour them but continued to accept all other forms of the supernatural.

This establishes a fact that although the Ijaws and many other African cultures have a tradition of dependence on the supernatural, they still maintain the autonomous mindset to create and accept whatever suits them while rejecting what either does not profit them or causes them to function at a loss. There is a sort of institutionalized, fundamentalist dependency or acknowledgment of both a higher realm and a higher influence on the affairs of wo/men and for every advancement, the Ijaws owe it to an inspiration or external force which helped them to get to such a point. Due to this acknowledgment, they will create or adopt a deity for it because a new phenomenon is assumed to be caused by a new influence. From the creation story, Woyingi had already set the paths of the humans in accordance with their wishes and had put other spiritual forces in place to influence different aspects of creation. These forces would also work in accordance with the choices which the newly created humans had made. A series of unexplainable unfortunate events will therefore lead to a new search for an alternative to continue with progress and development as the presence of a god or divine entity is an important factor towards progress.

This is evidenced by the personal acceptance and introduction of Christianity to Bonny in 1861 by King William Dappa Pepple on his return from exile in England. Fombo and Alagoa state that during his time in London, "the king had come to associate the greatness of Britain with the Church of England, and saw the establishment of a mission in Bonny as the beginning of a rebirth" (1972:26). This was a deviation from his previous decision in 1849 when although he welcomed a mission in Bonny, he himself would not convert and when asked why by Reverend Hope Waddell under whom this was to be supervised, he replied "… the children which go to your school may do as you say; but we men must keep on the same fashion as old time; for we grow for that already" (26) and the attempts came to a temporary halt as a place could not be found for missionary activities at that time.

A lot of these beliefs are used to explain occurrences which cannot seem to be explained otherwise but in the daily lives of the members of the society, evidence of diligence, hard work and innovation is seen and there is no excuse for foolish or irrational behaviour as is seen in the Ijaw proverb; "He who sees a rough river and tries to cross with a small canoe should not blame God". Quite a significant part of the oral tradition reflects scientific thought, observation and existential musings among the people. A proverb such as; "The world is like a dancing

masquerade. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place" is an example of such reflections of the people. It realizes the influence of perspectives in common knowledge and understanding and it emphasizes flexibility, open-mindedness and a more rounded perspective in the quest for knowledge and truth.

The Social Setting

Ijaw society plays a very prominent role at both the individual and the societal level. While the Ijaw individual recognises him/herself as an independent being, s/he also recognises the significance of his/her existence in the societal sphere; hence, decisions are made with a consciousness that all actions will have a significant effect on not just the individual, but also the surroundings and can even transcend the natural into the spiritual. Hollos and Leis (1989:24) agree on this point as follows: "Like a pebble falling into the centre of a pool of water, at birth an Ijo infant enters a proverbial web of kinship that ripples outward in ever-widening circles." A prime example of such a ripple effect occurs in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* which encompasses many of the features to be found in an Ijaw community. In this story Okolo is hunted by most of his community members for daring to think differently from others. He is told by Chief Izongo and most of his people that his "head is not correct" (1964:38) because he has embarked on a personal search to find "it". While *it* is never clearly defined throughout the story, one gets an understanding through Okolo's inner reflections and his interactions with other people of what "it" might be and this can be loosely explained as the meaning of the existence of human life and its physical and moral relationship with other members of the society. In this story, Okolo's quest seems to be a thought process different from the societal norm and he is hounded without respite. Even when he goes on exile to Sologa, a town far from his own, in some places, his reputation has already arrived before him and even when his reputation is not known, his quest is either frowned at, ridiculed or dismissed as a silly or impossible feat and there is always some form of controversy which surrounds his presence in any location until he leaves that place.

The story lets us know that Okolo is not the only person in society who has a different form of thought but it lets us know that the others who are like him have either been ostracised or taken a personal oath of silence. Among these two are Tuere, a woman ostracised by Amatu and labelled a Witch, and Ukule the cripple. These two in a discussion about misfortune in the

society have come to a conclusion that it is his lot from Woyingi. In this conversation, Ukule says; “What you came with from Woyengi will happen to you, whatever you do. So I do not fear. I asked Woyengi to make me a cripple, so I am a cripple. Whatever happens to you, you came with it from Woyengi”. (115)

Tuere replies saying; “What you say is correct. We cannot in this world ourselves recreate. If in this world we can recreate ourselves I would become a man. When I die I will return as a man.” (115). Ukule to this effect, says “I will continue to be a man, but not a cripple.” (115)

People recognise whatever position or situation in which they find themselves as choices they made during creation which were granted to them by Woyingi. During the course of their lives, these situations teach them experiential lessons which cause them to make certain decisions in the next life which will be devoid of the terrible situations they currently face or include situations they currently covet and these changes of course will be made by making different requests from Woyingi this time around. Although creation plays a part in the social strata, one takes full responsibility for the personal day to day actions taken in the society at any level whatsoever. Many an Ijaw man or woman has in the past, gone through harsh circumstances which were seen as punishment from the spirit world due to an imbalance probably caused by his actions. In some cases, only the individual bears the punishment while in others, the whole community suffers for the misdeeds of one individual. It is also commonplace that many Ijaw generally avoid a person who is said to have come under some wrath or punishment for fear that they would also suffer the same punishments. In this society, the pervading system of thought is frequently being instilled in its members with errants to this system coming under some form of intense scrutiny.

Apart from the general society which involves every citizen of the community, there are special societies or caucuses meant only for particular members of the Ijaw society. Such caucuses maintain roles and particular functions among the people. Though there are many societies found among the various regions and dialects of the Ijaw, one of the most popular and most referenced societies are the Sekiapu, Owu-Ogbo and Ekine societies found in the Eastern Ijaw region. These societies are seen as the custodians of most of what is culture in these areas because they are behind all the important – and even less important - cultural functions in the society ranging from dance, drama and every form of performance that stems from Ijaw oral tradition. This means that the knowledge of members of such societies runs deep into the cultural roots of the people and due to this level of knowledge, they also have very important

influences on the governance of the people as their ideology is also deeply rooted in oral tradition. Their functions will be discussed in more detail when we explore the masks and masquerade societies among the Ijaw people. From the description of the functions of these societies, it can be asserted that even the attainment of some level of social, political and moral influence in the society requires proficiency in the oral tradition. In addition, they are present to guide the society and to remind its members of the culture, laws and traditions of the people. Two major aspects of the social setting include the family setting and the economic setting.

The Family Setting

As has been said earlier, every Ijaw individual is already born into a web of relationships with the immediate family, the extended family and the society in general. Hollos and Leis (1989:24) also further state that these connections are established on places of residence and the decisions which have been made by the child's parents in reinforcing or ending their relationships with others. Of course, as the child grows and begins to mature, these same decisions will be deliberated by him/her with the aid of knowledge, experience and historical happenings. Errors and problems in the society are almost always traced to the families and marriages of the people involved and in most cases, the family along with the individual at fault, bears the burden of consequence, restitution or shame depending on the nature of the crime or taboo committed.

This was the case of the events in JP Clark's aforementioned *Song of a Goat* and its sequel, *The Masquerade*. In both plays, there are perpetual whisperings by neighbours about the continuous tragic cases involved in Zifa's family. The first play *Song of a Goat* tells us that Zifa has been spiritually punished with impotence for burying his father who died of leprosy before the right time, thereby polluting the land (2009:11). Zifa's wife Ebiere in sexual frustration, commits another abomination by sleeping with Zifa's younger brother Tonye (31) without the actual rites of transference taking place. Tonye then commits suicide (another abomination) before Zifa could kill him (46) which would have led to yet another taboo. Ebiere dies while giving birth to Tufa, Tonye's son and Zifa kills himself by walking into the sea (48). The next play *The Masquerade* has Tufa now a wealthy man, (who does not yet know the circumstances surrounding his birth), seeking to marry Titi and all seems to go well until the story behind his birth is somehow discovered the night before the wedding from two

presumably drunk neighbours (2009:76). Diribi and Umuko, Titi's father and mother with immediate effect, unanimously dissolve the marriage (85). Titi refuses this decision and runs away trying to elope with Tufa but Diribi chases her down to a grove and shoots her (93). Mental perturbation follows the realisation of his act and Tufa forces Diribi to shoot him as well (102). Family in Ijaw land could be either very profitable or very dangerous and paths such as these are usually trodden with great care as problems between certain families can lead to serious conflicts within the community. To help reduce the risks of such problems, there are usually systems put in place to create a way for these ties to run more smoothly.

The way Ijaw family systems are arranged especially in the Eastern delta, there is the smallest system of the family which involves the father, mother(s) and children, all the extended members of this family form a House, and it is the different houses that form a community or kingdom. The term "House" does not in this context, mean a physical building but a collective identity which binds all the members of that certain extended family together and this does not just include blood relations but people willing to identify with the actual heritage of the people and in older times, these also included slaves. The housing systems just like many other aspects of the culture, have a few variations across different regions but their effects are almost the same in the community howbeit, with different structures and various levels of contribution to the society. Spurgeon Adawari Green, a senior titled citizen in Bonny gives a brief expose on the Bonny housing system for instance in the July issue of the NLNG 2010 Host magazine. This particular system has three housing levels namely: the Duawari, Opuwari and Kalawari. The term "Duawari" can be translated to mean "Ancestral House" and they are the five founding houses of the kingdom which were created by the first settlers and founding fathers of the land. These are the Bristol, Holliday, Dublin-Green, Brown and Tolofari houses. These houses would then create the major houses (Opuwari) which in turn would create the minor houses (Kalawari) (2010:12-13).

Figure 1. An old house belonging to a significant person from the lineage of Asimini. Notice the two canons under the name signifying European contact and its capacity to be a war canoe house

Figure 2. A further description of the kind of people this house represents.

The description in the second figure tells of the kind of house this is. As written in this picture this is a *Duawari* house and its members are descendants of Asimini who was the first crowned

king of Bonny and a member of the Bristol House. The statement in parenthesis is a statement of acknowledgment to someone who is very likely not alive anymore judging by the nature of the statement and the visible age of the house. It can be translated in different ways, but the literal translation is "Ada, your name is also there". In Bonny, a very elderly man is referred to as "Ada".

These Houses are autonomous in existence but are duly represented in the King's palace and the strength of influence of certain Ijaw Houses and families in a community in the past have usually reduced the influence of a central system of rulership as there is a popular saying common among the eastern Ijaw – *Iri amanyanabo iwari bie* meaning "I am a king in my own house". This statement comes from the belief that even the king has an extent to which he can influence the individual's decision because the king does not own the individual, his/her house, family and certainly is not the one providing food for the individual. As with different African and non-African societies, there are certain parameters through which success is measured, among many other regular parameters such as wealth and status, one distinguishing feature among the Ijaw is the ownership of boats (which have a strong connection to the family and will be explored in the next few songs). Where there is a good sense of accomplishment in the family, there is also a sense of personal pride and self-worth found in the family. Dame Sarah Brown, an Octogenarian from Bonny, recalled one of such songs in an interview on September 2017:

Ari Ogonoaru bu fiiari so

A I da ofo kariari –e-e-

I da ofo kariari –e-e-

I da ofo kariari –e-e-

This translates into a starter and a chorus

Starter: Even if I am in the airplane

Chorus: I am holding onto my father's scepter (3ce)

This song does not just reflect the level of self-adulation and self-worth practiced by the Ijaw people but some of the linguistic terms of this song represent yet another aspect of the consciousness of the Ijaw people. The term "Ogonoaru" for instance, is roughly translated into the word "Airplane" but the word itself comes from two distinct words; the first being "Ogono" which means to be "on top" or "above" something and the second being "Aru" which means boat. The literal translation of this term would then mean "up boat" or "boat on top". The use of the word "boat" in relation to the sky might seem bizarre at first but the same word has more meaning to it than it would seem at first glance and this meaning comes from the history and beliefs of the people. There are two additional meanings to the word "boat". While the first is a spiritual meaning, the second is a more physical and historical meaning presumably derived from the spiritual context. On the spiritual level, it is believed that Ijaw individuals come to the earth in a boat. It is also believed that when it is time to depart, it is this same boat that returns the individual to the creator. It has been a common occurence in the past that when a human being has outlived his/her contemporaries, or no longer desires to live longer in old age, people tend to say that "His/her boat is broken" meaning that the means of transportation back to the place of creation, ancestry or the spirit realm has been severed.

There have been some told incidents where miniature boats were carved for such aged people to represent a new boat and these people reportedly dying after a short period of time ranging from a few days to a few weeks after these boats were made available. The word "aru" as used at present, does not just cover boats or any other floating vessel anymore but has become a transcendental vessel or vehicle for any form of transportation at all levels of the cosmic and metaphysical aspects of existence. Since the boat was the only means of transportation among the Ijaws in the pre-colonial era, it has also been attached to any modernized means of transportation in the post-colonial era. An example of this is *Kiriaru* with "kiri" meaning "ground" and the literal translation being "ground boat" but used to refer to a car. Boats along with water, animals and vegetation, usually make up a significant amount of the imagery of almost any performance or literature which comes from the Ijaw people.

As explained before, one of the distinguishing measurements of wealth among the Ijaw is the ownership of boats and this is the case for many reasons. The first is that the movement of almost all the wealth and resources of the Ijaw people is done by boats. Wars between different Ijaw communities are largely fought on boats. In times of war, the chief of a house donates a fighting boat along with able-bodied men. There are also a number of festivals (mostly

Regattas) which do not just take place for the sake of praise or reverence to a deity but are also a display of wealth and power which are also done on boats. The different kinds of boats that can be owned by a house include: Omuaru, Owiiaru Alaliaru and Ngoaru which are war boats, smoke boats, Merry boats and wealth boats. A powerful house therefore will make sure that among its repertoire of boats, the Omuaru which are also called Gigs are present because they are the very long boats used for wars and such houses must be able to show their strengths in combat and battle among other means to earn respect. These Gigs are usually hollowed out from single trees and due to their grandness and the effort put into decorating them, they are also the boats used for festivals and there are songs that convey the experiences of the journeys of these several boats, for example:

Gilo gilo mgbasi eh! eh! eya! Kulo dougbo nunne arigha x3

"He that paddles or steers the front part of the boat does not see the head steerer behind."

This song shows the trust the paddlers have in the person steering the boat. The person doing the steering will of course be an older and a more experienced individual on the sea than all or most of the people paddling the boat and the people use such songs to demonstrate their trust and keep them in high spirits as they paddle in rhythm on each side of the boat. Another reason for such trust is that the head steerer usually stands or sits in an elevated platform which enables him to see much further and have a much wider vision than those sitting down with limited vision and distracted by the work they put into paddling.

I wari nyanagha I aru nyanagha I mu opu-ogbo som aru e aru e.

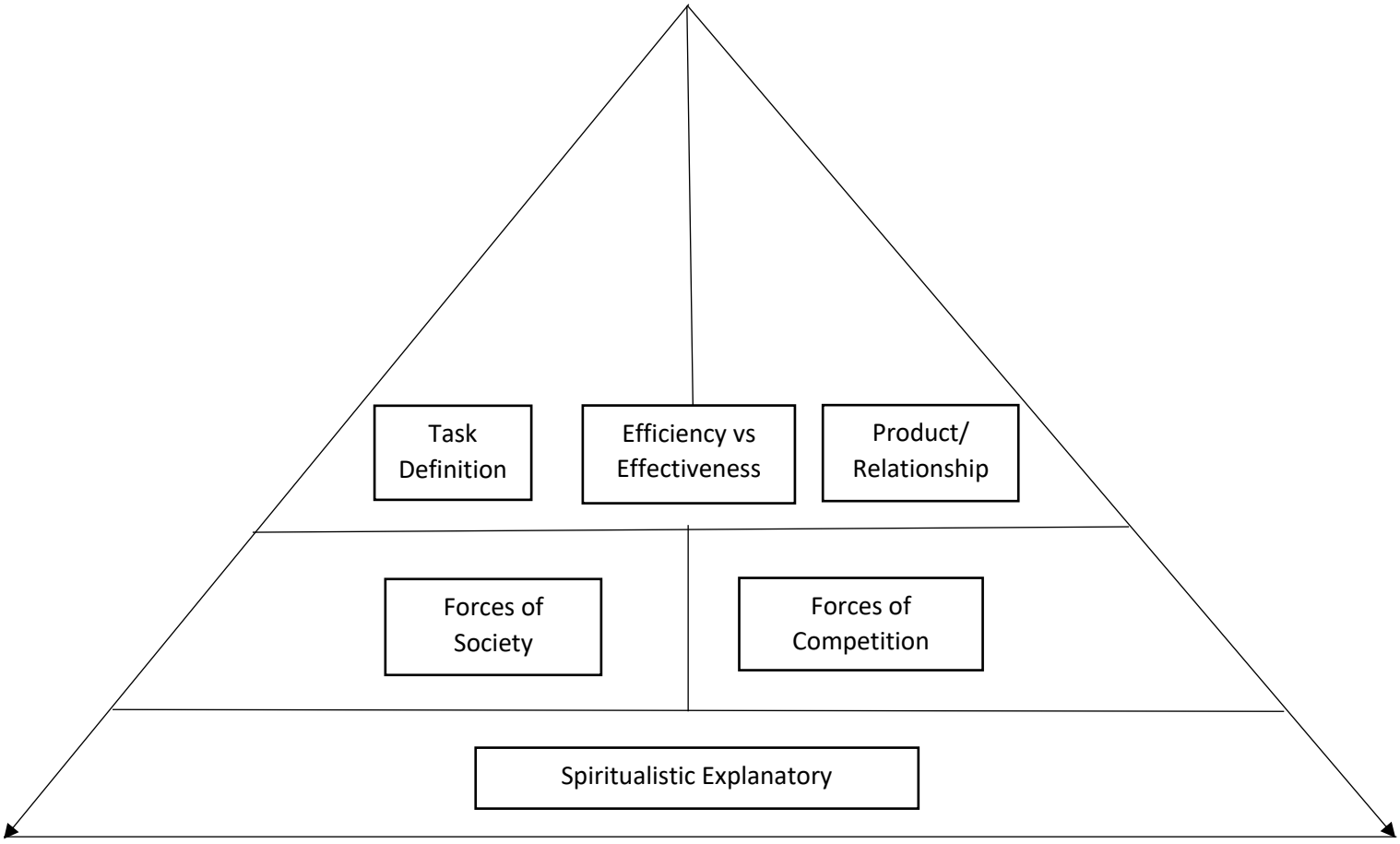
You do not have house nor boat yet you went and joined a big club boat e! boat e!

This song gives more credence to the previous explanation of the assessment of status among the various houses of the Ijaw communities. A person who has no status has no right to find himself in a gathering of people with status because he/she does not have what they have or know what they know. The boat clubs, much like the Sekiapu, are also dancing societies that includes people who have boats and it is through them that many of these songs that have to do with boats are created. Songs like these can be very easily turned into proverbs as these songs demonstrate the same lifelong truths which proverbs are used to enforce. The Ijaw people

also have ship masquerades and dance steps which portray not only the movement of the boat but also the acts and processes involved in sailing.

The Economic Setting

The dependence and commitment of the Ijaw people to the environment and external forces in light of progress has already been briefly discussed but this aspect of the Ijaw people brings a more practical perspective to the work involved in the progress of the communities. The Ijaw economy is majorly sustained through fishing, farming, hunting and trade. The first three are results of the natural habitat which brings the Ijaw individual into contact with neighbouring cultures and enables trade to take place between them. This is yet another reason why the Ijaws seek a favourable relationship with not just the natural habitat but the forces behind them. Due to the diverse geography of the Ijaw land, it is common to find certain communities where one aspect of the economy is more prominent, for example, fishing in more waterlogged areas. Trade is able to take place effectively among the Ijaw because the Niger Delta is a well-connected network of rivers and islands, almost all leading to river routes around Nigeria. It is natural for the Ijaw people to navigate rivers and the existence of the Ijaws in the Niger Delta is as a result of migration. The proximity of the Niger Delta to the Atlantic Ocean, has also exposed the Ijaws to international trade and there have been centuries of dealing with foreigners such as Portuguese and British traders. There is of course, trade within the community as there are large central markets in different communities which enable the exchange of various resources produced by different families. As with the issues of trade that usually rise with any form of economic advancement in any civilization, there have been issues of economic strife within and without the community which eventually turned into full scale wars which ended in pillage and advancement for the victor or defeat and decline for the vanquished. In times of war, different economies have been known to revert to certain tactics or acts which they are not known for in order to sustain their livelihood. Nimi Wariboko (1999:18-50) does an extensive discussion of the economic system of the Kalabari people (which is one of the most developed of the Ijaw people) in his article *The African Worldview and the Structure and Strategy of Traditional Business Enterprises: The Case of Kalabari of Southern Nigeria*. Wariboko (23) creates a diagram to accommodate the views of the people in relation to the economy:



The Conceptual Framework of Kalabari Entrepreneurs

One of such instances in which this diagram in a sense, is fully represented is recorded in Ola Rotimi's *Akassa You Mi* meaning "The Akassa War" in which the Nembe people of a town called Akassa were involved in altercations with the British Royal Niger Company. The play starts with people complaining about assaults by the Royal Niger Company and the Africans they have recruited and they are calling for an immediate retaliation but King Koko, who is more measured in his approach, calls for a calmer and more calculated approach towards the enemies who have superior technology, stating that "a hasty attack in wrestling leads to a violent fall" (62). Despite protests, he calls for a retreat and a change of livelihood in the meantime while vengeance is planned. He speaks of previous times where such things have happened before saying:

> Now, you, Inengite, my brother, this talk: "farming is no work for the men of Nembe", Iyah! Is that the talk of pride, or is it that forgetfulness now disturbs your mind? In the old days of Mingi, the first king of this land, did not the people of Nembe turn to farming on the land of Tubo Piri? And pray you, Kalango of Epemu House, dispute me if I lie. Even in Bassambiri, where you and Amabebe himself come from remember, when Ikata, the king of Ogbolomabiri, blocked all food passage to Bassambiri, in the rashness of a long-nursed grudge, did not Gbolowei, the second king of Bassambiri himself lead you people to farm? And by that spirit, did Bassambiri not bring Ikata's blockade to deem shame? Dispute me. (22)

In the build-up to this statement and the statement itself, the task is clearly defined which is to survive the current economic and sometimes physical war between the people of Akassa and the Royal Niger Company. King Koko then tries to convince his people of its efficiency by reminding them of former incidents in their history where this took place. The product /relationship yields two results: giving the people a period of respite and survival while allowing them a period of time to plan their retaliation against the company which, through its dubious treaties, interfered in Ijaw politics and began to compete with Ijaw traders. The spiritualistic explanatory comes in towards the end of the play in the last scene where the women of the town continue to keep a vigil for their men who have gone to war against the Royal Niger Company and the chief priest visits the various locations in which they are gathered and keeps them on their feet praying instead of falling asleep or having conversations with each other.

As previously mentioned, the rivers and seas are the major sources of income for the Ijaw people and there are sayings which have surrounded this aspect of the economy. One of such sayings goes thus: "When you see a hippopotamus pursuing a canoe in the river, it is not actually interested in the canoe, but what is inside the canoe. As soon as the person in sight jumps into the water, that ends the pursuit". The Ijaws have had many dealings with sea creatures of large proportions from hippopotamuses to monitor lizards. There have been cases of blockades caused by these creatures in the shallower parts of the sea which affect boat movements and have caused goods to be lost at sea. Apart from the periodic difficulties such a saying might mirror, it can also be viewed in light of the Ijaws in relation to external factors which affect the Ijaw economy. Just like the play *Akassa You Mi*, there have been activities of many other foreign companies around the Niger Delta region especially with the abundance of crude oil in that territory. It follows therefore, that when the above saying is uttered in light of possible exploitation of resources, the Ijaw then become the Hippopotamus interested in their property which is being taken away and at the same time, the Hippopotamus could also

be foreign companies looking for a chance to interrupt the steady movement of the people's boat to make it capsize and acquire all its contents.

Such feats and economic policies which have resulted in progress have usually been sung about, acted out or inculcated into the teachings of the people and used in matters of arguments and disputes. Just for a bit of a historical understanding, it is quite necessary to understand the magnitude of the external business dealings which the Ijaws had, especially the city states closer to the Atlantic Ocean such as the Ibani and Kalabari. Apart from other ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Ibani people were involved with a lot of trade with Portuguese and English merchants right from the 15th century. These transactions involved a lot, from slaves and palm oil to materials and heavy ammunition and other aspects of western technology which would be inculcated into the culture such as the cannons used on war canoes. More details about this can be found in Susan Hargreaves' *The Political Economy of Nineteenty Century Bonny*. The Kalabaris were also a principal force in the Niger Delta. As Erekosima and Eicher (2002:308) record:

> The involvement of Kalabari men is key in historical and contemporary funeral celebrations, for they traded overland in Africa before the arrival of the Portuguese in the late 1400s as well as by sea with European merchants after that time. Their overland trade brought textiles and other goods from West African sources: cloth from Ewe weavers in the country now known as Ghana … Their trade by sea provided them … Indian cotton madras … English printed woollen flannels … and a variety of European shirt styles.

The Kalabari system of trade also earned foreign recognition due to its style and efficiency so that Amaury Talbot, who was both a British anthropologist and a colonial officer over the southern Niger Delta in the early 1900s spoke of the Kalabaris saying:

> …they are a people of great interest and intelligence, hard-headed, keen-witted, and born traders. Indeed, one of the principal agents here, a man of world-wide experience, stated that, in his opinion, the Kalabari could compete on at least equal terms with (the) Jew or Chinaman. (1932:9)

This statement supports the assertion made during the introduction to this study that it was not possible for the pre-colonial African to communicate on equal footings with foreigners if s/he did not have some form of education written or unwritten which promoted the kind of critical reasoning needed for such businesses (15). It shows the strength of the oral tradition in guiding these city states throughout the centuries until the mass introduction of modern media into certain parts of Africa. It also puts into perspective, the kinds of businesses which have been

conducted by the Ijaws from times past up till now and provides some context into understanding both the roots of some aspects of the culture as well as the internal and external influences behind the culture's dynamism. It also gives some explanation as regards the conflicts which the Ijaws had both with the British colonial government and the Nigerian federal government as they were already established business people with an autonomous and effective system before the coming of these two governments which would heavily reduce their independence, sovereignty and influence over that region of the country.

One very important aspect of the economy is also the central market of any Ijaw community and apart from the royal structures, the market structures are also some of the largest. This is because apart from the market being a place for transaction, it is also a place of open publicity and these markets usually have squares which are large enough to contain large numbers of people. Public events which range from festivals and masquerade displays to the settling of disputes (with fights occurring in some cases) are done in this public space which consequently bring more revenue to the traders in the market.

The Natural Setting

In an interview published by Abdullahi Bashiru in the article, "Myths, Realities of Ijaws in Destiny with Rivers" on the online Daily Trust, Sir Ballard Benedick Bedewuru, an Ijaw man and the Director of Arts and Culture Bureau at the Bayelsa State Cultural Centre in Yenagoa, told the Sunday Trust that, everything about the Ijaws is interrelated with water when he stated thus:

> Unlike in the north where they dance like antelopes, we dance like fishes. Our dance steps are like the movements of the fish and the wagging of their tails in the waters. The Ijaw masquerades usually wear heads of the fishes. All our festivals have their origins from water. Our ways of life are influenced by our environment which is surrounded by water.

There is a lot of evidence to attest to this statement made by Bedewuru especially where festivals are involved. Apart from occasional references to the terrestrial landscape and vegetation of the people, Ijaw performing arts and oral tradition is riddled with water and all forms of aquatic imagery. As mentioned in the quote above, the influence of the Ijaw surroundings is such that there is constant acknowledgment given to nature and a constant

homage paid to the spirits believed to be behind the cycle of nature. Modern writers, artists and dramatists right from the colonial period up to this point in time constantly make reference to these surroundings as the foundation of not only their interests but also the reason behind the urge to write. Festivals are usually done to honour these nature spirits in order to maintain cordiality with them. One of such festivals with an important reference to water and the aquatic surroundings is the Owu-Aru-Sun Alali festival celebrated by the Kalabari people and of all the other festivals done by them, this is the highest, longest and the most respectable. The festival takes place during the harmattan with an average of three plays done every year over a 15 to 20-year period. During these periods, masquerades (which are deemed as representatives of water spirits) are played. These masquerades are played with various rituals done in reference to the spirits behind them. The festival ends with the masquerade carriers removing their headgear and costumes and diving forcefully into the water signifying the water spirits returning to their realm. More of this festival will be discussed in detail when festivals are discussed in this study.

The main body of the Ijaw nation is found in the Niger Delta which is the largest in Africa, measuring up to 7,000 square kilometres. Also found in this delta, is the largest mangrove forest in the world covering some 5.400 to 6000 km2 (Afolabi, 1998:2, Nyanayo, 2002:2). It also happens to be the most heavily occupied delta in the world, containing "a number of distinct ecological zones such as coastal ridges, barriers, freshwater swamp forests and lowland rainforests" (Nyananyo, 1999:18, 2002:2). There are strong arguments for the reflection and influence of the Ijaw natural setting not only in terms of geographical descriptions but also in the features of quite a number of the peculiar characters in Ijaw folktales and fables. One scholarly argument in favour of this notion is Okpewho's analysis of certain legends in J.P Clark's *Ozidi Saga*:

> …indeed the gigantic proportions given to some of these figures may justly be interpreted as the mythmaker's representations of the imposing dimensions of the mangrove flora. Hence Ogueren is pictured as a giant of twenty hands and twenty feet, aptly mirroring a great mangrove tree with enormous branches and roots. (2015:3)

Ogueren is not the only character of such massive proportions in the story and Okpewho mentions other monsters in the legend such as Badoba, The Scrotum King and Tebekwane whose descriptions conjure fitting images of treetops and numerous branches. He believes that "such dimensions are hardly possible outside the sort of ecology within which the *Ozidi Saga*

has been set" (3). The natural setting therefore, though not the most important aspect of the Ijaw cosmology, is definitely key in the representation of every other aspect of this cosmic system and it is through a performance in the natural setting that every other aspect of the system will find expression.

As has been seen in the course of this chapter, these systems serve as the basis on which an extensive study on the Ijaw people is made possible. The Ijaw setting serves as both the platform and the springboard from which everything about the Ijaw system of thought is created. There is no form of reflection, activity or system that does not hinge on the setting and this setting will continue to make appearances throughout the course of this study. This chapter serves as a brief introduction to familiarize oneself and to enable a background understanding to extensive study and reviews of different aspects of the Ijaw drama. The subsequent chapters of this work will expound on the aspects of the culture briefly mentioned already and also include several features not mentioned here. The next two chapters will dwell on the means of communication which the Ijaws have with their setting and the resulting philosophies therein.

Chapter Two

Festivals Among the Ijaw

Festivals in a sense can be seen as the complete embodiment of the physical, philosophical and spiritual beliefs of the Ijaw people. This is because they contain the songs, the stories, the performance, the proverbs, the teachings and the belief in the supernatural. Each of these aspects of the festival is done at some particular stage with some being done in secret and others being done in the open. There are different types of festivals among the Ijaw people and they fall into the categories of the celebration of the spiritual, celebration of human growth and development and celebration of power and possession. In terms of the spiritual celebrations, there are different spirits to whom an Ijaw community or kingdom pay homage. These spirits differ from community to community throughout the Niger Delta. As much as Festivals are generally celebrated among the Ijaws, certain regions have their peculiar celebrations and are able to attract more publicity than other regions. Among the Western and Central Ijaw, they celebrate three major festivals among others, the most popular being the *Segbein*, New Yam Festival and *Amapumo*. To incorporate the whole of Ijaw land into festivals is to include major festivals from the Eastern Ijaw such as the *Owu-Aru-Sun* festival and the *Odum* festival among others.

Variations in the publicity of festivals are due partly to the geographical location of the various Ijaw towns in relation to the presence of non-Ijaw communities. Apart from Ijaws present in the Eastern, Central and Western delta, there are a few Ijaw settlements in some other states such as Ondo, Edo and Akwa Ibom. These settlements where found, are in the minority to the other Ethno-nations around them and there is not much publicity about their dealings. The states with denser Ijaw populations which are Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta, enjoy a better political recognition and publicity than their counterparts in other states. This is recognition is also given because of the presence of crude oil in the region which still accounts for over 90% of the nation's revenue according to the organisation, Climate Scorecard. Out of the top nine oil producing states, Delta, Rivers and Bayelsa occupy the second, third and fourth position respectively, producing a combined 61.06% as stated by Climate Scorecard on the 9th of May 2019.

This has brought other benefits which might serve as additional factors such as a more widespread education, more national and foreign investments, among others. Of the three major

States however, the Eastern Ijaw of Rivers State seem to enjoy more popularity with festive activities. This might be due to the fact that they were city-states in pre-colonial times and the fact that the waterways in the East, allow for better transport with larger vessels than in the other parts of the Niger Delta. Just as dialectal and geographical differences among the Ijaw cause a diversity of religious and philosophical understanding, these also cause a diversity in festival celebrations. Festivals have different time frames of celebration and they range from a day to weeks, months and even years. They also vary in kind, ranging from festivals involving religious rites and spiritual beliefs to festivals for social entertainment and competition.

Religious/Spiritual Festivals

The spirit festivals are usually dominated by masquerades. This is because they are a visual representation of what the Ijaws believe goes on in the spirit world. Various festivals have various origins according to either the history of a community, association with another (non)Ijaw community or from the experiences and interactions of certain individuals with these spiritual forces or the spirit world in general. They also entail the acknowledgment of the forces believed to be behind the natural order and the success behind human endeavours. Bell-Gam et al (2002:207) agree to this stating:

> Traditional performance sprang from the people's religion, from mythical and legendary origins – folk-tales, rituals such as incantations, libation, sacrifices, witchcraft and their belief in the existence of supernatural forces which control the destiny of man. The people are predominantly a fisherfolk or farmers. In the struggle for survival, an attempt is made to meet the demands of sustenance through the worship of the forces that control the universe or the environment. Variations in the tide determine fishing venture but those elements that are beyond understanding, are worshipped by making constant sacrifices to them. The belief in life after death gives the opportunity to engage in ancestral worship. Water and forest creatures are acknowledged as deities. By constant imitation of these forms of nature, good health, good harvest and progress are attracted to community and the individual. Periodic festivals of performances are held to ascertain the manifestation of the supernatural forces among men. The following traditional performances are mostly used: masquerades of different forms and concepts; dances, acrobatic displays, puppet shows, songs and music.

Opongi Festival

An example of a festival borne out of human interaction with the spirit world is the Opongi Masquerade Festival. The Ekine society is not the originator of this particular festival as it is said to have come from the experience of an individual not part of this society. The Ekine, however, adopted it as one of their festivals and dances after hearing of the experiences of this individual. Charles Jenewari in his article "The Opongi Masquerade Festival of the Kalabari Ekine Society." (1980:4) documents an account given by a Kalabari local, Madam Rosanna Dick Tom Big Harry on the occasion of this interaction and according to her, the human involved in this interaction is a woman called Igebe.

The experience started one day when Igebe was at the mangrove to pick some shrimps and while doing so, the Opongi water spirit rose from the water with his son Emene and they decided to play in that area. Out of curiosity, she kept herself out of sight as she silently observed the various patterns of their dance steps as they played with each other. The two spirits eventually finished and left the scene back to the water and Igebe likewise, retired home for the day. This happening took place for two more days in the same manner and at the close of the third day, the spirits again returned to the water but this time, they had left their headgears at the scene of the dance. Igebe seeing this, picked them up and likewise retired home. For some reason which cannot be explained, it is said that the Ekine society got knowledge of the headgears that Igebe had acquired and requested that she give these crafts to them. They were confident their request would yield positive results because she had no male descendant in her family but she refused and instead erected a shrine to the crafts and made daily sacrifices to them. At the time of the year for the performance of various rounds of masquerade plays, the Ekine society again requested for the head gears. They stated that either Igebe gave them these head gears or she would play the masquerade herself to which she willingly obliged.

She taught the Akwa Alabo (Drum Master) the Opongi melody and she herself danced according to the patterns she had observed the spirits dance in the creeks during her three-day period of watching this particular performance. Igebe with a stroke of fortune later had two male descendants in her house named Obiali and Opuminji to whom she handed down the masquerades of Opongi and his son, Emene. Obiali being the older male took Opongi, while Opuminji took Emene. Though now part of the Ekine society today, the Obiali house remains the custodian of the Opongi Masquerade and because members of this house are the custodians, they are given priority in the performance of this masquerade. Such performances did not only

speak of their beliefs in such spirits, but they also served as a reminder of their ancestor Igebe and the societal structure in her time which she was able to defy.

This festival like a number of festivals hosted by certain groups of people include a display of material wealth, reverence for the spirits and ancestors and a performance which more or less describes the character of the deity to which the festival is dedicated to. Jenewari (1978:3-16) gives an account of one of such festivals which took place. According to Jenewari, these festivals are opportunities for houses to show their pomp and power and it "…offers an opportunity for the House to assert its material prowess and act out the core element (i.e. the final phrase) of their ancestor's drum name:

Obiri iyi kiri menji

Oboriiyi kiri menji

Furo be tunoku kura kura kura

Perebo tuboku seki baka seki baka

The dog walks soon after it is born

The goat walks soon after it is born

But a child takes about a year to learn to walk

Everything a rich man's son does is praise-worthy" (5)

The eve of the festival begins with prayers and sacrifices made to the deities concerned in this festival not only in honour and reverence to them but also for the success of the performances of the masquerade during the time frame of the festival. This is accompanied with different songs about the society and the glorification of its culture and all of this takes place from the late evening the day before the commencement of the festival to the early hours of the morning on the day of its commencement. From this point on till the completion of the festival, there is an abundant array of food and drinks in celebration for every member of the house and the members of the Ekine Society by extension. As the festival commences the next day, the Masquerade is dressed up and is no longer seen as a person for the moment but as a representative of the actual spirit. As it comes out for everyone to see, it is greeted with a cheer

among the people especially people from the house of the Masquerade's custodians. (Apart from owning slaves, war canoes and land, once in a while, a house could also own a masquerade like in the case of Opongi. In this case since the masquerade is the major object of the festival, the house will assume a very major responsibility concerning everything connected to this festival). The masquerade's appearance is accompanied by sacrifices and purification rites which are always a custom either before or at the beginning of every Ijaw festival.

Songs immediately begin, some of which praise the masquerade as a head-hunter and others which celebrate its founder and ancestor, Igebe. The more important masquerades of any Ijaw community hardly ever make their first appearances at the sites of the performance, rather they usually appear out of the shrines or spaces created by their guardians and make processions through the town, with their followers singing their praises and beating instruments. All of this noise would already have alerted the members of the community of the masquerade's approach and they either come out to watch or follow the masquerade to the place of performance. More often than not, the masquerades usually stop at the dwellings of important people to render greetings and receive blessings. This is no different in the case of the Opongi and after its procession, it then gets to the site where it begins to dance and mimic the attributes of a hunter (Jenewari, 1980: 9). After a period of dancing, the Opongi goes inside to rest and its companion Seki (Crocodile masquerade) comes out to perform. After Seki's performance, Opongi then comes out again and this interchange will continue to happen frequently till the end of the festival. Evening comes and the performers are entertained with more food consisting of rice, goat, chicken, yam, biscuits and corned beef. According to the traditional religion of the Kalabari people, rice, biscuits and corned beef are associated with water spirits and they are seen as "food from the sea". At first glance, this may seem a bit absurd due to the fact that these foods are not native to the Kalabari or even the Ijaw at large. The case of corned beef might even be seemingly more absurd as the trade of corned beef only began in the 17th century which is too late for a tradition whose most recent archaeological finding dates back to 1145AD (Jenewari 1980:3).

This is not the case as the Kalabari have never claimed to be the originators of these foods but the key to the interpretation of this statement lies in the statement itself. The Kalabari, like many of the Eastern Ijaw, have been in trade with Europeans for centuries and foodstuff such as rice, biscuits and corned beef were traded by the Europeans who came over the seas to meet the Ijaw people. These foods are then termed as "food from the sea" due to the nature in which

they came into contact with them and since the water spirits control the sea, they must have been the ones who brought the Europeans with non-indigenous food.

The next day consists of more dances and features three other masquerades as well because the Opongi festival takes place with five masquerades. The other masquerades are Owu-asawo, Emene and Sekiye-diamond. It also features dancers from various dance groups in the community and this continues till evening and after the performance of an *Egberi* meaning, "drama/story". Women and strangers are told to go away for the masquerades to unmask and the play is thus ended.

These festivals sometimes involve heroes who have accomplished great feats and have attained a divine status among the people. Usually, the stories of these heroes are linked to some exceptional blessing bestowed by or an encounter with a supernatural being which enables the hero to do extraordinary works. These heroes are many times believed to have retired to a place (usually the spirit realm) where like the gods and ancestors, they watch the activities of men which include the skills and abilities they passed on to them before leaving the natural realm. The heroes are believed to intervene occasionally just like the gods in the affairs of humanity particularly when individuals come across certain difficulties. Stories of such happenings are usually recounted at every festival dedicated to such interventions with entertainment being given and lessons being learned. One festival which involves a said hero is the Duminea festival in which the river god, Duminea is honoured alongside the hero of the people, Fenibaso, because he is believed to have lived on the same land as the people of Soku where Duminea is worshipped.

Duminea Festival

This festival is celebrated by the mangrove community of Soku also in Kalabari land. It is a festival to celebrate the water spirits of the land who are believed to be in charge of the day to day happenings on the rivers and seas and the heroes who are responsible for their sustenance on land. The region of Soku is riddled with many waterways and rivers surrounded by mangroves and swamps with the only solid ground being the land on which the members of the community reside. It is from these waterways that the inhabitants derive their sources of livelihood. It is believed that long ago, the rivers and creeks were created by various spirits

which the people must acknowledge. In the documentary *Duminea: A Festival for the Water Spirits* (directed by Robin Horton and Frank Speed in 1966), the narrator further explains this relationship with the spirits saying:

> To ensure its success, Soku people maintain cotton (ph) contact for the water spirits, for the unseen masters of the creeks. Each tract of water is named after its spirit owner who carved it out of the mangroves and who controls its temper and its fish. The maze of little creeks around Soku is fed by a large river which eventually leads to the sea. As the waters of the little creeks are controlled by the waters of the river, so all the local water spirits are under the control of the river's owner Duminea (0.45)

As has been said before, the people of this community also pay homage to the past heroes of the land who are believed to have taught them everything they know as regards to making a livelihood on land and in the sea. The narrator continues, stating:

> Where the creeks are the domain of the water spirits, Soku itself is the domain of their heroes. These are beings who once lived in a community with men who founded its distinctive institutions, gave it a means of earning and livelihood and then vanished. Today, as spirits, the heroes watch unseen over the established institutions and over the skills with which Soku people wrest a living from the creeks. They watch over the making of mats from the midribs, the swamp palm. They watch over the making and use of basket work fish traps. They watch over the net thrower, the hook setter and the mere paddler. (1.40)

Due to the dual influences of the spirits and heroes, they are both acknowledged in the festival because each plays a vital part in the mere existence of the natural surroundings and in the sustenance of the people. While the head of the spirits is Duminea, the head of the heroes is Fenibaso. Both of them are given their due reverence during the course of this festival. The narrator states further:

> For Soku people, Duminea and Fenibaso are two great forces that work together. Duminea controls the waters and the fish that live in them, while Fenibaso maintains the skills that people need if they are to brave the waters and catch the fish. This is why at Duminea's annual festival, the priests of Fenibaso are always in attendance. (2.50)

These narrations help to reinforce previous explanations of the cosmic beliefs of the Ijaw people. It is clearly seen that the people of Soku do not have a separate life apart from the beliefs they have and every form of growth and development is linked to the proper and balanced relationship maintained with the cosmic system by the people. The skills they learn and the technology they develop which enable them advance and sustain their livelihood show

that they are a people of progress with an established system of thought. Instead of an individualistic approach to growth and discovery, these people attribute the sources of growth and discovery to superior beings who are believed to be behind the existence of an environment the inhabitants are unable to create and circumstances which the inhabitants are unable to control. Hence, growth and discovery among the people is seen more as a gifting handed down by the spirits and ancestors of whom there is a communal acceptance by the people.

The Duminea festival begins in the morning with the priest of Duminea and the priestess of Duminea's wife, Falaba Dugyaro, coming out in the attire of the gods. In the midst of the songs by the women of the community, the priest and priestess are possessed by the spirits they represent. Duminea's wife, in a state of possession, is with a large decorated work basket which will be given to Duminea who currently possesses his priest. It is in this basket that the head of the ram sacrificed for this festival will be brought back to her. The basket already has the skulls of previous rams attached to it and it will be taken to the creeks where a new ram will be sacrificed and prayers offered. They get to the river where the priest of Fenibaso is already seated with three drummers, a number of paddlers and the ram to be used for the sacrifice. Duminea's wife is unwilling to give him the basket because she wants to go with him but this is not an expedition for women. There is a brief struggle between the two of them before her followers soon influence her to give her husband the basket and turn away from the expedition.

The company then sets off on this travel with the drummers beating a rhythm for paddling and the head drummer singing praise names to Duminea, Fenibaso and other spirits inviting them also. They get to the small creek that flows into Duminea's river, where they stop briefly for Duminea's priest to wear a large feathered headgear. Upon entering Duminea's river, Duminea possesses his priest again and causes him to tremble immensely to the point where he has to be held by the others in the boat for fear that he might fall into the river. It is said that at this point, Duminea is trying to go back to his domain, hence the trembling. It is also said that in times past, the priest actually went into the river to perform the sacrifice but the people were instructed by Duminea to stop it as jealous spirits could possibly try to kill the priest while he was performing it. They come to a place in the mangrove called Duminea's field which is where the actual sacrifice takes place and this is how the narrator explains what happens next:

> Before the offering, a representative of the community invokes Duminea with a bottle of palm gin (ph). 'Duminea, Duminea, Duminea, this is the ram of your festival. Take it in peace. Let wealth, property, children come into the town. The man who goes to the swamp for his livelihood, let all be well with him. The man who goes to the water, let all be well with him. Even the man who is just going out to the small canoe, let all be well with him.' The invocation completed, Duminea's priest and the helper emulate the ram. (7.45)

There is a victory shout as the ram's head is dropped into the water and Fenibaso possesses his own priest who also has to be contained while Duminea's possessed priest begins to dance holding the ram's head as a sign that the sacrifice has been accepted by Duminea. The narrator speaks of the prayers made by all the members of the company before departure. He says:

> Before leaving Duminea's field, each of the priests comes out, raises his left hand and cries allegiance to his calling. Work of priesthood, 'Heaven that made my time, gave you to me. Heaven that made my house, gave you to me. Heaven of my father, gave you to me. Heaven of my mother, gave you to me. My father's spirit, gave you to me. My mother's spirit, gave you to me. My own spirit, gave you to me. (10.40)

Parts of the ram are left there for Duminea and the rest is put back in the canoe as the company departs. On the way back to Soku, they stop at the shrine dedicated to Duminea's wife and the priest throws pieces of dried fish to it saying "We have given food to your husband and this is your own. Take it and calm the river." (11:50). They then return to the village. The next day of the celebration commences with drums calling out to members of the community telling them of Duminea's acceptance of the sacrifice and inviting them out to play for Duminea. Food offering is cooked from the remains of the sacrificed ram, plankton and fish are placed at Duminea's shrine in the village and the rest is shared among everyone. Significant portions of this food are kept aside for the priests and priestesses of the town while smaller fractions are set aside for the visitors from surrounding towns termed as "spirit guests". During the remaining days of this festival, it is the activities of the wives of Duminea, Fenibaso and the other acknowledged heroes that are more rampant because the more intense and potentially dangerous aspects of the festivals have been completed by their husbands whom they were not allowed to accompany on these missions due to the fact that they were women. They frequently come out on these days in the capacity of the spirits or heroes they represent to dance and their dances are accompanied by pot drums. As these drums are being played, just like in the case of their husbands, the spirits they represent possess them and their demeanours change.

This is apparent in the documentary as the possession of an individual is generally accompanied by trembling, disorientation, body movements and dances done with a seemingly inhuman level of strength. When the wives of these priests and deities are not dancing, the women of the town replace them as the pot drums continue to beat their rhythm but the drums do not precede a possession in this case because none of these women are priestesses. According to the Kalabari tradition, the activities of these gods are always done to remind the mortals of their presence and power. The narrator describes it thus:

> For any given occasion, the gods who will appear, the people they will mount, the time and place of mounting and the way they will behave when on the heads of their carriers, all these are prescribed in detail by tradition. The essence of this and other Kalabari festivals is to put community demands, intimate interferences of its guardian spirits as a reassurance to their continued presence and power. And in order to secure these appearances, it simply commandeers the bodies to enact as their vehicles. In such festivals then, possession is more of a public duty than an individual quirk. (15.45)

From this quote, it is to be understood that Ijaw festivals are not just times of celebration and dance but these are times to renew the individual's connection with his/her existence and with the physical and metaphysical environment. Prayers such as "Heaven that made my time, gave you to me" and "My own spirit gave you to me" show the level of self-reflection in relation to the individual's history and past successes while they also reaffirm the individual's consciousness of the environment and emphasize both a dependence on it and a willingness to live in harmony with it in order to gain profit and prosper.

Odum Festival

The Odum festival unlike the previous two mentioned, does not just address a particular deity but a number of deities familiar to the Okrika people. It involves a colourful performance in honour of what Professor Tekena Tamuno refers to as the "African Python" in his article, "The Odum Festival" (1968:68-76). This snake has also been refered to as the "Boa Constrictor" in a brief documentary of the 1992 festival on YouTube titled "Okrika Odum 1992" by T.D.K Otobo (2017). The festival itself takes place every twenty years and due to its rarity, this is arguably one of the biggest festivals which takes place in the Niger Delta; it brings in viewers from not only neighbouring towns and communities but from other regions of the Niger Delta. Quite like the Duminea festival of the Soku people, it seeks to acknowledge the water spirits

who are believed to inhabit their surroundings and whose actions had the capacity to affect the livelihood of the people. The last Odum festival which took place in 1992 found a few westerners present in the ceremony, observing the events of the day. Tamuno who is a native of Okrika, speaks on this festival saying:

> The Odum festival portrays an important aspect of the way of life of a people whose survival depended very much on sea. The local gods and masquerades, people believed, had a great deal to do with their habitat. Their belief in nature spirits involved a cosmology including *Owu ama* (the dwelling place of water spirits or mermaids) the masquerades festival with head-pieces resembling these same water spirits … believed to be inhabiting the creeks where they seek their daily bread. Such festivals involve men and women, adults and children, comers and patricians, priest and priestesses… Traditionally, the involvement is total because the well-being of the community depended on the success of the display. (70)

In the Odum festival not only lies the performance of the Okrika people but also their ingenuity. Among so many other activities in this festival, the main attraction and perhaps the most important part of the festival is when a very long contraption over 200-300 feet in the shape of a boa (which is worn by about four men) comes out of the water (70). The people then pay respect to it as they offer sacrifices of live chickens and drinks. It opens its mouth and when the gifts are put in, it gobbles them up. It is not known how the contraption is able to do this and go back into the water as this is a closely guarded secret among the creators of the masquerade – a common feature of masquerades and societies. According to Tamuno, this festival is done by only two communities in Okrika which are the Okrika and the Ogu. There are other surrounding communities which also revere the python and are capable of performing such a festival but these two communities have the advantage mainly due to the geographical locations they occupy. While many surrounding communities are largely coastal, these two have the advantage of more shallow waters along their beaches which makes it the optimal environment for such performances to take place without life-threatening hazards such as drowning (68).

Furthermore, it allows for an efficient communication within the performers involved as it is not only the python which will be in the water but other people guiding it as well as other masquerades and performers. This masquerade was once performed by the Ibani people as well but due to the activities of foreign companies in that region, the landscape has been altered which has created an unsuitable environment for such performances just like the other communities surrounding Okrika. Anna Hlavacova in her online article “Tempest

Masquerades", records a conversation with Patrick Jumbo, an indigene of Bonny who as a younger man, was once involved in masquerade performances:

> "At least someone's still performing it," says Patrick, having no sense of rivalry, which otherwise is always a part of these sorts of things. "We used to perform it too. However, Shell [the oil company] deepened the coastal waters so big ships could pass through. There are no shallows to perform it anymore." (85)

The Odum Festival of Okrika not only featured the Boa but a few other colourful masquerades and performances. At the performance of this particular festival in 1992 as shown in the already mentioned YouTube documentary, they can be seen both on land and sea.

As the 1992 festival commences, there are two Boas seen in the river; the male and the female which is smaller than the male but more colourful. Each has its part to play in this festival but only after some songs, a few dances and masquerade displays are performed. One of the masquerades is seen actually floating on the river but only the parts of its body from its torso upwards can be seen. From its waist down appears like it is embedded in one end of a rectangular floating object which has the shape and size of a very small raft. The nature of this object cannot be verified as it is completely overlaid with a white cloth, the same as what the masquerade wears apart from its colourful headpiece. Another floating masquerade much like the first but with a more colourful attire and a much more elevated base about two and a half times the height of the first, sits in the centre this time and is seen accompanying the male snake towards the shore like a herald. A young child is then brought to stand at the other end of the base of the first masquerade and facing the masquerade, together they begin to move in a synchronised form while the second masquerade not only shows physical expressions of praise to the boa, but also leads it on towards its prey which is a fowl hanging from a palm tree in the water. The predatory nature of the Boa much like other predatory animals such as the Shark, Hippopotamus and Iguana are the reasons they are celebrated across several Ijaw communities. This does not mean that their presence has always been positive as these animals were many times involved in the destruction of lives and property and as much as they are celebrated, these plays and re-enactments remind one of the dangers of proximity to such creatures. The narrator of the documentary briefly speaks on the Boa's significance to this festival saying:

> In the Odum festival re-enactment, this mode of killing by the Boa, has gone into the realm of symbolism…Preying was most certainly the routine for which Boas were most dreaded and for which they have entrenched themselves in Okrika mythology… In the Odum festival re-enactment, this mode of killing by the Boa has gone into the realm of symbolism. It is the

> male Boa that is to go on an onslaught that threatens the domestic possessions of the Okrika people. On this occasion, it is a chicken tied to a palm by its owner. (4.50)

The snake gradually moves towards the chicken, lifts its head, opens its mouth and snaps it up from the tree gradually retreating and this is where the female Boa is ready to play its part. Again, the harmful but awe-inspiring nature of this animal is portrayed as the female Boa this time is to creep up on a child oblivious of her environment and swallow her. This again reveals the danger of the snake to both lives and property in the community. The narrator gives another brief comment on the intent of the snake saying: "As if preying on domestic possession was not a sufficient trait, the female Boa is to complete the dangerous cycle by going after the human, this time, it is a most unaware youth playing and dancing away" (6.25). The said child is put on a platform on the water and is indeed unsuspecting of imminent danger as she dances to her pleasure (dance being one of the major forms of personal and public entertainment among the Ijaw) while the Boa approaches. Similarly to its male counterpart, the female Boa lifts its head and observes the child for a short while before moving closer, opening its mouth and taking the child, further lifting its head to make sure the child slides properly into its belly much to the excitement and mock fear of the onlookers at the waterside while the people guiding the snake, dance in excitement and sing songs of adulation to it while encouraging the audience to do the same to which the snake responds by dancing to their songs. This is the most important part of the festival and the aspect which garners the most attention.

With this part over, the people retreat inland where other lighter stages of the festival will continue through the town and in a public setting organised specifically for this event. This involves the usual aspects of a festival common among all Ijaw people with general singing, dancing and dance performances from various masquerades and dance groups with food and drink frequently passed around. The Narrator comments at the end of this significant display by adding; "At last, the story is told. The mystification and near deification of the Boa finds meaning in the symbolic preying. As the chief hosts, spectators and participants disperse, the lifetime desires of many have been fulfilled …" (8.01).

The Festivals are usually organised and maintained by prominent societies or institutions of the particular nation or kingdom like the Owuogbo society of the Ibani and the Wakirike (Okrika) who in addition, have the Kiriowu society and the Ekine society of the Kalabari. Apart from religious/spiritual festivals, perhaps the next most important festivals are the festivals that involve rites of passage in terms of growth, development and death. The celebrations involving

human development are numerous as there are various stages of growth and development throughout a lifetime which differ according to age, gender and societal roles. The festivals that entail a display of power and possessions generally take place under a lighter atmosphere as these festivals are usually held either by individuals or between the various Houses of an Ijaw community. Where festivals are held between the different Houses of a community, they usually involve competitions in various aspects of societal indulgence such as dances and boat displays. According to J.S. Mbiti:

> … there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the field where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament. Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death. (1970:23)

There are rites that indicate the transition of individuals from childhood to adulthood and also the passage of the dead into the realm of the ancestors. The rites which take place while an individual is alive are perhaps, more colourful, filled with more activity and more flamboyant for the likely reason that the individual or families who are the main focus of the rite are alive to see and experience all these activities as well as a chance to show off their abilities to execute a proper and memorable festival. These rites also seem to be more celebrated among the women of the communities than the men especially in recent times. Two of the most popular ceremonies of this kind among the eastern delta and the western delta are the Iria Bibite and the Seigbein Festival. Both are similar in the sense that they involve the girl-child attaining womanhood but they are quite different in the processes involved and the other activities they entail; for example, the Iria Bibite deals solely with the process of attaining womanhood while the Seigbein also involves fishing and social activities. The Iria Bibite also slightly varies among different eastern Ijaw communities but these two festivals concerning rites of passage will each be discussed.

Iria Ceremony

The Iria Ceremony is one of the oldest and most popular traditions among the people of the Niger Delta such as the Ibani, Kalabari and Okrika of the Eastern Delta. These all involve the maturity of the female and are done with the intent of maintaining the virtue and innocence of young girls till they all come to the point of womanhood upon which the celebration is fully carried out. Regardless of the community, they are all done with the same intent although with a few variances in procedures. Even though many traditions of the Eastern Delta have been lost or watered down, the Iria is still popular today. Even though it has survived the different ages, it has undergone many changes and modifications due to modernity and changes in religious beliefs today. Bonny's Iria, also known as Iria Bibite, is as old as Bonny itself which was founded in the second half of the 14th century. Since that period, the tradition has only existed in oral form (Waribere 2004: IV), (A. Titus-Green 2016: 24). The case of the Ibani Iria will largely be studied in this context.

The Iria ceremony today has many differences from the ceremony practiced centuries ago. According to Waribere (21) the Iria is divided into three different stages which are:

i) Kala-egere-bite

ii) Opu-egere-bite

iii) Bighi-bite

These different stages are actually the names of different types of cloth which the young woman wears during the transition period. In the past, these three stages would have been done across a span of twenty to thirty years but this is no longer the case in today's culture. For various reasons, which might possibly include added economic and social responsibilities as well as added factors of modernity, this process has been reduced to a span of two weeks and two days. In the case of the people of Okrika, each community organises the Iria as at the time it is most suitable to them and it lasts for a longer period than the Ibani. According to Charles Ogan (2008:37):

> Normally, Iria ceremony lasts for a period of three months beginning from late September when 'tickets' are taken by participants, to December when the public ceremony is held. (The ticket is a small document presented by the chiefs

endorsing satisfaction with a girl's chastity. It contains the name of the prospective celebrant, her parentage and family background).

The first stage of the Ibani Iria which is the Kala-egere-bite sees the iriabo (the girl who will become a woman) taken to a fattening room for confinement. This stage in older times, lasted for about six months or more but today, it is regulated to two weeks. During this time, she is fed and bathed several times a day. Difference cosmetics such as the *Awu* (camwood), the *Toru* (red chalk) and various oils are rubbed on her skin. She also wears her cloth up to her knees. In the past, the girl leaves the fattening room and is usually married off to one of her suitors; she then comes back after giving birth to about two children. This again has changed as the girl now does the whole process in less than three weeks. During roughly the same stage among the Kalabari people as B.S. Iyalla records, the young girl is taught various aspects of marriage. She also learns to "…cook, squat, walk, stand, laugh, speak to people of different social status, and the proper manner of sitting alone or before elders. Above all, she is taught what to say and when to say it politely." (1968:216).

The next stage which is the Opu-egere-bite sees the young woman come back to the fattening room. During this period, she is taught to dance by the Ereminogbo (which is a dancing club) in association with a masquerade club. Because of religious changes, religious diversity, economic reasons and the presence of Christianity, the Masquerade clubs have gradually disappeared leaving only the dance club. During this period, the iriabo ties the Opu-egere-bite which reaches from her waist to her feet. On Sunday, the Iriabo does a thanksgiving service, acknowledging God for life and for the opportunity to go through the process of womanhood. "On Monday morning, the iriabo is obligated to go to the stalls where she buys a number of snacks to fill her shopping basket. As she does this, she is met with congratulatory remarks and praises. She is also visited by many well-wishers and relatives and she is given many gifts" (Titus-Green, 2016:26).

The last stage which is the Bighi-bite is the highest point of womanhood. It was originally intended to be done separately from the Iria. It was also intended that the mother of the iriabo should be the one to celebrate it. This ceremony is divided into two sessions: the morning and the evening session. During the morning session, the woman appears in two different changes of cloth. If she has not done the first two stages of the iria before, she has to appear in two different types of opu-egere-bite during this session. Waribere (2004:26) explains that, "In the first stage of the afternoon session, she appears in "popo-cloth with nama-sibi and 'suu' with

damask. In the last or second to the last changes, she appears in "george"/njiri. This hits the highest point of grandeur of the occasion". Plates of this stage can be referred to in the MA Dissertation *The Importance of Performing Arts in Preserving African Philosophy Using the Akan and Ijaw Cultures* (Titus-Green, 2016: 34-5).

Seigbein Festival

Like most of the other festivals, this festival is an annual one which is practiced by the Ijaw of the Kabowei Kingdom which is located in Bayelsa and Delta States which accommodate the Central and Western Ijaw people respectively. It is a fishing festival which takes place between the months of April and May. While this festival is generally reported as a fishing festival, fishing is not the main theme of this festival as the word *Sei* in this region means "dance" and *gbein* denotes the idea of multiplicity. This is one of the festivals that is still very much in practice today. The festival of April 2018 was a ten-day event which took place from the 11th to the 21st of April. It featured the following events on its last day; *Azo-Sei* (Paddle Dance), *Opu-Obori Sei* (Elephant Dance), *Owusei* (Juju Dance) Traditional Wrestling, Boat Regatta, *Engu Sei* (Drum Dance) Miss Kabowei 2018 and an All-Night Party. The festival also pays a lot of attention to the women in this community with some of the activities involving a rite of passage into womanhood. The rites of passage in this part of the Ijaw region are not quite the same as the Iria (which as previously mentioned, is also a rite of passage into womanhood) practiced by the Ibani, Kalabari and Okrika of the Eastern Delta. While they both involve dances, the rites leading up to the Seigbein festival have been known to involve female circumcision in pregnancy which is missing in the Iria. There are also no specific stages here as compared to the various stages of the Iria as age is the main requirement for womanhood. It was after the due process of circumcision in pregnancy that the woman could then perform the Seigbein dance and attain the status of womanhood known as *Erera*. There have been claims that some of these activities such as female circumcision, though greatly diminished, still take place today. The Nigerian *Punch* Newspaper on the 10th of February 2018, published an interview with the Pere (King) of the Kabowei Kingdom, His Royal Majesty, Shadrach Peremobowei Erebulu Aduo III where he was asked about the unique practices of his people and this was his reply:

> The Kabowei kingdom is celebrated for her festival called the Seigbein Festival. It is about a 20-day event celebrated every year, in the month of April, where every son and daughter of Kabowei is expected to come home to showcase our rich cultural heritage. Our burial and marriage rites, we hold dearly. Also, the transition from girlhood to womanhood is held dearly. But most celebrated is our annual Seigbein.

With the description of all these rites involving women, one might begin to wonder whether there are no rites or festivals that encourage male progress and maturity and rightfully so as there is a strong male presence in Ijaw culture. There have also been exclusive ceremonies for Ijaw males in the past but as is an inevitable characteristic of culture, a lot of reformations and changes have taken place within the culture especially in the last 100 years with certain aspects of the culture suffering heavily from these changes. The male *Iria* ceremony of the Ibani people which is also known as *Jooji* or *Bighi-Bite* is one of those aspects which have been abandoned. The reason for this has not been clearly elicited and there are speculations concerning this, which range from colonialism to cultural dynamism. Although it is no longer practiced, it has been recorded and its features were briefly documented in the programme of events during the ten year coronation anniversary of the current King of Bonny, His Majesty, King Edward Asimini William Dappa Pepple, Perekule XI which was a one-week event between the 17th and 24th of December 2006 and it is from this documentation that the ceremony will be briefly described. The male *Iria* ceremony comprised of four stages spanning from early childhood to middle age. (15)

The first stage begins from the ages of about four to ten years of age where the boy would wear knitted cowries which would have a single bell or two and which would be tied round his waist. The bells were for locating the child if he strayed or wandered away from home to play by himself with his colleagues or if exploration and curiosity took the better of him. The second stage was called *Ikinda* and it began from about eleven to sixteen years of age where the boy would tie half a yard of real Indian cloth round his waist, but which would only cover his private part. This was a sign that maturity was near. The third stage which is the actual *Jooji* or *Bighi-Bite* took place when the young man had gotten to twenty years old and "like the Iriabo, he is painted with Indigo and after two or more days, he would formally be tied a full fathom of real Indian cloth with small sized coral beads" called *Kilari* (15). All this would be done in the presence of invited guests especially his colleagues or contemporaries who had already gone through the same ceremony (15). This was the official acknowledgment of manhood throughout the Kingdom and with his manhood recognised, he had the legal right to

then fend for himself and do his own businesses. Although still under the guidance of his parents, he was not allowed to marry until the age of twenty-five. The last stage takes place from his middle age and is signified by changing the position which he ties his wrapper, which is from the centre to his right-hand side, and the upper ends of the cloth would be tied. This is called *Bite Kpombi*. Again, many of these traditions have been abandoned and even the rules concerning dressing like the position of the wrapper are no longer enforced. One still remembers tying a cloth at the upper ends at the age of eleven with a few older cousins (none of whom were up to twenty-five at that time) and younger ones as well during the burial of our grandmother.

Funeral Rites

The rites involving the dead deal more with traditional bureaucracy and claims for the actual interment of the individual such as the time, place and kind of burial. Such bureaucracies have caused and still cause frictions between Ijaw people especially for an individual who had each parent come from a separate Ijaw community. Barclays Ayakoromah's *A Matter of Honour* astutely captures in drama an issue arising from the burial of an Ijaw individual. The plot begins with an ongoing traditional marriage ceremony in a town called Amabiri when news arrives from a local drunkard, Egberi that Oweibi – a native of Amabiri for whom Angiama has become an adopted home – has died, and the people of Angiama have resolved to bury him there (2010:6). This causes a conflict between the people of Amabiri and Angiama as it is the Ijaw tradition for an individual to be buried in the land of his/her father and a burial done otherwise is seen as dishonour to the community. The problem here is that Oweibi (the deceased) was not on the best terms with his own people and was treated better by the people of Angiama which led him to adopt them as his home. This leads to various threats between the two communities with the people of Amabiri resolving to interfere with Oweibi's burial. The people of Angiama succeed in tricking them about the actual date and time of the burial and by the time the people of Amabiri arrive, Oweibi is already in the ground and after a moment of tension, both sides decide it is in their best interests not to kill each other over a dead individual but reconcile (52-57).

E.J. Alagoa (1967:279) in his article, *Ijo Funeral Rites,* gives a very important account of an Ijaw funeral as it does not just concern any Ijaw individual but the late King of Nembe

Kingdom, His Highness, Francis Ossamade Joseph Allagoa in 1967. He also notes that "there are differences between funeral rites for the Kings (*amanyanabo*) of the city-states of the Eastern Niger Delta (Nembe, Kalabari, Bonny, Okrika) but also dissimilarities basic to the Ijaw culture that underlie their structure" (279). This particular ceremony had an interesting sequence of events as the late King who was an honoured member of the Catholic Church had been knighted by the Pope in 1954 and a pontifical High Mass was held for him before his body was transported in a ceremonial gig to Nembe. An alternating series of events followed as at each stage, the Catholic and Christian groups would first hold prayers and any other procedure followed by the traditional rituals of the people. There were first, two nights of wake keeping at the King's new house followed by the body being moved to another square called *Opupolotiri* where the mausoleum of most of the past kings stand and it was there for the next five days. On the morning of the eighth day, the burial was done along with final rituals and for seven days after the ninth, traditional performances were done every day in honour of the king with wine offered to the ancestors (*Kamo)* every morning and evening. Another seven days passed with events for the ordinary people of the kingdom. After that, yet an additional seven days passed for the King's special mourning house. There was almost an indefinite number of days for performances as the people of the town were joined by performers from other towns (280).

All this has been made into a brief summary to give room for some of Alagoa's analyses of the whole occasion as he himself is from Nembe. His explanations lead us to believe that it is quite a feat that, "the customs binding the detailed performance of so many ritual acts are remembered" (280). He also explains that they are not only remembered by instruction but also by eye-witness as the elders who supervised this particular burial were witnesses to the burial of the already mentioned King Frederick William Koko mentioned in chapter one of this study (41) in 1898 and Anthony Ockiya in 1936. Apart from watching these rituals performed, Alagoa explains that there are a number of simple underlying principles which aid the memories of the elders in these acts and they go thus:

> …first that the king being the embodiment of his people's character, was also the bedrock of their culture, and all ancient customs must be observed at his burial in some form. Second, that such observance was in the positive interest of the dead king, since he would not otherwise meet his ancestors on an equal footing. To ensure his acceptance by the ancestors, he must be made to be like them. Third, that since the king was ruler of every group within the community, procedures and rituals must be all inclusive of the society and strictly representative of every interest. (281)

Some of the customs here, just like a few others aforementioned, have been lost. One such custom - one of those which ensured that the king was presentable enough to meet his ancestor - was sculpting the teeth of the corpse in order to create gaps between each individual tooth. The loss of this custom would mean that when the king joined his ancestors, he would have a different dentition from them. However, women were paid here to do this in a symbolic manner to the corpse (282).

Despite the fact that certain customs have been lost, the Ijaws are still able to give a very elaborate burial when the situation calls for it. One such situation is the final burial rites of late Chief Fanyeofori Abbey-Hart (who happened to be a close relative) on the 11th of May 2019. The burial involved a few similarities with the late King of Nembe such as stopovers at the ancestral houses and a church service. It also involved several performances such as regatta and masquerade performances. These performances will be documented under their specific subtopics.

After the religious and individual festivals, the next most popular and perhaps the most frequent among the Niger Delta is the boat Regatta.

Regatta

The Regatta among the Ijaw is by its very nature and consistency probably the most colourful and vibrant act of festivity across the Niger Delta. Except for a few like the Iria which is done among the Ibani and Okrika, many Ijaw festivals remain specific to certain regions such as the Owu-Aru-Sun to the Kalabari, the Odum to the Okrika and the Seigbein to the Western Ijaw, the Regatta on the other hand is practised by virtually every region of the Ijaw and though there might be a few variances, the aim and foundations of the celebrations remain the same. A regatta, according to Alagoa:

> …is an aquatic display which depends on the tide, weather, and volume of water to succeed. The performers in ceremonial gig (Alali-Aru) are mostly paddlers who maintain same rhythm and style accompanied with traditional music while paddling. Other performers in the regatta are drummers and in some cases masquerades and performers. (1974:7)

Regattas also do not always have to follow the same re-enacted story line or plot whenever performed as do certain sacred festivals such as Duminea or Odum. U.N. Abalogu in his article *The Regatta* describes this festival, saying that it:

> … brings together a large fleet of colourfully decorated canoes with flags and buntings displayed along the river in artistic formations, the paddlers exercising their skill and dexterity while musicians and dancers perform to enrich the spectacle. In most cases, the canoes carry emblems or symbolic inscriptions of such groups. The costume of the players may be traditional warriors' dress or elaborately patterned to suit the occasion but always presenting a colourful drama. (1980:96)

As Abalogu also describes, when a war canoe was ready to go to war, it normally had cannons lashed to its bow and stern, and also others pointing to the sides. The chief sat on a platform at the centre, and upwards of sixty paddlers lined the sides. Other warriors would stand around in the canoe with rifles or other offensive weapons. When the city-state went to war, each of the chiefs would launch his own war canoe, and there would be a whole fleet on the waters. The control of the men in each war canoe, and communication between the individual canoes in the fleet was accomplished by means of the war canoe drums. (96)

In regard to the origin of the Regatta, there is no definite historical explanation as to its cause or the very first celebration, but assumptions can be made due to the understanding of the lifestyles of the more ancient Ijaw people. Among the general conversations on this topic, there are those who believe that this was started by the Ijaw ancestors who like their descendants, also lived along the coastline while there are those who also suggest that the regattas (especially with the added features of cannons in the modern war canoe) had a significant level of European influence starting with the Portuguese in the 14th century down to the British in the 19th century. Angba et.al (2018:1), from an interview with Chief Erewari Igbata speaking about the Nembe people of Rivers State, states that "the origin of Regatta is not known. However, it may not be unconnected with the celebration of victories from inter-communal warfare and successful trade expeditions." This conversation with Chief Igbata, seen in light of the various dealings which the Ijaws had within themselves and with foreigners gives a lot of credibility to his statement as there would be no need for celebrations on these canoes if there was not some form of victory in all the dealings for which the canoe was to be used from trade to warfare. This rightly leads to the statement by Angba et.al:

> Boats or canoes were the only means of transport between the Niger Delta chiefs and the European traders who bought slaves. After slave trade was abolished in

> 1807, they became legitimate means of transport mainly for trade in palm oil and palm products. Each King or head chief was entitled to a boat and these ceremonial boats (also known as Alali-Aru) were paddled by men from the chief's household. It was risky having to travel and trade by watercrafts because naval criminals, pirates, attackers and insurgents also lurked about. (1)

The Kingdoms of Nembe, Kalabari, Bonny and Okrika in the Eastern Niger Delta are well known for their part in the Atlantic slave trade and later in the palm-oil trade. Their internal organisation for these commercial activities across the delta, into the Nigerian hinterland, and with their European customers has been compared to the operations of the ancient Greek city-states. Alagoa (1974:1) states:

> The war canoe was, of course, an instrument of war, but it was also a political and a social instrument. Politically, the possession of a fully equipped war canoe was necessary for a chief to be recognised in any of these states of the Eastern Niger Delta. Socially, the war canoe identified a group of persons as belonging together under the authority of a chief. This social and political group was called a House (wari), and the war canoe was its concrete symbol, since the chief had to man his war canoe with members of his house.

When considered in light of its business and economic implications, the importance of the war canoe cannot be overemphasized. These boats did not just bring economic profit to the Ijaw people alone as they were used by Europeans in their dealings with other kingdoms. Tagowa in his article, "The Changing Patterns of Boat Regatta as Maritime Heritage in Nigeria", records one of such instances where the British used war canoes in their dealings with the Ashanti Empire:

> During the pacification of the Ashanti Empire of the then Gold Coast (Ghana), war canoes of the regatta assemblage were transported on board a ship from Bonny to the war theatre in the Gold Coast in 1875. Prince Charles Pepple of Bonny who was the first black West African commissioned officer of the Royal Navy was the fleet Admiral of the Gold Coast operation. The success of the operation was said to have pleased Her Majesty, the Queen of England that she honoured king Pepple of Bonny, Prince Charles Pepple and other chiefs from Okrika, Kalabari and Nembe city-states (2005:143-51)

This was not the only dealing a Queen of England would have with Regatta boats as in 1956, Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth was entertained with another regatta in honour of her visit as documented in a video by the online archive, British Pathé.

It was not just the economic boom which the canoe facilitated but it also served to pursue, protect and recover any lost possession. Abalogu (97) speaks of a story in the same article,

telling of one Chief Olumu of Ebrohimi from Bendel State (later split into Edo and Delta States) who with his war canoes, caught up with a group of kidnappers and rescued the wife of late Olu Akengbuwa that was kidnapped by some of the inhabitants of Delta State. With all these risks at stake,

> … it became pertinent for the chiefs to also protect their merchandise with war boats (Omu-Aru) manned by warriors carrying ammunitions, cannons and mystic powers. In recent times the war regattas are re-enacted to honour special dignitaries reputed to have been men of strength and valour. But warriors and warrior-kings were the first to be honoured this way. In modern times, regatta festivals involve social or promotional activities in which prizes or awards are staked for winners. Angba et al (1)

Ola Rotimi's *Akassa You Mi* (2001) gives a brief account of the processes involved in war in the Ijaw community and the need for war canoes. King Frederick William Koko together with his people and other neighbouring Nembe communities have endured a rising maltreatment by the Royal Niger Company. King Koko has made a plan to attack their premises and take as much spoils as they possibly can because they believe these foreign companies have taken a hold of their resources through trickery, violence and other unscrupulous means. King Koko then calls a council of war which consists of people from his land of Bassambiri and also chiefs and leaders of other Nembe towns. Even though there are quite a few disagreements from the chiefs (especially Chief Obu who bears a grudge against Koko on the grounds of a history of political tension), they still discuss the importance of this war and the implications it will have on them and their people. Chief Spiff reminds them of the need for unity:

> We are thankful to the King who has called this Council for War. Ehnn, if I remember well, the Okpoma of our ancestors has never, never failed to join Nembe in any war. Never. Or is Okpoma no longer the home of the shrine of Kalaorowei, the god of War of our ancestors? What kind of war do we talk about without the guardians of that shrine in our midst as we grapple? Sons of our fathers, may it not be in our time that the 'unheard of is heard! Our brothers, have I spoken well? (2001:87)

As concerning the activities on the boat itself during the regatta, Angba et al also explain that the war canoe or boat, also known as Omongu-Aru in Nembe dialect, is till date displayed during regatta competitions and young men mimic war prances in the boats. There are specific costumes that are worn to reflect this cultural gesture (war). Black and blue are the most used costume colours for re-enacting regatta battle. The two colours signify battle readiness. The trunks of the canoe contain the chief's court, mystic charmer and armed warriors. In what seems to be the entertainment angle of coastal battle, the war canoes are laden with talking drums (4).

The burial of the already mentioned Chief Abbey-Hart of Bonny, also featured a regatta performance as one of the rites required for a chief of the kingdom to be buried. Details of this regatta in picture and video formats were duly published by the Irise Media Group on Facebook as shown in the bibliography of this study.

Apart from the drums played (which are largely ceremonial and were not featured in actual war) there are songs which are sung by the women for their men which the men also sing for themselves in such instances. Such songs are believed to have power as well as a foundation in human or spiritual history which will enable them to defeat their enemies. Tasie (1977:14) writes one of such songs:

Oruba Otumutumugba bere menia

Awo-o-o-o Tubu Ogbo

Oruma Sinyaa bele siny

This is a song which according to Tasie, "begins with praise names and says the divinity 'was able in the ocean to do what other divinities could not do" (15). This song comes from the mythical origin of the Kalabari divinity, Owomekaso. The story goes that this divinity had other brothers and sisters who when they all grew up, decided to fend for themselves. Their parents upon hearing this, decided to throw a feast and hold a competition at the same time among their children. The competition turned out to be a test of strength among them and it was to see who could successfully lift a hot pot (which contained all their favourite foods) from the fire. All tried without success until it came to the turn of Owomekaso who asked for a piece of cloth called *Ekeke* and with this, she was able to lift the pot from the fire. The legend goes that these divinities occupied different Ijaw towns and communities with Owomekalaso occupying the Kalabari land. This story therefore gave the Kalabari people confidence going into war with neighbouring communities because these communities were perceived to be occupied by the weaker siblings of their divinity. The song is said to have had a magical effect on them whenever it was sung by their women. (14)

The regatta is not a festival that is peculiar to only the Ijaw people as there are quite a few other ethnic groups where it is done and they cover a few other states such as Cross River which

contains the Efik and Ibibio people, Imo and Anambra of the Igbos and Lagos and Ogun of the Yorubas with events which Abalogu also records (1986:96).

Inasmuch as all these festivals seem to have been classified into different categories, the truth of the matter is that there are still elements of the spiritual and religious perspectives to all the events and festivals which have been mentioned here. This goes back to the earlier explanation of the Ijaw worldview in the first chapter and the pre-eminence of the divine in the affairs of humanity. As stated earlier at the end of the first chapter, festivals are one of the major means through which the Ijaws communicate with their setting. In some sense, a festival is the interaction of an Ijaw individual with his/her environment amplified by a communal participation to a conventionally recognised being. As a result of this, festivals are a good place to identify ideological beliefs of the people as these beliefs are presented in an audio-visual way which is does not take place behind a television screen but around the individual. The next chapter will examine some of the intricacies behind the ideologies which are brought to life and some of the custodians behind these ideologies.

Chapter Three

Masquerade Societies and Masks Among the Ijaw

The concept of masquerade societies is one which is more peculiar to the Eastern Ijaw region of the Niger Delta. Among the Central and Western regions, these masquerades and dances are managed majorly by elders and more experienced people in the community, particularly those who hold office in the society. Among the Eastern Ijaw however, these societies are institutions which influence and maintain the major aspects of all kinds of performances in the society and since the spirits and influences behind these societies are revered, the members of these societies are also revered and do not just influence performance but influence the affairs of the societal system as they are custodians of the culture, traditions and beliefs. The major societies in the Eastern Delta include: the Ekine Society of the Kalabari people, the Sekiapu of the Nembe people and the Owu-Ogbo society of the Bonny and Okrika people. They are both quite similar in form but entail a few differences. The first society that will be studied here is the Ekine Society.

The Ekine cannot simply be defined in a word or sentence due to the multiplicity of its functions. Even after becoming part of the society, Robin Horton (1963:94-114) acknowledged that is not an easy task as it is like tasting a fruit with many flavours. Horton explains that the Ekine are not very easy to describe:

> On the face of it, Ekine serves many disparate ends. At a superficial glance, it appears as a religious institution, designed to solicit the help of the water spirits through invocations and dramatic representations of them by masquerades. A second glance suggests that these are recreational as much as religious in their intent. Yet again, many of the masquerades seem to be important status-symbols. And finally, Ekine often appears as a significant organ of government. A day-to-day description of the society's activities in any one community would reveal these aspects as tightly woven or tangled together. (94)

The best way and most seemingly agreeable way which Horton suggests in the understanding of the Ekine Society is to explore the myths and stories which surround the origin of this institution and they "…supply not only a theory of how Ekine came to be, but also the Kalabari idea of what it was founded for" (94). The most detailed myth according to Horton starts with the story of a woman called Ekineba. She is said to have been beautiful which was probably the reason why she was kidnapped by water spirits but their mother, however, was infuriated by this deed and instructed them to return her to the land of men to which they obliged, but not

before each of the spirits taught her its own unique play. Upon her return to her community, she taught her people everything she had learnt and they gained a widespread fame with frequent performances of these plays being constantly enacted. There was, however, an issue with these performances and it came from the inability of the men doing the performances to follow a certain rule. When Ekineba was being taught by the spirits, she was instructed that she must always be the first person to beat the drum whenever any of the plays were performed but this rule had not been followed (very likely due to the fact that it is the men who beat the drums just as only men carry masquerades). After the third violation of this rule, the incensed spirits took Ekineba away for the second time, never to return. (94). The men then made her the patron goddess of the masquerade and the Ekine society in charge of plays has been named after her.

Again, just like a number of myths surrounding contemporary culture, there is no established proof of this story and there are a few questions left to be asked such as: why the mother of the spirits did not get angry and instruct her return like the first time, why Ekineba was taken away instead of the men being punished for their violation of the rule, whether the spirits are still interested in such enactments today and if they still kidnap people after every performance since the men still beat the drums. Since Horton does not record any further conversation to this story, the study will focus on the more documented aspects of the Ekine society. As much as it is not easy to define, a few scholars have made attempts. According to Ruth Finnegan:

> This is a religious and artistic association for men, separately organized in each Kalabari community. Each such society stages a cycle of thirty to fifty masquerade plays. The society is divided into grades through which members can progress according to their skill and on payment of a small fee. Each society has its own headman and certain other officials and its own rules of behaviour; one of the strictest of these is the idea of concealment of certain activities from women. The plays themselves are connected with water spirits… (2012: 496).

E.J. Alagoa speaking of their function, says:

> The Ekine, Owu Ogbo or Sekiapu Society in many Eastern Niger Delta communities became a badge of cultural citizenship, knowledge, and of artistic talent. Political leaders took membership in it, and endowed it with authority to exercise discipline over citizens in certain matters. But the most important aspect of the Ekine or Sekiapu activity was the display of knowledge of the drum praise poetry, *kule*, during mask dances in the central city square. Ekine or the mask dancing society became, in this way, the principal custodian of this variety of historical fixed text. (2002:147-49).

According to Martha Anderson, the Eastern Ijaw performing masquerades, function within the context of societies called Sekiapu (Dancing People) or Ekine; the latter name is in deference to the legendary woman who taught men how to perform the plays. She also says:

> Sekiapu also serves social and political functions. Even if it did not officially govern Eastern Ijaw communities, community leaders were members. In Nembe, it was charged with imbuing males with manly virtues and punishing them for offenses ranging from voyeurism (spying on the women's toilet) to more serious crimes such as rape or theft. There, as elsewhere, the society promotes cultural knowledge by requiring expertise in drum language, a system that involves rhythmic equivalents for spoken words and shares similar tone patterns. A number of masquerades test the performer's skill through a sequence known as "the pointing ordeal." He must respond to drum calls by indicating the town or shrine being named. Failure to do so brings disgrace; success proves him to be a cultured member of the society. (2002:16)

From these various definitions, the functions of the Ekine society seem to fall broadly into three major categories with sub-categories under them. The three main categories are the Religious function, the Artistic function and the Political function. Due to the nature of this study, the features of this society which will be studied, concern more of the religious and artistic functions, than the political function. The instances where such functions are found are during important events such as festivals or other grand occasions and in these cases, the religious and artistic functions are usually interwoven in such a way that it is difficult to separate them. Take the concept of the Masquerade for example, it is artistically created and put on display to serve the religious function for which it was created. Some of the artistic ingenuity involved in the creation of these masquerades influence the appreciation of the viewers concerning the religious influences behind them. Masquerades are very important to festivals among the Ijaw people because they embody the beliefs of the society, and also the nature of whatever festival is being celebrated

In many of these societies, the members who are too old to perform are more involved in the administrative and logistical processes of the society and their wisdom and experience is very much welcome in maintaining the ideology and beliefs of the people. It is common among the Ijaw communities where they have masquerade societies for parents to bring their children to initiate them into these societies to improve their talents and also to see them grow to become esteemed members of the community since these societies are seen as prestigious, full of knowledge and part of the governing body of the community. Even till today, there still are quite a number of secrets held by some of these societies which are exclusive to only their

members which cannot be known unless one is initiated. The YouTube channel, Abonnema TV, published an interview with Chief Igbanibo George, one of the oldest members of the Ekine/Sekiapu society, who is also referred to as "The Demonstrator", on the 12th of March 2013. The Chief narrates his involvement in this society from a younger age and with his father's own involvement as follows:

> I born 1930, this is my year is about 79 years I small, I come to enter Sekiapu, my father put me in Sekiapu 1943. During those time, my father is a very good demonstrator- Kalabari national demonstrator. He play all the masquerades, he hand over to me… I like the Sekiapu as my father like it. This is a occasion, in Kalabari custom with anybody wey enter this Sekiapu, you must be sincere, you must be sincere. (2.34)

The last statement made by Chief George reinforces the claims made about the status of the Ekine/Sekiapu among members of the community. For such a society to have such a level of influence on the maintenance of law and order in a community, it must have a system of accountability among its own members. The narrator adds more information to this interview saying that "Chief Igbanibo George declares that the Ekine\Sekiapu are the chief custodians of the Kalabari culture and custom. In fact, the Ekine/Sekiapu have performed even in London, the United Kingdom" (3.30). The plays are usually kicked off with members of the Ekine Society going to the beach to call in the water spirits to come and take part in the play.

Just as the Ekine society plays such an important role among the Kalabari people, its Nembe equivalent -Sekiapu and its Ibani (Bonny) equivalent, the Owu-Ogbo, also enjoy similar status among their own people. The Sekiapu and Owu-Ogbo also do have a slight advantage over the Ekine in terms of a more established and documented historical narrative of origin rather than a mythical story. As much as the word "Sekiapu" is used here for the Nembe people, it is in many cases a synonym for a dance group anywhere in the Eastern delta and this is because the word itself is derived from two words, "Seki" meaning "Dance" and "Apu" which is used to imply a group of people. Because every club or society is founded by a group of people on the premise of dance and performance, the word "Sekiapu" can be used among different communities to refer to different dance groups. Alagoa, in fact, mentions (as told by informants,) that even though each town had its independent Sekiapu, there were fraternities around the delta and it was customary for a member of the Sekiapu to join members of another if they were around during a performance. Failure to do this would result in a fine (1967:149). Even with different dialects among the Eastern delta, words like "Sekiapu" do not really lose their meaning in translation. The Nembe Sekiapu according to Alagoa was introduced in

Nembe by Meinayi Orugbani from Kalabari which was his mother's home. This was done during the reign of King Kien (1846-1863). He later sold the masquerades to a club called Ikuli which then became the official Sekiapu club. (145).

Concerning the Owu-Ogbo of Bonny, the name itself is derived from "Owu" meaning "Masquerade" and "Ogbo" meaning club. The word "Ogbo" can be used as a substitute for its full name. Alagoa and Fombo in their co-authored work, *A Chronicle of Grand Bonny*, record that this society was established by Queen Kambasa, the first and only woman to have been a ruler in Bonny (1972:8). Although Alagoa and Fombo neither document the period of her reign nor the date of the establishment of the society, the estimated time of its establishment is set at the year 1515. This information about its estimated year of establishment was elicited by Amasenibo Alfred Allison, a titled citizen and a leading member of the Bonny Owu-Ogbo society during a personal interview with him on the 25th of December 2018. The estimation of their time of origin according to Amasenibo Allison, has been arrived at through the use of historiography based on the oral traditions of the people in relation to the documentations of the Europeans who had dealings with the Ibani people at this time. According to Alagoa and Fombo (1972: vii), the Portuguese first came in contact with Bonny in the late 15th century during the reign of Alagbariye, the founder and first king of Bonny. Alagbariye led a group of Ijaw people from the central Ijaw region to the new land of Bonny in search for a more peaceful life due to a calamitous civil war taking place at that time (3-6). They also record that Alagbariye did not die as king but gave up his throne to Asimini, whose daughter Kambasa, succeeded him (7-8). Since Asimini was the first king to have a full reign, the time of his death would likely have been after the turn of the century, validating the estimated period of the establishment of the Owu-Ogbo by Queen Kambasa. The Owu-Ogbo which was introduced as a "national club of mask dancing artists" will remain one of her legacies apart from the boom in trade which Bonny experienced during her reign (Fombo & Alagoa 1972:8). The dispensation of the Owu-Ogbo of Bonny was just the same as that of the Nembe Sekiapu. People who violate traditional rules or have disputes are taken to the society which is full of custodians of the tradition. Like in a law court, these issues are deliberated upon and in the case of any deviation from tradition or an act that negatively affects the society, fines and other forms of punishment are imposed on the offenders.

Up till today just like the Ekine, the Sekiapu and Owu-Ogbo are still part of the traditional government and "police" in Eastern Ijaw societies. These societies apart from their influence

in the government, also maintain strict rules among themselves. Alagoa speaking of the Sekiapu for example, says that they had a number of rules to be strictly followed. Members who came late to meetings – with lateness determined after the third beating of the drum- were fined. They were also fined for disturbances during meetings and failure to participate in performances as well. Other offences which the Sekiapu took actions against were failure to deliver a parcel, theft, rape and spying on the women's toilet (1967:149). The people who committed these offences were punished by being tied to a stake for a long time and Alagoa states that it was due to the Sekiapu's firmness and neutrality that non-members of the club began to bring conflicts and grievances to be resolved. To echo what has already been said of the status of these clubs, Alagoa follows up with another statement in the same article:

> The traditions of the eastern delta kingdoms are unanimous in assigning great authority to Sekiapu in the judicial affairs of their communities. My informants were sure the Kings of these states and towns did not object because they were often members, even leaders of Sekiapu. In any case, the services Sekiapu rendered in efficiently suppressing crime were appreciated. And since the dispensation of justice was one of the most obvious aspects of government, the judicial functions of Sekiapu are told in the traditions by the statement that Sekiapu members had been the governors of the communities. (149)

In explaining the functions of this society, Jones, Jaja (2015:1) states that:

> the Owu-Ogbo and Eremina-Ogbo are a cultural heritage of the people. While the Owu-Ogbo is a dance group with men and women members responsible for playing masks called Owu, it is a semi-secret society that enacted masked plays associated within the environment. Eremina-Ogbo (Ere-Ogbo) is solely a female dance group with a few men who beat the drums. Eremina-Ogbo is the dance group associated with the Iriabo womanhood rites.

Although Jaja here refers to this society as a semi-secret society, there is a slightly different understanding of this view. In the aforementioned interview with Amasenibo Allison, he stated that "…the Ogbo is a club with secrets, not a secret society". The club is not a closed cult but is open to membership by virtually any individual and is not limited to certain qualifications. They have their secrets which are kept in terms of their sustainability and performances, but they are not closed. This is possibly why Jaja might refer to this society as "semisecret" because of certain information which is withheld by the society. Alagoa also echoes the same thought about the Sekiapu as in the past, it had been wrongly compared to the Ekpe people of Cross River State (who are not Ijaw) as a secret society (148). Like Sekiapu's counterparts, it can also be joined by all male members of the society right from childhood and women are not completely excluded from all activities. Just like Ekineba, women have also formed part of the

histories of these clubs in the first place. Alagoa does acknowledge however, that Sekiapu "presents an atmosphere of exclusiveness" because it taught "manly virtues, and the fully committed member is supposed to have acquired manliness to an extent above all others" (1967:149). This ideology would lead to some forms of exclusion towards men who were not part of the society.

The Owu-Ogbo society apart from its main members, has lower levels of hierarchy and just like the Ekine, many are initiated from childhood and the hierarchies are written as described by Amasenibo Allison. There is the lowest group called the *Kala-Kala Awomenikine* which is roughly translated to mean a very little children's group. The word "Kala" meaning "Small" is repeated for the emphasis of the small size of these children in general and according to Amasenibo Allison, many are not more than 5-foot-tall or beyond the age of 9 years. They use seashells and the most common sonorous or percussion instruments which can be found and strung together as rattlers for their dances.

The next group is the *Kala Awomenikine* and these ones are between the ranges of an adolescent to teenage years. Though they are still young, they are a bit closer to the main society than the younger ones and some of their possessions consist of old, worn out, discarded or donated items by the main Ogbo. Such items include drums, different percussion and wind instruments and costumes apart from the ones they make for themselves like the rattler called *Isa Isa*. Although these younger members play among themselves, they are once in a while visited by the older and more esteemed members of the society who observe their actions and donate items. These elders watch for talent and skill while at the same time mentoring them and giving advice. Such kinds of advice include adjustments and changes to form, rhythm and technique during the dance as well as other elements of a play such as carrying the masks and costumes made for their level.

Figure 3 A small group of young people making their own procession. They probably do not have the resources nor the status for elaborate designs, but they make do with crude instruments such as bottles, metal scraps and discarded rattlers.

Amasenibo Allison also states that even among the main Ogbo, there are ranks which are generally more affiliated with age grade than other forms of contribution. In a setting where the society is assembled, the younger ones sit behind the older people and the age range increases from the back to the front. Even in burials, the activities of a burial are dependent on the age of the deceased individual. If the dead person was part of the younger generation, then masquerades with knives come out to perform. The knives symbolise the sharpness of youth and the overall performance of the masquerade is done with energy and exuberance. This shows that they were young people going into their prime whose peak and future had been cut short by death. If the person was an older individual, the masquerades which will come out appear with richly embroidered costumes to perform. The embroidery and the level of detail put into these costumes symbolise achievement. The deceased person has lived his life, contributed to society and earned his accolades so these masquerades represent a person deemed as more fulfilled and past his prime unlike the younger people.

These societies of course apart from religious and judicial duties, also entail some exclusive social and secular benefits. These festivals are also times of entertainment for their members.

Masks and Masquerades

The importance of masks to masquerade performances in the Delta cannot be overemphasized. Masks and headgears more often than not give identity to the masquerade apart from the decorations on its costumes. Abonnema TV in a YouTube documentary about the Owu-Aru-Sun Festival, interviews a masquerade designer named Morgan Morganson. Morganson explains his affiliation with masks saying:

> This work I am doing is a gift from God, God gave me this gift so that I could make a living out of it. I have already designed this compound's masquerade. Ojomaye is its name. The Ojomaye masquerade is accompanied by four other masquerades including Ojomajepelaa. Ere-Igbo konsia. I could design more than ten masquerades that is if at all I have not done much. Some masquerades eat human beings while others eat animals. (5:58)

This last statement does not in any way imply any form of cannibalism among the Kalabari or any of the neighbouring Ijaw communities. This simply refers to the imagination and the characteristic given to the mask created, almost like the traits a writer will assign to a character being created in a story. The creation of new masquerades in any Ijaw community despite the ones already existing should not come as a surprise because in essence, masquerades are purely representative characters either of the people's reality or their fictitious imagination. Newly formed dance clubs create their masquerades to rival those of other clubs in terms of performance, beauty, popularity and any other aspect that brings acclaim. It is left to them to assign whatever trait they deem fit for their masquerade to have. There are other masquerades which are created due to significant occurrences in the timeline of the people such as interactions with foreigners and foreign technology. This is not only an Ijaw feature, but it is also practiced among other ethnic groups in Nigeria such as some of the Igbo and Yoruba masks which have long noses or white faces to represent the coming of Europeans.

Masks and headgears among the Ijaw are very powerful symbols especially when they concern important aspects of the people's religion and beliefs. Every important mask and headgear most likely has a history as to the origin of its existence or its use among the people and among the frequent stories as to their origin, there are frequent tales of a supernatural encounter between the humans and the spirits or forces who were either wearing masks at the time of the encounter, or look exactly like the faces depicted in the masks or headgears. According to Martha Anderson:

> Although introduced by spirits, fish masquerades, like other ijo performances, often draw inspiration from real-life situations: after braving the shark-infested waters off the coast in their canoes, generations of fishermen have undoubtedly returned home to tell spellbinding tales of their heroic exploits. By re-enacting expeditions of this sort, performers transform this work of fishing into theatre, but instead of glorifying it, they parody the dangers involved in capturing fearsome marine animals and mock tales about the big fish that almost got away. Instead of contrasting idealised humans with monstrous animals, as masquerades sometimes do … these performances typically expose human follies." (2009: 115-134)

These stories, in many cases, explain that these items were either found, stolen, given by forces or created according to the memory of the person involved in the said encounter. In some cases, the individual is said to have been given specific instructions by the spirit as to the kind of headgear or mask to be made. According to Alagoa (1967:150)

> All Delta masks are believed to have come from the water spirits (*oru* or *owu*) and, each mask, accordingly represents its particular spirit. But the headpieces, dances and characterization of the plays do not always carry any religious or supernatural significance.

There have also been stories in which the individual was threatened with evil if he/she did not carve these masks or perform these masquerades and teach others to do the same. Anderson (2009:175) makes a reference to this saying:

> As in this instance, spirits often threaten their human sponsors with death if they do not agree to perform masquerades, but they also offer rewards; people often claim these performances avert evil spirits and disease and bring children and prosperity to their communities. When asked if masks demand sacrifices, an Ijo friend emphatically responded that masks are sacrifices. In addition to providing entertainment on secular occasions, they appear at funerals to accompany the dead into the afterworld; at purification ceremonies to sweep towns clean of pollution; and at performances held to call off enshrined spirits after they have been invoked to punish criminals or settle disputes.

Some other masquerades have been merely adopted by other communities as these communities see the usefulness of the spirits they represent in their daily lives. One such example is the Nwaotam Masquerade of the Ibani people which came through the Ibani of Opobo but was said to have originated from the Ndoki (Igbo) people according to Jaja M. Jones (2009: 3). Jones also gives a brief history of the mask according to the Ndoki tradition:

> Ndoki tradition maintains that the mask was carried by an only child who dies (was sacrificed) after the play. As a result of the harsh ritual demand, the people

> rejected the mask by throwing it into the river where it was picked by someone who could control it. (5)

This action serves as a reminder of the autonomous nature of people of the southern region of Nigeria as they reserve the right to reject certain demands made by external forces. This action also shows that although divine entities are respected by Ijaw people, certain moral and ideological laws can be debated between humanity and divinity. Jones then explains the reason why Nwaotam was introduced to Opobo: "In Opobo, Nwaotam was introduced in about 1931 by a group of friends and modified to fulfil the function of Otam. It was the answer to the biting need for protection, blessing and creativity for all 'hunters'" (5)

This masquerade according to Jaja, also serves as a god of the forest and protection to hunters against natural and spiritual attacks (5). Bonny would eventually adopt Nwaotam as well which is played annually on the 25th of December.

As previously stated, the Masquerades are an embodiment of every aspect of the society and the performances of each masquerade explain the aspect of the society which it represents. They are not only part of the more elite cultural caucus of the society, but they are also the characterisations of the philosophical processes in the society. According to Philip Leis (2002:15-21):

> In the Niger Delta, masks and other products that might fall under the rubric of "art" were part of a social fabric whose complex interweave provided the various contexts in which these objects must be understood. Depending on the circumstance, the same object could be venerated, feared, played with, or ignored. (15).

His explanation of the masks enables one to understand that these sculptures could even be a symbol of the owner's character. A mask could also be part of an "elaborate scenario" which begins with the dancer wearing costumes and then accompanied by "special dance steps, songs, acting and drumming". The masks which symbolise the occasion for which they are made, are worn by their masquerades and the meaning of the mask is performed through the masquerade's movement. (20)

A lot of creativity and ingenuity often overlooked goes into the making and maintaining of the various aspects of a masquerade right from the head and face pieces to every other item on its body. The reason why this creative aspect of the Ijaw oral tradition is being explained is because, technological and innovative advancements are often linked to an advancement of the

philosophy of the people and though in some sense, philosophy (especially in a western context) can be taught separately from other subjects, it is clear that there is an underlying philosophical foundation in any quest for growth, development and intellectual advancement. From the finished work and the various abilities of many of these masquerades, the skill of the artist(s) is quite clear with some of them bearing certain crafty contraptions and others being able to blow fire and smoke. Many of these contraptions involve simple tricks and inventions while others involve more complex actions right from the crafting of the masquerade costumes to the tricks involved in the actual performance which may or may not be seen by the audience.

Figure 4 A member of a masquerade club leading the masquerade procession on the streets of Bonny. He is carrying a device that produces a sound like a siren but seems a bit more eerie. This sound announces the masquerade and calls the rest of the procession together.

Figure 5 The masquerade which is the main attraction of the club. Notice the way the raffia is sewn in layers. This creates an expansive and rippling effect when the masquerade dances, jumps or runs during any performance.

In regards to the effect of these crafts, Amasenibo Allison states that the major factor upon which a masquerade is able to make an awed impression upon members of a society or audience is the fear of the unknown because it is common for human beings to fear what they do not understand or cannot interpret. During the interview, Amasenibo Allison spoke of his observation of a masquerade performance with a friend a few days prior to the interview. He stated that at a certain point in the dance, an unnatural acrobatic move was made but he being a member of the Owu-Ogbo society and a masquerade creator himself, immediately understood what had taken place and was amused at the simplicity behind the move and the awe it created among members of the audience.

The very appearance of certain masquerades alone is enough to provoke wonder as to the crafting of the masquerade; how the carrier is even able to stand and move with such costumes. Once in a while, a masquerade can perform an acrobatic move such as making a jump from a high platform like a rooftop or moving with such a deceptive speed and agility as would never be imagined for the size and nature of the costume and mask being carried. Amasenibo Allison himself who has made a contribution of seven masquerades to the Owu-Ogbo society says that despite his status in the society, he sometimes wonders and is in awe of some of the performances he sees. He explained that these peculiarities and closely protected secrets help to shroud the masquerade and its society with mysteries in the eyes of the common people. Such views eventually add to the psyche of the Ijaw people which is already dominated by the belief of a divine influence over the events of the natural. The abilities of these masquerades to do 'unnatural' things confirms the beliefs of the audience about the divine and this supports Amasenibo Allison's assertion about the Ogbo and other Ijaw societies saying that they are not a secret society but a society with secrets.

Concerning the secrets of the society, there is a lot that cannot be ascertained by an outsider and which members are not permitted to tell. Amasenibo Allison, in the course of this interview, explained that there are a lot of ideas and concepts which will not be disclosed because he was in the presence of non-members of the society. Even though these secrets cannot be disclosed, the presence of these masquerades provide historical evidence that the ancestors of the Ijaw people possessed their own ingenuity not only in regards to craft and technology, but also in regards to human psychology as they were able to put these two together in order to keep audiences in wonder for centuries. These tricks are usually closely kept secrets among masquerade cults and societies for fear that the masquerade loses its ability to awe

people or that another masquerade society might discover it and add to their own craft. There are often rivalries between masquerade groups, with each group striving to become the best and most respected group especially during competitions.

Craft is therefore an important aspect of the success of a masquerade and these crafts involve many materials again depending on the region of its origin. Perhaps, the most common or consistent material found throughout all the Ijaw communities in the Niger Delta in the setup of a masquerade is raffia palm. Depending on the masquerade, the amount of raffia used may vary and it usually adds to the sweeping movements of the masquerade when it is on display. This is especially seen in masquerades that are prone to sudden movements with short dashes, quick turns and sudden stops. The wearer of the masquerade must of course possess a certain amount of speed and agility to be able to do such things with the costume. A dance which involves such kinds of movements is the *Pegele* dance which the more agile members of the club take part in. Alagoa in his article *Delta Masquerades,* describes it thus:

> The dancer jumps up vertically and at the same instant twists in such a manner that he spins in the air in a near horizontal position; so that, taking off on a left foot, he lands on the right a pace or two in advance of his starting point. Expert exponents of the *pegele* dance can be spectacularly acrobatic, moving across the arena in a flash, their bodies appearing to float across the air in a horizontal spin. (1967:153)

Most of the masks or headgears used are carved from wood due to the abundance of trees in this region and the relative ease with which they can be transformed into masks and headpieces in comparison to other materials. Alagoa in the same article says this concerning their crafting:

> These usually consist of a frame of bamboo frond covered with cloth or paper and decorated with coloured plumes. However made, delta masquerades are rarely made to be worn over the face. They always have to be attached to a basket-work covered with cloth. And when this basket helmet is worn over the head, the headpiece itself sits on top of the head – so that the fish or animal would be 'swimming' or 'standing' naturally on the player's crown. (150)

There are two events which the Ijaws view as an abomination to masquerading. The first is for a masquerade to be unmasked in public and the second is for a masquerade to fall down in public. It is already viewed as an unfortunate incident for a common Ijaw individual to fall down in the first place and a masquerade with all its status falling down is an even greater misfortune. This is why great pains are taken in the creation of a masquerade to conceal the identity of the wearer in every way possible. Even in some cases where the identity might have

been discovered through other means, the people still treat the masquerade as a deity for the status it represents. This feature is not only limited to the Ijaw people as some of their neighbours have similar traditions. Chinua Achebe's *Things fall Apart* for example highlights a similar instance where the main character Okonkwo's identity was noticed by a few of his family members during a judicial procedure which involved the nine dreaded Egwugwu (masquerades) whose rare appearances usually caused people to flee;

> Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *egwugwu* had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of *egwugwu*. But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves. The *egwugwu* with the springy walk was one of the dead fathers of the clan. He looked terrible with the smoked raffia body, a huge wooden face painted white except for the round hollow eyes and the charred teeth that were as big as a man's fingers. On his head were two powerful horns. (1990:63)

Open discoveries of the person behind the masquerade are not usually heard of due to the strict measures taken to conceal the wearer's identity but Achebe aptly captures the effect of unmasking a masquerade when later in the story, a character tears off the mask of one of them after being flogged with a cane. The other *egwugwu* immediately shielded him from the gaze of the public and took him away because to them:

> Enoch had killed an ancestral spirit…that night the Mother of the Spirits walked the length and breadth of the clan, weeping for her murdered son. It was a terrible night. Not even the oldest man in Umuofia had ever heard such a strange and fearful sound, and it was never to be heard again. (132)

Again it is said that the wearers of the masks are possessed with the representative spirits of such masquerades which to them explains how the carrier is able to make certain acrobatic movements and, sometimes, vigorously perform for a prolonged period of time while wearing the masquerade and displaying some of the abilities which create awe to the viewer but is known by the masquerade society. There have been cases in which a few secrets as to the masquerade's ability were leaked, although how they were leaked is not known. Onuora Nzekwu in his article *Masquerade*, (1960:134-144) explains one of such secrets which in this case, is the secret behind the voice of some masquerades:

> The secret of the masquerader's voice was the most jealously guarded of all secrets of the cult for, among most tribes, it is the voice that is really the masquerade. Yet it is a simple device: a hollow cylindrical reed some two or three inches long and about three tenths of an inch in diameter, over one end of

> which a spider's cocoon is drawn taut and secured in position with a thread. This device will disguise a man's voice, giving it a harsh, grating quality, something like the sound of a gramophone record played with a worn-out needle (138).

Another more recent secret was revealed in 2010 in the NLNG Host Magazine when it interviewed Opuowu Jumbo, a veteran performer and member of the Bonny Nwaotam Society (under the Owu-Ogbo) who according to the magazine, "performed with the *Abata Dancers* when the Queen of England visited Bonny in 1956" (2010:10). Jumbo who is also a member of the Ndoki-Igbo Okonko society was reluctant to give a detailed exposition about the society but had this to say about their ingenuity:

> Umuahia Ibeku owned Okonko and the intellectual input there is the ability to create impossible things; with the main ideology being sound production. In the Glass Play you hear the sound of glass, clicking of glasses, production of a deep bass backed up by a radiogram sound. Local equipments are used and there are no wire sound. In Akpata; which is a kigbo-play, fishermen use the sound of akpata to simulate the sounds made by kigbo-fish and the fish come in great numbers to display and are caught! (14)

There are different perceptions given to masquerades by various kinds of people from foreigners to children, members of the community and even members of the masquerade societies. To foreigners, (especially non-Ijaw or a non-masquerading culture) these may just be performers or erratic dancers. To children, they could be frightening and intimidating figures capable of dealing serious punishment for mischief. To the members of the community, they are either messengers or entertainers depending on the nature and history of the mask being carried and to the members of the masquerade society, they are instruments and vehicles through which the values of the society are maintained and tradition is enforced. Even members of other masquerade cults have their own perceptions of other masquerades as Nzekwu explains:

> Even an initiate keeps well out of the way of a masquerade belonging to a cult from another community, partly out of respect but more from the fear of falling a victim to the magical powers which are worked into his mask or costume and which he falls back on in terms of stress. (1960:135)

Nzekwu also states that even during performances, many of these dance clubs are quick to make "medicine" to protect themselves from the medicine of any rival club within and without the community (135). The word "medicine" as used in this context, is different from its general English usage which concerns medication and drug use particularly with health diagnosis. Medicine here, has a less physical significance and deals with the forces that are either believed

to be behind or carry certain forces of nature. Inasmuch as they can be used to help people according to the tradition, they can also be used to hinder the progress of others as in this case. Robin Horton in his article *New Year in the Delta* (1960:256-295) shows a picture taken during an Owuama festival. In the picture, the drummers and the maskers can be seen in the background. They have shut themselves in a makeshift four-corner screen made of palm fronds to prevent any contrary "medicine" from affecting them and by extension, affecting the performances (288). The drummers are integral and are in no way dispensable to any performance because, every dance performance among the Ijaw begins with the beat of the drum. Apart from the rhythm being beat, the drums at times communicate with the performers and if the rhythm or communication is affected, the performance will lose its direction. These are different dance and masquerade clubs which are under the main Sekiapu society.

Figure 6 A space allocated to one of Bonny's masquerade clubs with their deity in front.

Figure 7 A procession on its way to an event where the skill of its members will be tested against other groups in Bonny.

Due to the nature of the masquerade and its importance to the community in a more sacred or secular aspect, the content of masquerading differs. The more serious masquerades (who are by extension seen as spirits) to which the Ijaw people pay homage and which deal with the existence, lifestyle and prosperity of the community generally put on a more ordered performance than the less serious and more secular masquerades. These are the masks which also perform on more serious and significant occasions of the Ijaw people, such as festivals or significant issues in the community which may concern power or life and death.

It is a common act among the Ijaw, just before the commencement of masquerading or festivals of this sort, for the chief priest or the spiritual leader of the town to go to the beach or any significant waterfront to call the spirits of the representative masquerades to come and observe the play. The level of the involvement of such spirits in a festival depends on the beliefs of the masqueraders or the community. For instance, some masquerades are believed to perform well because the wearers of the masks are possessed by the spirits the masks or headgears represent. This possession then enables the carrier to perform as the spirit would like as it is basically the spirit performing in the capacity of the individual. In other instances, the people have already been taught the dance steps and performances to the letter by the representative spirits and these spirits are present to be entertained by their works being performed or to ensure that their teachings and performances are properly being followed. Failure to follow these steps properly

could lead to angry spirits invoking bad luck or punishment on them such as in the story of Ekineba.

As much as there might be a different story or legend in any community, the acknowledgment of a spiritual presence in such performances is always the same. The presence of these beings by implication evoke a more serious and structured display as opposed to other masquerades. Apart from the masks which represent the elemental spirits that are believed to be in charge of the cosmic order of events, there are the masks modelled after respected elements of nature whose characteristics have been closely observed. Most of the time, these elements are animals. Some of these animals are believed to be manifestations of territorial or important spirits. The Iguana among the Ibani people of Bonny was seen as a manifestation of Ikuba, the war deity. The biggest square in Bonny today is the Ikuba square and it is on this ground that a lot of masquerade performances take place. There are other animals which though not viewed as gods, are still respected for aspects of their nature and have masks modelled after them because of these characteristics. Such masks include sharks, dolphins and hippopotamuses. It is believed that the spirits behind these characteristics, can be invoked through such mediums. A common characteristic among these animals is a level of fierceness and power and even the dolphin which is viewed as a social, intelligent and friendly animal is still acknowledged as a fierce hunter. It is not surprising that such animals are valued as the Ijaws value courage and strength above many other qualities and these masquerades and spirits are viewed both as protectors and helpers of the Bonny people.

Figure 8 The "Otobo" (Hippopotamus) masquerade at the burial of late Chief Abbey-Hart. There are other "Otobo" masquerades present apart from this picture and they always perform in groups of seven.

Sequel to the picture above, Irise Media Group also provides a brief performance of the Otobo masquerade group during the burial occasion on Facebook.

While these powerful masquerades are regarded among the people, they are also acknowledged as potentially dangerous due to the fierce nature of the spirits behind them. Many of their plays are watched from a safe distance, for fear of injury or more serious harm. This is coupled with the fact that some of these masquerades carry weapons as part of their costumes such as sticks and machetes. In a series of short video clips titled "Fun" which was published on Facebook by Kis Danl, the second video shows a masquerade dancing with an elderly man whose face is not clearly seen but seems to know the masquerade's dance moves. From experience, this man would most likely be not only an esteemed member of a dance society but probably a retired dancer and perhaps a carrier of either the same masquerade or the ones before it. This is more likely to be so as after the brief dance, the masquerade and the man share a few cordial gestures before the masquerade goes on to chase a few bystanders with its broom (2019).

Another example of such a masquerade is the *Ngbele* masquerade of Opobo Kingdom in the video, "Opobo Owu 1" by idatonyec on YouTube (2013). As seen in the video, even the masquerade's followers often restrain it with noticeable difficulty at different times even while holding ropes attached to the masquerade (7.07, 8.10).

Sometimes, youths and young adults see proximity to these kinds of masquerades as opportunities to test their braveness and strength. Some of them tease and taunt the masquerade until they get its attention and then they handle themselves in whatever aggressive form with which the masquerades answer them. These bold youths could either respond with more taunting (however not doing so in one place to keep their safety) or dodging attacks made by the masquerade. Up until the point where fireworks were generally banned in Nigeria, it was common for children and youths to even throw fireworks at some of these masquerades and have the masquerades chase them through the streets wielding long sticks or whatever weapons they were carrying. One of such instances is seen in another video by Kis Danl as posted on Facebook (2019). Here, a masquerade of the Okueme club can be seen performing as it moves down the street and just after the 0.50 mark of the video, there is a loud explosion and an angry woman can be heard in the background, complaining about the person who threw the explosive.

As earlier mentioned, some of these masquerades are deceptively fast and the people who engaged in such actions would have to make sure they had some level of athleticism in order

to escape the angry masquerades. Sometimes it is not just the masquerades that give the pursuit but their followers or the people restraining them. These events did not always go down well with all its participants as some unfortunate people quite often fell on the other end of the masquerade's cane or had their attires not made for such rigour damaged in the process of escaping harm from the vicious masquerades. It is common even now to see a youth return home with damaged footwear from running for his/her life.

Due to the inseparability of dance and performance from the Ijaw culture, there is almost no thought or process about the Ijaw people that cannot be conveyed through some form of dance or performance and this is why some of these masquerades are able to educate people especially the younger members of the community. Just like the more sacred forms of masquerading, the headpiece or mask which the masquerade carries determines the subject of its performance. In this way, different topics of education depending on its effect and usefulness to the community will determine the masquerades created to suit those topics. One such case of this occurrence is the case of the tempest masquerades described in Hlavacova's online article, "Tempest Masquerades", which represent the wind, the sea and the vessels that brought the European explorers and traders with whom the Ijaws communicated, traded and in some cases, resisted or fought with. These masquerades in whatever form they were created were more common in the Eastern Delta due to the geographical location of its communities.

These communities have wider rivers and are much closer to the Atlantic than the more inland Ijaw of the central and western delta which meant more contact with Europeans which resulted in a greater European influence on them as well. For example, European (especially British) names are borne among the Ijaws of the Eastern Delta and many have adopted them as surnames and names of family houses. Due to the width and depth of the rivers of the Eastern Delta and its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean, a few steamer ships were seen by the Ijaws of this region as opposed to their Western and Central counterparts which dwelt more inland with narrower and shallower waterways. This subsequently resulted in Easterners creating masquerades to portray these ships. Some of such masquerades used an actual replica of a steamer ship as their headpieces while performing to people and during these movements, the carrier begins to make movements that cause the headpiece - which is the steamer ship- to sway in such a way as if it were on high sea.

These performances were made to a people who though experienced in building boats and canoes, had no record of ship building. The sight of one of these headpieces was already a new

form of education as to the presence of other marine vessels other than the ones which the Ijaws had only known. The highest and biggest form of transportation among them before contact with the Europeans was the war canoe which is also referred to as a Gig. These were used to trade and fight with other communities around and more in inland waters but were never said to have crossed the ocean at any point. Even though the river or sea has a significant effect on every floating vessel, the magnitude of effect the sea would have on a boat is remarkably different from the magnitude it would have on a vessel several times larger.

The swaying movements made by ships on the high sea can be seen from afar due to its height and size but the same cannot be said of a canoe no matter its proportions. This particular masquerade does not enjoy such popularity anymore in Bonny. The reason why it might not be popular anymore is probably due to the frequent arrival and departure of modern ships in Bonny today due to the island's role in the export of crude oil. There does not seem to be any new thing to learn about the steamer ships which have long been out of business. Despite the presence of modern ships, there is no recognised masquerade in Bonny bearing any of these ships as a headpiece but there are still masquerades which use canoes as headpieces. This shows the traditional connection the Ijaws have to the canoe even when they use the most modern boats for transportation between Bonny and other coastal areas. In Hlavacova's interview with Patrick Jumbo, a Bonny elder, when asked about *Aki*, the wind spirit, Patrick replies:

> The Ibani and the Kalabari both worship him. However, we in the Bight of Bonny are a settlement by the open ocean, which is why we are more dependent on wind than they are. That is why the Aki masquerade is so important to us. Be that as it may, the Kalabari people have their *Bekinnaru Sibi* masquerade depicting white people's steamer because one time a few steamboats found their way to them. We do not commemorate such ships because they have never actually left us – they're always here. (84)

There are other masquerades that are just made for fun and by any member of the community. They can be carried by adults or children and usually either just played among contemporaries to have a good time or give different forms of entertainment to people in exchange for a small fee or donation. Many of these masquerades tend not to have names and even if they do, they are not recognized in any capacity in the community as they offer no help and are of no significance whatsoever. Their designs are less complicated, less attractive and they hardly ever carry masks, headpieces or anything that links to some significant reference point. Due to the insignificance of such masquerades, there is little to no repercussion faced in the case of a

disagreement or an altercation between such a masquerade and an individual, whereas other masquerades such as the more sacred ones are untouchable due to the forces they represent.

The ability to play a masquerade is regarded as a talent which like other talents, needs to be stirred and developed. Even from a young age, children are given costumes to perform with and they are closely watched for talent in performances. The ones who show talent then have their abilities nurtured by either masquerade societies or people close to them such as family members. The art of masquerading in itself is not all there is to a performance as there are other factors which complete the performance. These factors range from drummers to singers, players of different instruments as well as followers who sometimes restrain the masquerade when it becomes possessed by the spirit it is said to represent. Regardless of whatever perception an individual has conceived about a masquerade, one cannot upon a closer look, deny the level of artistic creativity and innovative ingenuity that is vested in the creation of these masks and costumes. Many of these masquerades apart from appearance, have certain peculiarities about them which stem from the innovations put in them.

Drum Language

As much as the masquerades and their societies have been established to be the "custodians of the historical or fixed text" (Alagoa 147-149) , it will be untrue to say that proper festivals and performances are successful due to solely the talent of the masquerades and the planning of the societies/houses/individuals behind these events. A most integral aspect often overlooked (mostly due to the visual attention taken by the masquerades) is the rhythm and the language of the drummers. There are quite a few different kinds of drums used by the Ijaw for different purposes and as part of an orchestra of drums and other instruments but the drum in particular which is used for communication is called the Slit Drum which the Ibani call *Ikitiko.* This is made from a log of wood that has been hollowed out and has holes made on its sides. It is the beating on or across these holes that creates intonation of sounds. Though briefly mentioned already in festivals and performances already described, the drummers are many times the unsung heroes of these events for several reasons. The first is an aspect which is obvious to every observer and that is to beat a rhythm to which the masquerade or dancers can perform or dance and the people sing to. Inasmuch as drumming at events is popular around the world, it is worthy of note that these drummers are consistently at their craft usually for the duration of

a festival which can span from a day to weeks. Such a consistent level of drumming is not easy to maintain. It is quite different for drummers of different dancing societies who have their own masquerades and drummers and often compete against each other or make their own performances and leave. In the cases of festivals which have a central theme such as the Duminea and Nwaotam performances, the drummers are hardly changed and every festival starts with the drum. The drummers arrive at the scene first and a good deal of time before other elements of the performance take place, they drum till the performance is over and more celebrations have begun, beating different rhythms depending on the stage of the festival or the kind of performance involved.

Another aspect of drumming which is not obvious to every onlooker especially foreigners is the drum language. African languages are largely tonal, and these tones can be incorporated into the tone of the drumbeats. The drummers of course, have to be master communicators in the language in order to qualify for drumming at this level and also have to master the art of drumming in order to incorporate the two aspects into one. The drum language then goes beyond the usual rhythm which accompanies singing and dancing to giving instructions to the performer and sometimes speaking to the audience as well. Buowari (2014: 45) lists a few other functions of the talking drum. Firstly, every War Canoe House (which by implication, is a major house in the community) has a drum name and names are also given to non-Ijaw surrounding communities which quite possibly is done in case of political matters arising (46). It was used to send messages to warriors which their opponents would not understand. It is used to announce important happenings like the death of a chief. It is also used to search for missing people or those who have been lost or drowned at sea and the fishermen of Bonny Kingdom were usually notified with the tune:

Mbre fite mbre fite

Finibo finibo

My brother is dead, my brother is dead

Everyone, everyone (46)

Buowari also discusses the ala-owu display which involves what Finnegan calls “the pointing ordeal” as one aspect of the drum language in use. There are consequences for not being able

to understand, interpret or follow the instructions of the drum at such a high level. Among the Ibani for example, the masquerade might either point to a person in the crowd or actually go among the audience to pick out a specific person it has been instructed to pick. An example of such is seen here as done by the already mentioned *Ngbele* masquerade of Opobo kingdom on YouTube (6:10). The use of the War Canoe House name is part of the way an individual can be identified in an audience by the drummers. Buowari describes such instances:

> During gatherings where a drum name is played, a man from that Chieftancy House or tribe if it is not Bonny comes out dancing gently, slowly swinging his arms alternatively moves slowly towards the ikitiko drummer. On reaching there, he places his foot on the ikitiko acknowledging that he has heard his drum name. Some people perform some acrobatic display by turning round, somersaulting, placing a foot on the ikitiko and drop their gifts on the ikitiko. (46)

Due to the kind of mask and costume worn by the masquerade, his vision and free movement can be quite limited and he has to rely on the instructions from the drum telling him where to go and in what way to move. This is important because due to limited vision, the masquerade might not see an object or person who might occupy his blind spot just like a person will have limited vision in a semi-lit room. In taking backward or sideways steps for example, the person who plays the masquerade might not see a large stone on the ground or an object which might hit or trip him up. At that point, the drummer begins to warn him with the drum saying *Erere oo* meaning "Be careful oo" to which the masquerade either slows his steps or checks himself and his surroundings because as previously mentioned, it is an abomination for a masquerade to fall down in public. This not only speaks ill of the status of whatever masquerade is being played and the club it belongs to, but it is also disrespectful to the spirit it represents. It does not just show the incompetence of the wearer in dancing and listening but also the incompetence of the members of the club in communicating properly.

Though the drum language can communicate the language of the people, it still has to be learnt as it is not exactly the same as the normal language spoken by the people but more of a derived version from the main language. First of all, a lot of nouns in the usual Ijaw dialects have different drum names. This is how many of the Houses of the Eastern Ijaw city states are addressed as most of the houses bear European surnames such as Green, Halliday, Wilcox, Horsfall and George. Alternatively, they have names which are very long and almost impossible to translate into English and this is how the masquerade or individual is able to know that s/he is being addressed by the drum. While the tonal form of the language is the

foundation of drum communication, the pattern and rhythms of these tones are different and these communications often depend on a pragmatic or cultural understanding of the culture and use of language in order to communicate.

Drum communication cannot thrive only on the tonal aspect of the language as within the same context there are different sentences that can be constructed with the same tonal pattern. The statements "Ofunguru ma fii mam" and "Ofunguru ma ku mam" for example, have the same tonal patterns when spoken but they each mean "The rat is dead" and "The rat has been caught" respectively. This is where the rhythmical pattern of drumming is able to differentiate these two statements and though they are spoken with the same tonal patterns, the rhythm of the tone beat into the drum is more often than not the deciding factor in understanding the difference between the rat being dead or caught. As earlier mentioned, context is also another very important factor in determining the understanding of drum communication. A masquerade carrier involved in the "pointing ordeal" will of course be aware that the language being spoken by the drum within that particular context would largely be instructional and would have prepared his mind to receive instructions from the drum in order to perform well or risk the embarrassment of his person and his club.

As documented by Toyin Falola (2004:310), word is told of a political situation among the Kalabari people where drum communication was used to save an individual's life. Falola records that a certain Chief Igbanibo Braide was in serious contention with the Kalabari people and caused a conspiracy by the people to have him killed. The major influences behind this plan were the community chiefs and they swore themselves to an oath of secrecy lest Chief Igbanibo get wind of it and escape. The problem with this plan was that among these chiefs was an in-law of Igbanibo who upheld the cardinal saying/proverb "*Ogo pulo kiri laghaa*" meaning "the blood of an in-law must never be spilled". The in-law was now in a serious predicament because he was torn between killing his own in-law which being a community taboo, might also risk the wrath of the divine forces of that community and saving his in-law risking the death penalty sworn by all the chiefs who had taken this oath. The story goes that he got himself out of this difficulty by remaining awake till late in the night when the community was asleep and then he took his *obo* (harp), called the drum name of Chief Igbanibo Braide and communicated a coded message: *akwa kiri poko fiete* meaning "the drum now gives an unusual tone" and "Braide who was steeped in Kalabari language, imagery, myths, and history, correctly interpreted the "unusual sound of the drum" to mean he was to be executed

that night. He quickly fled the town to save his life" (310). Other aspects of culture could help in understanding of drum language such as language (and by implication, cultural) fluency which translates to the culture's use of imagery, proverbs, metaphors and its understanding of the environment in natural and societal terms.

From the descriptions of the various functions of members of these societies such as the organisers, craftsmen, dancers and drummers, one can now understand the various levels of detail, mental aptitude and planning put into masquerading among the Ijaw and more often than not, an in-depth understanding cannot be arrived at from just a basic observation of the performance especially by one who is not a member of such communities where these plays take place. An example of such an observation is one made by Elizabeth Sasser in her book titled *The World of spirits and Ancestors in the Art of Western Sub-Saharan* Africa. She speaks of West African masquerading saying:

> Even without recognising the reasons, the strong life-force in African sculpture is felt by most observers. And yet, in the museum, visitors need to remember that the carvings they confront in display cases are quiescent and removed from their original purposes. Masked and costumed dancers are at the center of dynamic action united with the surge of drums, with songs, color, and frenzied activity that reinvigorate traditional rituals handed down for generations (1995: xx)

While Sasser in the build-up to this statement, rightfully acknowledges the functionality and purposes of West African Art and the impression it has upon its people, these observations lack an understanding of significance and interpretation which can only be understood from a competence and fluency of the culture in which the Masquerade thrives. In cases of documentation and transcription such as this one, it is safe to entertain the thought that the interpretation of non-verbal forms of culture can be just as tasking as the verbal forms of culture and within this context, her non-fluency has left this interpretation bereft of certain intricacies behind and during such displays. For instance, how is it possible for "most observers" to feel a strong connection/life-force to a certain phenomenon without an aspect of relatability? One would need to specify the kind of observers being spoken about here as it would be more understandable if these observers are individuals foreign to the culture just like she is. As such, an observation is made devoid of any previous experience or implication as to why the performance is being carried out.

The local observers are drawn to such performances through many aspects of relatability. For the Odum performance, the Okrika people have experienced the predatory nature of the Boa. For the Ofirima and Otobo masquerades, the Ibani people have experienced the violence of the Shark and the Hippopotamus respectively. Masquerades like the Opongi which is played by the descendants of Igebe are played with a strong feeling of connection to their ancestors and the contributions they have made to the society. This proves that even when she acknowledges that these masks in their "quiescent forms" are "removed from their original purposes", her understanding of the word "purpose" in this context is limited to the performing actions and not their cultural relevance or significance. This misinterpretation again is glaring in her statement about the dynamic activity linked to the surge of drums with songs and frenzied activity which reinvigorate the traditions of ancestors. All that can be heard from Sasser is a surge of drums, but she is unable to understand the drum language. The activities may involve moments of frenzy but the word "frenzy" cannot be used to define the activities. The shark is a predatory animal and for such a nature to be portrayed, it comes out of the water which is the shark's natural habitat and chases people with youths taunting it which leads to moments of frenzy. The dances themselves which are demonstrations of protection, history, education or the people's spirituality cannot be brought under the broad umbrella of a frenzy and these things cannot be understood without actively discovering what the traditions of the ancestors actually are instead of passively mentioning them in the statement. This is an almost classic case of what a number of scholars have explained as a misinterpretation of the idiom. This problem in translation, eventually, gives a largely watered down meaning of the events and tends to reduce or cheapen the effort and the skill needed to perform such plays. It is a common saying that an individual must be witty and careful before he can masquerade. Wit will enable the performer to understand the nature of the atmosphere and not only flow in his performance but also to quickly interpret any instruction or sudden change made either by the drum or in the atmosphere. Care is always taken to prevent failure and embarrassment to his people.

This chapter has discussed the relevance of masks and masquerade societies to the communication of Ijaw culture. It is the intricacies of the artistic crafts and the people behind them that enable Ijaw festivals and systems to continue to run effectively. As much as there are more advanced ways of preserving information today, there is an emphasis on individuals in their own right to become living institutions and reference points. We have already seen some of the consequences borne by individuals who are not well versed in the culture and history of their people chiefly of which is shame. The societies are as important as the masquerades and

performances as they enable discipline in maintaining the culture as well as the discipline of their members and others in the community. This is probably why many of them take a lot of pride in their identity and continue to emphasize their importance in these matters. The significance of the discussions in this chapter cannot be overstated as they are also relevant to the next medium of cultural preservation and ideological reasoning which is storytelling.

Chapter Four

The Storyteller Among the Ijaw; A Study of Different Means of Storytelling

In many ways, among the Ijaw people, the methods of storytelling are not dissimilar to the methods used in other cultures across Africa. The main determinant of a good story is the assurance that not only the idea has been passed on but whatever moral attached to it has been fully understood. There are two Ijaw terms for the word "story" and the way these terms are used are heavily dependent on the form or context in which the story is found. In some cases, one can be substituted for the other. The first which has already been mentioned is the term "Egberi" which is an abstract story in itself or any given scenario from imagination and is more popular in the Eastern delta. The presence of the term itself in any given conversation usually sets the scene or pace for the listener(s) to expect a story or a performance. For instance - and this is more common among the central and western Ijaw - when a story is about to begin, the storyteller gives a call *Egberi Yo* meaning "O Story" and the audience responds *Ee* loosely meaning "yes" but is usually the signal that they are ready to listen. There are other kinds of responses, but this is the most common.

As much as the word "Egberi" brings with it the expectation of a story, it also sets the scene for a performance during bigger events such as masquerade displays. In this case, there is no call and response like in the case of an individual storyteller. Instead, the word becomes a time frame in a program of events where one or multiple stories are told through one or a series of performances. The next word called *Olo,* seems to have a more common usage among the central and western Ijaw. This particular word primarily means "Play" but the word "Play" here to the Ijaw, is not exactly the type that involves fun and games. It might be an avenue for fun, games and entertainment through performance but the play at the same time could also end up being meaningful and creating scenarios which cause the viewers to think critically on different perspectives of such scenarios. One of the major characteristics of *Olo* is that it can be done anywhere: usually in open spaces like backyards, compounds, clearings, or any space available. It can also be done at any time and by any age group. It is usually the primary means through which children and young people have fun. This latter feature of the word due to its Ijaw definition, would in a humorous way affect the understanding of quite a few Ijaw people when the word "Play" was used in modern dramatic terms. As there is a slightly different meaning in translation, many older Ijaw people with a limited knowledge of English could not understand why a student in the dramatic arts would spend time and resources going to a

university to study "play" when they could easily do it outside and be done with it. They would then ask if there were not more important subjects, careers or businesses to study instead.

The reason the word *Olo* is also used as a term for the word "Story" is because there can be no performance of an *Olo* without the presence of an *Egberi* to give it the scenario to perform and so in essence, the *Olo* could be the performance of the *Egberi*. The best way to understand this concept comes with the viewing of Ijaw performances either by dance groups or masquerades. As is common with such performances, amidst all the dancing and singing, there comes a point in the action where the *Egberi* is introduced because at that point in the performance, a story is being told. The actions taken by the performers in telling the *Egberi* is what is termed as "Olo". Masquerades and dance groups either during their moments of performance or at the end of a festival are usually obliged to perform an *Egberi*. In the aforementioned interview with Mr. Kingsley Ineritei at the Niger Delta University on the 19th of September 2017, he stated that his first understanding of drama was as a child in a place called Okumbri in Bayelsa State. He had been on a journey and on getting to a place called Amatolo, there was this dance in progress as is typical of Ijaw people to do during festive periods. Out of interest, they had stopped to observe it and at a point in time, there was a pause in the dance performance and then there was a dramatic sketch.

The sketch involved a man and a woman going to the river to fish and it so happened that they threw their nets meant for small or medium sized fish but ended up catching a shark. The dilemma now was not only how to hold on to the shark but also how to bring it back home with them. The idea behind all of this is that in the current Ijaw environment, these are the problems that the Ijaw people are regularly faced with. Although this was a story told by a performance troupe, they were still able to highlight the issues which cause some serious deliberations in the lifestyles of the Ijaw people. Such a story could easily have been extended towards the nature and value of a shark as compared to other fish in the market. The state of wealth of the couple, their mode of business, the family they had to feed, the nets they might have to mend or even a fostered innovation in making new kinds of nets after making such an unusual catch to prepare for future occurrences. These plays concern domestic issues ranging from marital problems to occupational hazards. These sketches are common in different performances and many times, these sketches become the sources of inspiration for storytelling. Within this context, Alagoa in his article *Delta Masquerades* defines Egberi as:

> …essentially a play within a play and is sketchy in outline and comes close to being mime, since words are cut down to a minimum. The few utterances in song or speech are rendered in a squeaky falsetto, in imitation of the water spirits. The egberi in a masquerade play is merely an 'Embellishment' but the spectators look forward to it as a funny relief. (1967:155)

This definition comes under one of his listed categories of dance performances called *Egberi mie* which tries to show the happenings in the lives of water spirits who, as earlier stated, are the originators of most of these masks. They could be humorous "… but could also carry the barb of social criticism and comment, or message" (155). At this juncture, it is important to address what many scholars have called "Ritual Drama" in relation to storytelling at least from an Ijaw perspective because just like the two words "Olo" and "Egberi", these two words sometimes overlap and the presence of one can lead to the performance of the other. Ritual drama usually carries a much stronger sense of identity, history, and tradition as opposed to the general conception of a story which is usually more light-hearted. Furthermore, there is more verifiable, documented or excavated evidence as to the source of ritual drama.

An example of this is Jenewari's reference to "terra cotta pieces in a recent archaeological excavation at Ke, which bear resemblance to the Opongi Mask" (1980:4). According to him, "Three samples of charcoal from three separate test pits sunk in different parts of Ke gave dates of 985 A.D., 1600 A.D., and 1185 A.D" (4). Anthony Graham-White in his book, *Drama of Black Africa* concerning this, says that it "leaves a good many traces: masks retain religious taboos, the society presenting the performances may have primarily religious functions, the occasion for the performance may be a religious festival" (1974:28).

A good example of a ritual drama is the already discussed *Duminea* festival because it involves real ancestors and heroes who have been deified and monuments built to preserve their names and legacy. As the documentary shows, indigenes of Soku believe that the influences of people like Fenibaso still remain with them and they have continued to take measures to renew their ties with ancestors of whom they heard stories about. It is through these measures taken to preserve this relationship that the story becomes a ritual. It can be recalled that during the ritual, some of these stories are acted out but the overall purpose at this point is not really entertainment or education (though they are present) but it is part of a procedure which the Soku people see as vital to their existence, continuity and longevity. A story within a ritual usually serves to remind the people of either the origin or purpose of the ritual.

This concept of separating the word “Storytelling” into “Egberi” and “Olo” is a feature of the Central and Western Ijaw as the word Egberi is used for every aspect of storytelling among the Eastern Ijaw. Not every Ijaw story must involve a performance as there are times where the individual, family, group or community is content to just sit and listen to a story told by the storyteller who might be a friend, relation, colleague or bard and this is just plainly an Egberi. There are several means through which a story can be told. The common, most readily available means is the presence of an actual storyteller. A professional Ijaw storyteller or even a good communicator is not just a verbal storyteller but also an impersonator and a teacher as there are certain parts of the stories which are taught to the audience and these parts usually consist of songs or sayings to be remembered. In cases where there are several characters involved in a particular scene, the storyteller-impersonator usually employs a few additional impersonators where they are available, to help with the telling of the story.

Even with the presence of a storyteller, there are variances in the skill and status of the people who tell the story and such variances are what separate a common member of the family from a storyteller recognised by the whole community. The latter shall first be examined and in order to do this, the case of an actual bard, Okabou Ojobolo shall be examined.

The Case of Okabou Ojobolo: A Study of Ijaw Narrative Techniques

Okabou is the narrator of the famed *The Ozidi Saga* which took place over a period of seven nights in the University of Ibadan in 1963. This performance was recorded and later published by J.P Clark in 1977. The reason why Okabou is very significant to this study is because his is the only success story amidst two other failed attempts by Clark to elicit the same story from reputed storytellers which is recorded in his introductory essay to the story (2006:xv-xxxvi). These three attempts, highlight a few major determinants of the longevity of a good story which include the memory of the storyteller, the skill in communication and the ability to perform them because this story and many others like it are largely monotheatrical displays. They might sometimes, involve a choir or a few other actors for the sake of imagery while the story is being performed. These displays have crucial roles in the telling of a story as a story cannot be transmitted without the plot being remembered in detail and the story being skilfully communicated to the audience.

This was the case of Erivini who was Clark’s first attempt at compiling the narrative which was made into a film titled *Tides of the Delta*. Although Erivini had a good memory and was a

good performer, he did not have a good communicative skill and his words according to Clark, "amounted to no more than a programme sheet" because "although a fine performer, he had not the gift of words" (xv). This situation portrays not only the potential problems which may pose a hindrance to the communication of a good story but also the delicate foundation upon which most of the Ijaw Oral Tradition rests. Afoluwa coincidentally was the first person Clark heard the saga from but after almost twenty years, Afoluwa "… had forgotten the script in its proper sequence of cause and effect" (xv). A good recollection of the plot of a story can also depend on the skill of the narrator who the story was learnt from. It is possible that Afoluwa did not also learn from a very skilful storyteller which caused lapses when it was his time to perform. Okabou himself said at the end of the third night, that he learned the story from a man called Atazi for whom he had worked as an apprentice to a professional storyteller which would make him part of a line of narrators concerning this particular story (2006:155). Okabou already being in his seventies at this time, was a testament to the fact that he had learnt this story many years ago and the recollection of a story of this length is a testament to the communicative prowess of Okabou's teacher. Clark lauds him for being able to follow Aristotle's canon by telling such a "thundering good story to stir the heart anywhere" (xv) and for his story being outstanding not just in relation to the other two previous attempts. He explains the reason for this:

> As a story, Okabou's version has a beginning, a middle, an end in a total structure where no segment is superfluous. Each incident therein connects with the rest in its proper place and time so that were it to be left out, a fault would develop in the overall arrangement that is the plot, upsetting thereby the action represented. It is because Okabou, a dark horse in the race, preserves the Ozidi epic as a unified work of art that his account remains right in front of the others favoured to win the handicap. (xv)

Clark of course, does not deny that there are speech errors and various narrative flaws throughout this rendition but then again, he draws our thoughts back to the cumbersome tasks usually involved in the transcription of speech made in board meetings or by top political figures around the world which are usually done in an hour or less. A public performance such as this, which is done over the span of seven days will therefore take a physical and mental toll on the performer as opposed to a written script because "…oral delivery is evanescent as the air that shapes the word, and he is an artist indeed who builds in the air the solid structure that the audience enters as a story, that mirror-dome of pleasure, horror and pity offered by all great art" (xvi). The discovery of Okabou thankfully, enabled this Ijaw masterpiece and none too soon as Clark was never able to get in contact with Okabou again after this time. The coming

of the Nigerian Civil war caused a number of documents and contacts to be lost and irretrievable.

Alhough folklore is a subject of grave importance, and though an individual might be recognised as a skilled storyteller, this recognition does not necessarily translate into a publicly acclaimed office or status among the people. Many of them live relatively obscure lives or end up being an average member of the society. Some are travellers and others remain in their community. Being a storyteller or singer did not always bring financial profit and like the case of Afoluwa who had since become a seaman after his last interaction with Clark, it is likely that a number of other storytellers had an additional profession to storytelling. This comes off the back of a few determinants but mainly due to the nature of the economy of the people and the presence of other professional storytellers. The main Ijaw city states and kingdoms built their economies through fishing and trading. Therefore, an individual unwilling to work along these lines would have a very slim chance of prosperity as status was determined by wealth, the number of members of a household and their military might.

As is the case of Okabou, there is very little known about his past before this story was told and there is yet no evidence of any fame or public recognition given to him so it is quite safe to assume the possibility that he too might also have experienced an obscure life in whatever environment or society he might have found himself. The same is the case with Afoluwa of whom Clark speaks of that he has not heard a word from him since he was recorded (xi). The disappearance of Okabou was, and is still a grave loss to a further development of the Ozidi Saga because an insight into his person and livelihood would not only have provided enlightenment as to his identity as a storyteller but would also have given more insight into the form of training he had received from Atazi which could have been used to develop a framework in the art of traditional storytelling.

Further searches since the Civil War were made for Okabou but to no avail. Isidore Okpewho in his book *Blood on the Tides* reports that upon requesting for even a picture of him, Clark replied that though he might have pictures of the other two storytellers:

> …but as for the star himself, I am still searching. Forty years after, he stands clear before me, a sprite, in his T-shirt and brief loin-cloth, tied as for wrestling, with a skull cap to match. That was his simple outfit as he performed night after night for a small intimate Ijo audience, summoned by an imperious son, aided by a couple of foreign friends and allies! Rest assured I shall continue my search for Okabou the man. (2014:51).

If at all Clark's response provides any further insight into the person of Okabou, it states the simplicity of the man which confirms initial assumptions of the probably obscure life he might have lived. Since the person of Okabou cannot be analysed beyond the information given by Clark's introductory essay, the remains of his identity as a storyteller will be obtained through through a close reading of his narration.

The Ozidi Saga is recorded with not just Okabou's narration, but also his conversation with the audience throughout this period. A study of a narrative which spans seven nights is enough to discover a few characteristics of his style of narration. In studying the narrative style of Okabou, Okpewho (2014:56) makes a few observations from the way he tells the story. The first is the understanding of his identity as a storyteller and his place in a line of storytellers equipped with gifts such as this saga and the ability to tell it. Okpewho also notices that Okabou, in the course of his narration, gradually inserts his importance to the story (58). As has already been said, Okabou said he had learnt this story and his trade under one Atazi of whom nothing is known but even though Atazi is not present and is probably not alive as at the point of this recording, Okabou acknowledges him at the end of night three after Badoba has been defeated and at the end of night four after Ofe the Short has been defeated. At the end of night three, Madam Yabuku (who is one of the major planners of this event and who also is the one recording the story) ends the story with a speech and an acknowledgment of Okabou, saying:

> Now, this saga that we are telling, may it please Oyin to give us a heart full of love so that we can narrate it in this manner to a ripe old age. He who brought this thing for us to play should himself live to a ripe age so that he can raise the rear, raise the rear for us all. I am cutting it. The story is ended (*The Ozidi Saga*, 2006:155)

Although this statement signals the ending of the story, Okabou is quick to acknowledge his predecessors by requesting a libation to be poured in their honour. He says "Now you bring a bottle of gin, and I'll present it right here-Atazi is the man who held the front of this narration. Next Ozobo came and told it. Now today it is the man called Okabou-", a statement which Madam Yabuku acknowledges and duly responds in fashion to by saying "…now that it is he who has emerged to tell this saga, let him tell it as far as Tamara has given him until he has told it and grown old, until-I am not fit for death's night." (155). Although she is praying for him to tell this story till he is old, Clark records in his notes at the end of night three that Okabou is already seventy and two of his chief informants in this project died before the book and film

could be released (156). The other tragedy here is that this line of gifted storytellers might just have ended with Okabou as nobody has claimed any form of apprenticeship under him in the art of storytelling.

At the end of the fourth night, Atazi's land is referenced following Ofe's death and Okabou says, "Atazi did honour the gods and they gave him power. Everybody was around before the gods looked upon him alone and took him for their own" (202). On the Fifth night for some reason which cannot be explained, he mistakenly substitutes Ozidi's name for Atazi as he gives the monologue of the Scrotum King who, due to Ozidi's fame, searches for him to fight him. He initially says, "He said, 'of Atazi too, we've heard so much…" and then immediately realising his mistake, says "Oh is it Atazi I've gone and called, It's Ozidi I meant" (211). Apart from being his teacher, we do not know the level of influence which Atazi had on Okabou but whatever it was, the influence must have been very significant. On some of the different occasions in which Atazi is mentioned throughout these seven nights, Okabou attributes a divine source of inspiration to the creation and sustenance of such a story, while at the same time, quietly but meritoriously including himself in this divine lineage just as he did at the end on night three.

Whether this was intentional to the story told or not, it plays a role in the imagination of the listeners to create and attach a certain credibility and authenticity to his words and during the course of the seven nights, he reiterates this position. For example, at the beginning of night two, he briefly recounts the very last activity before the story ends which is the wife of Azeza and Ofe walking to the market and says he is taking the story forward, before instructing them. He says, "All of you, open your ears and listen to me. I am not talking anymore. The story I didn't start is finished." (60). At the end of Night Seven, Okabou would still make this same reference to the story as one he did not start and one that cannot end but merely views himself as a reporter of the events which took place with the words:

> …Yabuku did send for me. 'Atazi used to tell a story, now Atazi is dead. If you know it, she said, 'come and tell it'. Accordingly, I came, and I've told the story, right up to where I knew Atazi told it. If I add some more, I shall have told a false story. It is Yabuku who sent for me to come and tell the story to the child of the grandson of Ambakaderemo. The story will now end here. I can't finish the story formally for you. This is where it ends. I won't tell more, I didn't start it, the matter is finished. (388)

The person who Okabou refers to as “the child of the grandson of Ambakaderemo”is Clark himself. The quotation above is probably the last statement of Okabou that was ever recorded. The audience responded with shouts of “Hear! Hear! Hear!” because the story as has been mentioned earlier is viewed as divine and just as Atazi learnt it, he also did and has no knowledge of what happened before neither can he speculate what happens after it is finished. At the beginning of night three, he also quickly repeats the end of night two and gives the reason why he does so, saying:

> You see, if I had not re-told that section to you: you would think I do not know the root of the story, that’s what you would have thought. That was as far as I had told the story. That is why I have recapitulated it all to you. I will not speak again, I have covered it, the story is finished. (99)

Having ascertained his credibility and status as a storyteller, another feature of Okabou is his descriptive power when speaking in detail about certain events in the story. Because Okabou is the storyteller, it is from his perspective that the imaginations of the audience will be built and when he begins to make certain mindboggling descriptions of some of the monsters in this epic, such assertions add to the fascination of the listeners because he is not just a storyteller at this point but he also becomes an eyewitness reporting the events of the plot as they unfold.

One of these observations is the ability to not only narrate the events of the plot but to also merge them with either the relatable immediate environment or with relatable experiences of the various members of the audience. Concerning this ability, Okpewho says:

> Clearly, the delta is written all over Okabou’s tale. Yet storytellers cannot hope to succeed in their performance of a fantastic tale unless they bring it into conversation with present reality … no story, however extraordinary the details of its content, can successfully avoid contact with the immediate context to which it is addressed … In the final analysis, the true test of artistic excellence in oral narrative performance is the degree to which artists are able to achieve the proper balance in their tales between the fantastic world and the realities of time and place surrounding their enterprise. (66)

This play was performed in Ibadan which is far away from the Central and Western Ijaw with a different landscape, different infrastructure, and a different culture. Certain forms of measurement, cultural terms and analysis are not very easily communicated when they are done in places which have slightly or largely different parameters for doing the same things. Being new to Ibadan, Okabou immediately makes some clever adjustments in the setting of the story by using relatable imagery in Ibadan to explain the happenings of the Niger Delta. In some

cases, he uses the proximities of recognisable parts of Ibadan to measure the distance covered in the strides of the giants in the story. One of such landmarks worthy of note is Mokola market which is first mentioned in night two (75) during Ozidi's fight with Azezabife and which Clark describes in his end notes as about "two kilometres from the place of the narrative" (98) and he uses this measurement to describe the distance that could be covered by the single jump of the one legged Azeza whose body frame is not just half from his head to is feet but is also a skeleton. Within the same fight, he also uses Dugbe market which is also about two kilometres from Madam Yabuku's house to give an approximation of the expanse of land which had been cleared for their fight.

Okabou sometimes uses Lagos, a completely different state (87) which is 140 kilometres from Ibadan to describe the speed and distance which the Witch, Oreame who is also Ozidi's grandmother, is able to cover while flying in a matter of minutes while looking for herbs to fortify Ozidi during the fight. When in night two, Ozidi has once again been stirred, Okabou speaks directly to Clark saying: "Next the boom of monkey, and oh, where Ozidi bounded off was almost from here to where you came from" (90) which is a direct reference to Clark's residence, some eight kilometres from Madam Yabuku's place as Clark mentions in the end notes to the second night (98).

As much as Okabou has tried to use familiar surroundings to explain his measurements, he sometimes slips into using Ijaw geography. He tries to describe the distance covered by the Scrotum King in a single hop during Night Five's narration and says that "he could hop with that huge burden of his (which is an extremely large scrotum, hence the name) as far as the beach market" (228). The audience responds with laughter but Clark makes the reader understand at the end of the night that "The audience is laughing because there is no beach market in Ibadan which is 140 odd kilometres from the sea" (268). A few moments later, he makes the same beach reference again while describing the distance which could be covered by the giant monster Tebesonoma in one or two leaps to which one of the spectators replies saying "Wherever is that beach" and the audience responds with more laughter (263). This shows that the burden of translation not only rests on the language translator or the writer but also the storyteller as contextual knowledge is always important in the understanding of any story.

It is not very clear in the story itself as to why Okabou chooses Ado as the main setting for this story because Okabou himself is an indigene of Orua which is the main village where the saga

actually takes place and Orua is part of the Niger Delta but throughout the narrative, he continually substitutes Orua for Ado. Okpehwo, an indigene of Edo State makes a strong proposition that with a substantial part of the Western and Central Ijaw having been under the influence of the ancient Benin kingdom, not just the name Ado but a few aspects of the plot have had some Benin history added to them. He cites the characters Ogueren and Agbogidi, likening them to certain heroes in Bini folklore (2015:62). The next few features of Okabou will be seen through his relationship with the audience which in this case, is a small group of mainly Ijaw people in Ibadan who are also familiar with the story.

Audience participation is a key factor in any dramatic performance around the world today and it is no different among Ijaw people. In fact, the audience here can become part of the drama at different times through a direct request from the performer to participation in songs, asking of questions and making a few corrections to the story. Though these four types feature in the story, the last one features more over the seven nights than the others. The first time this is seen is in Night Two where Okabou uses an English word instead of an Ijaw word. It is worthy of note that the audience here was quite purist in terms of the story and did not want an Ijaw story being riddled with English words. This decision might either have been due to a simple preference for the language or because of the general effect foreign languages have in watering down the meaning of indigenous words when translated. In this case, Okabou uses the word *Pawa* (Power) to which the audience responds by laughing and he immediately changes it to *Kurose* which is the Ijaw word for "Strength" (94).

The most frequent squabble he has with the audience is over the word "Time" which he pronounces "Tain" as opposed to the Ijaw word *Seri*. This is a slip he makes so frequently and to which the audience so constantly reacts that at a point, it becomes quite humorous. The first time this happens is on night three (104) and although the reaction of the audience is not recorded, Clark notes at the end that he was immediately prompted to change it (156). Another function of the audience is to maintain a check on the authenticity of a story. Okabou is not narrating this story to a group of people who have not heard it before and because they have heard it numerous times, they guide him back when he has made a few mistakes in narration during the course of the seven nights.

As much as he has been corrected concerning his occasional slip into English, there are some cases where he adamantly refuses to be corrected as he has probably seen these English words as good enough to be assimilated into his vocabulary. On Night Six, the old quarrel about the

word “Time” is once again revived as a spectator outrightly interrupts him mid-sentence and repeats what Okabou has just said while once again replacing it with *Seri* and repeating it this time for emphasis, causing the audience to laugh at the retort (274). After the usual call and response, Okabou simply gives a short reply saying, “It’s all one Ijo” and the audience laughs again at Okabou’s retort. A few moments later, he makes the same slip and another spectator corrects him on the use of the word “Time” but Okabou tells him “Better forget it” which causes more laughter among the audience (284).

Still on the same night, while describing Ozidi’s action of laying his bed (286), he uses the word “Bed” instead of *Obine* (which literally means “mat” in the English translation) and after he is once again interrupted and corrected, he asks “There, is it wrong to call that a bed?” and the audience laughs again. He continues saying “Alright, mat it is then! He saw to it that their sleeping place was all made”. He then asks the spectator “Is sleeping-place wrong too?” The spectator replies that “It’s quite correct” (287). This frequent exchange between Okabou and members of his audience though probably a bit frustrating to Okabou at times, is not a begrudging one. For the most part, the audience is involved in the story and the reactions of general laughter shows that the whole group is taking it quite well and has probably been used to this kind of exchange in the past. Sometimes, he gets away with his slips into English due to the focus of the audience on the story. One of such instances is as the tension builds up between Ozidi and Ogueren. Oreame keeps spurring Ozidi on to quickly kill him and be done with it. In Ijaw, he says *Abei,* ***komon*** *bo okere sei telemo ebibera suomua abei* meaning “Boy, ***come on***, come and hold him, what, charge him right and proper boy!” (113). At this point, the plot of the story is so captivating that the audience temporarily loses awareness of his slips. The same unawareness by the audience would occur in similar situations in the future where the sub-plots reach their peak, causing a full focus and temporarily disabling a few other senses among the members of the audience. This is another testament to the narrative ability of Okabou.

Though Okabou has been praised as a great storyteller, this does not exempt him from a few human errors he makes or a few instances he forgets something in the story. As he narrates Ozidi’s fight with Ogueren on the third night, there is an indication by Clark that there are interruptions after which Okabou says “Pity, O Tarakiri” (106). Clark once again explains at the end that the plot has become a bit tangled and Okabou is protesting for being pulled up once again (156). Tarakiri is the region in which Orua is found and the members of the audience

are likely from this region as well for them to know the story and for him to address them the way he did. Okabou also had a prompter helping to fill in a few gaps and elaborate more on certain aspects of the story. On night four while describing how Ofe tries to run from Ozidi by disappearing into the earth, he says Ofe "dives" into the earth which is quite correct but his prompter duly adds his "disappearance" which causes Oreame to search for him for days. (176)

Though the audience is very much involved in this story, distractions occur once in a while, and it is the duty of the storyteller to draw attention back to the story. This he does by regularly giving the usual call *Egberi Yo!* And the audience customarily responds "Ee". There are other instances in which this call is given apart from a signal to start the story. The first is at moments of tension or sudden change in the plot like when Ozidi, against expectations, beats up the monster Ogueren so badly that he retreats quickly and he begins to urinate and stool blood. At this point, there is the call and response to which the caller adds "The story Widens" and the group responds, "Wide wide open" (115).

The second is to signal continuity after moments of participation or indulgence by the audience. These include a collective singing at points where songs are included, comic moments in the story that cause general laughter and side talk among the audience and interruptions from members of the audience as well – just like the comic moment following the use of "bed" instead of *Obine* (286). During the fight with Ogueren just before he retreats, the audience begins to laugh at the fact that Ogueren is beginning to lose his potency to fight because he sees objects which are taboos to his person. The attention of the audience is called back only for them to participate in a song after a brief unfinished statement by Okabou. They are then called back again for the story to continue (114).

Even though some of these interruptions were not taken too well by Okabou, there are instances in which the interjections were welcomed. One of such instances is where Madam Yabuku regularly calls out his praise name "Agadakpen Yenyen" to which he gives a plethora of responses at different times such as saying "it's fire", "Do not touch it", "Never pick at fire!" "Don't start a fire!", "Yes, yes, yes, yes!" (125, 149, 169, 239, 387). On one occasion, he responds with "Yes, of the nine clans" (135). This is probably another subtle way through which Okabou asserts his importance to the story as Clark notes that, "There are nine clans in the administrative area of Western Ijo Division" (156). Unfortunately, neither Clark nor his team translated Okabou's praise name so we do not know what it means. This name is called usually following moments of brilliance in the way he has told/performed the story or his

choice of words which allow for brief moments of laughter or approval. On a particular instance in Night Four, amidst the appellations, Madam Yabuku again calls and then he responds with "It's fire! Don't touch it! Touch it and you get burnt. She urges him on saying "Now on with it" to which he replies "Agreed. Fast runs the tide. And see how I breast it. O voice, pity! Seven days goes the narrative. And the voice is beginning to Patch." The audience then laughs before they are called back with the customary "E Gberi Yo!" (169).

Another instance where this interruption is welcomed is where members of the audience ask questions about the story and the third instance is where Okabou actually asks for assistance. On one occasion, he forgets the praise song of Badoba as he comes to battle with Ozidi. As he narrates Badoba's approach, he stops himself mid-sentence and says "Now I have clearly forgotten the song of Badoba-truly, you Ijo people, I'm not lying!" and the audience begins to laugh as usual (150). Again, Okabou is not telling this story to a group of people who have not heard it before and even though Okabou forgets this particular song, the audience sings it when it is time for it to be sung and he is reminded a few times about the names of birds and plants whose names slipped from his memory at that moment.

Amidst the interruptions, expressions of surprise and awe are also welcome from the audience. One of such cases is when after Oreame and Ozidi have used a special device to search for Ofe to no avail, a spectator says, "He vanished without trace", to which another spectator exclaims "What!" After Ozidi kills Badoba at the end of Night Three, he goes into an intoxicated frenzy destroying everything in his path so that Ofe leaves his own residence and runs away before Ozidi approaches. Probably in surprise at Ofe's action, a spectator asks, "When it had not as much as got to him?" and Okabou replies "Oh yes, he was going to be cut down at his own doorstep. Clearly, yes, he was going to cut him down at his own doorstep" to which the audience responds with laughter. (152-153). On Night Five, as Tebesonoma begs Oreame to let Ozidi spare his life, a spectator says "The doctor here himself will hold you for him to kill" which is in reference to a non-Ijaw speaking medical doctor seated in the audience who was the then Dean of Medicine at the University of Ibadan and had come along with a few friends and colleagues to watch the performance though none of them knew the language (263). One can only speculate that they came due to the reputation of the story/performance over the past four days. Though Clark acknowledges their presence in his endnotes, he does not expressly state that he invited them to watch the performance.

Due to the level of energy sometimes required in storytelling, though it might be entertaining, it at times could also be exhausting. A few times, he asks whether the tape has not finished recording due to the energy he has exerted such as in Night Five where he says, "So saying … (now will this thing not run out? Oh, well, let it be …" (234). Clark says in his endnotes that Okabou speaks in "reference to the tape and to the fact that the bard would like a break" (268) and at other times, he is visibly beginning to tire which causes his narration to begin to get tangled. One of such instances is towards the end of night three which Clark takes note of (156). Such are some of the challenges that the art of storytelling is faced with and from some of the experiences of Okabou highlighted here, it is plain to see that the office of a storyteller can be a tasking one especially for an individual who is already in his seventies.

The storyteller is in some sense, a "learned professor" as he does not just retain the mental aspect of a story but also the intellectual, spiritual, and dramatic aspects as well. It is quite a feat to remember such a long story that spans for seven nights and to tell its plot accordingly but repetition is a very important part of the Ijaw learning process and it is seen in the course of the nights that members of the audience are also familiar with the story having heard it from their childhood. This helps to maintain to some extent checks and balances in the integrity of the story with minimum variations within a community. A version of the story with a very noticeable variation is likely to come from another community.

As much as there were no record books in many of these places, a well-informed community could still manage to keep a semblance of the story as can be seen here with the involvement of the audience in Okabou's narration. This is not always effective as it has already been seen where Okabou gets away with a few slips. There are sometimes, definite mistakes in the plot which go unnoticed among the audience like the birth month of Ozidi in Night One where Okabou forgets that Ozidi was born prematurely at seven months old. Instead, he says that Ozidi was born after Orea had carried him for nine months (12). These are some of the occasions in which there can be excesses but then again, the reason why the reader is able to realise this mistake in the plot is because Clark who is also an Ijaw man is familiar with the story and takes note of these mistakes in his endnotes to Night One (59). This again shows how some of these errors can be managed and put right. The fact that this story has now been transcribed, also makes it unlikely to have many more variations although there were already a few before the telling of the story by Okabou or its publication. Apart from the presence of a

bard or named storyteller, there are many other mediums or agencies through which stories can be told. One other medium is through Masquerade performances.

Masquerades as Storytellers

Although masquerades have already been discussed, it is impossible to talk about the concept of a storyteller without making some form of reference to the creativity and mimesis employed by Ijaw masquerades. The masquerades already discussed in this study have been discussed in light of religious or festive activities, hence these will not be discussed here. Instead, two masquerades will be discussed in light of the actual *Egberi* itself.

The first is Jenewari's record of an incidence with the *Opongi* masquerade in the already discussed *Opongi* festival where this *Egberi* stage was compromised (1980:15). According to Jenewari, they had come towards the end of the festival to which the *Egberi* "is the traditional culmination of the *Opongi* festival" (15). As the place is being set up for the performance, the Ekine leaders have a change of decision and direct the props to a more central location in the arena. Jenewari explains that these changes reveal a precariousness among the people because "none of them can remember how the *Egberi* programme was carried out the last time". They make a decision to omit this phase of the play, with the festival simultaneously ending as the day draws to a close. The performance of the *Egberi* is a cardinal rule in every Ijaw performance and is taken very seriously especially among the more important performances such as those of festivals and other grand occasions. Due to the absence of the *Egberi* at this festival, the event was brought to an anti-climactic end as the spectators began to leave. As much as the Ekine leaders had forgotten this particular *Egberi,* it was at that time still very much remembered by certain people. On this particular occasion, Robin Horton was able to obtain the *Egberi* from another member of the Ekine society named Sunday Johnson who Jenewari acknowledges as a "professional drummer, a carter, a versatile masquerade-dancer and the introducer of some of Kalabari's non-Ekine masquerading societies" (15). On getting Horton's tape recording of his interview with Sunday Johnson, Jenewari translates it as follows:

> In the Opongi which has just ended, the masquerade that starts off the egberi is Seki. Ekine members erect (a fish-trapping basketwork screen) in the town square. The crocodile gets into the trap, and after some struggle, it is killed. Then they lay it on a mat. As it happens when an object for

> meat is trapped in a community's *kon*, people surge forward to look at the victim, with some people chopping off meat from the carcass (15).

It can be recalled from the second chapter that *Opongi* is a headhunting masquerade while the Seki is the crocodile masquerade and that the Seki being the lesser masquerade is played first. After the Seki is done, then comes the time of the *Opongi* and the masquerade:

> …sits on an *ikasie* (native stool) in front of Okpolodo's shrine (on the Ekine ground). Then he enters the Okpolodo shrine as a triumphant headhunter, and there a mock-heroic reception is accorded him, as befits the *peri* title holder. Thereafter Ekine members shout: 'Women go away! Women go away!' Finally, they unmask the masquerade and escort him unmasked, all the way from the Okpolodo shrine to the Obiali House shrine where he was dressed, shouting: 'Women go away! Women go away! Strangers go away! Strangers go away!' That ends the Opongi Egberi. (16)

The Ikaki (Tortoise) masquerade, which is the second masquerade to be discussed, seems to be a masquerade deliberately made for the purpose of storytelling according to the way it is described. The reason why this masquerade will be discussed is that this is one of the few cases where a certain character in Ijaw lore, has its own physical representation. Apart from masquerades, there are not many other performative representations of characters and concepts among Ijaw people. The story would very well have been able to take place without a masquerade unlike the cases of the other masquerades but the main character who is the tortoise needs to be properly identified in the story along with his fitting stereotypes hence the masquerade is worn. As seen in the study of *The Ozidi Saga*, Ijaw stories generally have certain divine inspirations behind them and are seldom without songs and other forms of entertainment, but the focus here will be on the actual story told by the tortoise.

Robin Horton documents one of Ikaki's performances in his article titled *Ikaki: the tortoise Masquerade* (1967:226-239). Before this performance is described, it is important to understand the reputation of the tortoise not just among Ijaw people but around many other ethnic groups in the South of Nigeria. The continuous travails of the tortoise are continuously enjoyed as his tricks on other people eventually catch up with him. Horton in his introduction says that the tortoise:

> Often referred to as 'Old Man of the Forest'… is a memorable character. On the one hand, he has an insatiable appetite for food, money and women, and seeks to gratify it without any regard for the limits set by established morality. On the other hand, he operates with a vast deviousness and an elaborate cunning. (226)

While many of these stories are very funny as they highlight the genius of the tortoise, they also highlight its greed which always creates loopholes of folly in its plans as it continuously tries to trick people and show that there is no end to greed or selfishness in a human being. It is because of the level of popularity that it enjoys (along with a few folk beliefs) that the character of the tortoise has its own masquerade among the Kalabari people. Throughout this performance, some aspects of the story might not be expressly stated or performed but in amusement, the audience which is familiar with Ikaki's ways would immediately guess what he is up to. Although the story behind its origin (like a few other masquerades mentioned in this study) comes from a spiritual encounter with an actual Ikaki spirit, the actions of the masquerade are better suited to represent the character of the tortoise as told in stories more than that of the spirit which was encountered.

This difference is seen in Horton's documented history of the divine encounter with the *Ikaki* spirit. The Kalabari people were said to have stumbled upon it dancing in the forest. Its dance steps mesmerised them and as they tried to learn those steps, the spirit intentionally made certain dance moves which had fatal consequences on the people copying it. As the spirit was said to have killed people with certain aspects of the dance, the people had since modified those dance moves in order to survive the entire dance performance (226-7). As a result of this modification, the masquerade although deceptive like the spirit, is not malicious and poses no physical danger. Concerning the masquerade performance itself, there are many other elements which include song and dance but are neither dramatic performance nor the Egberi within the play. Horton goes into further details about these elements in his essay (1967:226-239).

Concerning the performance itself according to Horton (228), the drums begin to play the rhythm of Ikaki known as *Ada* and Ikaki comes out of the Ekine society's club-house and is followed by two of his sons, Nimite Poku (Know All) and Nimiaa Poku (Know Nothing). A crowd is watching already and as they follow the masquerades to the waterside, Know Nothing in accordance with his name, is dressed in an unpresentable way and keeps walking and romping in such a way that it keeps disturbing the movement of the other two much to their annoyance. Ikaki goes to the main waterside and cannot find a boat so he goes to the beach of the gods and finds one and members of the Ekine help him and his sons into the boat. As Know All begins to paddle the canoe, Know Nothing sits at the prow and begins to paddle in the opposite direction and the audience hurls abuses at him in amusement. Seeing that there is an issue with the boat's movement, Know Nothing probably wondering if there is a leak, takes

out his basket instead of a proper container and tries using the basket to bail water but then he bails water from the sea into the boat rather than in the opposite direction and partially succeeds in bringing in a substantial amount of water into the boat. Know All has had enough of this foolishness and attacks his brother and they both fall to the bottom of the boat. While this is happening, the audience is roaring with laughter. Ikaki separates them and continues to beat his drum to enable them paddle to its rhythm though they still paddle in opposite directions.

They then get caught in a strong tide and almost capsize with the audience shouting instructions. *Ikaki* drops his drum and helps to steer them to land (229). They alight and as the *Ada* begins to play again, Ikaki begins to dance while Know Nothing tries to steal from his bag. As Ikaki has come out of the canoe after just surviving an imminent mishap, he is up to his old tricks again. This time, he has heard that the old king of Kalabari land is dead and while singing a dirge, he comes under a pretence of a very overt and clamorous wailing as he not only pretends to mourn the king but also claims his acquaintance and the king's indebtedness to him. Horton at this point states:

> Posing as a great friend of the dead king, he claims that whilst the latter was alive, he lent him a great quantity of palm-oil for trading with the merchants. With one breath he mourns the death of the king. With another, he mourns the loss of his capital. With a third, he asks for the King's children – obviously with an eye to claiming his debt, which of course is non-existent. Ikaki relies on the bitterness of his dirge to convince everyone that the debt is real. (230)

It is not clear that Ikaki states this intention to deceive everybody but the people of course knowing Ikaki's character do not give in to his pleas but instead they tell him that the children are not around. Ikaki then goes round to the people of the town repeating the same strategy and all the while, the drum master hurls both abuses at his character but praise at his genius which Ikaki accepts in the first-person and rejects in the third-person respectively. Some of these epithets include:

Drummer: *Ploploma bio si* (Ploploma bad inside)

Ikaki: Ee! Iyeri-ee! (Ee! It is me)

Drummer: *Kiri sokua Minji paka* (Digs into the ground and comes up in the water)

Ikaki: Ee! Iyeri-ee! (Ee! It is me)

Drummer: *Ere furubo, tanda bio, tanda bio.* (Steals women, hides in the corner, in the corner)

Ikaki: *Oriaa-ee!* (It is not him)

Drummer: *Yingi mono, tubo mono.* (Sleeps with his mother, sleeps with his daughter)

Ikaki: *Atabila-ee! I furo pele!* (Atabila! May your belly burst) (231)

The word *Ploploma* as Horton records from the translation of informants, is Ikaki's drum name and *Atabila* is believed to be the drummer for the water spirits. As much as the Tortoise is a land animal, a lot of its stories are more closely associated with the sea and this is perhaps why *Atabila* is the person to drum for him. (231)

The next time we see Ikaki's cunning is when as the "Old man of the forest", he begins to warn other animals of an imminent danger. He then brings a native doctor to avert the danger but when the native doctor is addressing the supposed problem with each animal, Ikaki takes his bag and starts stealing from their food stores (231). This is one of the cases where there is no clearly stated intention and all the audience can see is him disappearing into the bushes and coming out with his bag fuller than before. At this point, Ikaki is joined by two other family members, Kalagidi who is his favourite son and Aboita who is his wife but is loose and a simpleton and it does not take long before she begins to flirt with the Ekine members who in turn flirt back with her before Ikaki draws her away and they begin to make suggestive dances with the drum master hurling his mixture of praises and abuses with Ikaki responding in like manner (232-3). After all of this happens, it is time for the actual Egberi which in this case, consists of two episodes and the difference between the Egberi and the previous episodes already acted out by Ikaki is that in the Egberi, Ikaki actually sets out to do something worthwhile without tricking people this time around.

In the first Egberi episode, a mock palm tree has been set up with the use of scaffolding by the Ekine members. Ikaki climbs it to tap wine and cut palm fruit but while he is happily sucking on some of the palm fruit and praising himself, the perpetually foolish Know Nothing takes an axe and begins to cut down the tree. His wife is too busy flirting with the Ekine members once again to notice what is happening (234). Kalagidi tries to stop him but is unable to and when Ikaki notices what is happening, he throws his machete at Know Nothing but it misses him and strikes Kalagidi who collapses. Thinking he has killed his son, Ikaki swears never to come

down again but Kalagidi is revived by members of the Ekine society while Know Nothing and Aboita are dancing, rejoicing to the fact that the blow missed Know Nothing (234). Ikaki laments his wife's behaviour saying *"Ye, si erebo keni bam, si erebo keni bam. A fate-oo, Kalagidi"* meaning "Ye, a bad wife kills a man, a bad wife kills a man. I am finished-o Kalagidi" (235).

In the next Egberi episode, Ikaki is looking to celebrate Kalagidi's escape from certain death and decides to kill an elephant which will give him the chieftaincy title, *Peri*. Once again, the Ekine members have set up another structure which this time, is a mock elephant with a large banana stem, a cord and leaves attached to it. Ikaki with his weapon succeeds in severing the head which he takes to show the *Amanyanabo* (the King) who is sitting in the audience. He has now become Chief Ikaki and the play ends amidst all the celebrations and the final procession after which the maskers undress for the final time. (236)

Amidst all the ridicule and comedy associated with this performance, the underlying themes are not hard to see. Many of the tricks Ikaki is up to in this particular play are tricks which are very possible for a human being to repeat verbatim if they have not already been done and such slyness in humans makes them a danger to the community. The very appearance of the original Ikaki spirit brought danger as his dance steps killed people and Horton suggests that this prototype is seen as "an essentially deadly force" because again, he is in Kalabari metaphor:

> … a certain type of personality amply represented in present-day society. This is the amoral, psychopathic confidence trickster – the type who accepts society only in order to prey upon it. Kalabari have a very real fear of the human tortoise; so much so that they are reluctant to contract marriage alliances with certain Houses in which it is believed to abound. (237)

Horton also suggests that that this story being performed under the guise of an animal creates a distance from which the audience can analyse his actions and character in tranquillity rather than a human play which could arouse their anxieties (237-9). This fear of such a psychopathic presence and cunning that prevents alliances between certain Houses is not just a Kalabari phenomenon as this situation repeats itself across many other Ijaw communities. One of the most popular and well documented incidences of such quarrels is the quarrel between the major Manilla Pepple house led by Oko Jumbo and the lesser Ana Pepple House led by Jaja. This conflict would be the major factor behind Jaja leaving Bonny to Opobo. (Hargreaves, 1987:298).

There are quite a few other factors apart from Ikaki himself which might be easily overlooked. The presence of Ikaki's family for example – though not intentional on their part - is a check on his excesses and ambition. It is funny how with all his genius and cunning, he decides to marry a wife like Aboita. Although he has two good sons, Kalagidi and Know All, the presence of his silly and unwise wife Aboita, and his rather foolish son Know Nothing, are an undoing to whatever Ikaki might be planning even with the help of his two good sons. This is exemplified by Know Nothing when he takes an axe, and begins to cut down the same tree on which his father is perched trying to collect fruits. If Ikaki were a human being, the theory could be proposed that Aboita and Know Nothing are the effects of the muddy stream which Woyingi might have put Ikaki in after his creation as Ikaki according to the creation story, must have asked for genius, wisdom, cunning and possibly wealth. Again, all of these will reiterate a prominent point featured across all the previous Ijaw stories and folk beliefs and that is the fact that no character is invincible.

The trickster figure is a very popular figure in many cultures in one form or the other. To most of the southern Nigerians, this figure is a tortoise, to the Yorubas, he is Esu, the god of mischief a bit like Loki of the Norse mythology. To the Ghanaians, he is widely known as Ananse who was once a human but whose tricks turned him into a spider and there are many more variations such as the rabbit to the Russians and the King's fool in Shakespearean plays. All of them possess genius in some form or the other but in many cases, their genius becomes their prison.

There are many more stories told on a smaller scale with even longer plots than the Ikaki performance and these ones entertain people day in, day out. One of such stories tells of how the Tortoise in his usual ambition went to trick the fish. He told them that he had the ability to make them tall which would be good for them because people had kept on abusing them, saying that they were too short. The fish were happy with this plan and Tortoise set a big pot on fire, poured oil into it to and instructed them that when the oil got hot, they should begin jumping into it. The fish not knowing the use of a pot or oil, agreed to this plan much to their demise but a few escaped such as the Baracuda which was able to jump out of the pot back into the water but not without burning its mouth and tail. That is why the Baracuda today has a red mouth and red tail.

Another point to note about storytelling from the Masquerade's point of view is that it has a slightly different kind of audience from the audience of an individual or group of storytellers. A little bit of this has already been touched upon in the previous chapter but it will be discussed

a bit more elaborately here. The difference between the audience of a recognised storyteller and that of a masquerade is not one created by any demographic, statistical or any other form of analytical cause but rather one of a different atmosphere as the observers in this case are generally more rowdy, energetic and disorganised as opposed to a generally more seated or composed audience as in the case of Okabou's audience (Buowari 2014:137).

This change is probably due to the energy, excitement and authenticity brought by the masquerades and also the nature of the masquerade in view. As noted before, certain masquerades could easily turn erratic and violent and most of the general audience of a masquerade usually stand while viewing not just for a lack of sitting space but also so that they are ready to run if the masquerade becomes provoked. The audience of the masquerade also does not really make any contribution to the performance of the story; there is no call and response, neither are they required or needed to make contributions to the performance in terms of singing, sentence filling or any other form as all of these (if they must be done at all) are done by the masquerade's entourage or members of its club such as its singers, dancers and drummers. Even in a natural sense, the rowdiness of the atmosphere would make it almost impossible for the masquerade carrier to hear any comment being made by the audience even when they might be shouting except a member of the audience physically tries to do something as the performance goes on which at this point will be seen as an interference both by the masquerade group and the audience. This is an even worse offence if it is done to highly respected masquerades in the society especially the ones who are spiritual representatives. This is not to say that no member of the audience can participate in masquerade displays as a few recognised people are able to do so and there are masquerades which do not occupy such a high status that they cannot be approached. Other dance performances welcome dance participation and Buowari further describes the nature of this audience:

> … one is that it gives the audience allowance for effective participation in the performance. There is no clear-cut demarcation between the audience and the dancers. The dance steps and music move some spectators to the extent that they go into the arena to dance. The spectators run across the dancing arena to congratulate good dancers with gifts of money and dance back to their position. Any arena, playground, open space or field used for dancing for iria, a club or mask play is referred to as 'shiri' at that point in time. (137)

Apart from the entertainment factor involved in storytelling, there are definitely strong historical and identity factors involved. Not all stories are fictional and a lot of the Ijaw lore is

riddled with actual events that took place throughout the history of the people. Such events of course, would either have had to be unusual or had such an effect on the people that they were worth remembering. These stories (as is common with most cultures around the world) acquire a legendary or deified status among the people. This is even more so when the characters involved in such legends are connected in one way or another to either the storyteller or the people to whom the story is being told. This of course is one of the reasons why the Ijaws enjoy so much folklore because it teaches them and at the same time, reinforces their sense of identity. There are of course downsides to the use of oral traditions to document history. In an interview with an Ibani historian, Eric Jumbo on the 24th of December 2018, he makes it clear that this historical aspect oral tradition and storytelling most of the time only accounts for the significant happenings of the people throughout their history.

The main issue here is that despite constant growth and development, human life consists mostly of mundane, monotonous and insignificant repetitions and unusual happenings in a society are not common. Storytelling does not always account for times of peace and tranquillity among the people and though progress might have been made at these times something worth remembering would need to have taken place for these moments to have been remembered. The result of this irregularity is that there are sometimes gaps in the history of the people when stories are told and various lengths of time from days to years are missing because they do not contain events good enough to capture the sustained attention of the people although they would have been excellent for record keeping purposes.

This is not to say that the entirety of the history and lore of the people has been left at the mercy of storytelling as that would put the entire identity of the people in jeopardy. For one thing, it has already been discussed in the case of Ojobolo that there are factors involved in either the telling of a good story or the proper transmission of information which chiefly among others, involves the status, memory communicative ability and character of the speaker which are not always all present.

Another very important factor involved here is the neutrality and credibility of the information being transmitted as such stories can be subject to bias depending on the level of connection these stories have to the person telling it. There are still institutions recognised as more official reference points in the society. Among the Western Delta, they are found among the elders of the community who by virtue of age, have assumed administrative, political and cultural roles among the people. They are fully recognised as reference points for the continuity and

sustenance of the people. Among the Eastern Delta, they are found among the societies already mentioned and as members of the council of the Amanyanabo.

Because these groups of people are made up of individuals from different families in the community, the risk of monopoly in the lore and the history of the people is greatly reduced. With these institutions in place, the average member of an Ijaw land or kingdom is expected to know at least the history of his own ancestry and lineage not just for the sake of identity but also to understand his/her place in the community and it is an embarrassment for an individual to fall short of this expectation although the influence of modernity has watered down the consequences of this among today's Ijaw youth. Alagoa (1966: 409) makes note of the Nembe people's description of a person who does not know his/her history with the proverb "Bo yo nimi gha bo nondo" meaning 'He's of goblin ancestry who knows not whence he came.' He says:

> The Nondo was a strange mysterious ape-man believed to have peopled the mangrove swamps in the past. Since it was also believed that some of these creatures were domesticated and became indistinguishable from men, a man who was ignorant of his human ancestry ran the risk of being named Nondo. Such accusations are known to have been made in the memory of living people in Nembe Ibe. The accuser and accused then appeared at a general assembly. The accuser bore the onus of proof, but, if the accused was manifestly unable to cite a credible human genealogy, his neighbours went away with a feeling that he might indeed be of non-human ancestry. (409)

The forms of storytelling narrated here so far involve stories told on a grand scale but as is common with the culture of storytelling around the world, there are also stories told on smaller scales which could be just as impactful on the listeners. Most of these stories involve older people telling them to younger people and while some of these stories are already part of the culture's lore, it is quite common for a quick-witted individual to make up short stories on the spot with lessons involved. Amasenibo Allison in the same interview on December 25, 2018, spoke of one of such occasion called *Dupu Gbe* meaning "Closing of the Grave". This is a form of storytelling that only takes place four days after the burial of an individual. The death bed of the demised is left for four days and the people usually connected to the deceased individual in one way or the other gather round on the night of the fourth day and then the elders begin to tell general stories about life. This continues till midnight and then everybody departs, and this also marks the complete transition of the deceased individual. Other more common stories especially those which attract the fancy of children involve stories that contain funny or

familiar characters such as the already mentioned tortoise which though famous around the Niger Delta, does not have its own masquerade in every community.

Apart from being entertaining, it highlights a measured trust in strangers especially in cases where unfamiliar situations or objects are brought to the fray. Some of these stories originate from actual domestic situations and some of these stories become the origins of some of the songs which children sing while playing. One of such situations is when rodents like rats steal food (usually fish) from the kitchen and when they are caught, there is a children's song that goes like this:

Ofunguru ma fii mam

The Rat is dead

Furu nama sibi ogbo

The head of all thieves

Aghaa, aghaa

Yes, yes

Furu nama sibi ogbo

Head of all thieves

As this is a common happening among Ijaw people, it is certain that such songs like this are regularly sung in several homes. The children will sing it in the event that a rat is actually dead or just for amusement even when there is no such occurrence. The whole process of storytelling among the Ijaw is critical and inseparable from the existence of the Ijaw culture. Quite a few of these stories and the thought systems behind them are gradually beginning to diminish but with the presence of the Ijaw writer as a modern storyteller, it is safe to say that many aspects of storytelling can be salvaged and even developed along with the advancement of society and the older stories preserved for the sakes of both their integrity and also their message.

Chapter Five

The Writer as a Product of Ijaw Cosmology: A Study of J.P Clark and Gabriel Okara

As I look back, I suspect that no matter how I tuned the lyre, I played the same tune. All my writing-and yours-is autobiographical – Donald M. Murray

The build-up to this conclusive statement includes information concerning the various forms of writing which Murray has published and the various capacities in which he has written these works but in all of this, he realizes that although these publications cut across different genres, it was always the same person at the writing desk scripting these ideas. (1991:66)

The Need for a Writer

To quite a number of young African primary school leavers today, a lot of what is African history and culture begins with the advent of colonialism and there are not very clear expositions on the nature of the people before this period. The words "History" and "Culture" here are used within the same context because in a simple sense, history is the chronicler of culture in times past which the modern individual at such point in time, may or may no longer have direct access to. It is an exploration of such cultural consistencies that provide the framework to determine the philosophies of the people in times past which affect the various phenomena that take place today. The reason this is so is that apart from oral tradition playing its role in education among the Ijaw (and Africans by extension), the first point of introduction to pre-colonial periods is through the writings of a post-colonial writer. This is due to the fact that in these parts, there was not much of an orthographic documentation of cultural history as with the Ge'ez of Ethiopia or the libraries of Timbuktu. This is made worse by the fact that a lot of culture and tradition has either been lost or wrongly translated in the transition from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial era. The writer then with a knowledge of culture through his/her imagination, is able to create historiographic scenes which mirror not just the past cultures but also create a transition into the future. Such was the impact of the first-generation writers like Achebe, whose novel *Things fall Apart* was able to educate not just Africans born in the post-colonial era but for the first time, was also able to educate foreigners on the cultures, systems and ideologies of the typical African culture. The same is said of the Ijaw writers who

will be examined in this section. As much as the performances among the Ijaw people of Nigeria have gathered a lot of local and foreign attention, the documentations of these performances have taken further steps to inform, educate and influence readers today.

The Dilemma of the Writer

The fact that these writers were able to provide education through these changing periods did not exempt them from its influences and more often than not, these writers (like many other African writers) often found themselves in a state of disconnection between the present and the past. Many of them having travelled to western countries for a time, discovered upon their return that they had undergone certain changes which caused different forms of cultural estrangement. One of such cases is J.P Clark's "Agbor Dancer" in his collection, *A Reed in the Tide* (1965) where he observes a young lady from the Agbor region of Delta state whose dance performance has a significant impact on his cultural roots. In this poem, the reader is bound to notice almost immediately the kind of imagery used which is reflective of the Ijaw environment, an attribute which Clark's works are known for. The first stanza shows an immediate recognition of his ancestral background as shown in the dance when he says:

See her caught in the throb of a drum

Tippling from hide-brimmed stem

Down lineal veins to ancestral core

Opening out in her supple tan

Limbs like fresh foliage in the sun. (7)

Such a recognition is so enchanting to him as the dance becomes "entangled in the magic maze of music" and she performs her dance steps as if in a trance. But then in the last stanza, he mourns a disconnection between him and all of this beauty when he says:

Could I, early sequester'd from my tribe,

Free a lead – tether'd scribe

I should answer her communal call

Lose myself in her arm cares

Intervolving earth, sky and flesh. (7)

This seems like a lament of someone unwillingly separated from his culture and kept in a system which does not allow him to completely indulge in "her communal call". The major cause of this lament is the second verse of this poem as he wonders how he could "Free a lead – tether'd scribe". The irony here is that he has now become the very thing tethering him back from a full indulgence in his culture. Though he recognises that being a scribe, there are certain things "too atrophied for pen or tongue" yet if he does not remain one, how then can he document and translate his culture to others? Such are the problems of Clark as he is placed in a seemingly permanent dilemma.

Gabriel Okara, like Clark, is also torn between the old and the new. Part of the problem here is that the new or modern is not initiated by his own traditional or cultural history. Instead, it is initiated by an outside force which causes a developmental flaw in his tradition, ultimately creating a completely different future. His poem, "Piano and Drums" in the collection, *The Fisherman's Invocation* also portrays this feeling. Similarly to Clark, the beginning of the poem instantly creates an older and more traditional Ijaw setting which magically takes the poet to a nostalgic realm which he can see but can no longer experience. A realm which they both experienced at the earlier stages of their lives. While Clark says he was early sequestered from his tribe, Okara associates his past with the morning in the first stanza saying:

When at break of day at a riverside

I hear the jungle drums telegraphing

the mystic rhythm, urgent, raw

like bleeding flesh, speaking of

primal youth and the beginning

I see the panther ready to pounce

the leopard snarling about to leap

and the hunters crouch with spears poised (*The Fisherman's Invocation*, 1978:20)

In the poem, the drums playing immediately "topples the years and at once", he is in his "mother's laps a suckling" and living the simple life of a child and with all this euphoria going on, he suddenly hears a "wailing piano" (8). It is interesting that such an important instrument in music, constantly referred to as the "King of All Instruments", is referred to here as "Wailing" – a word which suggests a different image in the mind of the reader as this melodious instrument suddenly seems discordant and annoying especially in light of the drums being played. The irony in this statement increases if the reader is aware that Okara is actually an avid piano player and despite his prowess, this does little to change his opinion about the piano or what it stands for. This irony again, is stretched by a wider margin when it is discovered that Okara was actually listening to classical music while writing this poem. He speaks of this in an interview compiled by Donald and Mary-Lou Burness in *Wanasema: Conversations with African Writers*. The interviewer himself, had already sensed that Okara might have been listening to such due to some of the classical terms and references he used in the poem and this is confirmed by Okara who even speaks of his musical preferences saying, "I like concertos. They are just like sonnets to me, short and concentrated. Symphonies are more vast. The impact of concertos is to me more immediate, more personal. So I wrote a poem on the piano and drum, symbolizing European and African cultures" (1985:30). This object which seems to have a rude interruption in his musings at the beginning of his poem is actually something he has developed an affection and dedication for. His next lines further explain his grief because this wailing is:

solo speaking of complex ways in

tear-furrowed concerto;

of far away lands

and new horizons with

coaxing diminuendo, counterpoint,

crescendo. But lost in the labyrinth

of its complexities, it ends in the middle

of a phrase at a daggerpoint. (*The Fisherman's Invocation*, 1978:20)

The word "daggerpoint" here indicates an obvious duress under which he is forced to be lost in a "labyrinth of its complexities". A duress which Clark also acknowledges when he is "sequestered" and also "tethered". The end of this poem brings the poet to again, a seemingly permanent dilemma as he now wanders through the rhythms created by both the drums and the piano. Okara's state of mind on this issue is very obvious as this theme is conspicuously repeated several times in other poems of his such as "The Call of the River Nun", "You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed", "Spirit of the Wind" and "Once upon a time" amongst others. This disconnect as previously said, is not limited to the Ijaw writers but features across Africa with other poems like "Songs of Sorrow" by Kofi Awoonor, "We Have Come Home" by Lenrie Peters and "I Will Pronounce Your Name" by Leopold Senghor.

Some of these writers like Clark and Senghor would go on to form the Negritude movement which aimed to showcase the beauty of Africa which had either been previously tainted or misrepresented in the past due to shallow understandings of its various cultures with works such as Joyce Carey's *Mister Johnson* (1939) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). The works of these Ijaw writers were then pivotal in creating a better narrative of the continent and broadening the perceptions of foreigners; people who had no understanding of Africa but unfortunately had their first introductions to it through works written by the likes of Conrad. A similar occurrence of this process took place with other African writers like the already mentioned Achebe who did not openly identify with the negritude movement.

With these background stories telling of a past or system which had been attacked or negatively influenced by post-colonial and post-modern factors, the writer must then write out of necessity and not just leisure, pleasure or entertainment even though these are still to be experienced in either the process of writing, reading or performance. As at the time this generation began writing, there was not a lot of work done concerning the orthography of the language or education in Ijaw culture. Though archaeological and historiographical advancements were being made, they were usually met with the usual hassles of orthography and language development. Clark makes a note of some of these issues at different points in his introductory essay to *The Ozidi Saga* (2006:xvii-xxxv). Even at this time, bits of the culture were already beginning to fade away and the writer then consciously or unconsciously and either in a state

of deliberate action or one of nostalgia, found himself in a race against time to preserve what was left of his/her people. It is these myths, performing and aesthetic arts, legends, proverbs, stories and historical happenings that provide the materials from which the writer creates his story. These are rooted in what Fredric Jameson calls the "Social Reality" of the people in his book, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. He explains the value of art to social information as follows:

> Its specialised machinery…is capable of registering and recording data with a precision unavailable in other modes of modern experience – in thought, for instance, or in daily life – but that data, reassembled, does not model reality in the form of things or substances, or social or institutional ontology. Rather, it tells of contradictions of such, which constitute the deepest form of social reality in our prehistory and must stand in for the "referent" for a long time to come. (1991:151)

Jameson makes an interesting point on the power of precision that art possesses. In the two poems written by Clark and Okara, their attention, knowledge and nostalgia is first captivated by artistic phenomena at the beginning of their poems and it is only towards the end of their poems that the reverence for art gradually gives way to intellectual musings and deliberations. Even with the reflections of the past in these poems, these happenings did not mirror the present reality in which these writers wrote from but served as a contradiction to it. Despite the contradictions present, these artistic performances affected the social realities of the writers in their pasts, and they still have an influence in their perceptions of the present social reality. That is why they are remembered and written down because they "must stand in for the 'referent' for a long time to come" (151). The manner in which these historical aspects of art can still influence the environment according to Jameson comes from:

> … new social reality in which, from a document of cultural history, it becomes an antique and a commodity, a bit of yuppie furnishing, and in that sense no less 'contemporary' than its opposite number. As for this last, however, on our new trajectory, it begins to foreground itself more insistently as language and as communication (rather than as artistic production in any older sense) and brings into this new construction of omnipresence of the media as such, as that has seemed for many to constitute one of the fundamental features of contemporary society. (170)

The issues which these writers refer to in their works are still very much issues which are reflected both within the Ijaw society and the relationships between Ijaw people and the world. This gives it a contemporary relevance like its "opposite number" as mentioned above. Plays of course cannot always be staged as frequently as they have been staged in the past or in the

most rural parts of Ijaw land. The communal storytelling and performing scenes are gradually disappearing being slowly limited to festive or very important occasions and many rural settings are gradually giving way to urbanization. The work of the Ijaw writer, as Jameson says, is to then use his words to stand in as a substitute in times when these artistic performances are not available and s/he takes advantage of the ever-expanding omnipresent media in order to preserve it. Plays like Clark's *All for Oil* (2009) and novels like Okara's *The Voice* (1970) are modern stories published in contemporary times but it would be unusual not to notice the strong presence of Ijaw philosophies, patterns and systems in the background of the play and of the novel and these thought systems are behind the decisions which the various characters make as the plot unfolds. They are obviously in a different setting like the characters in *Ozidi* or *The Raft* but they are essentially the same people because they are led by the same thought process. The published works of Clark and Okara (and other African writers by extension) have extended to places where the Oral performance could not find footing and have played large roles in the education and re-education of minds foreign to the culture of the people. The beauty of this modern medium is that even though these performances are not often staged, the images, collective consciousness and stereotypes of the people are still retained and the level of imagery gleaned from Clark's works alone is such that it has become one of the most common talking points of scholars and critics alike.

The constant drifting and confusion between the old and the new or between two different worlds is a recurring theme in Okara's writings. His only novel *The Voice* portrays the main character, Okolo as a stark exemplification of this issue. Okolo's problems are quite peculiar as he goes from a complete rejection by his chief and most of his people in his town of Amatu to a complete misunderstanding with his companions on his journey to the city of Sologa. In the city, he is offered a partial and conditional acceptance which he rejects only to return to a home where he is only understood by the people who have been ostracised like him for similar reasons - because they are different. Tuere after a series of unfortunate events surrounding her family, is labelled a "Witch" and lives outside the city and Ukule the cripple is not given much attention due to his condition and so his significance is not recognised, neither is he considered as much of a threat to the people like Okolo and Tuere. What makes Okolo even stranger than the two others is that there is really no physical or obvious reason as to why he is hated unlike Tuere. He has neither committed an abomination in the land nor some grave crime for which he must be punished and his problem causes as much a dilemma to the characters in the story as well as to the reader.

The reader is told that Okolo is looking for "it" which is never defined at any point in the novel and it might forever be a quest to understand whether the characters in the novel understand what that means as well. Their constant references to the word "it" initially suggests that they are using it as a pronoun for the unidentified issue but a further reading coupled with their mere fascination for Okolo might also suggest that "it" is all they know about the subject of Okolo's search but either way, they all arrive at the same conclusion that Okolo's "head is not correct". They seek to remove this incorrectness from his head but as Okolo stubbornly refuses to give way to their coercions, they send him out of town. These intellectual complexities repeat themselves in Okara's poem, "The Fisherman's Invocation" (1978) with a lot of emphatic references to the past. The dominant word in this long poem is the word "Back" and just like Clark's *The Raft* (1964) it features roundabout musings of the characters which do not effect any particular change in their environment.

The Ijaw Cosmos as the Writer's Resource

In relation to Murray's statement at the beginning of this chapter that all writing is autobiographical, part of Clark's autobiography can be found in his consistent use of imagery throughout his works. The use of imagery by Clark is perhaps one of the strongest features which other literary scholars identify him with, and this is not without good reason. Whether in the poetic or dramatic form, his writings are constantly riddled with vivid images and conceptions whether of an actual Ijaw setting or a fictional one and this brings back into remembrance the strong effect of the natural environment on the Ijaw individual and its effect on the cosmological thought process of the people. His personal experience with Ijaw imagery is further understood when one considers his choice of words in his plays and his commentaries on the published recorded performance of *The Ozidi Saga* by Okabou Ojobolo. The saga has one of the most concrete expressions of imagery among other Ijaw narratives with many an Ijaw admitting today the fear such a story put in him/her as a child when told in its original form. Even in Clark's separate play, *Ozidi* (2009), his descriptions of the scenes and the characters conjure a consistent myriad of images in the mind of the reader. Many of these words and actions are absent in the recorded narrative and although there are different versions of the story which involve a few variants, Clark is still able to create his version with certain features included. One of these features is the appearance of the Storyteller at the beginning of the drama to set the play in motion. Of course, in the traditional Ijaw version, the storyteller is the

performer throughout the story and may include a few individuals like Okabou did with singers but because this is a modern theatrical scene, the storyteller now plays the role of a narrator and is bound to make periodic appearances. In this particular instance (which is not seen in the Okabou version) the storyteller immediately informs the audience that the drama cannot begin without seven virgins being made available to help perform rites and allow for spiritual guidance in the play. His prayer is a very interesting one which says:

People of the sea, people of the sea,

Two times, three times I call upon you.

Members of our community, in all their numbers

And from all quarters, sinking here their quarrels

And washing themselves of all colours and taint tonight

Bring to you in all belly sweetness seven huge pots

Of food, each properly brought to you by a girl still

Untouched by man.

(He takes from each her dish and makes a motion of dipping it in water)

Here's biscuit, here's sugar, here's wine

…Give us good children, and give us good money, too.

After all, in Lagos…and Kaduna we hear people are now running into streams of

riches right up to

Their necks…

After all, it is from you water people the wealth

Of the whole world flows…

That having all these, we your people, from those

Who stay at home like the wall-gecko to those who like

The black-kite go abroad, come next season,

May at the fall of every flood feast here with you. *Ozidi* (2009:4-5)

Among many other prayers made during the course of this drama and in Clark's other plays, this is one of the most profound. The reason is that although it is understandably watered down with a few aspects missing, Clark, through the mouth of the storyteller, is in such a brief statement able to give a broad summary of the Ijaw worldview in his prayer. In the course of his speech, one is drawn back to some of the already established worldviews of the Ijaw people already mentioned in the course of this study. He starts with calling upon the "people of the sea" for help. A feature which always precedes every Ijaw festival as already mentioned. There are even parallels drawn here between festivals and dramas due to the fact that they both involve performance and play. They are also looked onto for the purpose of remembering historical events of the people in the form of heroes or creatures who once walked the earth and had direct or indirect dealings with humans. They are said to be behind the genius of humans and the catalysts for the advancements of that age and time.

After the storyteller invokes the people of the sea, he offers them their sugar, biscuits and wine. These are like the same foods which the Kalabari *Opongi* performers eat which are associated with water spirits and are termed "food from the sea". The references to streams and water being the source of wealth are profound as all Ijaw communities as previously mentioned, have the rivers around them as a major determining factor in wealth creation from fishing to trade. It also draws reference to the significance of water in the Ijaw creation myth where Woyingi the creator leads into a muddy stream those who had asked to have riches and worldly possessions during their lifetime but leads into a clear stream those who had asked for no riches or worldly possessions. It is also interesting to note that the movement of wealth in general economic terms is spoken of as if in a liquid state with words like "cash flow" and "liquidation" coming to mind.

This might be a mere coincidence but at different points in time some of these different philosophies from different cultures tend to meet at certain points of agreement from time to

time. Even when there seems to be some disagreement, the idiom or means of expression in both cultures only needs to be examined and understood in order to gain full comprehension of the subject. In this case for instance, wealth like water/streams/rivers in a civilised society, tends to move in certain directions in society from the rich to the poor. Just like flora and fauna benefit from their proximity to the channel of a stream, those who channel the wealth of the society are the greatest benefactors of it. Just as streams can get dried up, water becomes evaporated, consumed or flows into cracks and disappears, so can wealth exist in a temporary form and can immediately be squandered or consumed due to personal decisions or adverse external conditions. A lot more can be said on just the singular idiom of water and its relation to wealth with further study. These idioms are found in different aspects of the Ijaw life, with some being so common that they can be easily overlooked. One of the quickest ways to find the philosophical reasoning of the Ijaw is to examine the physical imagery of the Ijaw surroundings in relation to how they are used both in common and literary speech.

Not long after the storyteller in *Ozidi* finishes his prayer, an old woman is seen on stage sweeping while at the same time, complaining of the ingratitude of people (presumably men). In her complaint, she says:

There are some that are sour all day

Give them sugar and they see ants

Give them salt and they smart

Thrush by the corners of their mouths. There's

No sacrifice will sweeten them. They have ears

But their drums beat back words of prayer,

Bounce back sound of music. They may possess

Double sight but they will dart

Daggers even at a bridal procession.

…Let them go off at once

…For we do not seek to please them. (2009:6)

To which in the likely fashion after her complaints, the storyteller stops and shoos her off the stage with the words "Tut, tut, tut, woman, now you buzz off yourself! We men have important affairs of state to consider right now" (6) and this sets the stage for the beginning of the play where the storyteller, who turns out to be Ozidi, is joined with other men who form the Council of State of Orua. After the council has plotted to kill Ozidi, Oguaran and Ofe begin to have a dispute as to how Ozidi should be killed but Azezabife steps in between and reprimands them with the following statement:

> Is it here we are going to fall out? Among ourselves? Indeed are we houseflies that cannot assemble a session of court? They say that whatever their crowd, those creatures cannot knock over a cow. We have agreed upon the act that will make or mar our joint canoe of life. Must we ourselves capsize the craft? (28)

The imagery used in this proverb is very easy to understand as flies are not known to move in swarms like bees and cannot collectively act towards a goal. There is also yet another reference made to the Ijaw individual's concept of a boat which lies beyond its physical uses.

The *Ozidi Saga* itself has a common lore concerning its origin which is similar to the origin of masquerade performances. Clark records this in his introductory essay at the beginning of the saga saying

> Tradition and awe surround *The Ozidi Saga.* There is the local lore at Orua that the epic began there several generations ago at the feet of the great god of Tarakiri Clan in western Ijo. The high priest at Orua had fallen into a trance one day while worshiping at the shrine. Out of that trance arose the vision of Ozidi. The man never quite came out of it, for upon waking, he knew no rest again until he had enacted to his people, the drama that their god across the river had revealed to him in his uncommon sleep. (2009: xx)

This is a similar experience to the stories told about people like Ekineba of the Ekine society and Igebe, the matriarch of the Opongi festival. The same tradition and awe that surround even a simple telling of this story is the same tradition and awe with which the masquerade societies of the eastern delta use to captivate their audiences through their well-guarded secrets behind masquerade performances. With all of these parallels drawn, the story of Ozidi can easily become a masquerade festival if need be and even during its performances, there are times when masquerades are used especially with the appearance of certain monsters.

Though the origins of these Ijaw stories and myths cannot be fully ascertained, one thing is certain about them and this is the fact that they all constantly place some form of reference or reverence to the Ijaw cosmology and its natural environment and the mythical characters involved always seem to have some origin, semblance or affinity with the environment. These are commonly known stories and myths which range from the gigantic ogres and daemons to the "short man in the bush" called *Osuwowei*. This is coupled with the fact that the story itself likens some of the unnatural happenings to nature such as the different occasions in *The Ozidi Saga* where Oreame takes off on her wings to look for different herbs and potent medicinal elements. The story likens the flights of Oreame, Odogu's mother and Azema to that of dragonflies and black kites. This is a very credible postulation given the fact that there is hardly any Ijaw story which refers to concepts, images or activities outside the Ijaw worldview and where there are such references, they do not usually include the philosophy or thought systems of the Ijaw people. With the Saga itself, there is a presence of a few non-Ijaw elements such as names like Odogu which is Igbo and a constant reference to Ado (Benin) being the setting of the story which is understandable as the influence of the ancient Benin empire spread towards even the western and central Ijaw and till today, some Ijaw still trace their origin to Benin.

As has been previously noted, the Ijaw writer many times begins his writings out of necessity in order to both preserve and reminisce on the historical and present culture of the people. In a recorded interview with Okara, Bernth Lindfors asks when and why he began writing. Okara acknowledges that this is a difficult question and could not "give any definite answer apart from the fact that I felt the urge to write":

> … I had read the poem 'Spring' by William Wordsworth, and I was very touched by it because it recalled my childhood experiences in my home village, where we used to go beneath the trees with bamboo bows and arrows and wait for birds to come and perch, and then start shooting. One day there was a very, very beautiful bird and I was fascinated by it; my companions wanted to shoot it but I made some noise and the bird flew away. And so when I read 'Spring' by William Wordsworth, talking about birds and so forth, it really touched me and just set things going … it sort of opened the lid to other emotional conflicts (1974:41).

The opening stanza amidst the other stanzas of Wordsworth's poem reveal a notable feature which might have set Okara's nostalgia in motion. The stanza goes thus:

I heard a thousand blended notes,

While in a grove I sat reclined

In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts

Bring sad thoughts to the mind

Eldred Green speaks on Okara's lyricism as a poet and in recalling that Okara is a pianist, makes a presupposition that he has a musical ear. He also believes; "that it is this musicality, coupled with the mellifluous sounds of traditional Ijaw music, and of the rivers, birds and other aspects of the Niger Delta – the environment that has produced legends like Rex Lawson, Erasmus Jenewari…" (2007:14). Coincidentally within the same paragraph, the only other writer and poet who Green compares Okara's lyrical and poetic prowess with is the other writer who is being studied in this chapter which is J.P Clark (14).

The same experience Wordsworth had where he heard "a thousand blended notes" while he was sitting in a grove was very similar to possibly the daily experience of a young Gabriel Okara in the rainforest region of the Niger Delta; especially on the day himself and his friend wanted to catch that beautiful bird. It is very likely that Okara had never been to England before reading Wordsworth's poem as in the same interview with Lindfors, he states that he read it as a twenty-year old who had finished secondary school (41). This meant that he did not have any familiarity whatsoever with the English setting but of home, far away in the rainforest of the Niger Delta. Although Wordsworth was speaking about a different natural setting, the nature that Okara imagined was his home. The effect on these two men is the same as there is an eventual sadness. While Okara's sadness leans towards nostalgia and separation, Wordsworth's sadness leans more towards the impurity of man but the same Nature that linked "her fair works" to the human soul that ran through Wordsworth in stanza two is the same nature which sets a lot of activities in motion in the soul of Gabriel Okara.

In the same way Ijaw lore provided a lot of material for Clark and his kind to write his works, it also provided the structure for Okara to craft his novel, *The Voice*. Okara explains in the same interview with Lindfors that the English literature he had read in school seemed bizarre in a few different ways ranging from their form to structure and situations involved in the plot. He acknowledges that although these stories were captivating, the experiences and unfolding of events were quite strange to him being a product of an entirely different system. He further

explains that to speak from his own experiences, he had a few barriers to break through in order to write. He says:

> And to reflect this in our novels, and in our poetry or drama, we had two barriers to break through. First, to bring out your ideas in writing as near as possible to your original conception… One slogan continually drummed into our ears in our art classes was "Nature is incopyable". It is the same thing in writing prose or poetry (43)

The fact that Nature consistently makes bold appearances both in the precolonial literature and the modern ones certainly deserves some thought, considering the influence it has on the production of any Ijaw work of art, be it literature, performance or craft. Okara's urge to write began with the description of a foreign natural environment by Wordsworth which stirred the influence of the nature he had experienced as a child while he consciously or unconsciously imbibed it. This influence of nature would then frame the way in which he would write this novel.

Another barrier which Okara had to face is the most common issue in cross-cultural communication which is the translation of ideas, philosophies and images into another language. Even though Okara had learnt that "Nature is incopyable" (43), he still tried as much as possible to copy the natural Ijaw style of speech and expression into his style of writing in English. Perhaps, one of the most dominant features of African philosophies in general is that they are not usually discussed in abstraction. Instead, they are always dependent on the power of imagery to carry their weights in meaning. The writer then has a task to first define the image before using it as a vehicle for his/her thought system. There is also an issue with defining each image within the story because constant side definitions and explanations hinder the free flow of thoughts and ideas in the minds of the reader/observer and in published works. The writer then has to create a separate section for references to images which may not be clear to the mind of the foreigner. In his essay, "African Speech … English Words" (1963, 137-9), Okara expounded a lot more on the problem of using English words to express African thought. He stated his belief in the use of African ideology and speech to the best extent possible which to him, meant bringing the almost literal translation into English. This was not an easy process for him as he states; "I had to study each Ijaw expression I used and to discover the probable situation in which it was used in order to bring out the nearest meaning in English" (137).

Considering that his novel *The Voice* was published the following year, Okara with this essay was very likely describing the process through which the novel was either being written or

already completed. This novel was written with a style that was unconventional and different from the styles of his contemporaries like Clark, Achebe and Tutuola. This was one that was bizarre compared to what readers had become used to and it caused Okara just like his creation Okolo, to come under different forms of criticism even by Africans. Arthur Ravenscroft in his introduction to the novel, records that it:

> … had a very mixed reception, and some African reviewers found its unconventional use of English unacceptable; they seemed to see it as a novel in a line of development from Amos Tutuola's books. Reviewers abroad were also partly nonplussed by the language, and uncomfortable about its strange symbolism and apparently naïve simplicity, which seemed old-fashioned in a world of Western European sophistication. (1969:4)

As much as this book caused negative reactions from foreigners, Africans and even Clark himself, there were also positive reactions from other reviewers such as Ravenscroft himself, M. Macmillian and Margaret Laurence but possibly the most widespread positivity it got was from its own Ijaw people and as Okara recalls in his conversation with Lindfors, they were in a hurry to get the book especially the paperback editions, the reason being that "the Ijo man enjoys the book because it reflects his own tradition and for those who are not familiar with our way of life, it exposes the roots of Ijo culture" (1974:45).

The Writer Against his People

This initial negative reaction to Okara's work leads us to explore another feature of the Ijaw writer which in essence, is more of an unavoidable consequence and that is the relationship of the writer with either his own kin or people foreign to his culture which constantly tends towards negativity. This is not just an Ijaw thing as there have been several examples of this scenario happening across Africa and even in Europe but the situation that makes the experience of African writers a bit peculiar is probably best explained by Chidi Amuta:

> Having come into prominence mainly through a Western dominated tradition of criticism which packaged and presented him variously as 'the custodian of the conscience of the race', the repository of social vision and crystallization of the aspiration for social justice, the average African writer acquired the mien of a deity. What with the hundreds of European critics, editors and researchers trooping in to interview him or inviting him to address a conference, the African writer was nurtured into a culture of messianism and was flattered into an over-exaggerated estimation of his socio-political importance. (1989:29)

As much as there might be room for debate on several fronts concerning this statement in relation to Clark and Okara, there is no denying a lot of the similarities they share with this statement especially when it comes to both their relevance to the culture and their relationships with European critics. This is not to accuse them of assuming a messianic role as Amuta states but to explain some of the reasons and perspectives behind the negativities either from the public or fellow writers, scholars or critics. As we have already seen, Okara after the successes of his poems and in his bid for innovative writing, drew criticisms from the public and Clark. Clark himself got negative reactions from other scholars on some of the introductions he made into his plays and to show the peculiarity of this situation to African writers by extension, Ngugi wa Thiongo would go through the same issue as will be later discussed.

After these negative reactions, it seemed that as the initial shock of the difference in style began to dissipate, more readers came to understand Okara's style and intent but as a group, the Ijaws were the first to accept it because they were the first to understand it not because of the style of writing in itself but for the familiarity, imagery and experience that could be drawn from the novel. Some of these imageries can be seen even as the novel begins with the statement:

> Some of the townsmen said Okolo's eyes were not right, his head was not correct … So the town of Amatu talked and whispered; so the world talked and whispered. Okolo had no chest, they said. His chest was not strong and he had no shadow. Everything in this world that spoiled a man's name they said of him, all because he dared to search for *it*. He was in search of *it* with all his inside and with all his shadow. (23)

This is a stark instance of the impact of imagery on the thought system of a culture so much that it affects the semantic and grammatical choice of the writer. As much as this statement can be understood by pretty much any reader, the weight of the meaning might not easily be grasped if the concept of the Head, the Chest, the Inside and the Shadow are not properly understood and the situation that could cause these four concepts to form a partnership when the resolve of the character is mentioned. Okara briefly explained it in his essay, "African Speech … English Words" where he says that some of these expressions are "rooted in the legends and tales of a far-gone day" (1963:138). He explained that the English equivalent of the townspeople's perception of Okolo as stated above is the word, "Timid". As there does not exist, a person who literally has no chest or shadow, a timid person among Ijaw people, is not fit to live and according to Okara, "… here, perhaps, we are hearing the echoes of the battles

in those days when the strong and the brave lived. But is this not true of the world today?" (138).

The concept of the "Inside" was also briefly mentioned in the previous chapter while talking about the Ikaki masquerade. The drummer called him by his drum name; *Ploploma bo* is meaning "Ploploma bad-inside". Here in *The Voice*, Tuere tells Okolo that it is a futile attempt to find *it* because "everybody has locked up his inside". Okolo replies that he "cannot stop this thing. I must find *it.* It is there. I am the voice from the locked up insides which the Elders not wanting the people to hear, want to stop me. Their insides are smelling bad and hard at me, but …" (34). This expression might not even be limited to the Ijaw dialects as it has even found its way into colloquial Nigerian usage and the equivalent of a bad inside in Nigerian Pidgin would be the word "Bad-belle" with "belle" being a different pronunciation of the word "belly" and as with many ancient cultures around the world, the belly, gut or bowels are associated with the root of feelings and emotions.

According to Green and Koroye who are themselves Ijaw scholars, this book published in 1964 was unique because it became "the first known attempt in fiction by any African writer to compose in an African language and then transliterate into English. Even though the language is uneven in some areas, it successfully retains elements of Ijo sentence structure" (2009:198). Green also states that because of this experimentative attempt by Okara, *The Voice* then became the literary ancestor of the Ngugi wa Thiong'o 's *Devil On The Cross* and the Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (Green, 2006:7-8).

Okara's most popular works maintain a transit between the past, present and future and they lucidly show the gradually changing psyche of the Ijaw individual as s/he is rapidly being introduced to a new form of modernity where his/her sovereignty both as an individual and an ethno-nation are either being partially or fully surrendered to a dominant force which this time, is not the gods as it has been centuries before or the receding force of colonialism but a new rising and more permanent force in the identity of the Nation-state. In this situation, the individual is steadily being coerced to leave the pleasures and communication with a known environment or comfort zone to begin to communicate with the unfamiliar and unknown; a communication who's conclusion does not necessarily end on the terms of the Ijaw people but often involves more external and more powerful factors. Upon being asked when he started writing *The Voice*, Okara explains that it was before independence and he had his "apprehensions about the state of affairs of Nigeria as a whole and about the outcome of our

independence, so it seemed important to tell a story of that kind at that time." He also acknowledged that "the coming thing" spoken about in his book is actually Nigeria's political independence and he uses the hero Okolo to mirror the predicaments of young and old intellectuals like him throughout the country who were apprehensive about the coming political change and in a time (and probably in the present) when deviation from the political norm would yield serious consequences.

This foreseen political tension was an echo of sentiments already felt by various Ijaw people in different parts of the delta; for instance, in the interview with Dame Sarah Brown on the 24th of September 2018, she also spoke of a man, Chief Henry Buowari Brown from Finima, Bonny, who was also a parliamentarian at the Western House of Assembly in Ibadan once representing the Rivers/Owerri Province. It said that Chief Brown declared he would not live to see Nigeria's independence because he believed that the country was not ready for it. True to his word, he died shortly before Nigeria's Independence Day, on the 1st of October 1960.

This political apprehension and discontent present in the Ijaw writer, presents another side to the tensions and disagreements he has with his immediate ethnic group and his nation. This chapter started with a celebration of an Ijaw past which has been marred and dented by the forceful intrusion of modernity by both internal and external factors but as modernity and a new era has been set, the writer seems to become disillusioned with the state of affairs in the society. Whereas, there were external factors to blame in the past such as "wailing pianos" and "lead-tethered scribes", there are rising internal factors affecting not just the existence but the continuity of what s/he holds dear; places where there were once celebrations have given way to satire and criticism and because the birth of a new nation has made him a member of the wider Nigerian society as opposed to his immediate Ijaw environment, his criticisms extend to them as well.

The members of the society did not always agree with such criticisms which included the writer's own people. Though the celebration of a wonderful past is generally regarded as a common heritage, the present day is filled with personal interest and taking a position on certain issues is taking a position against certain people. This again explains why the archetype of Okolo is so important because Okolo in some sense, is the disillusioned Ijaw writer himself whose epiphany has put him at odds with even his own people whom he does not seem to trust as he once did. Among many of the poems that Clark wrote concerning this issue, one of them;

"The Casualties" describes one of the biggest effects of political tensions in the country which eventually led to the Nigerian Civil war.

The poem begins with Clark's dismissing the usual definition of the word "Casualty" as used during a war and says that they "are not only those who are dead", lost, or "led away by night". They are not only those that "started a fire and cannot put out" or those "who are escaping" but also:

They are wandering minstrels who, beating on

The drums of the human heart, draw the world

Into a dance with rites it does not know

The drums overwhelm the guns…

Caught in the clash of counter claims and charges

When not in the niche others left,

We fall.

All casualties of the war. (*Casualties*, 1970:37)

Even now, Clark's imagery is starkly seen in this lament, but this imagery is of a different form. Whereas the drum led him and Okara into a magical bliss of celebration and longing, this seems to be a different drum. As much as guns are used for war, it is the rhythm of this new drum that makes the people pick up the guns in the first place and it beats a rhythm of confusion among the people as they begin to dance to rites they do not know, make claims and counter charges against each other and become different people who separate themselves from their niche. The death of a collective thinking (drum rhythm) is the death of the society and not the dead bodies counted during or after the war. Under the title of this poem, Clark writes "To Chinua Achebe", a fellow writer whose people (Igbo) suffered the biggest casualties of the war. This reveals what is likely a communal understanding between them as writers, and the effect the war had on them.

This disillusionment and disagreement with society is not just an Ijaw feature as Ngugi in various instances makes references to the changes in the responsibility of the African writer. He talks about the risk of the African writer "becoming too fascinated with the yesterday of his people" and being so involved in recreating the tainted past that s/he almost did not see the rising problems of post-independence Africa (1972:44-5). In his book *Decolonising the Mind,* he recalls an assignment he gave to his students to:

> …trace the development of the messenger class from its inception as actual messengers, clerks, soldiers, policemen, catechists and road foremen in colonialism as seen in *Things fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, to their position as the educated 'been-tos' in *No Longer at Ease*; to their assumption and exercise of power in *A Man of the People*; to plunging the nation into intra-class civil war in *Girls at War*. (2005:63)

It is apparent that Ngugi saw a very clear similitude with the focal change in Achebe's works and his own experience particularly as he was arrested five days after giving this assignment to his students which coincidentally was also six weeks after the banning of his co-written play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*) which spoke of the societal problems of Kenya at the time (2005:64).

The Writer as a Custodian of Traditional Ideology

Another advantage of the writer to his people is that through his stories, a proper discourse analysis can be done on the communications between characters which provides not only a deeper analysis into their forms of thought, but their style of communication as well. One feature of the image-riddled philosophy of the Ijaw people is that as proverbs or profound statements are made with the use of images, the intelligence or integrity of such statement can be challenged or countered by another individual by using the same image but howbeit, usually from a different perspective. An example of this is in Clark's *All for Oil (2009)* where Chief Bekederemo is in a heated argument with Chief Dore (a British political agent in the service of the colonial government). Dore tries to intimidate Bekederemo with his office reminding him of other paramount rulers such as Nana of Itsekiri and Ovonramwen of Benin who had tried but failed to resist colonialism and Bekederemo responds:

BEKEDEREMO: Don't you threaten me! There you are, you have an elephant slung over your shoulder, and you are still digging the earth for crickets with your toe.

DORE: The hippopotamus looks for a canoe, it also wants a paddle.

BEKEDEREMO: And when the hippopotamus spits, it is its own head it spits on.

DORE: Oh is that so? Well, we'll see. We know you have your cannons, your armoury right behind your kiln, and barrels and barrels of gunpowder passing as palm oil. (*All for Oil* 2009:9)

In the first statement, Bekederemo highlights Dore's pomp and greed in the sense that even though he already has enough power and possession, he still makes efforts to look for the most minute details of the least importance to which he must lord himself over despite having his hands full of more important matters. Dore acknowledges this in his reply using the hippopotamus as an example. Ijaw people had numerous encounters with hippopotamuses in the past (although they are greatly reduced today). One of the most common problems with the hippopotamus is not just its ferocity but the comprehensive destruction it can cause to a boat in the river or people on land. Traders and fishermen used to be wary of this creature while going about their business. This animal has been known to tip over canoes and go after both the canoes and whatever they contain. The paddle though the instrument for movement is not as important as the boat itself, its occupants and the goods being carried but because everything at that point is an enemy to the hippopotamus, it goes to any length to attack whatever it sees, even causing damage to an object of no value.

This is what Dore compares himself with while trying to make Bekederemo believe that he does not stand a chance against him but Bekederemo who is very much well versed either in Ijaw philosophy or in his observation of the environment counters this statement with the same animal but with a different perspective. There is truth to what he says because when the Hippopotamus raises its head upwards from the river and blows water out of its mouth or nostrils (which is the 'spit' Bekederemo talks about), the water falls back on its head because its physiology and the river give it limited movement to avoid the water falling on it. Bekederemo uses this to make Dore aware that though he claims to have the unquestionable ability to take actions and cause a complete destruction, he still has his limits and his actions will have consequences on him. This cuts Dore's boasting short and he issues talkative warnings instead. He is aware that Bekederemo cannot be easily bullied as he too is not without

power which he has gained from status and wealth and that he can use these things at his disposal to fight Dore.

This war of proverbs again repeats itself a little later in the same conversation when Egbe, Bekederemo's brother in-law is trying to settle the quarrel between them. As Egbe tries to convince Dore of no ill intent from Bekederemo, Dore accuses him of taking sides with Bekederemo because he is married to Bekederemo's sister, Fiobode. He says that even with certain grievances he should have had against Bekederemo, he still defends him like he is under a spell and is "besotted" by Fiobode (12). This statement made by Dore is most likely out of sheer surprise in seeing the loyalty of Egbe to his brother in-law but it does not take away the suggestion of witchcraft as it is a common thing in the culture to wonder about the interference of external forces when certain baffling events take place:

BEKEDEREMO: My sister carries no charms in amulets, only her natural gifts that enable the weakest woman carry her man, even like the delicate dish she serves him.

DORE: Hear the hawk playing the morning bird!

BEKEDEREMO: The hawk does not live for the chicken.

DORE: Why must you always swoop in with every word spoken? I didn't call my daughter a witch. (*All for Oil* 2009:13)

Before getting to this point in the argument, Dore has already accused Bekederemo of being sly and cunning. An example is where he says "Look at him! When he wants to, he can be winning in his ways, melting you down like the palm oil that brings him his riches. But most of the time, true to his praise names, he fears nobody" (11). Dore did the same thing again calling Bekederemo a predator who pretends to be a harmless person as he uses nice words to defend his sister saying, "Hear the Hawk play the morning-bird" (13). In his sister's defence Bekederemo as is his nature responds again saying "The Hawk does not live for the Chicken" (13). This means that even if he (and possibly his sister Fiobode) is a hawk, a bird of that level does not owe its existence to a smaller bird like the chicken, meaning that there is no victim in this case no matter the accusation Dore levels against them. Dore does not accept the accusation of calling Fiobode a witch and therefore defends himself. This results in the resolution of this long argument as Egbe swoops in and latches onto his last statement with the words:

EGBE: No, my elder, you did not. We all belong to Ogogomaro and therefore should not harm one another. As it is, we were just about to eat when you came in. That tells the good things you wish in your heart for this household. So let's have your prayers. (*All for Oil* 2009:13)

After this statement is made, they all settle down to eat amidst lighter conversation. This is a typical traditional style of rhetoric common among the Ijaw where speech is constantly infused with proverbs, idioms and traditional beliefs all common to the Ijaw people and drawn from their natural surroundings. As is seen here, this quarrel does not end with one party being wrong and the other being right but communality takes the place of discord with the wise choice of words by Egbe acknowledging their ancestry. The timing of Dore's arrival was another instrument Egbe used to bring calm as food is highly appreciated among the Ijaw people and is seen as a good thing. Dore's arrival at the time of a good thing happening is also what Egbe uses to flatter Dore and instead of a separation where each party goes their own way, there is a better bond through the medium of food and acknowledgment of a common ancestry which binds them together more than any person's personal ambition or political interest. Such methods repeat themselves over and over again among Ijaw literature.

Coincidental to the just concluded war of words between Chief Bekederemo and Dore, is a very similar exchange that takes place in another one of Clark's plays titled *Song of a Goat.* Zifa is enraged by the suggestion the masseur gives him to let another man sleep with his wife due to his impotence; a suggestion which goes against tradition and Zifa's person. Zifa threatens to beat up the masseur and the masseur, an old friend of Zifa's father, gives this reply:

MASSEUR: You are eaten up with anger but although you crush me, a cripple, between your strong hands, it will not solve your problem. What I suggest our fathers did not forbid even in days of old. Why the hippopotamus wants a canoe, it also wants paddles.

ZIFA: Dirt, dung and drippings at dark! I am that hippopotamus. I spit but it falls on my head. (*Song of a Goat* 2009:15)

As much as this is almost the exact same exchange as that which takes place between Chief Bekederemo and Dore, the meaning of this exchange is quite different. The context of this communication is key to understanding why it is different. Zifa is immensely afraid of the shame that will becloud his image were he to ask someone else to sleep with his wife as the secret of his impotence will be exposed and this same shame will not let him sleep with his

wife either. He continues to make her wait while he finds a cure so that they can have more children. His patrilineal line of the family already does not have an impressionable image among his people as his father died of leprosy and the news of his impotence will not just bring embarrassment to his image but also further condemn his family line.

The masseur on the other hand is concerned about his wife Ebiere and the consequences of starving her of sex for so long. This he tells Ebiere at the beginning of the play when he says "An empty house, my daughter, is a thing of danger. If men will not live in it bats or grass will, and that is enough signal for worse things to come in." (3). This same suggestion is what he also makes known to Zifa at the beginning of their own conversation saying, "One learns to do without the masks he can no longer wear. They pass on to those behind." (8). When the Masseur speaks of the Hippopotamus and the paddle in this instance, he is saying that Zifa can have the conventional "best of both worlds" in the sense that he can satisfy his wife and also make room for children while continuing his search for a cure but Zifa's reply about the spit that falls on his head declares the Masseur's suggestion as a counterproductive measure which will strip him of his dignity and immensely compound his shame, both to himself and to the people waiting to mock him in his community. This play represent's one of Clark's best-known works, earning the praise of Wole Soyinka:

> It remains however, an excellent premise from which to enter the metrical consciousness of the African world. The play is contained within a microcosmic completeness already described … A play of brooding violence, its central motif, the symbolic design may be described as one of contained, poetic violence … human beings whose occupation and environment are elemental and visceral. Flood and ebb affect their daily existence … mists and marsh colour their mood … Within this claustrophobia of threatening metaphors, existence is economical and intense … exterior forces merely reinforce their circumscribed intensity of being. (1976:50)

Another feature of such imagery and symbolism in proverbs and idioms is that just as the meaning of a proverb can change with the context in which it is used, the same objects of imagery or choice of words in an expression can be changed while the meaning remains the same due to the stability of the context in which it is used. According to Omeh Ngwoke:

> A symbolic word or expression … is an image simply because it evokes a mental picture of the things it refers to. The difference between a symbolic image and the other types (the literal and the figurative) is that a symbolic image has the capacity to extend its imagism since the evoked reality suggests other levels of meaning. A flag for instance, has the image of a piece of cloth

> with colour patches, but its symbolic reference extends its meaning beyond a piece of cloth to that of a nation and even more (2017:159).

An example of this is Barclays Ayakoroma's *A Matter of Honour* where the people of Amabiri have concluded that it is an urgent matter for them to capture the corpse of Oweibi whom they claim as their son from the people of Angiama (who also claim him as their son) before they bury him. The nature of this urgency is first seen when Kuro, a member of Amabiri urges them into immediate deliberation with the proverb, "They say a man with fire in his hand, has no time for pleasantries, he welcomes no delays" (*A Matter of Honour* 1999:7). He repeats the same words while talking to the people of Angiama when he goes with a small company of people to pay them an official visit to demand the corpse (20). In recounting the events of that visit to the people of Amabiri, Abere (who was part of the company) speaks of the brevity of their demand with the proverb; "A man whose house is in flames does not have time to chase rats" (36) and finally, when the people Angiama see the threat which Amabiri pose to their burial preparations, they also see the need to make urgent changes to their burial plans. Pifa summarises the opinion of most of the people present when he says "A man with hot food in his mouth has no time for talks" (49). Though these three statements are grammatically different, they are semantically the same. This goes to show the flexibility of the proverbial and idiomatic expressions found among the people and it is possible for them to carry as much of a semantic dynamism as words within a sentence which bears some semblance to Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist proposition where as stated by Aronoff et al, he says that "linguistic entities are parts of a system and are defined by their relations to one another within said system" (2017:108) although in this case, the proverb is not actually part of a linguistic system but instead it is part of a cultural and anthropological system.

With a lot of proverbs and idiomatic expressions floating round the typical Ijaw rhetoric, wonders as to the story behind their origin but then the use of proverbs in general is almost as old as time and with the dynamism of culture, new proverbs are created regularly due to the circumstances an individual may face. This is coupled with the fact that no culture exists in isolation and the Ijaws cannot claim to be the sole originators of any proverb, saying or idiomatic expression which they use hence it is almost an impossible task to ascertain the origins of many of these forms of wisdom either spoken or embedded in songs. One of the most popular proverbs in Southern Nigeria and possibly the whole of Nigeria says that *What an elder can see while sitting on a stool, a youth cannot see even if he climbs a palm tree*.

It is most likely impossible to ascertain the origin of such a proverb as it has been used across so many different cultures which have their own origins but we can at least assume that it originated from the south because the palm tree is more common in the south of Nigeria than in any other region. But then again, there are many variations with which this particular proverb is told and although the message remains the same, the varying descriptions and word choices with which this proverb is told everywhere might provide a bit of a reasonable assumption as to the background of the person using it. For instance, one has heard this proverb used just with the word "tree" but on average, southerners on a more general basis, use the word "palm tree" in the proverb and since palm trees are some of the tallest trees that can be found in the south, it makes sense for the southerner to use the palm tree not only to emphasize the height of the tree from which the youth looks down, but also to emphasize the disparity between the wisdom of an elder and that of a young person. Alagoa explains a few of these complexities which arise from his own personal efforts to ascertain the origins of some of these sayings. He says:

> Dating is a difficult problem for all oral tradition but probably most tricky for oral literature. It is, of course, easy to determine the historical period to which the literary data refer but not at what time the literature itself came into being. Thus proverbs, the pithy sayings of the wise embodying personal and general historical experience, may have been coined at the time of the incidents, or years afterwards. (1968:236)

He of course acknowledges the futility of trying to ascertain the origins of all proverbs as although (with Nembe being the case study) there are very few Nembe proverbs whose authors are known, "most are part of the accumulated wisdom and heritage of generations of ancestors". In a few cases, some of the origins of these proverbs are still known and Alagoa finds some success in tracing the origins of a few proverbs which he shares. The first is *Bila begere / Bila ba* meaning "A Bila spear killed the Bila" and this saying is used when there is an internal conflict mostly within a family which results in harm to one or both parties (237). The origin of this proverb is rooted in a war which took place in the eighteenth century between King Ikata of Nembe and Jike of Bile, a Kalabari town (which is pronounced as Bila by the Nembe), the irony being that these two figures were actually blood cousins and the result of this war was Nembe gaining victory over Bile but not without Ikata shooting Jike (Alagoa 1968:237). The word "Spear" in this proverb is very much like the word "Aru/Boat" in the sense that, it can be used as an adverb for any weapon at all and in this case, the spear was a gun.

Another proverb which could be analysed here is the proverb of procrastination *Kobai ene/ bekenowei bagha* meaning "Tomorrow, tomorrow, did not kill the white man". According to Alagoa, this proverb originates from a situation which took place in 1830 where the actual "white man" in this proverb was involved but he cannot ascertain whether it was Richard Lander or his brother John Lander who was to be sacrificed after both brothers were captured. In the course of their captivity, either King Kulo or his son King Boy Amain was able to ransom them from their captivity to the Obi of Aboh and they were brought to Nembe (237). A sacrifice of one of the brothers was demanded by the chiefs and it was the procrastination of either one or both of these rulers that saved this brother from that fate as both rulers involved themselves in a series of negotiations with the brothers and English merchants in order to profit from the captivity of the Landers.

Another link to the first chapter that this one provides is the reference to the unavoidable presence of Animism. One only has to look at the references made to animal, water, divine and other forms of imagery in the writings of these two authors to see its unequivocal influence on the writer. Although there might not be the outright mention of mythical creatures like the stories of Ozidi or Kemefiere the Ogress, there are continuous references to non-human and uncontrollable circumstances, while at the same time, addressing different parts of the environment just like they have a form of essence- a power or identity behind the mere physical.

The writer today, is a modern version of the bard or griot who existed in older times as with the likes of Atazi and Okabou. The organising, recording and translating of Okabou's narrative of the legend of Ozidi and also the publication of Clark's own *Ozidi* play, is in a sense a significant moment as it signifies a new era in storytelling where the storyteller now has access to a limitless audience and is able to not only preserve the integrity of the story or philosophy by writing, but is also able to further develop it with the contributions of members of his limitless audience. The undisputed influence of the Ijaw environment can never be over emphasized as its presence is always officially or unofficially acknowledged in every work of the writer and a destruction of the Ijaw natural world view may very much in essence be the beginning of the destruction of the Ijaw writer/producer/performer. Even though it is the character of a culture to morph into the demands of the current age, its very foundation is found in the very nature from which it was first drawn and this nature is solidly behind the impulsive memories, the urge to write and the urge to preserve it.

In the interview with Don Burness, Okara also spoke of a moral drive behind his book, *An Adventure to Juju Island* (1981) which was written for children. When asked if he had the same concern behind his other children's books, he replied, "Impregnated in all of the stories are some moral values, and traditional values – good ones. Children now-a-days in urban cities are all uprooted from villages and traditions. We have to go back" (1985:17). This statement coincides with the idea Chinua Achebe tries to convey in his essay, "The Novelist as a Teacher" where like Okara, he speaks briefly about some of his grievances with African societies, the chief of them being "Needless to say, we have our own sins and blasphemies recorded against our name. If I were God I would regard as the very worst our acceptance – for whatever reason – of racial inferiority." (1973:3). He then gives an example of a boy under the tutorship of his wife who used the word "Winter" instead of "Harmattan" for fear of mockery by his classmates and he makes the statement; "I think it is part of my business as a writer to teach that boy that there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that the palm tree is a fit subject for poetry" (3). Furthermore, as he draws this essay to a close, Achebe cites William Abraham, a Ghanaian professor of philosophy on his thoughts concerning the literary contributions of writers to Africa. Abraham states that as there are African experts in other spheres of life such as science, history and politics who strive to contribute to the development of Africa, why should the literary expert be left out? Achebe carries on from this thought with a statement of his own:

> I for one would not wish to be excused, I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set on the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them … Art is important, but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don't see that the two need be mutually exclusive (4)

In conclusion, as has been emphasized in this chapter, there can be no separation between the Ijaw writer and his/her environment as the writer is a product of the natural setting and its system. Even if the writer is separated momentarily from the environment as Clark and Okara were at different points in time, their identity is carried with them and their publications stem from the nature they have carried within themselves though separated from their land. This is very much in line with the song mentioned in the first chapter that says, "Even if I am in an Airplane, I am holding onto my father's sceptre". The writers who have either been studied or briefly mentioned in this chapter all share a common strength which is their ability to take the oral tradition of their people and weave it into the context of modernity. Through their efforts

towards the development of an oral tradition, Clark and Okara were able to give a modern voice and intellectuality to the same system that had sustained their people for centuries. One way in which this intellectuality would reflect itself is in the consistency of appearance of certain thematic ideas throughout not only their works but that of other Ijaw writers as drawn from Ijaw oral tradition. These thematic consistencies will be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter Six

Themes in Ijaw Oral Tradition

Having discussed up till this point the various means through which Ijaw Philosophy might find expression through Oral tradition, this chapter serves to study recurrent themes in these different modes of expression. These themes have been made visible due to the consistent appearance of certain situations, which occur throughout the oral and the written text. They not only serve as a link to various aspects of Ijaw Oral tradition which have already been studied, but they serve as a way into the ancient and more present state of the psyche of the modern Ijaw individual.

Vengeance

One of the most prominent and recurring themes throughout traditional Ijaw lore and culture is the theme of revenge. The perspective given to revenge among the people is given as a form of judicial proceeding in order to maintain law and order. In order to understand this concept properly, let us revisit the concept of the Egbesu myth discussed in the first chapter concerning the Ijaw worldview under the manifestations of Woyingi. Once again, the whole of the Egbesu concept can be narrowed down to two fundamental statements; the first is the "Non infringement of the fundamental human rights of any living thing" and the second is that "All things function as a whole within the same space and time". It will be recalled that Egbesu is seen as an enforcer of justice and discipline. These Egbesu concepts have become part of the thought system of a lot of Ijaw people, particularly in Bayelsa State.

The first statement of Egbesu means that in order for a vengeful action to be taken, there has to be in the first place, an infringement on the fundamental rights of the affected individual or entity. A call for the compensation of the victim, is what attaches a righteous belief to the act of vengeance. The second statement of Egbesu likewise throws more light on the first and gives a wider perspective on Egbesu's cause. If all things are to function as a whole within the same space and time, then a certain misdeed committed by an individual will either create a void in that wholeness or cause an imbalance in the collective creation of Woyingi. It is then the duty of Egbesu, to fill in the void and correct the imbalance created by whatever misdeed has taken place and this act of restoration is done by any means necessary. An Ijaw individual who experiences any (especially sudden) mishap without any immediate or obvious reason as to its

cause will usually find him/herself questioning either witchcraft or any past misdeed which might not have been atoned for.

It is for these reasons that even till today, a lot of Ijaws take revenge very seriously as the concept of revenge is not just an action taken out of emotional outbursts, but one done as a result of righteous necessity. Although an average Ijaw individual might not articulate this underlying philosophy in two fundamental statements from an academic point of view as has been done here, there is a consciousness of this cause in the lifestyle and sense of order among the people. Some of these thoughts can be seen in the statements of Ijaw individuals in real life or characters in stories. One instance is in a statement made by the former governor of Bayelsa State, Chief Diepreye S P. Alamieyeseigha, which was published on the online *Daily Trust* newspaper on the 14th of May 2002. In the statement, he said that Egbesu provided "all-round protective power to its adherents" and that "Whenever you are in trouble (or) a kind of bad situation and you shout 'Egbesu o! that the god would come to intervene".

One of the most conspicuous cases where vengeance along with these two concepts are present at the same time is in the already briefly discussed concept of *Ozidi*, where this worldview is mentioned both in the compiled saga and in the play written by J.P Clark.

The whole story of *Ozidi* tells of vengeance as Ozidi junior returns to Orua to bring vengeance upon the people who killed his father, Ozidi senior. In the saga itself, this vengeance is immediately seen in night one with the unexplainable events that take place with Ozidi's newly forged sword. Twice the sword is forged by the blacksmith from Awka but with a defect at its tip. When Ozidi tests the sword each time, its tip breaks off and instead of falling to the ground as is expected, the tip mysteriously flies to the house of the two leading people who murdered his father, the first being Ofe, (2006:44) and the second being Azeza (46). Each tip lodges itself into each of their first-born children, killing them. It should be noted that these two events take place when Ozidi has only just returned quietly to Orua and finished clearing his father's abandoned home. Although he is preparing himself to redeem his father's name, Ozidi has not even begun to make his official challenges to his father's murderers but already the cosmos seems to favour Ozidi as it latches on to the mistakes in Ozidi's weapon to kill the children of those who first murdered his father with weapons. It is also interesting that the forces of nature seemed to have waited for this act, though not deliberate, to be done by the hand of the junior Ozidi as their children could have been killed at any time in the past after the senior Ozidi was

killed. Ofe's reaction to his dead child already makes some of these thought patterns obvious when he cries:

> Oh from where comes the misfortune, oh this misfortune? Yes, this town, when Ozidi himself lived quietly, still with sticks and staffs we beat him to death, so we'd have peace, now is there any other thing I have done wrong – yes, what has caused this accident? And it has come and killed my eldest child? Oh what terrible task! Who are so envious of this one sovereign I have? (*The Ozidi Saga* 2006:45)

Ofe does the exact thing a typical Ijaw individual would do after such a sudden mishap, which is to question past misdeeds or suspect witchcraft. Any reader who has followed the story to this point will immediately notice Ofe's dishonest and hypocritical analysis of his past actions which are not properly atoned for. In his dishonesty, he becomes the victim and begins suspecting "envious" people. If Ozidi senior lived in peace, why would anyone want to kill him in order to achieve peace? Ozidi senior in the past, is unjustly treated by Ofe and his contemporaries because Ozidi senior honourably and dutifully serves the clans of these other people while they produced their kings who had exceptionally short reigns. Ozidi is neglected when his own clan produces a king which in this case, is his brother, Temugedege. Ozidi in rage at their actions, threatens that if they do not bring the same kind of tributes he had brought their clans during the time of their reigns, they would suffer his wrath as he is the greatest warrior in Orua.

This causes dissent among his peers and rather than apologise or mitigate his anger, they conspire, murder him and bring his head as a tribute to his brother (2006:1-11). It is now apparent that "Peace" could not possibly be the reason why Ofe and his followers killed Ozidi. Though Ofe hypocritically absolves himself of this act, he is still held accountable by the forces of creation and the death of his child and Azeza's is just the beginning of the many travails that will befall him by the hands of the junior Ozidi who after these happenings begins to issue several challenges to each of his father's murderers. When Ozidi finally begins to issue his challenges, Ewiri the Tortoise is the first to point out the cause of Ozidi's appearance and its immediate impact with an Ijaw idiom, something the others were already warned about with the death of Ozidi senior. He says "I have long told you this story. A man wronged will often bear a strong son, didn't I tell you so? Now trouble has come again. Indeed the thing has come" (2006:57). In Clark's own *Ozidi* version which is written as a play, Ewiri speaks about Ozidi to Ofe and his company before Ozidi challenges them. He says "Many, many years ago several of you here planted a champion yam. Well, that yam you sowed several seasons gone by has

now grown beyond arm's span." (2009:77). It is quite helpful to know that the typical size of a yam in the Niger Delta is less than the length of a full-grown arm and for this particular yam to grow beyond it, it means that the time for retribution is more than ripe. In both versions, the culprits receive this message with indignation as is expected. Amongst many deliberations and conflicts, they reach a resolve to kill Ozidi junior as well with Clark's version having the advantage here in giving the deciding discourse leading to the resolve.

AGBOGIDI: Whoever thought the cock has a chick?

OGUARAN: What shall we do before he flies forth?

AZEZABIFE: Seek to contain him immediately, that's what we must do for without doubt, he has come to scratch our eyes out. *Ozidi* (2009:79)

The initial statement recorded here by Ewiri adds more validation to the second statement of Egbesu in the sense that as the man wronged here (Ozidi senior) is murdered unlawfully, it means that he is no longer part of the wholesome collective function of the cosmos and his absence has created a vacuum. Ozidi before his death was the greatest warrior among all the Tarakiri clans and rightfully, Ozidi junior must also be born and made strong not only to fill in his father's vacant position but to also be used as an instrument to correct the perpetrators of the imbalance. A study of this story will also enable the reader understand that apart from the injustice that has been done to Ozidi senior, his murderers are well aware of the cosmic shift they have created in the land and this is referenced in Agbogidi's statement of concern after Azezabife's resolve to kill the younger Ozidi.

Agbogidi says, "The sacrifice of a son of the soil to his ancestors is a long rope without end I said at that time" meaning that there is no end to the repercussions of such an action (*Ozidi* 2009:79). Agbogidi however, is egged on by the others to continue with their decision. It is not surprising that Ozidi's grandmother Oreame who is a famous witch is able to lay stake to the claims she makes before Tamara (who as we remember from the introduction, is one of the manifestations of Woyingi, the supreme goddess) as Ozidi is about to fight with Azezabife and this is her claim:

> … I beseech you, is my child in the right in this matter?... Where has it been heard said a son of the soil was sacrificed to the spirits of his land?... He is a fledgling eagle flying for the first time to call home his father forgotten in some

> dungpit in the swamp, so he can take his seat among the worthy dead and have served to him his own dish at times of sacrifice… If I am wrong in inciting the boy forth, sever right now, the string that binds him firm to my hand… but if it is your wish … then let my eagle go, let him go now and pluck out their eyes, pick the flesh clean off their bones. (*Ozidi* 2009:91)

The eventual escapades of Ozidi would confirm that Tamara was behind Ozidi's vengeance. The statement made by Ewiri does not just stand for great warriors like Ozidi but also for the common individual who has had his/her rights infringed upon as the children of such people are encouraged to grow strong in order to bring honour to the name of the parent and deal vengeance on the culprits. As much as the wronged individual is rightfully encouraged to seek vengeance, the actions of this individual must fall within the specified reason for his/her vengeful acts and must include the guilty individual only as the concept of vengeance here does not permit excesses in the name of retribution as excesses contribute to yet another infringement and imbalance. In Okabou's narrated version, after Ozidi kills all his father's murderers, he begins to lust for more action and with Oreame urging him on, he begins to kill innocent people such as Tebekawene's sister and nephew. At a point, he even considers killing his own uncle Temugedege who has continuously abused him for bringing trouble upon his return to Orua and which Oreame warns will yield very serious repercussions. This attracts the visit of the Smallpox King who attacks Ozidi with the deadly disease that even Oreame with all her powers is unable to treat and it is only through the treatment that comes from his innocent mother Orea, that Ozidi is revived.

This treatment seems to have a purgative effect on him as after he is well, he declares "… I am Ozidi!... Hey, Orea… My mother! Those who killed my father I have now taken them all … Oreame, you the woman who knows everything … take my sword! All the battles in this world I have fought them. I shall never seek another fight" and thus ends the story on good terms as Ozidi has now taken a wife and is prepared to live a good life. (*The Ozidi Saga* 387)

The inability to execute vengeance among the Ijaw people is in general, seen as a major proof of weakness and is seriously frowned upon in the society. It will be recalled in Chapter 3 which speaks about masquerades, that an Ijaw youth often puts him/herself within a provocative distance of aggressive masquerades not minding the risk of being flogged or sustaining some serious injury or the other just for the sake of the ability to brag about boldness and strength. There are many other activities among the people that require a test of physical and mental strength such as wrestling and boat competitions. An inability to execute vengeance is on the

same pedestal as the inability to enforce truth and justice and such a person will never be trusted with any position of influence. Some thoughts were shared concerning this issue in the interview with Professor S.N. Agoro, Dr. Benedict Binebai and Mr Ineritei, all lecturers in the Niger Delta University in Bayelsa State on the 19th of September 2017. Mr Ineritei recalled an instance where a young man had members of a community bring to him the man who murdered his father and asked him to do likewise but he could not carry it out and the consequence was that though he was not exiled from the community, he became the equivalent of an outcast. Professor Agoro who is not Ijaw but Epie, also recalled an issue which took place decades ago in his community, where vengeance was taken on an individual who had committed murder in the past. After being killed, the murderer's body was left in view of the public for a few days as a warning to the community. According to Professor Agoro, the Epie people migrated from Edo State and have lived with the Ijaws of Bayelsa for many years, thus adopting some of the traditions of Ijaw people.

Struggle

This theme still falls within the confines of the Egbesu thought system and one of the major reasons for this is because, there are times when it takes a fight to prevent one's own rights from being infringed upon. This is due to the fact that although there are generally laws and systems in place to protect human rights, there are factors/people who have no regard for the rights of any individual or entity. Another reason is that although all things exist within the same time and space, there are often cases in which the collective co-existence is interrupted. This interruption could be caused by individual actions such as the deliberate knavish actions of Ijaw natives like Ogboinba of the creationist myth, Ozidi's killers, or external factors such as the Royal Niger Company of Ola Rotimi's *Akassa You Mi*. They could also be caused by any other imbalance which may be perceived to originate from the spiritual/ancestral side of things. Based on the gravity of the fault, the solutions might either be simple or quite complex and struggles are often involved in restoring co-existence among the people.

These struggles are seen in the Ijaw individual's relationship with the spirit world and natural environment, the relationship the Ijaw people have among themselves and finally, the relationship the Ijaw have with the world. According to Green and Koroye (2009:193-224), Ijaw literature "expresses an intense awareness of the environment and the harshness that the

people have to cope with" (219). They also reference Gabriel Okara's description of the environment in *The Voice* where Okolo journeys to Sologa:

> The engine canoe against the strong water pushed … Soon, the day's eye became bad. It became so bad and black and closed that it could not be looked at … and the thunder sounded like the sound of one hundred cannons going off near your ears … Then the sky suddenly broke and when the rain from above poured, it passed telling. The rain drops were like six-inch cannon balls. It did not rain like rain. It rained more than raining (1970: 61-62)

These struggles reflect in the conversations, thought systems and actions of the people. Vengeance as earlier mentioned can be identified as one of the ways in which struggles can be achieved but not every outright war among the Ijaw people is an act of vengeance. There is struggle present in virtually every play, novel, story or myth that has been discussed in the course of this study and they are present in the stories and documented writings of the people. Concerning the stories, the creation myth has Ogboinba who struggles with different authorities up to the point of the ultimate authority, Woyingi, to change a destiny she initially chose for herself. There was a struggle between the Eastern Ijaw gods for the most relevance with Owomekaso of the Kalabari people winning a competition over her brothers and sisters (Tasie, 1977:14).

There was the struggle of the matriarchs of some of the masquerade festivals today. First Ekineba whose struggle was between being kidnapped by spirits and showing men the right things to do with the risk of being kidnapped again if the dances were not executed properly (Horton, 1963: 94). Then came Igebe who struggled to be relevant in a male dominated Ekine society eventually bearing a son (Jenewari 1978:1). The general story of Ozidi starts with the struggle of a man who ends up dying and his son who has not yet been born, has already been destined to enter into this struggle for life and honour. Even the popular childrens' stories are full of the trickster tortoise who struggles to survive using his wit and cunning on his neighbours. Among the more documented ones there is the story of Chief Igbanibo Braide in contention with his own people who ends up escaping with his life. (Falola, 2004: 310).

Another case is the actual life story of Ikoli Harcourt White, a Kalabari musician who was orphaned at the age of 15 and at the same time, became stricken with leprosy. Harcourt White with other lepers in the society then faced an uphill task of becoming significant in the society despite their plague. Ola Rotimi turns this struggle of Harcourt White and his fellow lepers into a play titled *Hopes of the Living Dead – A Drama of Struggle* (1988) where he dutifully gives

background details of the lepers involved. The title of this play is very apt as victims of leprosy seem not to only experience a "deadening" of their body due to its symptoms but they are also avoided by healthy people. As much as there is no hope for a dead individual, there is still hope for the living, even though their bodies seem to be dying of leprosy. In the play, a number of these lepers are gathered into a general hospital by a Scotsman named Dr. Fergusson in hope of finding a cure but they soon find themselves in conflict with a series of circumstances which they cannot control ranging from the individual struggles between themselves to conflicts with some of the hospital staff and finally, the changing colonial government which would eventually become the Nigerian government. One thing to note before this play is analysed is that some of the lepers in this play are named by the former positions they held before they became afflicted by leprosy. These include Editor, Court Clerk (CC), Catechist and a few other characters who are not mentioned in this analysis.

The play begins with the lepers in conflict with the hospital Matron who despises their singing and tries to end it before the time of their curfew. From the replies given by a few of the lepers at this point in time, it is evident that they have accumulated frustrations over the way this same matron might have addressed them in the past and due to this sudden boldness on their part, the Senior Medical Officer (SMO) is called (1988:3-5). To gain some understanding of the lepers' frustrations, a few excerpts of their conversations will be examined. The first instance is when the matron asks them all to keep standing till the SMO arrives and Hannah who is one of the lepers, retorts that in their pains, they cannot hold such a position till the SMO comes into the room (7). The matron in shock, says "Miss Hannah!" But Hannah responds with "Don't Miss Hannah me! What's the matter! Don't we have a right to live in this land - just because we are like this …?" She then goes on to make the others sit down while waiting- even forcing those who have refused to sit down for fear of the matron. A few lines later, she speaks against the matron with the following words:

HANNAH: To people like her … we are like children without father or mother. When you don't take a bath, they tell you you smell, and they beat you. The day you take a bath, they beat you still and say you're wasting water. (*Hopes of the Living Dead*, 1988:8).

Another leper present in this scene who is simply known as "the Editor" proceeds to speak of the respectable positions a number of the lepers in that room held before this disease confined them to such a state and is in the process of pleading for understanding when the SMO arrives.

Although the senior medical officer is more understanding of the situation than the matron, he tries to explain to them that their activities might cause a disturbance to the other patients of the hospital but some of the lepers retort that these other patients are more privileged than they are. Taken aback, the senior medical officer tells them that they are ungrateful, that they do not know the efforts put in by the hospital to give them what they have and blames Dr. Fergusson for "all this rubbish" as they too have suffered a few ills because of the public (11):

SMO: Rubbish, yes! If what we'll be getting from you is ingratitude and impertinence. From the public, we get disgust and reproach. Daily. It all means that our experiment with you is rubbish. You know what the public calls the Doctor, don't you? The mad Scotsman!

EDITOR: Jesus wept!

CC: Please – don't

SMO: Well, just to show you how much the people appreciate our work with you!

EDITOR: That one! Don't call him that. Let no one – in my presence call him that! He's not mad … Dr. Fergusson is not … m-a-d! (*Hopes of the Living Dead,* 1988:12).

This particular exchange ends with a brief but disheartening message to the lepers that they might not be in the same situation after a month. They later find out that Dr. Fergusson will be leaving the country soon. Even at this point, the reader might already begin to experience a slight struggle on whose side to take in this argument as both sides seem to be at loggerheads with certain groups of people, regardless of any decision made. The lepers clearly have a strong point about their condition, but so do the hospital staff who even though begrudgingly, have taken efforts to deal with this condition although these efforts are not without repercussions. The difference between both sides at this point is that the lepers are in a situation which they have no power or skill to change but this cannot be said of the hospital staff. This is further understood when the lepers discuss among themselves their apprehensions concerning the departure of the British from the country.

From their recent experiences, they do not trust their fellow Nigerians to take care of them. While all of this takes place the main character Ikoli is not present in the room but when he returns, he comes in with more disheartening news about their future. This scene ends with his monologue: "We fool ourselves, if we think that the world outside will give us peace to

continue to be as of one blood, together, in this place. Children of our fathers, our struggle has begun". This is followed by a chorus asking for God's protection upon them who are also his children and have done no wrong to deserve all that is happening to them. (20)

With this hopelessness looming around, the lepers begin to take laws into their hands. This begins with the gradual application of force to the demands which they make concerning their needs. The turning point from helplessness to a strong resolve comes after the first letters they have sent to the Senior Medical Officer of the hospital in Port Harcourt where they are located yield no results. The Court Clerk gets frustrated with the humility with which they write their letters as this feeling of fear is beginning to cause divisions and insecurities among them. He asks, "Meanwhile what are we doing? Writing letters, scribbling memos. As usual, the authorities won't reply to this one. Why? Because in the first letter, we *begged*. In the second letter we *appealed*. Now, we are *beseeching*…" (23). This leads to another letter directly to Lagos which at that time, was the capital of Nigeria. The letter this time has a few strong word choices: "…And whereas we have of late been victims of utter neglect such as befit only a nation where the dignity of man has no place, and the sanctity of his soul, no value: We therefore demand in the name of humanity, that you improve our condition…" (35)

This letter proves to be the beginning of greater troubles as in the next act, Harcourt Whyte and Nweke as representatives of the lepers, are in a volatile conversation with the Senior Medical Officer and the Police Superintendent (43). They have just been told that they are to evacuate not just the hospital, but the city of Port Harcourt and return to their villages. Harcourt Whyte makes a plea for the lepers to be given a place by the government where they can live for themselves but this falls on deaf ears for the same reason the medical officer gives them in the first act and that is people outside are increasingly afraid of a growing epidemic due to the presence of the lepers in the hospital and the city. As in the case of the letters, the plea gradually becomes a bold demand by Harcourt Whyte which irks both the medical officer and the superintendent. The superintendent acknowledging the powers vested in him, orders them to leave in twenty-four hours. Ikoli retorts saying, "And by the powers conferred on me by our suffering people, I say: give us a chance to live like human beings, or we shall remain bones in your selfish throats forever". The superintendent on hearing this threat, tells them that they will get trouble if they want it. Ikoli duly responds that they will wait for the trouble given because: "Try as they might, bad rulers in this land shall never find strength enough to crush the people down forever." At this point, they are ordered to walk out and Nweke pulls Ikoli out of the

office for fear of impending danger. As they leave, the superintendent barks a reminder "Twenty-four hours!" And Harcourt White barks the reply, "Same to you!" (48)

The series of simultaneous struggles the lepers initially encounter in the beginning of the play is again visible. Firstly, they struggle with their condition, then they struggle with the perceptions of the non-afflicted people about their condition who then take actions which do not allow the lepers to live dignified lives. Ikoli himself as the leader of these lepers is at the forefront of this struggle. Among them all, he is the one who faces the full force of the government for his bold demands so that at some point, he has to be pulled away (which in itself is also another form of struggle) by a fellow leper for fear of serious consequences. The situation further deteriorates when policemen are sent to get them out the next day but are unable to do so, due to an organised resistance from the lepers. The lepers then get information that the government will listen to their needs and transfer them to a new location with adequate facilities. All of this is not without further quarrels between firstly, the lepers and themselves and secondly, the lepers and the hospital authorities. The lepers proceed to fend for themselves by growing their food instead of receiving free meals by the government, realising that they have been pampered too much by the likes of Dr. Fergusson. Despite this new development, Ikoli Harcourt Whyte warns of new obstacles ahead with a long monologue to close the play. He says:

> Now we've won our freedom. But this is only the beginning of a new struggle, my people… The day children of the porcupine made bond to drift apart: one, going this way, a mouse; the other going that way, a Bush rat, is the day both mouse and bushrat became food for cats… Must our saplings, yet to be born, curse our spirits, lacking in strength?... If the river stops the arm of the paddler going backwards, must it stop him going forward also?... Wisdom of the crab: it says 'forward'! (*sliding first to the right, then left*) This way – forward … that way, it is forward. Rather than go backwards, the crab breaks of its legs… (*Hopes of the Living Dead* 1988:111).

The play ends with a chorus which speaks against fear because "Victory in the struggle demands faith in the cause". (112)

The two foremost Ijaw writers; Clark and Okara who have been studied in the previous chapter begin in almost the same situation experiencing a struggle within themselves and their identities as they begin to write and in their written works, the characters in their stories reflect all sorts of struggles. This struggle as seen is present everywhere with the individual and his/her environment, family and even deity. At the same time, there is a collective struggle present

either between Ijaw families, groups, communities or between the Ijaw nation and another entity.

Dr. Binebai, during the same interview on the 19th of September 2017, speaks on the struggle concerning both the Ijaw individual and the Ijaw nation. Concerning the individual, he brings up an interesting Ijaw proverb in English which says that "If the gods are not cruel, they will die of hunger and thirst" This does not mean that the Ijaw gods inherently exhibit cruelty to the people who worship them. The gods are primarily served for their usefulness and if the gods are primarily cruel, then it would undermine one of the first proverbs examined in chapter one of this study which says that "when a spirit becomes too furious, people will tell him the wood he was carved from" (Wariboko, 1999:28). On the contrary, it should be understood that as the gods are important to the people's way of life, it is their entitlement to make certain demands for their services and their demands may be easy or difficult to the degree in which they render services. It is usually in the difficulty of the demands that the cruelty of the gods can be perceived because the gods do not just want satisfaction but continue to reinforce their authority over the people by allowing difficulties into their lives so that the people can continue to depend on them and render the sacrifices which feed them. In this way, the gods maintain their self-preservation and ensure that they do not die of hunger and thirst.

Interestingly enough, Dr. Binebai explains that this proverb can be turned the other way round and be said thus: "If the people are not cruel, the gods will die of hunger and thirst". This again refers to the fact that the people can reject a god that is not working for them and it is therefore the duty of the gods to keep rendering services to the people or risk ceasing to exist among them (29). These two sayings put together mean that although there is a conventional agreement as to the power of the gods, there is often a struggle for power between humanity and divinity. Concerning a collective struggle, Dr Binebai also draws a number of considerable parallels to the plights of the Ijaw people right from the point of colonialism up till this point in time and why this theme might be a never-ending one. From the point of colonialism, the Ijaws have struggled with Europeans for their resources. After the creation of Nigeria, the Ijaws then struggled with the Federal Government for control of their resources. This was made more complicated by the fact that after the creation of Nigeria, there was a Northern, Western and Eastern region which all had premiers leading them but there was neither a Southern Region nor the presence of a premier representing the South-South Region as it is called today.

There was then another struggle from Ijaw leaders like Chief Harold Dappa-Biriye and Edwin Clark (who is the older brother of J.P Clark) for the creation of the South. It would then take a total of forty-seven years from Nigeria's independence for a southerner to get into the office of the presidency in the name of His Excellency, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan. During the course of the forty-seven years, there were uprisings from this struggle resulting in militancy and cultism under groups like "Egbesu Boys" and "Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force". The movements of these groups climaxed at different points between the early 1990s to 2000s. One of these points was the Odi massacre in Bayelsa state on November 20, 1999 where as reported by the Nigerian *Punch* Newspaper on December 16, 2017, soldiers were sent by the then President of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo after some of their colleagues had been ambushed and killed by some of these movements. The retaliation of the soldiers led to an alleged two thousand, four hundred and eighty-three civilians losing their lives as reported by the Nigerian newspaper, *This Day* on the 21st of November, 2002. There were other spats between these movements and the federal government so that their presence was recognised in foreign countries. The UK *Guardian* called them "Rebels" in their publication of the 25th of September 2004. Their profile also appeared on the Terrorism Research & Analytics Consortium webpage (TRAC), GlobalSecurity.org as well as on the archives of other countries such as the U.S Department of Justice.

The militancy in particular was seen as not only a struggle but an act of vengeance against federal authorities who were perceived to have been unfair to the people by approving local and foreign investments in the Niger Delta region without much benefit to the people. This was more so by reason of the negative effects of these investments such as oil spillages and gas flares which not only damaged land, sea and agriculture, but also caused negative environmental changes thereby making the indigenes more prone to health hazards.

This is not an attempt to take political sides but only serves to show that from all of these situations, it is seen that the Ijaws have been in a continuous struggle for relevance and Egbesu supports this struggle among the people. The struggle between the Ijaws and the government explained here is spoken purely from a literary point of view as conversations like this are usually subject to serious political and ethnic debates from other ethnic groups and the government at large. From this interview with Dr Binebai and his colleagues, it is clear that there is quite a difference between this theme of struggle and the general idea of struggle which is usually associated with rebellion and revolutions. Amidst Ijaw history, there is little to

suggest that the Ijaws are against authority and rulership as they are generally peaceful people but there is always a fight where there is a suspicion of unfairness or high-handedness.

Family Tradition

The institution of marriage and the family in Ijaw land is one of the most critical and most complex institutions in all of Ijaw culture. Some of these complexities have already been discussed briefly during the course of this study with Clark's *Song of a Goat* and *The Masquerade* as case studies (34-5). Under the subject of the Ikaki Masquerade (121), Robin Horton also speaks of fear of the "human tortoise" among the Kalabari people "so much so that they are reluctant to contract marriage alliances with certain Houses in which it is believed to abound" (1967:237). This is because the marriage involves two different individuals, their immediate families and in many cases, different communities (if the two people involved happen to come from different communities). Due to the nature of its complexity, there is always a lot of deliberation with rules being set and bargains being made. The union itself is then a significant part of the society and must contribute in one way or the other in order to sustain the society's continuity. Marriages give rise to the family and marriages done properly usually set the path for a successful family. Behind marriages are certain rules that must not be broken. For instance, there is a form of marriage (which is not practiced by every Ijaw community) where marriage to a woman is only seen as marriage to the flesh and blood of that woman as her bones belong to her community and must be returned when she dies.

The family structure among the Ijaws as previously explained, involves a lot of intricacies and the average Ijaw individual has many family ties to relatives and also ties to traditional systems and obligations and these obligations usually differ mainly due to the status or the gender of the individual in the family. The plays of Barclays Ayakoroma more than many other published Ijaw writings, show a lot of intricacies involved in the Ijaw family system. His play *A Matter of Honour* (1999) shows a quarrel between two families which was at a risk of violating the already discussed cardinal rule among the Ijaw which is that, "One must not spill the blood of an inlaw." Had this fight taken place, it would have deteriorated into a series of actions in vengeance as the Ijaws are prone to taking. This inevitably would have come full circle and would have validated the reason for why the blood of an inlaw must not be spilled. From this

particular play, quite a lot can be gleaned about family tradition from the situations, statements and traditionally observed rules which have been immersed in various parts of the plot.

The play itself opens with a wedding scene at Amabiri where a young woman from this town has just married a man from another town. The people of Amabiri being the hosts of this occasion, pray for unity not only between the woman and her husband but also between themselves and their new in-laws. It is during this prayer that the drunkard Egberi staggers into the scene and breaks the news of not only Oweibi's death but also the decision of Angiama to bury him without the involvement of Amabiri. The wedding ends abruptly and the people of Amabiri after a brief meeting, immediately go to Angiama to confront them on this decision (5-14).

The conversation that initially ensues when Oweibi's maternal (Angiama) and paternal (Amabiri) sides meet to discuss the plans for the burial is worthy of some analysis. Bear in mind that these two sides are from two different Ijaw villages between which there is a rivalry. The communication between them begins with an exchange of idiomatic expressions which ride on the back of the verbal wit of members of both parties showing that each side is well aware of the tendencies and intentions of the other. As the people of Amabiri coincidentally arrive when the people of Angiama are discussing the logistics of Oweibi's burial, there is already a strong suspicion of their intent and this plays out in their crypted greetings. The people of Angiama begin this greeting with the words:

ABIDE: *Afere fari ozi*!

PIFA: That is mine. The drum beaten by the wind is danced to by all trees in the bush, not even the mighty iroko can refuse to dance. *If I were to be the one…*

ABIDE: There is nothing you could have done. Don't push me into a fight I don't have the heart for. *When the talk comes to money.*

ABERE (Part of the team from Amabiri): … *the family is not complete*. You defer the matter until the family members are complete. But when it comes to food or drinks, you carry on saying you will leave some for those absent, or worse still, you consume everything and just tell them when they return. Such is life. *The whole town…*

ABIDE: … *does not go for a fishing festival*. Well there is no dividing meat or fish here.

ALL: Yes. Yes.

That is alright

Carry on.

ABIDE: *When the talk comes to money matter …*

ABERE: … *the family is not complete. The whole town …*

(*A Matter of Honour* 1999:17)

It is to be recalled that the play begins with the people of Amabiri receiving news of the plans of Angiama who coincidentally are holding that same meeting when they arrive. Pifa's initial idiomatic expression means that news/knowledge cannot be hidden. He uses the general effect of the wind on trees to explain this but for the reader to understand his use of metaphor better, this will be briefly elaborated. Because the wind is an entity that is everywhere, its effect is also felt everywhere and usually the first visible sign of the presence of the wind is with the bending of trees back and forth which he describes as dancing. Ijaw traditional dances, are mostly accompanied by drums, hence, the drum beaten by the wind and the laws of physics tell us that sounds are usually carried further by the wind. Their decision to bury Oweibi in this case is the wind and the people of Amabiri are the trees. He wishes they could have stopped Amabiri from getting wind of their plans but Abide rightly continues his statement saying that there is nothing they could have done because just as it is impossible to resist the effect of the wind, it is also impossible to resist the spread of news and a fight against it is futile.

Abide then starts an Ijaw expression about the family which is completed by Abere and the next few exchanges between Abide and Abere in summary states that when it comes to family decisions, there is an established convention that calls for the involvement of all members of the family and if all are not present, then certain decisions are to be left till a more opportune moment. They acknowledge that this is not always the case as there are people who by being present, see a clear profit in taking decisions in the absence of others. Situations like this are inevitable because there are people who will always be missing at profitable events, whether by decision or by circumstance. In this important matter (with money and food being metaphors for the important matter here) the whole of the family is to be involved in decision making and as each of them claim kinship to the departed Oweibi, both sides should be involved in his

burial. This is not the case because, Angiama according to Oweibi's wishes has decided to bury him in the absence of his paternal family but are betrayed by the wind (Egberi) hence, the dancing trees of Amabiri have come to stake their claim. In the beginning of the play during a marriage celebration, the people of Amabiri take measures to ensure cordiality with their in-laws through prayers and advice on issues of perceived conflict because the Ijaws take the in-laws of the family very seriously as a cordial relationship brings much profit against a conflicting one.

Gender Hierarchy

The Ijaws take femininity quite seriously howbeit, it might not always play out in the same vein as the modern female movement but there are quite a few points to be considered here. We will once again return to the Ijaw creation story where the supreme being Woyingi is referred to as "Our Mother". This immediately denotes a submission to a matriarchal presence among the people as she is seen as the creator. Just as after impregnation the formation (creation) and birth of a child takes place in and through the woman, so the creation of everything takes place through Woyingi and it is not just the creation of human beings but also the creation of Nature which has been put in place before the arrival of the human beings in order to cater for their needs. Again, this aspect of care, provision and nursing is more typically associated with Ijaw mothers and this influence does not usually stop with just the mother but extends to the matrilineal side of the family. It is a usual thing to see the maternal family have more of an influence in raising a child than the paternal side.

Among many other cultures in Nigeria, the Ijaw are unique in that they readily welcome an individual to become a chief in his mother's town instead of his father's town. Appah (2003:67) speaks on the first requirement for marriage among the people of Ekpetiama which is to examine the record of the mother-in-law's family for controversial issues. Women occupy important positions in communities such as the priestess of Falaba-Dugyaro among the Soku people under the already discussed Duminea festival. Women also take on titled citizenry in many parts of Ijaw land and are part of certain decision-making processes. As previously stated, the reign of Queen Kambasa of Bonny kingdom brought one of the most significant periods of progress in Bonny history. According to Uzobo et al (2014:8), she was also known for her bold effective measures and military prowess. Although Kambasa did not fight any war with the

Europeans, her reputation might allow a comparison to Yaa Asantewa of the Ashanti people as both were known for strength among men and military might. Both queens also came from a culture which emphasizes a strong matrilineal heritage as in some parts of Ijaw land, the identity of a child is also given through the maternal side. The women also contribute very significantly to the economy of Ijaw communities as they not only farm, but also fish, however, in the shallower parts of the rivers. As much as there is a strong presence of the feminine gender among Ijaw people, this influence is not always recognised as there are instances where masculinity claims certain rights.

In cases where feminity refuses to surrender these rights, a struggle arises. One of such cases is in the aspect of burial and Barclays Ayakoroma's *A Matter of Honour* fully exemplifies this. This play speaks of one of the Ijaw paternal rights which states that an individual (especially a man) who dies, should be buried in his father's village. The issue about death and burial among the Ijaw as is with many other African cultures is that though there is a belief that the actual person (which is the spirit or soul depending on the culture) has been translated to another realm, the body of that person is all that is left in remembrance of his/her existence and because of this, there is a real significance attached to the place that holds the body.

This is more so if the deceased person was also an important person in life, or whose actions had a positive lasting impact on the people. The final gesture of attachment or connection of an individual to his/her ancestors is in the belief that the bonds of a deceased individual must rest in that person's place of ancestry. In many parts of Ijaw land, this is a strict tradition and this tradition sometimes affects the way some marriages are done. In general, the males are more likely to take wives from other Ijaw communities different from theirs but since the bones of the individual must return to the place of ancestry, the Ijaw male in a sense, marries only the flesh and blood of the woman as the bones cannot stay with him or his people when she dies. Many women are more typically transported back to their ancestry when they die as many males typically grow up in their place of ancestry or return to it at an older age to rest after spending their youth and livelihood elsewhere. During the first argument between Amabiri and Angiama, Pifa from Angiama says "Then have you considered the issue of conveying the body of a dead man from one town to another as if he is a woman? How ridiculous! (*A Matter of Honour* 1999:22).

In the fourth act, when among the members of Amabiri, the issue of leaving Angiama to bury Oweibi is once again suggested, Kuro again disagrees and says that if they allow Angiama to

do this, the people of Angiama in the future will also decide to bury the daughters of Amabiri in their town as well and pin only a walking stick at their gravesides without any proper monument (43). Mr. Kingsley Ineritei during the interview on the 19th of September 2017, also explained that one other reason why the place of burial is important is because that is where the children of the deceased will continue to pay visits to and since children anywhere are seen as a future investment, the community would not like to lose the children to another community. The play also shows a few gender struggles and stereotypes as the plot unfolds. Oweibi is survived by his daughter Doubra to whom he most likely makes the request concerning the location of his burial. Unfortunately for her, the controversy which arises between the two communities is mostly taken up by the men, leaving her little room for expression. The first instance this is seen is when the people of Angiama decide to ready themselves for war based on the threats they have received from the people of Amabiri. Doubra stands up to shut down the suggestion but never gets past the first three words "Look, I said…" before Eyifasu cuts her off and this almost deteriorates into a fight:

EYIFASU: *Yay ya ya*! We heard what you said. Allow us to do the thinking now. Sit down! I said sit down!

DOUBRA: (***Sitting down.***) We are talking about my father!

EYIFASU: We have not said otherwise. And don't forget we are talking about our brother!

DOUBRA: I have not said otherwise too.

EYIFASU: So allow us to think of what to do. After the burial you will run back to the city. We are the ones to bear the brunt of whatever happens after the funeral.

AGBEYE: Leave her. She thinks this is a matter of painting eyes and lips like one going for a feather dance.

DOUBRA: Don't abuse me o!

AGBEYE: If I abuse you, what are you going to do?

(*A Matter of Honour* 1999:29)

As a follow up to his question, Agbeye charges at Doubra but is held back by the others and there is a brief moment of a heated exchange of words. Another instance where the seeming irrelevance of women in matters like this is mentioned is when in another meeting of the people of Amabiri, Enemo once again questions both the need for and the cost of violence with Dikumo agreeing with him once again and sees this point as worth considering. Kuro almost causes a brief scuffle with the following:

KURO: What is worth considering? We are not here to talk like women.

DIKUMO: What? Who is talking like a woman? (***Trying to charge at him.***) I say who is talking like…

(*A Matter of Honour* 1999:39)

Ironically, while Dikumo is being restrained, Egberi who is almost always in a perpetual state of semi-drunkenness loudly muses that people do not like him speaking but the two people arguing at the moment were quarrelling like women and now it is Kuro's turn to become angry. He charges at Egberi and is also restrained (40). Before continuing with the theme, it should be understood that it is not the nature of the average Ijaw man to become enraged, violent and charge at people at the slightest moment of disapproval. This play is a comedy and a few of these actions are very likely exaggerated for their effect on their audience though it is not unlikely that such actions take place from time to time. This is said because the quarrel between Dikumo, Kuro and Egberi, takes different sudden turns with each of them shortly doing the same thing they accused the other of. It is reflective of the unpredictability of human nature. With such unpredictable natures, it is difficult to trust the decisions or motives of the people even when they bring up proverbs or other forms of ideology.

The title of this play is a fitting one as the conversation among the paternal side of the deceased explains the esteem and honour attributed to the act of the burial and tells the reader that it is not a matter of choice or deliberation but one of honour to do what is to be done as actions taken otherwise are an insult to the paternal side of the people. In this particular play, a man from the town of Amabiri called Oweibi has just died but before he dies, he makes a request that he should be buried in his mother's town called Angiama because as a younger man in need, he was ignored by his father's side of the family and it was his mother's side who took care of him and helped him become accomplished. The issue of honour first comes up when

the story of Oweibi's death is broken to the people of Amabiri by the local drunkard, Egberi and even in his usual semi-intoxicated state, he is well aware of the tradition and seems slightly uncomfortable with relaying it at first due to the gravity of its implication:

EGBERI: I don't know how to start. But then our people say *the message does not kill the bearer*. What is happening is a matter of honour. A son of Amabiri, Oweibi, who has been with his mother's people at Angiama has joined our ancestors. (*A Matter of Honour* 1999:5)

Notice how Egberi is quick to define Oweibi's identity from the beginning calling him a "son of Amabiri" while speaking about dwelling with his mother's people as if it were a casual thing. As is expected with almost any news of death, there is an immediate reaction of surprise, questioning and recollection from the crowd present such as "What!" "Was he sick?" "I don't even know him" "I knew him very well. He is married to my sister's daughter from Orua" (5). Amidst all this conversation, Egberi is quick to point out the major issue here:

EGBERI: …For now, it is not important whether he was sick and for how long. What should concern us now is the matter of honour.

ABERE: And what is that?

EGBERI: The people of Angiama have resolved to Bury him there.

CROWD: Impossible!

Against tradition!

Over our dead bodies

It must be a joke …

They want to provoke us again…

They won't get away with it…

This time around… (6)

The reaction of this crowd is better understood when it is realised that this news was broken by Egberi in the middle of a marriage ceremony upon which he stumbled and all of a sudden, the

marriage is temporarily forgotten while a number of urgent plans are put in place. The level of urgency here is seen through the proverbs which the planners use. Kuro for instance says, "They say a man with fire in his hand, has no time for pleasantries, he welcomes no delays." Papa agrees with this saying while adding his own saying, "I cannot agree with you more. He who is responding to the urgent call of nature, never knows a bad waterside. Inside the bottle!"(7). After things have somewhat calmed down, the conversation between the elders of Amabiri in this scene give a more in-depth understanding as to Oweibi's decision to identify with his mother's people even though the people of Amabiri lay claim to him as a son and a blood brother.

DIKUMO: … But the point is did he ever identify with us? He had decided to stay with his mother's people.

ABERE: You can't say that. He did not decide…

DIKUMO: That is what you did not find out. He was just a child when his father, Kiridi, died. Agonodi, who took Oweibi's mother as wife in accordance with our tradition, made life difficult for her and the children. When she could bear it no longer, she decided to go back to her parents. All attempts to bring her back failed because Agonodi did not show any remorse. (*A Matter of Honour* 1999:10)

Even with this bit of information given to them, a section of this committee is still adamant about bringing Oweibi from Angiama to Bury him in Amabiri and Gbaki. One of the people present reiterates that, "a man is never buried outside his father's grave". Enemo who is more measured in his approach reminds them that "he has been living away from his father's grave" but Abere reacts immediately to this statement with the retort; "Enemo, our argument is not whether he has been living on top of his father's grave, under it or inside it. We are talking about tradition." (11) As has probably been observed by now, the council is divided as to the decision of Oweibi's burial and while there are those such as Dikumo and Enemo, who understand Oweibi and Angiama's decision in the more pragmatic and morally justifiable sense, there are those such as Abere and Gbaki who say that tradition must come first before anything else even in exceptional cases. The latter are adamant so much so that they take a lot of pride in the ability to uphold the Ijaw tradition and they use this to boast of their superiority to the people of Angiama as their individual statements say basically the same thing; describing the people of Angiama as brainless, impulsive, and crude. Abere goes on further to say that it

is tradition that differentiates them from apes and that failure to bring Oweibi back would be a dent on the status of the people of Amabiri as they will be seen as people who cannot bury their dead. It can be recalled that weakness among the Ijaw people is not tolerated and throughout the play, this singular reason more than others mentioned, is the biggest driving factor of Amabiri's obstinate resolve to bury Oweibi.

This request to be buried among his mother's people is his own show of honour to them for their kindness towards him and as the maternal side of the people are making burial preparations to honour this request, his paternal side gets wind of this plan and tries to oppose it. This leads to a series of threats, intimidation, conspiracies and trickery leading up to the burial of Oweibi with the climax being an eventual standoff between the two families with looming threats of war (54). This play reiterates the significance of the female presence in a community and the emphasis to respect female decisions as seen with the collective matrilineal community of Angiama and with Doubra, the daughter of Oweibi.

Another instance in which there is a strong sense of the feminine will is in another play by Ayakoroma titled *Dance on His Grave* (2010) where there is a systematic revolution of women which starts with the rebellion against their husbands. The play begins with a meeting of the women of Toriama who have had enough of the presence of male dominance in the town and do not want to occupy a subservient position in the home always serving men. They have instead, reached an agreement where they will also require service from the men. In addition, they also want to take up positions of authority and rulership among the people in the town. This meeting is organised by Alaere, the wife of the king himself. She begins by telling the women that, "When the lizard nods its head, it does not mean that all is well". (2010:23) This drives home her point that the women have been suffering in silence for a long time in the community. The lizard nods its head because that is its given ability and like all animals, it is unable to speak in the first place. This seems to be the plight of the women of Toriama as they have lost their ability to speak and just keep nodding to their submission by men. There is also a sharp irony observed here when parallels are drawn between the women and this gesture made by a lizard. When a lizard nods its head, it does not mean a "yes" as many human cultures would interpret it but it is actually an aggressive display for physical and territorial dominance which is the main reason for the women gathering in this play and these can be seen from the motions that some of the women move in this singular meeting such as:

ALAERE: … They say they are men. Who gave birth to them"?

CROWD: We, of course!

ALAERE: Who breast-fed them?

CROWD: We did!

ALAERE: Who cleaned their running noses?

CROWD: We did!

ALAERE: You are right. We did. So, as mothers, we have to take our rightful place in the affairs of the land!... They say drastic problems need drastic solutions! We are going to adopt serious measures to force the men to grant our request to have a say in the land. From today, no woman should clear the compound alone! … It should be a joint affair. If there is a fine at all for the dirtiness of the compound, it is the husband's affair. There is no reason for the woman to suffer when the man is the owner of the compound. (24)

When it comes to marriage, they do not want a man to marry more than one wife since the women are not able to "spread their tentacles" like the men do and one woman even proposes that "from now on, the woman should be on top when sleeping with her man" (25). All of this is part of their "nodding" which has been misinterpreted by the men just as the nodding of the lizard has been severally misinterpreted by human beings in the past. Towards the end of the meeting, an elderly woman gives a few bits of advice which although are with the aim of mustering the women's cause, they also unknowingly seem to foreshadow the ending of the play. She emphasizes the word "caution" saying that "The face does not quarrel with the nose which gives it beauty". Another proverb said by the woman is "he who pours water in his compound will always step on wet ground". All of these the crowd and the King's wife wholly accept. (29)

The women of Toriama deny their husbands food, sex and any other form of pleasure with varying degrees of success in different homes throughout the play. Ayakoromah through the various discourses, gives different perspectives to the matters which have caused the quarrel. This he does by expressing not only the male and female points of view, but also the perspective of the government in relation to the governed. Apart from male dominance in the home, the women are frustrated that Toriama is sending its sons to fight a "senseless" war with Angiama which could be better resolved by settlement and letting certain grievances pass but

the men respond justifying their actions, stating the issues with Angiama which include encroachment, kidnapping and challenges to Toriama. The plan of the women is quite simple; the men cannot fight two wars at the same time and in starting another war within the homes, the men will be forced to not only abandon the war outside (with Angiama) but also be made to reconsider their actions within the home. Concerning this, Alaere tells the king "I have spoken. We want to be recognised; and no more wars in the land! If you refuse, we will have our own war in this house!" (40).

In this war within, wives are beaten up by their husbands in certain homes, while some husbands concede claims to their wives in other homes. Once again in the home of the king, Alaere among other issues is involved in a serious quarrel with her husband over their daughter's future. Seeing that the king will not budge, Alaere decides to attack his dignity and pretends that he is not the actual father of their daughter. This is because the king though he believes in the rights and responsibilities of a man as the father of a child, he also believes in a general saying in the land that one can never really be sure of who the father of a child truly is (52). The king struggles with his identity after hearing this (even after Alaere tries to tell him it was a bluff) and this is heightened by more intense quarrels with his wife that leads to violence (85). Their daughter Beke though on the side of her father's decision about her future, is annoyed at his beating her mother and in a fit of anger, tells him to his face that he is not her father (86). The king believing this and seeing nothing else to live for, commits suicide which went beyond what Alaere had planned and which sends a shock throughout the community (88). The chiefs infuriated, call the women out to see the effect of their actions and tell them to dance on the king's grave to celebrate their 'achievement'. (89)

In conclusion, these themes mentioned in this chapter are just a brief exposition of what exists in the Ijaw worldview. In examining the first chapter of this study, one would realise the in-depth connection between the themes mentioned in this chapter and the various settings described in the first chapter. This is because the setting of the Ijaw people is what creates the environment for these thematic happenings to consistently occur in the first place. The efforts of Ijaw writers as stated in the fifth chapter further developed the tradition and gave it a modern intellectual platform to be able to identify these thematic consistencies. This is further proven by the fact that the writer has been featured in every chapter of this study along with certain thematic ideas. This reiterates one of the first statements made in chapter one: it is close to impossible to completely separate aspects of Ijaw oral tradition into separate institutions.

Conclusion

In the course of this study, various aspects of Ijaw oral tradition have been examined. These aspects of Ijaw culture have not only been critically examined by this study but also by scholars, artists and individuals who have contributed either directly or indirectly to the information behind this research. In spite of the accolades that Ijaw oral tradition has received, it is also pertinent to acknowledge the fact that oral tradition just like many other African cultures, has experienced a number of setbacks in different areas. It has already been stated in this study that a few aspects of the tradition have been lost. The causes of these losses range from the advent of colonialism to stringent policies of cultural identity, carelessness and disinterest on the part of a number of indigenes. Roger Blench (2005:8) for example in a collective manuscript of the Ibani language dictionary, tells of the experience of a German doctor in 1840 with the Ibani people's disposition to the spread of Ibani. This doctor who worked for about four months with people on a ship, noted the use of two languages, Ibani and Igbo:

> … and the attempts by elders to prevent boys from teaching him Ibani; this confirms what is said today, that the major reason for the decline of Ibani is the successful attempt to keep it from being learnt by outsiders, which in the nineteenth century, included a large slave population. (8)

More of these traditions are gradually dying out as quite a number of the very old people in these communities who should ordinarily remember these things have been adversely affected by old age. Although Alagoa (2005:6), acknowledged the effectiveness of the oral tradition in that:

> Knowledge of names were ensured by the process of ancestor worship. There were special buildings erected to the memory of rulers and founders of lineages in which memorabilia were kept and libations poured. In some cases, priests were appointed. Such practices served the purposes of museums in other societies and preserved knowledge of the past.

Alagoa also in the statement leading to the one above, speaks of the rising problems with this form of tradition as progress is made saying there were:

> …already growing complexities of this form of tradition even in parts of Ijaw where there have been professional bards, griots, and storytellers. And …for stateless societies, many scholars are still doubtful of the possibility of recovering any valuable information from their past. For the Ijo it has, in fact, been asserted that even in the Eastern Delta where states developed, the people were not 'interested in recalling the names of their kings (5)

These and a few external factors such as government policies on language have contributed to the setbacks which oral tradition has taken across Ijaw land. Now that these problems and their causes have been identified, it is important that measures are taken so that avoidable mistakes do not repeat themselves today. These measures should be taken to preserve and develop what is currently left of the tradition for as much as there have been setbacks, there is still a lot left to be preserved and developed.

Despite the decline in certain aspects of Ijaw culture, there is yet hope for other aspects of Ijaw performing arts as modernity has provided other means through which its art and philosophy might express itself. The modern contributions of Ijaw people like comedian turned playwright and director Yibo Koko are proof that these aspects of culture can still be further developed. One of the features of Koko's contributions is to not only introduce a lot of dense Ijaw performances into the theatre, but also ensure that they fit into the modern theatrical stage setting. The traditional setting for Ijaw and several other African performing arts has always been an open space or setting; a *Shiri* as described in Chapter 3 (124). The problem with a *Shiri* in this day and age is that it cannot always be provided in every setting in the country. Hence, many cultural performances are relegated to rural settings where there is a lot of space made available for these performances. There are of course various occasions like the Rivers State Carnival and other official celebratory periods, where major city areas are filled with these displays but must an individual or group of individuals wait for such days to display their cultural heritage? This is why it is essential for the Ijaw performances though still displayed in traditional settings, to be further developed to fit the modern stage in order not to fall behind in its ability to express itself.

This act like Koko's and a few others like it, have come after a few Ijaw stories have been criticised for their inability to be performed within the confines of a theatre. One of such as already mentioned is J.P Clark's *Ozidi* where the dimensions and proportions of some of the monsters in the story are admittedly baffling to imagine on stage. Scholars like Robert Wren have been baffled as to the means of portrayal of characters like Ogueren of twenty hands and twenty feet or Agbogidi the nude (1984:111). Matthew Umukoro on *Ozidi* remarks that:

> Ozidi is apparently a different play. Different not from the perspective of literary appreciation but from that of theatrical realization. Transforming Ozidi from an essentially literary outfit to a living vibrant performance is an intricate creative process capable of daunting the creative spirit of the less experienced or less adventurous theatre director. Little wonder then,

> that this play which explores the indigenous dramatic mode and celebrated authentic African spirit has tested the stage far less frequently than it actually deserves. (1986:136)

With the emergence of modern film technology, it would not be surprising if a film director like Koko takes up the use of Computer-Generated Images (CGI) to recreate the images of creatures like Tebesonoma and Ogueren which were so graphically described that they plagued the minds of young Ijaw children for years. One of the main positives of such a project is that it would serve as a much better medium of preserving the durability of these stories as they can be created and stored electronically with viewings and references to them made at any time. The importance of film and television cannot be overemphasized here as children will have the opportunity to learn about their culture by continuously watching through cartoons and documentaries and the *Shiri* does not just become a ground where a performance can be made but it could be taken anywhere as wherever an individual watches these performances could become his/her own *Shiri*. Such things have already been seen in documentaries like the Odum festival.

Koko whose work, *Seki: The dance about the Niger Delta people* is briefly documented on CNN *African Voices* finds motivation in not just the rich cultural heritage of the Ijaw people but the fact that some of its culture has affected a few others in other continents of the world. This has also been documented on the BBC news in pidgin titled "Seki dance na our own" and in the video by the BBC, a few Nigerians are seen affirming Koko's views in pidgin. Koko says for example in the CNN documentary that:

> Seki is a spectacular dance, it is a dance about the Niger Delta people, it is a dance that traces the American tap dance to the indigenous people of the Niger Delta and look at it, do I copy the American? Do I copy the British culture? No. I have my culture, it is rich, it is beautiful and the world wants to see it. (0:05-0:33)

Part of what has attracted a lot of foreign attention to Koko's work is the ingenuity with which he is able to create a lot of modern cultural artefacts today which have a lot of colour and detail attached to them. A feature which is very much like the ingenuity of the Ijaw people of previous generations and he shares the inspirations and understanding behind his ingenuity and creativity on TEDx Talks under the title, "The Art of Seeing Things Invisible" which was published on the 15th of September 2013. It can be recalled as was mentioned in chapter three of this study that virtually all the ingenuity and creativity that goes into performances especially in masquerade play is kept secret by the masquerade societies but Koko's illustrations on a

screen during this talk provide a glimpse into the genius, and yet simplicity with which some of these creations and effects are made. Since the members of these societies are held accountable to their codes of conduct, it is safe to assume that the ideas behind the particular illustrations Koko makes belong to him.

Even before the recent successes of people like Koko, there were attempts at other forms of publications which were easier to understand and not as academic as the likes of Clark and Okara. One of such attempts which started and petered out was the publication of a simple comic series called *Okolo* which published stories about Bonny Island and its counterpart *Angala* which is produced in Akassa. Unfortunately, the dates of these publications cannot currently be determined as these dates were not recorded in the comics but it would be safe to assume that the time of its last publication was about twenty years ago, given that one read a few of them as a child and one is currently in possession of a few copies. No other new publication has been seen since then. The purpose of *Okolo* was very simple and quite effective; it created scenarios at the grassroot level that the most common individual would relate to and as the plot progressed, the reader would gradually be educated about certain forms of business and innovation surrounding the story. *Okolo 2* has the editor, Miriam T. Isoun, giving a definition to the comic:

> Okolo is a comic magazine devoted to the issue of comprehensive conservation. Comprehensive conservation includes protection of renewable and non-renewable natural resources, sustainable community development and poetry alleviation, as well as the preservation of the uplifting aspects of culture and traditional knowledge. (2)

The comic was divided into two sections; in the first one, the story was told in English and in the second, the same story was repeated in Ibani so that an individual who could not read or write in English could listen to it being read out with the aid of pictures. One of the most easily understood stories in this series is in *Okolo* 2 where an old man suddenly discovers that his grandson does not know the migratory history of the Ibani people and tells of how a hunting expedition landed on the island and one of them saw the *Okolo* which is a Eurasian Curlew and upon chasing it inland, came across not only a vast presence of the bird, but also of other animals and vegetation and they named it *Okoloama* meaning “Land of the Okolos” (and of course, this bird has since then been the symbol of Bonny and this is the reason why its name was adopted as the name for the comic). The old man in this particular story then briefly speaks on Bonny’s activities with foreign countries and Nigeria and talks about the effects of these

dealings on the ecology of the people and how it affects their relationship with the spiritual environment. For example, he says; “The animal and plant parts we could use as ingredients to appease the gods are no longer found. So we cannot appease our gods anymore. And we suffer the consequences of such sacrilege” (8).

These issues addressed by the old man to his grandson who at some point in the story, expresses that he has not learnt any of this from his father is a direct mirror of many Ijaw communities today. If one might be wondering the extent to which comic productions such as *Okolo* relate to the drama and philosophy of Ijaw people, it should be noted that since the 1970s, the world has seen a phenomenal progress in drama particularly in both the theatrical and film industries. A large part of the success of these industries is due to the adaptation and modification of written and published literature such as plays, novels and comics with the most popular, highest paying and top grossing films coming through these means. The said works of literature are more or less compilations or modifications of ancient Eastern and Western mythology which the audience loves to hear over and over again.

In more recent times, there has been a rising clamour for a multicultural diversity and representation in some of these popular western films and while there is some level of understanding as to the reasons behind these agitations, these clamours for change might not be very effective in the sense that the story is first of all written by an individual about his/her own cultural experience and not that of a foreigner. Secondly, although there might be a change in representation of colour or country, this change will not bring into effect the cultural or ethnic heritage of this person as this person only fills in a role in another individual’s cultural experience. Such changes, in essence, serve no more than to perform a facelift or rebranding on cultural representation in these films and performances while the story itself, maintains its core essence and foundation.

From the previous chapters in this study which are but brief summaries of many aspects of the Ijaw culture and worldview, there is no denying the fact that the Ijaws and other cultures around them have such a wealth and depth of performances waiting to be exploited and modified to fit modern productions. If these performances in their original form (such as the *Odum* festival) were able to draw interest and attendance from scholars around the world, then putting these into a modern art form will only serve to positively develop the dynamics of these performances especially as the dynamic feature of culture ensures that certain things do not stay the same over a long period of time.

A proper practical and sustained investment into a culture like this would be a very appropriate way to represent culture and diversity in the 21st century. At this juncture, one would like to re-echo a statement made by Chidi Amuta which is mentioned in the introduction to this study and that is the fact that although the dynamic nature of culture has changed the various methods of communication as well as content in relation to particular experiences or particular systems, the fundamentals of the culture remain the same as they stem from the linguistically transmitted fiction which is grounded in social experience and psychology (1989: 106). Hence, as far as the language lives on, the culture will continue to survive but as has been stated at the beginning of this conclusion, there have been several language crises across the Niger Delta with an increasing risk of these languages thinning out in terms of speakers, vocabulary and an eventual dying out in the next few decades. This is particularly so in reference to the Ibani language. This situation if it happens, will result in an unrecoverable blow to Ijaw people as the identity of the people will not only be lost but the people will also lose the self-autonomy and self-sovereignty to not only be able to contribute to knowledge from their cultural experiences, but also to take a political and social stand to demand social recognition and the rights that come with it.

Given the presence of professionals in the various fields in which drama and philosophy can be applied such as in the academia and film industry, it is safe to assume that with a continued level of interest and momentum applied, Ijaw culture will gain steadier traction and motion towards development, significance and relevance especially in the 21st century. Studies like this one and others from aforementioned fields, will only serve to generate or revive both local and foreign interests in this culture. With these available, along with support from government authorities, there is no reason to anticipate the demise of Ijaw culture.

In conclusion, the late Professor Eldred I.I.T. Green uses an Ibani statement in his closing words, to explain the relevance of the Ibani dictionary to the revival of the Ibani language (2005:ii). I will also adopt this statement as my final words in the expression of hope for Ijaw culture;

Énē na dīghā sāa si enē pá anị sị mā. A day that is not yet night should not be called a bad day.

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