

Cultural Practices and National Development: The Case of Uparuba Festival among the Isua Akoko of South East Nigeria

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Abstract: The observation and celebration of festivals is central to African cultural heritage with due social, political and economic relevance. This paper examined the celebration of *Uparuba* festival in Isua Akoko, not just as a yearly festival celebration but Jubilee celebration (*Odun Jubili*), to appease the deity for the remission of sins and atrocities against the cultural norms of the land and also to request for divine intervention and prosperous jubilee year. The focal horizon for the exploration into the study is to; investigate the historical background of Isua Akoko amidst reasons motivating origin for the celebration of *Uparuba*, purposes of the festival, *modus operandi* and its significance to the developments of Isua Akoko. In achieving this, the research made use of ethnographic research which was largely gleaned from primary sources and made use of the Structural Functionalist theory, which explains social stratification. The research argues that, the celebration of *Uparuba* Festival in Isua Akoko has not only brought development into the community, the celebration also protects the society against both internal and external attacks. It protects them from epidemic situations through the celebration, the role of litigation despite civilization is still not well pronounced as crime related issues are still solved communally. This increases the consciousness of the people of Isua Akoko to the genuineness and unfading nature of her cultural heritage. The research outlines some recommendations for future research, one of which is reduction in the excessive use of local gin to ameliorate one of the preaching of the festival.

Keywords: Cultural Practices, National Development, Uparuba Festival

I. INTRODUCTION

Isua is the administrative headquarters of Akoko South East Local Government of Ondo State of Nigeria. It forms part of the Eastern Yoruba-land, formally under the tutelage of Akoko South West Local Government until December 1996 under the Military Administration of Late General Sanni Abacha. The town is situated in the valley of mountainous rocks with beautiful settings. The mountainous rocks form part of a range of hills known and called the “Akoko-kukurukuru” meaning mountainous area. The Rocky Mountains in the olden days provided a sentinel post with a broad overview, enabling the Olisua and his people inhabiting the tableland on the mountains to see the approach of the enemy. (Oyolola, 2010).

The focus of this research work centres on the *Uparuba* festival celebration in Isua Akoko. A festival presumed to be the mother of all festivals, celebrated before

any other festival in Isua Akoko. Originally, festivals developed as an expression of the relationship between man, society and nature. Culture as an aspect of society has played a dynamic role in its dual relationship with society. It serves as a link between the individual and society through which it perpetuates itself, institutions and values which enhance the progress of the larger society (Lawrence-Hart, 2014). From the above, the celebration of festival goes beyond merry-making like eating, drinking and dancing but is also an expression of the relationship between man, society, nature and appeasement to various gods for protection against foes, evils or epidemic diseases. There are many Festivals in Nigeria, some of which date to the period before the arrival of the major religions in this ethnically and culturally diverse society.

Mbiti (1991) in his book *Introduction to African Religion*, classifies festivals into two categories; namely, “individual and community” festivals. According to him, some festivals are meant to reform the spirit and human society. For example, the *Egungun* (Masquerade) festival in Yoruba land. He stressed further that festivals are religious ways of implementing the values and beliefs of the society.

Banwo (2019) in his paper *Myth in Festivals: A Comparative analysis of the Osun Festival of Nigeria and the Gragon Boat Festival of China* opines that festival holds many connotations which may include; the celebration of an event, historical traditions and values of the society which involve seasonal change or cultural significance. In the same vein, Falassi (1987) considers festivals to be sacred periods with the observations that are unique to mankind. Pieper (1985) relaxed on Falassi opinion that the uniqueness of festival celebration comes into manifestation when the celebration is occasioned by feast reiterated only on religious and cultural perception. Festivals in Nigeria according to Jones (1997), are a cultural heritage entwined from the dress of history, conquest and legends which are traditionally expressed through celebration. In this way, Nigeria has enormous local festivals, which covers a range of events from investing in new chiefs, harvesting, betrothal, and festivals marking events in traditional religion. Given this, the preparation and celebration of *Uparuba* festival is poised with a series of rituals before its celebration.

II. THE STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONALIST THEORY

This study adopts the structural-functional theory associated with Durkheim (2013), that society consists of parts, which have their own functions and work together to promote social stability. Structural-functionalism, or functionalism, is a broad perspective in sociology and anthropology which sets out to interpret society as a structure with interrelated parts. It addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements; namely norms, customs, traditions and institutions Durkheim (2013).

All aspects of a society serve a purpose and are indispensable for the long-term survival of the society. Herbert Spencer popularised this theory and presents these parts of society as "organs" that work toward the proper functioning of the "body" as a whole. If one part fails, the body ceases to function normally. In the most basic terms, it simply emphasises the effort to impute, as rigorously as possible, to each feature, custom, or practice, its effect on the functioning of a supposedly stable, cohesive system Herbert (1898).

The theory examined here presumes that society is a system composed of various social elements, or units, *Uparuba* being one of them. If *Uparuba* festival is not properly celebrated or disrespected, society's functioning will be disrupted, forcing it to readjust to seek equilibrium. In this case *Uparuba* is unavoidably important within the structure of society. The theory also asserts that if society's needs are to be met, social structures must be shaped.

Uparuba is therefore assumed to help society operate smoothly. Talcott Parsons notes that according to structural functionalism theory, values and norms provide for a strong measure of agreement among people (Parsons, 1983). The wants and desires of people are not randomly distributed but are socially derived through values and norms, which, in this case, include *Uparuba*. The theory therefore affirms that *Uparuba* has a functional role in society.

Uparuba Festival in Historical Perspective

Ogidan S.K in his work entitled "Ogogoo GO Isua Past and Present" *Isua people know how to use their tradition to party and this is revealed in the arrangement of various festivals round the year. Most of the festivals are in the dustbin of history while few have stood the test of time. festivals are always accompanied by a lot of merriment and food consumption. it was also a time for peaceful interaction between the natives...*p33. Ogidan, 2013.

Uparuba festival has a dirth written document concerning its origin. Nearly all that is known about it are deduced from oral sources and because of this, one cannot be totally accurate or specific on how and when it came into existence. However, evidence gleaned through oral transmission were properly scrutinised and synthesised. Evidence gathered in an interview with the clan head in Isua Akoko, shows that *Uparuba* festival is the foremost and

important festival in Isua Akoko. It dates back to the founding of Isua C. 300 years ago (Oyolola, 2010). *Uparuba* was a great warrior who fought both physically and spiritually for the protection of Isua Akoko against external attack. Before *Uparuba* was captured, he fought for seven days to conquer their enemies but was later captured guillotined by a neighbouring town called *Oshare*. Before his demise, he made a pronouncement that he must be worshiped every seven years which is regarded as *Odun Jubili* using human-being as a sacrifice, but he was later pacified and the sacrifice was changed to white ram. Today, the town called *Oshare* is no longer in existence. A high hill shrine has ever since been erected for the worship of *Uparuba*. It is important to know that the *Uparuba* festival is celebrated across the quarters of Isua. However, the sacrificial rites and ritual and pre-festival are restricted to two quarters. In other words, only *Ahinni Okunnu* and *Irobo* Quarters can perform the preparation of the sacrifice. This is because the *Uparuba* hailed from *Irobo* while he married from *Ahinni* and as such, the rites and celebration is central to these two quarters in Isua Akoko, while other quarters produce representatives during the celebration (Joseph personal communication 22 July, 2016.).

Through effective performance of traditional rites and outright abstained from taboos, It is crystal clear that the celebration of *Uparuba* Festival in Isua Akoko without prejudice has brought about oneness among the people of Isua Akoko and as such, helps to fight against every external attack as far as it is worshiped according to the laid down rule and regulations.

Organisation and Celebration of Uparuba Festival

No doubt, the discussion on the origin of *Uparuba* festival has been able to establish the festival celebration as the commemoration of the significant role of *Uparuba* in the protection of Isua from external attack, promotion of unity and oneness among them. The festival is celebrated every seven years specifically in the month of August for the remembrance of *Uparuba* and change of political positions such as the Age-group and the installation of new *Olori* (the Custodian of *Uparuba* from each quarter).

Uparuba festival is regarded as the prime and most imperative festival in the entire Isua Akoko. The festival preparation starts with the *Ifa* priest (*Aworo*) who consults the oracle on the precise day for the celebration of the festival. Each quarter, through the directive of Oracle choose *Ogogomule/Olori* who serve as a liaison between the quarter they represent and the deity for another seven years. After the initiation, their head is bald and dressed like *Ifa* priest on white regalia holding rods which serve as a staff of office. The rod is called *Ukutumu* (Aremo, personal communication, 25 July, 2018). Owing to the fact that, the celebration of *Uparuba* is central to *Irobo*, their custodian is from *Irobo* Quarters always with indigenous white cap. Before the celebration proper, they move to *Odupa* in *Okua* quarters to ingest and later go to dance round the hill where *Uparuba* disappeared after which he was guillotined. They place their

leg on the blood and say *Megbofia* (I kill enemy) and pray and perform rites that none of the *Olori* should die before the seven years lapse. Be that as it may, only four quarters are allowed to enter into the shrine (Idefa, Ahinnioso, Irobo and Oope) (Julius, personal communication, 24 July, 2018)

Before their arrival to the main shrine, they meet *Aworo* while the *Olori* representing Okua stay at the entrance of the shrine. The shrine is a stone step which is also about eight to ten feet down to the surface of the ground. *Olori* Ahinni-Oso first goes in with two kola-nuts with four pears and local tobacco. The *Aworo* then collects it and uses it to pray to the ancestors to know how the journey of the seven years is going to look like. Same thing is done by all the *Olori* (Benson, Personal Communication, 24 July, 2018.). The *Aworo* usually dress in white attire and tie gung/bell around their waist and go back to their various homes. They must not look back nor talk to anybody when going back to their various quarters to undress and begin to entertain all their well-wishers. After the celebration, the gung disappears back to the hill and they must not see it again till the next seven years. It should be noted that during the ritual period, females must not touch their cloth and their rod. Then, on the market day, they dress on their traditional attire (with beads on their necks and hands) and also with white powder in their face, they dance around the market as people spray money on them and at same time, they were to pick anything they like without paying and subsequently take it to the hill where they must be for seven days. During this period, women also change their age group dressing like males and hold their office staff and dance to the market. Before they go to the hill for rites and celebration, the age group is changed and begin to sing cultural songs with traditional drums (Stephen, personal communication, 3 August, 2018).

After the divination and a day has been chosen by the oracle, the preparation starts from Irobo quarters. After nine days, Irobo quarters take them to *Oope* in *Ahinni Okunnu* quarters, after five days, *Oope* goes to *Osumu*, after fifteen days, they then go to *Agbasi* to make arrangements and go to the palace after which they go back home. After nine days, *Agbasi* quarters take the hosting rites, from the host, arrangement is made on how to go to the high hill with pounded yam, beans cake (*Akara*) and dog to make sacrifice. After the sacrifice, a date for the celebration is announced to them. They will then come back home dancing with joy and happiness. After nine days, a date for the festival is then announced and everybody begins to make preparations for the festival. It should be noted that everybody involved in the preparation and organisation of the festival must be in the designated cultural attire, with a rod in their hands. During this process, they must not talk to anybody and must not sleep with their wives (Vincent, personal communication, 20 July, 2016).

However, it is interesting to know that nobody is exempted from participating in the ceremony, both indigenes and non-indigenes are free to participate in the merry making

celebration segment of the festival as this is not regarded as a taboo in comparison to the various dances that took place initially, particularly at the shrine which is regarded as a holy ground which exempts non-indigenes and some quarters. Apart from this, everybody is allowed to participate in the merry making (*Ojo*, personal communication, 25 August, 2016).

The Sacred Nature of Uparuba Festival

A festival like *Uparuba* cannot but possess certain sacredness in the nature of its celebration. The *Uparuba goddess* is revered as a sacred figure because, it has over the time presented itself as a source through which prayers of *Isua* is being answered through constant and faithful worship at the shrine in every seven years in commemoration of the unalloyed peace, tranquillity, bountiful harvest and security. The *Uparuba* shrine is sacred because it is regarded as a holy ground. Therefore, non-*Irobo* and *Ahinni* people cannot visit the shrine during and after the period of the celebration because, on that particular day, it is believed that the ancestral spirit of *Uparuba* is present at the shrine. It is only the *Olori*, *Aworo* and the four quarters that can move close to the shrine (Akinola, personal communication, 25 August, 2018).

All the *Oloris* are regarded as one and they must not have anything to do with wicked acts and they must always be at the rescue of their citizens at all times. The *Olori* must not fight, he must not have his hair cut publicly for seven years, as only their wife is entitled to cut their hair when necessary. In other words, their head must not be exposed to the public and whosoever touches their head either consciously or unconsciously must be brought to book, which may take that person's life if not properly handled (*Ojo*, personal communication, 25 August, 2016).

Also, another sacred event is that all the *Oloris* must not sleep outside their room for that seven year because it is believed that *Uparuba* comes on visitation at all times and if *Uparuba* did not meet them, the whole or that particular quarter is in danger unless quick action is taken.

More so, the immunity that covers them is synonymous to that of *Invaire*, they are not arrested. If they fall short of litigation related issues and they are to be prosecuted, all the elders stand in for them. If the law refuses the elders to stand in for the arrest of the *Olori/Ogogomule*, and request for the arrest of *Ogogomule*, they are released for arrest. In this case, all those who partake in the arrest die within seven days of the arrest. This, in other words means that the deity is being arrested and hindered to perform its functional rites.

It should also be noted that should the *Olori* commit any taboo, he personally pay the reparation of White sheep. This is made known whenever he wants to hand over to his successor. In this case, the number or nature of taboo committed is directly proportional to the cowries given at the point of installation. The number of cowries discovered in his bag is the number of the taboo committed which is tantamount

to the number of sheep that he will pay as reparation (Omoba, personal communication, 22 July, 2016, Oladele, Personal Communication, 22 July, 2016.).

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF UPARUBA FESTIVAL IN ISUA AKOKO

The role of festivals as a lifeblood of culture proves the fact that festivals are of colossal importance to every society due to its impact. The lifestyle of people has changed with time, and the importance of traditional festivals in their lives has not faded because it is always observed as at and when due, which serves as the vanguard of unity among the people of Isua Akoko.

The significance of *Uparuba* festival on the entire Isua community is considered as an appreciation of the deity which brings together the entire people of Isua Akoko to appreciate the deities of *Uparuba* for answered prayers for the past seven years (Akanbi. Ogedengbe, personal communication, 24 July, 2018.).

However, traditional festivals have been considered a ritual drama among unlettered people. To this effect, Akinjogbin (1998) is of the view that many festivals are no doubt re-enactment ceremonies in commemoration of historical activities or the worship of deities. Akinjogbin espoused this when he said in his book titled *Enactment of ceremonies as a source of unwritten history*.

“an enactment ceremony has actual important events within the period of their history of the particular people enacting it. And only important events which bear directly on the foundation and the growth of a particular kingdom or people are re-enacted. The sources therefore, grow not by imaginary additions but by addition which are themselves enactment of things that happened after the original enactment had come into being.”⁷

The above espousal of Akinjogin hypothetically summarizes the principle behind the traditional festival in Isua Akoko.

This is more present in the celebration of the *Uparuba* festival in Isua Akoko. The significance of the festival has cut across various developments in the political, economic, sociological and influence of external religion and its effects on the people of Isua Akoko.

Political Significance

The worship of *Uparuba* deities, which has been associated with the unquestionable authority of the Oba typified the historical beginning of *Uparuba* festival in Isua Akoko.

It provides an appropriate opportunity to recognise, honour and venerate the achievement and performance of individuals especially the nobles, chiefs and the council of elders. Also, the festival is put in place to curb any breach of

tradition made by the high and the mighty, through proverbial songs (personal communication, 24 July, 2018, 2018).

Uparuba festival serves as an avenue that keeps the society against crime, social sanitation and promotion of political unity in Isua Akoko. That is, changing of Age group from one position to another; (Isisi- Uwienna, Uwienna-Ekeka, Ekeka-Itapo, Itapo-Ude, Ude-Ofude, Ofude-Iyengba Iyengba-Ofueruekeka And Ofueru Ekeka- Ofueru) each of these groups with their role in the development of Isua Akoko. This has immensely helped in strengthening the traditional and political system in Isua Akoko in smooth running of Administration.

Consequently, failing to recognise the inner significance and the power of this immemorial culture, the town would be drafted into purposeless existence, because this festival has a profound meaning and purpose, but no earnest effort is made to understand the inner meaning and deeper objectives (Aremo, personal communication, 25 July, 2016).

Economic Significance

African traditional festivals have been reputed for the promotion of economic activities which is embodied for continuous celebrations of such festivals. They boost economic activities especially in transportation, in such a way that people who have to come from neighbouring towns to witness it.

The people of Isua are known as predominant farmers, the celebration of *Uparuba* festival has overtime increased the farmer's income and better-quality of their standard of living. In substantiation of this development, this improvement in farming activities has boosted intergroup relations to the highest level in Isua Akoko regardless of their foreign religious influence on the people of Isua Akoko (Adeyanju, personal communication, 25 August, 2016.).

Furthermore, gift items play a very important role in improving the economic life of the people of Isua Akoko during this festival. These gifts range from yams, palm oil, money, cloths, goats, rams and so on which drastically reduce the cost of funds which are supposed to be spent on the celebration of the festival. Also, friends and relatives from long distance who do come to witness the festival, thereby present gifts and presents to the chief priest and the town in general (Ajulo, personal communication, 25 August, 2018).

Sociological Significance

Uparuba festival is a sacred ceremony which provides the assemblage of different entertainments for those who learn about social and traditional values of Isua Akoko. Festival is a way through which the people exemplify their culture and promote them through songs, dance, and incantation and ritual activities.

The celebration of *Uparuba* festival poses many sociological effects in Isua Akoko. According to oral

tradition, the festival which is part of the worship of powerful forces pulls all the sons and daughters of Isua Akoko together from their various places as one.

It also serves as a unifying factor among all the quarters therein; it has remained a major source of unity since the pre-colonial era till date. Moreover, it also serves as an avenue to reverse and remember their historical events in the society that are significant to the survival of the town. It also reminds the indigenes of its historical antecedents of their warfare with their enemies during the period of *Uparuba*. The festival helps to greatly awaken the people of their consciousness and about cultural heritage which promotes the spirit of unity among the quarters in Isua Akoko and serves as cultural transmitter and religious preserver (Joseph personal communication 22 July, 2016).

However, there are still some adverse sociological effects of the *Uparuba* festival during its course of celebration. The sociological effect of the *Uparuba* festival on the negative part is that it encourages excessive drunkenness and smoking among the male youths. These acts are perilous to health and it can also make them misbehave and may eventually commit taboo (Olatunji, personal communication, 19 July, 2018).

Influence of external religion and its effects on Uparuba Festival in Isua Akoko

In respect to the discussion on the origin of celebration of *Uparuba* Festival in Isua Akoko, the sacred nature of the festival has great significance to the motivation of external agents of change. As a matter of fact, western education brings about western culture which has prevented many Africans from giving serious thoughts to anything which is of value in their traditional past. The above position is applicable to the situation in Isua Akoko as a result of the impact of western education and other world religions. Africans are more exposed to the civilization brought by the external agents of change and this in turn makes them attach less importance to their traditional way of life. The young ones however do not bother to come home during the celebration of the festival, in other words, they refuse to take active part in the festival thereby leaving it to the old people (Julius, personal communication, 24 July, 2018).

Furthermore, the works of the missionaries have also done great harm to make people lose their traditional values. The introduction of Christianity and Islam and the adherence to the culture of these foreigners have been a factor which has paralysed the traditional religion in West Africa (Elisha, personal communication, 29 July, 2016).

From the foregoing, it is evident that the town and *Uparuba* festival have been affected adversely by the missionary activities. In actual facts, the festival is greatly affected by Christianity and Islam. Both religions prevented their adherents from taking active part in the festival.

Those who are found involved in the celebration of the festivals are regarded as sinners. As a result of this,

people, mainly Christians and Muslims are running away from the celebration so that they will not also fall victims of sin. It is clear that the great importance attached to *Uparuba* festival by their fore bearers is greatly diminishing in value and importance because of rival religions like Christianity and Islam.

Challenges and Prospects of Uparuba Festival

From the discussion on the influence of external agents of change on the festival which are mainly western education and rival religious practices such as Christianity and Islam, it is likely that the future prospect of the festival is at a bleak.

This, therefore, calls for the organizers and the indigenous people to discharge their responsibilities in the continuous celebration of *Uparuba* festival and now to arrest the declining image of the festival in the mind of its historical admirers. More importantly, the ultimate challenge is how to retain the confidence of the celebrants and organizers on the relevance and importance of the festival. This can be achieved if the following steps and recommendations are put into consideration. The festival should not be left for the celebration of the chiefs and old people, the youths should be involved so that people would emulate and encourage the importance of the festival. Western education which serves as an agent of destruction to the festival should be used as a means by which the festival could be modernised. This would eventually increase the number of indigenous participation and other people from Christian and Muslim circles. For this would contribute to the success of the festival and its preservation.

If these suggestions are considered with all forms of seriousness, *Uparuba* festival would be preserved. However, if the situation remains as it is, there would be a time the festival would be a thing of the past.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This work examined and analyzed the accounts of the history and organization of the *Uparuba* festival in Isua Akoko. It has also been able to establish the achievements and development of the celebration as the unifying factor that brings together the entire people of Isua Akoko. However, despite the achievements and developments of the festival, there are still some flops and inadequacies which have characterised the celebration of this festival as discussed in the study. Nevertheless, the study has given a balanced view on the history of the origin of Isua Akoko. It has been able to establish the fact that the celebration of *Uparuba* festival was because of the pivotal role "*Uparuba*" played in protecting the people of Isua from external attack. This makes the celebration bring about the nexus of intergroup relations which are, political, economic and socio-cultural in nature. Also, the unity of the people of Isua since the 19th century is tied up to the celebration of the *Uparuba* festival.

The study further gives insight into the origin, organization and celebration of the festival. It also observes the use of animals as a sacrifice in place of humans.

The festival is being celebrated every seven years for the remembrance of the great warrior (*Uparuba*). It serves as a means of fostering unity and serves as an avenue for group interaction among the people of Isua and its environs.

The celebration also brings about a change of age groups among the people of Isua Akoko. It also makes them traditionally conscious of their culture. It also serves as bases of interaction and occasionally brings her citizens both home and abroad together. The celebration of this festival leads to closer ties and exchange of ideas on many issues that bring development to the people of Isua at large. Also, economic interdependence among the people has continued to create rooms for interaction among traders with neighbouring towns. Westernization through the advent of Christianity and Islamic religion which perpetrated much evil to African traditional religion and at the same time, people who are supposed to give attention to their culture have swept it away through the influence of European culture.

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