



## Ibani People: Restoring its Battered Identity/Heritage

### KEYWORDS

**Jones M. Jaja**

Ph.D, Institute of Foundation Studies  
Rivers State University of Science and Technology  
Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

**Edna A. Brown**

M.A. College of Arts and Science Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

**ABSTRACT** *This paper addressed the impact of Western agents of change in Opobo land. It is not oblivious of the fact that other African nations have suffered similar fate of cultural clash as noted by scholars, thus, the main thrust of this work was to provide a solution on how to restore the lost cultural identity/heritage of Opobo Ibani people vis-à-vis the socio-cultural predicaments posed by Western civilization in Opobo Kingdom. It enjoin all Ibani (Opobo and Bonny) to come together in the spirit of Ibanishood and censor what should be infused into the peoples' culture. The paper advocates for a proper enculturation of the good aspects of Western civilization, while discarding those aspects that may become detrimental to the people's socio-cultural heritage.*

### Introduction

The coming of Europeans into Ibani Kingdom or African soil was applauded by scholars. This applause was hinged on the notion that their presence brought westernization and changes which were beneficial to the society. Their presence brought about cultural clashes. In Ibani, one of the problems was the attempt at destruction of the culture/tradition of the people. Ibani people were noted for their unique language, dressing, eating habits, hospitality, brotherhood and many other identities which were turned inside out. These cultural identities have been eroded as a result of European presence at the coast. It is therefore the fundamental objective of this work to provide a panacea to the lost cultural identity of Ibani. It is hoped that this work will be of utmost benefit to the Ibani people who want to undertake a study on social change. Some of these agents of change are Christianity, education, secularization and urbanization (Trimingham, 1959:200; Ayandele, 1974).

### The Ibani

The Ibani are those group of people that moved from their homeland in the Ijo central Niger Delta. Alagoa (1972) argued that they moved into Ndoki and from there into Ogoni area and stopped at Opuoko. Ogoni hostility made them move southwards into the Essene Creak Otumo (a place called Whydah near Egwanga in Opubo district then). They first settled at Orupiri and finally moved into Bonny town which they named Okoloama (Alagoa 1972:3). Here they settled until the 1869 breakaway that saw a group led by leader of the Annie Pepple House called Jaja. Jaja who took over as head of Opobo Annie people house in 1863 led them out of Bonny to create the new state of Opobo in 1869. Cooley (1974) argued that this movement out of Bonny was strategic. This Ibani group now in Opobo is better known as the Opobo Ibani.

Opobo Ibani is a modern state created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its activities centred on the activities of European invaders (Trevor Roper, 1984) Cooley called it a new town of Opobo because it was planned as a town. According to him "... as trade improved and the chiefs prospered, better homes were constructed by them out of imported wood and glass" (Cooley, 1974:80).

It is pertinent to note that the Opobo Ibani passed through a transition period from farming and fishing to salt making both for domestic consumption and for trading with her neighbours. Opobo Kingdom came into existence when the slave trade had given way to palm produce trade and which the Europeans participated greatly at the coast. Less emphasis was placed on trade with local riverine communities. The imperialism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century required that for an individual to accumulate wealth in the Niger Delta, that individual must necessarily be trading with the Europeans at the coast. All other economic activity was for subsistence. Here lies the root of the battered identity which the Opobo Ibani faced in the period under view.

### Opobo Ibani and Change

A fundamental fact remains that change is a constant factor of existence and society is not absolved or immune to this; the focus is however, the nature and purpose of that change and the perspective from which a scholar views that change. It is hoped that this work would be of benefit to scholars who want to undertake a study of social change, particularly that of identity loss. Trimingham (1959), identified a number of factors that eroded African cultural heritage. Some of which are Christianity, Western style Education, Urbanization and Secularization. Let us see how these factors played out in the Opobo situation.

### Christianity

Christianity was introduced in the Coast (1864) in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and in Opobo Ibani in 1890 (Queen Town) by Chief Oko Epelle (1891) Christianity was an important agent of change. The Christian religion came with its culture and technology. It did not penetrate African societies solely. It became a catalyst of change in Ibani society. The religion came without any aspect of enculturation, thus every aspect of the Ibani traditional religion, philosophy, cosmology, Ibani theology, modes of festivals, concept of ancestorship, traditional dancing, kingship inheritance, traditional marriage and other socio-cultural values; were all condemned as fetish. In the spirit of evangelization, most parts of the culture were replaced with Western culture in disguise for Christianity. For instance, today for a wedding to be significant, the traditional marriage must be compli-

mented with the white wedding. This was not so before 1893. Then marriage was completed by traditional rites only.

### Western Style Education

A by-product of Christianity, it was believed Western style education came with Christianity (Ayandele 1974:17). To this end the educated elite, who themselves lacked the means to bring about the desired revolution, expected the British government to provide this brand of education as a matter of duty, from the levels, to the primary, secondary and tertiary. Western-style education is "the acquisition of skills, knowledge, adaptations and exhibitions either by association, observation, learning in world-views, arts, science, philosophy which are technically of the occidental or Western World Origin" (John 2010:136). Concerted efforts were made to imbibe western-style education. In the Niger Delta, the small nineteenth century educated elitist group were trained abroad in Britain. Prominent among the Delta elites trained abroad are King George Pepple of Bonny Charles Pepple, several children of Oko Jumbo of Bonny and King Jaja of Opobo (Ayandele 1974:13). Western style education became a catalyst of change in Ibani land. Many educated Ibani people are now indigenous agents of Western culture. At every opportunity they criticized and attack the indigenous ways. An action that threatens the fabric of Opobo-Ibani culture. Moreover societal values and socio-cultural lifestyle has been bastardized. With secularism, youths have become dishonest and eager for easy wealth and means of livelihood. Ostentatious lifestyle, lack of fear of for indigenous Gods, emphasis on material things, mediocrity, militarization, armed robbery, raping and kidnapping of foreigners and Political Exposed Persons (PEP) have become the order of the day.

### Secularization

Secularism is the belief that religion should not be involved in the organization of society, education etc. Secularization therefore is "the process by which religious beliefs lose social significance and the people's mundane activities is being carried out without reference to God (Hart, 2010:19). Secularization as Western agent of change impacted on the religion-cultural heritage of the Ibani. This no doubt have grave consequences on the morals, ethics and standard of living of Ibani people. Respect for ancestors and deities of the land were eroded. The traditional religion was the bases on which the peoples lives were factored. It provided the structure on which Christianity stood on. Traditional religion provided that fear which deterred people from deviant behaviour. A fear of punishment from the gods. Today fear has reduced and criminality abounds. Ibani culture no doubt offered a better life style in the pre-modern times because its people acted according to the moral dictates of their religion. In contemporary times secularization seems to have corrupted these ethical values, the younger generation now cherishes all that is modern and Western system of life, leading to the destruction of their socio-cultural life.

### Urbanization and Industrialization

Modern technology, companies, firms, institutions, building of contemporary houses, machines etc. in a particular locality, thereby transforming such a place into an urban centre because of their presence.

Industrialization and urbanization are twin agents of Western civilization which had caused many able bodied men and women of Ibani extraction to migrate to Port Harcourt, Owerri, Calabar, Enugu, Lagos, Abuja, Germany, Britain,

China, U.S.A., among others where they seek employment or engage in other businesses or even further their education. The result is, many have relegated their place of birth and its affairs. The effect of this is that the indigenous religions, traditions, culture, mores are gradually forgotten and abandoned. The few who are left behind are reluctant to practice the culture and traditions of their forefathers as they consider themselves inferior when compared with their brothers and sisters settled outside Ibani Kingdom.

### The Lost Identity of Ibani People

Evidence abound to attest to the fact that Ibani traditions and cultural heritage had undergone rapid transformation (Ayandele, 1974). A change attributed to Western agents of change (Evans, 2005:38). There are also the view that the coming of Western civilization into Ibani land was largely beneficial (Ayandele 1974; Tamuno 1972). It is also worthy to note that, selfish motives may not be completely ruled out of this humanitarian venture in Ibani Land. In other words, while the coming of Western civilization has improved over forty percent of the peoples' well-being, it is difficult to state out right that there was no iota of ulterior motive behind the overseas adventure by the white-men. Economic, social and political rationalization had been attributed for European, presence in Africa (Cookey 1974; Ofonagoro 1979). Lord Lugard affirmed this when he declared:

Let it be admitted at the onset that European brains, capital and energy have not been, and never will be expended in developing the resources of Africa from motives of pure philanthropy: Europe is in Africa for the mutual benefit of her own industrial classes (Enwerem, 2010:27).

Lugard's statement attests that European presence in Africa was not altruistic. It was not for the so-called divine mission of educating, Christianizing and civilizing the "backward" people from Africa as often parroted. Their mission was also to decapitate or ruin a peoples culture and traditions while exploiting its natural and human resources to the fullest Western agents of change was also aimed at exterminating everything African. In an attempt to "annihilate" a race, every trait of the people, technological inroads into many communities became an important factor. European culture was introduced with their technology and language. Components not compatible with Ibani customs and traditions. The result was a society torn apart from the inside. Before colonial period pornography, nudity, sexual obscenity, prurience and lasciviousness which were agents of prostitution were not rife. If sexual immorality did exist then, it was in the barest minimum and was not seen openly. Today these immoral practices are displayed openly in Ibani land under the pretext of modern life style. It came to a head that the Amanyanabo of Opobo Kingdom His Majesty Dandeson Douglas Jaja had to place a bann on wearing of skimpy dresses, shots and trousers by women. This bann was liften in 2010.

The introduction of Western civilization, no doubt had its advantages, it also was destructive of Ibani culture and ethical values. Equally of note is the operation of two conflicting or complementary social cultures in Ibani territory. For instance today (2015) some Ibani men bear two names, a native and an European name. The same apply to burial rites; people bury the deceased using the traditional as well as the church/Christian method. Thereby plunging the people into the unnecessary financial burden of performing two different rites. Expatriates who settled and did business in Ibani land have not adopted Ibani

name in addition to those of their country's. The reason is not far-fetched, they see themselves as superior and therefore reservoir of knowledge and innovators of ideas.

In Ibani today, the cultural identity is virtually extinct. What is apparent is an admixture of two cultural traits the Ibani, and that of the Western World, or atimes from the neighbouring communities.

Language is an important cultural identifier. Language is a carrier of culture and traditions. It is the root of a peoples culture and the basis of identification and identity. Ngugi Wa Thiongo, the literary anglicist opines inter-alia:

Language is a carrier of a people's culture. Culture is a carrier of a people's value; and values are the basis of a people's self-definition-the basis of their consciousness of their environment. And when you destroy a people's language, you are destroying a very important part of their heritage.

A language gradually charges as new words are adapted into its vocabulary but not totally altered. If a language is not passed on from one generation to another it dies off. Language has to be elongated through usage; that explains why conscious efforts are made to protect a language. Ibani language today (2015) is one of the endangered African languages. This is because no effort is made to elongate it, particularly among the Opobo Ibani in Opobo Kingdom. And also in Bonny Kingdom its sister Kingdom and point of dispersion (Alagoa 1972, Cookey 1974).

In Opobo and Bonny Kingdoms little effort is made in promoting its usage within the community, especially by improving its practical usefulness, and creating situations where the language can be used. Moreover, its social prestige had diminished as men of prestige and influence in the society are reluctant to use it and talk positively about it (Austin *et al.*, 2011). Ibani language is a dominant aspect showing loss of cultural identity. Only few educated Ibani can communicate fluently in Ibani in Bonny. In Opobo Kingdom, just a handful. When Ibani indigenes meet outside the Kingdom, rather than communicate in Ibani, they prefer the western language. Dominic (2005) highlighted the importance of native language when he said:

...thinking is most mysterious, and by far the greatest light upon it that we have is thrown by the study of native language. This study shows that the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious. These patterns are the unperceived intricate systematization of his own culture. Advancement depends therefore on his native language.

It is therefore clear that there is need for Ibani people to revive their native language instead of allowing it to die. Marshall (2007) has also observed that the first scientific knowledge expressed by a child is that which he has related or communicated to his parents within his ethnic language. For him native language is an inevitable component to develop ones potentials. In Mbanugo's (2005) words. "Children grow up and into singing and performance of songs in their native culture without any formal teaching at the ages up to three. Moreover, moral teachings are also impacted unto a child through daily singing the family and teachers do and as the children hear these words of advise and morals, their lives change." Okofar (1996) states: Discipline begins in the home with the so-called rules of the house and in our own society, extends to family groups, clans... and so the body of rules, which

governs social action and maintains social order, is found in customs, tradition.

Jaja (1996) emphasized this role of the cultural historian. His responsibility to society is in ensuring that traditions are passed on to the younger generation and into the future. Parents must ensure that their culture and traditions does not die with them. These traditions are seen in our folklore, masquerades, even libation. The act of libation is not an ordinary performance of a people. Jaja (2001) expressed the importance and lessons of the libation ritual. In his words "the past is even more important that the present" because without the past the present will have no foothold. The past is an indestructible part of their social existence. It is the fulcrum of their national consciousness. In Alagoa's (1985) words:

"There is a cultural dimension in the building of National consciousness in which the historian can play a role... it is the responsibility of historians, as men of culture and as members of the intellectual community, to proclaim the truth that wisdom derives from the heritage of history, and that experience of the ages embedded in culture is an essential ingredient of national development.

We must harness our grassroot activities and use them to better the lives of our children. Grassroot community based activities such as festivals (initiation rites, puberty rites, new yam festivals and marriage ceremonies) instill harmony, good neighbourliness and family hood. These are what give Ibani its identity and helps to sustain the trade-religious heritage of the people.

This research is not oblivious that western scholars would want this paper to outline achievements of western agents of change. Despite the much taunted acclaimed achievements of western agents of change in African society, it is like the Ibani society, which include massive conversion from the indigenous religion to Christianity, education, science, technological know-how, medicine, modern means of transportation, communication gadgets, industrialization etc (John, 2010), these are nothing compared to what still exist. The individualism, sordid life, political crisis, greed, violence, youth restiveness, drug abuse, lack of ethics at all levels of professionalism, massive poverty in the midst of plenty, gangsterism, nepotism and favoritism, embezzlement in high places etc are all on the increase in Ibani land, and the Federal Republic of Nigeria in general. Ibani people remain under-developed despite being among the first to come in contact with the whiteman and Western culture (Epelle, 1970).

These socio-cultural systems have virtually been eroded by the onslaught of Western agents of change. With, capitalism firmly enthroned and the technological transformation brought by Western culture, the nation of Ibani-se or Ibani brotherhood had been watered down. Let us briefly examine Panacea aimed at restoring the lost cultural identities of Ibani people.

### **Restoring the Lost Identity of Ibani People**

As Ibani citizens we must recognize the socio-cultural identity of our people. Ibani traditional values like descent dressing, language, marriage rites, burial rites, informal education, respect for ancestors, worship of the Supreme Being, brotherhood, self reliance and contentment, transparent life style etc are basic factors that are not at variance with Christian ethics. A proper fusion of Ibani religion cultural norms with Christianity will ensure cultural rejuvenation.

nation, vitality, fruitfulness, peace and stability in Ibani land thereby leading to the recovery of Ibani cultural identity.

Ibani sons and daughters who are knowledgeable in Western culture should appreciate the fact that they are in a better position to speak on behalf of Ibani people and protect her cultural identities. They should come together in the spirit of "Ibanihood" and develop the Ibani socio-cultural philosophy, Ibani indigenous education, Ibani science which has to do with inventions, fabrications and manufacturing of local product using materials in the environment. There is need to educate the people and foreigners on Ibani traditional religion. Unfortunately, there are no sacred writings of Ibani religion. What exists so far, is derived from art forms, archaeological excavations, institutions, customs and usages, Myths, proverbs, names etc (Metuh, 1987:12-25).

A sacred writing or document is the most authentic instrument that speaks for any religion. When a particular religion has become adulterated and misconceived by her adherents, its holy book speaks for itself in contradiction to its practitioners or adherents. Therefore, Ibani educated elites should develop a single document on "Ibani sacred ways". This would correct the misconceptions foreign missionaries have about Ibani, God and the religion.

There is need for the generality of Ibani people to develop their own skills. We must appreciate the fact that Ibani's ancestors were able to establish industries and locally manufacture soaps, scarp, canoe for transportation among others. If Ibani people today (2015) could add efforts to what has been achieved by their forefathers in the field of industry, they would compete with other culture groups in this age of globalization. This would also stem the problem of urbanization which had sent many Ibani into the Diaspora.

There is an urgent need for the Federal Government of Nigeria to address issues of statistics on crude oil and gas production in Nigeria. Ile states that Ibani land is the largest producers of oil and gas in Nigeria (Ile, 2007). Yet, the people have remained impoverished (David, 2010:40). Government should compensate Ibani people through the provision of amenities and infrastructure. The education system in Ibani land should be reformed. There should be subjects to teach Ibani language, Ibani religion. Ibani cultural identities in her primary and post primary schools considering the economic contributions of Ibani land. No compensation is too big and as such a department should be established for the study of Ibani culture in the University of Port Harcourt geared towards awarding degree, in Ibani cultural identities, in Ibani language, and Ibani history etc. This would help recover cultural identities of Ibani people as well as advance Ibani civilization.

Cultural censor should be adopted if Ibani identify must be resuscitated. According to Hegel, censor is the beginning of knowledge (Grant and Harod 1950:461). The Ibani should be able to distinguish the good and bad aspects of Western philosophy of life and since the Western forces of change are still rife in Ibani, cultural censor is ethically a necessary factor.

Heraclitus, assert that there is no permanent reality to life. Every thing is becoming and changing, be it matter or non matter, living or non living organism (Onyewuenyi, 1994:174). Humanity must evolve. This evolution, be it in religion, economics, development politics or Western civi-

lization cannot take place without imputation of human errors and frailties. Errors of today help perfect tomorrow. Therefore, changes that have taken place in Ibani land, are not enough to dwell in the past or reject everything Western. These changes ought to make a better tomorrow. Consequently, changes today or in the future must be positive in its entirety, it must address issues of immorality, rape, ill-health, poverty and a host of other societal ills identified earlier. Any change that cannot address those issues, is not worth while and must be discarded/rejected. Ibani people must utilize the knowledge and benefits of our past for a better society today and tomorrow.

### Conclusion

Society has to set its priorities right if people are expected to cherish the knowledge replete in our culture and traditions. Its impossible to foster a deep love of our culture and life of our forefathers when the life of our wise men and women are not eulogized and made ever green in our songs, history and folklore. Whether or not our people will be able to intensify the love our culture and traditions will depend on how attractive and desirable we make the achievements of our forebears to look. There is need to prioritize our values in our culture to those around us. When this happens, it becomes easier to guard against the forces of change.

This paper has attempted to explore the effect of Western agents of change on cultural change in Ibani land. The most subliminal import of the paper was that it proffered a panacea to the recovery of the cultural identities of Ibani people eroded to a large extent by the winds of change. The presence of these forces of change which includes Christianity, Western-style education, secularization and industrialization have improved the quality of life of over forty percent of Ibani people, while at the same time being detrimental to the cultural life of society. It is against this backdrop, that the researcher advocates the censor of what is ethically practicable in the land. To that extent the educated elites of Ibani extraction must come together with the council of chiefs in the spirit of Ibanise "Ibanihood" to ensure protection of Ibani cultural identities.

It is also necessary at this point to develop a document on "Ibani sacred ways" this would to a large extent shed light on misconceptions about Ibani God and Religion which has been battered by the early Christian missionaries. The book shall be a reference point on Ibani history and culture, a modus operandi of some sort. Furthermore, Federal Government should establish a department to study all aspect of Ibani culture and civilization, especially, the Ibani language that is fast going extinct. It would be a sad commentary on the Ibani extraction if that language and civilization is wiped out inspite of the rich history of the people and their contribution to the history of the Atlantic slave trade and palm oil produce in the Niger Delta of Nigeria.

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