



TRADITIONAL CULTURE OF THE IBIBIO: A CHRONICLE OF THE IKPE NEW YAM FESTIVAL

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ABSTRACT: *Ikpe clan is a sub-tribe in the Ibibio ethnic group in Nigeria. They believe in and worship the Esieri Ikpe deity, with an annual new yam festival structured into eight separate days of celebrations between July and October. It is embedded with a lot of ritual sacrifices, traditional rites and celebrations. The festivals are role-shared amongst the women, young adults, the Ete-Idung and traditional council members. Yam plays a central place in all that they do, as it is believed that the celebration will usher in more blessings and bumper harvests in the New Year. Through the participant's observation and oral interview, the study seeks to uncover the symbolic methods of serving the gods and their pattern of new yam celebrations. However, some parts of the culture have been altered due to time, socialisation, education and poor economy, but its significance is still very relevant.*

KEYWORDS: Ibibio, Ikpe, Yam, Festival, Rituals, Esieri Ikpe Deity.



INTRODUCTION

Ikpe clan has twenty-eight (28) villages, situated in the northern part of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. It is located within longitude 7° 40' and 7° 50', and on latitude 5° 27' and 5° 20' North. Rivers running through the area have great support to the Eniong creek water course and a major water body to the Cross River, thus giving great assistance to the inhabitant farmers for the cultivation of cocoa, cocoa-yam, okoro, rice, cassava and most importantly yam. The people are involved in swamp and creek fishing. Ikpe people practice eight (8) market days of – Obo, Etim, Fiongaran, Edet, Etaha, Edem-etaha, Fiong-etok and Edereobo.

This study aims to aver the cultural significance of yam in Ibibio culture; portray the pattern of new yam celebration in the Ikpe clan; and demonstrate the symbolic methods of serving the gods. There is no known study on the yam festival in the Ikpe clan.

Study Context / Methodology

The study was carried out in Ikpe Ikot Nkon, one of the communities in the Ikpe clan in the Ini Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. The town is bounded by Itie Ikpe – southwest, Ibiono Ewuro - east, Ogu Itu-Mbonuso - north, Ibam Ukot – north west and Nna Enin - west. According to the 2022 population estimate, Ini LGA is about 126,400; in a 406.9 km² area. Ikpe practice a patrilineal system and are adherent to the traditional customs and religion. Several sacrifices and supplications are made to Abasi Ibom (God Almighty) through Esieri Ikpe deity. It is believed that the ancestors are blind (because of death) but not deaf to the supplications of their children, hence the constant touch through liberations and sacrifices. The period of the celebration signals the beginning of the general harvest and rest from major farm work till sacrifice for the new farming season.

This paper is an outcome of fieldwork carried out in September 1993 and September 2024. Focus group discussions, interviews and participant observation were adopted for data collection. Participant observation was used in observing, recording and practising the annual festival. Key interviews were conducted with the Ete-Idung, server, Obong Ekpe, women leaders, and some community leaders. The aforelisted people are knowledgeable and yearly celebrants of the new yam festival and in the customs and traditions of Ibibio, vis-à-vis Ikpe clan in particular.

The People of Ikpe

The Ikpe people are members of the Ibibio sub-tribe and trace various origins to their present living location. As Ibibio, they live in the south-south region of Nigeria, with mangrove swamp forests by the coast and the rain forest by the hinterland (Udo, 1983). According to Akpan (2016), the origin of Ibibio is traced to Cameroon Highland, with villages and clans administratively fragmented. They live in villages with political and spiritual leadership bestowed in the Obong (Ete-Idung) and legislated by the council of chiefs. Traditional governance is leveraged in secret societies such as Obon, Ekpo, Ekpe, Akata, and Obon Iban (Akpan, 2018). The people of Ikpe, irrespective of their diverse legend, are commonly involved in all traditional activities – starting from selection and installation of Ete-Idung (Kingship), common ancestral deity worship – Esieri Ikpe, cultural plays, and the celebration of Usoro-Udia (new yam festival).



The Social Status of Yam

Yam in Ikpe land is not only a staple food but is highly revered. Yam attracts many ceremonies from preparations for cultivation to harvesting and eating. It is highly celebrated amongst the people. In the ancient days, yam cultivation was a major source of wealth and fame. An individual barn size and several yam tubers on stake were a symbol of status and means of wealthy identification. Traditional gifts were bestowed on an accomplished farmer with a large barn. Amongst the Ikpe, yam is used in every spiritual, cultural and social celebration such as, during marriages, major festivals as Usung Udia (pounded yam), ritual sacrifices, thanksgiving, gifts, during Mboobi (fattening) and for nursing mothers.

Ikpe New Yam Festival – The Performativity

Usoro-Udia is an annual festival celebrated to give thanks to God the creator and the gods of the land for the bomber harvest. The festival is for every family head that has farmed and has been rewarded with a good harvest. The festival season is made up of a series of ritual performances. Activities covering the New Yam Festival are principally eight stages and simultaneously woven. The Ete-Idung beats the drum at the village square to signal the commencement of Nde (peace). This implies that, throughout the duration of the New Yam Festivals, court cases are not entertained no fighting, no quarrelling. With no doubt, deviants are seriously fined with – a He Goat, five tubers of yam, money for sacrifice, a jar of palm wine and a bottle of gin. The heat of the events is mainly at the Ete-Idung palace and various compounds. Central to every taboo is – the removal of shoes, and caps, no crossing of legs and hands while activities are ongoing; and no twin's mother passes the Oyong (raffia) boundary at the palace. There is total silence within the duration of each of the stages of the festival, except for a call by the war commander – to slot in war songs, proverbs and praises to the gods and Ete-Idung. In a village where more than one crowned chief exists, the occasion is duplicated at every palace starting from the most senior. Visitations to every palace are scheduled and processed after every event and in a single file led by the Ete-Idung. Custom has it that the crowned Obong scheduled to be visited remains in his palace waiting to receive others, receiving gifts, and pleasantries from friends, in-laws, citizens, visitors and a host of others.

The following are activities and ceremonies that take place in Ikpe.

1. Fiongaran: Basket Setting

The celebration starts on the first week (Fiongaran) of the seventh month (July) of the year with Udong-akpan (basket setting). Here, the oldest woman in the community sets the basket comprising elements such as – Maize, Kolanut, Palmwine, Gin, Nsei (red clay), and Isip-ubiom (palm kernel). The basket is taken to the town square where she makes incantations to God and gods for the harvest season, seeking peaceful celebrations. Immediately after, Obodom Mbok (wrestling drums) is set up for wrestling, first by children. The coming Edereobo is set for adults. Next Fiongaran is slated for age grade. Thereafter, the wrestling competition starts with an invitation to different communities. Winners are usually awarded he-goat, while the women cheer with powder pouring.



2. Etaha: Opening of Harvest

On the first Etaha in the ninth month (September) is Usoro Abasi (celebrating the God). The celebration belongs to women who have given their daughters out in marriage. They will set a basin containing – pounded yam, and a pot of Melon / Nsana (wild grass) soup and send it to their sons-in-law. This is in appreciation for the farmlands the in-laws gave them during the farming season. While the exchange of gifts is ongoing, Oyo (a twisted stock of palm fronts with the broom removed, tied with a rope) celebration games are used in hunting unmarried girls. This takes over the land till dawn.

The day is set aside for visitation to Abasi-Ubong (deity). In the early hours of this day, each Ete-Idung sends young men to collect raffia palm. Iso Ndem Abasi Ubong (the Ete-Idung compound shrine) is cleansed, renovated and decorated with new raffia. With all decorations completed, Ete-Idung in the company of the Nka-Isong (traditional council members) sacrifice a cock and offer liberation to the gods, inviting them to the ceremony, suing for peace, and progress within the community as they set to celebrate the new yam.

3. Edereobo: Ekimme Oil picking

Edereobo is a major market day in the Ikpe Clan. Ete-Idung with Nka-Isong (council members) and young men visit the market and dispense any palm oil meant for sale without cost for use during the festival. This is one of the activities and important elements of the celebration.

4. Obo: Ekimme elements collection

On this day, other materials for the festival are gathered. Before this, as day breaks, Ete-Idung liberates, informing the gods of the continuous activities and seeking peace and security for the young men about to gather the elements in the farms. As part of the send-forth process, Ete-Idung offers Otong (meat sauce), palm wine, knives and a bag to the young men selected for the exercise. As the young men return from the farm with vegetables and pepper, Ete-Idung again offers liberation of thanksgiving for a safe journey before collecting the Ekimme elements. The journeyed men are well-fed together with drinks. The Ekimme elements are secured at a place that no woman would have access to till Etim, the festival day.

5. Etim: Ekimme Festival

Ekimme is a traditional old fruits festival performed to usher in the new yam. It is celebrated exclusively by Ete-Idung (Traditional Crown Kings) of the Ikpe clan. Old yams are used in the celebration. As part of the preparation, the early morning sun gives promise to another hot day. In the early hours of the day, young men with the supervision of elders decorate the Ete-Idung palace with raffia. Eyei (raffia) is placed at the frontage of the Ete-Idung's palace. This serves as a barrier to the twins' mothers not to pass the limit. The old Eyei is removed and burnt and replaced with new ones to mark the beginning of the year in the tradition. New Eyei is also added to Eseri Ikpe (deity) house. New mats are spread over the floor for members of the Traditional Rulers' Council and guests to the celebration. Before the commencement of cooking, the Ekimme elements are supervised by the Ete-Idung along with his council members. In the palace, each item is placed for inspection, first Akpassa (basket) contains a cock, vegetables, a stick of fish, red oil, seven pears, salt, pepper, Nsei, and old yams. The palm wine pot is filled; the nominated person to serve does not leave the palace (for fear of



contamination or poison). Drink from the pot is served only to those who have observed the traditional taboos of not sleeping with mothers of twins and have not eaten new yam.

Ekimme preparations: There is total silence in the palace. Guards are on guard to arrest defaulters when making noises or crossing legs or hands. All women and girls must cover their heads. Traditional Council Members and aged women all sit at the right-hand side of the palace. Young men and invited guests occupy the left-hand side. After libation by the Ete-Idung, the Ekimme server smeared the Ekimme with Nsei. The Ete-Idung swings a cock over his forehead three times and later made a sacrifice with it, with the cock head left in the basket. The cock blood is smeared over the Ekimme elements. Servers serve both meat and drinks simultaneously. In the background, members of the Ekeri-ikpe (war) cultural group entertain the audience with war songs, while the Ekimme-chief-cook gathers the elements and prepares the food. Three coconut logs serve as the pot legs. Oton (red) wood is the only firewood used, while the spoon is made of Ukpa (mahogany). The Ete-Idung nominates his Ekimme server who presents seven pieces of meat in seven plates. When all necessary preparations and cooking are done, the Ete-Idung offers libation (Ukot Ukuwok Effe) from the drink pot tied with palm fronds.

Ete-Idung then goes to dress up with the Council Members. After that, all assemble at the town square and movement proceeds to the palace. The Ete-Idung leads in a single file, followed by seniority in the council membership to the most junior. After the council members line, are women chiefs, title holders, committee members and young men in a single file past the streets. Along the way, war commanders trot off and send people off the road. No one is expected to put his/her hands in their pocket, no front crossing of the road. Incantations are made by the chief priest against planners of evil to the occasion, while total silence precedes.

Eating Ekimme takes place when all Obong (Members of the Council of Chiefs) traditional title holders and witnesses to the occasion are present at the palace. In and outside the palace, no crossing of legs and hands; no shoes; no caps except for the Ete-Idung with his crown; no head tie except for the older woman. Ignoring and violating -any of these rules symbolises equality and a curse to the Ete-Idung on his eating table. As soon as the Ekimme is done and the pot is put down, there is absolute silence and a glittering rain to quench the Ekimme fire which was made outside.

Sitting arrangements are such that the Ete-Idung, Family Chiefs are at one table with their wives behind. Members of the Council of Chiefs occupy one side of the palace. Eating Ekimme begins with sharing by the server who creates seven rings on the floor. Inside each ring is placed a plate. The Ekimme is then shared into the seven plates. Every serving and sharing is by hand. Each plate serves a particular person or group.

- First plate - Ete-Idung
- Second - Deputy
- Third - Women Chiefs
- Fourth - Council of Chiefs
- Fifth - Inam (Priesthood Sect members)
- Sixth - Uso (Chief Priests)



- **Seventh - Nto Aban (women)**

As the server begins to feed the Ete-Idung, condiments are taken from each of the plates, one to the seventh plate at a very slow and calculated pace. No rush to avoid choking. At successful eating, Ete-Idung will clear his throat to the hearing of everyone as a sign and symbol of freedom on the thrown and celebration of the yam festival. Ekenne (cymbal) is beaten by the Ete-Idung followed by several native gunshots, traditional plays and dances, and songs by men and women. But if the Ete-Idung is choked in the eating process, he dies within a year. This symbolizes the effect of the violation of customary taboos on the gods.

After completing the eating, the remaining Ekimme from each of the plates is served to those concerned. Those to eat must have kept the rules of – not eating any new fruits used in preparing the Ekimme. For men, in addition, they must not have slept with a mother of twins. The Ekimme festival is eaten with hands, and everyone who ate moves in a group to the cooking spot and generally washes their hands into the smoky fire. By this, the Ete-Idung laments, bringing the ceremony to a close. Jubilation takes over the community throughout the day with traditional plays (Ekpo, Akata, Obon, Nnabor, Uba) songs, and dancing by women groups, and there are general merriments.

Every turn of seven years of the festival by an Ete-Idung mark Ubuk-Udung (burying of mortar). In the seventh year, the festival is marked with a great sacrifice which involves offering a goat to the gods. According to tradition, on that day, Ete-Idung feeds the community members in his palace with boiled yam, while visitors and well-wishers visit him with presents.

Edereobo, on this market day, five days after the eating of Ekimme, the Ete-Idung, members of the Council of Chiefs, title holders, men and women of the community visit the market to yet perform another ritual of the yam festival – buying of new yams, except for those who cultivated yams. Here, everyone buys new yams, oil, melon, nsana, pepper, and other condiments for the general new yam festival – a week after Ekimme.

6. Obo: Breaking of Kola-Nuts

The breaking of kola in the season of this festival signals the coming of blessings, good health, and wealth to members of the community for the New Year. This tradition is done mainly by Ete-Idung, members of the Council of Chiefs, title holders, Obong-awan (women chiefs) and the wives of chiefs'. The great event goes with the presentation of drinks (palm wine) with raffia tied to the neck, Akwa (native tray) containing seven pieces of meat on seven plates. Before all, the drink is poured to the fullest in the pot – thus notifying the gods of the presence of the gathering to appease their thirst. The kola plate is presented with seven kola pieces, two dry Obout (catfish), Ntuen ibok (alligator pepper), and Nsei (red clay). Again, there is no crossing of legs, wearing of caps and there is total silence.

Ete-Idung then calls for the commencement of the ceremony by pouring libation to the gods. He takes his seat on coming back from going to pour the libation. The Ete-Idung server begins too by taking his seat in front of the Ete-Idung. Seven bunches of kola nuts are brought; each is practically assessed by the server and later handed over to Ete-Idung. The process is repeated (in a very slow manner to give room for perfect analysis of each kola to ascertain its slides) till the seventh is completed and handed over to Ete-Idung. All members of the Council of Chiefs are participants in the assessment activity. There is total silence throughout the period of the



ceremony – as many hours as it lasts. There is no wearing of caps and shoes in the palace during the occasion.

After completing the assessment process, each kola is broken by the server and placed in his hands before handing over to Ete-Idung to authenticate the numbers. Here, Ete-Idung marks the number of slides of kola it's composed of. Each kola is presented the second time in broken pieces till the seventh is shown. Members of the Council of Chiefs are equally shown the kola one after the other. As a mark of approving each presentation, each person nods his head. On completion of approval, the server presents a piece of the kola, Ntuen-ibok (alligator pepper), and a piece of fish to each chief and those eligible to eat. Finally, all with the piece of kola will cough, and Akangkang (double cymbal) is beaten by the Ete-Idung announcing the showers of blessings. If a kola piece is made up of seven slides, a gift is presented to the server (a wrapper, goat and other elements for sacrifice). A great ceremony follows the breaking of seven pieces of kola.

7. Etim: New Yam Festival

Etim Mfon (New Yam Festival) is a day for all citizens to celebrate the new Yam festival. Everyone in the community now cooks new yams in any style and eats to the fullest satisfaction. Among the young and children, they all eat to stupor (Ndia nyuko unanam), make kites and playfully fly with family members and friends and continue to eat from one family member's house to another. Throughout the community is total jubilation in traditional plays (Obon, Ekpe, Ekong, Nto-aban, Akata, Uba, Ekpo). Visitations, exchange of gifts and drinking continue all through the day.

At about ten o'clock in the morning, the Ete-Idung with members of the Council of Chiefs, in the palace offer yet another sacrifice made up of – a he-goat, a glass of water, Nsei and palm wine. With the elements presented, Ete-Idung alone goes into the Nkuku (shrine) house opposite his palace where it embodied (clay pot, Itiat Abasi (the stone of god), cow head, elephant tusk, Oko (pot) and mortar) once every seven years to Esire Ikpe. During this process, council members line up on the right-hand side of the shrine. Nsei is first smeared on the stone for the gods, then goat is sacrificed and smeared on the Ete-Idung face, the palm wine is used for libation and water is finally used to appease the gods to keep peace on the land, make men, and women, plants and animals to be fruitful and having more bountiful harvest for next year.

Back to the palace, wives of chiefs first present, boiled yams with Otong. All in a communal mode surround the food in trays and eat with hand. No discrimination, and no sharing while the Ete-Idung performs incantations. This marks the beginning of eating new yam to the Ete-Idung and the entire community. After eating, all return to their seats while the server fills the pot with palm wine – raffia tied to the neck. He equally presents seven pieces of meat in seven plates before the Ete-Idung and council. The Ete-Idung pours libation to the gods – inviting them to share in the ceremony, prosper citizens, and usher peace and progress in the New Year.

As many crown kings in the same community, the process is repeated at each palace. After, they all retire to a palace for the real yam festival, if no other crown king, they all sit and wait for the pounded yam from the Ete-Idung wives. While awaiting the food, songs, riddles and jokes, cultural plays and drinks are offered. Lastly, the pounded yam is served with the soup made of the sacrificed goat. All meat parts are removed from the soup. After eating, all take their seats and the meat is shared amongst the celebrants. Celebration sets in with dances, drinks, visitations and exchange of gifts. Finally, the goat head (skull) is returned to the shrine



house for the gods. At dawn, only the crowned Obong in the Ikpe clan make sacrifices to the gods of the land – Eseri Ikpe, by sprinkling boiled yam with red oil to the Nkuku (ancestors) as part of the great festival. This means giving back to the gods what they provided to us. On this day men as was the case with women set out gifts to their mothers-in-law with – a set of yams (five tubers), stockfish, a packet of salt, and a fathom of wrapper.

8. Etim: Mbeg Ebere

This is the final festival for the year in the second Etim in the tenth month (October). It is a women's festival, where they display cultural dances, while men provide them with drinks as a thank you.

CONCLUSION

Some aspects of the New Yam festival are now facing extinction. The challenges are the influence of Christianity, education, the high cost of living, the abandonment of farming as well as the younger generation living in the cities. The socialisation process is lacking as many have refused to be initiated into various cultural groups. On the side of the Ete-Idung, many have refused to be crowned, as this has a lot of spiritual and cultural implications for the tradition of the people. They are afraid of violating the rules and of dying early. However, some elderly men and young ones in the village still keep to some form of modified version, devoid of most sacrifices.

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