Nwaotam Carnival in Opobo Kingdom: An Assessment of Socio-Economic Impact

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Abstract

The study explains the Nwaotam festival of Opobo and analyses critically its impacts on the socio-economic developments of the kingdom since its introduction. This paper uses both primary and secondary sources of data to establish the conviviality of the festival that is geared toward entertainment and fostering unity among Opobo people. The work opines that, years after introduction of the festival in Opobo, it attracted unprecedented admiration among the people with influx of members, concomitant of many different groups within the Nwaotam society, a development that seemingly showcased the festival as the leading festivity in the kingdom and neighbouring communities that borrowed the festival from Opobo. The study observes that the festival is one cultural activity in the Niger Delta Area that had whittled down the pressure from Christianity, with a sustainability of swollen membership within and outside Opobo kingdom over years. The study establishes that the Nwaotam festival was the nucleus of the stupendous cultural revival that engulfed Opobo kingdom in the post-colonial era, a fact that contributed in uniting Opobo people with a robust and focus mindset of survival after the devastation caused by the Nigeria fratricidal Civil War. The paper concludes that, the Nwaotam festival of Opobo which is the cynosure and signpost of the kingdom's rich cultural heritage had not been properly harnessed alongside with the endowed tourist potentials of the kingdom by the stakeholders for a maximum business oriented posture, aimed at increasing the internally generated revenue of the local government, state and the country in general. And that efforts should be made in this direction that will among other things, create employment opportunities for the teeming youths of the area.

Introduction

Opobo Kingdom is an Ijaw Ibani speaking community of Eastern Niger Delta. The Kingdom is located at east fringe of Eastern Delta, mouth of the Imo River. Its founders left some of their kith and kin at their original location, Grand Bonny, under the leadership of Chief Jaja (Head Chief of Opubo group of houses), in 1869 and founded the new Kingdom in 1870. Presently, the Kingdom is part of Opobo/Nkoro Local Government Area of Rivers State of Nigeria.

As part of an Ijaw group, the socio-cultural activities of Opobo people is rooted in the Ijaw cosmology, superintended by the Owuogbo cult (Ogolo, 2020:27-32). This is the cultural base under which the kingdom was established by the founding fathers. Furthermore, the founding fathers of Opobo Kingdom were active participants of the Trans-Atlantic trades while in Bonny, and the trade, however, form part of the reasons why they eluded Grand Bonny and founded Opobo Kingdom. In Opobo, they rejig their participation on the trade, basically on palm oil, as middle men between the hinterland producers and the European buyers at Opobo River.

The palm oil trade was capital intensive as it required plenty of man power, a development that fine-tuned the intensity of the acquisition of domestic slaves by Opobo chiefs/middlemen traders (Alagoa, 1980; Oko-Jaja, 2020). In essence, many of the domestic slaves came from the Ibo hinterlands. The massive acquisition of these slaves, contributed to;

1. Opobo strong participation in the trade, as they established permanent and temporary trading posts in many hinterland communities, a fact that helped them fostered peaceful integration necessary for cordial and robust trade transactions and relationship, and
2. Opobo demographic explosion, concomitant to geographical expansion of the kingdom years after settlement, with Opobo town as the main town and satellite communities such as, Queens town, Kalaibiama town, Minima, Okpukpo, Iloma, Epellema, Opukalama, Ekereborokiri and many others.

Furthermore, many of the domestic slaves resided in the trading posts in different hinterland communities and served as trading agents to their fathers/masters. While in the trading posts, many of them established cordial relationship with their host communities through marriage, membership of cultural societies and cultural assimilation, particularly in the area of language. Interestingly, the membership of Opobo sons and daughters into different cultural societies of their hinterland trading communities enhanced and

sustained the introduction and domestication of some of the interior hinterland cultural practices in Opobo kingdom. However, many of the interior people cultural practices that was introduced into Opobo are; Okonko, Oboni, Epke, Nwaotam, Amiwo, among others.

Nevertheless, Opobo tradition through the Owuogbo society has a period every year set aside for celebration, called the *Fungu mini*. This period fall between August and September. It is a period of the year when the sea is so turbulent and so, unhealthy for fishing and trading activities on the sea. Consequently, the Owuogbo cult through the various Wari Ekina (compound masquerade cults), display different masquerades throughout the period for entertainment of the people, as many Opobo sons and daughters at the trading posts usually visit home (Oko Jaja, 2020; Ogolo 2020:28). Opobo tradition claimed that, during the pre-colonial period, the Fungu festival was a period that coincided with a serious trading activities such as, stock taking by various house Chiefs with their trading agents at different trading posts, which lasted till the New Year period. So, as the Owuogbo cult ends the Fungu festival in September, many Opobo sons and daughters who belong to different cultural activities of the interior people, started practicing it in Opobo as a way of entertaining themselves while the stock taking last, hence the introduction and domestication of foreign cultural practices in Opobo kingdom.

For the Nwaotam cultural play, Opobo tradition claimed that it was introduced into Opobo kingdom in the pre-colonial era, by Chief Obomanu Captain Uranta of Queens Town Opobo. Queens Town Opobo is one of the satellite communities of Opobo kingdom established in 1886, five nautical miles away from Opobo town by Chief Obomanu Captain Uranta (Oko-Jaja, 2020; Obomanu, 2015:48). It is unknown why Chief Obomanu, shortly after him and his households eluded Opobo town following his squabble with king Jaja, and established in that part of Opobo, introduced this foreign festival in his community. The Nwaotan society, unlike in Opobo town, is the highest cult in the area known as 'Ntuma'. 'Ntuma' is the highest cult group in the community and the custodian of the Nwaotam, with membership comprising of representatives from the different houses of the community, headed by Chief Captain Uranta (Uranta, 2021). Ntuma is not an Ibani name and the meaning is unknown, but according to Jude Uranta, it is synonymous with the 'Odu' a special sacred flute, blown to invoke the spirit of the Nwaotam and control the direction of movement of the carrier of the Nwaotam mask during the festival. The Nwaotam mask possesses a strange spiritual power that resist capturing in camera. Also, the origin of the Nwaotam mask is unknown, but according to Senibo Monday Manilla, the mask alongside the Nwaotam masks of Nkpojekiri in Ohambele, Otokoto in Obunku and that of Ogolo compound in Opobo, were carved by a wizard sculptor from Akpabiyo in present Cross River State, that was banished by his people over his strange powers, but

relocated to Ndoki. It is believed that he invoked strange powers into his sculptures which he sold at Ndoki that later became powerful mask of the Nwaotam societies of the above communities. The Nwaotam mask of Queens town Opobo is called Ikirinwaobon and had lasted for over a century and still remains in its original state. It is claimed that when provoked, she gnashes her teeth. It is a female gender and never welcomed innovation like the one in Opobo town and as such, it maintains its natural unique pattern of play. It dances every 1st January.

Concomitantly, every 1st January many Opobo sons and daughters from Opobo town and other satellite communities trooped to Queens town in dugout canoes to see the Nwaotam display. Consequently, on many occasion, an ugly occurrence of canoe mishap resulting to casualties were experienced on their way back in the evening (Jaja, 2009). A development that contributed to the establishment of Nwaotam dance in Opobo town in 1931 (Opubowatch, 2013) and other Opobo satellite communities. Furthermore, emphasis on this study shall be more on Opobo town Nwaotam carnival due to various spectacular innovations it had imbibed that have immensely contributed to cultural revival of the kingdom, thus, the establishment of Opobo international Boat Regetta (0IB) that had earned national recognition, hence, placed Opobo cultural tourism to national and international space.

Nevertheless, the subject matter of the study was discussed chronologically with sub-titles such as, abstract, introduction, a brief history of Nwaotam carnival of Opobo town, socio-political impact, economic impacts and conclusion.

A Brief History of Nwaotam Carnival of Opobo Town

Nwaotam carnival of Opobo town started in 1931 during the reign of King Arthur Mac Pepple Jaja in the colonial era. Actually, on the origin of Nwaotam of Opobo town, many works had discussed extensively on it (Jaja, 2009; Pepple and Oko-Jaja, 2015; Opubowatah, 2019 and Eberiopubo, 2020) but there are gaps worthy of filling, that will enhance the articulation and coherency of our discussion of findings, hence the need for a brief highlight.

The carnival started in a crude form, no rhythm, order nor character, like what is applicable in Queens town Opobo, with few like-minds who perhaps were members of Nwaotam societies in Ohambele and Azumini in Ndoki, such as Ada Ezekiel Jaja (later Chief Sunday Jaja War Canoe house), Senibo Tilibo Yellow Accra Jaja, Ada Olu Mac Pepple, Ada Matzen Omubo Pepple, among others (Jaja, 2009; Pepple and Andrew-Jaja, 2015). According to Senibo Monday Manillia, the earliest Nwaotam dance in Opobo town was without the

present 'Uke' groups, as such, the Nwaotam danced alone without side attraction, and was known at that time as 'Asayikpon', also the costume of the Nwaotam was English suit.

Furthermore, it is unknown where the mask of the Nwaotam came from, but it is more beautiful to that of Queens town, and it is claimed to be the male gender (Opubowatch, 2019), and not as spiritually powerful to that of Queens town, Nkpojekiri and Otokoto that detest capturing in camera, and innovation. However, it is claimed that the Nwaotam of Opobo town possesses spiritual powers that enables the carrier to outperform on a roof top during the carnival. It thus developed a spiritual third eye which enables it to see evil spirits and protective powers against the evil spirits which many people sorts particularly pregnant women during the carnival (Jaja, 2009). How the carrier of the Nwaotam acquires these powers is unknown, but according to Senibo Davidson Jaja, the founders of Nwaotam carnival in Opobo town, that later constitute the ''UKEMKPA'', custodian of Nwaotam, acquired supernatural powers which they use to protect themselves and the Nwaotam during the festival. For the mask carrier, he is required to undergo days of ritual exercise for spiritual fortification with the spiritual leader of Uke Mpka (Ada Nwaotam) in the Mkpa, a sacred forest that serve as burial ground, and from there he will put on the Nwaotam regalia, guided out by the 'Mgbada-Uzo', forerunner who invoke the spirit of Otam, during the festival day. Probably, the ritual exercise was the source of the supernatural powers of the Otam mask carrier during the carnival.



Uke-mkpa group and Nwaotam Masquerade

Years later, a few number of Opobo town sons and daughters whose trading posts and other economic activities were at Offion area in present Akwa-Ibom State, constituted themselves under a cultural group with a get-together in Opobo town on every 1st January, the Nwaotam festival day. Consequently, in the early 1940, this cultural group, metamorphosed into 'Uke' a cultural group with a common interest, purpose, uniform and constitution, that dance during the Nwaotam carnival with a spectacular colour and glamour to the event, with the name Ofo Na Ogu, thus, began a major triumphant innovation that blossom the carnival to its present degree of admiration and participation in Niger Delta. Accordingly, the founders of Ofo Na Ogu group, acquired a spiritual power epitomized under a sacred regalia known as 'Ofo', meant to protect members of the group during the carnival, project the spiritual interest of the group and as well solve spiritual challenges of members and Opobo people in general. Consequently, an "inner circle" of the group was formed, saddled with the responsibility of performing spiritual and ritual functions with a chief priest as head.

However, other groups later emerged such as Ejesilem, Iyieke, I have no time (Amatemeso), Wayagang, Igwekala, Ekwem, Pistle and Uwawonkeonye. In the same vein, the founders of these groups acquired spiritual powers and established "inner circle" members. Unfortunately, physical and spiritual contestation of influence, power and legitimacy ensued among these Nwaotam cultural groups and its impacts we shall discuss later. But the skirmishes between the Uke Mpka group and Uke Ejesilem on issues not limited to the similarity of their uniform, made the Mkpa group to form a new Uke group known as the Ugelemkpa with 'Ugele' as their secret regalia, handed over to them by the Mkpa group. Interestingly, it is these 'Uke' groups that introduced a remarkable regatta innovation, held on every 31st December to stir up the mood for the carnival. These innovations indeed had a degree of influence on Nwaotam carnival of Opobo town with an attendant socio-political and economic impacts on the kingdom.

Socio-Political Impacts

The degree of admiration attained by Nwaotam carnival of Opobo, within and outside the kingdom, orchestrated by its wonderful innovations began during the reign of King Douglas Jaja (1936-1980). King Douglas era witnessed huge cultural revival in every facet of the kingdom, as he was the only king that spent most of his youthful age at Opobo with full dosage of Ibani cultural heritage before ascending to the throne of king Jaja (Oko-Jaja, 2020). The love and support which he gave to culture witnessed unprecedented boom of admiration and love of Opobo cultural activities by his subjects and lovers of the kingdom, inspite of the whirling spray of Christianity.

However, Nwaotam carnival was the highest hit as the 'Uke' skyrocketed in number with a multitude of members and cultural enthusiasts. The revival was so tense that many of the cultural enthusiasts developed unimaginable love for their different 'Uke' as they organized themselves as 'inner circle' members, acquired the responsibility of overseeing the spiritual protection, influence, power, necessary for among other things, the spiritual and physical growth of the group. A fact, that enhanced spiritism in Opobo value system, thus, viewed as necessary for protection and progress. Interestingly, spiritism became embedded in the activities of the Nwaotam carnival among the groups and individual members, a development that gave room for a spiritual and physical contestation among the groups as well as individual members and accounted for sudden disappearance of many 'uke' some years after appearance such as, Ekwem, Pistol, Igwekala, Nwayagang and I have no time, which years later reappeared as Amatemeso, and the mysterious deaths of members like Fubara Nwa Idiriya of Ugelemkpa and Adol Nwa Oroni of Obiefule groups, as well as many Uke regatta mishaps with great casualties at Opobo river during the carnival (Brown, 2020 and Oko-Jaja, 2021).

In another development, the mystic powers of the Nwaotam groups had contributed in solving many spiritual challenges of members and other people within and outside the kingdom. It is claimed that people with strange illnesses and importune challenges often visit the power house (the ritual shrine of 'Uke' where all its mystical charms and ritual materials are stored until an occasion for its usage) for solution, which many often get (Oko-Jaja, 2021), thus soared the influence, admiration and membership of the carnival within and outside the kingdom.

Furthermore, many of the Nwaotam cultural enthusiasts had benefited in one way or the other for their commitments to their groups, some of them are, Emmanuel Atari, Ogolo, Geriald Dappa and Paul Pepple were assisted to get employment; Chief Ezekiel Sunday Jaja, Chief Eugene Mac Pepple, Chief Hebron Oko-Jaja, Chief Charles Mac Pepple and Chief Godwin Sunday Jaja, ascended to chieftaincy position of their War Canoe Houses partly because of their contributions to the Nwaotam carnival and others like Hon. Idabiekpo Opusunju benefited as the first executive chairman of Opobo/Nkoro Local Government Area (Manilla, 2021). Indeed, these leaders with their exposure and experience in the leadership organization of their different 'Uke' in the Nwanotam fiesta, did wonderfully well in the administration of their chieftaincy War Canoe Houses and made an indelible contributions in the political administration of Opobo in general.

The Nwaotam cultural fiesta is an experience that bring Opobo people home, unite them under a common ancestors, king Jaja and his comrade chiefs that toiled to establish the

kingdom. This bound of unity and love was exemplified during the kingship tussle in the kingdom. Consequently, the twenty three years of legal battle that created kingship interregnum did not witness any form of violence activities among the groups contesting for the kingship position in the kingdom, but the activities of the Nwaotam carnival soared, and took the centre stage of cultural fiesta of Opobo kingdom as the Owuogbo cultural activities was whittled down owing to the absence of a king, a development in Opobo tradition that jokingly compares the role of the Nwaotam dance in Opobo culture and that of the Nypa palm in the coastal environment of Niger Delta Area. Nypa palm (Nypafruticans) was introduced in the Niger Delta environment in 1906 from Asia to curb coastal erosion, 30years later, it became invasive having acclimatized to the coastal area, thus, developed an edge over the mangrove trees that originally dominated the coastal environment of Niger Delta (Numbere, 2019).

Nevertheless, the Nwaotam carnival had become a rallying point for Opobo people and also gave the kingdom a new flush of relevance and glory reminiscent of its former status as a proud city state within the Niger Delta and beyond. The different musical albums produced by the different Uke such as, Ejesilem and Ugelemkpa in the 70s are being played in many musical stores in different cities of Nigeria and beyond. These traditional music and others, produced by cultural groups such as, Ereminagbo and Ikiaminaogbo, had projected the kingdom beyond the shores of Niger Delta as it serves as a sign post showcasing Opobo and its rich cultural heritage into a collective asset treasured by different people. To Opobo people, the sound of the music usher in joy, peace and unity amongst them, necessary for progress and development, a fact demonstrated after the devastation caused by the Nigerian Civil War in Opobo. The survivors hope and efforts were rekindled and rejuvenated by the sounds of these music at homes and streets in major towns such as Port Harcourt, Aba, Egwanga Opobo (Ikot-Abasi) and Lagos, as they push for survival again, which also materialized as evidence stand tall in Opobo (Jaja, 2012; Oko-Jaja, 2020).

In the early 1960s a remarkable catalytic innovation was added to the metamorphosis of the Nwaotam carnival; the regatta display of the different Uke in Opobo River on the eve of the New Year, an exercise that had added splendor, colour and glamour to the Nwaotam carnival. This yearly ritual of the 'Uke' groups has sustained and positively transformed the age long war Canoe houses regatta parade exercise of Opobo. The yearly regatta exercise had indeed, helped in keeping the Asawo (youths) physically and mentally fit for a war canoe house regatta parade when the need arises, mainly during chieftaincy or kingship coronation and any important period in Opobo history. The exercise had also preserved many of the paraphernalia of war canoe house regatta such as, drums, paddles,

canoes, among others. Interestingly, the yearly 'uke' regatta exercise midwife the establishment of Opobo International Boat Racing and Regtta, Festival (OIB) by Opobo Council of Chiefs under his majesty King Dandeson Jaja and other stakeholders. This festival which gained accreditation from the Federal Government as a National Cultural Festival in 2008, had contributed in catapulting Opobo and her rich cultural and tourist potentials to the national and international level as many countries within West Africa participated in the festival (Jaja, 2012).

Furthermore, as noted, the negative tide of spiritism that eclipsed the ecstasy of the carnival for years was abated following the establishment of 'Gburugburu Nwaotam' in about 1991. It is a body that comprises representative from all the major 'uke' in partnership with ukemkpa with the responsibility of overseeing the activities of the 'uke' groups and ensure that peace and unity characterized the activities of the carnival. The pioneer chairman of this body, Senibo Promise Apawari Azu Cookey from Ugelemkpa, did wonderfully well in ensuring that the objectives of the body were implemented, continued by his successors, the development brought to fullness the ecstasies of the carnival, consequently, gave birth to a new innovation (Manila, 2021), this time, many of the 'uke' started establishing a feeder groups, a development that gave opportunity to younger people to become members of 'uke' of their choice and accordingly, soared membership and number of the groups, as follows:

Major groups	Feeder Groups
Ejesilem	Akwakuru, Acholam and Nwereaya Maraizu
Ugelemkpa	Okwueme, Okofini and Ndandaamaginaoya
Ofo na Ogu	Obiefule and Azuanuka
Iyieke	Oganaudo and Egbebere Ugobere
Amatemeso	Ucheawuchi



Ugelemkpa group

Consequently, every household in Opobo has one member or more in the 'uke' groups, thus, the joy and unity associated with it became an entrenched core value among the people. In view of the foregoing, many of the major groups began to acquire piece of land where they erected their halls, and some of the halls such as, Ofo na Ogu hall which is sited close to the premises of Government primary school Opobo, at some point, was used as classroom when the school was faced with shortage of rooms for its teeming population. The Ofo Na Ogu hall served in that capacity for years as part of their social responsibility to the kingdom. In addition to that, 'uke' groups supports welfare of some of their members, especially the committed ones in time of challenges like, illness, burial of member or their loved ones, etc, a progress that had also contributed in the growth and sustainability of the groups (Oko-Jaja, 2021).



Ofo na Ogu Hall

Economic Impacts

With the collapse of the palm produce economy and consequent introduction of British economy in the Oil River Protectorate and later Niger Coast Protectorate and Southern Protectorate in the early 20th century, Opobo economy became moribund, and many of her people deserted the kingdom into hinterland communities and British established urban cities such as, Port Harcourt, Lagos, Aba, Enugu, Calabar, Ndoki, Etche, Egwanga Opobo (now Ikot-Abasi), and among others, for greener pastures. However, the different activities of the Nwaotam carnival form part of the major activities that brings many, if not all of these Opobo in diaspora and friends of the kingdom back to Opobo, a development that revives the economy of the area throughout the period the activities lasted. For instance, the influx of people into Opobo for the Nwaotam carnival boost the income of many Opobo people in the water transport sector, those in the buying and selling sector in the markets and those in other economic sectors. According to Ibifuro Oko Jaja, "it is during major activities when people come home like the new-year, that we in petty trade here in Opobo, sell very well" (Oko-Jaja 2021). Also, according to Joshua Jaja, "it is during the festive period, when our people visit home, that we in the water transport sector make huge profit that ordinarily we cannot make in 7months. Accordingly, those in the hospitality business

also simile to the banks as they were overwhelmed with customers. For example, the hotels in Opobo such as Opubo hotel, Prestige hotel, Three Sisters hotel and others, have their rooms fully booked and often booked ahead of the holidays with exorbitant prices.

Furthermore, the 'uke' groups have different uniforms, adorned in colourful attires that distinguish them during the carnival. The uniforms are unique and many of them are customized, and as such, those Opobo sons and daughters in the business of making the uniforms make huge amount of money during the carnival period from new members and those that needs replacement

Consequently, many of the 'uke' groups have developed most members talent, versed in cultural activities like singing, dancing and drumming. These experts had formed a special group that are being hired to play in different occasions in Opobo and outside, a situation that had been a source of livelihood, exposure as well as making many of them popular as they travel round the world to sell their talents. Indeed, many of these groups had produced many musical albums that are been sold, and had brought financial rewards and fame to them and their "uke" groups.

Conclusion

The Nwaotam carnival, ever since its introduction to Opobo, had helped to enhance a robust cordial inter-group relationship between Opobo and her neighbours, as well as many hinterland communities particularly Ndoki where the festival is claimed to have originated from, as many 'uke' groups had established branches in many of the communities such as, Egwanga Opobo (now Ikot Abasi), Port Harcourt and Aba were they play the carnival every 25 December and as well, assist many of her neighbours such as, Andoni, Ogoni, Bonny and Ikwerre to establish the carnival in their areas.

The carnival indeed had shown to be unique in the plethora of Opobo cultural activities, as its positive impacts are so overwhelming and undoubtedly contributed immensely to the socio-economic and political development of the kingdom till date. However, it is a fact that the carnival has not been properly harnessed alongside the rich tourist potentials of the area for economic development of the kingdom and the state in general.

With the linking of Opobo town by road to Port Harcourt and other parts of the state, the momentum of the Nwatoam carnival had been on ascending trajectory, a development that urgently requires the synergy of Opobo stakeholders and the different level of governments in the country, particularly the law makers and policy makers, on how to maximally harness the economic opportunities of this great carnival, in conjunction with

the rich tourist potentials of the area, to boost economic development of Eastern Niger Delta, Opobo/Nkoro Local Government Area in particular, vis a vis creating a robust employment opportunities to the teeming youths of the Local Government Area and Rivers State at large.

Furthermore, it is a fact that tourism is a huge sector that requires so much financial investments, with a robust national and international patronage vis a vis a foreign exchange earning of a country. Opobo tourist potential is so huge and is one area she has a comparative advantage. It requires investors that will properly harness it to international standard, a development that will attract local and international tourists to the area, thus, create employment and generates foreign exchange earning to the country.

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