Chastity: Change and Continuity in the Initiation into Womanhood (*Ovia-Osese*) Festival in Ogori, North Central Nigeria

By

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Abstract

Ovia-Osese festival is an annual festival of Ogori people which usually takes place two weeks after the Christian Easter celebration. It is a rite of passage for maidens in Ogori as is required by the custom of the land. It is a significant socio - cultural phenomenon which hinges on moral chastity among the maidens. These young girls are trained to abstain from pre-marital sex and even how to conduct themselves after marriage. This paper takes a look at the origin of *Ovia-Osese* in Ogori and investigates the change and continuity of this unique festival. In doing this, the paper employs primary and secondary sources of data collection. Primary sources include interviews of some of the Ivia (maidens), their parents, Iyiodina (custodian of the maidens) and other significant figures in this festival. Secondary sources include textbooks, magazines, journals, Internet among others. It was observed that over the years, *Ovia-Osese* festival has been influenced by Christianity, Islam and modernization but has retained the major motive embedded in the cultural festival which is moral chastity among the maidens before marriage. The paper concludes that such cultural festivals should be sustained and in fact emulated by other communities.

Keywords: *Ovia-Osese* festival, Continuity, North Central Nigeria.

Introduction

Festivals are part and parcel of a society's culture; varying from place to place depending on what the occasion is. In Afrca, womanhood is essentially adored and revered. It is adored because of the positive values it projects and revered for its esoteric energy that transcends ordinary comprehension[1]. In Ogori, *Ovia-Osese* is

one of the festivals celebrated yearly. It is a maiden ceremony that openly extols the virtues of womanhood while celebrating the purity, chastity, undefiled, untainted, untouched and unexploited physical and emotional conditions of young girls of marriageable age. This event serves as a vital social check on sexual promiscuity and the abuse of the female body before marriage. It is also a reaffirmation of the collective faith of a people in a tradition designed to protect the female gender, the veritable source of life sustenance and race continuity[2]. Similar festivals exist in other parts of Nigeria. For instance in Cross River state *Mbopo* ritual outing ceremony for girls from the fattening room, *Ejiji* ritual coming of age ceremony among the Ikwerre of Rivers state, *Igogo* festival of Owo, Ondo state, *Nkpu* ceremony of Awka, *Iria* ceremony of the Kalabari and the *Irovbode* ceremony among the Benin people[3]. The essence of all these ceremonies is to maintain the moral values and chastity of womanhood.

Methodology

The research employs primary and secondary sources of data collection. Primary sources include interviews of some of the *Ivia* (maidens), their parents, *Iyiodina* (custodian of the maidens) and other significant figures in this festival. Secondary sources include textbooks, magazines, journals, Internet among others.

Ogori

Geographical location

Ogori is situated approximately on the intersection of longitude 6^0 7^1 E and latitude 7^0 30^1 N. It is located at the extreme South-West region of Kogi State and shares a boarder with Edo State [4] (Fig. 1). It is bounded by Ebiraland (Igbirra division) to the South-West corner [5] a land also in Kogi state to which Ogori is administratively attached to until the creation of Ogori/Magongo Local Government Area in 1993 [6].

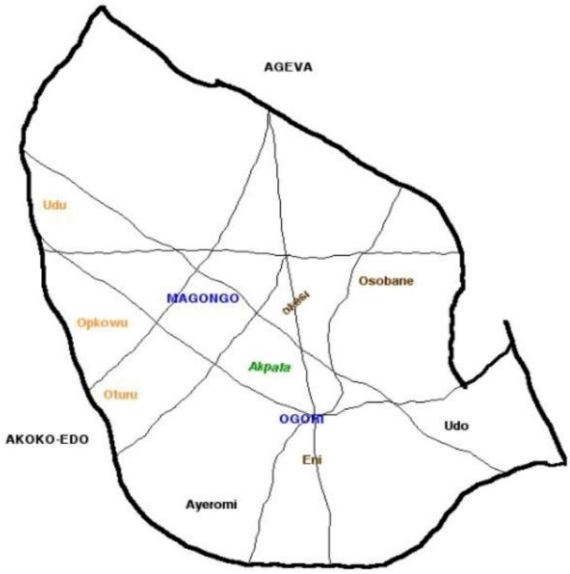


Fig 1: Ogori – Magongo Local Government Area

The people

Its uniqueness has tripartite intersections: its culture, language (*Oko*) and the importance of education. The Ogori people's affinity for education has produced in relation to its size and population the largest number of Professors by square kilometer in Nigeria[7].

Following the people's final descent from *Agada*; one of the three hills which encompasses Ogoriland, the others being *Omoneyen* and *Odiobo* in 1886, Ogori has three major quarters: *Oshobane*, *Eni* and *Okesi* and each of the quarters is made up of clans or compounds. However, since the 1940s, additional quarters were created as a result of increase in population and development. These include: *Udoba*, *Ileteyin*, *Aiyetoro*, *Ekema* or *Aiyeromi*, *Otamunrun* or *Yidi* and *Akpaju* quarters.

Beliefs and culture

The people of Ogori practiced the African Traditional Religion prior to the advent of Christianity and Islam in Ogori. This involved the worship of over twenty nature gods, *Omoneyen* being the chief of them all. These gods were situated within the different geographical locations by which they were called. While some families

worshipped many of them, very few of them were worshipped by everybody in the community. These gods had certain attributes by which they are known and certain days were set aside for their worship. They showed some levels of benevolence towards the people with the exception of *Otare Ogbiyogben* who demands the killing of twins, still births and their mothers, witches and wizards and criminals in its enclave[8].

The *Omoneyen* was well worshipped in the past. Its worshippers believe that he is capable of protecting the land; it helped Ogori warriors during wars and immune the people against accident occurrences. The reverence with which *Omoneyen* is held stems from his benevolent disposition towards the people. He is said to have been so concerned with the good of Ogori people that he could trace the Ogori people to anywhere on earth to shower his blessings on them and guard them against any evil. The god is so dear to the community that an *ode* is dedicated to him by the maidens whenever *Ovia-Osese* is held. They sing his praises, expressing confidence that as they feel his presence in their midst, they have every assurance that the festival is going to be a huge success. For the maidens *Omoneyenis* the breeze of peace, comfort and success that blows while the *Ovia-Osese* lasts [9].

As an organized ethnic group, Ogori possesses a rich culture and cultural heritage, material, institutional, philosophical, creative and linguistic aspects. Since these culture contents are interwoven, and intricately dependent, the place of festivals becomes important in the lives of the people. Festivals of varying degrees are given prominence in the activities of the people as a group without which a vital part of their existence would conspicuously be missing. Certain festivals are annually celebrated in Ogori. They include: *Igila ofifi, ekonmorire, ema, ukpe, edidibi, iyibi, Idu* and *Oke* among others.

Igila ofifi is an age-grade traditional festival. It involves the free use of canes on the opponent's body. *Ekonmorire* is an annual age-grade festival that marks the transition from adolescence to adulthood. In fact, it is the male version of *Ovia-Osese* as it is the initiation of boys into adulthood though it has less stringent measures to defaulting initiates. *Ema* is the Ogori traditional masquerade festival. The women are excluded from this festival as they are not permitted to see the

masquerade and thus, have to stay inside throughout the period of the festival. *Ukpe* traditional festival marks the beginning of the Ogori new-year. It starts in August and ends in July. This festival was normally followed by *Oke, Ovia-Osese* festival which is the initiation of maidens into womanhood. The chain of festivals ended with *Idu,* the new yam festival. [10]

***Ovia-Osese*: Origin**

The origin of *Ovia-Osese* festival dates back to the very existence that is the origin of the Ogori people and their other festivals. There are two speculations of the origin of the festival. The first speculation is that the festival first started several hundred years ago as a nuclear family affair when the community had evolved and had become tolerably stable after the migratory era of the evolution of the community.

It was speculated that a worried mother was forced to consult the oracle (*Ivia Isiya*) due to rumour among many suitors that her daughter was wayward. The worried mother was answered to the contrary. The mother, who felt highly elated by this discovery, rejoiced with her daughter encouraging suitors to seek her hand in marriage with the lady eventually making her choice. The mother trained the daughter for her future role as a wife. This may have encouraged more families to organize the same type of festival for their daughters at their own convenience. The festival grew from family to kindred to clan and eventually community affair [11].

The second speculation is that perhaps the Ogori people borrowed this idea from Benin or Owo, the two communities they came across during their migration from Ile- Ife to their present location. In Owo, Ondo state, there is a similar female initiation into womanhood festival called *Igogo* festival [12].

However, Apata contends that the origin of *Ovia-Osese* is traceable to the immediate ecological zone of Ogori and Akoko-Gbangiri. According to him, Ogori people in the past had consistently identified themselves with Akoko-Gbangiri people. Traditions claim that Ogori belong to Akoko-Gbangiri Ogori had many things in common with Akoko-Gbangiri ranging from tribal marks, festivals, marriage customs and modes of life [13].

Ebenezer Adurodija opined that the history of the *Ovia-Osese* festival dates back centuries, deep into the roots of African culture; believing that it originated from ancient fertility rites and purification ceremonies. Over time, the festival evolved to encompass the celebration of chastity and purity, focusing on the girl-child. The festival has survived the test of time, with each generation passing down the traditions and rituals to ensure its continuity [14].

Taboos existed in traditional Ogori community and violation of these attracted grave consequences including death. Premarital sex among the maidens is a taboo in Ogori. Oracles were consulted to confirm the chastity or otherwise of the maidens. Mothers of the maidens who were discovered to be chaste felt highly elated, honoured and respected. This prompted parents in Ogori to consult the oracle in order to know the state of chastity of their daughters. Since then, the King has committed the affairs of the maidens and the women in the community to the care of *Iyiodina* as the custodian of the tradition.

This was how the rite of passage of the maidens known as *Ovia-Osese* festival started in Ogori community. '*Ovia*' simply mean the maidens while '*Osese*' means celebration. This celebration is basically for maidens who have attained the puberty age from 14 years and above. It also reveals that *Ovia-Osese* is a festival for the celebration of chastity, purity and virginity. It is a festival in which morality and value are highly cherished and preserved [15].

Ovia-Osese festival

Ovia-Osese is a rite of passage ceremony designed as an educational bridge that Ogori adolescents must cross into adulthood. It is not an enactment of history or story but an expression of a people's desire for a sane and healthy humanity [16]. *Ovia-Osese* is the celebration of the coming of age of a young girl who is initiated into womanhood after having scaled the hurdles for the test of morality and virginity. At the attainment of the age of puberty of 16-18 years [17] or 14-17 years, [18] her parents signify this by going out to the market and public places with songs, dances and firing of guns (Fig. 2 and 3) . This marks the commencement of the process of initiatory rites with celebration and jubilation [19]. This suggests flexibility in the age consideration of those eligible to be initiated.

There are three major aspects of *Ovia-Osese* namely *Iviasi, Opa-Obubwe* and *Oke*. Parents apply on behalf of their daughters who have attained the age of puberty at 15 to 16 years for admission into the Maiden School situated in her house and headed by *Iyodina*. Every applicant must be an indigene of Ogori either through Paternal or Maternal parentage. *Iyodina* is the Chief and Head of female gender in Ogori. After receiving the applications from the parents, she consults with her council of female inion leaders and contacts *Asigiri* to consult the oracle, *Ivia –Isiya.* The oracle is to determine the following on each candidate:

i. Peep into the destiny of each candidate and reveal her future. Here any obstacles to her success are identified and removed through sacrifices.
ii. To determine if the candidate was still a virgin. Anyone who was violated is disqualified and punished either by death or banishment from the community. This often brought shame on both the maiden and her family. Those that passed this test are admitted into the Maiden School and their parents especially their mothers are extremely happy. The training lasted for three years [20].

Opa-Obubwe is the next aspect in the celebration of *Ovia-Osese*. This covers the period of camping and training of the maidens in *Iyodina*'s compound. It spans three *Ukpe* festivals which according to Akerejola [21] is the beginning of Ogori calendar year that is three years. The training covers areas that include philosophy, vocational knowledge, medicine, creative arts, matrimony, love ethics, home economics and management, child care, motherhood etc. The maidens are groomed and well fed and this period culminates with the application of indigenous cosmetics for beautification. Items used for this include *Iburu* (camwood) and *Ikokori* (ink for tattooing the face, shoulders, stomach and the *ovia*'s back). There's the reshaping of the maiden's teeth, use of nickel bangles made of Ivory and beads (*Odolo. Ebele* and *Isu* beads). The *Odolo* beads are arranged in wide layers around the loins of the maidens as cover (pants) this appears to be the only form of costume accessories worn at the time. *Ebele* and *Isu* beads are used to decorate the maiden's hair styled into *Ogogorogo* type [22] According to Sofola [23], the last three months of the training was devoted to grooming the maiden for her role in life as a woman, a wife and a mother. Other things that the maidens were taught include: how to be good hostesses, how to sing traditional songs of historical

interest, art of story storytelling, how to play traditional musical instruments (such as *Ogege*, *Osa* and *Ogitoroko*) [24]. This training period does not include any form of vaginal mutilation.

The *Oke* is the last aspect of the *Ovia-Osese* celebration. The training at this stage concentrates on the teaching of indigenous music (lyrics, songs and instrumentation) in which the history, philosophy and worldview of Ogori people are encoded. Emphasis is laid on the dance steps and their meanings, chants and poetry of the community that elevate womanhood. Songs, chants and dances to be performed at the grand finale are selected at this stage. Assignments are given to the maidens to ascertain their level of absorption of the trainings given thus far. Final instructions are given by the *Iyodina* concerning the festival and post-*Ovia* moral bearing of the maidens then the technical and dress rehearsal takes place a night to the festival proper. This is done at the venue (*Oyara*) for the festival. Here, all the maidens engage in the ritual dance of transition from adolescence to womanhood in innocence and purity on the actual day [25]. Sofala summarizes it this way: The maidens, in those days, processed semi-nude to display health, beauty of pure womanhood, their adornment of beads, delicate body tattooing, and enhanced skin tone with camwood. Their coiffeur was said to be exquisite. Proud parents and relatives would flutter in utter delight and joy as festivities mounted from the eve of the graduation day to the day after passing-out ceremonies [26].



Fig 2: Image Showing Ogori Virgins
Source: Adopted from the 2020/2021 Ogori Week and Annual Ovia Osese Festival Brochure

Change and continuity in *Ovia-Osese* festival

Over the years, the festival has been influenced by religion (Christianity and Islam), Western education, and Modernization. The festival has been Christianized. Reverend E.A. Adigun, an Anglican Pastor posted to Ogori initiated the idea of a joint celebration of the festival by the Anglican Christian adherents as against the former practice of each family lavishly entertaining their friends and families at different days. This idea was later followed by members of other Christian denominations. The Moslems later followed in the same direction [27].

Again, Rev. Adigun made the Anglicans to agree to fix a fortnight after Easter as the period for the celebration of the festival. Christening the *Ovia-Osese* festival in Ogori meant that the *Iviyisiye* stage had to be erased since it was against the principles of Christianity. The festival also adjusted to the new social dispensation by wearing of new calendar garb and celebrated in lump during the months of March/April in conducive weather as against the raining month of August, the traditional period for *Oke*. The *Opa Obubwe* stage of the festival was eradicated as well after the friction between the overzealous, fanatical Christians and Ogori African Religionists and the second generation of educated Ogori youths. This brought an end to the *Iyodina* School. Thus, the disruption of the Christian girls' academic pursuit during this period was avoided. The duration of the training and preparation of the maidens usually three years was reduced to three months and eventually shortened to three days- Friday (all night dance), Saturday (visitation by orchestra groups, presentation of gifts to the initiates, entertainments of guests by the *Ovia, Oke* dance and general festivals) and Sunday (thanksgiving in the churches).

By this way, the festival was reduced to a mere songs and dances for *Oke* at *Oyara. Oyara* is now restricted to the Town Hall instead of open arena. The singing and dancing procession of old women from one *ovia's* house to the other is now organized according to age groups of mothers (only members of such groups are visited). Locally brewed drinks are now overshadowed by modern spirit liquor and beer [28].

A fortnight after Easter was chosen by the Anglicans as a period to celebrate their own *Ovia-Osese* festival while the Catholics and other remaining denominations chose to celebrate theirs a week after that of the Anglicans to culminate with thanksgiving services. For the Moslems, their own comes up a fortnight after *Id El Moulud* celebration. It starts from Wednesday night to Friday afternoon with a thanksgiving at the Jumat mosque. This has been turned into avenues to raise funds for the places of worship [29].

Again, age qualification for participation originally put between 14 and 17 scarcely has any limitation any more as girls as young as nine and ladies of 21 years or more are now admitted to participate in *Ovia-Osese* celebration. The role of *Asigiri* and *Ivia-Isiya* have been jettisoned and replaced with fasting and prayers thus, questioning the virginity of the participants. The compulsion of personal participatory presence has been relaxed to accommodate participation by proxy. Only the names and personal details of the maidens are required for this purpose. What was essentially a communal affair now attracts gate fees from audience participants and spectators as well. Certificate of participation are also issued in place of moral self-identity [30].

Another notable change in the celebration of *Ovia-Osese* festival is in the dressing of the maidens to be initiated into womanhood. There were some moderations in their dressing. The traditional way of wearing beads on their loins to rest on their waist bedecking private parts while leaving the other parts of their bodies bare was replaced with a piece of loin cloth is wrapped on from chest down [31] In fact, exotic fabrics as costumes have been introduced. It has moved from semi-nudity to vital concealment. Ogori traditional attires like *Esa owuwo* (hand woven special type of *aso 'ke)* are now donned full length from the bust line down beyond the knees, with modern shoes, bags and jewelleries to match. Apart from the initial *Odolo, Isu* and *Ebele* beads, new forms have been introduced to complement the limited presence of these old types. *Egueyin Egbolo, Asasa* and *Ofun* are among the new ones. The maiden's make up has also assumed a new dimension. Weaving of the traditional *Ogogorogo* hairstyle has largely been replaced with palming, jerry curls, fixing of weave on etc. Body toning with camwood and other traditional make-up for body adornment and decoration have been somewhat abandoned for modern cosmetics

to enhance their beauty and physical attributes. Only the *Ivia Egben* (maiden's children) that now richly adorn *Iburu* (camwood), *Opereto* and the three original beads. Clothing in the festival has now assumed competitive dimension as parents see this as an opportunity for wealth display (Fig. 3 and 4). By so doing, the festival is seen as an exhibitionist funfair. The festival that was once handled by the local musicians with indigenous instrument is now open to incorporate foreign musicians with hi-tech equipment. There is the introduction of the dance entertainment performance by the Kogi State Council for Arts and Culture to electrify, charge up the environment and add colour to the festival. It really has bearing with Ovia- Osese festival at all [32].

1977 *Ovia-Osese* festival witnessed a landmark in which, for the first time all the Christians in Ogori jointly celebrated it though the Moslems still celebrate theirs at a different time. This year is equally significant in the history of *Ovia-Osese* celebration in Ogori because for the first time the Ogori Descendants Union (ODU) brought it under their aegis; changed it into a civic social function with cosmetic religious colouration [33].

In 1978, cocktail parties were incorporated into the festival with invitation cards distributed by the families that could afford them. There was equally the introduction of *Aso Ebi* on denominational and Age group basis rather than family basis. This added colour and pageantry to the festival. In fact, the festival became an international affair whereby Ogori indigenes residing in various countries of the world and their friends travel back home for this annual festival. More changes have occurred in the recent celebration of *Ovia-Osese* festival in Ogori. There is the extension of the celebration to a whole week and different activities/events now take place like mountaineering, cross country race, cooking competition, beauty pageant, cultural carnival just to mention but a few. The festival is then capped up with the grand finale package on the last day known as Ogori day [34].



Fig 3: A cross section of Ogori Girls showing the passage of rite for females
Source: Adopted from the 2020/2021 Ogori Week and Annual Ovia Osese Festival Brochure



Fig 4: Image Showing the Ivia (maidens), dressed in traditionally hand woven cloth and wearing beads in their hair
Source: Adopted from the 2024 Ogori Week and Annual Ovia Osese Festival Brochure

Conclusion

In looking at the change and continuity of *Ovia-Osese*, the paper has been able to look at the origin of Ogori, Origin of *Ovia-Osese* and then brought to the limelight some of the changes and continuity of the festival. These changes are rapidly stripping *Ovia-Osese* bare of its importance. Presently, the festival emphasizes more on entertainment than observance of the rites of the chastity of womanhood.

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