

An African Monotheism: The Igbe Religion of the Urhobo and the Economic Importance of *Ore-Isi* Festival

Fortune Afatakpa
University of Ibadan, Nigeria
fortuneafatakpa@gmail.com

Abstract

This article illustrates the religious diversity of coastal Nigeria by analyzing the Igbe religion, a monotheist religion practiced mainly by Urhobo speakers. The first part of the article situates Igbe within the concept of “Evolving Modern Religion” rather than “African Traditional Religion” because it has a founder and is a monotheist religion. It then provides the historical background to the emergence of Igbe religion and gives an overview to its organisation. The second part of the article describes the religion’s main *Ore-Isi* festival and explores its core values and the nostalgic experiences in the minds of Igbe adherents. The third section of the article analyses the social and economic benefits of the *Ore-Isi* festival and its implications for Delta State in particular and Nigeria in general.

Introduction

There have been limited studies on Igbe religion in the last two decades since the eruption of the oil resource control agitations and conflicts as researchers have focused directly on the socio-political implications of the crisis. Despite the fact that it is largely unknown outside of Nigeria, the Igbe religion has helped to define the religious landscape of Nigeria’s Delta State. More than two decades of violence surrounding oil extraction in the Niger Delta have

limited research on Delta State, but the Igbe religion is estimated to have about two million adherents.¹

Igbe is an institutionalized religion with a strong organizational structure and the bulk of its members are of Urhobo ethnic extraction. Like other ethnic groups, the Urhobo have their own core territory, language, lifestyle and ways of organizing their political institutions, marriage and family. The Urhobo are made up of twenty-two separate entities and constitute the sixth-largest ethnic group in Nigeria. They spread over nine local government areas, namely Ethiope East, Ethiope West, Okpe, Ughelli South, Ughelli North, Sapele, Udu, Uvwie and parts of Warri South in Delta State. Like the Ijaw and the Itsekiri, the Urhobo are one of the dominant groups of Warri. However, the Urhobo also constitute one of the important migrant groups in many parts of the Yoruba-speaking coastline discussed in this issue, and in particular in the Ikale and Ilaje areas.²

The Igbe religion was founded by Ubiesha Etarakpo around 1858 and has its headquarters at Ubiesha's home at 11 Egbo Street, Kokori Inland, Ethiope East Local Government Area of Delta State, about 40 kilometers northeast of Warri. The word "Igbe" is an Urhobo word meaning dance. Thus, Igbe is a religion of dance.³ Most Nigerians who are not familiar with the details of the religion think it is polytheist because it draws strongly on local beliefs and practices.

Among the Awori Yoruba, Igbe refers to a particular form of chant and dance, which suggests that practices described as Igbe might have been part of wider cultural exchanges along the coastline.⁴ However, far from being a polytheist religion with belief in many gods, the Igbe religion believes in a single God known as "Oweya", who is worshipped through dancing and the consumption of native chalk.

Igbe religion was fully established in the 19th century, long before the influx of modern missionary Christianity into Urhoboland in the beginning of the 20th century. At the present point of research it is impossible to say if the religion emerged solely from local ideas, or whether the presence of the Portu-

1. Interview with *Uku Festus Ikoba*, High Priest on Saturday, May 7, 2016, at Abraka, Delta State

2. Ogen, Olukoya. "Urhobo migrants and the Ikale palm oil industry, 1850–1968." *Nigerian Journal of Economic History* 5, no. 1 (2003): 1–16.

3. M.Y. Nabofa, "Igbe Ubiesha: an indigenous charismatic movement of Urhobo people," in P. Ekeh, ed., *Studies in Urhobo Culture* (Lagos: Urhobo History Society, 2005), 371–402.

4. Barnes, Sandra T. "Meta-Cultural Processes and Ritual Realities in the Precolonial History of the Lagos Region." *Òrìṣà Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture* (2008): 164–90, 171.

gues in Benin and Warri, and their attempts to Christianize these states in earlier centuries, meant that the idea of a single God survived in local practices or narratives in some form and influenced the emergence of Igbe religion. It is also possible that, through trade and exchanges along the coast, Ubiesha Etarakpo had learnt about the teachings of early Christian missionaries: the first CMS missionaries arrived in Badagry in 1845. (It is even possible that Islamic ideas and practices percolated from areas north and west of Urhoboland.) But while it cannot be discounted that Ubiesha Etarakpo's monotheist revelation reflected the influence of other forms of monotheism, it also remains possible that his vision was his own. Certainly success of Igbe religion relied exclusively on its ability to inspire and transform the lives of its local followers, both in the Delta and along the coast.

Igbe as an "Evolving World Religion"

Scholars of the Igbe religion such as Michael Nabofa,⁵ E. S. Akama,⁶ Okolugbo,⁷ Echekwube,⁸ and Ikoba⁹ have classified Igbe under the genre of African Traditional Religion. However, a critical consideration of some of the features of the religion and those of African Traditional Religion suggests that Igbe does not really fit into its mold.

From a general perspective, Awolalu¹⁰ contends that religion enters into every aspect of the life of Africans and it cannot be studied in isolation. Its study has to go hand-in hand with the study of the people who practise the religion. He posits that there is need to explain the word "traditional". For him, the word traditional means indigenous, that which is aboriginal or foundational, handed down from generation to generation, upheld and practised by Africans today. This is a heritage from the past, but treated not as a thing of the past but

5. M.Y. Nabofa, "Igbe religious movement" in O. Otite, ed., *The Urhobo People* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1982), 249–264.

6. E.S. Akama, "Igbe Cult in Isokoland: Missionary Response and Government Response," *Journal of African Religion*, 15 (1985): 25–49.

7. E. O. Okolugbo, "The Olise-Igbe Religious Movement," in E. Ekpunobi and I. Ezeaku, ed., *Socio-philosophical perspective of African traditional religion* (New Age Publisher, 1990).

8. A. O. Echekwube, *A philosophical analysis of Igbe religious experience in Nigeria* (Benin City: Aigbos Publications, 1994).

9. O. F. Ikoba, "African traditional religion as mechanism for social control: a Study of igbe orhe in Delta State," M.Sc. Dissertation, Delta State University, Abraka, 2014.

10. J.O. Awolalu, "Sin and its Removal in African Traditional Religion," *Journal of the American Academy Religion*, 44. 2 (1976): 275.

as that which connects the past with the present and the present with eternity. He argues:

When we speak of African Traditional Religion, we mean the indigeneous religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. It is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans, and which is being practised today in various forms and various shades and intensities by a very large number of Africans, including individuals who claim to be Muslims or Christians.¹¹

Awolalu further contends that an essential feature of African Traditional Religion is that it is based mainly on oral transmission. It is not written on paper but in people's hearts, minds, oral history, rituals, shrines and religious functions. It has no founders or reformers like Gautama the Buddha, Asoka, Christ, or Muhammad and is therefore not the religion of one hero. It has no missionaries, or even the desire to propagate the religion, or to proselytize. Ebohon,¹² however, following extensive field research across the African continent, has discovered regularly occurring, constant, and distinctive features in the religious world views of African people. These include: belief in God, belief in divinities, belief in spirits (deities), and belief in ancestors, and the practice of magic, charms, and medicine. In his submission, all these have come to be seen as the basic structures or features of African Traditional Religion.

Amponsah¹³ opines that in African Traditional Religion, adherents are taught to revere the Supreme Being (God) through their gods and Ancestors, that is, through divinity cults and ancestral veneration. He identifies the following as features of African Traditional Religion: belief in smaller deities and ancestors to whom libations are made and sacrifices offered; belief in the fact that the human being is weak and has to depend on benevolent transcendent powers for protection and sustenance; and, they also believe in 'causality', that things in this world do not happen by chance. In his book, *African Religion: A very Short Introduction*, J.K Olupona¹⁴ argues that Traditional African Religions are less faith traditions than lived traditions. He further notes that they are less concerned with doctrines and more with rituals, ceremonies and lived practices. Olupona also argues that African Traditional Religions are not based on conversion like Islam and Christianity. They tend to propa-

11. Awolalu, "Sin and its Removal in African Traditional Religion," 275.

12. Ebohon Igodo, "African Traditional Religion," <http://ebohonculturalcentre.net>, accessed Jan 10, 2016.

13. S. E. Amponsah, "Christianity and African traditional religion in Kumasi: a comparative Study," M.A. Thesis, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, 2009.

14. J.K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

gate peaceful co-existence and promote good relations with members of other religious traditions.

Even though Igbe religion started from Africa, it should not be classified as an African Traditional Religion because it bears a strong resemblance with the world monotheistic traditions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism: like them, Igbe religion has a founder who performed miracles and manifested great healing powers. In order to facilitate the growth and expansion of the religion, the founder commissioned Omonedo of Orhomuru in Orogun, the father of Chief Agege, Okinedo of Ozoro (in Isoko), Ojanonogha of Oweh (also in Isoko); Idubor of Benin; and Akpobome and Efenedo as early apostles of the religion. These men also performed miracles in their various communities.¹⁵ Contrary to the postulations of Olupona,¹⁶ Awolalu,¹⁷ and Ebohon,¹⁸ adherents of Igbe religion believe in the mystical power of songs, dance and the *orhe*.

In the Igbe worldview, dance draws down the power and presence of the almighty God known as *Oweya* or *Oghene* in the Urhobo language. This is a view that resonates strongly in the Christian faith tradition. The religion is built around strong doctrines such as respect for constituted authority, sexual purity and the equality of mankind. Hence one of the themes that resound deeply in Igbe religion is respect for the sanctity of life.¹⁹ Above all, Igbe religion is monotheist. Therefore from its features and practices, Igbe religion situates well within the context of an “Emerging World Religion.”

Historical emergence of Igbe religion

Igbe tradition has it that Ubiesha and his wife, Erukanure (both of Urhoboland) were farmers. One day, the two of them went to plough their farmland in preparation for planting yam seedlings. While hoeing, Ubiesha unearthed the indigenous white chalk (known as *orhe* in the Urhobo language), to which he did not initially attach importance. Back home, however, an unknown man, who refused to disclose his identity, appeared to Ubiesha in a dream, appealing to him in his own best interests and those of humanity, to return to the farm and take home the chalk (*orhe*) that he had found the previous day. It is believed that the “mystic man” taught Ubiesha some songs and dances and then instructed him on how to organize his new movement and what he should

15. Interview with *Uku* Festus Ikoba, High Priest, May 7, 2016, at Abraka, Delta State.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Interview with *Uku* Festus Ikoba, High Priest, May 7, 2016.

avoid to maintain a state of ritual purity. In addition, Ubiesha was taught how to use the *orhe* for healing diseases and for protection against all forms of evil spirits. The following morning, therefore, Ubiesha went and took home the chalk from his farm.²⁰ With the aid of this chalk (*orhe*), he established the religion, known today as Igbe, probably because *il'igbe* (dancing) and *il'esuo* (singing) were foundational to its practice.²¹ Soon after his first vision, Ubiesha began to heal people, see visions, speak in tongues and prophesy with passion, all through the power of the chalk (*orhe*).

A major turning point in the religion was the healing of Idubor, a leper from Benin, and the visit of a prominent Oba of Benin, who disguised himself by turning into a little boy with the intention of testing the authenticity of claims to Ubiesha's prophetic discernment. As a result of both encounters, Ubiesha soon gathered a large following, constituted predominantly of those who were seeking healing and protection against witchcraft and other evil spirit forces.²² In due course, the new religion was also disseminated to non-Urhobo territories such as Benin, Isoko, Itsekiri and Kwale and other coastal areas in Nigeria. The religion began to spread gradually to all of the Urhobo nation and southern Nigeria at large. In the mid-1970s Igbe assumed a transnational dimension by establishing a chapter in London. Today Igbe religion also has practicing adherents in the United States of America.²³

The Organization of Igbe Religion

The adherents of the Igbe religion are monotheists, who believe in an omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God called *Oweya*, who rewards the good and evil alike, each according to their deeds. Dance is a core element of Igbe, and there is no worship session without dancing. The adherents believe that by dancing, they draw on themselves the very hand of God. The adherents of Igbe usually meet in an "*Ogwa*", a sort of temple, in which they dance, welcome members, and sing native Urhobo songs in place of hymns. At worship services, the Igbe priest wears a white dress and white head gear. He also administers the native chalk (*orhe*). The chalk is smeared on the forehead and it is also ingested by the worshippers for their protection and

20. Interview with *Uku Phillip Akpokovo*, High Priest and eldest grandson of Ubiesha, May 5, 2016 at Kokori, Delta State.

21. E.S. Akama, "Igbe cult in Isokoland: Missionary Response and Government Response," *Journal of African Religion*, 15 (1985): 25–49.

22. Interview with *Uku Phillip Akpokovo*, May 5, 2016.

23. Interview with *Olorogun Ochuko Umukoro* ex Senior Chief Priest, May 11, 2016, at Kokori, Delta State.

fortification. This protection is predicated on the belief that witches and wizards are extremely powerful and possess the powers to maim and kill people. Among most social science scholars of Africa, particularly anthropologists, witchcraft is defined as an act of magic that results in harming a person or aspects of the material world on which he or she depends. Therefore, the person who possesses such power is called a witch (for women) and wizard (for men). The Igbe religion emphasizes purity of mind, body and soul of all members.²⁴ Consequently, members always wear white as a symbolism of their pure state. Igbe members also believe in the afterlife. They believe that once a person dies, his soul is reunited with God until a new body is created by God for the soul to enter and come back to earth. Hence, they believe in reincarnation as is normal in Urhobo cosmology.²⁵ A prerequisite for priesthood in Igbe is the ability to see into the future. Hence all Igbe priests are presumed to be second-sighted.

The Igbe religion has a hierarchic leadership structure and the spiritual head goes by the title *Uku Supreme*. The religion also has a unique priesthood order and leadership structure. The *Uku Supreme* is the earthly embodiment or representative of God. This is reflected in his official status and the honor accorded him by his followers. His utterances and advice are highly revered. The congregational head of each Igbe assembly is called *Uku* (for male) and *Omote Uku* (for female). No Igbe member or non-member is allowed to touch the head of the *Uku* or *Omote Uku* willfully. Violation of this is believed to desacralize the *Uku* and consequently leads to very intricate and expensive rituals of cleansing.

Strictly speaking, divination, in the traditional sense and form, is not practised amongst the members. But the *Uku* and some members of the priesthood order are believed to have special prophetic powers to see visions and interpret dreams. The *Uku* is supported by his chief priests who are called the *Onori*. They welcome new members and listen to confessions. They also carry out other spiritual and administrative assignments delegated to them by the *Uku*.²⁶ In addition, every Igbe temple has an *Oni-Igbe*. There can be more than one *Oni-Igbe* in an Igbe temple. The *Oni-Igbe* is the female head priestesses in Igbe religion. They are believed to be able to dig out any secret and can see into the future. They also listen to confessions, especially from female members. The

24. Interview with Raphael Udumebrae, seller of *akise*, May 26, 2016 at Isiokolo, Delta State.

25. M. Orhero, "The first monotheistic religion in Nigeria: Igbe Religious Movement," <http://abiyamo.com/see-the-first-monotheistic-religion-in-nigeria-igbe-religious-movement>, accessed February 14, 2016.

26. Interview with *Onori* Abel Egofovwe, Chief Priest on Friday, May 5, 2016, at Kokori, Delta State.

typical Igbe member's day starts with the ritual of silence where they walk round the four corners of the *Ogwa* of their house and hum. After this they eat native chalk, *Orhe*, which it is believed can cure ailments such as malaria, fever, leprosy, and provide deliverance from spiritual oppression, madness, fertility challenges, ill luck and witch craft manipulations. This is also done at the end of the day.²⁷

Their most sacred day of worship (as Christians use Sunday and Muslims use Friday) is market day, or once every eight days. This day is known as *Edigbe* or "*Ediruo*" which means day of dance or day of work. The typical activities on this day include singing, dancing, praying, cleansing, confessions, intake of new members and other social/ritualistic functions. Their liturgy is not written but learnt by the *Uku* who initiates and oversees it. The *Uku* is like the walking Bible of the Igbe religion.

***Ore-Isi* Festival**

Adherents of Igbe religion celebrate an elaborate annual thanksgiving festival known as *Ore-Isi*. The *Ore-Isi* annual festival was instituted by the founder of the religion Ubiesha Etarakpo in the early part of the 20th century.²⁸ The *Ore-Isi* festival of Igbe religion can be likened to Christmas celebration which is popular among the Christians or *Eid al-Kabir* popular among the Muslims. The festival usually takes place in Kokori, the spiritual headquarters of Igbe religion. The eleven day annual festival is celebrated in the month of May. It is dedicated to offering of special thanksgiving and praises to the almighty God (*Oweya*) for his protections, provisions and providence in the previous year and to seek his mercy for fresh blessings and spiritual empowerment in the coming year. Moreover, the annual *Ore-Isi* festival of Igbe religion provides the platform for its adherents all over the world to convene and pay their vows to *Oweya* for answering their prayers in times of distress. Vows in Igbe religion are made willingly, and it is important to mention that members of the religion are neither forced nor coerced to pay their vows. It is generally believed that vows are private and personal between *Oweya* and any adherent making such vows.²⁹

Furthermore, the *Ore-Isi* festival is an opportunity for all the High Priests (*Uku*) and High Priestesses (*Omote Uku*) to pay homage and pledge their submission to the *Uku Supreme*, who is the overall spiritual head of the religion.

27. M.Y. Nabofa, "Igbe Ubiesha," 371–402.

28. Interview with *Uku Festus Ikoba*, May 7, 2016.

29. Interview with *Olorogun Uku Albert Ogievewe*, High Priest, May 5, 2016, at Okhrere Agbarho, Delta State.

Although some circles in Igbe religion have stopped paying homage to Kokori, they are, however, insignificant when compared with the huge turnout of devotees during the annual festival.³⁰ Also adherents seize the opportunity of the festival to make fresh vows and to renew their covenant with *Oweya*. For many adherents of Igbe religion, participating in the *Ore-Isi* festival in Kokori is like going on pilgrimage to Mecca or Jerusalem. The annual *Ore-Isi* festival brings together adherents of the Igbe religion from countries like the USA, United Kingdom, Germany, and from Lagos State, Ondo State, Rivers State, Delta State, Cross-River State, and all over Urhoboland.

Equally, the *Ore-Isi* festival brings together the various sectarian divisions of the Igbe religion. It strengthens the collective memory of adherents that Ubiesha is the founder of Igbe religion who performed miracles through the *orhe* and by word of mouth. It further entrenches the oral tradition of the encounter Ubiesha had with a Benin Monarch around the 19th century and the famous healing of Idubor from Leprosy in Ubiesha temple. According to the current *Uku Supreme* of Igbe religion, His Eminence Obaoga Ibodje, the planning and execution of the annual *Ore-Isi* festival is the sole responsibility of the Central Working Committee. It also performs other functions such as conflict resolution and mediation within its membership. The committee is headed by *Uku* Ododo Abanwa. Upon fixing the date for the commencement of the festival, the *Uku Supreme* will then call on the members of the committee to shoulder the responsibility of mobilising material, human and financial resources for the festival.³¹

The activities of the *Ore-Isi* festival are very dynamic depending on the theme for each year. The festival usually opens with general songs of praise worshipping and adoring *Oweya* the almighty God for all his miraculous interventions in diverse ways. The first night also feature special thanksgiving dance by all *Uku*, *Omote Uku* and *Inori* in the religion. One of the high points of the festival is a special procession known as *Arue Osu Orere*; it is a procession that takes place in the night of the opening ceremony. This particular procession is targeted at cleansing the community from all forms of impurity. During this procession usually led by the *Uku Supreme*, forgiveness is sought from God on behalf of the inhabitants of Kokori and prayers for peace and prosperity in the land are offered. Other activities in the festival includes mental empowerment seminar, capacity building workshops that are meant to address thematic issues bordering on life and living.

30. Interview with *Olorogun Uku* Ubieshakparobo, High Priest and last grandson of Ubiesha, May 5, 2016.

31. Interview with His Eminence *Uku Supreme* Obaoga Ibodje Supreme head of Igbe religion worldwide, May 4, 2016, at Kokori, Delta State.

Economic Benefits of *Ore-Isi* Festival

Over the years, the *Ore-Isi* festival has provided both tangible and intangible benefits for Kokori, the communities adjoining Kokori, and Delta State at large.³² The findings of this study revealed that *Ore-Isi* festival has three major domains of benefit: religious community bonding, economic benefits and tourism. The socio-economic impacts of the *Ore-Isi* festival on the economy of Kokori are categorized into primary and secondary impacts. The primary impact is the direct socio economic impact on businesses that are into the production and sales of religious materials that adherents of Igbe use. It must be noted that sellers or producers of these religious materials are not necessarily adherents of Igbe religion. The secondary impacts are those who are not selling religious materials but are beneficiaries of the money brought into Kokori by adherents of Igbe religion during the period of *Ore-Isi* festival. Findings also revealed that there are general ripple effects on the economy of Delta State as a result of the festival.

Orhe

The native white chalk also known as *orhe* in Urhobo language is the principal icon of Igbe religion. It symbolizes the power of God and it is proven to be used for healing purposes, exorcism and for divine direction.³³ According to Nabofa,³⁴ the *orhe* can also be used for detoxification. During the *Ore-Isi* festival, members come to renew their *orhe*. Equally, because some of the adherents live a great distance away and may not have the opportunity to visit Kokori in a long time, they buy the *orhe* in large quantity and have them consecrated by the *Uku Supreme*.³⁵ It is worth mentioning that though adherents of Igbe religion are major consumers of the *orhe*, it is not produced in Kokori. It is mass produced in Oza in Ika Local Government Area of Delta State and Ikpe a suburb in Edo State. The native white chalk is also sold in large quantity in Oyoko market located in Abavo, a town close to Agbor in Delta State. From this market, people buy and take to various destinations. Eight respondents both at Benin and Oza who are producers of the native white chalk attest to the fact that the production and sales increase during the period of the *Ore-Isi*

32. Interview with Olorogun Ochuko Umukoro ex Senior Chief Priest, May 11, 2016, at Kokori, Delta State.

33. Interview with *Onori* Abel Egofovwe, Chief Priest, May 5, 2016, at Kokori, Delta State.

34. Interview with Professor Michael Nabofa, scholar of religion, September 2015, at Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State.

35. Interview with *Uku* Festus Ikoba, High Priest, May 7, 2016, at Abraka, Delta State.

festival. They all agreed that the major bulk of their sales during this period come from order placed from Kokori. In the words of John Okoh and Brume Siakpere who are engaged in the commercial production of the native white chalk in Oza:

At times we work over night so as to meet up with our sales target because during the *Ore-Isi* festival people come from Kokori who are members of Igbe Ubiesha religion. We have observed that during *Ore-Isi* festival and whenever other circles of the religion are celebrating their feasts we experience bumper sales. This is a period of economic boom for us.³⁶

According to Diokpa Nwokolo “whenever this Igbe people are doing their festival in Kokori we feel the impact on our native chalk business”.³⁷ From the submissions of these respondents, it can be presumed that the benefits of *Ore-Isi* festival transcend the borders of Kokori, affecting the market economy of Delta and even Edo State.

Adjuju

The traditional hand fan, known as *adjuju* in Urhobo language, is another major religious instrument that is used in Igbe religion. It is made from either goat or cow skin. All members of Igbe religion own and make use of an *adjuju*. The symbolic power of the *adjuju* is rooted at least partly in the fact that the fan is a symbol of royalty and power in many communities in the western Delta and in Yorubaland. The *adjuju* is skillfully engaged in all worship sessions of Igbe religion. “When we make use of the *adjuju*, we experience peace. It initiates peace for the troubled soul. Therefore, the *adjuju* symbolize peace in Igbe religion. According to Eyareya³⁸ the *adjuju* can also be used to ward off evil spirits. In fact the founder of Igbe religion Ubiesha Etarakpo died holding the *adjuju* in his hands”.³⁹ When an adherent of Igbe religion dies, he or she is buried with the *adjuju* firmly tucked in the hand.⁴⁰

36. Interview with John Okoh producer of native white chalk, May 20, 2016, at Oza, Delta State and Interview with Brume Siakpere producer of native white chalk, May 20, 2016 at Oza Delta State.

37. Interview with Diokpa Nwokolo, producer of native white chalk, May 20, 2016, at Oza, Delta State.

38. Interview with *Omote Uku* Eyareya, High Priestess, May 6, 2016, at Ughelli, Delta State.

39. Interview with *Uku Festus* Ikoba, High Priest, May 7, 2016, at Abraka, Delta State.

40. Interview with *Olorogun Uku* Albert Ogiewwege, High Priest on Friday, May 5, 2016, at Okhrere Agbarho, Delta State.

The production of *adjuju* requires special skills. This skill requires apprenticeship before it can be acquired. The *adjuju* is produced in Kokori town and some other parts of Urhoboland. During the *Ore-Isi* festival adherents are wont to buy new sets of *adjuju* for consecration. They also buy and take along for their members who could not make it to the event. Men who are skilled in the production of the *adjuju* enjoy great patronage during *Ore-Isi* festival. It is a well-known fact that the late Onori Mathew, the Confidential Secretary of His Eminence Ibodje Ubiesha (the son of Ubiesha who took over the mantle of the religion after his death) was well gifted in the skillful production of the *adjuju*. Legend has it that he makes very good profit from the sales of the *adjuju* during *Ore-Isi* and eventually built a story building from the business.⁴¹ Stanley Azubuike and his friend Chinedu Chilaka usually hawk goods along the streets of Kokori and the *adjuju* is also part of the goods that they sell:

Money is not the repository of any religion. The truth is that during this annual festival of Igbe Ubiesha, we sell very well, especially this hand fan that the Urhobo people call *adjuju*. We sell close to thirty or forty in a day. The reason is because this Igbe people cannot do without the *adjuju*.⁴²

Akise and Igoni

The *akise* is a percussion instrument that consists of a dried hollow gourd of which the larger half is covered with a net or web that is woven with beads. It can be played by shaking, tapping, rubbing or pulling on the net with the hands. The *akise*, which is also known as *shekere* in the Yoruba language, is found in various forms in a wide variety. The *akise* is a functional creation of nature with a wide variety of uses and traditions in cultures around the world. The *akise* is sacred and indispensable spiritual paraphernalia in Igbe religion. The flexibility of the *akise* provides calm and pleasurable way for adherents to develop creative independence in its usage during worship sessions. The playing of the *akise* in Igbe religion is an energizing spiritual experience that establishes true spiritual connection to the strength and genius of *Oweya*. It is given great respect and plays a very important role in congregational worship.

41. Interview with *Uku Festus Ikoba*, High Priest, May 7, 2016, at Abraka, Delta State.

42. Interview with Stanley Azubuike street trader, May 26, 2016, at Kokori, Delta State and Chinedu Chilaka street trader, May 26, 2016, at Kokori, Delta States.

According to Onori Egofovwe,⁴³ the *akise* draws down the spirit of music on the congregation in Igbe religion. He submits that when they begin to sing and pound on the *akise* with intensity, the spirits of benevolence descends on the congregation. Some sellers of traditional musical instruments in Kokori posit that once the preparation for the *Ore-Isi* starts, adherents of Igbe religion begin to patronize them and sales reach their peak when the festival is at its height. The weaving of beads or shell around the *akise* just like *adjuju* requires special skills. One of the respondents who lives in Isiokolo, a town near Kokori explained,

I weave beads around calabash gourds which the Urhobo call *akise*. It is not only Igbe Ubiesha worshippers that use the *akise*. It is our traditional musical instrument in Urhoboland. But during the annual festival of Igbe, people who are traveling to Kokori usually stop here to buy *akise* from me. This *akise* is very important to all members of Igbe because of the spiritual empowerment that accompany its usage.⁴⁴

One of the central paraphernalia that affects creative bond, enhance the spirit of communality and strengthens the fabric of brotherhood in Igbe religion, is the *Igoni*. The *Igoni* is made from thin white wool thread. It is worn as a bracelet or band on the wrists, neck and around the ankle of adherents. However, as a result of modernisation some adherents now wear beads as a replacement. Beyond its ordinary look, when consecrated by the *Uku Supreme* or an ordained *Uku*, the *Igoni* becomes a protective and preservative energy. The *Igoni* when consecrated and worn carries enormous spiritual power. It protects against witchcraft attacks and scares away evil spirits.⁴⁵ From the attestation of the *Uku Supreme*, the *Igoni* can be likened to the red string bracelets spotted on Hollywood celebrities who practice Kabbalah. It is a sacramental article and not a fashion statement.

It is generally believed that negative energies can enter people's lives through the metaphoric evil eye, which is, when someone looks at you with envy and jealousy. Adherents of Igbe religion believe that they can protect themselves from and reject negative influences from people with evil intentions by wearing the *Igoni* 24 hours a day and every day of the week. A similar version of the *Igoni* is also found in the Hindu faith; a sacred red string bracelet known as the

43. Interview with Onori Abel Egofovwe, Chief Priest, May 5, 2016, at Kokori, Delta State.

44. Interview with Raphael Udumebrae, seller of *akise*, on Monday, May 26, 2016 at Isiokolo, Delta State.

45. Interview with His Eminence *Uku Supreme* Obaoga Ibodje Supreme head of Igbe religion worldwide, on Wednesday, May 4, 2016, at Kokori, Delta State.

kalava or *mauli*. The *kalava* is tied onto a man's right wrist and a woman's left wrist at the commencement of a ceremony. It is worn to symbolize benedictions to the wearer. Just like in the Hindu faith, the *Igoni* is a symbol of goodwill among adherents of Igbe religion. In the words of the *Uku* Supreme Obao-ga Ibodje,

anywhere I travel to around the world, once I see the *Igoni* around the neck, wrist or leg of any person, with excitement I will say “*omo ose ovo*” (in Urhobo language it means child from the same father). Once the person hears that statement, he or she will immediately embrace me.⁴⁶

Beyond the spiritual and communal importance of the *Igoni*, it generates huge economic benefits to both the producers and sellers of the special white cotton wool that is used for its production. Six sellers of traditional religious artifacts around the Kokori town attest to the fact that their sale of the *Igoni* is synonymous with the season of the *Ore-Isi* festival:

I always look forward to the Igbe festival. The way Christmas is to the Christians, so is the annual festival of Igbe Ubiesha. Members buy things, especially spiritual items, that they can use to protect themselves and also pray for prosperity. This *Igoni* is one of the fast moving items on in my small whenever they are celebrating their festival.⁴⁷

Palm Wine

Palm wine is a beverage created from the sap of various species of palm tree. Palm wine is very special among adherents of Igbe religion. Palm wine is prominent in traditional cultures as a source of raw materials for consumption, construction, and other functions of daily life. Beyond its day to day consumption, palm wine is important and central in the spiritual framework of Igbe religion. It performs a mystical function by attracting spiritual forces into the worship ground. For *Onori* Egofovwe it is a sacred drink.⁴⁸ He contends that palm wine symbolizes fruitfulness and prosperity because it never runs dry. Therefore in Igbe religion when people pray into the palm wine in the name of *Oweya* it is generally presumed that the opportunities for fruitfulness will open up. He further explains that palm wine in Igbe religion is also used

46. Ibid.

47. Interview with Mrs. Hannah Atori seller of *Igoni*, May 26, 2016, at Isiokolo, Delta State.

48. Interview with *Onori* Abel Egofovwe, Chief Priest, May 5, 2016, at Kokori, Delta State.

for the purpose of exorcism and to arrest the manifestation of malevolent spirits. As a result, he submits that during the *Ore-Isi* festival, sellers of palm wine are among the primary economic beneficiaries. Some sellers of palm wine even carry their product to the venue of the festival to sell to participants. Madam Felicia Akpokiniovo, a resident of Kokori agrees with the fact that palm wine sellers benefit immensely. She expands her views in the following words:

Apart from palm wine people who sell drinks like schnapps, fruit wine, juice and kola also enjoy good sales during the Igbe festival. They all have their spiritual importance in Igbe religion. These are things adherents don't joke with especially when it comes to seeking God's face and fulfillments of vows. This is because they use these items as thanksgiving offering and gift presentation.⁴⁹

Benefits to other Sectors

Apart from the sales of spiritual materials, there is the secondary dimension to the socio-economic relevance of the *Ore-Isi* festival. It affects other sectors of Kokori's economy. This is an observation made by *Olorogun* Umukoro a onetime senior *Onori* who served Ibodje, but who is now an elder in a Christian Church. He opines that though he is no longer an adherent of Igbe religion, the annual Igbe festival of thanksgiving has been a source of financial and material blessing to the general business community in Kokori. He also argues that the advantages derived from the festival also go beyond Kokori. He submits that Kokori should be likened to Jerusalem in Israel or Mecca in Saudi Arabia:

During the festival there is usually increase in sales activities, especially livestock. For example once the festival commences adherents come with cows, goats, and sheep. An average of three cows is slaughtered every day of the festival. Apart from the adherents, all ordained *Ukus* and *Emete Uku* in the religion also come with food items and live stocks as thanks giving offering. It is interesting to note that all these items are bought here in Kokori market and from adjoining towns.

The Hausa/Fulani community benefit tremendously because the cows, goats and sheep are bought from them. Another interesting point about the

49. Interview with Felicia Akpokiniovo seller of assorted wines and confectionaries, May 11, 2016, Kokori town.

festival is connected to the fact that these sellers are both Muslims and Christians. Categorically, both Christians and Muslims benefit from the festival. Furthermore, those selling white clothes also benefit from the festival. So beyond Kokori the celebration of the festival affects the economic life of people in other communities.⁵⁰

Adherents of Igbe religion adorn white apparel. White symbolizes purity in the religion. However, there are variants in Igbe religion that use a mixture of white and red fabric as symbol. Mrs. Abigail Akusu a dealer in cotton and lace fabrics gives credence to the claim that during the Igbe festival of thanksgiving they enjoy sales increase:

Generally, many of us who are into the selling of this white cotton dress experience sales increase during the Igbe festival of thanksgiving. This is so because the members of the religion mainly use white and you know they will not want to appear in the old faded ones that they have. This festival is just like their new year. So, members come here to buy the white clothes for themselves and for their children as well. But this year we experienced very low patronage unlike previous years. I believe it is as a result of the challenges facing the economy of this country. Many people have not received salary. Well maybe next year will be better.⁵¹

There are limited hotel facilities in Kokori town. It has been observed that the few hotels in Kokori are usually fully booked by adherents when they come for the festival. Some members also look for hotels around the adjoining towns. Therefore it can be categorically stated that the hospitality industry in Kokori and other adjoining towns benefit from the festival. Apart from the hospitality industry there are landlords in Kokori who renovate their houses and rent out rooms to participants who cannot afford to pay the hotel bills. Also, there are landlords who as a result of their benevolence renovate their houses and give it out for free to followers of Igbe throughout the period of the festival. According to *Olorogun Okiti*,⁵² apart from landlords, there are tenants who also rent out rooms in their apartments to people just to make a little business. Additionally, dealers in food and confectionaries enjoy good patronage during the period of the festival. According to Akpoguma, a resident and an adherent of Igbe religion,

50. Interview with Olorogun Ochuko Umukoro, ex Senior Chief Priest, May 11, 2016, at Kokori, Delta State.

51. Interview with Mrs. Abigail Akusu, cloth seller, May 11, 2016, Kokori, Delta State.

52. Interview with *Olorogun Okiti* Koloko, resident of Kokori, May 11, 2016 at Kokori Delta State.

People will buy food items such as yam, beans, rice, palm oil vegetable oil, gari, plantain etc. and present them as part of their thanks giving offerings. Some of these food items are bought in Kokori town and in other adjoining villages.⁵³

This further establishes that the *Ore-Isi* festival empowers people economically, both directly and indirectly. In the submission of Ikoba, during the *Ore-Isi* festival Kokori town automatically becomes a beehive for commercial transporters. He also attests to the fact that Okada riders are not left out.

Conclusion

This article examined the *Ore-Isi* festival of Igbe religion in the context of its economic benefits to the Kokori community and Delta State more generally. Religious festivals are celebrated across the world with great expectations. The same can be said about the *Ore-Isi* festival. The festival brings together all the sectarian divisions in Igbe within and outside Nigeria. It has been observed that over its 100 years of existence, this intra-sectarian festival has not degenerated into inter- or intra-religious violence, despite the seeming differences in doctrines and practices among the sectarian divisions. The study contends that the annual Igbe festival of thanksgiving can be likened to the celebration of Christmas among members of the Christian faith or *Eid al-Kabir* that is celebrated among Muslim adherents.

The article also established the patterns of socio economic impacts that the festival portends for the people of Kokori. Additionally, the Igbe annual festival of thanksgiving also provides economic blessings to other community. By extension it can be inferred that Delta State profits tremendously from the festival. The festival has immense economic bearings on agricultural produce, livestock, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. Correspondingly, the hospitality industry, dealers of white cotton and laces also benefits tremendously from the festival. Above all, adherents of Igbe religion use the annual festival of thanksgiving to strengthen their collective memory that they are all sons and daughters of Ubiesha the founding patriarch of Igbe religion. However, there is need to do more concerning the effective publicity of the festival. It is important for the office of the *Uku* Supreme to take advantage of the social media platform to create more awareness and enhance the robustness of the festival for better visibility. This study therefore concludes that *Ore-Isi* festival activities meet the nos-

53. Ibid.

talgiç definition because the activities draw upon economic, historical resources and address present needs to create a better future for its adherents.