

## Socio- Economic Significance Of Cultural Festivals In Epe Division Of Lagos State: An Overview

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### Abstract

Throughout the history of mankind, culture has been the fulcrum upon which society rests. Culture provides the social, religious, intellectual and artistic manifestations that characterize a society. This is particularly so in Africa where the relationship between the inhabitants of a society and their culture is comparable to that which exists between the umbilical cord and the foetus. The system of production, exchange, political organization, religious worship and rituals, child –rearing practices, family and kinship ties e.t.c are culturally determined. This paper contends that traditional festivals occupy a crucial place in the socio-economic life of Epe people. The study considers the origin and nature of major traditional festivals in Epe Division of Lagos State with a view to determining their impact on the society.

### INTRODUCTION

The view that culture plays a pivotal role in the life of people is indeed incontrovertible. The culture of ethnic or socio-linguistic groups is the fulcrum upon which all manifestations, relations and developments rest. The system of production, political organization, child-raising practices, family and kinship ties, and other social patterns are culturally determined. Thus, hardly can any society afford culture vacuum in its overall life. The manifestation of culture in a society takes various forms including traditional festivals, industries, marketing and food items. The focus of this paper is to examine the nature and significance of the traditional festivals of *Epe* people.<sup>1</sup> The methodology of this research is descriptive and analytical. It relies essentially on information from secondary sources such as books, journals and monographs.

*Epe* town is situated along the coastal strip east of the present day Lagos State<sup>2</sup>. It shares boundary with Ijebu Ode to the north, with Ikorodu and Ibeju-Lekki in the west, while to the south it is bordered by the Lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean and to the east by the creek to Benin River.<sup>3</sup>

The exact date of establishment of *Epe* is yet unknown. However, available historical evidence suggests that the town was founded between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries by a band of migrant hunters led by *Urakaloye (Huraka)*.<sup>4</sup> *Epe* was subsequently, in 1853 settled by ex-king Kosoko of Lagos and his Eko followers following their exile from Lagos by the British.<sup>5</sup> And by 1863 a large body of Eko population under Kosoko's

chief Warrior-, Iposu had emerged in *Epe*<sup>6</sup>. Although other immigrants like the Ilaje (mainly from the riverine areas of *Okitipupa* and Warri) later settled in the town, *Epe* and its coastal areas have two broad ethnic groupings, *Ijebu* and *Eko*. But these two groups of people of the *Epe* Division, have by historical circumstance, co-habited and developed enduring economic, political and socio-cultural links with one another<sup>7</sup>. Significantly, these people have in common a number of cultural manifestations such as traditional festivals some of which shall be considered shortly.

### **Okosi (Boat Regatta)**

*Okosi* is a common festival among the lagoon communities of Ijebuland. It is an annual festival (associated with rowing and sailing) observed by the people to appease the river goddess (*Olokun*) for greater fish harvest and protection against river accidents.<sup>8</sup> Extant sources point to *Makun-Omi* as the origin of the *Okosi* festival. The people of *Makun-Omi* claim to be the originator of the festival, and that the other towns and villages which now observe it copied the idea from *Makun-Omi*<sup>9</sup>. The war boats of *Makun* warriors were equipped with *Oko* (sword) and *Esi* (javelin). Thus, the boats were referred to as containing *Oko* and *Esi* which was later contracted to *Okosi*.<sup>10</sup>

The exact date of origin of the festival in *Epe* is not known. However, existing sources suggest that the people of *Epe* had staged Boat regatta before 1933.<sup>11</sup> The ceremony is usually characterized by colourful display of delightfully decorated canoes, boats, and paddles, and exciting songs and dance steps in praise of *Olokun*. Procedure for celebrating the festival is elaborate. Although each age group runs the expenses of the *Okosi* festival, due to its attachment to the *Ebi* festival, it is the *Osugbo* (elders) who fix the date for the celebration<sup>12</sup>, usually within the month of March. The first noticeable sign of the festival is the *Jigbo* masquerade who after paying homage to the king and his chiefs, traverse the town to render prayers on behalf of the populace (normally for a period of about two weeks)<sup>13</sup>. This is followed by the appearance of a masquerades the *Alegbegba* which goes round the town to cut plantain. The *Alegbegba* appearance every three days for three consecutive times props the relevant age group for that particular year to commence preparations because the *Okosi* day is at hand.

The cultural significance of *Okosi* festival is symbolized by the array of rituals marking its celebration. As an illustration, the appearance of *Alegbegba* which goes round cutting plantain is a ritual meant to protect the indigenes of *Epe* against madness.<sup>14</sup> Further importance of the festival is seen in the circumstances of *Epe* as a coastal town which depend a lot on the Lagoon for its economic and transportation requirements, thus the need to propitiate the river gods and goddesses. Among *Epe* fishermen, it is widely believed that the celebration of the *Okosi* is a necessity for abundant fish harvest and a sure guide against accidents on water.<sup>15</sup> Lastly, the festival is seen by the people as a remedy for barrenness and a precursor to safe child delivery by pregnant women.

### **Agemo**

This festival is peculiar to the *Ijebu* generally, but its celebration is widespread in *Epe* (and *Ikorodu*) where it has seemingly become a state religious festival. The festival,

held every August is a form of ancestral worship in remembrance of *Agemo*, the son of *Obatala* believed to have lived a courageous life such that his followers continue to celebrate and venerate him.<sup>16</sup> Yoruba mythology has it that *Agemo* and *Obatala* became locked in conflict following the former's marriage to a lady disapproved by the latter. *Obatala* subsequently withdrew *Agemo's* magical powers as a punishment for his 'disobedience'. It thus became impossible for him to reinstate his body after he had disemboweled himself in one of his magical performances. It is said that termites consumed his intestines thus hampering his movement in public. Instead of allowing his deformity to halt his public outings, *Agemo's* courage and ingenuity helped him devise a means of covering his body with mat in order to conceal his deformity. Subsequently, members of his community on account of *Agemo's* action symbolic of courage and tolerance, institutionalized his worship<sup>17</sup>.

Due to the ritual significance built around it, the *Agemo* masquerade, which in public is a raffia pulp mat which can move unaided is strictly a male affair as no female is permitted to watch or partake in its activities. Celebration of the festival is marked by thrilling display of the *Agere*, a band of stilt dancers, and the offering of propitiations for the good health and progress of the people. Musical tunes are produced by many types of drums including *Esi*, a raffia-covered musical instrument, and the *Aran-Ogida*.<sup>18</sup>

Significantly, there is a strong belief among the people that the observation of *Agemo* festival will help to check the outbreak of epidemics and other evils, as well as prevent drought.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Agbo (Agbo Remi-Reke)***

*Agbo* festival is a purely Ijebu affair and the most common masquerade festival in *Epe* Division, particularly in *Agbowa-Ikosi* where it is known as *Agbo Remi-Reke*. The historical origins of the festival is mired in seeming controversy. One account traces the origin and worship of *Agbo* to *Ekine*, a historical personage whose boat sank on the high seas and was rescued by sea deities. In consequence, these deities were venerated via sacrifices as a mark of appreciation and appeasement.<sup>20</sup> Another account has it that the festival came to *Agbowa* through a woman, *Efunpotun* of *Anjorin* family who married a man called *Maran*, a native of *Epe* and *Iwopin*. *Efunpotun* had gone with her husband to *Iwopin* to watch the festival which was already an annual affair there and she instantly became fascinated. On her return to *Agbowa*, *Efunpotun* introduced the idea to the town's elders, and by early 20<sup>th</sup> century (between 1904 and 1907) they had received the *Agbo* rituals from the elders of *Iwopin*.<sup>21</sup> Beyond these diverse views on the origin of the *Agbo*, what is certain is that the festival has overtime, become entrenched as a major cultural manifestation in the *Epe* Division, particularly among the riverine people of *Agbowa - Ikosi*.

Festival date is made known to the public by a masquerade called *Ukoro*, nine days before the appointed day. Indeed, this announcement is a *sine qua non* for celebration of the festival, because without it there will be no festival<sup>22</sup>. Similarly, a day to the festival another masquerade, *Alegbagba* emerges from the fetish grove

to stage an outing accompanied by followers who embarked on the cutting of plantain all over the town<sup>23</sup>.

It is important to note that, riverine *Epe* people mostly do not refer to the *Agbo* as masquerade, rather a group of *Agbos* are known as 'Imoles' (the deities themselves). Such include *Akowa*, *Ololo*, *Ofole*, *Alapa*, *Esiwu*, *Agira*, *Aligbagba*, *Igbile*, and *Ajeye* which procures hens and chicken for propitiation during worship.<sup>24</sup>

The significance of *Agbo* festival in *Agbowa-Ikosi* is rooted in the belief system of the people. First, the people believe strongly in the *Agbo* deity for the provision of children for the barren. Second, it serves as an agent of social cohesion and communal stability. Third, the festival is seen by the people as an antidote against untimely deaths, diseases, unemployment and general misery in the town. Lastly, *Agbo* festival serves as a mechanism for fighting social immoralities<sup>25</sup> as festival songs which are often satirical highlight individual and institutional actions and behaviour.

### ***Ebi***

This is an outstanding cultural festival among the people of *Ketu* in *Epe* Local Government Area of the state. It is an annual festival celebrated usually between January and April, in commemoration of the first settlement of *Alaketu* believed to be the son of *Oranyan* whose movement from Benin to *Ketu* is considered to be symbolic of personal strength and determination.

The festival is marked by a wide range of ceremonies usually led by the *Oloja* of *Epe* and his chiefs. The five-day festival, which often involves the whole community consists of major highlights like *Iyonfonron*, *Igbodo*, *Ita Ebi*, *Kilajolu* and *Ebiriki Ipade* each featuring on a particular day and accompanied by traditional rites. On *Iyonfonran* Day, *Epe* people led by the *Oloja* cast burnt stakes into the Lagoon to stave off dangers and ill-wind. On *Ita Ebi* Day, the *Oloja* leads a procession of people including age grade groups and masquerades like *Okoro* and *Epa* to the *Oju Alaro* shrine where traditional dances and rites take place. The *Kilajolu* Day which may be described as the peak of the festival is characterized by a fascinating show of bravery and endurance involving caning and flogging by the indigenes reminiscent of early *Ijebu* warriors.

On the whole, the *Ebi* festival in *Epe* Division symbolises the people's quest for societal peace, good health, socio-economic progress and Public security through traditional means.

### ***Kayo-kayo***

This is an annual religious and cultural festival observed by the descendants of *Oba Kosoko*, generally called *Eko-Epe*. *Kayo-kayo* festival is celebrated during the first month of the Islamic calendar in commemoration of "*Yaom-al' Ashura*", the tenth day of *Muharram* in the Islamic Calendar. This festival which gained official recognition by the state government in the early 1990s is a religious event which celebrates on one hand, the flight (Hegira) of Prophet Muhammed from Mecca, and on the other, the historical landing at night of Prophet Noah's Ark. Significantly, explanation for the above may be seen in the traditions and genealogies of the *Eko-Epe* which have versions of both Prophet Muhammed's hegira and Prophet Noah's safe landing in the Ark.

Kayo-kayo festival, which is a week-long affair, is marked by a number of important events. Special prayers (Ashura) for peace, security and political stability are held at the *Epe* central mosque and the palace of Olu of *Epe*. Processions led by the Olu of *Epe* pay homage to the descendants of the founding fathers of 'Eko-*Epe*' at such palaces as Oke Balogun, Bado Isale, *Bado Oke*, *Agoro*, *Oke Iposun*, *Lagbade* and *Popo Oba*. The Al-Kausara, a spiritual bath is taken by the *Olu* and his subjects at a Lagoon on the night of the Kayo-Kayo carnival. Before the bath however, the people led by their monarch embark on the symbolic boarding of Noah's Ark. A carnival at *Popo-Oba* and Quranic recitation on the seventh day brings the festival to a close.

### CONCLUSION

This foregoing study examined cultural festivals in *Epe* Division of Lagos State with particular emphasis on *Okosi*, *Agbo*, *Agemo*, *Ebi* and *Kayo-Kayo*. The paper detailed upon the historical origins, celebration procedure and significance of these festivals. The study reinforced the notion that Lagos State, particularly *Epe* Division is rich in culture and tradition. Generally, *Epe* people undertake strict observance of these festivals due to their belief that such can guarantee peace, stability, progress and good health.

The festivals overtime have proved to be veritable agents of social mobilization, unity and development. Moreover, they serve as catalyst for commercial activities because their celebration usually attracts people from far and wide who ultimately get involved in fanfare and merrymaking. Finally, the festivals are capable of enhancing fundamental economic progress if their tourism potentials are effectively utilized by the various tiers of government.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Epe town is the capital of Epe Division, the largest of the five Administrative divisions of Lagos State, Nigeria. Other major towns in the area are Agbowo-Ikosi, Ilara, Odoragusen, Ibeju, e.t.c.
- 2 Ade Adefuye, "Lagoon Communities of Epe Division, A Melting pot of Culture". Journal of Business and Social Studies , New Series. Vol. 3, 1980.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 See focus on Epe, Lagos State Monograph of PID, Lagos State Ministry of Information and Culture. P. 7.
- 5 Welcome to Lagos State, A Publication of International Business Links Ltd, Ikeja and the Lagos State Ministry of Information (1998). P. 183.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Odukoya A. "Okosi festival at Epe Town", Journal of Yoruba and Related Studies ODU, No. 7 1959 P. 28.
- 9 Tunde Ogunpolu, "Okosi Festival Songs" in Wande Abimbola (ed.) Yoruba Traditional Festivals (Ife, University of Ife Press, 1973) p. 552.
- 10 Ibid P. 554

- 11 "Our Cultural Heritage" (LSCAC) 1973.
- 12 Odukoya A., 1959.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Balogun, O.S, "Traditional Festivals in Epe Division" B.A. Long Essay, LASU, 1998.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ajala, A.A., "Cultural Manifestations of Lagos State" in A.O.K. Noah (ed.) Fundamentals of General Studies (Ibadan, Rex Charles, 1995) p. 160
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Welcome to Lagos State, (1998) p. 186.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid p. 187
- 21 Okesola, E. "The Agbo Festival in Agbowa-Ikosi", Nigerian Magazine No 95, 1967.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 For more details on the traditional rites and ceremonies of the Agbo Remi-Reke, see Balogun, O.S., (1998), pp. 20-23.
- 24 Welcome to Lagos State, (1998) p. 187.
- 25 Balogun, O.S., (1998).