

RECREATING IBUIRIMI FESTIVAL OF OKPE PEOPLE OF DELTA STATE IN CEMENT SCULPTURE

Ogba Obukoavworho Markson
Department of Fine and Applied Arts
Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku
marksonogba@gmail.com

Abstract

This research is a studio-based project which specifically focused on visually documenting the Ibu-irimi festival of the Okpe people in the Delta State of Nigeria, with emphasis on the regalia and role of the chief priest during the festival. This study becomes necessary when we consider the fact that most of the African core traditional values and institutions have been eroded by Westernization. Okpe culture is not an exception as Its citizens look down on their traditional institutions and even neglect the significance and spiritual essence of the ibu-irimi festival to the wellbeing of the people. The study employs a qualitative and descriptive research method. Sources of data include primary sources, which are mostly oral and secondary sources comprising written materials, both published and unpublished. The researcher also employed Group Focus Discussion (GFD) researchers observation. Pictures Of core activities were captured during the festival and later analyzed. The study reveals that there is a near abandonment and lack of interest in Okpe cultural activities. The research calls for more work on this subject to help in propagating and documenting African cultural heritage and traditional institutions.

Keywords: Okpe people, Preservation, Cultural heritage, ibu-irimi festival, Recreations.

Introduction

The need to preserve African traditional religion, culture and civilization become imperative now, with the fast rate of science and technological development in the world, if Africans fail to appreciate and keep their cultural heritage, society might witness, the loss of our natural endowment and cultural pride. This situation calls for more knowledge on the origin of African cultural phenomena and to begin to inculcate the habit of appreciating her cultural heritage among the upcoming generations. Given this problem, this project examines the traditional religion and cultural festival of the Okpe people of Delta State, to document some of its core cultural values exhibited during the Ibu-irimi festival. Okpe is the largest and the most populated clan among the Urhobo ethnic group, with a population of 402, 671 (1991 census). It is bounded by the River Ethiope on the North which separates it from Idjerhe and Oghara clans, on the West by the Itsekiri, on the East by Agbon and Agbarho clans, and on the South by the Ughievwen and Uvwie clans.

“Ibu-irimi” feast is a religious festival observed to honour the clan’s war god ‘Ehor’ of the ancestors. This god of war of the Okpe is a symbol of unity and an embodiment or the form

of the Okpe ancestral spirit, which they collectively worshipped. This multi-spirit deity forewarns the people of hardship especially, oncoming inter-tribal wars” (Idolor; 1994).“ it also gives a signal of evil omen that shall befall any Okpe indigene” (Ojalikele; 1996).

The Origin of Ibu-irimi Festival

The origin of “Ibu-irimi” is traceable to the Okpe people of Okpe- Isoko. “Ibu- irimi” was created for the sole purposes of security, peace, stability and defence against external invaders and to foretell what is to come. According to Ojalikele, “Ibu-irimi” was incarnated with a live human being and other mysterious herbs. Invocation of strong mystical and prophetic incantations and rituals are done to make it highly effective, this enactment metamorphosize to ‘Ibu-irimi’”.

When Orerokpe was later founded by the sons of Okpe namely, Orhoro, Ewreke and Ezezi, they planted the ‘Ohimi or Ogriki’ tree as a mark of ownership, and initiated another ‘Ibu-irimi’ war god. Biokoro and Ojalikele further said that a Chief Priest is normally selected by the god. His main responsibility is to serve the deities and consult them on matters affecting the entire community. The knowledge, power, and experience that a Chief Priest has can assist in giving genuine advice, warning and help. Also, the rites and sacrifices are carried out by the rules handed down from pre-historic times by the ‘Udoguns’ of Okpe to ensure the favour of the powerful protecting spirit and to enforce authority and obedience with their assistance.

The Priest puts on his regalia, early morning of the day of the feast, he moves around the four original streets and renders mystical incantations summoning the spirits of the ancestors to participate in the rites, for protection, peace, security and fertility of the soil as well as against diseases and pestilence.

The Chief Priest’s regalia includes a crown made of green leaves from bamboo trees and guinea grass. His clothes are made of wild animal skins, especially those of a Lion and Tiger, to camouflage himself against an enemy and to blend with the bush environment.

The Chief Priest also carries a type of bronze sword called ‘Oda or Opia’’. Slung across the shoulder in a sword sheath called ‘Ekpo-Oda or Opia’’. This is for self-defence in case of attack. All these have been modernized and have been replaced with modern war outfits because of Western civilization and the transformation of culture and society.

This modern outfit is called ‘Ibosun’ (red), the red clothing is sometimes called ‘Idodo’ With a complimentary carved wooden staff in the form of a cutlass to symbolize a sword. This is shown below.



Plate 1. Showing Regalia, Date 1995 Photo; by the Researcher,

It is important to mention that from the beginning of time, festivals have been a means of propagating religious worship in the world. The reason is that man needs stronger forces that will protect him from the hands of his foes and probably reincarnate. The rites associated with the worship of gods and deities sometimes culminate in festivities. Festivals, in this regard, can be defined according to the New Encyclopedia Britannica (1943) as: “days or periods set aside to commemorate, ritually celebrate or re-enact or anticipate events or seasons (Agricultural, religious, or socio-cultural) that give meaning and cohesiveness to an individual and his community”

In any community or society festival celebrations have been held in honour of gods or for war fetish in one way or the other. However, as a result of the advent of Western culture and foreign religions, things started to take different dimensions as a good number of people embraced Western culture and civilization, and things started falling apart. This later gave room to the violation of the set – rules and norms of the Ibu-irimi festival. These include social-cultural and traditional ways of doing things. The youths of the town no longer participate actively as it was in the past when traditional feasts were being celebrated.

Statement of Problem

The Ibu-irimi feast is a religious festival of the Okpe people in the Urhobo kingdom, which is celebrated to promote their Traditional Religion. It is significant because of the role it played during inter-tribal wars by protecting its citizens from being taken into slavery and bringing peace, security and stability to the Okpe kingdom.

Unfortunately, after the death of one of its Chief Priests and there was no replacement, things deteriorated and the feast was neglected. As a result, some of the beautiful aspects of the festival of the Okpe war god became moribund, and the Chief Priest’s regalia began to decay. Given this problem, the research embarked on documenting the festival before it went into total extinction.

Aim of the Study

The study aims to recreate the major activity that takes place during the Ibu-irimi festival in sculpture using cement.

Objectives

The objectives of the study include:

To produce a sculpture of the Chief Priest in full regalia performing one of the rites during the Iburimi feast,

To produce a brief cultural history of the Okpe people,

To highlight the importance of the Ibu-irimi festival,

To document the studio project in a written form.

Scope of Study

The scope of this project is limited to the visual documentation Ibu-irimi festival, focusing on the Chief Priest of the "Ibu-irimi" performing a rite of the feast as seen during the celebration of the festival.

Limitations

The biggest handicap for the researcher is a scarcity of related literature on the subject. The means that the source of information relied on was mostly oral.

Review of Related Literature and Knowledge

It is a known fact from time immemorial that each society of the world has its religion conjoined with festivals. Festivals have been widely used as instruments of propagating religion in the world. This has been essentially for the reason that man needs a stronger force that would protect him from the hands of his enemies and probably to enjoy life after death. This concept of man being well secured under a powerful god or divinity motivated him to think about a divine or supernatural God. In Okpe, the Highest God is called "Osonobruwhe". Man in his search to be protected by a stronger force, "the man thought that all the forces of nature around him, such as the winds, rain and fire, had soul and are controlled by their separate gods, animals and trees and even lifeless object like rocks and piece of wood have life" (Clement, 1983).

These thoughts made man believe that living beings have souls. In support of this, Tinfay and Badcock (1972) stated, "The dead can still influence the things of this world. Everything in nature is controlled by separate spirits or divine power, both at home, as well as, in the field, because man depends on the seasons and mysterious forces of nature for his livelihood"

This belief in life after death of their ancestors, or divinity of the greater role they play in the existence of man on earth here led man often to worship his ancestor or divinity or at least to pay great respect to them.

Among the Yoruba, “Shango” the son of Oyamese after his death, is taken to be their god of thunder and war which is worshipped as such to this day”. In this sense, anything which is so peculiar to a man in his belief such as man himself, trees, sun, water, inanimate objects etcetera, can be accepted and worshipped as god or deity provided it made a symbolic meaning to him.

Festivals generally, have governing rules and rituals performed for the deity and sacrifices to make the gods to be more friendly and active. Hence, [Tinfay and Badcock; 1972) supported that, “the sacrifices and ritual have to be correct in every detail and be performed at the right time for man to be at peace with the gods, if the sacrifices are correctly performed the spirit will be co-operative and will even give warning, if a disaster is approaching”.

In this regard, the god or deity will be functioning as long as all protocol is observed. “These were purely terrestrial concepts because the ancestors were part of the material order of this world and, though invisible, were still subject to some of its physical law (Atmore and Stacey;1979).

This is believed because the ancestors have an increasing interest in what is going on in the clan or family since they are still regarded as the heads of the families to which they belonged while they were here on earth” (Jacob, 1973). Okumagba (1982): said; “Most festivals in Urhobo land are observed in Commemoration of past events usually connected with victories in war”.He went on to say that the main purpose of festivals is to serve as a unifying object, which helps in the preservation of culture. Also, many of the events which feature during the festival serve as corrective measures.

The Okpe, as a distinct unit of people with many religious observances one of which is associated with “Ibu-irimi”. In all the preparation for the Ibu-irimi festival, it is usually believed that a Chief Priest called “Orheren”, normally officiates and ministers to the people about the god. At the ‘Ibu-irimi shine, the Chief Priest has a specific function to perform in carrying out the wishes of the god.

The Chief Priest is the only authorized person appointed to offer sacrifices to the war god. The responsibility of understanding the operation of the forces flowing from the god or deity and the power of controlling them in a meaningful and wise way lies in the hand of the Chief Priest. With his wealth of experience, he can deal with the spirit which threatens the life force. With this knowledge, power, and experience he acquired, he can give genuine advice, warning, and help.

On the day of the feast, according to Ojalikele and Obiokoro (1996), all warriors put on their war attire. It is only the Chief Priest that does put on the full regalia to distinguish him from the other war Lords (Ilotu).

The outing of the warrior is accompanied by war songs. As they dance through the streets of the town, items for the rituals of the war god are collected involuntarily. These items include goats, plantain, yam-tubers, and spirit drinks, which are taken to the shrine where rituals are performed where cooking and drinking are done before the performance of the rituals. The Chief Priest addresses the deity for supplication in continuous protection and for peaceful living without any plague in the kingdom throughout the year.

A male goat is then slaughtered by the Chief Priest and offered to the god. All sons of okpe present are entitled to eat there. But nothing of the sacrifice and ritual is taken home. In all these observances women and non-natives are forbidden from the arena. The Ibu-irimi

shrine is also the final point of settlement of any dispute between two individuals or towns in the clan.

The ancestry of Okpe people is sometimes traced to Okpe who is said to be the son of Igboze, a prince of Benin, the son of Oba Egbekarhi, who resigned about 1255-1370 A.D. Ojalikele (1996). But Idolor (1994) says that “Okpe is the son of Obalufo born at “Igbo-takpa near ile-ife”, that the Okpe people once lived in Ufe (ife), they and the “Benis” people left the ife source at a different time in history. And Okpe migrated with his contingent from Ile-ife, first to the old Benin kingdom and then moved to the present site of settlement for a kingdom of his own”. According to Otite (1973) he said that, “the relationship between Igboze and Okpe is vague, and that insinuation of relationship is merely based on similarities in certain words or pronouncement”.

There is also a version of the origin of the Okpe people that links or associates them with the Olomu clan. It is said that, when the son of Obalufo left ile-ife with his contingent, he settled in the Benin area for some decades. He moved out later because of insecurity and arrived at a place known as “orere” meaning a village or town, where they were all known as Okpe, where he dwelt with his followers. The new abode later metamorphosis to be called Okpe-Isoko. As Okpe-Isoko became populated, there was a need for further dispersal of the people, a group moved out to found a new settlement which came to be known as Okpe-Olomu. It is traceable from this that no kinship relationship exists between the present Olomu people and Okpe.

According to Erakpotobor (1986), Okpe is the cousin of Orogbo, Urohobo and Igboze, who are princes, and sons of one Oba in Benin kingdom who later moved from the kingdom in time of chaos. Okpe and Igboze moved from Benin and later arrived at Orere-Olomu. When they were living peacefully, an important visitor came and dwelled among them, known as Olomu, as noted by Okumagba (1982), Otite (1973), Hubbard (1948) and Ojalikele (1996). Olomu is later said to have married one of Igboza’s daughters. The seeking of the “Ovie” title later prompted Okpe to leave the Olomu kingdom and settled at Okpe-Olomu as it is known to this day. And finally, he settled at Okpe-Isoko.

Some other body information does not suggest any affiliation of the Okpe with the Olomu people, because there is no communal relationship or linguistic affiliation. The Olomu people are of Igboze origin as noted by Okumagba (1982). The Okpe do not share any festival relationship with the Olomu. But the Okpe’s and the Okpe-Isoko both participate in one another festival because of a common tie of one ancestral home” (Otite 1973). Also, in support of this view is Idire (the Oketa of Okpe-Isoko).

In this regard from the above arguments, one can rightly say that the Okpe are not from Benin nor affiliated with Olomu people who are of Igbo origin. But the forefather of the Okpe people is from Ile-ife. Thus, the origin of Okpe becomes a controversial issue.

In recent years, however, there have been great changes in the normal way of conducting rituals and performances in respect of this deity. The outfit of the chief priest and other materials necessary for the feast have changed. For example, using fowl instead of animals. All these are due to the advent of modern civilization and Christianity in prevailing circumstances of individual attitude.

After the installation of the Oroje of Okpe, His Royal Highness, Orhoro 1 in 1972, all festival ceremonies have now been fixed to be observed on the 26th of December. This is at variance with the practice in the past when the Udoguns of Okpe fixed the “Ibu-irimi” festival date subject to the appearance of the moon. However, the activities of the festival

begin on the 22nd of December every year. On the 22nd of December, from eleven o'clock in the night, the "Ogri" activity is carried out. It is a seven-day traditional exercise designed to drive away evil spirits from Okpe land. By its nature, it is carried out at night when all are supposed to be in bed, especially women and children. According to Idolo (1994), the "Ogri" is carried out at night so that, the desperate evil spirit might not enter the children and women as these evil spirits can cause barrenness and premature death. It is believed that in the olden days, men performed the rituals nude and any woman or child that sees their nudity does not go unpunished by the gods of the land. The next day, women assemble at Adane-Okpe with their new brooms to sweep the first location of the settlement of Orerokpe. The women are led by "Okpako" called "Egwemese". This exercise started early in the morning at about five o'clock and ended before seven O'clock in the evening. "Oje" dance, is performed around Orerokpe followed by chanting of songs. These dancers include men and women from all over Orerokpe. This Oje dance is revered for its rigorous synchronized movement of hands and feet. With this, the festival has begun.

At the Ibu-irimi shrine things that are necessary for the sacrifice and rituals are taken freely throughout the town and the market according to the rules and nature or custom governing the Ibu-irimi" (Dick 1996). The "Ibu-irimi" festival, therefore, provides an opportunity for Okpe indigenes to give thanks to the gods of the land in appreciation of what they have done for them during the out-going year and for the new coming year to be peaceful and prosperous for all. The ancestors are also thanked for their splendid job of founding the clan and being able to give birth to this great outstanding population and implore the power of the war god- "Ibu-irimi" for the continuous protection of the Okpe people.

Studio Project Procedure

The primary focus of this project is to produce a three-dimensional form of the chief priest performing one of the core rites associated with the Ibu-irimi festival.

Materials and Methods:

In carrying out this project the following materials were sourced. Portland cement along with sharp sand, iron rods, wire mesh and gravel, tools include a saw, chisel, hammer, modelling tools trowel and others.

Stage 1:

Sketches and Armature

Various sketches were made for the design chief priest and among them, one was selected for the sculptural project. Next, the Marquette(model) was produced in clay. The sketch and Marquette all served as a guide to avoid deviating from approved forms and tolerable proportions. The Marquette depicts a smaller scale of the complete figure which was later blown up to more than life size.

Stage 2:

Armature and Base Production

At this stage, the armature was planned. 12mm iron rod was measured in length of various proportions which were aligned to different parts of the armature rod was first cut out with a hack-saw assembled into a skeletal framework and fixed into joints in the shape of the body form. The base is very significant, it was networked in a rectangular shape and articulated to various parts of the human skeletal forms together to complete a whole. This is shown in Plate. 1



Plate 2: Base Construction by Ogba, O. M.

The waist and trunk or thorax were constructed to have a vacuum including the knees region. The rods were connected through the shoulder with one thick rod and attached to support the weight of the shoulder and the chest or thorax region. The construction of the base and the connection of other parts which are related to one another was necessary to provide firm support for the type of work or action intended.

Stage 3:

The casting of Base and Mesh Wire for Re-enforcement

After assembling the skeletal framework, a flat board was held down on a flat surface of the earth and cellophane was laid by spread on top of the plain board. The armature skeletal was placed on it. A 4” by 4” sized plank, was used to achieve the thickness and height of the rectangular base, which was created to enable the vertical work to stand.

This stage was directly prepared for the casting of the base. This process is called the pre-casting, method. A hammer and nail were used to connect each side of the four sides with a steel sheet of zinc to hold the plank to create a plane of even thickness so that, when a mixture of concrete materials was poured it would not pull off.

The slab concrete was produced with the following materials; sharp sand, gravel, and cement. These were in the ratio of the following table, using a fixed measure.

S/N	Sharp Sand	Gravel	Cement
1.	3	3	1
2.	3	3	1
3.	3	3	1
4.	3	3	1
5.	3	3	1

Table 1 Concrete mixture in Ratio

As shown in Table 1, sharp sand, gravel and cement are mixed with water in the ratio of three measurements of sharp sand, gravel, and one cement (3:3:1). The measurement has to be in accordance so that the desired strength may be achieved. These are properly mixed and poured into the rectangular box base formation filled up to the edge, smoothed and left to harden and set. The iron rods, already embedded in the concrete slab act as re-enforcement to the mixture. (see plate 4)



Plate 3: Picture showing the cast base in concrete, Source: The Artist

This was allowed to cure for ten to eighteen (10-18) days, later, chicken mesh wire was wrapped around the iron rods running through the skeletal armature in the form of a network. This network mesh wire enables the modelling using cement mortar (see plate 4).



Plate 4: picture showing the armature covered with mesh,
Source: The Artist

Stage 4:

Application of Cement Mortar on the Skeletal Form

The first layer of cement mortar was mixed in a ratio of one to two (1:2). Later more mortar was applied with a modelling tool over the body at different times to enable the mortar applied to stay in place and to take desired shapes, directions and proportions as it was seen in Plate V show this shape

Plate 5: Gradual building up of sculpture by applying mortar in layers, Source: The Artist



As the work progressed, attention was paid to specific areas or each volume as they relate to one another and across space.

Stage 6:

Drapery and Addition of Facial Features

The chicken mesh wire was used to form the animal skin. It was used to wrap the sculpture from the waist down to the knee. When this has been fixed to the body, cement mortar was gradually added till the figure was draped.



Plate 6: The Researcher working on the head of the sculpture, Source: The Artist

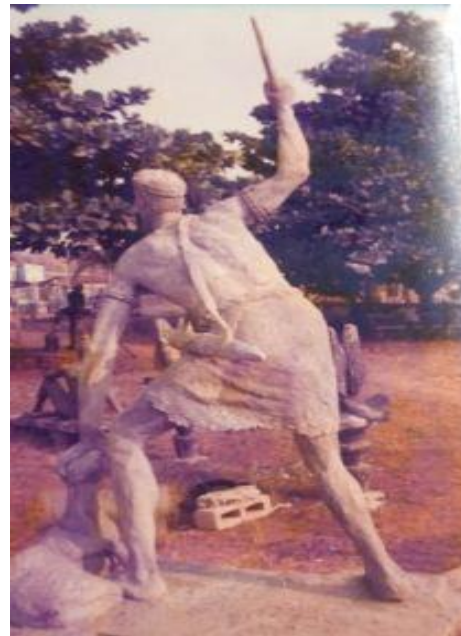


Plate 7: Back view of the Sculpture drapery, Source: The Artist

This was followed with the production of the sheath of the sword called “Ekpo-Oda” at the same time producing all necessary details including the charm, the head-gear and the sword for defence as lifted when rendering invocation and incantation to the god out to sacrifice the animal. At this stage, the introduction of details is depicted in the human and animal three-dimensional forms. This was to show the various expressive characters of their parts as they relate to each other in space.

A jute bag was got and cut into shapes and soaked in a mixture of sand and cement of a ratio of one to four (1:4). This was left for two hours to enable the mortar to penetrate deeply into the jute. The jute was then used to produce the toga. It was placed and tied to the left shoulder and packed to the back to enable it to hang on and stay on the body.

The chicken mesh was placed all over the surface under the jute cloth. Cement mortar of a mixture of one-to-one (1:1) ratio was applied to enable the mesh wire to stick to the surface of the human form and the jute. This was done through the region of the jute line. The jute was arranged in composition to achieve the pattern of drapery, and it was left for some hours to enable the jute cloth to dry to a desirable degree before further application of cement mortar. This was done to achieve the surface texture of the drapery.

The main reason for using a jute bag instead of using only chicken mesh wire throughout was to enable the researcher to achieve a good result of drapery on the surface texture. This stage of production is shown in Plate 8



Plate 8: Detailing of the Sculpture by the researcher, Source: The Artist

When the drapery has been completed, the ears are detailed as shown above. The researcher made the design of the headgear into a suit on the head as in ancient times. The lower part of the headgear was designed and produced in two rolls as it was worn. Small pieces of iron rod were fixed in position with a mixture of cement mortar, in combination with mesh wire. The researcher created the rough design pattern of the crown, to represent leaves pinned to the head or cap to resemble the local warriors of the past.

Stage 7:

Finishing Process, Texturalisation and Patination of Work

The last stage is to detail all parts of the surface texture and to clear off all unwanted textural forms that may have stuck to the body of the human and animal figure. The human figure is textured in such a pattern to distinguish it from the regalia or attire put on by the chief Priest. Later, the whole form was washed to remove smaller particles. The work was then left to dry for a day.

After it has dried, enamel colour is applied to the surface texture through the use of painting brushes. The colours used by the researcher are green (a secondary colour) and black (a neutral colour). The colours were mixed in different tonal grades with a small quantity of black at a time. This resulted in a darker green shade. The darker green colour is used to paint all over the surface of the sculptural piece.



Plate. 9. Back view of the chief priest offering sacrifice to the war god



Plate. 10 . Profile view of the chief priest offering sacrifice to the war god



Plate. 11: Picture showing the attire of the present-day “Ibu-irimi” Chief priest.
Source: The Researcher

Project Analysis

The sculpture depicts a typical Ibu irimi chief priest slaying a goat as an offering to the god of war of the Okpe people. Looking at the work, one could see a male figure (The chief priest) raising a sword with his right hand while holding down the sacrificial goat with his left hand. This important ritual must be performed periodically to appease the god of war and ensure the unity of the Okpe people. In other words, the god of war is a symbol of the people's unity.

The costume of the chief priest is also noteworthy. It includes a sheath for the traditional sword called "Ekpo-oda" and charms. The figure is scantily draped and wears a headgear. From its facial expression, the figure appears to be chanting incantations and involving the spirit of the war god as he slays the sacrificial animal.

The costume of the chief priest depicted in the sculpture was used in the past and is no longer in use. It contrasts with the modern-day costume of the "Ibu-irimi" chief priests which consists of long robes and befitting headgear.

In all, the sculpture serves as a constant reminder of this core aspect of Okpe culture and a clarion call for a cultural revival amongst Africans.

Conclusion

This research/studio project arose because of the need to create interest in the revival and promotion of a culture that is fast fading away as a result of modernization. Thus, to revive cultural heritage, the researcher's objective was to recreate culture in a three-dimensional form as it was seen as the "ORHEREN" (Chief Priest) puts on his full regalia and performs the rites during the feast of the "Ibu-irimi" of Adane-Okpe festival in the ancient times, so that it may be compared with the present era. This project will go a long way to encourage the community or society in the preservation of cultural heritage, which will lead to the creation of interest in the revival and promotion of culture and increase international awareness.

Finally, this project also serves as an instrument of knowledge to those indigenes who were born outside the Okpe-cultural centre (Orerokpe), and to those who are not indigenes but have witnessed the religious festival to know the level of civilization of the Okpe people in the pre-historic past.

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