



# Ibani Deities and Methods of Worship: A Survey of Extinct Traditions in the Niger Delta, Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

Opobo Kingdom founded in 1873 by King Jaja is an ancient Ibani Kingdom. The institutions in Opobo is similar to what exists in Bonny its ancestral home. The people are religious and worshiped various deities from the environment. This paper explores the various deities known to the Ibani people and how they were appeased or worshipped as a way of recording these for posterity. It concludes by working at the impact of Christianity on these deities.

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### Keywords

Worship,  
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### Introduction

The people are highly receptive and friendly. They are mainly fishermen and women, involved in shallow and deep water fishing. In the pre-colonial period they were also engaged in slave trade and palm oil trade but with the discovery of oil in 1956, the Ibani (Bonny and Opobo) Kingdoms became involved in crude oil and gas production. With time the distribution of the oil, gas and allied companies tended to favour Bonny more than its sister Kingdom Opobo and gradually altered the tempo of socio-economic life of these kingdoms.

### Geographical Location

Bonny is located on latitude 4° 30' N and longitude 7° 15' E. It shares boundaries with Kalabari in the West, Andoni in the East, Okrikan in the North and the Atlantic Ocean in the South, while Opobo is located geographically at the interception of latitude 4° 35' N and longitude on latitude 7° 35' E on the estuary of the Imo River. It commands a strategic position at the estuary close to the Atlantic Ocean, 56km North-East of Bonny in the Western Niger Delta. It is bounded on the North by the large community of Ogoni, on the West by Bonny and Andoni, on the East by Ibibio and on the South by the Atlantic Ocean.

### Origin and Migration

The Ibani (Bonny and Opobo) are Ijaw (Ijo) who left their home land in the Central Niger Delta Area (Okoloba or Ekaw) passing through the Ibo country of Ndoki, Azumini and Azuogu and later through Ogoni country of Opuoko to their present location in Eastern Niger Delta at about the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Alagoa, 1972). The movement from their earlier settlement was as a result of devastating civil wars. The migration were led by Opu-Akuba, Alagbariye and Okpara Asimini. After the Bonny Civil War of 1869, the Ibani Kingdom of Bonny became divided into Bonny and Opobo Kingdoms and the kingdom of Opobo was recognized in 1873 (Alagoa 1972, Cookey, 1974).

The Ibani (Bonny and Opobo) had and still have organized leadership system before the coming of the Europeans. The first recorded King of the Bonny reigned about the 14<sup>th</sup> century and the first crowned King, Asimini reigned between 1420 – 1450, while the first King of Opobo was Jack Jaja, who reigned between 1873 and 1891. As far back as 1420 Bonny had coastal guard when King Asimini brought the first Whiteman (Portuguese) to Bonny Town. Bonny Monarchy is hereditary;

that is succession to the throne moves from father to first son, unless there is no son then the brother or sister can take over the leadership of the Kingdom. However, in Opobo Kingdom succession is by “selective monarchy” meaning that succession is limited/reserved in the Jaja House which is the prime family but selection is among the families that make up Jaja House through the Jaja Executive Authority. The Ibani trace linkages through the kitchen lineages “Burusoyo” or Burusu and a group of kitchen lineages make up what is called House pillar (“Wari-Ikpangi”) and a group of House pillar (“Wari-Ikpangi”) make up the House (“Wari”). The head of the kitchen lineage (“Burusoyo”) is the “Wari-Senibo” while the head of the House pillar (“Wari-Ikpangi”) is the “Wari-Opu-Senibo” and the head of the House (“Wari”) is called a Chief (“Ama-Alabo”). Lineage is also traced through the “ereji” blade. The ereji refer to the matriarch who ritually admitted new slaves into the family by shaving off of hairs of new entrants. Those whose hairs was ritually shaved by a particular matriarch belong to one household and form a lineage.

### Culture and Tradition

The Ibani speak a unique language called “Ibani”. It is widely spoken in the satellite villages, though scarcely spoken in Bonny and Opobo Main Towns, as a result of the injection of a large population of slaves in the pre-colonial period and the cosmopolitan nature these cities have come to take. Moreover, Ibani people living in Bonny and Opobo Main Towns became more interested in learning the commercial trade language (Ibo) and later English language, to the detriment and eventual “death” of Ibani dialect.

The Owu-Ogbo and Eremina-Ogbo are cultural heritage of the people. While the Owu-Ogbo is a dance group with men and women members responsible for playing masks called Owu. It is a semisecret society that enact masked plays associated within environment. Eremina-Ogbo (Ere-Ogbo) is solely a female dance group with a few men who beat the drums. Eremina-Ogbo is the dance group associated with the Iriabo womanhood rites.

### Religion

In 1861 King Dappa Pepple came back from England and made a concerted effort to establish Christianity in Bonny. In 1861, despite the fact that King Dappa Pepple hired seven English men to help establish the faith at very high salaries the

efforts failed. In 1864 the King asked his son Prince George Orugibi Pepple, (Later King George Orugibi Pepple (1866 – 1888) to write to the Bishop of London (Dr. Tait), requesting for a missionary to preach the Gospel in Bonny. The Bishop redirected the letter to the secretary of the Church Mission Society (CMS), the reverend Henry Veun, who then contacted the first African Bishop, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who was consecrated Bishop in St. Paul's Cathedral London two weeks before the arrival of the letter. The Ibani people today (2015) are Christians. Most of the ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, and in fact the continent of Africa had, and still have their national deities, which they revere and worshiped before the introduction of foreign religions like Christianity and Islam etc. into the African continent.

The Ibani in the Eastern Niger Delta like any other culture groups in Nigeria worshiped the under mentioned deities some of which have pockets of followers up to date (2015), despite the fact that Bonny was the gateway through which Christianity penetrated in 1864, and from Bonny into the ancient Niger Delta City States of Nembi and Okrika in 1880; New Calabar, old shipping station in 1874; Bille, Bolo, Ogu, Kalio-Ama, Amadi-Ama and Abulo-Ama in 1883; Brass in 1868; Bakana in 1892; Bodo (Ogoni) in 1908; Opobo (Queens Town) in 1890; Chief Sam Oko Epelle Compound in 1891 and Benin River in 1875. The Ibani foremost deities were: Ibani-nyana-simingi which was the principal tutelary deity of the Ibani people inherited from the indigenous Inyong Okpon Community (now Tombia), Ikuba, (Opu-ikuba and Kala-ikuba) the war deity of Bonny was from the Anyangla people of Andoni. Its totem was the Iguana lizard. Nungbaw (Numbo) was another deity of the Ibani.

The deity Tolofari, a very powerful deity of the Kalaibi-Ama Community, whose totem was a precious stone was said to be the son of Simingi and Otuburu the tutelary deity of Azuogou in Ndoki. The deity was brought to Peterside (Aya-Ama) by Chief Ipoli when he came down to join his wife, Princess Edimini Kamba-sa (probably Queen Karibasa). There were other deities of lesser importance like Kunbupagha, Arukara, Alakiki and Owu-Ekpe stationed at the Coal Beach creek. The totem of Owu Ekpe was a he-goat. It is believed to be one of Opu-adum's powerful messengers. There were also Amakiri the mother earth deity and Torukiki, Opu-Adum was the god of the seas, oceans, rivers. It was dreaded by the people, because victims of this deity were not given proper burial nor were they buried at the normal burial grounds. Moreover, no one inherits the victims belonging, except, the priests of the deity. The deities Tololo, Okolobiebo, Adumta and Ikpali were said to be the wives of Opu-adum, Oje-kurutu was Adumta's son; Birikukanana, Ogboloyi Doku (Ogbolodo) and Opu-Panga and Fulosi were Opu-adum's daughters. Kondo, Ofombele and Owe-awo were his (Adum's) servants. Adum was said to have had many servants in the spiritual realm and he delegated many to torment men in the physical realm every hour of the day. Many of the water spirits served him. The king of the Obubu (probably Ebubu) at the Nun River was Opu-adum's closest friend, hence the very close relationship between the Ibani and Nembe ethnic nationalities up to date. Nembe deities Finimaso and Amatemeso gods were also adapted by the Ibani.

It was believed that Tolofari, Atuburu and Kungupagha and Arukara deities had moved to Mbambie with the exit of the Opubo and the Anne Pepple Group of Houses to Opobo. Simingi had moved some of its children to the Ekukiri creek with a faction of the Inyongokpon community now known as Tombia in the Kalabari area between 1863 and 1890. In some Bonny villages the under-listed gods were worshiped. Bonny Island

(Okolo-ama). Kala-Ikuba, Numgbo etc, Orupiri. Opu-ikuba, Peterside (Aya-ama), Fibriribi, Oloma Okoba, Iwo-ama. Adum, Finima. Simingi and Adum gods, Aganya. Aburuka, Ayambuo. Otuburu, Kalaibiama. Tolofari, Fibriri. Alamina, Ayaminima, Okpoma, Obioso, Ndakworo-ama, Finimasoo, Minima, Ekerema, Epelema, Akanja, Eloma (Iloma), Simingi and Amafina and Abalamabie Okopohotumbi.

Though the present two Ibani Kingdoms of Bonny and Opobo had been Christianized in the nineteenth century; some of the population today still worship these deities. Priests and metaphysicians attest to these deities existence though their influence is less noticeable because of the overwhelming Christian population of Bonny and Opobo Kingdoms. Some deities are transcendental, these invisible beings can still have powerful impact on the lives of those that worship and believe in them. Of all these deities of the ancestors of Ibani people, Simingi, Ikuba, Tolofari and Otuburu were of "national prominence". The priests even performed legislative, Executive and Judicial functions in states and or communities and even were made co-signatories to some international treaties made with European countries. Some were signatories to local treaties made with sister Delta States, while some appended their hand with the kings and outstanding Chiefs in the State at the early stage of the oversea trade. In fact, priests of deities played very important roles in the cultural, economic, and social lives of the people then, to the extent that priests were consulted before Ibani people went to war with any other state. Sometimes, to arrive at a decision over serious disputes within communities and families, the priests were consulted. Priests of deities had the last say in communities' affairs on matters of life or death. There was the general belief that priests were the physical representatives of the ancestors and the deities, hence there was total obedience by the people to the words and instructions of the priests.

Priests of deities were appointed by the deity itself, and were supposed and presumed to be men of unblemished character, transparent, honest, meek and slow to anger and must be willing to serve the deity and the people. Priests were very wealthy during the oversea trade in Ibani Kingdoms of Bonny and Opobo as they competed with the kings and influential Chiefs in the trade.

However, since the activities of these priests were not in consonant with the ideals and objectives of the missionaries and European traders, it was not therefore a coincidence that King Dappa Pepple was deported in 1854 and finally found himself and his family in England defending his fundamental rights. It was also not by accident that Chief Priest Awanta of Ibani-nyana-simingi was captured and deported in 1847, to an unknown destination on a trumped up charge of murder and buccaneering (Jones, 1963). Neither was it surprising that on the 21<sup>st</sup> April, 1867 Ikuba the Bonny national war deity was denounced and the totem Iguana Lizards, on Easter day were killed in their hundreds and eaten for the first time as food by the Ibani people (Leonard, 1906). Some of the killed animals blood were sprinkled into all the water wells in Bonny at the orders of King George Pepple a Christian educated in England. That was the end of real worship of deities as a national policy in Ibani kingdoms. Finally, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August, 1889 the house of skulls was brought down. The missionaries evangelized, educated and introduced agricultural techniques to the converts.

The deportation of King William Dappa Pepple and his final movement to England disrupted the traditional authority of the African City-State. The Ibani people and their neighbours benefited from the coming of Christianity, as the civil service system and Western education came with Christianity. The

quality of life of the Ibani people and their neighbours improved; innocent twin babies and their mothers who were hitherto killed and banished ended. Not only were the lives of slaves, wards, servants and their children valued they were no longer killed to bury, kings and Queens. Slaves were eventually granted manumission; these advantages were not without strains on the genuine cultural values of the people.

However, some of our Christian Chiefs and leaders have continued to pour libations and make sacrifices to these deities and gods in the discharge of their traditional functions. In public and social gatherings, after praying to the Almighty God, we also pour libations as a form of traditional prayers to the very ancestors that opposed the enthronement of Christianity to Ibani land more than two hundred year ago. The chief priests (Fubara and Ekeke) of Ibani-yana-simingi and Ikuba gods, became Christians. It was an era of propagating new messages of faith. Every indigenous culture and belief were regarded as heathenish and anti-Christian, even Ibani names were changed to Hebrew and Greek names that have no meaning to the people. Christian converts decided to bear Western names like Brown, Long John, John Bull, Good Head, Black Jack, Wilcox, Fine country etc; since these names were European they felt they were a mark of civilization and were good to emulate.

#### **Worship of Deities**

Deities mentioned above are worshipped in different ways at different times. Some are called upon when the need arises: For instance, the deity Ikuba (Ikiba) inclusive of Opu-Ikuba and Kala-Ikuba that is, big Ikuba and small Ikuba are called upon when there is war in Ibani land. A number of Ibani deities have been highlighted above, however, only two Ibaniyana Simingi and Ikuba would be examined to show their nature before the colonial rule.

#### **Ibaniyana Simingi**

The deity Ibaniyana Simingi is the god responsible for preventing the overflow of the Bonny River and helps to ensure that more European vessels came into the River for trade. Obtained from the Ayam-kpon people of Tombia in the Kalabari Kingdom, the Ibani effectively adopted it, probably on account of its power. Smith in his *'Gulf of Guinea'* states; "It has been customary at certain periods to sacrifice one or more human beings as an offering to the god of the bar of Bonny River to prevent it from filling up as have severally of the Rivers of this coasts" (Leonard, 1906).

#### **Methods of Worship**

Ibaniyana Simingi had in the past a Chief Priest like Awanta and Fubara, with other subordinate priests to them. The deity is located at old Finima at the River Bank by the present NLNG site in Bonny Kingdom. The deity was worshipped once in seven (7) years. The process involve people gathering at Finima from other parts of Bonny Kingdom. Human sacrifice (Young Boys and virgin girls) were prepared two weeks before the ceremony, which lasts for one week. During the period of this ceremony, food items and cloths are brought to Juju town (Finima), as it was then called. According to Captain Crown (from 1800)" it was the custom there (at Bonny) once in seven years to sacrifice a virgin of fourteen or sixteen years of age as a propitiatory offering to the Bore as of the god of the North Wind". Before the peak of the sacrifice, virgin boys were thrown into the Bonny River as sacrifice through the messengers of Ibaniyana Simingi in preparation for the grand finale of the ceremony. During this period there will be masquerade display (OWU), merry making, eating and drinking. Victims of these sacrifices are captured from outside Bonny Kingdom. The virgin girl to be sacrificed was led through the town and everything fancied by her was

given to her and finally she was thrown into the Bonny River at the point called Simingi-toru. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of May 1840 a little Ibo girl brought from the interior some months earlier for the purpose had been prepared at the shrine. On the day of sacrifice, the Chief priest led the king and his Chiefs to the shrine to request from the deity, Ibani-yana-simingi. The Chief priest and some of his priests would then take the girl to the River to be sacrificed, she would be thrown into the River alive.

#### **Ikuba**

The deity Ikuba (Kala-Ikuba) was the National war god of the Ibani captured from the Ayangala people of Andoni, during the reign of King Amakiri of Bonny. Its totem was the Iguana Lizard. This god was responsible for all the successes in wars fought by the Ibani.

#### **Method of Worship**

In 1835, the Ikuba's (Kala Ikuba) Chief Priest was Ekeke and other priest subordinate to him. The shrine of the deity was located in the heart of Bonny main town at a place named after it (Ikuba Nungo). The deity was worshipped occasionally (that is before and during war period), the deity has a skull temple located just by the shrine usually half filled with human skulls. The deity only requires a fresh human skull and the blood of the sacrificed victim. The blood of the victim is usually used to garnish the palm wine of the reigning king. During the worship, the king, his Chiefs the Chief Priest, and other war Lords must be present in the shrine to make pledges and offering as part of the ceremony and the peak was the presentation of fresh human heads. During the ceremony, the king dances (PERESEI) in the shrine with the master drummer, drumming and praising the Ikuba god; the master drummer recounts the success the kingdom had achieved and will achieve against her neighbours with the help of the Ikuba god. EMT Epelle (1970) states that the animal worship was so real at the time, that the British Government in the Oil Rivers was compelled to accord it a certain recognition".

Sir, Harry Johnson, formerly Vice – Consul at Bonny, in his lecture before the Royal Geographical Society, gave his invaluable testimony to this. According to him, "If you wounded or killed one of them (the Iguana Lizard) there was no end of what to do." Also in 1787 two crews of an English ship lost their lives on Bonny shore for rolling casks of oil over some Iguanas (Ikuba). Charles Ogan (1986) states "in alternative Okrika should produce a fair complexion virgin who must have no scar on her body and must be daughter of a noble an outstanding personality in Okrika, this demand was to appease the god of Bonny known as Ikuba in 1605".

#### **The Ancestors (Ancestral Worship)**

I had earlier stated in 1992 (Jaja, 1992) stated that the Niger Delta religion rests on a tripod of deities, spirits and ancestors. I discovered that the Niger Delta peoples' life and indeed most Africans had emotional attachments to ancestors just as they have to the environment in which they live. This is despite their professed and expressed Christian sentiments. In reality, to take the ancestors away from the African, is to rob him of his personality. Put differently, to take the ancestors from the African psyche is to deprive him of his Africaness – that which make him an African.

The pursuit of education at the highest level, the many years of sojourn abroad has not diminished or exculpated the persistent role the ancestors play in the African life even after acceptance of Christianity. It often seems as if these attainments increase the cords by which Africans are bound to their ancestors. A few examples will suffice. A professor of theology relates how after his return from his studies in the USA, his parents slaughtered a

ram, invited the whole family and friends to welcome him home. The ceremony involved the pouring of libation and praying to the ancestors. He said "if I had said No, I would have been understood to disown myself and my family".

Nor is this an isolated or unique understanding. This presence of the dead is known all through Africa in spite of Western sophistication and Christianity. Take this case of a Youngman who had spent 10 years abroad and lost his dad and brother but couldn't come home in spite of these loss. The vehicle he was traveling was involved in an accident but he came out shaken, but otherwise unhurt. Someone from his home recognized him and narrated to by-standers, that Youngman had not been home for 10 years even after the loss of his father and brother. The reaction of those that heard the story was simple. They congratulated him and said "ndichie chori eduru ya ulo" the ancestors want to guide him home (ancestral home). They did not say "your God or your Christ want to guide you home (Ancestral home). Gabriel Sateloane's (1978) "I am an African" is an apt testimony of what most Africans feel. According to him:

*Ah... yes... it is true they are very present with us... the dead are not dead, they are ever near us; approving and disapproving all our actions, they chide us when we go wrong, bless us and sustain us for good deeds done, for kindness shown, and strangers made to feel at home, they increase our store, and punish our pride.*

#### **Land as Deity**

Any discussion of the ancestors would be inadequate without a brief mention of the place of land in the life of the Africa, land was not only the property of the living, but of the total community of the living and the living dead. For the African, the good disposition of the ancestors made rain in season, and the harvest plenty for all, when one understands the place of land, then the religious undertone associated with it is appreciated. Land, the place of man's birth and upbringing is "a holy place" because there he meets his ancestors, only then will one comprehend the depth of insult and the feeling of being raped and dismembered when one realize what some Africans face after being removed and deprived of this precious "institution". It is this despoliation and desecration of a peoples very sanctuaries and shrines which leave wounds that time would not easily heal. Often among the Ibani you hear them call or describe each other as "nwa afo" – well-bred or son of the soil. In deed, they are, because ritually, they are tied to the soil, body, mind and soul. A child's umbilical cord is buried in the soil under a coconut tree, the same soil into which his ancestors were buried, thus linking him to them permanently. If he is removed from that ancestral land, the cord which tie them together is broken.

The African have a sense of history for they understood how the Jewish exiles felt when their Babylonian captors asked them to sing their beautiful song and play the harp. Their reply in Psalm 137:4 was simple "How can we sing the song of the Lord in a foreign land".

#### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that in spite of the introduction of Christianity in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, African societies like the Ibani society still hold tenaciously against the impact of Western Europe and Christianity. These areas of resistance to which African world view holds have been dealt with, however briefly. The findings of this study show that Ibani deities play significant role in the lives of the people. It is a peoples response to their environment and the need to find solution to important

challenges that confront them as a people in their everyday existence.

This is the true nature of Ibani religion. It is indigenous. In spite of the inappropriate appellation given to indigenous religion such as primitive, heathenism, jujuism, animism and fetishism, there is no doubt that these name calling terminologies are prejudiced and unpleasant.

I will certainly align myself with Awolalu and Dopannus' (1979:3) view on Africa traditional religion. Ibani deities like other African religion can be described as:

*...not a fossil religion but a religion of the Africans. It is a religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forbearers to the present generation of Africans. Today, they have made it theirs by living it, and practicing it. This is a religion that has no written literature, yet it is written everywhere for those who care to see and read. It is largely written in the people's myths and folktales, in their songs and dances, in their liturgies and shrines and in their proverbs and pithy sayings. It is a religion where historical founder is neither known nor worshipped. It is a religion that has no zeal for membership drive, yet it offers persistent fascination for Africans young and old".*

That is the religion that Christianity and westernization seem not to be wining in the 'war' of change. It is difficult to win this war because it is based on the people's everyday culture and experience. They seem to be comfortable and attuned with their environment, what they see and fear, rather than a Christian God they have not fully appreciated or seen. The awe, power and the mystery of the sea make a lasting impression on the Niger Delta peoples. The place of deities, ancestors, land, and the sea in Ibani religion cannot be overlooked. Although by nature the Niger Delta environment was created to undergo steady and slow changes, in other words, the natural state of the environment is designed to transits from one state of dynamic equilibrium to another state of dynamic equilibrium over geologic time. This does not apply or change the way the people conceive of their religious life.

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