

Ogori Culture and People:
Ovia-Osese and Beyond

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Ogori Culture and People:
Ovia-Osese and Beyond

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Indigeneity and Eclecticism in Ogori *Ovia-Osese* Festival

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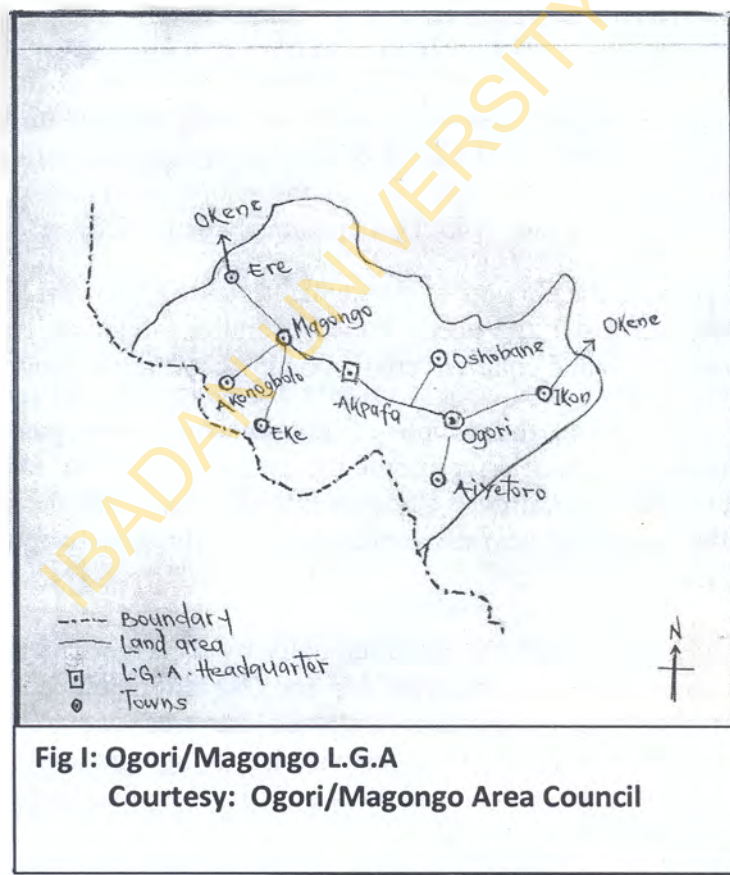


Fig 1: Ogori/Magongo L.G.A

Courtesy: Ogori/Magongo Area Council

Introduction

Ogori is one of the notable towns in the Central Senatorial District of Kogi State. Ogoriland is located in the southwest of the confluence of the rivers Niger and Benue. Its topography is of light open woodland characterized by frequent rocky hills upon which villages were traditionally sited for protection in times of feuds and wars. Ogori shares boundaries with Ebiraland to the south-west in Kogi State and Lampese to the north in Edo state. It is the headquarters of the Ogori Magongo Local Government Council. (See map in Fig. 1)

Ogoriland comprises one local government council, Ogori/Magongo, which is one ward with a total population of 39,807 (according to the 2009 census). The mode, nature of settlement and subsequent dispersion are attributed to constant inter-ethnic squabbles and wars, and the hunting of games. These necessitated the contemporary permanent location of Ogoriland.

As an organized ethnic group, Ogori possesses a rich culture and cultural heritage, material, institutional, philosophical, creative and linguistic aspects. Since these culture contents are interwoven, and intricately dependent, the place of festivals becomes imperative in the lives of the Ogori people. Festivals of all types are given prominence in the activities of the people as a group, without which a vital part of their existence would conspicuously be missing.

Ogori festivals are celebrated at particular times of the year. They are meant to emphasize and foster the needs for co-operation, togetherness, and to maintain a tight inseparable and coherent ethnic bond. According to Anabe:

Festival events remind the people of the sweet glorious past, a great feeling of nostalgia which drives home the essence of societal existence in relation to the prevailing sentiments of the shared collective responsibilities and the earnest preparation and prognostication of the immediate future¹.

The traditional festivals celebrated annually by the Ogori include: *Igila ofifi*, *Ekonmorire*, *Ema*, *Ukpe*, *Edidibi*, *Iyibi*, *Idu* and *Oke* among others. *Igila ofifi* is an age-grade festival. Its observance involves the free use of canes on opponent's body. *Ekonmorire* is an annual festival also for age-grade. It marks the transition stage of adolescent male to adulthood. It is, therefore, celebrated as

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initiation of boys into adulthood. It is the male version of *Ovia-Osese* but with less stringent measures to defaulting initiates. *Emá* is the Ogori masquerade festival. Its celebration glaringly excludes women's participation. The women-folk are not permitted to see the masquerades and so have to remain indoors while the festival lasts. *Ukpe* is a festival that marks the beginning of the Ogori new year. This starts in August and ends in July. The *Ukpe* festival is followed by the *Ovia-Osese* which is the initiation of girls and maidens (Plates 1 – 3) into womanhood. However, the chain of festivities ends with *Idu*, the new yam festival.

From the above list of cultural festivals, the *Ovia-Osese* festival finds itself firmly fixed and dependable among Ogori festivals. Hussain asserts that:

In order to provide a means of sustaining life, some people accorded values to some phenomena believed to possess natural powers. They believe that the phenomena can liberate them from uncertainties that characterize their lives, and these include natural disasters, epidemic, death, the fear of the unknown...²

This paper is designed to establish the Ogori concept of *Ovia-Osese* in order to espouse the people's rich culture and cultural heritage. This is imperative in the face of the compelling influences of diverse external stimuli such as the overwhelming consequences of the incursions of Islam, Christianity and Western education. The culture of any society does not exist in isolation; it is not static but dynamic and highly unanticipated; therefore the extent to which these festivals are affected, at the level of reformation, refinement, reorganization, regeneration and decay, becomes an important area of study. This paper serves as an authentic cultural document of the Ogori.

Traditionally, Ogori *Ovia-Osese* is a festival organized for the initiation of young girls or maidens, known as *Ivia*, into womanhood. The festival symbolizes chastity, virginity, and purity in conformity with the laws and social norms of the Ogori. Ogori *Ovia-Osese* is an annual cultural festival that is observed two weeks after the Easter celebrations. It is therefore, a festival for girls who are nubile and have attained marriageable age. In effect, the occasion presents a golden opportunity for prospective suitors to select their life-partners.

Ovia-Osese dates back to ancient times, and the exact origin of the festival is still unknown but it is generally believed to be as old as the Ogori people³.

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Initially, its ceremonies lasted for over nine (9) months. But nowadays, *Ovia-Osese* ceremonies last for seven (7) days.

The Traditions of the Origin of *Ovia-Osese*

According to Askari, *Ovia-Osese* began basically as a family affair, that later spread because of its wide acceptability by Ogori families. The tradition recounts that a worried woman was forced by circumstances beyond her control to consult an oracle, as rumour had it that her only daughter was wayward. The oracle pronounced the daughter innocent, chaste and thus confirmed her virginity.

“Consequently, the woman went back to town singing, dancing and telling the ‘whole world’ that, her daughter had been vindicated and proven innocent. The woman later arranged a grand party to mark the occasion”⁶

Another version of the traditional origin of *Ovia-Osese* is hinged on the belief that the festival is a borrowed culture from either Owo or Benin⁷. (a similar festival, known as *Igogo*, is widely practiced in Benin and Owo) and that such similarities could only have happened as a result of cultural diffusion.

Apata, in his own accounts of the origin of *Ovia-Osese*, has it that “*Ovia-Osese* is traceable to the immediate ecological zone of Ogori and Akoko-Gbangiri.” He notes that the Ogori in the past had consistently identified themselves with the people of Akoko-Gbangiri. In fact, he remembers traditional claims that Ogori belongs to Akoko-Gbangiri. The Ogori people indeed have many things in common with Akoko-Gbangiri, ranging from face and body marks to festivals, marriage customs and mode of life. When Ogori was detached from Akoko-Gbangiri in 1918, the council of elders of Akoko-Gbangiri petitioned the District Officer, imploring his assistance “towards the possibility of solving the problem of the return of our traditional brothers in the north to Akoko District in Kukuruku Division,” adding that “ever before the advent of the British government, we were a people of one stock in every aspect.”⁸

On the whole, the plausibility of the above traditions of the origin of the Ogori *Ovia-Osese* as authentic historical sources becomes difficult due largely to the inadequacies arising from individual informant’s probable intrinsic manipulation to suit social and political ends.

Cultural Significance of *Ovia-Osese*

Ovia-Osese is embraced by the Ogori because it instills moral self-discipline and responsibility to preserve and protect chastity and purity among the female population. The acts of being nurtured in home management and health-care have made parents more responsible by consciously bringing up maidens to meet societal expectations.

Also, the festival engenders in maidens a sense of superiority over others especially their female counterparts in neighbouring communities who do not have such social mechanism over them.

Ovia-Osese is a period when mothers show off and display their chaste maidens. Parents, at this time, are proud of their children in that they (the maidens) have not disappointed them and their families. That they (the parents) have been able to train and properly groom the maidens in accordance with the customs and traditions of the people.

Ovia-Osese is a unifying factor and a living reminder of the culture of the people. This is because Ogori people at home and outside converge in Ogori to witness *Ovia-Osese* every year. Consequently, Ogori indigenes' interaction and relationships are strengthened since the festival is a cultural cord of unity that binds the people. Nowadays, Ogori indigenes all over the world eagerly look forward to the *Ovia-Osese* festival.

The festival helps to preserve and protect the people's language, particularly Ogori poetry, through *Ovia-Osese* songs that are performed and chanted annually. It concretizes the people's language in the minds of those living at home and enlivens the minds of those outside.

The high moral standard anchored on indigenous cultural values among spinsters in particular, and the Ogori community in general, is maintained by the institution of *Ovia-Osese*. This brings into sharp focus the female-folk and their place in the society. By celebrating purity, chastity and cleanliness, womanhood, the vehicle for procreation, is purified to enhance human worth.

Above all, *Ovia-Osese* is a manifestation of the meeting point of culture, religion, custom and tradition. And in recent times, it epitomizes religious

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tolerance through the mobilization and coming together of Islam and Christianity in *Ovia-Osesé* activities. Today, Islam and Christianity now play defined roles in the festival. Thanksgiving ceremonies in mosques and churches are now regular components of the festival.

Preparations for *Ovia-Osesé*

As soon as a female child is born to a family, preparations for the child's *Ovia-Osesé* commence in earnest. Parents particularly the mother, set to work in guiding and guarding in order to maintain and retain chastity and purity of the child from infancy to the last days of *Ovia-Osesé*. The child's dressing habit, friends and company she keeps, social endeavours and general mannerisms and conduct, are watched and checked regularly, thus putting her in line with Ogori morality codes and ethical values.

The care and administration of maidens is a tedious job for parents. Physical guidance and gestures to checkmate antisocial behaviour and habits go along with constant prompting based on unending counselling. In effect, parents are kept on their toes over the years till *Ovia-Osesé* ceremonies and festival are over. Parents heave a sigh of relief when the child passes through *Ovia-Osesé* unscathed. It is instructive to note that in an African society, the singular act of bearing a child brings joy to all, but in Ogoriland the birth of a child, especially a female, entails mixed feelings of joy and heightened anxiety because of the enormous social expectation for raising the child.

Nowadays, the *Ovia-Osesé* festival is often preceded by elaborate preparations in form of constant rehearsal of songs, music and dance, fashioning out appropriate costumes and props. As soon as the *Ovia-Osesé* celebration ends, the preparations for the next one start immediately. The parents especially would have noted areas of their strengths and weaknesses. They would now set about making quick amends so that by the next *Ovia-Osesé*, they would come out stronger and better. Indeed, parents and relations of would-be *Ovia*, maiden, engage in elaborate preparations of grooming maidens in household chores, weaving, child-care, care of self and good conduct.

Relations and well-wishers are duly informed by parents of their child's impending *Ovia-Osesé*. Such information allows this group of people to get set and be aware of their responsibilities in terms of support in kind and cash. The

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age-mates, friends and well-wishers of the maiden readily agree on what to wear on that day. They levy themselves for that purpose. They also provide sweets, chewing gum, soft drinks, biscuits, etc., for entertainment; these are distributed to the maiden's visitors in her house.

On Friday, the eve of *Ovia-Osese*, food and *ade* (locally brewed wine) are in abundance for visitors to the maiden's family home. Mothers and members of their age groups perform *Igaro esan* dance round the town. In the evening, the *eregba* club accompanied by music dance to the maiden's father's house in solidarity. Sometimes, depending on the social status of the maiden's parents, other professional musicians are invited to well-organized night parties⁴.

Ovia-Osese Performance

The grand *finale* of *Ovia-Osese* is usually on a Saturday. This is the *Ovia-Osese* proper. A well-positioned praise-singer continuously chants the family praise-names. The maiden (Plate 3) wakes up amidst showering of gifts from parents, relations, friends and well-wishers. She receives lots of cash and material gifts. Around noon, the maiden is accompanied by her parents to the *Oyara*, the official arena for the festival. Nowadays the *Ivia*, maidens (Plate 2), assemble at the first floor of the civic centre. They go down to the arena in group singing the *Oke eguru eh eh eh eh eee...* "holding hands and swaying from left to right, right to left in that order. At the centre of the arena, the maidens form a circle, moving round amidst music and dance."

Accompanied in a dance by their mothers, immediately after the *Oke* song and dance, the maidens (Plate 2) move from the arena. After the *Oke* songs and dance at the civic centre has been completed, people go to the homes of individual maidens for merriment. Large quantities of food and drinks are shared out among family members, with the extended gesture of hand of fellowship to neighbours in an atmosphere of peace, joy and merriment.

Thanksgiving services are held in mosques on Friday and in churches on Sunday after *Ovia-Osese*. This practice is justified by Awolumate who asserts that:

Thanksgiving at the end of *Ovia-Osese* festivals is hence justified that our young girls have come of age as maidens initiated into womanhood since they have been duly guided to happy married instruction. The thanksgiving is a token of appreciation of the mercy and goodness of God to human beings⁵.

Some of the Rules and Regulations of *Ovia-Osese*

Few rules and regulations guide the *Ivia*, maidens, for a successful conduct of *Ovia-Osese*. Some of the rules were:

1. The *Ivia-Isiya*, the oracle, must be consulted to prove a maiden's chastity.
2. An *Ovia*, maiden, should be a virgin, if not, she must die.
3. Maidens must dance naked at *Oke*, the market place.
4. *Ovia-Osese* should not be performed by proxy.
5. Ages fourteen (14) to twenty one (21) should perform *Ovia-Osese*.
6. *Ivia* maidens, must be groomed by *Iyaodina* for three consecutive months.
7. *Iyaodina* must present the maidens along with her lieutenant, *Onyente*, for *Oke* songs and dance on *Ovia-Osese* day.

Today, some of these rules and regulations are being relegated as a result of contending contemporary external stimuli. Consequently, some of the rules are either deliberately expunged or relaxed. For example, maidens (Plates 2 and 3) no longer consult the oracles to prove their chastity in order to take part in the *Ovia-Osese*. They no longer dance semi-nude in the town square with only beads covering the essential parts leaving the breasts exposed as shown in Plate 1. Instead, maidens now cover their hips, breasts and necks as shown in Plates 2 and 3 with heavy layers of expensive beads, especially *isu* (coral beads). They cover their torsos and breasts with *aso-ofi*, handwoven clothes (Plate 3). Similarly decorated with beads are the maidens' elaborate *ogogorogo* hairdo (Plates 1 – 3), completing their outfit. The role of grooming the maidens originally was that of the *Iyaodina*; it is now done by the maidens' mothers.

Indigenous Ogori *Ovia-Osese*

As earlier pointed out, *Ovia-Osese* is a rite of passage for teenage girls (Plates 1 – 3) who have attained the age of puberty preparatory for marriage. It is the final stage of a series of ceremonies, rites and celebrations connected to the mass

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initiation of young girls into womanhood. Of the three stages of the rites of passage, *Ovia-Osese* is the last and concluding ceremony.

The girls received an intensive three months' grooming and training at the *Iyaodina's* court. *Iyaodina* (Plate 4) was the female chieftain who was the deputy of the Ologori; she was in charge of women affairs. The woman groomed the maidens (Plates 1 and 2) in domestic chores, body care and good manners (recreation occurs at regular intervals). Here, singing and dancing would be the girls' pastime for three months. It was also a fattening period for the maidens. They equally learnt cooking, washing, playing of female musical instruments and general discipline.

Oke was the first of such rites to be celebrated. In compliance with *opepepan*, the town crier's announcement, arrangements were made for *Oke*. On *Oke* day, groups of qualified girls (Plates 1 and 2) assembled on an open field (this was the meeting point of the kindred or clan, *osin oyara*). They were accompanied by younger girls and older women. The village women orchestra played melodious songs rendered by the sonorous voices of the girl initiates. Later, the groups from the various clans assembled at *Oyara Okeka*, the town square, with music and dance which echoed far and wide.

Iburu, camwood, *ikokori*, black cosmetics, and *Isu*, expensive coral beads, are spread thickly on the maidens' waists and necks with fascinating *ogogorogo* hairdo (Plates 1 – 3) to match. Each maiden (Plate 3) is dressed to reflect the wealth and status of her family. This is a practice that is still prevalent among the Ogori.

At about the third month, the second stage *Opa-obubwe* comes up. The maidens (Plates 1 and 2) accompanied by *Iyaodina* (Plate 4) and *Onyete*, her assistant, went to the market place. At the market place, prayers are said for the girls to find good husbands and to have good married lives, and then their feet are ceremonially cleansed by wetting them with local guinea-corn wine, *eginade*. Several dance groups such as *Oke*, *Eregba* and *Okitoroko* performed.

The third stage is *Ovia-Osese*. This is when the maidens (Plates 1 and 2) are presented to the public. They are ushered into the market-place by *Iyaodina* (Plate 4) and her assistant, *Onyete*. The maidens (Plates 1 and 2) sang and danced. The indigenous *Ovia*, maiden (Plate 3), is bedecked with *ebele* and *isu* beads on the waists (Plate 6) leaving their breast bare. Her neck is similarly decorated with either the blue *ebele* or the red *isu* beads. Red *isu*, coral beads, are however considered more expensive than blue *ebele* beads. The maidens' *ogogorogo*

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hairdos are similarly decorated with beaded crowns (Plate 5), reflective of their parents' status.

The *Onyara Okeka*, the market-place, was the *Oke*, arena, for *Ovia-Osese* in the past. The arena attracted a large turn-out of spectators from far and near. This was the rallying point for the maidens (Plates 1 and 2) to parade themselves to the admiration of parents, relations, friends, well-wishers and suitors.

Eclecticism in Ogori Ovia-Osese

The 21st century *Ovia-Osese* has undergone a lot of transformation right from its inception to date. Borrowed ideas and practices, principally due to the advent of Islam, Christianity and Western education, have gradually permeated the much-revered tradition of the Ogori people. According to Edahson:

In any human society... there is usually very distinct traditional arts and culture independent of those other societies, and peculiar to that society. As time progresses these arts and culture may be dropped from the original practice, some innovation may be introduced into it to change its mode of practice or observance under the guise of modernization. Some foreign cultures and ways may eventually adulterate the traditional arts and culture, and the citizens are thus enculturated.⁸

Initially, *Ovia-Osese* started as a family affair and was celebrated on a family basis. It is now a joint communal cultural activity of the Ogori. *Ovia-Osese*, therefore, forms an integral part of Ogori culture and cultural heritage, passed on from generation to generation. Consequently, it is a basis for social and political transformation of the Ogori to effect growth and development.

To determine the purity, chastity and virginity of would-be maiden initiates (Plate 3), *Ivia Isiya*, the oracle, is no longer consulted as was the case in the past. In essence, no verification as to whether or not the maiden is a virgin is carried out to qualify for participation in the festival. The two main religions of the Ogori people, Islam and Christianity, strongly condemn and disapprove consultation of oracles. Such practice, according to the religions, is heathen and paganistic. Apata tenders that:

The early church condemned unreservedly these festivals, which were described as 'pagan'. The church adherents were strictly forbidden from taking part in the festivals. As regards *Ovia-Osese*, the church roundly condemned the killing of the young girls who had been found wanting⁹.

In the distant past, *Ivia*, the maidens, went about in complete nudity (Plate 1) irrespective of their ages. Nowadays, *Ivia* perform the *Ovia-Osese* ceremony dressed in beads neatly arranged around their waists with *aso-ofi*, handwoven cloth (as shown in Plate 3), tied round the chest region to cover the breasts. The neck and hairdo, known as *Ogogorogo*, are similarly decorated with expensive *isu*, coral beads. The maiden's ankles are also decorated with *iyeye* seedlings which make jingling sounds as the maidens walk.

Again, the three stages of *Oke*, *Iyaodina* court and *Ovia-Osese* of the past that spanned a period of six months have been phased out. *Ovia-Osese* and its attendant ceremonies are now only a one-week affair. In essence, the first and second stages of the indigenous rites of passage have been phased out. The second stage which concerned a three-month grooming of the maidens has been replaced by parents and relatives assisting in teaching the maidens. It is now the parents' responsibility to groom and train the maidens in cooking, washing, child-care and other household chores. These are combined with discipline and female comportment.

Nowadays, parents register maidens with ministers in churches. In effect, registration of maidens in the churches has replaced the initial first stage of indigenous *Ovia-Osese*. Also, thanksgiving is offered by Muslims on Friday in mosques and by Christians in churches on Sunday, days preceding the Saturday grand *finale* of *Ovia-Osese*. Also, maidens (Plates 2 and 3) only attend a well-arranged one week rehearsal at the Ogori civic centre as against the former three-month stay at *Iyaodina*'s court. Sports, such as football matches, volleyball and athletics are remarkable features of contemporary *Ovia-Osese*. Sport competitions and athletics are organized among the streets and quarters on knock-out basis as part of activities to mark *Ovia-Osese*. Trophies and cash are often donated for the competitive sports as rewards for winners.

Recently, a beauty competition has been added to the *Ovia-Osese* festival finale. Secondary school girls avail themselves of the opportunity to actively participate in the beauty contest. Four girls are registered for the competition. The winner at the grand *finale* on the Thursday of *Ovia-Osese* week is crowned "Miss

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Ovia-Osese". The reigning "Miss *Ovia-Osese*" sits with the dignitaries at the high table on *Ovia-Osese* day.

Traditionally, *Ovia-Osese* was a ceremony for virgins (Plates 1 – 3) between the ages of 14 and 21. Nowadays, there are three categories of maidens at *Ovia-Osese*: the traditionalists, the semi-traditionalists and the educated elites. The first group is the traditionalists who are still strongly attached to the core values of the society. Girls in this group maintain their chastity before, during and after *Ovia-Osese* ceremonies. They eventually lose their virginity only to their husbands.

As for the second group, the girls have some respect for tradition. Hence, they remain chaste till the conclusion of *Ovia-Osese*. The girls intentionally or otherwise lose their chastity before marriage. Girls in this category are more in number than those in the first group.

Female educated elites is the third category. Due to the growing influence of Western education, girls in this group are detached from and do not uphold the customary conventions of the Ogori community. In effect, they may have lost their virginity long before the *Ovia-Osese* festival. Since they are not pregnant, and there is no more consultation of the oracle, the unchaste girls can easily go through *Ovia-Osese* undetected and unhindered. The number of girls in this third group is far higher than either the first or the second.

However, the dynamism in Ogori *Ovia-Osese* is an attribute to cultural diffusion, a clear index and manifestation of a living, developing culture that is susceptible to changes occasioned through travels, and the political and social relations of the Ogori with their neighbours. On the whole, about 10% of *Ivia*, maidens, maintain in its entirety the indigenous customary convention of chastity. Slightly over 90% of *Ivia* maidens have been affected by the influence of external stimuli one way or the other.

Conclusion

As one of the numerous festivals in Ogoriland, *Ovia-Osese* by its concept is particularly meant to celebrate the coming of age of maidens into womanhood. The festival, is no doubt, a significant part of the culture of the Ogori. It has thus

Indigenetty and Eclecticism in Ogori Ovia-Osesse Festival... **O. I. Pogoson & A. T. Anabe** established Ogori and thrown it into limelight as one of the notable cultures in Nigeria.

As a stabilizing, unifying factor, *Ovia-Osesse* remains the only traditional mechanism to guide, guard and give a sense of morality and chastity based on observable purity. In a rapidly decadent society, *Ovia-Osesse*, in no mean dimension, tries to reverse, revamp and restore good and enduring public morality and conduct. The purpose, functions, aims and objectives of *Ovia-Osesse* are noble, invigorating and progressive, as it upholds the cultural values of Ogoriland. Since *Ovia-Osesse* is dynamic, it is therefore susceptible to the contending contemporary external stimuli. Consequently, a lot of innovations have greatly influenced *Ovia-Osesse* festival. Thus, the festival has been reduced drastically to mere entertainment with seemingly uncontrollable, unchecked chastity and morality among *Ivia* (maidens).



Plate 1: Indigenous Ivia (Maidens) **Plate 2: Ivia (Maidens) of the late 20th Century** (An artist's impression)



Plate 3: 21st Century Ovia (Maiden) **Plate 4: Iyaodina in Full regalia** (An artist's impression)



Plate 5: An *Ovia* (Maiden), with a beaded crown
Courtesy: Ogori Descendants Union, 2008. P. 13.



Plate 6: *Ebele* and *Isu* Waist Beads
Courtesy: Ogori Descendants Union, 2008. P. 26.

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