The Socio-Religious Significance of *Koro-Bere* Festival of the Ekeni People, Southern Ijaw Local Government Area, Bayelsa State

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Abstract

In this paper, we have attempted to discuss the *koro-bere* festival of the Ekeni people, Southern Ijaw Local Government Area, Bayelsa State. The authors used the sociological, historical and phenomenological approaches to guide the work. This very festival that have impacted the life of the Ekeni people positively have not been documented, this is the focus of this study to create literation on the festival. From our investigation, it has been discovered that the festival has both sociological and religious components. It is a festival that started from a social background in form of beach carnival organized by a group of Ekeni sons who were resident in Port-Harcourt and Yenagoa town to celebrate the Christmas and new year season annually. However, as the festival evolved, the religious aspect was added and that has to do with using the carnival season to also commemorate the founding of the community. This aspect now brought in the religious part of the worship of the community founding ancestors and deities of the land. This is how the aspect of their visit to the site of their first settlement of abut 2 kilometers away from the present site of the Ekeni community became part of the celebration. Nevertheless, the festival has served a very good purpose to the Ekeni people. It has helped to enhance their social life, cultural life, religious life and also the economic life of the people. Sequel to the above-mentioned functions of the festival to the people, the authors are recommending that the celebration of the festival be encouraged. Government should put the status of the festival to international tourist

attraction like other international festivals like the *Argungun* festival in Lagos State, the Oshun Osogbo Festival in Ondo State etc. This will attract tourists to the state and that will in-turn impact on the economy of the Ekeni people, the state and Nigeria at large positively.

Introduction

The cynosure of the study focuses on the *Koro-bere* festival celebrated by the Ekeni people in the Southern Ijaw Local Government Area, of Bayelsa State. The *Korobere* festival is a significant traditional event that holds immense cultural and religious importance for the Ekeni community. It serves as a time for the community to celebrate their heritage, honour their ancestors, and strengthen social bonds, as such, it's not out of place for us to discuss and document the *Koro-bere* festival and its religious Significance to the Ekeni people.

Nwanolue in his book 'titled Amobi and the Door beyond time' (2019), delves into the unique cultural practices and rituals associated with African festivals, highlighting their importance in shaping communal identity and fostering social cohesion. He notes, 'The *Koro-bere* festival serves as a time for the Ekeni people to reaffirm their cultural identity and strengthen social bonds within the community. The Ekeni people have a rich history and cultural heritage that is deeply intertwined with the *Koro-bere* festival. The festival is believed to have ancient origin and is rooted in the spiritual beliefs and traditions of the Ekeni people. It serves as a time to connect with the gods and ancestors, seek blessings for the community, and ensure prosperity for the upcoming year.

The *Koro-ber*e festival is characterized by various rituals, ceremonies, and performances that reflect the unique cultural identity of the Ekeni people. The festival activities include masquerade performance, traditional dance, drumming, storytelling, and symbolic sacrifices to appease the gods and ancestors.

Through the *Koro-bere* festival, the Ekeni community passes down their history, values, and traditions from one generation to the next. The festival plays a vital role in preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of the Ekeni people, ensuring that their customs and beliefs are maintained and celebrated. It is with this background that we are going to use in discussing the *Koro-bere* festival

Understanding the significance of the *Koro-bere* festival among the Ekeni people provides valuable insights into the community's identity, beliefs, and social structure. By studying this festival, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how cultural practices shape community life, strengthen social cohesion, and contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage.

Literature Review

In the article titled "Celebrate Cultural Festivals, Engender Love and Unity, Activate Future-Assured Community Development" Barclays Ayakoroma (2011, p161), highlighted that Cultural festivals come in diverse forms. They may be organized to commemorate harvests, betrothals, initiations, coronations, foundation days, funerals, or long-standing communal traditions. Duruaku (2011, p166) deals extensively on cultural festivals, categorizing them to those that centre on ancestral veneration and worship of deities, and others that celebrate rites of passages. As a point of fact, that cultural festivals are basic ingredients that enhance tourism. Festivals, if well packaged, have the capacity to project the identity of a minority ethnic nationality, while fostering unity amongst them and their neighbours', and at the same time enhance their socio-economic development. They can divert the attention of warring parties to direct their energies to more friendly and profit-oriented ventures. This is where effective branding comes in. Just as Nigerians come together, in spite of their religious and ethnic differences, to support our national teams during international soccer competitions, warring communities can stave off hostilities, while basking in the euphoria of a well programmed festival brand. Kari Jager & Reidar J. Mykletun in the article "Titled Festival, Identities and Belonging (2013, p227)" noted that 'festivals may influence the identities of the people involved and the host community itself'. This impact may be as result of the events functioning as occasions to express collective belonging to a group or a place, and provide opportunities to create united histories, cultural practices, and ideals, but there is little evidence for this.

Though, the reviewed literature did not mention any thing about, our subject matter, it is not out of place for us to use this as a background to discuss the *koro-bere* festival of the Ekeni people

The Ekeni People

It will be nice to know a little bit of the Ekeni people, the confines of our study. Ekeni community is located at the western part of Bayelsa State, Nigeria, it is one of the tribes of Bassan Kingdom, in Southern Local Ijaw Government Area, Bayelsa State. it is blessed with mangrove forest vegetation and is surrounded by rivers and the Atlantic Ocean. The community is located along Pennington river in Bayelsa State. The community is bonded on the north by Ezetu 1, Foropa on the south, Letugbenene, Ngalabiri and mangrove forest on the east and Atlantic Ocean to the West. The distance between Ekeni and Oporoma, the Development Centre's Headquarter is 3 hours long by speedboat.

The study shows, that there are different versions of the history of Ekeni Community. However, this version is taken from Comr. Jonah Meinfade Joseph. In an oral interview, in (2024), his narration is that Ekeni community was founded by a group of brothers led by Konbor who left Ke with his six (6) sons and wife from Kalabari in Degema Local Government Area of River State. The community is made up of six (6) compound/families, namely; Oruduowari, Ogienwari, Agbatereghewari, Ebekewari, Ebeniwari 1 and Ebeniwari 2. The community is purely of Ijaw extraction that speaks *Dei* dialect of the Ijaw Language. However, there is mixture of other ethic groups who constitute about twenty percent of the population. This include Urhobo, Hausa, Igbo, Ilaje, Calabar, Ghanians, Cameroonians, Ogoni and Effik. The nature of the terrain of the community is riverine which has a combination of sandy and loamy soil texture.

Origin of *Koro-bere* Festival

The origin and history of *Koro-bere* festival that is our focus is that *Koro-bere* festival of the Ekeni people started as a social festival known as Ekeni Beach carnival in the 90s by a group of Ekeni indigenes who lived around Port-Harcourt in Rivers State and Yenagoa in present day Bayelsa State. This group usually come to Ekeni community in every December to organize Beach carnival. The annual beach carnival celebration became very popular in Koluama area where Ekeni community is located to the extent that it became a tourist attraction.

The Bayelsa State Government of then, came in to promotion the festival and along the line, according to Manifade (2015) there was this suggestion by the Ekeni

people and the Ministry of culture of Bayelsa State to use the festival period to celebrate the foundation of Ekeni community.

The elders of the community bought into this suggestion and so the festival was now expanded, in other words, made to accommodate also the celebration of the founding ancestors of the Ekeni people. By implication, the festival now snowballed into both traditional, cultural, and religious celebration. Hence till today, as they celebrate the festival, the ancestors of the Ekeni people and the deities worshipped by the community are also venerated and worshipped.

Rituals and ceremonies of *Koro-bere* festival

During the celebration of the festival, some many activities are involved. They are activities like carryout of various sacrifices, libations, worship of the ancestors and the deities of the community among others. The festival proper starts on the 28th of December every year. The festival spans through four days that is usually from 28th December to the 2nd of January on the following year.

On the very first day, all the interested indigenes of Ekeni community that would want to participate in the aspect of their visitation to their original ancestral home are expected to appear in White regalia. They appear in white because, to the Ekeni people, in their indigenous religion's belief, white represents or symbolize peace and so since the festival is meant to enhance peace in the community, they usually appear on white attire to kick start the opening of the festival.

After when all the people or the participants of the festival from Ekeni community had dressed up, they would then go to the water front or river, to embark on a special visitation to their ancestral sacred forest, where the ancestors of the community first settled before moving to their present site. The purpose of this visit is to go and invite the ancestral spirits or the spirits of the founders of the community that died and were buried there to come to their current home and participate of the festival celebration.

They embark on this journey through speed boats, for the site of their original ancestral home is about 2 kilometers, away from their present site. They usually journey in a convoy to the sacred bush with the beating of drums, songs and

traditional music. This very bush is called *Koro-bere* bush. This is where the festival got its name from.

Koro-bere festival lasts for Four days, below are the programmes for each of the days of the festival's celebration.

Day 1:
Koro-bere festival usually kick off in the compound of the king. All the priest of the community's deities, the council of chiefs, and some selected young men from the community would come together and converge at the chiefs' compound. After when all of them have gathered, the Chief priest would open the festival officially with the following prayers with the pouring of libation of *Kounwuru* or *Ogogoro*, native gin.

Chief Priest:

Koro-bere ateme.	Spirit of *koro-bere.*
Meri-in wo ba' pa' wo'ni' udei' o	Today we are about going out.
Wo'ni' be'le' mo tu' mo ti'	Be in our front and back.
Wo' weni-mu' layo' layo' ebi ke pa'wo pre'	Where ever we get to, let only good things happen to us.
Sai'-ke' wo tou' bo a'	Whoever that had planned bad against us,
u'boke' oni' ti'bi'-ko' agbe'umi'ni'	Let him or her pay with his or her head,
ebi-ke wo ton bo'	Who ever that plan good for us
wuose'	so be it upon us all.
eba' ton boa' kono pou	Who ever that plan to kill me (The Chief),
ebi ke eto boa ama'ke pou	so be it upon him.
woni pa mini bra ke woko kelili bomini	as we are going out so shall we come back happy and sound.
mirain wo ba pa woni udei o	Today we are going out,
wo do mu wori beli bo o	Grant us journey mercies'
All: *iseee wopiri o*	Amen.

From there, they would move to the river bank where other community members are gathered and libations will be made by the chief priest again using gin, coca-cola and fanta to libate to their ancestors.

Day 2:
The second day is the day that masquerades come out to display to entertain visitors. The Chief priest of *Koro-Bere*, the *Owu-osuobu,* and some youths usually dance around the *Osubo,* this is the masquerades name to fortify and energise the mortal body of the carrier to be able to perform during the festival. The chief priest of the community always leads the processing and usually, as they dance along, libation of drinks is made to the *Osuobo* masquerade and the spirits of the ancestors in the community.

The masquerade that dance to entertain the people are believed to carry the spirits of the ancestors of the community and so he is entrusted with the responsibility of mediating between the people, other spirits and the ancestors, on behalf of the community, seeking their blessings, guidance and protection during the festival and beyond. Other spiritual leaders' roles in the *Koro-bere* festival are multifaceted and encompasses various aspects of the event. These roles may include that: they could be the Ceremony Leaders, they are also in charge of the interpretation of signs and omens that would manifest during the celebration, healing and protection of the people from being flogged by the masquerade etc., They also have the wherewithal of the knowledge of the preservation of traditional aspect of the festival.

The significance *Koro-bere* festival.
The *Koro-bere* festival holds a significant importance among the Ekeni people. Through a review of relevant narration concerning the festival, it is evident that the festival plays a crucial role in preserving the cultural identity and heritage of the Ekeni people, fostering a sense of unity and cohesion among its members, and maintaining spiritual practices and beliefs. The festival serves as a platform for passing down cultural components of the people through oral traditions, folk tales, and historical knowledge of the people, ensuring the continuity of Ekeni culture for future generations. Additionally, the spiritual rituals and offerings made during the festival reinforce the community's connection to their ancestors, spirits, and deities, seeking blessings, protection, and prosperity for the Ekeni people. Further research on the *Koro-bere* festival could explore its adaptation to modern contexts, its resilience in the face of changing societal dynamics, and its continued significance in preserving Ekeni people identity and spirituality.

Overall, the festival serves as a vital cultural and spiritual cornerstone of the Ekeni people, embodying their rich cultural heritage and deep-rooted belief systems.

The *Koro-bere* festival of the Ekeni people has significant economic, political and cultural impact on the people. Economically, *Koro-bere* festival provides an opportunity for the exchange of goods and services within the Ekeni community, fostering economic growth and development. Socio-culturally, it unites the people and encourages a feeling of pride and solidarity among them. Finally, politically, the festival provides a platform for the community to come together and express their desire for better governance and support the development of their community. The *Koro-bere* festival is significant to the citizens and there is no doubt that the people will continue to celebrate the festival for many years to come.

Conclusion

Conclusively, based on the information provided, through our investigation *Koro-bere* festival is of great importance to the people. It is a major celebration for the community, with various cultural dances displayed during the celebration, spiritual rites, and even spiritual communion feast held in honour of the gods, and the ancestors of the people. The festival also serves to unite the people and create a sense of belonging among the people. It also shows cases the cultural values and beliefs of the people, as well as reflecting on the past.

In summation, the *Koro-bere* festival of the Ekeni people is more than just a festival event; it's a celebration of culture, and the showcasing and advertisement of stunning coastal landscapes that define this region of the Ekeni people, therefore, the following submission were drawn by the researchers; It is the view of the authors that the festival had helped the Ekeni people in diverse ways and so its celebration be upheld. Its activities contain vital information of the people's cultural heritage and that, has been helping to transmit such from older generations to the current generation and it as such should be upheld to continue.

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