

# Examining the Importance of Ojekulo Cultural Practice Among Ndoni People of Rivers State

<sup>1</sup>Amb Ayegba Abdullahi Adojoh, PhD, <sup>2</sup>Odiji Okpanachi Linus, PhD and <sup>3</sup>Onucheyo Sunday,  
<sup>1</sup>Igala Royal Archives and Museum, Attah Igala palace, Ohiala Igala Educational Development Association Inc, and  
United Igala Peoples Network Inc, Attah Igala palace, Idah, Kogi State, Nigeria,  
<sup>2</sup>Department of Political Science, Kogi State University, Anyigba, Kogi State, Nigeria,  
<sup>3</sup>Culture and History Research, Jacob Onucheyo Street, Mission 2, Idah, Kogi State, Nigeria.

**Abstract:** This research work was carried out with the aim of examining the importance of Ojekulocultural practice among Ndoni people of Rivers State. The work which used qualitative research method made use of interview and library materials to discuss the history of Ndoni people, history of Agaidoko community of Ndoni, the origin of Ojekulo practice as well as the comparison between Ojekulo practice of Ndoni and the Ulor festival of Asaba, Ichuko of Onuaboh, Kulo Kulo of Illah, Onya, Aika, Oko, Onuaboh,... and Uchokwo of Igala kingdom, Kogi State. The result shows that the origin of Ndoni people (various clans in Ndoni) can be traced to Igala, Benin and Ogbaru in Anambra State. The result also shows that the Ojekulo practice in Ndoni is the same as the Ulorfestival of Asaba, Kulokulo of Illah, Ichuko of Onuaboh, ... all of Delta State, and Uchokwo of Igala kingdom Kogi State, as all these people perform it as a cleansing festival or ritual. From the results, it was concluded that the Ojekulo practice in Ndoni originated from Igala in Idah as seen in Asaba, Onuaboh, Illah, etc. who are all Igala, and that it was brought by Agaidoko and Onya/Onikwu clans of Ndoni who are part of the first people to settle in Ndoni. It was also concluded that the festival or ritual is very important as it will pave way for good luck, good health, development and many good things in the Kingdom, while the house or community is free of all evils. It was recommended that the Ojekulo be fully celebrated in Ndoni as a festival just like it is done in Asaba, Onya and Onuaboh, and not just as part of festivals or ritual to mark end of festivals in Ndoni, Itwas also recommended that the name in Ndoni which has been adulterated from Uchokwo or Uchokulo to Ojekulo, be corrected to Uchokulo, which means "bad luck or bad things go".

**Keywords:** Agaidoko, Benin, Igala, Ndoni, Ogbaru, Ojeluko.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### ORIGIN OF NDONI PEOPLE

The origin of Ndoni people is not traced to one origin or ancestry. They are said to have come from about two or more places to the present-day Ndoni. According to Boston in his work in 1960, Ndoni and many other towns by the river Niger were founded by Igala people. In his words, Boston said that "the lower Niger towns of Aboh, Okpaiye[Okpai], Umuolu, Onya, Ndoni and Ossamala were of Igala origin". Also, according to Opone (2021) in his work titled "A Discourse on the Origin of Aboh of the lower Niger of Nigeria", Onya, Ndoni, and Ossamala were of Igala origin. In particular, he said, the tradition states that Aboh was founded through the migration of a family from Idah, capital of Igala Kingdom, and that the kings of Aboh, according to the tradition were subject to Attah Igala, and would go to Idah, spend three months, performing rituals and learning some things before being crowned by Attah Igala. Opone went further to report that

although some people trace the origin of Aboh to Benin, those groups were likely to have arrived from Benin later. He quoted Oguagha(1982), that this movement of Igala might have taken place during the early part of the 15th century that marked the "infiltration phase" of Igala fishermen into Igbo territory. In other words, though Benin people are also in Aboh or took over the ruling of Aboh, there were earlier Igala families from Idah. Among this family members, some migrated from Aboh later to Obeti and Ezionum towns in Delta State. According to Opone in the same work, in his interview with Enukegwu of Obeti in Delta State in 2017, it was stated that their ancestors were a group of Igala people who came from Aboh. Also, in his interview with Ikediashi of Ezionum town of Delta State in 2019 too, he was told that a group of Igala migrated from Aboh to found Ogbe Ofu quarter of Ezionum. Apart from this, there were many things done between the king of Aboh or his people and Attah Igala in those days. According to Oguagha (1982), "... Obi Ossai solicited the co-operation of a major trading partner, the Attah Igala". Members of the 1832 Niger expedition noted upon reaching Aboh on the Niger River, that its king, Aja, had gone to Idah to consult the Attah of Igala regarding commercial disputes that endangered trade relations among different Igala groups and possible Aboh, and other traders (Hutchinson, 1966).

When a white man was said to be killed in Aboh, the king of Aboh sent a message to inform Attah Igala of what had happened.

According to Samuel (1885), king Obi of Aboh had sent to inform Attah of Igala of the conduct of the inhabitant of the Delta, who had killed the white man coming to establish trade with the upper country, and that something must be done to keep the road open for free commercial activities ...

In fact, even when the king of Aboh, King Ossai died, an official message was sent to Attah for him to be aware of the situation. This shows that there was a royal relationship between Igala king and Aboh King too.

The case of Ndoni is similar to the Aboh scenario. It is true that the ruling house of Ndoni is Benin, but they arrived at later time. According to ndoniusa.org, the Awoh Kingdom is a monarchical system of rule under the Awoh of Ndoni. This system of rule has been for over 200 years from the reign of AwohAligbondu in the 17th century to the reign of AwohAghaeze in the 18th century. This is far ahead of the 15th century. Also, the oldest town in Ndoni which is Onikwu, is said to be of Onya or relatives of Onya from Idah who settled in Aboh a short while and moved to Onikwu. It is a known fact in Ndoni that Onikwu is the oldest town in Ndoni, and that is why they are the first to celebrate their festival before others. Also, the river deity of Ndoni is located in Onikwu, and it had

been in existence before the arrival of other groups from Benin or Ogbaru, Anambra state according to history.

Also, still on the origin of Ndoni people, according to Austin Obiechina of Ndoni in an interview in 2019 published in Academia.com with the title "Culture and History Ndoni from 1900 - 2014", the origin of Ndoni can be traced to Ogbaru in Anambra state and Benin kingdom, Edo State. It was also reported in the same work that a group of Onya people had to migrate from Ndoni in the 15th century to a location by the side of Aboh even before Aboh displaced Akarai people. This shows that Onya people were initially in Ndoni before some groups, but some migrated out of Ndoni in the 15th century. Though the author was silent on the tribe or origin of Onya, it has been stated at the beginning of the work according to various authors such as Boston (1960), Ogaugha (1982), Opone (2021),...that Onya people are Igala. In addition to these sources, the Inawai; King of Onya kingdom, the Obi of Onya in Illah Delta State and other Onya towns including Atani in Ogbaru have their history of origin or migration from Igala, and are till this day participating in Igala activities taking place in Attah Igala palace Idah Kogi State, while also maintain their Igala cultures.

Some locations or towns of Onya descendants or relatives in Southsouth and Southeast Nigeria according to the record at the palace of Inawai of Onya Kingdom, Delta state are Onya kingdom of Delta state, Okpai, Umeh in Isoko area, Ebutobe in Ijaw area, Ushie, Ase, Utuoku, Obikwere, Abala, Obeti, Onyah in Illah, .. all in Delta state, Odoni in Bayelsa, Ibisini in Bayelsa, Umuonya in Enugu and Anambra, Atani in Anabra, Onya in Oguta, Imo state, Onya in Nsukwa, Osifo, Oworobia, Utezi, Osekwenike, Abuetor all in Bayelsa state, Onya in Cross River, etc. Onya, as a kingdom is in Delta state, which is where the king is, but part of the kingdom (Osekwenike, Abuetor etc.) is in Bayelsa which occurred after the creation of Bayelsa state. It is the same case with Anioma people in Delta, and other parts carved into Rivers state.

HRH Obi Sunday Akazue, the Obi of Onya, Illah is a board member of United Igala Peoples Network (an umbrella organization of Igala people worldwide). He is always in the palace of Attah Igala during events, and his interviews are on YouTube and Facebook channels regarding the Igala origin of Onya people. Onya is Igala name which means relative or my close person. But aside this Onya Igala people who were in Ndoni before some emigrated in the 15th century leaving the remaining in Onikwu town which is still in Ndoni, there are other Igala people in Ndoni who still maintain the name of their clan in Idah, but little or nothing is talked about them when talking about the history of Ndoni or origin of Ndoni clans in most cases. This is probably because of the same thing that happened in Aboh where the later group's history dominates the earlier groups' history. This Igala clan or group in Ndoni is from Agaidoko clan in Idah, and the clan in Ndoni is called Oma-Agaidoko later changed to Umuagaidoko. This means children or descendants of Agaidoko. Umuagaidoko is one of the 12 clans (Umu Agidi, Umu Omosor, Umu Mazi, Umu Agaidoko, Umu Ikwuzom, Umu Okeya, Umu Awoh Aligbondu, Umu Olodu, Umu Onyema, Umu Awoh Achi, Ogbe Ajukwu, and Ogbe Ogwezi) making up Ndoni but history of Ndoni is mostly discussed without mentioning their Igala origin even as they were part of the first settlers of Ndoni. Apart from Umu Agaidoko, there are other Igala clans in Ndoni, some of whom moved to the area on secondary or tertiary migration. The Igala of Ndoni are not just there but still have their cultural practices being added to the festival of Ndoni people. In Ndoni, after various festivals, the end is

marked by a rite called Ojekulo or Agbaluko. This is an Igala cultural practice as confirmed in Academia.com with the title "Culture and History Ndoni from 1900 - 2014". According to the work, "... to show that the festival has come to an end for the year, the custom of Agbaluko (Ojekulo) must be observed in Ndoni. It is an end of festival custom of exorcising the evil spirits... This type of culture is common with the Niger Delta peoples up to Idah. After the Ojekulo (evil spirits) have been exorcised, young men as a custom burst into wrestling competition at the river side sand bars. But despite linking the origin of the Ojekulo custom to Idah or Igala, the name of Igala people is not mentioned in most Ndoni history. From the above, and as confirmed by Boston, Opone and Ogaugha, the origin of Ndoni can be traced to three roots. These are Igala; Kogi State, Benin; Edo state and Ogbaru, Anambra state. In fact, Onikwu people, who are the oldest in the town, are Onya people, and they are Igala from Idah. The classes of traditional titles in Ndoni kingdom are the Awoh, Iyasele (Onowu), Okpalauku and Ishagba-Ajie. Awoh is the king of Ndoni, and they (ruling houses of Ndoni) are from Benin Kingdom, Iyasele is the Prime Minister, Okpalauku is the oldest in the community, and IshagbaAjie is the traditional title of the Igala, Umu Agaidoko clan of Ndoni. Hon Lucky Odili, a member of the 7<sup>th</sup> Rivers state House of Assembly, under Governor Rotimi Amechi, is of Agaidoko clan of Ndoni. Agaidoko clan of Ndoni has a cultural practice involving their (Igala) masquerade called Okpokolo. The similar one is in Igbokenye Igala town in Anambra West, Anambra State. It comes out only when an elderly person dies in the community.

## II. COMPARISONS BETWEEN OJEKULO OF NDONI, ULOR OF ASABA, KULOKULO OF ILLAH, ONUABOH, ONYA KINGDOM AND UCHOKWULO OF IDAH, IGALA KINGDOM CAPITAL

### 2.1 Ulor festival of Asaba Delta State

Asaba are descendants of Nnebisi, son of Onoja Oboni of Idah, Igala kingdom's capital, and Diaba as his mother from Nteje in Anambra state, also from Igala kingdom Idah (Isidienu and Nwokoye, 2021). Asaba celebrate a cleansing festival called Ulor festival. Ulor means leave. It stands for sickness go, evils go, etc. The celebration involves the carrying of partly burnt fire wood and the ashes or charcoal swept from various homes. These are carried by various individuals while singing, and are all taken and dumped or thrown into the river Niger. On their coming from the river, the Omu Ahaba, Queen mother of Asaba will cleanse each of them by rubbing chalk on their hands. After doing this, it is believed that the community is cleansed of various diseases, evils, bad luck, etc.

### 2.2 Cleansing festival or rites in Idah, headquarters of Igala nation or people worldwide

The cleansing practice in Idah and other various parts of Kogi State Igala land is called Uchokwo or Uchokwulo or Unyi egworinyo. Uchokwulo simply means bad luck go or bad luck leave. Unyi egworinyo means to remove bad things from home. It is believed that when the house is "dirty", there will be bad luck or problems in the land which can be in form sickness, troubles, etc. It is always done very early in the morning when no place has been swept. It is done using different items ranging from few strands of broom, spare grass, local scent leave, etc. It can involve chicken in some cases especially if something had gone wrong in the community. The personal one is done at family level or compound level. While the general one is handled by the king and his chiefs. The brooms and/or other items will be used to touch various items such as cooking stones, doors, grinding stones, buildings etc.



while everyone will be out of the compound or room to far away from area or side of the house. The person performing the cleansing by touching these things at home with the materials in his hand will be running though very slow, and will be saying Uchokwo, uchokwo, uchokwo..... He will do this and ensure that every item outside including door is cleansed by touching them. When he finishes, he will go far away from home on the road, and throw it away. The woman of the house will be standing at that far location before he comes. She will be holding a cup of water. When he throws those items away because there is no closer river to be thrown into, the woman pours the water on the hands or palms of the man who did the cleansing, and who must not have a paternal relationship with the family. The pouring of water on his hands is to ensure that any dirt or bad luck that might want to follow him back be washed away. The house is now free and clean.

### 2.3 Kulo Kulo festival of Illah, Delta state

Illah, originally known as Ala has some sections occupied by Igala people from Idah before the arrival of Ala, whose father was Ika from Nteje and mother, Ejini from Idah, Igala kingdom headquarters. There are numerous Igala quarters in Illah under the collective name of Azanoma, though they arrived there at various times. Cleansing festival is celebrated by Ukpologu quarter of Illah who are descendants of Ogwu, son of Attah Igala, Agaidoko Attah Ayegba Oma Idoko. It is also celebrated by Ogbeolu quarters. They are descendants of Egwu Oma Idoko, the Ochai Attah. It is celebrated with the Ocho festival. In the celebration, very early in the morning, various firewoods used in the previous night and other fire residues or wastes are carried from home. While singing or making various Igala chants, they will take the firewoods and burnt items into the forest far away from home. One of the songs is Oga kulo ola kulo, meaning "sickness leave, troubles leave". This, when done is believed to have made the community cleanse and free of various dirt, diseases, evils, bad luck etc.

### 2.4 Cleansing festival of Onuaboh Igala people of Delta State

Onuaboh people are Igala people from Idah. They are related with Onyah Kingdom directly by blood. They are also related with Onikwu people of Ndoni in Rivers State and the earliest set of Aboh people who are Igala too. Just like some Igala clans in Kogi State ruled by the oldest, Onuaboh is headed by Okpala uku. Okpala is Igala word for a man old enough to have a great great grandchild. The present OkpalaUku of Onuaboh is Chief Peter Uti AlumonaEnuebuke. Onuaboh people practice cleansing culture too. In their case, as a result of their closeness to river like Asaba too, the firewoods are thrown into the river Niger after all the activities. On the day of the cleansing, as the first cock has crowed, everyone will make fire of firewood including those who do not cook with stoves or gas who would carry their firewood to those making fire for them to join them. The firewood are later

carried by each person and songs sang along such as sickness go, evil spirit go, problems go, etc and the firewoods will be thrown into the river. In Utagba Ogbe and Utagba Unor who are also Igala, the partly burnt firewood taken from home are gathered together at a location where everyone will meet together. There, the oldest man of the town, the Okpala uku will pray on the wood and pray for the people too. The entire firewood will be set on fire, and the people dance round it while they burn. After the woods have burned completely, it is believed that various problems have been destroyed from homes and the community. Everyone would start to go back to

their various homes. It is called Ichokwo in Onuaboh just like Uchokwo in Kogi state Igala area.

In Onya kingdom of Ndokwa, it is done exactly as in Onuaboh and Asaba. The woods are thrown into the river, which signifies that various problems and diseases and badlucks have been thrown away from the kingdom, and all taken away by the river.

Other Igala towns in Delta State that perform the cleansing as a festival or part of a festival are Ukala, Ebu, Aika, Oko, etc, Ossamala, Odekpe, Atani in Ogbaru Anambra state, Odekpe in Anambra West and other towns in Anambra West LGA of Anambra state. In most cases, they are done before other festivals commence or to mark the end of festivals.



HRM Frank Otunuya Okolocha Akpati II, The Inawai (king) of Onya Kingdom



Chief Peter Uti Alumona Enuebuke, The Okpala uku of Umugwor Onuaboh, Delta State

### 2.5 Ojekulocultural practice or ritual of Ndoni people

Ojekulo as it is called in Ndoni is a ritual or cultural practice that involves cleansing of the community as a whole. Though it is a yearly event, the community it is only a few sources that

could trace the real origin of the practice to its root. This is because, the history of Ndoni is mostly told by people without mentioning the Igala groups who were even the earliest settlers of the place. As stated earlier, and as reported by Boston in (1960), Ogaugha (1982), and Opone(2021), Onya, Aboh, and many other towns along the river were founded by Igala people. In the case of Ndoni, Onya people and Umuagaidoko people were the earliest people from Idah in Ndoni. Although, some Onya people have gone out of Ndoni around 15th century, some of them are in Onikwu town till date. According to “The Tides News Online: Appraising kingship in Ndoni 11, 2014”, Onya siblings are Onikwu, Onuaboh, .... Umuagaidoko are Igala people from Agaidoko clan in Idah Kogi State. Agaidoko clan are descendants of Ada, son of Ohiemi Ezenepew of Attah Ayegba, who migrated from Idah to found Igu (present day Koto Karfe, Kogi state) where he will be independent. Agaidoko clan became a strong clan in Idah after their clan head was appointed as a Chief to control the river Niger from Idah to the lower Niger, i. e. from Idah through Onitsha, Asaba... to Rivers State. The clan had to establish various camps along the river Niger from Idah to Rivers State. This occurred even before the Igala Benin war. This was the time Agaidoko clan now called Umuagaidoko in River State came to Ndoni. It is worthy of note that apart from Agaidoko clan head, two other clans’ heads were appointed by Attah Igala for the same assignment. The clan head of Aboko was appointed to control the waterway from Idah to upper Niger including Benue. The clan head of Omogbajewas appointed to control the Niger river activities within the Idah region. These three chiefs have the same objectives set for them by Attah Igala. Aboko, like Agaidoko descendants are also along the Niger river even in lower Niger area like Delta and Anambra States.

These are: The control and taxation of all movement of goods on the remittance to the Attah Igala. The safeguarding of peace along the Niger and Benue to ensure the safe passage of commerce. The provision of canoes for Attah’s own commercial transactions, and to transport Attah’s produce to suitable markets on the Niger. To act as intermediary between the central monarchy and the foreigners desiring an audience with the Attah. The provision of economic support for the palace, organization of the markets, general good conduct of commerce and commercial agents.

The cleansing practice of Ndonipeople is done after the various cultural festivals. It is normally the last.

Ojekulo is corrupted form of Uchokulo. Another word used for it in Ndoni is Agbaluko. This is correct. Agbaluko is Igala phrase which means "we sweep away" or "we cleanse away". Truly, Agbaluko is "to sweep away". According to “Culture and History Ndoni from 1900 - 2014”, Academia.co., Agbaluko or Ojekulo is linked to Idah [Igala]. In Ndoni, after the firewoods are thrown into the water just like in Asaba, Onya, Onuaboh, etc, it is believed that the evil spirits have been cleansed from home. This is an Igala cultural practice which is still talking place in Ndoni town.

### CONCLUSION

The research on the study of the importance of Ojekulo cultural practices among Ndoni people of Rivers state has been done using descriptive method. The analysis showed that many towns along the river Niger were founded by Igala fishermen or water people before the arrival of other people. For instance, the town of Aboh, Ndoni, Onuaboh, Ossamala were said to be founded by Igala even though History of Ndoni tends to isolate Igala which is about three or more of the twelve clans making

Ndoni in addition to the other earlier settlers of Onya in Onikwu as confirmed by “The Tides News Online”

From the results, it can be concluded that Ojekulo practice of Ndoni people originated from Igala, and same cultural practice is performed as a festival or ritual in other Igala towns in Delta State such as Asaba, Illah, Onuaboh, etc. as in Igala Kingdom of Kogi State. It can also be concluded that the festival or ritual is very important as it will attract to the home good luck, good health, development and many good things, while the house or community is free of all evils.

### Recommendation

It is recommended that the Ojekulo be fully celebrated in Ndonias a festival just like in Asaba, Onya and Onuaboh and not seen as part of festival or ritual to mark end of festivals in Ndoni.

### References

- [1] AmbAyegba Abdullahi Adojoh (2022): “A Study of the Importance of Ichu Ulor Festival of Asaba People of Delta State, Nigeria”, International Journal of Trend in Research and Development, Volume 9(3), pp 61 – 63.
- [2] Chief Peter Uti EnuebukeAlumona, Okpala uku of Onuaboh: Interview by the authors on How is Cleansing festival or ritual done in Onuaboh town of Delta state on March 8, 2024.
- [3] HRH FrankOtunuyaAkpati II, Inawai of Onya Kingdom: Interview by the authors on the locations of some Onya descendants or towns across Nigeria, on March 8, 2024.
- [4] Isidienu Cordelia Ifenyiwa and Nwokoye Anthonia Nkechinyere (2021): “Igbo legal and Justice System: The case of Nteje”, African Journal of Language Research, Vol 3 & 4., pp 15 – 27
- [5] Igala Royal Archives and Museum, Attah Igala palace, Idah, Kogi State.
- [6] J. S. Boston (1960): Notes on contact between the Igala and the Ibo, Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria, Vol 2(3), pp 51 - 68
- [7] Nwaubani Ebere (1999): “The political economy of Aboh, 1830-1857”, African Economical Periodical.
- [8] Robert Arthur Sarheant (1984): Politics and economics in the Benue Basin, c 1300 – 1700. PhD thesis, Dalhousie University, National Library Canada.
- [9] Ogaugha P. A. (1982): “The impact of European Trade on Igbo – Igala commercial Relations in the Lower Niger, 1650 – 1850 AD”, Journal of the Historical society of Niger, xi, pp 11-27
- [10] Paul O. Opone (2021): “A discourse on the origin and migration of the Aboh of the lower Niger of Nigeria”, International Review of Humanities studies. Vol 6(2), pp 726 – 736.
- [11] Samuel Crowther (1885): Journal on expenditure of the Niger and Tshadda Rivers. Church missionary House.
- [12] T. J. Hutchinsonson (1966): “Narrative of the Niger, Tshadda, and Binue Expenditure, including a Report on the position and prospects of trade up those rivers”, London, Frank Cass.
- [13] The Tides News Online: Appraising kingship in Ndoni 11, 2014”, “Culture and History Ndoni from 1900 - 2014”, Academia.com
- [14] ndoniusa.org