RITUAL, GENDER, AND CUSTOM: RE-EXAMINING THE IRIA CEREMONY IN THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF OPOBO AND KALABARI

Oko-Jaja, Eze Tuonimi

Department of History & International Diplomacy, Faculty of Humanities, Rivers State University
Email: okojajatuonimi@gmail.com
&

Jaja, Ethel Kalanne

Department of Modern Languages (French), Faculty of Humanities, Rivers State University
Email: ethelkalanne.jaja@ust.edu.ng
&

Omiete Idoniboye

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, Rivers State University
Email: omiete.idoniboye@ust.edu.ng

Abstract

This research re-examines the Iria ceremony within the historical trajectories of Opobo and Kalabari, presenting ritual, gender, and custom as dynamic forces in socio-political development. Drawing on oral traditions, archival materials, and qualitative historical analysis, the study argues that Iria is not merely a rite of passage but a gendered institution embedded in the cosmological and social organization of Eastern Niger Delta societies. Following Victor Turner's concept of ritual as "social drama," Iria emerges as a performative arena where feminine identity, lineage continuity, and communal prestige are publicly constructed. Tracing its origins in the Ijo cultural sphere and its adaptation within Opobo's monarchical structure, the study demonstrates how Iria has mediated intergroup relations while reinforcing elite authority. At the same time, it has provided women with collective organization, visibility, and symbolic power. Engaging Judith Butler's theory that gender is constituted through repeated performance, the research interprets Iria as a culturally sanctioned script that stabilizes yet gradually reshapes gender norms. Although modernity, commercialization, and class display have transformed aspects of the ritual, these shifts represent historical negotiation rather than cultural erosion. By comparing developments in Opobo and Kalabari, the study shows how ritual institutions remain resilient, sustaining identity, fostering female agency, and generating economic activity. Ultimately, Iria functions as a living archive of gender memory and a lens for understanding continuity and change in the Niger Delta.

Keywords: Commercialization, Development, Ritual, Gender & Ceremony

Introduction

The Iria ceremony occupies a central place in the ritual architecture of the Ijo (Ijaw) peoples of the Eastern Niger Delta. Far from being a mere festive spectacle, it represents a deeply embedded institution of gender formation, social legitimation, and cultural continuity. Among Ijo-speaking polities such as Bonny Kingdom, Opobo Kingdom, Kalabari Kingdom, Okrika, and Nembe, the Iria functions as a rite of passage marking the transition from girlhood to socially recognized womanhood. Within the historical evolution of Opobo and Kalabari, the ceremony reveals how ritual, gender norms, and political authority intersect in shaping communal identity.

Historically, the institutional consolidation of Iria in Bonny is traced to the reign of Queen Edimini Kambasa (c. 1485–1520), under whose authority the ceremony gained royal patronage and symbolic prominence. Its further incorporation into the Owu Ogbo Cultural Society during the reign of King Amakiri (c. 1634) transformed Iria from a familial observance into a structured cultural institution. The emergence of masquerades such as Taria, Amua, and Igbuerende under the umbrella of the Owu Ogbo society signaled a ritualization of gender surveillance and affirmation. While Taria and Amua were associated with the symbolic chastisement of women who had not completed specific Iria stages, Igbuerende publicly celebrated those who had fulfilled the rite. In this dynamic, ritual became both regulatory and celebratory, a cultural mechanism that disciplined and dignified womanhood simultaneously.

The spiritual worldview of Ibani culture, shared by Bonny and later Opobo, positioned Iria within a cosmological frame. The ceremony was not merely social but sacral, embedding female maturation within communal metaphysics. The public performance of Iria legitimized a woman's full participation in the War Canoe House structure, an essential socio-political unit in Ibani society. Thus, ritual here operated as a conduit between gendered identity and political belonging. A decisive transformation in the Iria ceremony emerged during the trans-Atlantic commercial era. The influx of foreign textiles, particularly the Indian "George" wrapper, locally called Bii-Bite (white man's wrapper), reconfigured the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of the rite. The wrapper's prestige within elite households, especially during the reign of King George Oruigbi William Pepple (1866–1888), elevated it into a ceremonial marker of maturity. Its integration into Iria produced the Bibite stage, regarded as the apex of female initiation. The act of tying the plain George wrapper signified not merely adornment but status: the celebrant was recognized as a fully matured woman within her House and kingdom. In this moment, global commerce intersected with indigenous ritual, demonstrating how external influences were indigenized into Ibani gender constructs.

This study adopts a qualitative historical methodology, combining oral history, archival research, and ethnographic observation to reconstruct the social and gendered dimensions of the Iria ceremony across time. Primary data were gathered through semi-structured oral interviews conducted between January and February 2026 with key informants in Opobo and Port Harcourt, including cultural custodians, initiated women, members of the Opobo Women Welfare Association, and community leaders with established knowledge of Ibani ceremonial practice.

Informants were identified through purposive and snowball sampling, and interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis. Secondary data were drawn from published historical monographs, journal articles, undergraduate and postgraduate research projects, community newspapers, and archival holdings relevant to the Eastern Niger Delta. The analytical framework integrates Victor Turner's concept of social drama, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital to illuminate how the Iria ceremony simultaneously constructs, legitimizes, and transforms gendered identity within Ibani society. Where oral and archival sources converge, the study treats such convergence as corroborative evidence; where they diverge, the discrepancies are noted and their historical significance assessed.

The establishment of Opobo in 1870 by the Opubo Annie Pepple section under Chief Jaja marked a political rupture but not a cultural discontinuity. The Iria ceremony migrated intact into the emerging Opobo polity, where it became a significant site for displaying familial wealth, heirloom textiles, and aesthetic refinement. In both Opobo and Kalabari, Iria served as a pedagogical institution. The fattening room (Iriabo confinement) functioned as a gendered academy in which elderly women instructed initiates in domestic management, sexuality, public comportment, culinary traditions, dance performance, and textile symbolism. Through this process, the ideal "Ibani woman" was socially constructed as custodian of communal values and transmitter of lineage dignity.

Traditionally, the ceremony unfolded in distinct stages, Egerebite as the preliminary rite and Bibite as the culminating affirmation. Each stage corresponded to specific social thresholds and ritual expectations. However, the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War (1967–1970) introduced profound socio-economic disruptions across the Niger Delta. Opobo's involvement in the war and its devastating aftermath generated economic hardship that altered ritual capacity. Financial constraints made it difficult for families to sponsor the elaborate Egerebite stage during adolescence. As many girls surpassed the culturally prescribed age without initiation, the ritual logic weakened. Gradually, the stages were merged, resulting in the contemporary fusion of Opu-Egerebite and Bibite into a single celebration. This post-war restructuring illustrates how macro-political crises reshape micro-cultural institutions. Poverty curtailed the month-long confinement period in the fattening room to approximately seven days. The elaborate nudity associated with the early Egerebite stage, intended historically to signify eligibility for marriage, became increasingly incompatible with changing moral sensibilities and modern educational exposure. Thus, modernity and economic pragmatism jointly redefined ritual temporality and performance.

Within Kalabari Kingdom, transformations of the Iria ceremony unfolded alongside, yet distinct from, those in Opobo Kingdom, shaped by localized political economies and cosmological sensibilities. In Kalabari, Iria retained its classical elements of ritual seclusion, corporeal embellishment, and moral instruction. The use of indigenous cosmetics; *odo*, *uhie*, *nchara*, *nzu*, *ezizi-awu edeala*, palm oil, and indigo, was not merely aesthetic but symbolic, inscribing the female body with meanings of purity, fertility, and communal honour. Seclusion functioned pedagogically: initiates were instructed in dance, culinary arts, sexual ethics, and marital diplomacy, thereby embedding gendered knowledge within the fabric of Ibani social reproduction.

Yet, as urbanization, missionary Christianity, and global cultural flows intensified, Iria was neither abandoned nor fossilized; rather, it was reinterpreted, revealing ritual as a dynamic medium of historical negotiation.

Re-examining Iria through the prism of ritual, gender, and custom thus discloses its historical elasticity. Far from a static relic, the ceremony has operated as a living institution mediating commerce, warfare, kinship, and modernity. It structured femininity within Ibani cosmology while legitimizing women's socio-political recognition. In both Opobo and Kalabari, Iria functioned as a cultural text, encoding tensions between continuity and transformation, indigenous sovereignty and external intervention. Its adaptive resilience underscores how ritual systems recalibrate amid economic upheavals while preserving symbolic cores.

The decline of the Kala-Egerebite phase, formerly the foundational pre-marital stage, significantly altered the pedagogical timing of gender formation. Nonetheless, as Annie-Pepple (2026) argues, its essential rites have been re-integrated into contemporary practice. The present sequence, in which the Iriabo dances first in her parental home on Saturday before proceeding to her husband's household on Sunday, symbolically reaffirms parental obligation even when belated. The Saturday rite re-enacts the parental responsibility once fulfilled during Kala-Egerebite, while Sunday's Opu-Egerebite and Bibite stages consolidate marital incorporation.

Felicia Annie Pepple (2026) further contends that although early adolescent training has diminished, the transmission of Ibani norms during contemporary Iria remains socially consequential. Knowledge acquired, even later in life, reshapes marital conduct and communal participation, while obligating the initiate to instruct younger girls prior to their own rites. Thus, gendered continuity persists through intergenerational pedagogy.

Christianity's initially antagonistic posture toward African ritual practices necessitated adaptive recalibration in Opobo. Once denounced as "fetish," Iria incorporated church thanksgiving services, substituting libation and ancestral invocation with Christian prayer and liturgical acclaim. This ritual syncretism enabled survival, broadening participation across religious divides. New performative trajectories emerged, including the public elevation of the Iriabo after church thanksgiving, a symbolic enthronement that dignifies her as a socially recognized Ibani woman.

Within Opobo's marital framework, Iria also mediates bride wealth and social maturity. As Ibiere Brown (2020) observes, the ceremony consolidates a woman's status within her husband's lineage, often signaling completion of marital obligations. Bell-Gam (2020) notes that Iria's integration into marriage practice reconfigures bride price as a reciprocal cultural investment rather than a mere transaction. The rite's symbolism of "covering nakedness" further situates womanhood within cosmological and ancestral registers, linking maturity, respectability, and eventual ancestral veneration. Thus:

> Adult Ibani woman who dies 'Naked' (without having done Iria during her life time), her family usually will arrange to perform her Iria ceremony (that is tie her wrapper on her death bed) before her interment. The culture forbids an adult Ibani woman being buried as a 'naked woman'.

A critical re-reading of the Iria ceremony within Opobo and Kalabari historical trajectories reveals ritual not as a static inheritance but as a dynamic gendered institution embedded in cosmology, kinship, and political economy. Felicia Annie Pepple (2026) underscores the spiritual ontology of Iria by observing that when an Ibani woman dies without having undergone the rite, her children and family perform a posthumous Iria before burial. The underlying belief is that burial without ritual completion invites misfortune upon descendants. This practice situates womanhood within a moral-spiritual continuum, where the body, lineage, and ancestral order are inseparable. Iria therefore functions as a rite of incorporation, affirming both feminine identity and communal equilibrium.

Comparable ritual logics appear in Okrika, where Iria is linked to aquatic cosmology and the mythic relationship between the people and river deities. In Okrika tradition, as Olunwa (2022) notes, initiates pledge chastity to the earth goddess Amakiri and conclude the rite with libation and ritual washing—*Awu Sikiri Owu Piri*—symbolizing purification and transition. Such symbolism foregrounds Iria as a mediation between terrestrial and aquatic spiritualities, reinforcing gendered morality and communal continuity across Eastern Niger Delta societies.

In Opobo, the posthumous performance of Iria is shrouded in secrecy, conducted by elderly initiated women who ritually clothe the deceased with ceremonial wrappers, accompanied by incantations and libations. This act symbolically settles the deceased within the ancestral realm, preventing spiritual alienation and reaffirming her status as a "real Ibani woman." Gender here is not merely biological but ritually constructed and cosmologically validated.

The post–civil war intervention of the Opobo Women Welfare Association (OWWA), founded in 1971 under the leadership of Mrs. Eugenia Kalaya Pepple (Mama Ayadede), marked a transformative phase. By harmonizing stages of the ceremony and moderating overtly esoteric elements, OWWA aligned Iria with new economic and religious realities while preserving its core symbolic grammar. Their reforms broadened participation across denominational lines and diaspora communities, enhancing cultural resilience and stimulating socio-economic development. Thus, Iria emerges not merely as a rite of passage but as a historically adaptive institution through which ritual, gender, and custom continually negotiate identity, spirituality, and development in Opobo and Kalabari.

Modernized Kala Egerebite

OPU Egerebite

Bibite

Source: Abonnema (2022)

Ancient Kala Egerebite Ceremony in Ijo of Eastern

Kalabari Iria: Ama-buro

Source: Jaja Ethel Kalanne Collections

Source: Bell-Gam, H. I. (2025).

Economic Contributions of the Iria Ceremony to the Development of Opobo and Kalabari

The Iria ceremony, central to the Ibani-speaking polities of Opobo and Kalabari, transcends its popular description as a rite of passage. Rather, it constitutes a historically embedded institution in which ritual performance, gender formation, and customary economy intersect to shape socio-political development. As anthropologists have long argued, ritual is not a peripheral embellishment of culture but "a primary mechanism for the reproduction of social order" (Turner, 1969, p. 94). Within this framework, the Iria ceremony functions as a structured cultural text through which femininity, status, and communal belonging are enacted and publicly validated.

In its contemporary form, the Iria celebration has become increasingly elaborate and capital-intensive. The merging of formerly distinct ritual stages into a unified performance reflects what Hobsbawm (1983) describes as the "invention of tradition," wherein continuity is maintained through adaptive transformation. Preparations for the ceremony involve the procurement of Iria wrappers, kilali (coral beads), gold ornaments, arena decoration, musical ensembles, and hospitality provisions. These ritual objects are not mere adornments; they symbolize lineage prestige, fertility, and communal continuity. As Geertz (1973) observes, cultural symbols operate as "models of" and "models for" reality (p. 93), shaping both perception and practice.

The economic ramifications of Iria underscore its developmental significance. Indigenous entrepreneurs specialize in the production and rental of coral bead regalia, gold ornaments, decorative canopies, and catering services. Women skilled in nurturing the Iriabo during her fattening-room seclusion, through body adornment, dietary regulation, and moral instruction, occupy a respected socio-cultural niche. In this sense, Iria reinforces what Bourdieu (1977) terms "symbolic capital," converting ritual expertise into economic and social prestige. The ceremony thus stimulates local commerce, from textile vendors and gold renters to hoteliers, drink suppliers, and fish traders, particularly during Easter and New Year festivities.

Gender remains the organizing axis of Iria. The seclusion and tutelage of the Iriabo reflect a structured pedagogy of womanhood, mediated by senior women and associations such as the Opobo Women Welfare Association. This process resonates with Butler's (1990) thesis that gender is performatively constituted; through dance, dress, and disciplined comportment, the initiate embodies culturally sanctioned femininity. The public dance arena becomes a performative space where communal spectators affirm her transition into socially recognized womanhood.

Furthermore, the ceremony's outdoor spectacle, accompanied by Ngunume and Ekpete music, draws diasporic indigenes and visitors, reinforcing trans-local identity and economic circulation. Ritual, in this context, is both memory and movement: it sustains historical continuity while generating contemporary development. As Durkheim (1912/1995) contends, collective ceremonies intensify social solidarity, renewing the moral bonds of the community. Re-examined historically, Iria emerges not as a static cultural relic but as a dynamic institution integral to the evolution of Opobo and Kalabari. It mediates gender formation, sustains customary authority, and energizes

indigenous economies. Through ritual, these riverine kingdoms continually negotiate identity, modernity, and communal prosperity.

Social and Cultural Contributions of the Iria Ceremony to the Development of Opobo and Kalabari

The Iria ceremony is a culturally significant event closely associated with women, characterized by singing, dancing, and the performance of traditional songs. In Opobo, Ibani songs constitute the core musical repertoire of such cultural events, dominating performances and celebrations over time. The continuity and enhancement of Ibani songs in Opobo have historically been supported by cultural clubs within the kingdom, such as those established by Oko-Jaja, Jaja, and Omubo-Pepple (2025). However, the economic repercussions of the post-civil war era significantly constrained the activities of these cultural clubs, a limitation further exacerbated by the wave of modernity that swept through Opobo in the 1990s.

Notably, the resurgence of the Iria ceremony in the 21st century, particularly as a class-based celebration, revitalized the role of cultural clubs, framing their performances as economically viable ventures. The patronage of these clubs by Iria celebrants facilitated the establishment of new clubs and the production of contemporary Ibani musical albums. This development has not only sustained the performance of Ibani Ijo songs and dances but has also reinforced Opobo's Ijo cultural identity, enhancing its relevance for contemporary society.

Beyond its cultural and economic dimensions, the Iria ceremony fosters social cohesion by bringing together indigenes, extended families, and friends of the celebrants. This integration contributes to the sustained peace within the kingdom and strengthens inter-community relations, thereby supporting the broader social and developmental progress of Opobo. Furthermore, the ceremony offers economic and social benefits to less privileged members of the community, who participate directly in ceremonial activities or as spectators, receiving gifts, food, and tokens of appreciation. These benefits enhance social welfare, contribute to community happiness, and indirectly discourage engagement in criminal activities.

Each Iriabo is obliged to adhere to Ibani norms and values, often dressing in traditional attire that signifies her status as a genuine Ibani woman. Such adherence plays a critical role in preserving Ibani traditions, reconstructing socio-cultural history, and sustaining the Ijo identity for future generations.

Comparative Dimensions: Opobo and Kalabari

A comparative reading of the Iria ceremony across Opobo and Kalabari reveals both structural kinship and significant divergence in how each kingdom has managed the ritual's evolution. Both polities share the Ibani cultural substratum, a common Ijo cosmological frame, and the foundational conviction that Iria marks a woman's transition into full socio-political personhood. Yet their respective historical experiences — Opobo's monarchical rupture in 1870, its particular entanglement with the trans-Atlantic trade, and its post-Civil War social dislocations, set against Kalabari's more continuous political economy and its distinct cosmological emphasis on aquatic spirituality — have produced meaningfully different ritual trajectories.

In Opobo, institutional intervention has been the defining feature of ritual adaptation. The founding of the Opobo Women Welfare Association in 1971 introduced a layer of organizational governance that deliberately harmonized the Iria stages, moderated esoteric elements incompatible with Christian sensibilities, and broadened participation across denominational and diaspora lines. This institutional mediation produced a more standardized, publicly legible ceremony — one susceptible to class-based elaboration and commercial investment, but also more accessible and more easily transmitted across generations scattered by migration. The merger of Kala-Egerebite, Opu-Egerebite, and Bibite into a compressed contemporary sequence reflects the pressure of modernity channelled through collective organizational will.

In Kalabari, by contrast, adaptation has been more organic and cosmologically conservative. The ceremony retained its classical structure of ritual seclusion, corporeal embellishment with indigenous cosmetics, and rigorous moral instruction well into the twentieth century. Urbanization and missionary Christianity produced pressures comparable to those experienced in Opobo, yet the Kalabari response drew more explicitly on indigenous aquatic cosmology as a legitimating frame, as evidenced in parallel ceremonies such as the Okrika Iria, in which initiates pledge to the earth goddess Amakiri and conclude rites with ritual washing (Olunwa, 2022). Where Opobo's Iria moved toward institutional standardization and Christian syncretism, Kalabari's maintained a closer proximity to cosmological original, with adaptation occurring at the level of aesthetic and temporal compression rather than structural reorganization.

The economic dimensions of the ceremony also diverge instructively. In Opobo, the elaboration of Iria into a prestige-laden celebration has generated a dense local market for coral bead regalia, ceremonial textiles, catering, music, and hospitality — with women skilled in the preparation and adornment of the Iriabo commanding significant symbolic and material capital (Bourdieu, 1977). In Kalabari, where indigenous cosmetics and seclusion traditions have been more continuously maintained, the ceremony sustains a parallel set of specialist knowledge-economies centred on bodily preparation and ritual instruction. In both cases, Iria functions as a vehicle for what Durkheim (1912/1995) understood as the moral renewal of collective bonds, but the mechanisms through which that renewal is achieved — institutional in Opobo, cosmological in Kalabari — reflect the distinct historical experiences of each polity. Together, these trajectories demonstrate that ritual resilience is not monolithic but pluriform: communities preserve symbolic cores while renovating ceremonial forms in ways shaped by their specific political economies and governance structures.

Conclusion

The examination of the Iria ceremony within the historical development of the Opobo and Kalabari Kingdoms underscores the intricate interplay between ritual, gender, and socio-economic advancement. This study demonstrates that the Iria ceremony is not merely a rite of passage but a dynamic cultural institution that has historically mediated social cohesion, gendered roles, and community identity. By situating the ceremony within a historical lens, it becomes evident that socio-cultural practices such as Iria have consistently contributed to the economic vitality of both kingdoms, particularly through the revitalization of cultural clubs, the stimulation of indigenous commerce, and the engagement of younger generations in sustaining Ibani traditions (Oko-Jaja, Jaja & Omubo-Pepple, 2025).

The post-Civil War adaptation of the ceremony, where elements of Ibani cosmology, such as veneration of water spirits and ancestral appellations, were reinterpreted through Christian thanksgiving rituals, illustrates the flexibility and resilience of cultural practices in negotiating modernity and religion. This adaptability, as documented by Olunwa (2022) in the parallel Okrika context and by Felicia Annie Pepple (2026) in relation to contemporary Opobo practice, has facilitated broader participation, enhanced socio-economic outcomes, and positioned the ceremony as a vehicle for local entrepreneurship, as many Opobo women and youths have leveraged its activities for livelihood and community development.

In light of these findings, it is imperative that government and community stakeholders collaborate to preserve the ceremony's core traditional values while strategically integrating it with tourism and cultural investment initiatives. Such a framework would not only safeguard Opobo Ibani identity for posterity but also stimulate sustainable economic growth, generate employment, and elevate the Kingdom's cultural prominence on a national and global scale (Ekechi, 2002). Ultimately, the Iria ceremony exemplifies the enduring nexus between ritual, gender, and custom as catalysts for both social cohesion and economic development.

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