



BONNY ISLAND FOUNDATION
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Unity And Service

Aru bile bilem kuma mbapa bile bileghaa



IRIA CEREMONY AND EREMINOGBO IN GRAND BONNY KINGDOM



**IRIAPU SHOWCASING DIFFERENT
BONNY TRADITIONAL WRAPPERS**

The people of Grand Bonny Kingdom in the Rivers State of Nigeria are called Ibani. They are known to be gentle and graceful, and this extends well into their rich cultural heritage. The geographical location of the town connects it to the Atlantic Ocean, a great advantage that put her at the crossroads of the Atlantic trade in the 15th century. Needless to say, Bonny saw a lot of sea merchants who brought in gold, silver and other colorful merchandize to her shores. The influence of western civilization has its imprint all over the fabric of the Ibani culture, and this is evident in their traditional garbs and way of life in general.

Howbeit, the advent of Christianity and education did not take away the traditional way of life from the Ibani people, rather it enhanced it. Such traditions as marriage and the Iria ceremony have all withstood the test of time.

In Ibani culture, the iria ceremony is the rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood. It is a colorful ceremony that involves the tying of different beautiful wrappers, donning expensive jewelry, and dancing in the town square. To witness the ceremony are the chief, elders and other members of the community.

The Iria ceremony is a requirement for all women in Bonny, including those that marry into the culture. It is considered a taboo for a Bonny woman to die without performing her iria. When the former is the case, tradition demands that the ceremony be carried out on the death bed before the body could be buried. Over the years, the iria ceremony has become more popular, one reason could be because it is a "show off" culture! There is so much that goes into planning, and carrying out the ceremony that it takes years for most women to save up for it.

There are certain privileges that come with performing the Iria ceremony, such as: gaining acceptance into certain women's clubs and the right to tie the Erebu and Mbudu in the Bonny township. The Erebu and Mbudu are Ibani words which stand for the bottom and top wrappers. The Erebu is the first piece of wrapper tied from the waist to the ankle, and the mbudu is usually tied on top of the Erebu, from the waist to just below the knee. This traditional outfit is for women who have completed the Iria Ceremony.

In the Grand Bonny Kingdom of old, when a young teenage girl reached the age of puberty, her mother prepared her for the Iria ceremony. It was the responsibility of her parents to buy, acquire or borrow the necessary materials which she would need for the celebration. If the girl was

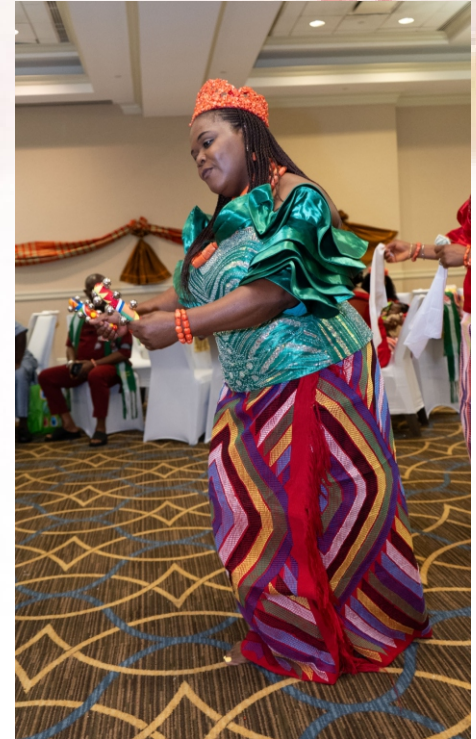


already engaged to be married, then the responsibility was shared between the fiancé and her parents.

THE FATTENING ROOM: In the past, the pubescent girl was confined to a room called the fattening room, where she did nothing other than eat and sleep, and she was not even allowed to take a walk outside of the house. In the fattening room, she would be attended to by women who have gone through the iria ceremony. While the woman is going through this stage, she is referred to as the Iriabo. The period of confinement in those days could be up to six months. Today, the fattening period for the modern day Iriabo is about one week. The belief is that the Iriabo looks well and radiant when her body is full.

During her confinement in the fattening room, the Iriabo is dressed with a hand-woven cloth called the Suu, which drapes her from her chest to the knees. She receives beauty treatments, and massages with special oils and emollients such as the cam wood, palm oil, and Shea butter leaving her skin shiny and radiant. At the end, her skin is tattooed with ink which washes away with time.

During the last week of the fattening room stage, a group of women traditional dancers known as the Ereminogbo, will come to the house to do a dance rehearsal with the Iriabo. This exercise is known as the buodi. If she already knows how to do the traditional dance moves, then their job becomes easy, otherwise they would go through a period of dance lessons with her.



STAGES IN THE IRIA CEREMONY AND NAMES OF THE WRAPPERS

The tying of cloth is done in stages: The first stage is known as the tying of the Kala-egerebite. In the olden days, this stage was done when the young woman reached between the age of 10 and 15. The second stage called the Opu-egerebite was done between the age of 18 and 21, and the third and last stage called the Bighibite was done from the age of 40. The age limit has changed today, when the woman is of age these 3 stages can be done in one or 2 days.

The Iria ceremony is divided into the morning and afternoon sessions. In the morning, the Ereminogbo who have performed this rites, and are experienced in dressing the Iriabo, will meet to dress her up in her parent's house. The wrapper tying in itself is an art form: Usually, two women from the group will do the dressing whilst the others watch and make merry. Two hand woven wrappers are tied on the waist of the Iriabo to make them look full, before tying the colorful ikaki wrapper on top to look like a long maxi skirt. After the first rounds of dance, the Iriabo undergoes a wardrobe change into another colorful hand woven wrapper called the popo. In the evening, her Ereminogbo attendees will dress her up with the beautiful damask, followed by the Awomiebite. The last wrapper change will be the george.

The Awomiebite is a plain george, hand dyed in cam wood. It is the most important wrapper amongst the ensemble, because when a Bonny woman dies, it is the first wrapper that is tied on her



body underneath any other clothing she wears to the grave. Due to this reason, this wrapper cannot be borrowed.

To finish the look, a beautiful lace blouse will be fitted over her top wrapper at each change. Chunky coral beads adorn the woman's neck, with matching earrings, bracelets, and gold rings on the fingers. The gold jewelry would be pure weighty gold. On the top of her hair, she wears a crown made with coral. While dancing bare footed, she holds flowers decorated with little jingle bells on both hands to add to the music.

The Kala-egerebite : Kala means small in the Ibani language. During this stage the Suu wrapper is tied in a mini form, from the waist to the knees of the Iriabo by her attendant Women. Suu is a hand woven cloth.



IRIABO DRESSED IN DAMASK WRAPPER
AND GOLD JEWELRY.

The Opu-egerebite: Opu means big and as you can guess, this means that the wrappers worn at this stage are big. They are also hand woven and colorful. Examples of this type of wrappers are the Ikaki and Popo. The Ikaki wrapper has triangular designs on it, whilst the Popo wrapper has square designs.

The Bighibite: This is the George tying stage and the last stage of the ceremony. The george wrapper named appropriately, is said to have been introduced into the Bonny culture from India by King George Pepple of Bonny in the 19th century. In the past, this stage was done when the Bonny woman had attained the age of 40 and above. Today it can be done on the same day or the next day after the Kala-egerebite and Opu-egerebite stages. Without the Bighibite ceremony, the Bonny woman is prohibited from tying the up and down (erebu and mbudu) george wrappers in the Bonny Kingdom.



IRIAPU AND SAUCER GIRLS

On the day of the celebration, the Iriabo is expected to dance around the town square led by two good Ereminogbo dancers, one in front and another behind. In the middle of the square, a table is prepared for the elder statesmen, where they would sit, chat, and drink during the celebration. A young girl dances besides the Iriabo holding a saucer for collecting gifts from guests who generously and lavishly "spray" her with money. Other gift items include traditional Bonny wrappers. For her part, the Iriabo throws candies and little packets of cookies to the children in the crowd.

When the dance has gotten to a frenzy, the parents of the celebrant present her with gifts as they dance along with her. If she is married, her husband will do the same. This usually kicks off the gift-giving session as friends and relatives follow suit.



At the ceremony, guests are entertained to an all day feast of traditional dishes, fine wines, and spirits. This ceremonial dance usually takes place on a Saturday in the dance square. It will be worthy to mention that the friends and relatives render support to the Iriabo and her family. Such help as cooking, serving, decorating, and running of errands are very much appreciated by the Iriabo family. In most families, a heirloom of gold and coral beaded jewelry are kept in preparation for such a time when a daughter from the family might need to borrow them for their iria ceremony. This is a very good idea because these preparations (as aforementioned) can be very expensive.

The dance square is usually decorated with banners and buntings by men folks in the village, they also build a small gazebo-like house with the colorful ikaki wrappers in the corner of the square. A chair and foot stool are provided for the Iriabo to rest on, in- between dances. The chair and stool are also covered with the ikaki cloth.

The Ereminogbo group and some male drummers provide music for the dance. The Ereminogbo clap their hands and sing familiar dance songs, while the male folks punctuate the songs with their deep baritone in agreement with its message. At each wardrobe change, the Iriabo would display at the arena.

At the end of the celebration, the iriabo is carried off to her parent's or husband's house on top of the shoulders of able bodied men. The next day, which is on a Sunday, the iriabo can rightfully tie the Eregbu and Mbudu in form of, either the Popo cloth or the ikaki, and this time she ties a head tie with her outfit. Accompanied by friends and relatives, she goes to church to give thanks to God.

After the Thanksgiving Service, the Iriabo walks around the town with relatives greeting friends and neighbors. The iria ceremony is usually characterized by pomp and elegance. It is said that in those days, on such occasions, many suitors found their brides.



IRIABO DRESSED IN AWOMIEBITE WRAPPERS AND CORAL BEADS.



BY MRS. IBIE GREEN.