



A PRECIS ON THE ORIGINS AND PRACTICES OF THE SEKIAPU MASQUERADE SOCIETY OF NEMBE, NIGER DELTA, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The origins, practices and cultural implications of the Nembe Sekiapu masquerade society were investigated. This was done to adduce reasons for the decline of the society's activities and the negative perceptions and beliefs as a result of civilization and western religious beliefs that consider the society and their activities as demonic. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design methodology for the study. A structurally designed questionnaire was the research instrument used to obtain information for the study using oral interview method. The information gathered through the oral interview were analyzed and discussed in the study. Cultural imperialism theory was adopted and used for the study because the theory deals with imposition chain or foreign cultures on smaller cultures. The findings revealed that the Nembe masquerade society of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria was founded by a man known as kperighada and the Nembe Sekiapu masquerade is similar to that of the Kalabari's who are close neighbours of the Nembe people in the Niger Delta. The Nembe masquerade society has several masquerades in their possession that display periodically to entertain spectators as a way of also promoting the rich cultural tradition and heritage of their people. The masquerade was discovered by a fisherman who went for fishing after discovering the masquerade performance at a sea-shore by water spirits. The findings further revealed that the Sekiapu masquerade society events and activities have a lot of tourism, socio-economic and aesthetic implications that help to develop the region. Therefore it can be concluded that the mystification of the society is baseless as the activities of the society has also helped in promoting the culture of Nembe people. The Masquerade society should not relent in performing the festivals; and government and other individuals should financially support the society as there is nothing demonic about it.

KEY WORDS: *Nembe, Sekiapu, Masquerade, Society, Niger Delta, Nigeria.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Although the Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerade society cultural tradition has existed long ago, their origin is quite sketchy in the public domain. As a result, despite the cultural and artistic implications of the Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerade society, the culture still suffers neglect and rejection from indigenes which could be as a result of lack of information and the introduction of the Christian religion and western civilization which has had a great influence on the perception of the people; who now see the practice of the society as fetish and devilish. This attitude of the people has gradually eroded the culture and its practice. The culture of the Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerade has consequently suffered lack of patronage, popularity and inadequate documentation notwithstanding the

emotional effects, attraction and satisfaction which the masquerades performance gives to spectators.

This study therefore seeks to uncover, the origins, practices, rituals and the importance of the society in the socio-economic and religious life of the Nembe people and Nigeria. It may also provide an impetus for the rejuvenation and demystification of a cultural practice antagonized by the Christian religion.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Area of the Study

The research study was conducted in Nembe, a sub-Ijaw tribe in Eastern Niger Delta, Bayelsa State. Nembe is one of the culturally endowed ethnic groups in the Niger Delta.



Figure 1: Map of Bayelsa State of Nigeria showing Nembe.

2.2 Research Design

The study adopted the purposive research design. Persons and groups with presumed knowledge of cultural practices were selected for sampling. The study also adopted a descriptive survey research design methodology for the study. A structurally designed questionnaire was the research instrument used to obtain information for the study using oral interview method. The information gathered through the oral interview were analyzed and discussed in this study.

2.3 Sample of the Study

98 persons were interviewed from two locations in Nembe. Location I took place in Nembe at the house of the President of the *Sekiapu* Masquerade Society, *Sekiapu* House Nembe and also around the community. These persons range from members of the *Sekiapu* Masquerade society, elders and adults in Nembe and other Nembe towns like Twon Brass, Bassambiri and Okpoma.

These 98 (ninety-eight) Nembe indigenes interviewed involve 30 (thirty) members of the *Sekiapu* masquerade society who hold important positions including the present president of the *Sekiapu* society and "juju" priests who are members of the society; 30 (thirty) elders who are from 50 (fifty) years and above that have participated in the festivals; and 38 (thirty-eight) adults from below 50 (fifty) to 30 (thirty) years of age that have been resident in the community from birth.

Location 2 was carried out outside Nembe at Prof. E. J. Alagoa's residence, Oyoma Research Institute, Phase 2,

2.6 Definition of Operational Terms

Nembe	-	Nembe kingdom
<i>Sekiapu ogboyanowe</i>	-	The President of Nembe <i>Sekiapu</i>
Masquerade Society	-	
<i>Sekiapu</i>	-	Dancing people
<i>Owu</i>	-	Masquerade
<i>Own-ay a</i>	-	Mother spirit or Mother Masquerade
<i>Ofurumo</i>	-	Shark
<i>Owuaya</i>	-	Canoe of the mother of masquerade
<i>Owu-arun-sun</i>	-	Canoe of the water people

G.R.A., Orogbum Crescent, Port Harcourt; He is a Professor emeritus of History and is a prominent elder from Nembe. Also Chief (Major) Nathaniel N. Yekeogha, at Phase 2, G.R.A., Orogbum Crescent, Port Harcourt, He is the present chief of Yekeogha Group of Houses and an "ebe" (senior member of the *Sekiapu* Masquerade society).

2.4 Instrument Administration

Questionnaires were administered to the respondents at the shrine, their homes and performance sites to collate their responses. Both the literate and illiterate respondents completed the questionnaire items and the forms were collected. This exercise was completed within three weeks.

2.5 Method of Data Collection

2.5.1 Library sources

Cognate literatures like historical textbooks, journals, internet among others were used as secondary sources for the study.

2.5.2 Oral interview

Adults, elders and some members of the *Sekiapu* masquerade society were interviewed and the questions from the questionnaire read to them in the case of illiterate respondents.

2.5.3 Participant Observation

Personal observation of the performance of the *Sekiapu* masquerade society was made to obtain more knowledge for the study.



<i>Ekufernasondiabiri</i>	-	The Town of the six quarters
<i>Ekulema Sonoma se</i>	-	The town of the seven communities
<i>Egbert</i>	-	Stories
<i>Oki</i>	-	Sawfish

2.7 Methods of Data Analysis

The primary sources of information were critically analyzed and the response of the survey gives us a broader insight into the origins of Nembe, Sekiapou masquerade society and other practices.

3.0 RESULT/FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Brief Historical Origin of Nembe

Nembe Kingdom is a traditional State in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It includes the Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas of Bayelsa State. The paramount head of the Kingdom is known as "*Amanyano*." Today, leadership is split between the Amanyano of Nembe (*Obolomabiri*), and Amanyano of Bassambiri and Twon Brass. According to Hanson¹ historically the Nembes are Ijaw people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. He added that the date of foundation of the Old Nembe and where they emerged from is unknown due to divergent views about their origin. One account has it that the Nembe people migrated from Benin, while another account has it that they migrated from "Ekulema in new Calabar (Kalabari district). Also, other sources postulate that they migrated from Ijo Obiama². Subsequently, my personal oral interview gave a similar account that the first period was characterized as Ijo, since the migrant's place of origin was not exactly defined beyond locating it in the central Niger Delta. No place outside the Niger Delta was admitted. This period extended into the creation of a kingdom by Kala -Ekule, who apparently united a number of settlements. Indeed, the polity created is called "*Ekulema Sondiabiri*" (Ekulema of the six quarters).

The people of Nembe in Bayelsa State have rich cultural artistic traditions. Some of their rich cultural tradition is showcased on their cultural events through masquerade performers, which have a lot of artistic implication for the people. The interest of visitors shows that their masquerade performances have artistic and cultural values. The interesting thing to note is that, one major custodian of the Nembe cultural tradition is the *Sekiapu* masquerade which displays various kinds of masquerades in Nembe. Although, the *Sekiapu* Society is also displayed in some parts of the Eastern Niger Ijo block like Kalabari, Okrika, Bille etc.

3.2 Historical Overview of Sekiapu Masquerade Society of Nembe-Ibe

The historical origin of Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerade society is similar to that of Kalabari. Legend says it can be traced to a man known as *kperighada*, who was fishing in the Cameroons, and he wasn't seen for seven days. His people searched all around for him, but couldn't find him. When he reappeared days later, he told the people who had been looking for him that he was abducted by water spirits who taught him to dance a masquerade dance (Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerade).

In another account Nabena³ opines that the ancestors of the Nembe people who observed the water spirit performance from river banks stole their masks and drums, and then returned to the village to stage the plays there. Amongst the Nembe people, were women who got instructions from water spirits to introduce dance societies and masquerades. This may have led to the similarities in the tales with the Kalabari situation where *Ekine* (The mother goddess gave them the *Sekiapu* Masquerade). However, there is another account in history that a man was taken by water spirits, who taught him how to dance a masquerade dance. He returned to *Ondewari*, where he called the elders together to inform them of the water people's ultimatum that he must perform the masquerade dance or he would die. They carved the masks out of wood and he performed the (*Ofurumo* or Shark) dance (play) as it is being performed now. Although, there are other contrary views, the above account may have formed the genesis of the society.

3.3 The Role of Sekiapu Masquerade Society as Custodians of Cultural Tradition in Nembe

The *Sekiapu* masquerade society plays very vital roles in the development of Nembe tradition and culture among others. Despite its role as a masquerade society which performs with mask to entertain people, they also perform some spiritual functions within the communities in which they reside. According to Anderson⁴ the *Sekiapu* masquerade instills masculine virtues and promotes cultural knowledge. He adds that *Sekiapu* also appear to have played an important judicial role in the past by punishing members not only on minor offences like tardiness at group events, telling of lies, but also for more serious crimes like rape and theft.

Relatively, Anderson⁴ opines that the *Sekiapu* masquerade is credited with preventing barrenness, bringing children, preventing infant death, averting epidemics, and assuring posterity. In addition, Anderson adds that the masquerade undoubtedly satisfies need for aesthetic expression, provide a recreational outlet, and promote unity among various factions. He further stressed that in the past, they also served as an important means of acculturating youths. All these facts are also adduced by respondents in this study.

Alagoa⁵ also pointed out that the *Sekiapu* masquerade society served as integrating agencies. This is why it has membership ranging or cutting across the society, including the cultural, political, elite, and even the kids and acculturating slave recruits into the system.

Sekiapu masquerade society also serves as a traditional and educational institution which educates people the tradition and custom of the people through the drumming and pointing skills of its members. According to Anderson⁶, the society promotes cultural knowledge by requiring expertise in drum language, a system that involves rhythmic equivalence for



spoken words and share similar true pattern. A number of masquerades test the performer's skills through a sequence known as "the pointing or deal". The performer/Masquerade must respond to drum calls by indicating the turn or shrine being named, failure to do so, brings disgrace. Success in the dance proves him to be a cultured member of society. These facts were also corroborated and elucidated upon by the respondents from the field study.

3.4 Concise Summary of History of Ekine Sekiapu Social Club of Nembe-City

Ekine Sekiapu Institution is a century-old institution in the Niger Delta Region particularly Nembe Community. It emanates from Kalabari and spread to Kula from which community, it migrated to Nembe-City. *Sekibo* is the singular form of *Sekiapu* (the plural) meaning dancers in Kalabari dialect. *Sekiapu* therefore is a social organization purely formed for the sole purpose of entertaining humanity. It was established first in *Minama* also called *Nangbolo* in around 1782-1862 during the reign of king Karibo, Amachree III of Kalabari.

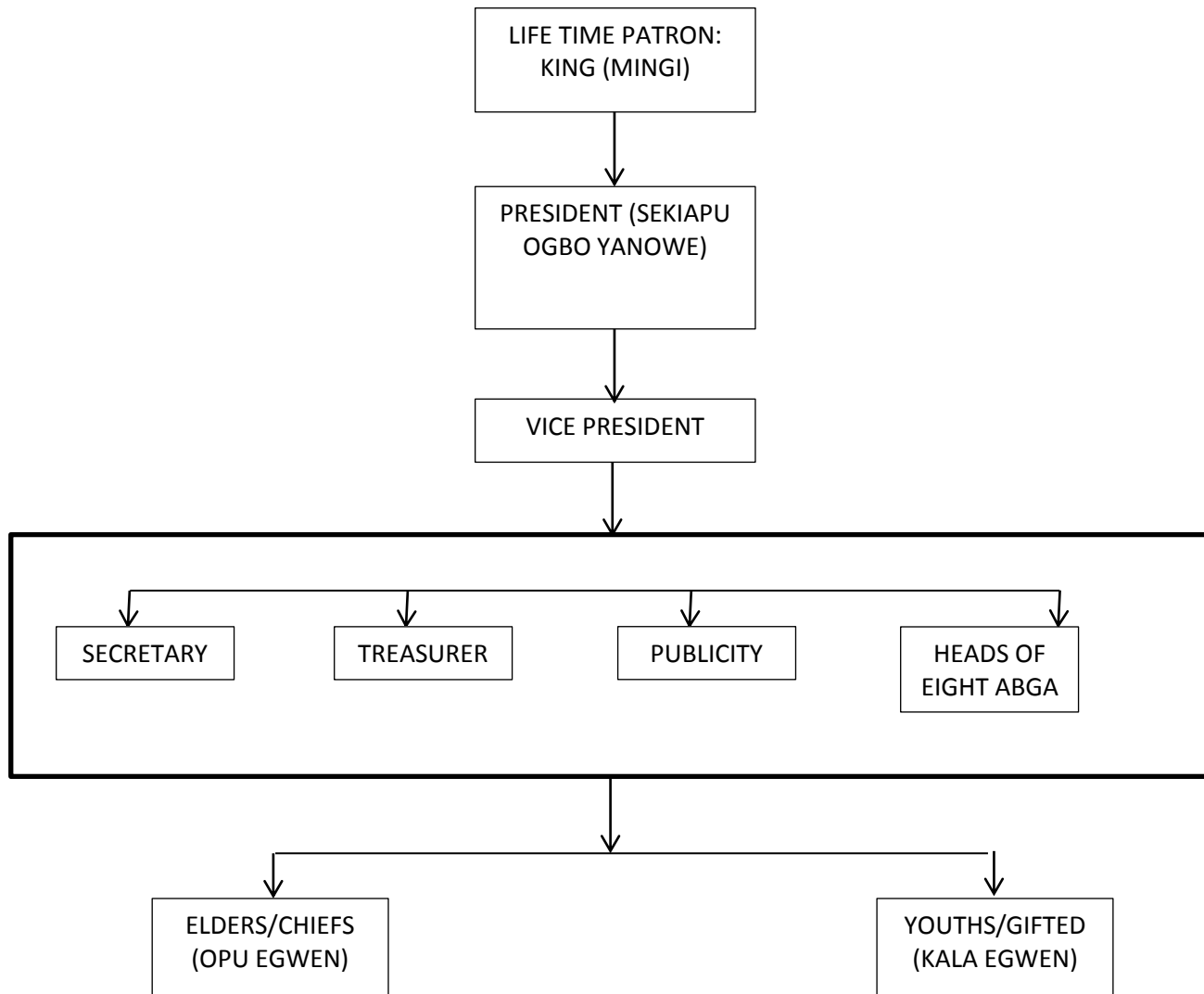
There are two groups of *Ekine Sekiapu* in major towns in this part of the Niger Delta including Nembe-City. *Opu Ekine Sekiapu* is one group while the other is called *Kala Ekine Sekiapu*. *Opu-Ekine Sekiapu* meaning big or senior *Ekine*, in like manner, *Kala Ekine Sekiapu* meaning junior or II *Ekine Sekiapu* which was initially formed with youths who are skillful in dancing, singing and playing masquerades but were not to pay the required membership fees of twelve bottles of gin in those days to join *Opu Ekine*. In order to tap the talent or expertise of youths, late chief Nelson Teitei Yemainain organized the youths together to form *Kala-Ekine* of Nembe and charged a membership fee of nine bottles of gin in the early 1940s. *Kala-Ekine* of Nembe formation occurred during the reign of Chief James Teidinyo Ogbari as the president of *Opu-Ekine Sekiapu* social club of Nembe. However where one or two youths show exceptional performances in *Ekine* activities, such as playing the drums, masquerades of different types and singing, such a youth must be taken to *Opu-Ekine Sekiapu* social club without paying a dime or Kobo. The major differences between *Kala Ekine* and *Opu Ekine Sekiapu* of Nembe, city include

1. The power to play *Owu- Ayah Aru* festival is vested only with *Opu Ekine*, the arrangements, finance and execution of *Owu- Ayah* festival rest with *Opu-Ekine*. However all members of *Kala-Ekine* will join or participate in all activities of the *Owu-Ayah Aru* events.
2. Another distinguishing factor between the two *Ekines* is that *Opu Ekine* social club of Nembe, with the lapse of time, evolved to a point that it became the highest cultural institution in the land of Nembe before the advent of *Kala Ekine*. Not only that: it also became invested with all executive, legislative and judicial powers upon greater entry into it by kings,

chiefs, nobles and the common people. The judicial functions are only performed by *Opu Ekine Sekiapu* of Nembe to settle litigants out of normal courts. Every member of *Opu Ekine Sekiapu* who is of the judiciary panel, to be safe from the devastating wraths of God and our ancestors, must be upright, impartial, in his view. And this was the sole reason trust in the capability of *Opu Ekine Sekiapu* arbitration was total, and acceptability of their decisions ever-assured.

3. Whenever important dignitaries pay a visit to king *Mingi* in his domain, e.g. Presidents, Governors, Royal fathers of other communities, foreign envoys, etc, the king, Chiefs and members deliberate as to what highest honour of the land to be accorded to such person. Admission into the prestigious highest cultural organization in Nembe, that is, *Opu Ekine Sekiapu* social club, NOT *Kala-Sekiapu*. *Opu Ekine Sekiapu* social club, is always the best option to serve as souvenir to be given to Very important Person's (V.I.P) who visit the ancient community of Nembe-City. Sir Chief Stephen. S.N. Appi- Agama, on behalf of *Opu- Ekine Sekiapu* institution chalked late Governor D.S.P Alamieyeseigha J.P and president Goodluck. E. Jonathan when they were ruling Bayelsa State and presented eagle feather to them as a symbol 'signifying membership of *Opu-Ekine* institution. Furthermore, the immediate past Governor of Bayelsa State and his Deputy Hon, Seriki Dickson and Rear Admiral Gboribioha John Jonah (RTD) were chalked and presented with eagle feathers in the name of *Opu-Ekine* of Nembe during their thank-you visit to Nembe.
4. Another significant difference between *Opu Ekine* and *Kala Ekine Sekiapu* clubs is in the area of the masquerades that they display. The early hours display in the night of New Year called *Igbila* masquerade to sanctify the Nembe community on New Year day, is sacrosanct duty of *Opu Ekine Sekiapu* club of Nembe-city not *Kala Ekine*. Also the masquerade *Tan Okoko (Oboko)* in Kalabari and *Owei Ofohi* (Cock) in Nembe is purely the exclusive right of *Opu- Ekine*. However, with permission, *Kala Ekine* can display it if they so wish. Apart from the above differences, both *Opu-Sekiapu* and *Kala-Sekiapu* play masquerades together. When one *Sekiapu* is on stage, the other members also join. When once one is a member of any *Sekiapu* in the Nembe, he can participate in all *Ekine* institution he finds himself. A member of *Opu-Sekiapu* from Nembe city can dance at *Kala Ekine Sekiapu* display organized at Nembe-Bassambiri. The governance of *Opu-Sekiapu* social club of Nembe can best be described with the following organogram below:

ORGANOGRAM OF SEKIAPU MASQUERADE OF NEMBE



3.5 Mask, Masking and Costumes of the *Sekiapu* Masquerade Society of Nembe

Mask is a covering for all or part of the face, worn to conceal one's identity. The Oxford English Dictionary ⁷ views it as a covering for all or part of the face, worn as a disguise or to amuse or frighten others. There are different kinds of masks and uses. These are fibre, wood and even plastic mask amongst others. In the *Sekiapu* masquerade society all masquerades wear mask as to disguise themselves to amuse, entertain spectators and also to frighten them not to come too close to them.

According to Anderson ⁸ in order to impersonate water spirits, Ijo dancers wear costumes designed to alter appearance and make them look less human. Most costume in corporate carved wooden hand pieces. This situation is applicable to the Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerades because they use wooden mask to cover their face to disguise themselves to entertainment speculators. Anderson also explained that the oddly juxtaposed features of guitar fish, skates, and

other members of the ray family way have suggested the forms of the composition headpieces for which this region is best known the headpieces of the masquerades which form mask for the masquerade to display are replica of fishes within the coastal area of the place.

According to Anderson ⁸, The Nembe claim they originally named their dance societies after fish and other animals made masks to represent them. Anderson added that most of the mask rest on their head instead of covering the face.

Masking societies according Anderson is known as *Sekiapu* (Dancing people) or *Ekine* in honour of a legendary Kalabari woman, *Ekineba*, who taught her town's people to perform masquerades, is similar to the *Kalabari Owu-Aru - Sun* or canoe of the water people.

Costume is one important aspect of the *Sekiapu* masquerade society. Costume forms major aspect of decoration and display because they are usually agog or decorated with flamboyant fabric. While others members of



the society are usually uniformly dress with *Engere* and *Atibo* cloth to perform their dance step. According to Anderson costume helps to create the impression of a spirit who has come out of the water to play. It typically, includes a *siko*, or fish tail, which is made by mounting a cane framework over the dancer's buttocks. Padding may be added at his waist to accentuate his stomach. Locust bean rattles are strapped around his ankles, and he carries objects like cutlasses, sticks, or switches in his hand.

3.6. The Role of Women in *Sekiapu*

Most historical narratives of the origins of the *Sekiapu* masquerade society of Nembe revolves around the mythology of a women spirit. According to Alagoa⁹ the central element in the mythology of the *Sekiapu* masquerade performances of Nembe is also a female spirits during which all the masquerades that play by the society in a cycle are brought in from spirit-land, it is a female spirit, "*Owuaya*" who brings them in, sitting at the helm of the ceremonial canoe. "*Owuaya*" of course, mean mother spirit or mother masquerade. Similarly, as narrated by Owolo¹⁰ women spectators also support and appreciate them during displays by applauding and praising them for their good performance. Thus, women have some roles to play in the *Sekiapu* masquerade society of Nembe, although women are prevented from partaking in some purification rites as women. Also, membership into the *Sekiapu* masquerade society according Owolo¹⁰ is restricted to only men; women are not allowed to be members.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The Nembe *Sekiapu* society has been in existence long time ago, thus it has become very difficult to know when the society started. Like the origin of Nembe itself there are a plethora of stories and historical accounts. One account of the story states that the society was founded by a fisherman who went for fishing after discovering the masquerade performance at a sea-shore by water spirits. He watched them perform. After which he returned and discussed with the leadership of the community who decided to form the masquerade society in the community. Although, there are other aspects of this information, but this explanation seem to be more popular. However, the society plays vital roles in Nembe both in the past and even at this present time of our existence. In the past before the Western colonialists came and gave us their form of governance, the society was saddled with the responsibility of enforcing the tradition, discipline and performing to entertain people. The society's activities and events over the years as gathered really helped in promoting, sustaining and preserving the tradition and culture of the people. The Nembe masquerade society has several masquerades in their possession that display periodically to entertain spectators as a way of also promoting the rich cultural tradition and heritage of their people.

The masquerade society is however shrouded in mystique. Notably, women are not usually members of the

society, although, elderly women who have passed child bearing age join them to perform during their dance performance but not as members.

Regrettably, despite all the contributions of the Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerade in promoting, sustaining and preserving the cultural entity of the Nembe people, it has over time suffered neglect, regression and misleading information concerning it. Observations and findings from this research have shown that due to the make-believe by, specially Christian religious practices in recent times, the activities of the society is viewed as demonic and thus responsible for the neglect and regression the society suffers. Sadly the situation is beginning to make people to get less involved in their activities. Therefore, making the culture and tradition of the people to begin to erode and go into extinction.

The findings of this study have shown that the demonetization of the society by other religious groups is baseless as the society has a marked impact on socio-economic and cultural development of the Nembe society.

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APPENDIX I A QUESTION SCHEDULE ITEM

Section A: Personal information Instruction: Please respond to the questions asked verbally to aid the study

1. State of origin: _____
2. L.G.A.: _____
3. Own Town: _____
4. Age: _____
5. Educational qualification: _____
6. Occupation: _____
7. Membership of any cultural society: _____

Section B General Question

1. Does *Sekiapu* masquerade society exist in Nembe?
2. When did the *Sekiapu* masquerade commence in Nembe?
3. Who and how was the *Sekiapu* masquerade society of Nembe founded and in what year?
4. Was the *Sekiapu* masquerade society of Nembe masquerade performance and activities graced with large spectators in the past?
5. Do large crowds still attend the performance of the *Sekiapu* masquerade events?
6. Are women members of the society and are they allowed to perform in the activities of *Sekiapu* masquerade society of Nembe?
7. How does one become a member of Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerade society and at what age one is expected to join?
8. What cause the reduction of crowds or spectators during the masquerade performance of Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerade society?
9. Does civilization, modernism and religion influence the sustenance of the Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerade society?
10. Does the Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerade society have any tourism implication towards the development of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria?
11. What are the artistic implications existing in the Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerade society?
12. What are the socio-economic values of the Nernbe *Sekiapu* masquerade society towards the development of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria?
13. What are the cultural implications of the Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerade society of Nembe towards the development of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria?
14. Is there any need to document the Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerade society, as a way of preserving it from going into extinction?
15. Does any other ethnic group have the *Sekiapu* masquerade society?
16. What are the other functions of Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerade society apart from masquerade and dance performance?
17. What are the basic benefits and relevance of the *Sekiapu* masquerade society to the people?
18. Do tourists and spectators come from different places to visit and watch the performance of the *Sekiapu* masquerade society?
19. Do petty trading activities like buying and selling take place during the *Sekiapu* masquerade events that can promote economic development of the place?
20. Does the regular performance of *Sekiapu* masquerade society events preserve the culture of the people and by extension help the education of younger ones the culture of the people as a way of developing them through the cultural activities of the *Sekiapu* masquerade society?