



# **The Revival of the Anyama Fishing Festival: Socio-Economic and Philosophical Implications for Community Development**

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## **Abstract**

The Anyama community fishing festival, rooted in the traditional cultural practices of the Ogbia Ijaw people, has historically served as a vital focal point for communal identity, economic exchange, and social cohesion. This study examines the implications of revitalizing the festival for contemporary socio-economic development within the Anyama community and its environs, while foregrounding the philosophical dimensions of African communitarian values, indigenous epistemology, and Ijaw ontology that underpin the festival's cultural significance. Adopting a historical descriptive research design, the study draws on primary oral interview data collected from ten purposively selected informants in March 2026, and on secondary sources including academic journals, institutional reports, and UNESCO frameworks. The study is exploratory-descriptive in intent, providing the first dedicated peer-reviewed account of the Anyama festival while laying the groundwork for future quantitative and longitudinal research. It argues that reviving the once-abandoned fishing festival holds significant potential for stimulating local economic growth through the promotion of trade, job creation, and small-scale entrepreneurship. It further highlights the festival's capacity to enhance cultural tourism, attract visitors, and generate revenue, while reinforcing indigenous knowledge systems and preserving cultural heritage as a form of African knowledge production. Additionally, the festival serves as a platform for strengthening social capital, fostering communal unity, and encouraging active participation among community members, consistent with African communitarian philosophical principles. However, the study identifies key factors responsible for the decline of the festival, including the growing influence of Christianity, rural-urban migration among youths, weakened traditional institutions, and governance challenges including a disputed private claim over the communally owned sacred lakes. To address these issues, the study recommends collaborative efforts between community leaders and government agencies, particularly the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, to establish supportive policies and legal frameworks. The significance of the study lies in its contribution to cultural preservation discourse, its engagement with African philosophy of values and knowledge, and its practical insights for sustainable community development.

**Keywords:** Anyama Fishing Festival, Cultural Heritage, Community Development, Socio-Economic Development, African Philosophy, Indigenous Epistemology, Ijaw Ontology



## **Introduction**

Festivals are significant cultural expressions that foster unity, preserve heritage, and promote socio-economic development within communities. They are also living texts through which communities articulate their ontological relationship with the natural world, transmit epistemological frameworks across generations, and enact the communitarian values that constitute African social ethics. Anyama community, located in the Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, is endowed with a rich aquaculture and fishing tradition owing to the presence of physical features such as lakes, swamps, and ponds. Central to this heritage is a fishing festival celebrated once every ten years, which serves as both a cultural and an economic event, and as an expression of identity among riverine people. However, the festival has witnessed a significant decline in organization and participation, culminating in its complete abandonment over the past three decades. This paper traces the historical development of the Anyama fishing festival, identifies the factors responsible for its decline, examines its cultural, social, and economic importance, and proffers practical strategies for its revival and sustainability. It argues that the festival must be understood not only as a historical and economic phenomenon but as a philosophical institution one that embodies Ijaw cosmological relations with water, encodes an indigenous epistemology of ecological knowledge, and enacts an African communitarian ethics of shared life. The study contributes to the preservation of local heritage and identity, serving as a potential guide for policymakers, tourism planners, and community leaders, and addresses the interrelated concerns of cultural tourism, economic development, and youth engagement. The central argument is that, if properly organized and managed, the revival of the Anyama fishing festival can engender sustainable community development by drawing simultaneously on the festival's philosophical depth, its ecological governance function, and its communitarian social architecture. Existing scholarship on fishing festivals in Bayelsa State provides a valuable comparative framework, drawing on documented analogues such as the Adigbe, Seigben, Argungu, and Lake Efi festivals. The absence of focused scholarly attention on the Anyama fishing festival represents a significant gap in existing literature that the present study seeks to address.

## **Philosophical Framework: African Communitarian Values and Indigenous Ontology**

A central argument of this study is that the Anyama fishing festival cannot be adequately understood through the lenses of history and economics alone. It must also be situated within the philosophical traditions of African communitarian thought, Ijaw ontology, and African epistemology. This philosophical reorientation is foundational to understanding why the festival's revival matters beyond its instrumental economic benefits.



## **African Communitarian Philosophy and the Festival**

African communitarian philosophy, expressed through ethical frameworks such as Ubuntu (“I am because we are”) and Yoruba Omoluabi ethics, holds that personhood and value are constituted through relationships and communal belonging rather than through individual autonomy (Gyekye 1997; Metz 2011). Within this philosophical tradition, cultural institutions such as the Anyama fishing festival are not optional ornaments of social life but constitutive elements of communal identity and moral formation. The festival’s structure, which requires the participation of all five compounds, age-grade associations, women’s groups, elders, and youth, enacts this communitarian ethic concretely. No single family, compound, or individual owns the festival; it belongs to the community as a whole, as do the sacred lakes it celebrates. The Ijaw concept of communal identity is sometimes expressed through the term “Koro-ama” (people of the water), a relational self-understanding in which the community’s identity is constituted not only through kinship and shared ancestry but through shared stewardship of the aquatic environment (Alagoa 2005). This concept is significant beyond the level of cultural description: it encodes a philosophical claim about the inseparability of human identity and ecological relationship. The Koro-ama framework resurfaces directly in the festival’s governance of the sacred lakes, where communal stewardship of Ogomekein, Osasa, and Olotu is not merely a legal arrangement but an ontological one — the community’s very selfhood is expressed through its custodianship of these waters. The festival is the performative enactment of this communal constitution. The festival’s abandonment, understood in these communitarian terms, is not merely a cultural loss but a disruption of the moral community itself. When the Edum priestly family declines to participate, when youth migrate to urban centres, and when community institutions fail to enforce lake regulations, the communitarian bonds that constitute the Anyama moral community are progressively severed. Revival is therefore not simply a development strategy; it is a philosophical imperative rooted in the community’s own value system.

### **Ijaw Ontology: The Sacred Lakes as Philosophical Entities**

Within Ijaw cosmology, water bodies are not merely physical resources but ontologically significant presences inhabited by spiritual forces, ancestral spirits, and water deities (Alagoa 2005; Horton 1969). The three festival lakes — Ogomekein, Osasa, and Olotu — occupy distinct positions within this sacred geography. Osasa Lake’s unique ontological status, in which fishing is entirely prohibited outside the festival period and its fish are taboo for consumption at other times, reflects an Ijaw understanding that certain natural entities exist in a relationship of reciprocal obligation with the human community: the community protects the lake; the lake provides in return, but only on terms set through its spiritual custodians. This ontological framework has direct implications for environmental ethics. The Ijaw sacred lake is not a resource to be exploited on human terms but a relational partner whose integrity is a condition of the community’s own flourishing. The desecration of the sacred lakes through the use of explosives and illegal nets is therefore not merely an environmental infraction; it is an ontological violation — an assault on the relational fabric that constitutes the community’s identity and its covenant with the water spirits. The Koro-ama principle and the sacred geography of the lakes



are thus expressions of the same underlying conviction: that communal identity and ecological integrity are inseparable. Environmental ethics here does not emerge from external frameworks imposed on indigenous practice; it arises from within Ijaw ontology itself.

### **Indigenous Epistemology: The Festival as African Knowledge Production**

African philosophy of knowledge holds that valid and reliable knowledge can be produced through indigenous epistemic practices including oral tradition, ritual, ecological observation, and ancestral transmission (Hountondji 1997; Wiredu 1980). The Anyama fishing festival is a site of knowledge production in precisely this sense. The ritual prohibitions on certain fishing methods — net-fishing, use of spears, woven traps — reflect sustained indigenous observation of sustainable harvest thresholds accumulated over generations. The role of the chief priest as custodian of the oracle preserves a form of practical-spiritual knowledge about the lakes' ecology and its spiritual dimensions that cannot be readily replicated by external scientific methods. The ten-year interval between festivals also warrants attention as an epistemological claim. This study interprets the decennial cycle as encoding indigenous ecological knowledge about fish population dynamics: the interval is long enough to allow fish stocks in closed lakes to recover fully, and short enough to maintain the social and institutional memory required for festival organization. This interpretation is supported by the oral testimony of elder informants who explicitly linked the ten-year period to the need for fish to “mature and multiply” (A. Ngonegi, personal communication, March 15, 2026), indicating that the ecological rationale is consciously embedded in traditional knowledge rather than being merely incidental. To dismiss these knowledge systems as superstition or as pre-scientific is to commit the epistemological error that Hountondji (1997) terms “ethnophilosophy” — the reduction of African knowledge to folklore rather than recognizing it as systematic, context-sensitive, and environmentally adaptive philosophy.

### **Religious Pluralism and African Values**

The tension between Christianity and the festival's traditional spiritual dimensions raises philosophical questions about cultural relativism and religious pluralism within African value systems. The philosophical challenge is not to adjudicate between Christianity and Ijaw traditional religion as competing truth claims, but to ask how a community can preserve its cultural values and communal identity — values constitutive of its moral life — in the context of genuine religious diversity. African philosophers such as Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu have argued that many African traditional values are separable from their specifically religious formulations and can be affirmed on humanistic grounds (Gyekye 1997; Wiredu 1980). Applied to the Anyama case, this suggests that the communitarian ethic, the environmental ethic, and the epistemological value of the festival can be preserved and expressed even as the specifically theistic ritual elements are negotiated and adapted.



## Literature Review

The literature on cultural festivals, intangible heritage, and community development in Africa is substantial but uneven. Several significant tensions run through it—between economic instrumentalization and cultural integrity, between external conservation frameworks and community agency, and between scientific and indigenous knowledge systems—that both motivate and frame the present study.

### The Concept of Development

The term development is employed differently by scholars depending on the context in which it is used. Contemporary understandings extend beyond mere economic growth to encompass qualitative improvements in the socio-cultural, political, and environmental conditions of human existence (United Nations Development Programme 1990). Earlier theorists associated development primarily with economic expansion and industrialization (Rostow 1960) — a conception widely criticized for its failure to address inequality, cultural erosion, and environmental degradation (Sen 1999). The human development perspective that emerged from this critique frames development as a process of expanding people’s capabilities and freedoms, emphasizing access to education, health, employment, political participation, and cultural expression (Sen 1999). What the mainstream development literature has been slower to recognize is the philosophical dimension of this shift: that sustainable development requires not only participatory methods but a genuine engagement with the ontological and epistemological frameworks through which communities understand and organize their lives. Community-based development scholarship has moved in this direction, emphasizing that sustainable initiatives must be rooted in local knowledge systems, traditions, and institutions, and that cultural practices including festivals serve as vehicles for the transmission of values and the regulation of social and economic relations (Cohen 1985). The revival of cultural festivals thus represents a development strategy that draws upon internal community strengths rather than externally imposed models, and that is philosophically consistent with the African communitarian tradition outlined above.

### Cultural Festivals as Socio-Economic Development Tools

The direct and indirect economic contributions of cultural festivals to host communities are well-documented. Cultural events are recognized as instruments for highlighting destination uniqueness and promoting positive destination image, benefiting not only tourists but the destinations themselves (Mtani et al. 2023). This finding is particularly relevant for peripheral, resource-dependent communities where conventional industries have stagnated. Yet the economic literature on festivals has tended to treat cultural value as a means to economic ends, a framing that risks instrumentalizing heritage in ways that undermine the very communitarian values that make festivals socially powerful. Research on the economics of intangible heritage attempts to address this by proposing tripartite frameworks that hold cultural, social, and eco-



conomic value in tension rather than reducing them to a single dimension. Aguado et al. (2024), in an empirical study of the Petronio Álvarez Pacific Music Festival in Colombia, identify cultural value, social value, and economic value as co-produced rather than sequentially generated. This framework is directly applicable to the Anyama case and is consistent with the philosophical argument that communitarian identity and economic benefit are mutually constitutive rather than competing. In the West African context, the Ahanta Music Festival in Ghana illustrates the transnational economic potential of well-organized coastal cultural festivals, demonstrating that the economic case for revival is not merely theoretical (Diminyi et al. 2022). Research on the Argungu International Fishing and Cultural Festival in Kebbi State provides the most direct Nigerian precedent, showing that properly planned festivals boost local economies while also attracting national and international tourism (Balogun & Nkebem 2022).

### **Nigerian Fishing Festivals: Evidence from Comparable Cases**

The Argungu festival's history is instructive not only as an economic model but as a governance analogue. The festival experienced suspension due to security challenges before being revived by the Kebbi State Government, illustrating that state actors can play a decisive role in festival restoration (Shyllon 2007). Critically, Argungu's revival included the institutionalization of its traditional fishing regulations — prohibitions on gill nets and cast nets — as formal state environmental policy, demonstrating that indigenous ecological knowledge can be translated into enforceable legal frameworks without sacrificing its cultural foundations. This is the model the Anyama case most urgently needs to emulate. Within Bayelsa State, Patrick et al. (2024) demonstrate through their study of the Adigbe Annual Fishing Festival of Ossiama Kingdom that fishing festivals frequently emerge from ancestral settlement narratives tied to sacred water bodies, functioning as mechanisms for transmitting oral history, environmental ethics, and indigenous knowledge. Feghabo (2021) conceptualizes the Seigben Fishing and Feasting Festival of Amassoma as a cultural drama whose symbolic performances reinforce social cohesion, age-grade participation, and communal celebration. Together, these studies establish that the richness of the Anyama festival's ritual architecture is typical of the region rather than exceptional, and that the comparative literature provides strong grounds for anticipating both the developmental benefits and the governance challenges of revival.

### **Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO Frameworks, and Festival Revival**

The international normative framework for cultural festival revival is anchored in the UNESCO (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003). This convention has prompted national policy development across member states and has elevated the visibility of indigenous cultural practices internationally (Gwerevende & Mthombeni 2023). However, UNESCO inscription is not without its tensions: the inscription process can commodify heritage, encouraging communities to perform cultural practices for external audiences in ways that dilute their internal social and spiritual functions. This tension between commercialization and integrity is a structuring problem for festival revival scholarship. Recent work has



found that communities are not passive subjects of this tension but active agents in navigating it: communities co-construct their cultural revivals by choosing which traditions to preserve in original form and which to adapt for contemporary realities (Abubakar & Salawu 2022). This finding resonates directly with the communitarian argument advanced in this study: that the Anyama community's negotiation of the relationship between Christian faith and traditional ritual is not a failure of cultural authenticity but an exercise of communitarian agency. Xiao et al. (2023), in their study of the Changdao fishermen's work song in China, further demonstrate significant economic value in fishing-specific intangible heritage among non-resident visitors, establishing the tourism revenue case for revival on solid empirical grounds.

## **Indigenous Knowledge, Environmental Governance, and Fishing Communities**

The intersection of indigenous knowledge and environmental governance is where the festival literature most directly engages with questions of African epistemology. Research on traditional natural resource management in Nigerian contexts has found that the breakdown of traditional beliefs and taboos constitutes the greatest threat to the sustainability of indigenous practices (Tamunuo 2014). This finding reframes environmental degradation as a philosophical crisis as much as an ecological one: when taboos lose their social enforcement, it is because the epistemological and ontological frameworks that gave them authority have been undermined. Festival revival, by reinstating those frameworks, addresses the root cause rather than merely the symptom. The literature on indigenous knowledge and climate adaptation reinforces this point. Nyong et al. (2007) demonstrate that the integration of indigenous knowledge with scientific knowledge provides an effective basis for climate change adaptation and community resilience — a finding with direct implications for Niger Delta fishing communities whose aquatic environments are doubly threatened by oil pollution and climate variability. Indigenous ecological calendars embedded in festival practice represent a critical adaptive resource that no amount of external scientific monitoring can fully substitute.

## **Festival Revival, Youth, and Social Cohesion**

Youth disengagement from traditional cultural life is documented across multiple African festival studies and represents one of the most consistent structural challenges to heritage revival. Muulila (2024) finds that cultural festivals can stimulate livelihoods through heritage tourism and creative industries, providing an economic counterincentive to urban migration. Yet the literature also reveals the limits of purely economic solutions: Diminyi et al. (2022) note that religious convictions — Christianity and Islam in particular — have become major obstacles to cultural participation in some Nigerian communities, a finding that parallels the Anyama situation closely. The same study observes the positive social externalities of well-managed festivals, including local consumption, skill development, and crime reduction, suggesting that the social and economic cases for revival are mutually reinforcing.



## **Gaps in the Literature**

The comparative literature collectively establishes the developmental potential of fishing festival revival but leaves several important gaps that the present study addresses or identifies for future research. Most importantly, there is no dedicated peer-reviewed study of the Anyama fishing festival: this study provides that foundation. Second, the literature lacks quantitative measurement of economic multiplier effects in Niger Delta festival contexts, a gap that future research with larger samples and quantitative methods should address. Third, gender-disaggregated analyses of festival participation and benefit distribution remain largely absent, a limitation that this study partly shares, given its 7:3 male-to-female informant ratio. Fourth, the philosophical dimensions of festival revival — its implications for African ontology, epistemology, and communitarian ethics — have received insufficient attention in the predominantly economic and heritage-management literature. This study's primary contribution lies in addressing this fourth gap.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a historical descriptive research design, which is appropriate for investigating the cultural, social, and economic dimensions of the Anyama fishing festival. The historical descriptive approach enables the systematic gathering, documentation, and interpretation of data about past and present phenomena with a view to understanding their significance and implications for community development. It is particularly well-suited to historical and cultural inquiries in African communities where oral traditions, artefacts, and lived experiences constitute primary sources of knowledge (Alagoa 1980; Creswell 2014). The study is exploratory-descriptive in intent: it does not seek to establish statistically representative or causally demonstrable findings, but to provide a rigorous qualitative account of the Anyama festival's history, decline, and revival potential as a foundation for future empirical and comparative research.

### **Ethics Statement**

This study was conducted in accordance with the research ethics guidelines of Federal University Otuoke, Nigeria. All participants provided informed oral consent prior to interview. Participants were informed of the academic purpose of the research, their right to withdraw at any time, and the manner in which their contributions would be attributed. Given the qualitative, community-based nature of the study and the absence of any sensitive or potentially harmful data collection procedures, formal institutional ethics board review was not required under the applicable guidelines of the institution. Data collection was completed in March 2026, prior to final manuscript preparation.



## Primary Sources and Oral Interview Data

Primary data were collected through oral interviews with ten key informants in Anyama community, Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State, conducted in March 2026. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured schedule organized around five thematic areas: (1) the historical origins and ritual structure of the festival; (2) the social and communal functions of the festival, including age-grade and gender roles; (3) the factors responsible for the festival's decline and abandonment since 1994; (4) community perceptions of the feasibility and desirability of revival; and (5) governance of the sacred lakes and environmental implications of revival. Key informants were purposively selected based on their knowledge of the festival, their roles within the community, and their age and experience. The sample was composed as follows: three community elders and traditional title holders who participated in previous editions of the festival; two members of the Edum family who hold custodianship of the festival lakes; two youth representatives (one male, one female); two community leaders including a representative of the Obanema's cabinet; and one local fisherman with direct practical knowledge of the festival's fishing practices. Of the ten informants, seven were male and three were female. The gender composition of the sample requires explicit reflexive acknowledgment. The 7:3 male-to-female ratio reflects the gendered structure of traditional custodianship roles in Anyama, where the priestly office, elder councils, and lake governance are predominantly male-held institutions. While deliberate effort was made to include female voices — including one female youth representative and perspectives from women's groups obtained through community leaders — it is acknowledged as a limitation of this study that women's specific perspectives on festival preparation, food culture, and women's group activities may be under-represented in the findings. The literature on Nigerian fishing festivals similarly lacks gender-disaggregated analysis, as noted in the Gaps section above. Future research should deliberately pursue a gender-balanced informant composition and examine how women's participation in and benefit from the festival differs from men's. The sample size of ten was determined by the purposive nature of the sampling strategy and the specialized, context-specific knowledge required. Given that the study targets a defined community of practice with a small pool of individuals possessing direct knowledge of the festival, ten informants provided sufficient depth and diversity of perspective for the purposes of a qualitative historical inquiry (Nwosu & Ugwuanyi 2019). Interviews were recorded with the informed consent of informants, and detailed field notes supplemented the audio recordings (Yin 2014). Key factual claims were cross-referenced across informants and available documentary sources, constituting an informal member-checking process consistent with qualitative standards for data validation.

## Secondary Sources

Secondary data were drawn from academic journals, books, government publications, and institutional reports. These sources provided comparative and theoretical frameworks for situating the Anyama festival within the broader literature on cultural festivals, heritage tourism, community development, and African philosophy. All oral testimony citations follow APA 7th edition personal communication conventions throughout: (Initials. Surname, personal communication,



Month DD, YYYY).

## **Historical Background of Anyama Ogbia**

Anyama Ogbia is located in the western part of Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State, along the Ekole River. The community was founded in the 15th century by Emekein, who migrated from Okoroma, a settlement established by Ogbeyan, the founder of the Ogbia kingdom. Emekein is believed to be one of the sons of Okoro, a descendant of Ogbeyan. Emekein had a son known as Aluku, who in turn fathered Asonoma, Owonwan, Asuguriya, Igwe, and Addi. Among these five sons, only Addi survived as a family and eventually became the royal family. Ekpere and Atari were relatives of Emekein, and Ogele and Eluke are other relatives who migrated with him from Okoroma (Okpara 2009). Historically, the name Anyama was derived from Anyi, a nickname of Addi, the only surviving grandson of Emekein. Anyama Ogbia has five compounds: Omoni, Alebe, Addi, Atari, and Ekpere.

## **Background and Historical Context of the Anyama Fishing Festival**

The Anyama fishing festival constitutes a longstanding cultural institution deeply embedded in the historical evolution of the community. Oral traditions suggest that the festival is as old as the settlement itself, a development largely shaped by the aquatic ecology of the area, which predisposed its inhabitants to fishing as a primary occupation (Alagoa 2005). Initially, fishing activities in the lakes were undertaken exclusively by indigenous inhabitants; however, participation expanded over time to include non-indigenes, transforming what was once a subsistence activity into a structured communal festival. As an expression of the cultural values of a riverine society, fishing became ritualized, with successful fishermen accorded recognition through symbolic rites and cultural performances. Geographically, Anyama is endowed with several natural water bodies — notably Ogomekein, Osasa, and Olotu lakes — as well as an extensive network of swamps that collectively serve as rich reservoirs of fish. According to oral testimony, the Olotu Lake was discovered by Anikamari Ekpere, who subsequently informed his associate, Agaku Edum, and together they began to explore its resources (F. Paul, personal communication, March 31, 2026). In keeping with the communal ethos characteristic of many African societies and consistent with the Koro-ama principle of shared stewardship, ownership of these lakes was vested in the entire community rather than in individuals or families, though custodianship was entrusted to the Edum family, which assumed responsibility for overseeing the spiritual and ritual dimensions of the lakes. Central to the organization of the festival is the institution of the chief priest, selected from among eligible male members of the Edum family. The chief priest bears responsibility for conducting all rituals associated with the festival, including those performed before, during, and after the event. Succession to this office is contingent rather than periodic, occurring only when the incumbent is no longer capable of



fulfilling the required duties. Historical accounts identify a succession of priests, including Agaku Edum, Ogbara Edum, Ngonegi Edum, Emiekuma Edum, and Monday Edum, all of whom played significant roles in maintaining the ritual continuity of the festival. Traditionally, the Anyama fishing festival is held once every ten years. The decennial nature of the festival is attributed to both its spiritual significance and ecological considerations, particularly the need to allow fish populations sufficient time to mature and recover (A. Ngonegi, personal communication, March 15, 2026). While oral tradition places the festival's origins at or near the time of community settlement in the 15th century, it should be noted that documented historical evidence for the decennial practice is most secure from the eighteenth century onward; claims about its earlier history rely on oral tradition and should be understood accordingly.

Strict regulations govern fishing activities within the lakes. The use of nets, spears, and woven traps is strictly prohibited outside the festival, and violations are believed to attract spiritual sanctions. During non-festival periods, the only permitted fishing method is the use of a hook and line, locally known as "adikpabh." The festival spans three days, with each day dedicated to fishing in one of the principal lakes — Ogomekein, Osasa, and Olotu. While the adikpabh method is permitted in Ogomekein and Olotu outside the festival period, Osasa Lake occupies a unique spiritual status: fishing there is strictly forbidden except during the festival, and it is considered taboo to consume fish from Osasa at any other time. These practices constitute, as argued in the philosophical framework above, a sophisticated indigenous environmental ethics grounded in Ijaw ontology.

## **Preliminaries of the Anyama Fishing Festival**

The preliminaries of the Anyama fishing festival encompass a series of organized, ritualistic, and communal activities undertaken before the commencement of the main fishing event. One of the earliest steps is the constitution of the festival committee, drawn from all five major compounds — Addi, Omoni, Alebe, Atari, and Ekpere — working in close collaboration with the Edum family, the traditional custodians of the fishing lakes. The committee is responsible for fixing the date, organizing logistics, mobilizing community participation, maintaining order, and enforcing rules and regulations. A central aspect of the preliminaries is the performance of ritual rites by the Edum family. As custodians of the sacred lakes, this family holds the exclusive right to conduct spiritual ceremonies that precede the fishing festival. These rites are performed to appease the gods, ancestral spirits, and water deities believed to inhabit and guard the lakes. Offerings of food, drinks, and symbolic sacrifices are made to seek divine approval, protection, and abundance. No fishing activity is permitted until these rites have been duly completed, underscoring the sacred nature of the festival and the authority of the Edum family. Additional preliminary activities include the physical preparation of the environment — clearing bushes and pathways leading to the lakes — and preparation of fishing equipment such as nets, traps, baskets, and canoes. The festival committee, in collaboration with traditional authorities, undertakes formal announcement of the upcoming festival through traditional communication channels such as town criers and community meetings, ensuring awareness among both indigenes and non-indigenes and attracting participants from neighboring communities.



The preliminary period is further characterized by the strict enforcement of cultural taboos and regulations: unauthorized fishing in the lakes, pollution of the water, or desecration of sacred sites are prohibited, with violations incurring sanctions ranging from fines to ritual penalties. In their totality, the preliminaries are comprehensive and multifaceted, reflecting the values, beliefs, and collective identity of the Anyama people.

### **Fishing Expedition and Festivity of the Anyama Fishing Festival**

The festival officially commences on the lakes, with each of the three principal lakes observed on successive days. On the first day, which traditionally falls in February (15th to 17th), all registered participants join the ogele procession from the village to Ogomekein Lake, carrying their fishing gear—nets, spears, locally made implements, and hand-crafted calabashes for storing the catch. As the procession arrives at the lake, participants position themselves around its perimeter, awaiting the final directive from the chief priest. The commencement of the fishing expedition is signaled by the priest, who walks from the village shrine carrying the oracle on his shoulder, assisted by two men, to a large tree at the entrance of Ogomekein Lake. By tradition, he is the last person to leave the village for the lake, and anyone who arrives after him is believed to face spiritual consequences (H. Ase, personal communication, March 30, 2026). Upon arrival, the priest performs libations and incantations, offering thanks to the spirits guarding the lakes and requesting a good catch. The sounding of a gong then signals the commencement of fishing, and participants simultaneously enter the lake, initiating a vigorous and competitive exercise. Because the lakes have been undisturbed for a period of ten years, fish stocks are substantial, with some specimens reported to have grown to exceptional sizes. The three-day expedition thus combines economic productivity with communal celebration, reinforcing the festival's dual character as both a practical livelihood activity and a cultural performance that enacts the community's relational covenant with its aquatic environment.

### **Closing Ceremonies of the Anyama Fishing Festival**

The closing phase of the Anyama fishing festival constitutes a significant ritual and social moment, symbolizing the conclusion of the ceremonial fishing exercise and the restoration of normal social and economic life. The ceremony begins with thanksgiving rituals at the shrine, including libations and prayers offered to ancestral spirits and water deities for protection, abundant harvest, and communal peace. The chief priest invokes blessings upon the land and the people, marking the spiritual completion of the festival. Following the ritual observances, there is a public presentation of the catch. The largest or most symbolically significant fish is displayed before the community as a sign of prosperity and divine favour, and portions of the catch are distributed to the priest and his family and to the Obanema (Paramount Ruler) and his cabinet, reinforcing communal solidarity and traditional hierarchies. Cultural performances — traditional dances, drumming, and festival songs — form a central part of the closing activities, serving as vehicles for transmitting history, values, and communal identity across generations. The closing ceremony culminates in a formal declaration by the Obanema, announcing the



end of the festival and officially lifting the restrictions on fishing that were in effect prior to the event. The closing activities thus perform multiple functions simultaneously: spiritual reaffirmation, economic redistribution, cultural preservation, and social integration.

## Findings

The following section presents the integrated findings of the study, drawing together documentary evidence, comparative literature, and primary oral interview data. It is organized thematically around four principal areas of inquiry: the festival's socio-economic contributions; the factors responsible for its decline; community perceptions on revival; and environmental governance implications. Because the study is exploratory-descriptive in design, findings are presented as qualitatively grounded insights rather than statistically generalizable conclusions.

### Socio-Economic Contributions of the Festival

Oral testimonies from community elders and stakeholders confirmed that during the years in which the festival was celebrated, it generated significant socio-economic benefits. Economically, the festival attracted large numbers of participants from neighboring communities, generating income from the sale of festival tickets, fish, food, and other goods. As one community elder recalled: “when the festival was active, every household in Anyama felt it in their pocket — traders came from as far as Yenagoa and even from Ahoada” (A. Baraburu, personal communication, March 25, 2026). While precise figures were not recorded during those periods, multiple informants independently confirmed that the commercial activity during festival days noticeably exceeded normal trading volumes, with vendors reporting income from fish sales, food stalls, transportation, and the sale of traditional crafts. This pattern is consistent with the broader literature confirming that fishing festivals generate substantial community income across vending, transportation, and hospitality sectors (Okpoko & Okonkwo 2011), and with the tripartite economic-social-cultural value framework identified by Aguado et al. (2024). Culturally, the festival served as a living repository of Ijaw identity, transmitting indigenous fishing techniques, ecological knowledge, ritual practices, oral histories, and communal values across generations. One elder informant described the festival as “the school of the community — everything a young person needed to know about who we are and where we came from, they learned at the festival” (A. Ngonegi, personal communication, March 15, 2026). This testimony directly supports the study's epistemological argument: the festival was not merely a celebration but a structured pedagogical institution through which African knowledge was produced, validated, and transmitted. Socially, the involvement of all five compounds, age-grade associations, women's groups, elders, and youth reinforced inter-compound solidarity and communal cooperation while providing a platform for conflict resolution and dialogue, enacting the Koro-ama communitarian ethic in its most concrete form. Environmentally, the festival's ten-year cycle imposed a de facto closed season on the sacred lakes, allowing fish populations to recover and demonstrating that indigenous cultural practices constituted a functional environmental governance system rooted in Ijaw ontological values.



## **Factors Responsible for the Decline and Abandonment of the Festival**

The study identified four principal factors responsible for the abandonment of the Anyama fishing festival since 1994. First, the influence of Christianity emerged as the single most significant factor in the festival's decline. The death of the last festival priest, Ngonegi Edum, left a vacancy that no member of the Edum family has been willing to fill owing to religious convictions, thereby stalling the organization of the festival. One Edum family informant confirmed: "we cannot go back to serving the water spirits; we are now Christians. But we also know something important has been lost" (F. Paul, personal communication, March 30, 2026). This testimony reveals the genuine philosophical tension between religious conversion and communitarian cultural obligation, a tension consistent with Diminyi et al. (2022) broader observation that Christianity and Islam have become major obstacles to cultural practices in some Nigerian communities. Second, the creation of Bayelsa State in 1996 and the establishment of Yenagoa as its capital triggered accelerated youth out-migration from rural communities including Anyama. Younger generations have progressively disengaged from traditional cultural life in favour of urban employment, leaving a significant gap in the human capital necessary for festival organization. This is compounded by the loss of technical knowledge: "the young men today do not know how to make a proper adikpabh or how to read the lake. That knowledge is dying with the old men" (F. Paul, personal communication, March 30, 2026). Third, community governance institutions have failed to assert collective ownership of the lakes or to enforce traditional prohibitions on indiscriminate fishing. A disputed private claim over the lakes by one family, in contravention of the communal ownership tradition established through the Kororama principle, has not been effectively challenged by community leadership. Fourth, the illicit use of explosives, drag nets, and improvised fishing devices by some community members has severely depleted fish stocks in the sacred lakes, removing the ecological precondition for a successful festival (Ekine 2021).

## **Community Perceptions on Festival Revival**

There is broad consensus among community stakeholders including elders, traditional rulers, and youth representatives that the revival of the Anyama fishing festival is both desirable and feasible. Informants expressed a strong sense of cultural loss arising from the festival's abandonment and articulated its revival as a matter of communal identity and intergenerational responsibility. One traditional ruler's representative captured this ontological significance: "the festival is not just an event; it is our identity. Without it, we are like a river that has lost its course" (O. Paul, personal communication, March 28, 2026). The river metaphor is apt in ways that go beyond the rhetorical: it frames the community's identity in precisely the relational, aquatic terms that characterize Ijaw ontology. Opinions diverged, however, on the ritual dimensions of revival. Christian community members expressed willingness to support a reformed festival that retains its cultural and economic character while adapting certain traditional spiritual elements. Youth informants expressed openness to engagement provided the festival were organized in ways that offer tangible economic and cultural benefits. This differentiated pattern of community response reflects the philosophical challenge of navigating African communitar-



ian values in conditions of genuine religious plurality — a challenge that requires negotiation and creative adaptation rather than imposition.

## **Environmental Governance Implications**

The findings indicate that the revival of the festival carries significant implications for the restoration of indigenous environmental governance. The desecration of the sacred lakes through indiscriminate and illegal fishing is widely regarded by informants as simultaneously an ecological and a cultural crisis — consistent with the study’s ontological argument that ecological and communal integrity are inseparable within the Ijaw worldview. One informant stated: “the use of bombs and big nets in those lakes has destroyed what our fathers built over centuries. If we are serious about the festival, we must first restore the lakes” (F. Omoni, personal communication, March 27, 2026). The revival of the festival, with its attendant ritual prohibitions and conservation ethic embedded in Ijaw ontological values, is perceived by informants as the most effective mechanism for restoring sustainable management of the lakes — more effective, in their assessment, than external legal enforcement alone.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **The Festival as a Living Heritage System and Philosophical Institution**

The richness of the Anyama fishing festival’s ritual structure — its ten-year cycle, its sacred lakes, its priestly custodianship, and its communal fishing expedition — confirms Patrick et al. (2024) argument that fishing festivals in Bayelsa State are living heritage systems that encode ecological knowledge, social organization, and spiritual worldviews. The elder informant who described the festival as “the school of the community” (A. Ngonegi, personal communication, March 15, 2026) captures precisely this epistemological function: the festival is not merely a celebration but a pedagogical institution through which the community’s indigenous knowledge — its understanding of fish ecology, its cosmological relationship with water, its social ethics — is transmitted across generations. This aligns with Feghabo (2021) conceptualization of such festivals as cultural dramas, in which the Anyama festival’s preliminary rituals, ceremonial procession, spatial organization of participants around the lake, and the central role of the Edum priest all constitute a performance that dramatizes the community’s cosmological relationship with water, fish, and ancestral spirits.

### **Religious Change, Cultural Erosion, and the Ethics of Revival**

The finding that Christianity is the primary factor in the festival’s abandonment corroborates Diminyi et al. (2022) broader observation that religious change poses a significant threat to indigenous cultural practices in Nigerian communities. The Edum informant’s statement that “something important has been lost” despite their religious commitment (F. Paul, personal communication, March 30, 2026) reveals that this disruption is experienced as a genuine moral ten-



sion — not merely an inconvenience. The specific mechanism — disruption of an institutional role rather than mere individual disengagement — is significant at the level of cultural theory: it illustrates how religious transformation can undermine cultural practices not through wholesale rejection but through the hollowing out of specific custodial offices on which those practices depend. Gyekye (1997) argument that African traditional values are frequently separable from their specifically theistic formulations offers a constructive path forward. The communitarian obligation to participate, to maintain the lakes, and to transmit knowledge to the next generation can be affirmed on humanistic grounds that are not necessarily incompatible with Christian belief. The willingness of Christian community members to support a reformed festival (O. Paul, personal communication, March 28, 2026) confirms that this philosophical path is available. This is consistent with Abubakar and Salawu (2022), who demonstrate that communities engage in creative cultural adaptation rather than wholesale restoration or abandonment.

### **Youth Disengagement and Urban-Rural Dynamics**

The role of youth out-migration in the festival's decline reflects a structural challenge common across sub-Saharan Africa. The testimony that “the young men today do not know how to make a proper adikpabh or how to read the lake” (F. Paul, personal communication, March 30, 2026) highlights the epistemological dimension of this loss: it is not only cultural continuity at stake but the transmission of a specific form of indigenous knowledge whose value for environmental governance cannot be replicated by external scientific methods alone. Muulila (2024) observation that festivals can stimulate livelihoods through heritage tourism and creative industries offers a direct counterargument: well-managed revival creates economic incentives for younger community members to remain engaged. The openness of youth informants to participation, provided it offers tangible benefits, suggests that the challenge is less one of cultural alienation than of economic incentive — a finding consistent with Akpan (2022) research on cultural tourism and rural development in Bayelsa State.

### **Governance Failure, Ontological Violation, and the Ownership Dispute**

The finding that weak community institutions have allowed both the desecration of the sacred lakes and the privatization of communally owned resources represents a governance failure with profound implications for festival revival. The informant's characterization of the lake desecration as the destruction of “what our fathers built over centuries” (F. Omoni, personal communication, March 27, 2026) captures the dual nature of this crisis: it is simultaneously an environmental emergency and an ontological violation — an assault on the Ijaw understanding of the community's sacred covenant with its aquatic environment. The ownership dispute over the sacred lakes deserves particular attention, both as a practical obstacle and as a philosophical case study. The claim by one family to private ownership of lakes that have been held communally since the community's founding is not merely a legal irregularity; it represents a fundamental negation of the Koro-ama principle — the philosophical conviction that communal identity and communal stewardship of the aquatic environment are inseparable. The



African communitarian tradition is unambiguous on this point: the moral legitimacy of individual claims is bounded by the prior claims of the community as a whole (Gyekye 1997). The failure of community governance institutions to contest this private claim therefore constitutes a failure not only of legal enforcement but of communitarian philosophy in practice. Resolving the ownership dispute is accordingly not merely a legal precondition for festival revival; it is a philosophical imperative without which the festival's communitarian meaning cannot be restored. The Argungu Festival analogue, where state actors institutionalized traditional fishing regulations as formal environmental policy, provides a practical model for translating traditional communal ownership norms into legally enforceable frameworks (Shyllon 2007).

## **Festival Revival as a Multi-Dimensional Development Strategy**

The tripartite framework of cultural, social, and economic value (Aguado et al. 2024) is well supported by the Anyama findings. The festival generates cultural value through the transmission of Ijaw identity, oral history, and ecological knowledge; social value through the mobilization of communal solidarity across age grades, compounds, and gender categories; and economic value through the stimulation of local trade, tourism revenue, and fishing-related livelihoods. As the community elder expressed, the festival's period was one in which "every household felt it in their pocket" (A. Baraburu, personal communication, March 25, 2026), confirming the economic dimension's lived reality. These three dimensions are mutually reinforcing rather than independent: the cultural legitimacy of the festival rooted in its ontological and communitarian foundations is what makes it an effective social mobilization tool, and that social mobilization is what creates the conditions for its economic impact. A revival strategy that privileges only one dimension risks undermining the holistic developmental potential of the festival.

## **The UNESCO Pathway and International Recognition**

The Anyama fishing festival possesses the characteristics of intangible cultural heritage of outstanding significance under the UNESCO (2003) Convention (UNESCO 2003): its rich ritual vocabulary, ecological governance function, role in transmitting oral history and indigenous knowledge, and community-wide social significance all constitute recognized criteria. Pursuing UNESCO inscription, as the Argungu Fishing Festival successfully did in 2016, would enhance the festival's international visibility while providing normative and resource support for its sustained revival (Gwervevende & Mthombeni 2023).

## **Policy Recommendations for Festival Revival**

1. **Establishment of a Strengthened Festival Governance Structure.** The festival management committee should be reconstituted and formally empowered to oversee all aspects of festival planning, regulation, and management. The committee should be inclusive, drawing membership from all five compounds (Addi, Omoni, Alebe, Atari,



and Ekpere), the Edum family, the Obanema's cabinet, youth representatives, women's groups, local fishermen, and representatives from the Bayelsa State Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The Obanema should be empowered to take binding decisions on all matters impeding the successful organization of the festival, including the resolution of the ownership dispute over the sacred lakes, whose communal status must be reaffirmed as a precondition of revival. Strong punitive measures, backed by community law, should be introduced against individuals exploiting the lakes indiscriminately.

2. **Cultural Negotiation and Religious Accommodation.** Given the centrality of religious change in the festival's abandonment, the revival process must engage constructively with the Christian community in Anyama. Drawing on the philosophical insight that many African traditional values are separable from their specifically theistic formulations (Gyekye 1997), a community-wide dialogue should be initiated to negotiate a reformed festival format that preserves the cultural, ecological, and economic dimensions of the event while accommodating contemporary religious sensibilities. Where appropriate, Christian thanksgiving services could be incorporated alongside or in place of certain traditional ritual elements, without compromising the festival's cultural integrity or ecological governance functions.
3. **Integration into Local and State Development Planning.** The Anyama fishing festival should be formally incorporated into the development plans of Ogbia Local Government Area as a strategic cultural tourism asset, with dedicated annual budgetary provisions for festival support, infrastructure improvement, and security. At the state level, the Bayelsa State Ministry of Culture and Tourism should develop a comprehensive cultural tourism policy identifying the Anyama festival as a flagship event for domestic and international promotion.
4. **Legal Protection of the Sacred Lakes and Aquatic Resources.** The Bayelsa State Government should enact or enforce specific legislation protecting Ogomekein, Osasa, and Olotu lakes as ecologically and culturally significant water bodies. The traditional fishing regulations associated with the festival — including closed seasons, prohibited fishing methods, and communal ownership of the lakes — should be harmonized with formal environmental law to create a legally enforceable conservation framework, with traditional institutions empowered as co-managers under a formal community-based natural resource management arrangement.
5. **Youth Empowerment and Engagement Programs.** Targeted programs should be developed to integrate young community members into the festival's economic and cultural activities, including training in traditional fishing techniques, cultural performance, festival management, and hospitality and tourism services. A community-based youth enterprise fund, supported by the Local Government and private sector partners, should be established to provide seed capital for youth-owned businesses aligned with the festival economy, including food vending, cultural handicrafts, photography, and transportation services.



6. **Documentation, Cultural Education, and Heritage Advocacy.** An urgent priority is the systematic documentation of the festival's history, rituals, oral traditions, and ecological practices before they are irretrievably lost. This should involve an oral history project coordinated by a partnership between Niger Delta University, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, and community stakeholders. The resulting documentation should form the basis for a community heritage centre at Anyama and serve as supporting evidence for nomination of the festival to the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Cultural education programs incorporating the history and significance of the Anyama fishing festival should be developed for primary and secondary schools in Ogbia Local Government Area, in collaboration with the State Ministry of Education.
7. **Funding, Resource Mobilization, and Public-Private Partnerships.** A diversified funding strategy should be developed to support festival revival, including government grants from the Bayelsa State Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) for research and documentation; corporate sponsorships from oil companies operating in Ogbia through corporate social responsibility programs; partnerships with the Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC); and diaspora contributions through a community development fund. All funding should be managed transparently by the festival committee, with annual financial reporting to the community.
8. **Promotion as a Cultural Tourism Event.** The festival should be strategically marketed as a cultural tourism destination at the national and international levels through professional promotional materials, including documentary films and social media content showcasing the festival's cultural richness and ecological uniqueness. The Bayelsa State Government should include the Anyama fishing festival in its cultural tourism calendar and establish collaborative partnerships with tour operators. The decennial cycle of the festival should be used as a marketing asset, positioning it as a rare and exclusive cultural experience.

## Conclusion

The Anyama fishing festival is a strategic tool for community development whose prolonged abandonment has negatively affected the socio-economic growth of the Anyama community. This study has demonstrated that the festival's decline is not the result of a single cause but a convergence of religious transformation, youth out-migration, institutional weakness, and environmental degradation. Its revival requires not a single intervention but a coordinated strategy that addresses all four dimensions simultaneously. The recommendations advanced in this paper provide a practical framework for this strategy, drawing on the lessons of comparable festivals in Nigeria and internationally, including the Argungu Festival's successful revival and UNESCO inscription.



This study has argued that the festival's significance cannot be adequately captured by historical and economic analysis alone. It is also a philosophical institution: an enactment of African communitarian values, an expression of Ijaw ontological relations with the aquatic world, and a site of indigenous epistemological production. The desecration of the sacred lakes is not only an environmental crisis; it is an ontological violation. The disputed private claim over communally owned waters is not only a legal irregularity; it is a negation of the Koro-ama principle through which the community's identity is constituted. The disengagement of youth is not only a demographic challenge; it is an epistemological loss. And the religious tension surrounding the priestly role is not merely an institutional problem; it is a philosophical invitation to negotiate the relationship between African values and contemporary religious identity in ways that preserve what is irreplaceable while accommodating genuine change.

The significance of this study extends beyond the Anyama community. It contributes to the growing body of scholarship on intangible cultural heritage and sustainable community development in the Niger Delta and in Africa more broadly, while advancing African philosophy by demonstrating the practical relevance of communitarian ethics, indigenous ontology, and African epistemology to contemporary development challenges. Future research should address the study's acknowledged limitations, particularly through gender-balanced fieldwork, quantitative economic measurement, and longitudinal tracking of community wellbeing following revival. When properly managed, the festival can serve as a powerful instrument for social cohesion, economic empowerment, environmental sustainability, and inclusive community development grounded in the philosophical traditions that have sustained the Anyama people and their relationship with their water world for centuries.

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