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CULTURE AND HISTORY OF THE EBEDEBIRI WAR BOAT TRADTIONS

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Abstract

This study offers a cultural–historical analysis of the war boat traditions of the Ebedebiri people of the Niger Delta, Nigeria. Drawing on qualitative methods including oral histories, ethnographic observation, and secondary historical sources, the paper examines the origins, functions, and symbolic meanings of war boats within Ebedebiri society. Historically, war boats served as instruments of defence, territorial protection, and political authority, while simultaneously embodying communal identity, spirituality, and indigenous maritime knowledge. The study further analyses the performative dimensions of the tradition, highlighting music, dance, costume, coordinated paddling, and ritual actions as elements that transform martial practice into a form of theatrical and cultural expression. Attention is given to boat construction and ornamentation as sites where aesthetics encodes social hierarchy, cosmology, and communal values. The paper also interrogates the impact of colonialism, Christianity, modern governance, and environmental change on the continuity and transformation of the tradition. Findings reveal that although the military functions of war boats have diminished, their symbolic and performative significance persists in festivals, rituals, and heritage performances. However, contemporary challenges such as urbanisation, economic pressures, and declining youth participation threaten the sustainability of the practice. The study argues for sustained documentation, cultural education, and community-led preservation strategies to ensure the survival of the Ebedebiri war boat tradition as a living cultural heritage.

Key Words: war-boat, culture, history, territorial protection, performative entertainment.

History, Environment and Culture of Ebedebiri

Ebedebiri is an Izon-speaking community located on the southern bank of the River Forcados. It is bordered by Bulou-Orua to the south, Angiama to the west, and Toru-Angiama and Udophori to the north. Within Nigeria's present political structure, the community falls under Ward 5 of Sagbama Local Government Area and serves as the district headquarters of the Tarakiri Clan in Bayelsa State.

Ebedebiri is regarded as part of the Tarakiri Clan because it traces its ancestry to Tarakiriowei, the same progenitor claimed by other member communities. The Tarakiri Clan currently comprises thirteen communities: Adoubo, Agbere, Agbidiama, Angalabiri, Ayamasa, Bulou-Orua, Ebedebiri, Egbemo-Angalabiri, Igbidiama, Isampou, Oduophori, Ofoni and Toru-Orua.

The community is traversed by several flat-floored creeks that drain into the Forcados River. Its terrain is predominantly low-lying, largely as a result of seasonal flooding and erosion during the rainy season. Ebedebiri is mostly surrounded by water, with limited land areas, and the landscape is generally flat, without prominent hills or mountains. The stretch of land between the riverbanks and the mainland is locally known as the *waterside*. This zone consists mainly of soft clay and sand deposits formed through coastal currents and riverine sedimentation. The land supports the cultivation of food crops such as cassava, yam, plantain, groundnut, pepper and sweet potatoes, while the waterways serve as routes for fishing and transportation. Climatically, the area is humid, with a prolonged wet season. Rainfall occurs almost throughout the year, from late March to October, while the dry season runs from November to February.

The genealogy of Ebedebiri is traced to Ondo, the father of Tarakiri-Owei, also known as Tara (Alagoa 444; Nieketien 7). Ondo originally lived in Benin but migrated with his three sons—Kolokumowei, Tarakiriowei and Opukumaowei—after the Oba reportedly confiscated private lands and imposed heavy taxes on the people (Alagoa 444). Following a period of migration, Ondo settled temporarily with Abowei, the founder of the Aboh Clan. He later left due to the scarcity of land and moved to Amatolo (OgboinIbe) in Sagbama-Igbedi Creek, where he died around 1620. After his death, Kolokumowei and Opukumaowei migrated eastwards to the end of Igbedi Creek, while Tarakiri remained nearby as neighbours of the Mein people in the Ogobiri axis of the creek.

A civil conflict with the Mein, reportedly arising from an unequal sharing of prepared *wan* (duiker) meat, led to Tarakiriowei's first migration to the Western Delta, upstream of Sagbama Creek, a tributary of the Forcados River that flows into the Forcados estuary. From there, he moved downstream and settled at Oruassa with his sons: Muluku, Kiobriowei, Awaran, Kolokriowei, Aranmabri, Agberiowei, Ogelle, Egbemo-Angalabri, Kanboye and Ayama. As these sons married and expanded their families, they migrated further and established separate settlements. Their dispersal was driven by a spirit of adventure and the need to secure sufficient resources for their growing households. Alagoa notes that

"the founders of Urhobo groups of Owha, Ogo, Ogele (Ughelli), Agbarha and Orogun are also said to have migrated from Oruassa" (445).

Ebedebiri was one of the communities founded during this period of migration. It was established by Ebidebiriowei, a son of Awaran and a grandson of Tarakiriowei. Historical accounts state that Awaran had three children: Edenmowei, Ebidebiriowei and Ayamasa-owei. While Ebidebiriowei founded Ebedebiri, Ayamasa-owei went on to establish the Ayamasa community. Ebidebiriowei had two sons, Abi and Okponye. Abi fathered Obo and Ogba, while Okponye had Ofori and Oluka. These lineages form the basis of the four quarters of Ebedebiri: Oboware, Ogbazi, Oforiwari and Olukaware. Below is a genealogy chart of Ebedebiri community.

THE GENEAOLOGY OF EBEDEBIRI COMMUNITY IN A CHAT

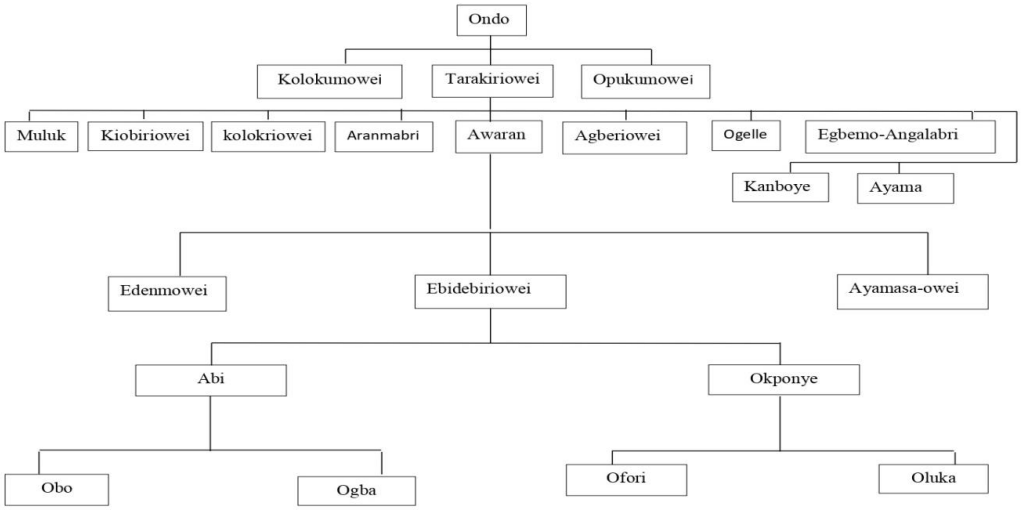


TABLE 1: A GENELOGICAL TABLE DIAGRAM SHOWING THE FOUNDATION OF EBEDEBIRI COMMUNITY, Sources, (*The History of Tarakiri Clan)* by, P.B. Nieketien Ebedebiri

The Ebedebiri people, like other descendants of Ondo (Izon), are dark-skinned and generally considered handsome or beautiful, with a strong sense of decency (Owonaro 71). They are known to be truthful, loyal and courageous, though at times they may be stubborn and difficult to manage in large gatherings. Nevertheless, respect for elders is deeply ingrained in their social life. According to Sunday Akemefa, in an oral interview with the researcher, meals are served strictly according to age hierarchy. In greetings, younger persons kneel on one knee when saluting an elder. This reverential attitude also extends to the marriage

practices. Women are regarded as industrious, devout and faithful to their husbands, and they are traditionally discouraged fromengaging in strenuous and dangerous activities such as warfare.

Beyond farming, the Ebidebiri people are deeply religious, and their belief system strongly influences their character and worldview. They believe in the existence of numerous divine beings, most of whom are thought to reside in bodies of water such as rivers, lakes and creeks, each representing different aspects of human life. For example, Sene, the national deity of the Tarakiri, is consulted for fertility and productivity, while Kunowei and Egbesu are invoked for protection in times of war. They also believe in the spirit world (*Teme-akpo*), which consists of ancestors, Tamarau (the supreme creator) and various divinities believed to control the physical world. Worship is commonly carried out through formal rituals performed in, on or near water. As part of ancestral veneration, families often erect shrines close to their homes, where libations are poured and religious rites observed.

In their quest to maintain harmonious relations with the water deities believed to exercise strong influence over the community, the people perform specific rituals, particularly on the eve of festivals such as *Owu* (masquerade) and *Endi-ba-oge* (fishing). These rites often involve paddling to the middle of the river with items such as assorted drinks, biscuits and groundnuts, offered to invite the deities to participate in the celebrations. Upon reaching the river's centre, the deities are invoked individually by name and title, and the community's request for their approval, presence and protection is formally presented. During the process, offerings are poured or cast into the water, accompanied by ordered movements and symbolic gestures. Similar rites are also performed to honour and appease these spirits, as it is traditionally believed that the well-being of the community depends on the success of such performances.

During ritual performances, participants impersonate water spirits, dancing in response to the intense rhythms of the orchestra. Alagoa, in *The Land and People of Bayelsa State: Central Niger Delta*, observes that:

> Izon performers impersonate water spirits by wearing designed costumes to alter their appearance and make them look less human. They employ a variety of dramatic devices to portray water spirits as unruly beings under the precarious control of drummers, dance demonstrators and attendants. Each performance

> incorporates specific songs, dance steps and tableaux, while allowing considerable room for improvisation (136–137).

A distinctive feature of Ebedebiri society is its strong belief in structured leadership, hierarchy and a historically warlike disposition. Oral historians such as Egemeze and M. L. Agoro recount that during the era of the transatlantic slave trade (*omoni-beke*), the community was heavily involved in inter-tribal conflicts. This period was characterised by piracy, naval crime and slave raiding, making riverine travel and trade extremely dangerous. In response, wealthy chiefs organised war boats (*omu-aru*), manned by armed warriors believed to possess mystical powers, to protect themselves and their goods. Fear was widespread, as individuals armed themselves with charms and weapons and travelled only in groups. At times, communities carried out nocturnal raids on neighbouring villages, capturing men, women and children for sale to slave dealers. Social order during this period was largely governed by the principle of survival of the fittest, allowing the strong to dominate the weak. These conditions fostered a culture of aggression and militancy as a means of self-defence.

Over time, however, the people became more socially organised and united in defending themselves against both internal disputes and external aggression, such as conflicts arising from broken agreements or invasions. Although contemporary Ebedebiri society is more civil, vestiges of its martial heritage remain evident in modes of dress, speech and recreation. Wrestling is a popular pastime among men, serving as a display of strength, courage and masculinity. Women perform processional war dances (*ogele*) before wrestling events, adding colour and entertainment. Recreation occupies an important place in community life, with rivers and creeks frequently used for aquatic sports and canoe regattas. Beyond transportation, canoes function as theatrical props in performances such as victory parades, carnivals, ceremonial displays and war boat enactments.

Ebedebiri War Boat (*Omu-Aru*) Traditions

The war boat performances of the Ebedebiri people are similar to those found in other Izon communities across the Niger Delta. According to Augustine Angba, Nkem Fortune Alu and Osuji Onyeku, the tradition dates back to the transatlantic slave trade period and is closely linked to the commemoration of trading expeditions and victories in inter-communal warfare (2). A notable example is the Nembe victory over the United African Company (UAC) in 1892, celebrated in

Alagoa's *Bekeyoume* and dramatised in Ola Rotimi's*Akassa You Mi*. Alagoa notes that during the reprisal attack on the UAC, the Nembe deployed hundreds of canoes, with each community in the clan represented by a war canoe. This victory is still re-enacted as a performance during festivals in the Nembe Kingdom. Rotimi's play further elaborates on the earlier attack on Nembe, also documented by Alagoa. Today, war canoes remain prominent among many families in Nembe and even in Okrika.

In Izón communities, canoes are constructed for specific purposes: farming and transportation, ceremonial regattas, long-distance travel—as highlighted in J. P. Clark's *The Boat*—and warfare. Each type reflects its intended function through design and ornamentation. For instance, the Nembe war canoe used by King Koko during the conflict with the United African Company was equipped with cannons and elaborate decorations intended to intimidate opponents.



PLATE 1: King Koko of Nembe War Canoe of 1892 (*Photo curled from Google search)*

Abraye, citing Henry Bell-Gam, observes that monarchs and chiefs of the Niger Delta travelled by canoe either to visit their counterparts in neighbouring city-states or to transport trade goods between markets. Canoes conveying valuables (*alali-aru*) were paddled by men drawn from the households of monarchs or chiefs (34). Owing to frequent attacks by slave traders and pirates on these treasure

boats, an accompanying war canoe (*omu-aru*) was deployed to provide protection. Expanding on this, Abraye notes that:

After the abolition of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in 1807, a new legitimate trade in palm products flourished. Niger Delta chiefs became major actors in this commerce. Markets were located in the hinterlands, requiring chiefs who retained slaves to travel inland to sell palm oil and kernels. This competitive trade demanded able-bodied, well-fed men who could paddle swiftly to reach markets early. Members of the chiefs' or kings' households therefore practised paddling movements in synchrony with traditional drumming, songs and dances in the various war canoes (33–34).

Anderson similarly remarks that navigation through the Niger Delta was extremely dangerous because of piracy, slave raids and attacks on foreigners, leading local populations to regard trade as an undertaking reserved for the bravest individuals (93). To deter such threats, "Izon middlemen who dominated trade along the River Nun, the central artery of the Delta, designed their canoes to withstand attacks from inland neighbours and foreigners" (Anderson 99). Describing war canoes built by Izon men of Nembe descent in the 1830s, Anderson cites the Lander brothers, who noted that:

> The boat is extremely large and heavily laden, paddled by forty men and boys, with about twenty additional occupants… making at least sixty people on board… It is furnished with a cannon lashed to the bow, numerous cutlasses, and quantities of grape and shot, powder and flints. There are also boxes filled with spirituous liquors, cotton and silk goods, earthenware and other European manufactures… This canoe is cut from a single tree trunk, draws four and a half feet of water, and measures over fifty feet in length (99).

Although the Ebedebiri people also employed war canoes to protect chiefs and merchandise during the transatlantic slave trade, Chief Emeku Egemeze stated in an oral interview that, in Ebedebiri, war boat performances primarily serve the worship of the deity Kunowei. Kunowei is revered as the community's protector against external aggression. Consequently, between 25 and 30 October each year, the community stages a war boat ritual in her honour. During this period, the war canoe may be used as a challenge boat to demonstrate the supremacy of Ebedebiri's war deity, military strength and firepower. The canoe is rowed past

neighbouring communities amid drumming, war songs and gunshots fired into the air, daring others to engage in combat. Should a neighbouring community accept the challenge, an attack on the Ebedebiri war canoe may ensue.

Such attacks are considered extremely dangerous, as the challenge is believed to be inspired by Kunowei's desire to display power. The practice is categorised within a cycle of provocation, retaliation and reconciliation: provocation incites confrontation, retaliation asserts strength, and reconciliation restores peace. Oral traditions maintain that no community that has attacked the Ebedebiri war canoe has survived. An assault on the canoe is interpreted as an attempt to cut the *epi* (crown) of the community. The *epi*, a calabash tied to the canoe's trunk and allowed to float on the water symbolises communal authority. Cutting another community's *epi* signifies superiority; hence, it is guarded by the fiercest warrior.

In times of dispute with neighbouring villages that threaten armed conflict, the people invoke Kunowei through rituals, seeking her protection. Egemeze explains that after such rites, any gun fired against Ebedebiri becomes ineffective, while bullets fired by Ebedebiri warriors are believed to cause devastating destruction. Before battle, a priest of Kunowei selects young men, purifies and prepares them for warfare. These warriors must be courageous, loyal, morally upright and indigenes of the community. Among communities in the Tarakiri Clan and Sagbama Local Government Area, only Ebedebiri allows its *epi* to float visibly on the water during war boat displays. In contrast, neighbouring communities such as Tungbo, Sagbama and Angalabiri attach their *epi* to the canoe but submerge it. Oral historians describe Ebedebiri as both the spiritual and administrative headquarters (*Ande-epe*) of the Tarakiri Clan.

Ebikapa Weridongha, a former Chairperson of the Community Development Committee, could not specify the exact origin of the war boat ritual but affirmed that it predated his lifetime. Akpos Adesi explains that war canoes are integral to Ebedebiri culture, reflecting the community's riverine livelihood and need for protection. Another explanation, offered by Okiyeazi Weridongha and Tamarapreye Orukekeme, links the war canoe to the annual ritual boat (*ekian-aru*). Ritual cleansing at the end of the year is widespread across African societies. Abraye and Kansese note that many Izón communities employ the *Owu-sei* masquerade to cleanse communities of evil spirits, either at the beginning or end of the year (332). Similarly, Adelugba observes that Bori dances are performed during periods of communal crisis to seek divine blessings (207), a practice reflected in Osofisan's*The Strong Breed*.

In Ebedebiri, the *ekian-aru* is prepared to symbolically transport misfortunes—such as death, poverty and disease out of the community. These symbolic items are deposited into the river at the outskirts of the town following ritual observances. Afterwards, the ritual carrier transfers to the accompanying war canoe (*omu-aru*), which then returns triumphantly to announce the community's successful purification.

Tamarapreye Orukekeme, a former warlord who manned the Ebedebiri war canoe for over a decade, explains that the presence of the *omu-aru* is necessary because neighbouring communities often attempt to prevent the *ekian-aru* from approaching their territory, sometimes firing at it. The war canoe, crewed by armed warriors, serves as a deterrent. He further notes that if the ritual boat were to discharge its contents near another settlement, that community would suffer misfortune, hence the hostility it attracts.

War canoes are also deployed during inter-communal conflicts. Fred Brisibe, in an oral interview, notes that in Izon communities such as Ojobo and Ebedebiri, war canoes are used for revenge missions (*sowei-bi*). Where death results from murder, the victim's kinsmen organise such expeditions. Anderson supports this, observing that prolonged feuds sometimes force communities to relocate to ease tensions (91).

Ebedebiri maintains no standing army and does not pursue wars of conquest. However, the people readily mobilise guerrilla forces when compensation for accidental deaths, adultery fines or gambling debts is refused. Anderson explains that among the Izón, warfare and hunting are regarded as ultimate tests of masculinity, with conflicts continuing until adequate restitution is made (93–94).During inter-tribal wars, charmers accompany war canoes to invoke fog or dew, obscuring the enemy's vision (Angba, Alu and Onyeku 4). Warriors are fortified with charms, including white cloths imbued with spiritual power (*osei*), over which they leap before battle. Anderson similarly records the extensive use of charms and herbal concoctions, including bulletproofing amulets (96–98).

This practice parallels revenge missions depicted in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where Umuofia demands compensation from Mbaino to avert war. In Izón society, such missions are typically undertaken by young, agile men, stirred to action by women's processional war songs that challenge their courage and prowess (Anderson 94). In Ebedebiri belief, a war canoe embarked on a revenge mission must never retreat. Turning back signifies cowardice; instead, paddlers reverse direction only by changing orientation within the canoe. This principle

reinforces bravery and resolve. A warrior is always stationed to guard the *epi*, tasked with killing anyone who attempts to cut it. Those who rely on spiritual enhancements to challenge Ebedebiri warriors are believed to be rendered powerless by Kunowei, after which the guarding warrior ensures their elimination, thereby preserving the deity's honour and the community's prestige.



PLATE 2: warrior guarding *epi* in war boat performance. War boat performance of the Ebedebiri people of 22/4/23 (*Photo by Mike Ekiye).*



PLATE 3: warriors attempting to cut *epi* in war boat performance. War boat performance

of the Ebedebiri people of 22/4/23 (*Photo by Mike Ekiye).*

Every performer in the boat has a clearly defined role. The priest serves as a spiritual guardian, acting as the intermediary between Kunowei and her warriors. Singers and drummers provide motivation and inspiration, while the paddlers propel the boat forward. The warriors remain on board as fighters. In many instances, after the priest has performed incantations, offered propitiation and ritually prepared the warriors, the sky is said to darken, fog envelops the river, or a strong breeze arises. These signs indicate that the moment of departure has arrived. The boat therefore sets out only at the deity's command, a moment heightened by vigorous drumming and spirited singing.

In response to changing social realities, the Ebedebiri war boat is now also performed in secular contexts, stripped of its ritual intensity and mystical associations. Such performances take place during the burial of kings or notable warriors, the coronation of a new monarch, or in honour of distinguished visitors, serving to showcase the community's rich history and cultural heritage. Unlike the ritual version, the secular war boat performance places no restrictions on audience participation and consequently attracts wider patronage. Its entertainment value has come to dominate other traditional functions; as public spectacle remains the primary interest of spectators. The war boat performance examined in this study is therefore the secular form, characterised by openness and unrestricted audience engagement.

Conclusion

This study has provided an analytical examination of the Ebedebiri people and their war boat tradition, situating the practice within its historical, cultural and socio-political contexts. It has demonstrated that the war boat is not merely a battle-hardened or performative activity, but a complex cultural institution through which the community expresses identity, authority, spirituality and collective memory. Rooted in the riverine environment of the Niger Delta, the tradition reflects the deep relationship between the Ebedebiri people and their waterways, which have long shaped settlement patterns, defence strategies, trade networks and intergroup relations.

The findings reveal that war boats historically functioned as instruments of protection and territorial assertion during periods of inter-communal conflict, while also fulfilling ceremonial and symbolic roles during festivals, rites of passage and communal celebrations. The processes of construction, decoration and deployment, alongside coordinated paddling, drumming and singing, point to

a refined system of indigenous knowledge, craftsmanship and performative aesthetics. Together, these elements strengthen social cohesion, transmit cultural values across generations and reinforce the legitimacy of traditional institutions.

The study further highlights the adaptive nature of the war boat tradition in response to changing historical conditions, including colonial rule, the decline of inter-ethnic warfare, the spread of Christianity and the influence of modern state governance. Although its original military functions have waned, the symbolic and performative significance of the war boat endures, particularly within cultural festivals and heritage displays. Nevertheless, contemporary challenges such as urbanisation, environmental degradation, economic pressures and declining youth participation pose serious threats to the survival of this cultural practice.

In conclusion, the war boat tradition of the Ebedebiri people remains a vital cultural resource that encapsulates their historical experiences, worldview and artistic expression. Its preservation and revitalisation are crucial, not only for safeguarding Ebedebiri cultural identity but also for enriching the wider narrative of Niger Delta and Nigerian indigenous maritime cultures. The study therefore advocates sustained documentation, community-based cultural education and supportive cultural policies to ensure that the war boat tradition continues as a living heritage rather than a vestige of the past.

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