

# **DANCE ACROSS GENERATIONS FROM ELDERS TO CHILDREN: THE UNIQUENESS OF AKWAOBIO THEATRE TROUPE IN AKWA IBOM STATE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Beyond its entertainment value and its role as a cultural marker, dance is a force that transcends boundaries and embodies a unifying power. It is a bridge that spans time, space and cultural differences, connecting human to its past and to each other in ways that defy easy categorization. Akwa Ibom State, a region steeped in cultural richness, boasts a wealth of traditional dances and troupes, each with its own distinctive character. Amidst the rapid transformations of modern society, it has become imperative to preserve, promote and document these dances, lest they fade away with time. This paper examines the vital role played by Akwaobio Theatre Troupe in preserving and transmitting Akwa Ibom State's unique dance traditions across generations. In the course of preserving these dances and making the accessible to the youths, Akwaobio Theatre Troupe ensures that the knowledge and skill associated with these art forms remain alive and dynamic. The study also explored importance of intergenerational understanding and the benefits of cultural tourism, highlighting the potential of Akwaobio Theatre Troupe's initiatives in promoting greater appreciation and awareness of Akwa Ibom State's cultural heritage. Beyond mere preservation and promotion, the troupe's initiative foster intergenerational understanding and respect for both young and old. This harmonious collaboration between the different generations nurtures the growth and evolution of Akwa Ibom's dance traditions, ensuring they remain vital and relevant for years to come.

**Keywords:** Dance, Generations, Uniqueness, Theatre, Troupe

## Introduction:

Dance is in essence the coordinated and rhythmic movement of the body to music within a defined space. According to Ekaette Edem, “Dance is truly a mirror that reflects the myriad aspects of a culture. Each geographical location, religious belief, political and historical experience, biological, social, and economic factor adds a distinct layer to the depth and richness of a particular dance form” (161). Yet, it is more than just a physical form of expression. At its core, dance is a conduit for conveying ideas, emotions, and stories, leveraging the powerful language of movement and music to speak directly to the hearts and minds of its audience. Through this language, dancers can express a spectrum of human experiences, from love and joy to grief and conflict. They become storytellers, conveying complex narratives and evoking a visceral response in their viewers, forging a connection that transcends verbal communication. Walter Sorell asserts that, dance is “as old as man and his desire to express himself to communicate his joys and sorrows, born with the most immediate instrument: his body” (10).

To borrow the words of Sorell, dance, like culture, is as old as humankind itself. Ekaette Edem affirms that “culture in its diversity is distinguished by virtues of its specific historical evolution and its unique characteristics, making each culture structurally unique and original (5). Precisely, the multifaceted nature of culture is a product of its diverse historical trajectory and distinctive features. No two cultures are exactly alike, as each had developed in its unique time, and context. This inherent singularity imbues each culture with its own identity, rooted in customs, traditions, beliefs, languages, artistic expressions, and shared narratives. These elements woven together over time to create a rich pastry of unique characteristics that make

each culture one of a kind, worthy of preservation and celebration. As such, dance is an essential part of a society's way of life, embodying the beliefs, values and traditions of a people in a manner unique to them. This uniqueness is manifested in the movements, music, and costumes associated with the dance form, reflecting the distinctive character and history of the community from which it originates. Further, this cultural significance lends an inherent value to dance beyond its aesthetic appeal. It becomes a repository of collective memory and identity, a medium for storytelling, and a conduit for cultural expression and preservation. The essence of a people is captured within the rhythmic beats and the fluid movements of their dances, serving as a source of pride, continuity, and social cohesion.

Beyond its entertainment value and its role as a cultural market, dance is a force that transcends these boundaries and embodies a unifying power. It is a bridge that spans time, space, and cultural differences, connecting us to our past and to each other in ways that defy easy categorisation. Dance is the life blood of human expression, the pulse that drives our cultural revolution. It unites us through our shared experiences, our joys and sorrows, and our innate need for connection. As such, dance is not just a form of art or entertainment, but a vital part of our collective heritage. Dance, with its expressive movements and primal rhythms, speaks to something fundamental within us, something that reaches beyond our individual selves and connects us to something universal. It is through dance that we tap into the collective unconsciousness, accessing the wisdom and experiences of generations past and infusing them within. As such, dance is not just a form of art or entertainment, but a vital part of our collective heritage. Dance, with its expressive movements and primal rhythms, speaks to something fundamental within us, something that reaches beyond our individual selves and connects us to something universal. It is through dance that we tap into the collective unconscious, accessing the

wisdom and experiences of generations past and infusing them with new life through our own interpretations; indeed dance is a language that we all understand, regardless of our cultural background.

Whether it's the intricate footwork or the sensual sway of belly dance, or the frenetic energy of break dancing, each style has its own unique beauty and expression. Ahmed Yerima confirms that; “Dance is the bond, the link, the power beyond entertainment or identity” (8). And Chris Ugolo is of the opinion that “dance art in Nigeria is woven around the fabrics of the traditional societies with focus on the socio-political and economic relevance of the people that owns it” (39). This expresses dance in the Nigeria society as significant medium. It is a significant mode that borders directly on the totality of aspects of life of the people. That is, their cultural identity’. This is corroborated by Keita as he opines that “Unlike other forms of dance, African dance is not detached from the lives of the people, but a spontaneous emanation of the people that Translates everyday experience into movement” (76). Dance in this context is no longer merely an art form or a pastime, but a vital component of the social fabric. It is a language of the soul, weaving together the stories of the past and present, binding communities in shared experiences and a deep sense of belonging. The rhythmic movements, the expressive gestures, and the syncopated beats of traditional dance become a medium for expressing the hopes, fears, dreams, and joys of a people. These dances connect us to our ancestors, their struggles and triumphs, their wisdom and their faith. In Africa, traditional dances become a powerful symbol of a people's identity, a living history that evolves and adapts with each new generation. They are a cultural legacy, handed down from parent to child, teacher to student, community to community. As such, these dances become a means of preservation, ensuring that the stories and experiences of past generations are not lost to time. They

act as a living archive, a repository of knowledge that is passed on not through books or lectures but through the physical embodiment of movements and rhythms.

Indeed, dance transcends its artistic nature and permeates into the fabric of social and economic life. As a potent force in cultural expression, it can function as a catalyst for positive change and growth within a society. According to Ekaette Edem, “Africans have been kept alive for centuries through indigenous festival performances, which are peculiar to the person that celebrates it. And the life of a community is always renewed during festivals which... associates with dances, musical performances, incantations, prayers and sacrifices to the gods and the spirits of the ancestors” (104). The rhythm and harmony inherent in dance can serve to unite people, fostering a sense of belonging, togetherness, and social cohesion. Beyond its immediate effects, these bonds can contribute to increased collaboration, innovation, and productivity in both social and economic spheres. As a society, we must ask ourselves: What are the values of traditional dances in a rapidly changing world? How can we ensure that these cultural treasures continue to thrive in the face of modernization and globalization? By exploring the economic impact of these dances, we can begin to answer these questions, and pave the way for innovative approaches towards preserving and celebrating our shared cultural heritage. From traditional tourism to cultural festivals, traditional dances offer a window into the soul of Akwa Ibom State, revealing a deep connection to the land, history, and the people.

Akwa Ibom State, a region steeped in cultural richness, boasts a wealth of traditional dances and troupes, each with its own distinctive character and charm. Passed down through generations, these dances act as a vibrant and enduring manifestation of Akwa Ibom's cultural identity. Amidst the rapid transformations of modern society, it has become imperative to preserve and promote these dances, lest they fade away with time. Through the advocacy for the importance of traditional

dance, Akwaobio Theatre Troupe is preserving Akwa Ibom's rich dance legacy, ensuring that future generations may continue to appreciate and embrace this essential part of their cultural identity. Beyond mere preservation, the troupe's initiatives foster intergenerational understanding and respect. Elder dancers, rich in knowledge and experience, have the opportunity to impart their wisdom to the youth, while the younger generations gain a deeper appreciation for their cultural roots. This exchange fosters a sense of community and shared purpose, allowing traditional dance to serve as a means of social cohesion and connection. The harmonious collaboration between the different generations nurtures the growth and evolution of Akwa Ibom's dance traditions, ensuring they remain vital and relevant for years to come.

### **Bio-Data of Obiousop Samuel**

Chief Obiousop Samuel Obiousop is a native of Ikot Usop, a village in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Obiousop Samuel is a versatile artist and performer, who obtained his Bachelor's degree in Theatre Arts from the University of Uyo with a specialisation in Dance and Choreography. He is proficient in various art forms, including drumming, dancing, acting, choreography, singing and playwriting, showcasing remarkable talent and passion for the performing arts. His impressive body of choreographed works spans over through decades and includes a range of productions such as; "Time" (1998), Ibarki (Fire Dance 2015), the captivating "Beach Fashion Show" (2016), and Calisdin (2018). With over 40 years of professional experience in the area of cultural practice, Obiousop's expertise in traditional dance and culture has been sought after by various organisations within and outside Akwa Ibom State. His wealth of knowledge and experience has made him an invaluable resource for schools, churches, and others. Committed to preserving and promoting the cultural legacy of Akwa Ibom State, Obiousop Samuel serves as a valued staff member of the Akwa Ibom State Council for Arts and

Culture. His dedication to his profession and his community is reflected in his role within the Council, where he actively participates in all the performances and outings by the Council as a lead dancer.

### **About Akwaobio Theatre Troupe**

From an interview with Samuel, he mentioned that according to history and legend, the founder of Ikot Uso village was indeed a man named Obiousop, whose name is etched into the cultural memory of the community. Obiousop, meaning “the descendant of Usop” is said to have settled in the area now known as Ikot Uso after a long journey, establishing a community that would bear his name and become a vibrant center of culture and tradition. Over time, the village of Ikot Uso flourished under Obiousop's leadership, becoming a hub of trade, agriculture, and cultural exchange. Ikot Uso expanded with its brothers migrating to villages like Anua Offot in Uyo Local Government Area, Ikot Obio Akwa, Ikot Obio Uko, Ikot Nsodo, a neighbouring village with Ikot Uso to Mbiabang Ibieno, Ikono, Ini, Ohafia in Abia State to Aruchukwu, Afikpo and even Switzerland, located in central Europe.

Indeed, like many African communities, the people of Ikot Uso believed in a pantheon of deities and spirits that governed their world, and they performed various dances and rituals to appease these powerful forces. One of the most significant dance forms in Ikot Uso was the *Ekoon*, a dance that was used to honor the gods and spirits, and to seek their blessings and protection. The dance was characterized by its energetic, rhythmic movements, which were said to invoke the power of the gods and to create a spiritual connection between the dancers and the divine. They also believed in the spirit of *Ntrukpom* (The Eagle) as a guide, and many other gods like *Ibritam*, *Iso Asobo* etc. The people of Ikot Uso believed in a diverse array of deities and spirits, each with their

own unique powers and areas of influence. The *Ntrukpom* (Eagle) spirit was revered as a guide and protector, with its keen eyesight and swift flight symbolizing vigilance and wisdom.

Samuel retold that the *Iso Asobo*, also known as the “Face of the Python” is a mysterious entity that roamed the forests and waterways of the region, protecting the community from harm and evil spirits. To honor the spirit, the community would often perform a special dance, which featured intricate movements and gestures that were said to reflect the sinuous grace of the python. The Obiousop as the founder of Ikot Uso after settlement began celebrating the corn festival and other farming season. He further mentioned that as the founder of Ikot Uso, Obiousop played a pivotal role in establishing the community's cultural traditions, including the celebration of festivals, marriage rites, coronation, the coming of age, birth and others. They also had the CORN FESTIVAL, known as “*Usoro Abakpa*”. It was another important celebration in the cultural calendar of the Ikot Uso Community, a time of great joy and celebration that was marked by feasting, music, and dance. This festival marked the end of the harvest season, and was a time of thanksgiving and feasting, as the community came together to share the fruits of their labour and offer gratitude to the gods for their blessings. During the “*Usoro Abakpa*”, the Akwa Obio Theatre Troupe would put on series of elaborate dances and performances, often accompanied by drumming and singing, to honor the gods and invoke their continued favour. The festival honoured the bountiful harvest and the life-giving power of the earth.

According to Obiousop Samuel during festivities, the people of Ikot Uso would recount the stories and legends of their ancestors, passing down the wisdom and traditions of their forebears to younger generations. During the farming season, part of the celebration was the introduction of *Ekpo Ntem* (Farming Masquerade) who performs in the bush for clearing. The *Ekpo Ntem* would perform to the part of the village, where a ram had been prepared for sacrifice called *Nkong Erong*



to appease the gods as a symbol of devotion and thanksgiving to the gods. In the eyes of the people of Ikot Uso, the sacrifice of the ram was more than just a ritualistic offering; it was a sign of divine acceptance and favor. The sacrifice of the ram served as a powerful symbol of spiritual reconciliation between the earthly realm and the divine, bringing the community closer to the gods and ensuring their continued protection and blessings.

Once the sacrificial ritual had been completed, the celebrations would continue in earnest, with the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe taking the lead. The troupe's members, decked out in colorful costumes, would converge on the palace of Obiousop, the founder of Ikot Uso, to perform a series of traditional dances. The palace as a cultural center for the community would be filled with music, laughter, and the lively energy of the troupe's performances.

For Samuel, the growth of Ikot Uso into a thriving community was marked by the establishment of various clans and families, each with their own unique culture and traditions. These clans were named after the ancestors of their members, and each had its own customs and rituals that reflected their unique histories and beliefs. He also mentioned that before Obiousop theatre troupe was formed, they were other groups and societies that performed diverse cultural roles and functions like *Mbre Ikpaisong*, *Mbre Ikot Uso*, *Mbre Mbong*, *Mbre Uyong Ekong*, *Ekpo Initiate*, *Ekoong Mfang Ukom* and many more. Each with their own unique practices and traditions, for example, the *Mbre Ikpaisong* was a group of warriors and protectors who served as the village's first line of defense against external threats. In addition to their defensive responsibilities, the *Mbre Ikpaisong* also played a significant role in the community's cultural life, often performing intricate dances and rituals that were said to bring good fortune and ward off evil spirits.

Cultural exchange was an integral part of the community's traditions, with neighboring villages often invited to participate in the celebrations and festivities, as Ikot Uso would welcome

performers and artisans from nearby communities to share in the festivities and showcase their own unique cultural expressions. This not only fostered a sense of camaraderie and friendship between the different groups, but also allowed for the exchange of ideas and practices, enriching the cultural landscape of the region as a whole. These regular interactions with neighboring villages allowed for a rich exchange of ideas and traditions, fostering a sense of shared history and connection between the different groups. These cultural exchanges also served as a form of diplomacy between the communities, helping to strengthen bonds and resolve disputes in a peaceful and harmonious manner.

Moreover, these cultural exchanges often led to the adoption and adaptation of new dance forms, musical styles, and storytelling techniques, enriching the traditions of the different groups and contributing to the development of a rich and diverse cultural landscape. The cross-pollination of ideas and traditions between the neighboring villages was not just a source of enjoyment and entertainment, but also a key factor in fostering harmony, creativity, and innovation in the region. Indeed, the children of the different villages were often at the forefront of these cultural exchanges, contributing their youthful energy and enthusiasm to the celebrations. This intergenerational aspect of the cultural exchange was particularly valuable, as it allowed the young people to develop a deep appreciation for their cultural heritage while also forging bonds of friendship and understanding with their counterparts from other villages.

According to Obiousop Samuel, Ikot Uso's evolution from Five to Nine Families is intricately connected to the legacy of the ancestor Obiousop. As the community grew and more families arrived, Obiousop, in his role as the founding leader of Ikot Uso, oversaw the expansion of the settlement and the division of the community into distinct families of Nine as officially documented. The name Akwaobio was derived from “Akwa Mbri Ikpaisong”, which is translated

to “Large Community”. This name was chosen to reflect the increasing size and vibrancy of the settlement, as well as the diverse cultural influences that were shaping the community's identity. As the largest family within Ikot Uso, the Obiousop family established the Akwaobio Troupe as cultural guardians.

The names also given to the children in Ikot Uso had deep spiritual significance, reflecting the community's reverence for the gods and spirits that governed their lives. Each name was carefully chosen to honor a specific deity or spirit, and also to identify the age and number of the child in the family. They had names like; Ette Nso, Baba Nso, Akpan Uso, Akpan Mbat, Okporo (Okporo Isip (Kernel) – Last son), Usop, Inyang Udo etc. The Akwaobio Theatre Troupe was a living, breathing embodiment of the cultural continuity and intergenerational wisdom of the Ikot Uso Community. From its humble beginnings as a family-run troupe to its current status as a respected cultural institution, the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe has persisted through centuries of change and adversity, preserving and celebrating the unique traditions of the region.

Founded over half a millennium ago, Akwaobio Theatre Troupe has stood a taste of time as an institution with a rich legacy rooted in Akwa Ibom State's cultural history, serving as a guardian and promoter of the region's traditional dances, storytelling, and performances, continually refining and preserving the unique cultural heritage of the region. Obiousop Samuel's profound connection to Akwaobio Theatre Troupe is inseparable from his ancestral legacy, as he was born into a lineage deeply entrenched in the cultural traditions of Akwa Ibom State. Growing up within this rich heritage, Obiousop has been groomed to carry forward the artistry and cultural knowledge passed down by his ancestors, exemplifying his devotion to preserving and perpetuating the legacy of his forebears. It was also fascinating to hear about the evolution of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe in the context of its relationship to the Obiousop family. From Obiousop Samuel, he was born to see that

his father was not really involved in the troupe, as this was due to the influence of Western education, and perhaps the pull of modernity. In his father's quest to go to school, led him to distancing himself from the traditions of the troupe, while still retaining an attachment to certain practices such as the Ekpo masquerade. He had performed at his early age as an Ekpo masquerade initiate.

Growing up within this rich heritage, Obiousop Samuel has been groomed to carry forward the artistry and cultural knowledge passed down by his ancestors, exemplifying his devotion to preserving and perpetuating the legacy of his forebears. The commitment and passion of Obiousop Samuel to the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe is a testament to his connection to the community's cultural heritage. Despite his father's shift away from the troupe, Samuel recognized the importance of carrying on the traditions that had been passed down through generations of his family. His deep personal involvement with the troupe reflects his desire to honor the legacy of his ancestors, while also shaping and adapting the performances to reflect the changing needs and interests of the community.

The appearance of the moon was a magical moment for the Obiousop family and the wider Ikot Uso community. The moonlight nights offered a respite from the daily grind of work and life, providing an opportunity for the families and the people to come together, relax, and share in the joys of traditional games, music, and dance. It was an important social event, reinforcing the bonds of community and providing a space for people to connect with one another in a way that transcended the usual boundaries of age, status, and gender. The moon, with its cycle of waxing and waning, was seen as a powerful symbol of the passage of time and the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth. As the people gathered under the night sky, they would have invoked the spirit of the moon, asking for guidance, protection, and blessings in their daily lives. Ekaette Edem asserts that

“community and cultural celebrations as a form of gathering may be entertaining in nature, conducted or organized by a person or group of persons, organization, firm, association, or even the government within and outside a particular locality and may not be limited to things as carnivals, sports, concerts, music performance, dance and drama presentation, arts and craft, fairs, etc.” (92). Indeed, community and cultural celebrations play vital role in nurturing social cohesion and a sense of belonging within a community as identified among the people of Ikot Uso community

While the early dances were more spontaneous and improvisational, the desire for greater precision and clarity in performance led to the development of more formalized movements and arrangements. The introduction of choreography and dance placements within the traditional dances of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe speaks to the evolving nature of cultural expression in the community. This shift towards modern dance practices is indicative of the increasing influence of Western ideas and aesthetics on traditional African culture, as performers sought to appeal to a wider audience and incorporate new elements into their art. As visitors from other parts of Nigeria and beyond began to visit Ikot Uso, there was a greater need for performances that could be easily understood and appreciated by people from different cultural backgrounds. By incorporating more structured choreography and clear staging, the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe was able to create a more accessible and dynamic experience for audiences, while still retaining the essence of their traditional practices.

It's fascinating to know that Obiousop Samuel's Senior Uncle; Chief Ette Jack Samuel Obiousop is the leader of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe today. This position not only demonstrates his dedication and passion for the troupe's traditions, but also speaks to the importance of family and lineage in preserving and passing on cultural knowledge. As a respected elder within the

community, his uncle's leadership serves as a vital link between the past and the present, ensuring that the unique history and traditions of Ikot Uso continue to thrive for future generations. Obiousop Samuel further mentioned that the lineage of leaders within the Akwa Obio Theatre Troupe reads like a page from the community's history, each generation building on the legacy of the previous one. As his Grand-Father was a leader of the troupe who was fondly called Ada Jackson, who succeeded from his Great- Grand- Father, Akpan Mbat, who succeeded from Uko Udo, his father and Akpan Akwa who was Uko's Father. Akpan Akwa succeeded after Akwa Obio, a man who was named after the founder of Ikot Uso, Obiousop and then Akpan Akwa handed over to Akwa Obio. From Ada Jackson to Akpan Mbat and beyond, the role of the troupe's leader has been passed down from father to son, creating a continuous thread of knowledge, experience, and cultural wisdom. With each successive leader, the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe has evolved and adapted, yet the spirit of its founders has remained strong and unbroken. The troupe has been shaped by the unique personalities and visions of its leaders, each bringing their own distinct style and perspective to bear on the troupe's performances and cultural impact. The leadership structure of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe was indeed based on a number of factors, including age, wisdom, and leadership qualities. This system of selection and appointment within the Akwa Obio Theatre Troupe embodied a delicate balance between tradition and meritocracy. This blend of hereditary and merit-based selection ensured that the troupe's leaders possessed the necessary qualities to guide the group through changing circumstances, while also preserving the historical continuity and cultural legacy of the community.

The hereditary leadership of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe underscores the strong ties between family, lineage, and cultural tradition in Ikot Uso. This system of leadership, while reflective of traditional African governance structures, also highlights the respect and trust that the

community places in the Obiousop family, who have been entrusted with the stewardship of the troupe for generations. In this way, the continuity of the troupe's leadership not only ensures the preservation of its traditions and practices, but also reinforces the social fabric of the community, solidifying bonds of kinship and shared history. For Obiousop Samuel, he will return to the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe after his career as a civil servant. This reflects the deep-seated importance of cultural identity in the lives of people like him. By choosing to rejoin the troupe after his retirement, Obiousop Samuel is affirming his belief in the value of the community's traditions and his own role in perpetuating them. In this case, the allure of returning to the troupe and engaging in cultural practices is a powerful force that transcends the boundaries of time and space. Samuel's decision suggests that, despite his exposure to the modern world, the pull of tradition remains strong and compelling. In doing so, he reaffirms his identity as a member of the Obiousop family, a custodian of Ikot Uso's cultural heritage, and a vital contributor to the ongoing story of his community.

### **Cultural Participation:**

Akwaobio Theatre Troupe encompasses a broad repertoire of traditional African dances, such as Abang, Ebre, Mboppo, the dynamic Asian *Uboikpa*, *Eka-ekoong*, *Ikprang*, the graceful *Abobom Ekoong*, and the lively *Utta*. Additionally, Samuel said that the troupe has cultivated expertise in a range of contemporary African dance styles, demonstrating their versatility and commitment to exploring the diverse forms of dance rooted in their cultural heritage. Embodying the spirit of intergenerational continuity, the leadership of Akwaobio Theatre Troupe is entrusted to a family member upon the passing of the current manager, ensuring the sustainability of the troupe's legacy across generations. This long-standing tradition, rooted in the troupe's history as a family-run

institution, guarantees the continuity of the troupe's artistic vision and cultural knowledge, and contributes to its enduring presence and impact on the cultural landscape of Akwa Ibom State.

The journey undertaken by the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe performers in the past is a testament to the immense dedication and fortitude of its members. The members used to carry instruments on their heads, walking for an entire day through various villages before reaching their destination, all to share their art with other communities. This was a remarkable display of physical endurance and artistic devotion. One of it was the performance they attended at Minya Village as they walked all night from Ikot Uso village to Minya. Such journeys must have been both physically demanding and spiritually enlightening, offering the performers a chance to commune with the natural world and the spirits that inhabit it. In a sense, these journeys became a vital part of the performance itself to them as emphasised by Samuel. As they walked, the rhythmic steps of the performers created a beat that echoed through the forests and villages, invoking the spirits of the ancestors and harnessing the energy of the natural world. However, there was a shift from walking to wheelbarrows, bicycles, and now cars and buses, which reflects the troupe's continued innovation and adaptation to new technologies, and has allowed them to reach a wider audience and expand their impact beyond the local community.

For the performers, the Troupe is open to individuals from the age seven and above. The Akwaobio Theatre Troupe also encourages lifelong engagement in traditional dance and cultural expression, ensuring that the vibrant legacy of Akwa Ibom's rich cultural heritage is passed down to successive generations. From childhood to adulthood, members of the troupe are continuously immersed in their cultural traditions, cultivating an intimate understanding and appreciation of their indigenous art forms. By welcoming individuals of all ages, the troupe creates a sense of community and shared experience that transcends generational boundaries. Moreover, the



involvement of young members in the troupe ensures the continuity of its legacy. By instilling in them a deep connection to their cultural heritage at an early age, and are advocates of traditional dance and culture.

Akwaobio Theatre Troupe located in Akwa Ibom State, in the vibrant town of Ikot Abasi. Established over five centuries ago, the troupe has been an enduring fixture of this community, perpetuating and preserving the rich artistry of Akwa Ibom's cultural heritage with pride and passion. As a cultural hub within Ikot Abasi, the troupe serves as a vital resource for the town, drawing visitors from near and far who seek to experience the diverse and captivating dance forms and storytelling traditions of the region. The members of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe embody the spirit of resourcefulness, seamlessly balancing their artistic pursuits with a many other commitments and responsibilities. From educators to business owners, farmers, civil servants, each member brings a unique set of skills and experiences to the troupe, contributing to its diverse and resilient nature. Despite the demands of their professional and personal lives, the members of the troupe remain dedicated to their shared passion for cultural performance, balancing rehearsals, performances, and community engagement with their other commitments.

The Theatre Troupe, despite their busy schedules, prioritizes regular gatherings to maintain the continuity and momentum of their performances. Wednesdays at 4:00 PM serve as a standard time for the troupe. During these weekly meetings and rehearsals, members hone their skills, discuss upcoming performances, and plan new choreographies, all while cultivating their bonds of friendship. The importance of these weekly meetings extends beyond their practical functions. For many members of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe, these gatherings offer a sense of community, a respite from the demands of their daily lives, and an opportunity to reconnect with their cultural roots. As they engage in the rhythms and movements of traditional dance, they also engage with one

another, sharing stories, laughter, and memories. The troupe's bond is forged not only through their shared passion for the arts, but also through the intangible threads of friendship and family that bind them together.

**Artist Training:** With the spirit of community empowerment, the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe takes a holistic approach to supporting its members, by offering opportunities for personal and professional development beyond their artistic pursuits. The Troupe sponsors members for professional courses, educational endeavors, and skills training, and also invests in their individual growth, by equipping them with the knowledge and abilities to succeed in their personal and professional lives. This approach reflects the troupe's commitment to promoting self-reliance and economic sustainability among its members, recognizing that the preservation of cultural heritage is best served by a community that is healthy, educated, and self-sufficient. This dedication to the holistic development of its members is a brand of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe, demonstrating its enduring commitment to the well-being and success of its people.

Beyond their artistic and educational endeavors, the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe exemplifies a spirit of philanthropy and generosity, extending its support to both members and non-members through its scholarship programs and charitable activities. Committed to the well-being and success of its members, the troupe recognizes the critical importance of education in fostering personal growth and prosperity. By offering scholarships to its members and other deserving students, the troupe facilitates access to education, creating opportunities for young people to pursue their dreams and build a brighter future for themselves and their communities. Through its charitable initiatives, Akwaobio Theatre Troupe embodies the values of kindness, empathy, and service that lie at the heart of African cultural traditions.

**Jobs Opportunity:**

The diverse talents and skills of the members of the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe are a source of tremendous benefit to the community and beyond. The members are trained to perform a wide array of dances and play various musical instruments; the members' versatility and expertise have made them highly sought after as great entertainers in Akw Ibom State. Their contributions extend beyond boundaries, as they take their performances to schools, churches, government events, private functions, enriching the lives of those they encounter with their arts and cultural knowledge. From teaching traditional dance forms to leading drumming workshops, from choreographing performances to providing technical support, the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe's members play vital role in the transmission and celebration of African cultural heritage.

As ambassadors of their culture, the troupe's performers have shared the unique traditions and history of Ikot Uso with audiences around the world, showcasing the rich diversity of African culture and highlighting the many ways in which different communities can connect and share their common humanity. Akwaobio have participated in International Cultural Festivals such as: National Multi-Cultural Festival in Australia, Yearly African Root Festival in Venezuela, and also travelled to Belieze, Aruba, Trinidad & Tobago, Jamaica, Bahia, Nigeria Cultural Relationship in Brazil. This impressive list of international events in which the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe has participated reflects the troupe's growing reputation on the global stage. Beyond the cultural significance of these international engagements, the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe's participation in these events has also had a profound impact on the lives of its members. For many, the opportunity to travel and perform overseas has opened up new worlds and perspectives, exposing them to different ways of life and broadening their understanding of the world beyond their own community. This exposure has not only enriched their own lives, but has also informed their artistic expression, inspiring new

creative ideas and approaches that they can bring back to their community, enhancing the troupe's performances and cultural impact.

### **Challenges of Akwaobio Theatre Troupe**

#### **Religious Barrier:**

The Akwaobio Theatre Troupe's struggle with religious opposition to their cultural practices reflects a larger societal tension between tradition and modernity in many African communities. From Samuel, on one hand, the troupe's performances represent a cherished and integral part of the community's cultural heritage, preserving ancient traditions and practices that have been passed down through generations. On the other hand, the rise of Christianity and other religious movements in recent decades has led to a rejection of many traditional practices as “fetish”, “demonic”, or “barbaric”, often leading to a clash of worldviews and values. This tension between traditional culture and religious doctrine is a complex and multifaceted issue that has shaped the course of history in many African societies. For the Akwaobio Theatre Troupe, the challenge is to find ways to balance their commitment to preserving their cultural heritage with the need to respect and coexist with the religious beliefs of their community. One possible resolution by Akwaobio is to focus on the universal, humanistic aspects of their performances, highlighting the themes of community, tradition, and interconnectedness that resonate across cultures.

#### **Income:**

Akwaobio Theatre Troupe, like many other cultural organizations around the world, is tackling with the challenge of financial sustainability. While the troupe's performances may be enriching and fulfilling on a personal and cultural level, the reality is that funding for the arts can be difficult to secure, especially in communities where traditional practices are not widely valued or supported. For Obiousop, this issue presents a significant hurdle in his efforts to support and

compensate the troupe's performers, who are dedicating their time and talent to the preservation of their community's cultural legacy.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Akwaobio Theatre Troupe's efforts to document and share Akwa Ibom's dance traditions across generations represent a triumph of cultural preservation and intergenerational harmony. By embracing the wisdom of the past and inspiring the curiosity of the future, the troupe ensures that the vibrant legacy of Akwa Ibom's dances continues to dance across time, weaving an intricate tapestry of heritage, identity, and beauty for generations to come. By preserving these dances and making them accessible to the youth, Akwaobio Theatre Troupe ensures that the knowledge and skill associated with these art forms remain alive and dynamic. In essence, they are paving the way for future generations to step into the spotlight and continue the intricate choreography of Akwa Ibom's cultural identity, making sure it never misses a beat.

To further preserve and promote Akwa Ibom's dance heritage, the following recommendations could be considered:

- 1.** Encouraging the involvement of schools, dance groups, and cultural organizations in teaching and performing traditional dances, thereby creating a sustainable dance culture among younger generations.
- 2.** Highlighting Akwa Ibom States dance traditions at local, regional, and national events, creating greater visibility and awareness of these art forms.
- 3.** Providing financial and structural support to traditional troupes and other cultural organizations to continue their efforts in preserving and promoting Akwa Ibom's dance heritage.
- 4.** Creating incentives, such as scholarships or awards, for young people who excel in these traditional dances, motivating them to pursue their interest further.

5. Developing cultural tourism initiatives that highlight Akwa Ibom's dance traditions as part of its cultural richness, attracting visitors and spotlighting the state's unique identity.

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