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Article

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### THEATRE AND SOCIAL MOBILISATION: THE CASE OF UYO LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN "CHRISTMAS UNPLUGGED 3.0" FESTIVITIES

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#### Abstract

This article examines the cultural festivities inherent in Christmas Unplugged celebrations in Akwa Ibom, Nigeria with particular reference to the outing of Uyo Local Government Area, as a unique indigenous phenomenon that juxtaposes traditional practices with modern influences. Premised on Functionalism theory, this paper uses qualitative approach to establish indigenous music, dance, storytelling, crafts and costume traditions as contents of indigenous festivities that serve as a means of resisting the homogenising pressures of globalisation and commercialism in the Akwa Ibom State. By analysing the historical evolution of these celebrations alongside their socio-economic impact, the article highlights the role of cultural preservation in fostering community solidarity and economic empowerment. It concludes that the deliberate reduction of digital and commercial interventions should encourage the retention of local heritage and the reinforcement of traditional identity across generations. Ultimately, the study contributes to broader discussions on cultural sustainability, emphasizing the importance of maintaining traditional practices as a counterbalance to modernity's pervasive influence, and underscores the resilience of indigenous communities in adapting to contemporaneous artistic indications.

**Keywords:** Festivities, "Christmas Unplugged 3.0" Social-mobilisation, Theatricality,

#### Introduction

In the heart of Nigeria's coastal region lies Akwa Ibom, a state renowned for its cultural richness, intricate traditions, and vibrant communal celebrations. The phenomenon of Christmas in Akwa Ibom, often celebrated with the pomp of commercial parade and with a

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unique “unplugged” authenticity, serves as an intriguing reflection of tradition conscientiously savoured and an evolving modernity practically cherished in the emergent Christmas festivities in Akwa Ibom State. This intermingling of tradition in a modern society and modernity in a traditional aura reflect a paradigm shift from the particular to the global in cultural practice. To Stephen Umoh, “there is a strong linkage between (cultural) action and (social) logic” (144) in a personal to collective development, indicating that “a developed culture is the *sine qua non* for the general development of any society” (Aghaga 217). This is in tandem with Ekaette Edem’s view that “culture connects individuals and society to each other in language, norms, beliefs, arts, lifestyles, and ways of living together” (64).

Although the primordial bustle of this celebration fully showcased commercial activities within which the Uyo indigenes along with other Akwa Ibomites converge to display their food and crafts, the current bustle is shifting more to indigenous arts revitalisation, social mobilisation and tourist-bent alacrity in the state. On the other hand, the intermittent innovativeness through this festival idealises an internal plunge to improve and reposition the state towards a vibrant socio-economic amelioration through culture. For one thing, “if culture is given its rightful place in a society, irrespective of the challenges of that environment, culture can offer pro-solution responses” (Johnson 7). Johnson’s position situates man, creativity, craft and values as the harbinger of social recalibration. According to Acholonu, “the difference between man and animal is culture. Man is always trying to improve himself and the weapon through which he improves himself is culture” (6). To synchronise Akwa Ibom State culture into the contemporary developmental trends, the periods for commemorating belief’s values are significant.

Christmas is one of the Christian’s annual festivals and the sentiment is savoured as a religious rite hyped to aesthetic credence by economic grace. While the global perception of Christmas is dominated by images of commercial excess and standardized rituals, the “Christmas Unplugged 3.0” in Akwa Ibom reveals a deliberate choice to return to indigenous roots and authentic communal participation. And “by virtue of its specific historical evolution and unique characteristic, each culture (becomes) structurally original” (Edem 2). On this account, Christmas in Akwa Ibom overlaps merely a religious sentiment to a cultural festival that integrates indigenous practices, socio-economic recoup and a paradigm shifts from savagery to modernization of human practices in periodic celebrations.

“Christmas Unplugged 3.0” is one of the names the evolving Ibom festival has come to be known. The festival began as “Uyo Christmas Village”, which the consumption of Akwa Ibom food was the priority. The event began to flourish following the introduction of theatrical components and the appropriation of each of the December days to each of the 31 local governments in the state. In the 2025<sup>th</sup> edition, a unique blend of spectacle and society surfaced in the Uyo Local Government Area presentation, drawing attention to the convergence of arts, economy, politics and social mobilisation in a festival. This paper investigates the interplay between tradition and modernity through an historical evolution of the Uyo City celebrations of Ibom Festival of 2025 as an artistic plunge of identity, resilience, and transformation as themes of cultural festival in Akwa Ibom State.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Observing the interconnection between the Akwa Ibom festival and the component parts that make it a reality, it is better to acknowledge the prominence of the bulk and the relevance of the bits that are brought together to form the whole. To this effect, this study draws from the functionalists’ conception of the society and culture. Functionalism as a social theory is primarily linked to the idea of Emile Durkheim; it was further expounded in

the views of Talcott Parsons, an American Sociologist. The theory was brought to limelight in the 1940 and 1950s. The tenet of the theory is that every unit of a system is *sine qua non* to understanding the wholeness of the system. This implies that the strength of a system is determined by the energies of the parts making up the system. “The theory defines the society as an amalgam of people and culture who survive through the support of the other” (Akpan and Udofia 16). According to Michael Haralambos, Martin Holborn and Robin Heald, “any part of the organism must be seen in terms of the organism as a whole.... The various parts of society are seen to be interrelated and, taken together, they form a complete system” (8). This gives a broader view of the Uyo people’s conception of the 2025 “Unplugged 3.1” as a system through which political interest, cultural practices and identity politics could be streamlined for wholeness.

Functionalism views cultural practices in both ways: the head is “a-top” to protect the legs and the legs are “a-ground” because they have to haul the head. Thus, each sector of the economy should be studied as an indispensable component of the body. The theory contextualises every unit that is identifiable with a structure making both edges a double-position to understand man and his activities. “The positions propel a unified basis within which reasons for negotiating a counter position may not arise... (to) project absoluteness devoid of differentiation” (Udofia 201). In terms of cultural enactment and theatricality, Umoh links the components of a production to the synergy in the claim that “the theory throws more light on the use of traditional components such as cloth, grass, wood, root, ropes, fowl feathers... animal skin, etc to weave a masquerade, and how these components used as the accessories in the body of the masquerade denote ideas that are understandable across the society” (13). However, Eddiefloy Igbo intersects the viability of the whole from the vitality of the parts as the basic tenet of functionalism thus:

Functionalism holds a view of society as a social system that is made up of different parts which are interdependent and interrelated. These different parts of the society, namely, the family, church, government, economy etc perform various functions...towards maintenance, stability and survival of the social system.... Functionalist theory views society as organised, stable and well-integrated system held together by value consensus that is common value and norms collectively shared (333-334)

This position explains the wholeness of Uyo Christmas Village as an organised system in which Uyo, a section of the state along with its indigenous practices, infuses a sustainable tourism conception. The relevance of this theory to the paper is that the wholeness of Akwa Ibom festival can only break even as the state’s tourist factor through the unification of indigenous creativity, political harmony, and the intersection of traditional and modern culture in their elementary bits to their universal chunks.

### **Uyo Metropolis: An Ethnography**

Uyo, the capital city of Akwa Ibom State, developed gradually to its present urban status after the creation of Akwa Ibom State. It is made up of four distinguishable clans, which are Offot known as Offot Ukwa, Oku, Etoi and Ikono Uyo. Uyo is divided into eleven wards and each of these wards contains villages, which are irregular in numbers. According to Wikipedia,

Uyo became the capital of Akwa Ibom State...on September 23, 1987 when Akwa Ibom was created from the former Cross River State. According to the 2006 Nigerian census, the population of Uyo is 427, 873... (today). The

population of Uyo is put at 1,393,000 as at 2024. Ibibio is the primary Indigenous Language ([en.wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org)).

As a core Ibibio terrain, virtually all indigenous practices are Ibibio-centric. Meanwhile, “Uyo culture is closely linked with life” (Edem 92), and in life, man is saddled with boundless challenges. As Elijah John puts, “man is expected to use his intellect to solve those problems” (135). Expectedly, the indigenous activities of the people of Uyo should gear towards providing solutions to the problems that exist within the territory of Uyo.

A typical Uyo citizen may speak Ibibio, Annang, Oron and English Language in its variance. In terms of social life, Ekong Ekong writes that the Ibibio society traditionally encourages competition (76), which makes a typical Uyo person a hustling-type. On the other hand, Ibibio people are immersed in cultural practices. According to Ubong Nda, such would include traditional dances, songs, ceremonies, props, costumes, acting/ performance, dialogue engagements and others, which are capable of attracting someone (54). Currently, Uyo is everyone’s land due to their culture of attracting people and their hospitable lifestyle. As a frontline Ibibio society, Uyo people are deeply religious. Some are core traditionalists, some moslems, and others are Christians. Along this line of thinking, Edet Udo acknowledges that a typical Ibibio person is pantheistic. He knows the god of the sky, the one on earth, the one in the river, the one that makes his farm to yield and the one that controls power and leadership (248-249). Thus, Uyo as the heartbeat of Ibibio society acknowledge cosmic duality, which Anietie Udofia and Aniekan James expatiate as “a universe in which one is a common social being... (which) the spiritual agents seem to command a superlative potency compared to the human beings” (12-13). Against this backdrop, Uyo city is filled with traditions that are purely physical but laced with spiritual undertone. This is realised in the various cultural displays and their connotations in “Christmas Unplugged 3.0” held in Akwa Ibom State between 1st December 2025 and 1st January 2026.

### **The Unplugged Celebration: Characteristics and Significance**

The term “unplugged” in the context of Akwa Ibom Christmas celebrations encapsulates two distinct phenomena. First, it refers to the low reliance on modern technology and commercial advertising during the festivities, making traditional drumming, dancing, and storytelling preferable over television broadcasts or internet streams. Second, it symbolises a conscious shift from the hyper-commercialised portrayals of global Christmas celebrations toward the simplicity of communal bustle and aesthetics (Adeyemi 45). Put differently, “Unplugged”, is an offshoot of “Uyo Christmas Village” instituted by Udom Emmanuel, the former Governor of Akwa Ibom State. The name, “Uyo Christmas Village” was meant to be an avenue for relaxation of a select industrial and government elite. According to Okon Bassey,

Akwa Ibom Christmas Village came into focus as tour operators from all over Nigeria... for the annual general meeting of the Nigerian Association of Tour Operators (NATOP). The meeting which brought together proven professionals... from within and outside the country, saw potentials unveiled, challenges x-rayed, targets set, promises and assurances extracted, advice given, dancing skills showcased, places of interest toured and diverse local cuisine enjoyed as the tour operators savoured the serene beautiful environment... to adopt new strategy in promoting tourism in Nigeria (7).

From the standpoint of professionals coming together to brainstorm, the need to eat arose; from eating, the need to relax arose; and from relaxation, the need for cultural renaissance

arose. Currently, the “Uyo Christmas Village” of food for tourists has unfolded to Ibom Festival identified as “Christmas Unplugged” which specifically harnesses diverse Akwa Ibom mindsets for development across the thirty-one local government areas. In 2023 it was “Christmas Unplugged 1.0”, in 2024 it was “Christmas Unplugged 2.0” and in 2025, it was christened “Christmas Unplugged 3.0”.

However, at the heart of these festivities, a gamut of indigenous art forms was blended with social configuration of Uyo political network, within which various human values for cultural renaissance, tourism advancement, social mobilisation and policy formation surfaced. Prominent among them were various masquerades, the historical costume displayed as artefacts of the Uyo LGA, the presence of political representatives of Uyo and the sudden recoup of unity through theatricality, which acting, makeup, lighting, sound effect and traditional costume design were deployed to harness the synergy. In the view of Edet Okon, “Traditional costume comes to play where participants don intricate attires as representatives of local history and communal feasts, which remain integral to the celebrations” (115). Makeup, on the other hand, “remains one of the most fundamental visual elements in performance and vital tool in all creative productions” (Umoh 3). Eze, on the other hand argues that “musical resonance and storytelling draw attention to historical narratives ... that shape the social and political identity” (102). These practices provide continuity to cultural expression and reinforce a sense of belonging among the indigenous youths and elders alike.

### **Theatricality In Uyo People at “Christmas Unplugged 3.0”**

A prominent aspect of the Akwa Ibom festival is the impact of performances, which suggests the various theatrical enactments performed to spice the occasion. These theatrical components are discussed under the subhead below.

#### **The Actor/Imitator**

Uyo people used acting to grace the occasion by deploying numerous brands of masquerades and colourful dance displays.

#### **The Performer**



**Fig 1: Obiakpo Masquerade (Umanah 2026)**

Masquerading is a pivotal aspect of Uyo people’s tradition. Through masquerading, many indigenous values are encoded. For instance, Umoh further clarifies that “it is through the process of masking that people can celebrate, reaffirm and guarantee the community of an order that is concentrated by tradition” (2). To Edem, “it helps reveal the hidden treasure of culture in Nigeria” (10).

## **Costume/Bodily Paraphernalia**

### **Costume Design**



**Fig 2: Ekombi Performance Costume (Umanah 2026)**

Costume is one of symbolic elements of the theatre widely deployed in the Unplugged-3.1. Through this theatrical craft, the Uyo people's conception of period, age, profession, emotional grid between one performer and another, down to the celebrative mood the festival conveyed were established. From the perspective of Uyo people's designer, "there is much space for the costume designer in the contemporary performance world" (Umoh 20).

## **Makeup/Bodily Adornment**

### **Makeup Design**



**Fig 3: Nkuho performer (Umanah 2026)**

Makeup Design is a major theatrical element that can transform a performer from one personality to another. It is also a major career to generate income currently. As Umoh further puts, "the services of a makeup artist in the contemporary society expand on daily basis based on the superlative attraction and visual aesthetics they add to any applicable performance and events" (109). The use of makeup by the Uyo people during the 2025 Uyo Unplugged added lustre to the aesthetics and stimulated the elation of the period through forms, pattern and the interplays of cosmetics and colour embossment for effect.

## **Scenography**

Theatre uses light for various reasons. Some of them are to illuminate the stage, generate effect and to stimulate a specific requisite mood. These were fully utilised in the Unplugged 3.0 of the Akwa Ibom people. This means that apart from using light to see, light was also used to generate effect and create mood in the festival.

### **Scenery and Lighting**



**Fig 5: Backdrop with Light Effect (Umanah 2026)**

Scenery was not actually emphasized since every local government used the same scene. That notwithstanding, there was a giant modern construct that served as backdrop of the Unplugged 3.1 in 2025 session of the Ibom cultural festival.

### **Props/Heritage**

#### **A Heritage Preserved as Performance Prop**



**Fig6: A Beetle Volkswagen ( 2026)**

Uyo people showcased a Volkswagen on their performance day. Although it did not convey a novelty sight; being that it was displayed as a component of performance, it sent pieces of information about the genealogy of Uyo city and the effectiveness of conservation. Many children who have been seeing a Volkswagen on TV or books were able to see one, and the status of Uyo as an evolving city along with her citizens were convincingly established.

### **Social Mobilisation in “Christmas Unplugged 3.0”**

Aside rolling out of a gamut of human practices of the Uyo people in the festival, the organisational pattern incited a wider desire to participate, represent and share the festive ambience with other Uyo comrades in town and in diasporas. This made the “Christmas Unplugged 3.0” an instrument of social mobilisation. The mobilisation is discussed in bits below.

### **Reflection of Tradition and Modern Identity**

In analyzing the Unplugged 3.1 celebrations, it becomes apparent that the community is engaged in dynamic negotiations of identity. The original Uyo identity as a people with an identifiable autochthonous outlay in Akwa Ibom State was exhibited side by side with the acquired identity of a people dwelling in the state capital and seat of Akwa Ibom State’s government. This gave the outlook of the traditional Uyo persons and the modern ones in a single cultural display. However, the decisions to limit commercial influences and technology during Christmas festivities are indicative of broader concerns for cultural erosion. The

festivities appear as a set of cultural reclamations meant to authenticate the people's indigenous philosophy. The festivities "showcase the innate resistance to the pressure and dominance of transposed human practices on a people; and they become a means of safeguarding the cherished heritage and identity of a people" (Mensah 67). Through the activities, the older and younger generations easily reconcile their authentic heritage and push to conserve it.

The Christmas unplugged celebration reaffirms a regeneration of ancestral values and the successful incorporation of hybrid and acquired customs that Uyo people may have come across and intermingled for decades. For example, while the local media was still in operation, community leaders were using social media platforms to promote information about the unplugged events, and ensuring that the core festivities remain rooted in tradition. This duality reflects the openness to global interaction without compromising the community's cultural essence. The ability to reconcile these conflicting elements testifies to the resilience and adaptability of Akwa Ibom's cultural spirit with the acquired cultural dynamism.

### **The Socio-economic Impact and Tourism Prospects**

Beyond cultural affirmation, "Christmas Unplugged 3.0" festivities showcase some significant socio-economic implications for the people of Akwa Ibom. They procure a space to display food, clothes, bags, roots, medicine and other things they want to experiment and develop. The celebrations always involve local artisans, performers, and small-scale vendors in display and transaction of goods for patronage, reinforcing the spread of local economies. Traditional crafts, such as hand-woven textiles and indigenous musical instruments, experienced resurgences as they are central to the celebratory display during the Christmas season. This revival has led to an increase in local tourism potentials and a renewed interest in preserving traditional skills among younger generations. Moreover, "Christmas Unplugged 3.0" has fostered a sense of communal resilience and social solidarity. During a period when many global festivities rely on corporate sponsorship and external cultural cues, the Unplugged 3.0 approach proves to be an effective platform for the community to address what Mensah, presents as social issues such as youth unemployment and cultural identity loss (80). This alone thrills both the youths and adult giving them a sense of belonging and hope especially on the mindset to conceive of a marketable substance that can attract patronage and a return on investment.

Despite the focus on spectacles of indigenous artefact and cultural displays, many Akwa Ibom citizens focused on preparing various brands of food, jewellerys, shoes, drinks and other items that attracted value, through which they made a huge return on investment. On the other hand, Akwa Ibom State government levied the citizens certain amounts of money to secure a space. This made the celebration a two-way income route. Both the government and the citizens generated income. Community organisers used these celebrations to launch local initiatives and educational campaigns aimed at empowering the populace and encouraging a return to culturally enriched narratives. These indicate the capacity of cultural festivities to act as catalysts for grassroots social development.

### **History Recoup through Rituals and Symbolism**

"Christmas Unplugged 3.0" of Akwa Ibom's festivities encourage a deep engagement with ritual and representational signs, garnished with traditional songs, dance, narratives and theatrical performances, which serve as entertainment pieces and vehicles for intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge (Okon 130). There was a total exposé

of indigenous practices such as *Nkuho*, ritualised ethnic songs and typical Uyo dances as found in the recurring motifs of the “coming home” narrative during the celebrations. Another aspect of Unplugged 3.0 was the endless deployment of signs to represent ideas. Many spectacles made much significant referent to the genealogy of the Uyo indigenes and their metamorphosis from the rural to the current urban position. It spoke to a collective memory of migration, loss, and eventual rediscovery of cultural roots. In this sense, the unplugged celebration was seen as a living archive that preserved and re-enacted the community’s historical experiences.

According to Eze, “the communal sharing of memories through oral history sessions and spontaneous storytelling act as a reaffirmation of identity. This ritualized commemoration reinforces the bonds among community members while also providing a counter-narrative to the commercialized, media-friendly versions of Christmas found elsewhere”(138). There is a sense of unity and harmony in shared communal values. The use of traditional artefacts along with the modern ones, reflected a form of resistance or a deliberate effort to ensure that traditional narratives and practices continue to thrive despite external influences in Uyo metropolitan. The urge to belong to the diverse levels of class brought many Uyo citizens to a common view of their indigenous outlook and the hybridised becoming.

### **Socio-political Reorientation and Identity Projection**

The “Christmas Unplugged 3.0” was remarkable in many dimensions. There was a grid of political office holders who occupy diverse political offices in the state. Each one doggedly supported the course by partaking in alleviating the financial bulk of the Uyo people. This made the celebration a memorable one. For instance, National Assembly members, the commissioners representing Uyo, the State House of Assembly member, the permanent secretaries, Uyo Local Government Chairman, indigenous religious leaders, the entire councillors and other dignitaries of Uyo extraction, occupying various important offices in the State were present to identify with their culture. By this unity, differences were dimmed, and instead of the typical urge to showcase unnecessary political ego, there was a total stillness of temperance and orderly ambience of endearment. Politicians rapport with one another; party affiliations became irrelevant, everyone mended fences to protect the collective identity of Uyo and its people.

### **Challenges and Prospects of “Christmas Unplugged 3.0”**

Like any other emerging State’s festival, “Christmas Unplugged 3.0” is always filled with challenges, which if tactically handled may widen the scope of tourism in its contemporary plunge in Akwa Ibom State. An event of this magnitude which drew participants from the thirty -one Local Government Areas of the State, Captains of Industries, political office holders, traditional and religious leaders; would definitely have some challenges to confront.

**Crowd control:** One of the major challenges of “Christmas Unplugged 3.0” was how to control the mammoth crowd that turned out everyday for the festivities. Inspire efforts by the organisers to handle the crowd, we still had reports of missing children, stolen items, fightings, violence and all kinds of harassment.

**Exorbitant Charges for Sales of Kiosks:** The event was primarily meant to alleviate the economy on the side of the citizens; it was not meant to enrich the government at the detriment of the citizens. The rampant increment on the amount charged business owners for the available kiosk at the event venue, has become worrisome, resulting in a situation

where the business owners are not able to make expected returns on their investments. Imagine the increment from One hundred thousand Naira per kiosk in “Christmas Unplugged 2.0”, to the sum of two hundred thousand Naira per kiosk in “Christmas Unplugged 3.0”. The attitude of always increasing the price for the kiosks should be looked into, so that the economic engagements during the festivities are not played down with manipulative exploitation.

**Circumscription of Creativity and Copyright Nihilism:** From “Christmas Unplugged 1.0, many creative crafts have been exhibited and each local government always attempts to surpass the other by upgrading its form. This in a way ameliorates the festival, opening a wider tourist opportunity to explore. After the celebration, no one ever hears about the creators of those arts. However, if these creative minds are incorporated to the creative department of the State or given a special recognition, many more people would join the creative class, thereby enhancing well creation.

**Expenditure versus Income per Local Government:** The gradual appropriation of cultural enactment and expenditure per local government is a better idea. However, it would have worked well if esteem is not prioritised. Each local government tries to ameliorate its past achievement by engaging in many more exorbitant activities to win the empathy of the crowd and government’s medium for mere glory than a substantial prize. It turns out that these struggling local governments waste much resource to put up a memorable appearance and to be relevant than to benefit. It would make more sense to encourage creativity from indigenous material than buying of already printed wax, damasks and expensive lace to win the applause of the crowd only to go bankrupt, leaving sensitive projects undone.

**Lack of Archive and Conservative Approach:** The numerous crafts each of the local governments creates to win mere nods from the spectators would have been better utilized by setting up an archive in which all creative works realized in a year were preserved and treasured. Also, if a system of grading the arts were conceived and made to be as a benchmark to determine the better and best arts, it would stimulate more indigenous innovation. This would have stimulated competitiveness at the local level, making “Christmas Unplugged 3.0” a resurgent festival that could turn carnivalistic in subsequent years. Leaving those creative designs wasted and the designers abandoned appear to be a direct way of killing creativity. There should be a way of streamlining the crafts with the global outlook of such crafts. According to Udofia *et al*, a culture is made transcendent when it “commands appeal within and outside its domain and epoch in which another made the same way commands...” (45). Wasting all the indigenous creativity without attempting a fashionable leap, sponsored and owned by the State is a waste of resources.

## **Conclusion**

The “Christmas Unplugged” festivities in Akwa Ibom offer a compelling reflection on cultural resilience, adaptation, and transformation. By foregrounding local traditions over commercial influences, the celebrations serve as a vibrant reminder of the importance of cultural roots in harnessing the indigenous and modern identity. In the prevailing socioeconomic challenges and the pressures of globalisation, “Christmas Unplugged 3.0” approach, revives traditional artistic expressions and fosters community solidarity. However, the inclusion of economic empowerment would have made much sense on the already well laid foundation for a robust tourism exploration in Akwa Ibom State.

In reflecting on the multilayered dimensions of Akwa Ibom's Christmas unplugged activities, this article highlights the importance of preserving indigenous cultural practices, underscoring the possibility of innovation within traditional creativity. The dialogues between the past and present and the interface between traditionalism and modernity, have opened a wider scope for further research and discussions on the way forward of Akwa Ibom tourism potentials and approaches. There is need to draw from the Uyo model of the 2025 "Unplugged 3.0" spirit of comradeship, unification of purpose and creative consciousness as the blueprint for sustaining cultural heritage in an ever-changing global landscape.

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