

The Igede Agba New Yam Festival: A Reflection

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Abstract

Festivals are celebrations of important events in every society which bring together people from all walks of life. The Eurocentric view has dubbed African Culture as barbaric, backward, retrogressive and worth nothing to study. Nevertheless, various aspects of African culture manifested in form of African traditional festivals which are of great historical significance. In Igede land, the famous Igede Agba New Yam Festival is observed by the Igede people worldwide to mark the commencement of the new planting season (Yam) the king of all crops in Igede land. It is indeed marked as one of the most important social and cultural events. The Igede New Yam Festivals contained series of performances, entertainment among other events. Through this festival, the values and beliefs of the people are demonstrated; they give meaning to the social, political and economic life of the people celebrating it and the neighbouring towns benefited tremendously due to increase level of patronage in all spheres of life. They are vital mainsprings in the traditional education and the remix of the people's culture. This paper discusses the social, entertainment and education variables inherent in the Igede Agba New Yam Festival. The paper also suggests possible ways the government can get involved in the celebration of the festival especially the entertainment aspect so as to attract the attention of global means of communication, education and economic empowerment. The multi-disciplinary approach of research methodology is adopted including the use of primary and secondary sources in the course of the research..

Keywords: Igede Agba, Culture, Entertainment, and Traditional Festival.

Introduction

In Africa, festivals are a colorful and vibrant part of the culture which brings together people of common historical background. Periodically, festivals are held in most African societies to celebrate the heritage of the people. The festivals are held for a purpose of reunion development and to strengthen belief of the society and entertainment among others. Most Africans believe that datival hey them large close bondage with their ancestor. Festival is also held in other to priority the community of kingdom so that people can continues to live with confidences and hope.

However, our reason that needs to be investigated, some African culture which was manually meant trained in festival is drifting into obligation or unconsciousness and gradually moving forward extinction. The Igede new yam festival of the Igede people in the lower Benue valley is one those festivals that stands out among the numerous festival celebrated in the region with its unique attributes. It is important to note that through the Igede new yam festival, the value and belief of the Igede people were demonstrated. It gave meaning to the social, political and religious life of the people. It was a vital mains fling in the traditional education and preservation of the Igede culture. These, the Igede Agba new yam festival is no longer embraced and widely celebrated due to some factors which include the spread of Christianity and Islam. It is against the background above that this paper discusses the importance of the Igede new yam festival to the Igede people particularly, the socio-cultural respects, and the factors of forces behind it going unconsciousness and suggests possible ways towards it revival, particularly the entertaining aspect, so as to attract the attention of the national and international tourists. The paper is divided into six sections: introduction, conceptual framework, and the Igede new yam festival (History, activities and significance) factors responsible for its decline, the way forward and conclusion.

Conceptual Framework

This section classifies some concepts and the manners in which there are applied or used in this papers. The basic concepts that are clarified include culture, festival and entertainment.

Culture: Culture is a universal concept and experience, which is used in various ways with different meanings. The word itself is traced to the Latin word “cultur” meaning cultivation, which is the cultivation of human mind. For the Greek, culture encompasses

philosophy, drama and religion and as a result, we can talk about religious culture, political culture, economic culture and scientific culture¹.

People have viewed culture in various ways, for instance, in the western world, there is a narrow view of culture which restricts its meaning to ideas, values and attitudes. On the other hand, Africans look at culture as preserved traditions or ways of life of the forefathers. The sociologist and anthropologist alike examine it from different angles, while the Marxist sees it as a specific attribute of the society that reflects the level of historical development achieved by man and determined by his relationship to nature and society. Therefore, the anthropologist sees culture as that complex whole which indicates knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, customs and other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a member of the society². However, this may not give us a complete understanding of culture as referred to in this paper. Therefore, it is important to look at another definition of Ademola Ajayi who sees culture as:

The established pattern of behaviour among people...it is an all embracing and heterogeneous concept that encompasses every aspect of man's life and experience. It is perceived as a way of life or the totality of all human efforts and achievement in the struggle for survival. It is a collective and interacted whole, comprising everything in man's ideas, behaviours and products or anything relating to his needs as a social being³.

Therefore, it is important to note that, culture includes everything that makes man what he is, as well as the heritage he possesses. It also finds expression in his religion, language, philosophy, music, dance, drama, architecture, political organization and economy. In a nutshell we can say that, culture is the sum total of people's learned pattern of life or it is a learned pattern of behaviour, ideas, belief as well as the artifacts that a people share and transmit from one generation to another⁴.

In other words, culture is the center of human existence, because it distinguishes man from other creatures. It is also important to note that, culture may consist of the distinct behavioral pattern that is peculiar to a group of people at a given point in time. These embrace the growth of their knowledge, their beliefs, customs, institutions, duties, norms, values, skills and their general worldview and cosmology. It is also the means through which

members of the society interact meaningfully among themselves. It helps members of the society to identify themselves within a certain environment and also embraces the method of a group of people adopt and subdue their political environment as well as ways by which they find solution to their problems.

According to Joireman, as cited in Odey⁵ every ethnic group state the same common characteristics which are unique to them and norms that distinguish them from others around them. Those traits include the group own ethnic name, language and cultural practices or customs. Thus, this is what culture is all about as a living reality of every society and distinguishes one group from another. In the words of Mazrui, Culture has several functions.

They include among others the shaping of these reception of the peoples word view; it provide a motive for every behavior or action. Culture provides the basis for evaluating what is right or wrong, what is beautiful or ugly etc. Also, culture provides the criteria of identity and set people apart towards solidarity or hostility. Culture is also a basis of stratification, mode of communication and production as well as consumption system⁶.

It is significant to stress that, there is no absolute goodness or badness in culture. What is regarded as bad or immoral in one culture may not necessarily be so in another. In essence, therefore, what may be good among cultural group may be bad in another. Therefore, it is improper to use culture of one people as a parameter for measuring the culture of another. More so, to love one's culture is natural and patriotic because it provides a rallying point for social mobilization and liberation struggles as well as attitudes or legacy for actions. From the discussion so far, it won't be out place to adopt the definition of culture by UNESCO as our working definition. In 2002, the united nation educational, scientific and cultural organization (UNESCO) thus defined culture as:

A set of distinctive spiritual material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or social group, encompassing, in addition to art and literature, ways of living together, value systems, tradition and beliefs⁷.

Culture is always expressed in our daily life and mirrored in such events as festivals which are sometimes traditional, religious, socio-cultural, economic and political in nature. Festivals: Since culture presents the most viable outlet for self-definition and self-assertion, to study a people, it would be better to also study their arts, which in the main, represents the

emblem of their culture. As observed earlier, a manifestation of African's people's culture is mirrored inside many festivals that are part and parcel of the African people. Festivals therefore are integral part of the circle of life of a traditional African man. From the birth of a bouncing baby girl to the adolescence of a young black teenagers in the bush, right to the elderly recline of a chief in front of his house, there is a strong inclination towards festivals⁸.

Festivals are common to human society in Asia, Europe down to Africa. It is one of the ways through which man expresses his awareness of transcendental beings outside himself. By and by, a people have their spectacular performance for entertaining themselves, and these performances are dramatic as they are planned and rehearsed for future date at agreed venues and performances are put on customers to mimic ideas and characters. Therefore, performances such as praying, making, scarifies and offerings, performing ceremonies and rituals, observing various customs among others, including singing, dancing, eating and celebrating a particular event can be referred to as festival. According to sheilah¹⁰, traditional festivals are performed to observe some certain rituals and/or a type of event that communicates important cultural themes, often through the use special forms of language, music, dance etc.

While Okpe and Sylvester simplicity it as:

Traditional festivals are periodic celebrations marking significant events in the life of a people or community. There are used to transmit ideas, aspirations and the philosophy of the people from one generation to another. They are re-enactment of historical, religious and traditional events which serve as factors of contraction and interaction, cohesion and mobilization in these societies¹¹.

Traditionally, in Africa, the traditional religion is always part of the African man and his community. Therefore, the African traditional religion is vital part of the African cultural heritage. Thus, the African traditional religion is found in all areas of a typical African human life, having dominated the thinking of African people to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, social role, political organizations and even their economic activities¹².!; is because of the religious bond with the traditional African way of life that some African

festival which encompasses both religious, socio-cultural and economic traits are classified as African traditional festivals.

These festivals are significant in the past and present because they serve as rallying points and for a ramification of groups and it strengthens all to play their roles as good members of the community. In Nigeria, every ethnic group has some forms of festivals such as the Oshun festivals among the Yorubas, the Ofala festival among the Igbo, the Argungu feshing festival among the Hausa, the Eja Alekwu festival among the Idoma, the Puje festival among the Igede people and so on. However, in this paper, we shall reflect on the Igede New Yam Festival as observed by the Igede in the Lower Benue Valley Area.

Entertainment

Entertainment is one of the forms of activities that holds the attention and interest of audience, or gives pleasure and delight¹³. Although people's attention is held by different things, because most individuals have different preferences in entertainment, most forms are recognizable and familiar. Entertainment can be one or two things or both. It can be an experience, or it can be a business. As an experience, one can become amused or divested through performance, and as a business, one may become a multi-million dollar worldwide that show case the work, services, talent and the creativity of a humongous cross-spectrum of commerce. This industry built on the strength of live performance arts such as the traditional live entertainment.

It is important to note that the experience of being entertained has come to be strongly associated with amusements so that one common understanding of the idea is fun and laughter. Although, many entertainments have a sense of purpose. Thus, it is significant in this paper when it comes to ceremony, celebration, religious festivals or satire. Therefore, the possibility of what happens as entertainment may also be a means of achieving insight, intellect or economic growth. Hence, this paper sees entertainment as an activity designed to give pleasure or relaxation to an audience, no matter whether the audience participate passively as in watching or actively involved. It can be private or public, involving formal, scripted performance or unscripted. Most forms of entertainment have persisted over many Centuries evolving due to changes in culture, technology and fashion. Thus, traditional African entertainment such as the Igede New Yam Festival make use of variety of musical instruments made out of materials found in nature.

The Igede new Yam Festival: Background, Features and Significance

The Igede constitute the third largest ethnic group in Benue State. They number after Tiv and Idoma who form the first and second largest ethnic groups respectively in the State¹⁴. Though the main home of the Igede people is the present Oju and Obi Local Government Area, yet the Igede live in other neighbouring local government areas of Gwer, Konshisha and Vandeikya in Tiv land as their homes as well. There are also very many Igede people living in Otukpo and Ado local government areas of Idoma land. More so, one-third of the Igede in Benue State live in the present Cross River State, particularly in the Yala local government of the state¹⁵. Beside these places, thousands of the Igede have left their homes to live in the Western and some southern states of Nigeria. There, the Igede settle down as permanent labourer in the cocoa and other plantation farms.

With the introduction of the so-called indirect rule in Northern Nigeria and the gradual extension of same into the North Central and Igede land in particular, the need for ethnic group identity and recognition by the colonial rulers naturally arose. It was in response to the British administration that some ethnic groups formed cultural associations in the Southern areas of Nigeria¹⁶. Ethnic groups which formed such associations first became models for others to emulate. It was in such circumstances that the Igede Youth Association was formed in 1950. The Igede elites behind the formation of the Igede Youth Association are: Eje Iyanya who served as the Chairman, Ogah

Okwoche as the Secretary, John Ogah Idikwu as Treasurer and Alexander Isegbe Ikape served as the pioneer Financial Secretary respectively.

Membership was opened to all Igede, especially the elites. From this period, the Igede people became more conscious about their Cultural Identity and hence, the membership kept increasing. From 1955, the Igede Youth Association began to think of something that will ignite all Igede clans socially and to make other ethnic groups, including the Colonial administration to recognize the Igede ethnicity. What really preoccupied the minds of the elites was the New Yam Festival because before this time, there was no general feast to mark or celebrate the eating of new yams. Hitherto, each clan used to give permission for eating of the new yams without reference to other clans¹⁷.

In April 1956, the Igede Youth Association concluded discussions on how to make the Igede New Yam Festival what it has become today. It was in the process of this

negotiation and arrangement that Ihigile been the best day in Igede custom was adopted and consequently, every first Ihigile day of every first September is a unanimously chosen for the festival¹⁸. At first, the name was “Igede Day” just first Ihigile of September, 1957 that the first Igede New Yam Festival was held for all Igede and by all Igede people both at home and in Diaspora. Since the inauguration festival that was held and celebrated by all the Igede Sons and daughters, it has become an annual event in the Calendar of the Igede people to celebrate the Igede Agba New Yam Festival either at home or in the Diaspora¹⁹.

Features/Activities of the Igede Agba New Yam Festival

To every household in Igede nation, from the beginning of the New Igede Festival calendar, a date for the Igede Agba New Yam Festival is already known and established. As the people prepares for the celebration of their most important and cherishable farm produce, the women and children were not left out. The men who are usually the leaders of the household normally calls for meetings at their respective families and instruct their wives and children on what to do as the date draws closer.

Some of the important instructions given out to the women are as follows:-

- a. The need to weed their yam farms as they get prepared for the announcement of the harvesting and eating of new yams.
- b. The children are charged with the responsibility of clearing all the major roads and footpaths linking the various households and communities alike.
- c. The parents ensure that their children get new dresses for the wards especially the Igede attire which depicts the identity of the Igede people. The Igede attire is made up of white, blue and black colours which symbolize peace and unity.

As a result of the high level of preparation for the festival, the various markets in and around Igede environs usually experience high level of patronage from the people. This is due to the fact that the various items to be used such as goats, chickens, cows etc are been purchased before the date and this helps the people to focus on other aspect of the preparation. Between three to two days to the festival, Igede begins to be crowded with visitors who were not only Igedes from the outlying towns, but members of the neighbouring ethnic groups that has link with Igede in one way or the other. Some Igede kingsmen usually

come from various towns and cities across the Country, and even from Diaspora to see their loved ones.

The period is always very busy and entertaining in Igede land, where there are the Ayita dance, the Ogirinye dance, the Ogbete dance, akatanka dance and egbuo dance respectively. Thus, the climax of preparation for the festival celebration is marked on the eve of the festival day which is Ihiokwu market day. On the Ihiokwu market day, every head of the household would go to the farm, dig and bring home a large quantity of yam tubers for the feast. In the morning of the feast day, young men would offer yam presents to the eldest member of their families and friends and at the same time, men whose fathers were living would in turn make their own presents to the eldest members of their lineages. The acceptable and royal numbers among the Igede people are odd numbers. Hence, the yam presents would range from one to nine.

On the day of the festival, every household prepares enough pounded yam with abundant meat. When the food is ready, every member of the household, and in some cases a group of compounds, would assemble at the seat of the eldest male surviving member to eat the food and enjoy the feast. While waiting for the arrival of the food from the respective members present in the eldest man's house, the oldest man in the gathering would say the family prayer and declare the feast open by eating before everybody present. The food and drinks are enjoyed in three main groups, namely; the adult males, the house wives and the children.

The food is usually so very plenty that everybody present would eat to his or her satisfaction. Any stranger in the family whether invited to the compound or not would be fed free of charge. After eating the pounded yam meals, drinks comprising locally brewed beer made from millet and guinea corn (burukutu) palm wine, beer, minerals etc will be served round depending

on your choice. The same oldest man who ate the meal first, would as well pour libation, thanking God for giving yam to the ancestors who in turn bequeathed the crop on their descendants.

After taking the heavy food and drinks, the people of each village would assemble in the village square or any other public place to play and dance to their various traditional music. This music and dances include: Ogirinye, Oyita, abakpa, Ogbete, egbuo and the host of

others. Some of the prominent and recognized dresses to be put on by every Igede sons and daughters that day is the Igede traditional attire which is a large locally woven cloth called 'Ogodogodo' with white and blue stripes. Males would wear caps and females would wear head tie of the same material. It was not an offence for any person to wear any dress of his or her choice during the festival. In fact, most people especially women and children use to wear their new dresses for the first time that day.

In addition to the food and drinks, music and dances with masquerades displaying different styles of dances, the festival was also marked with plenty of gun firing across villages in Igede land. The booming of the guns from the villages dominated the noises that characterized the festival.

Significance of the Igede Agba New Yam Festival

At this point, it is important and fundamental to ask that of what significance is the celebration of the Igede Agba New Yam Festival to the Igede nation when it is being celebrated, and how can the Igede New Yam Festival be revived so as to attract the attention of the international tourists. In response to some of these questions, Chief Ogah Odike states that:

“Igede Agba New Yam Festival was a unifying point for all the people of the Igede nation; it helped in stabilizing the entire Igede society. It also advanced a fundamental economic progress of the kingdom. Above all, the people were entertained in all kinds of traditional dances which was able to put away all other stress they had, and thus pledging their undivided spirit towards the development of Igede nation 20”

Firstly, the festival amounts to cultural consciousness and recognition of the Igede as people with a strong sense of history. It shows where they were coming from as a people and where they were heading to. It was a cultural expression of the Igede identity. Secondly, the Igede New Yam Festival proved as agent of social mobilization, unity and development. It also served as catalyst for commercial activities because its celebration attracted people from far and wide who ultimately got involved in fun-fair and merry making.

Through the Igede New Yam Festival, the people were entertained with all types of Igede traditional dances and music which gave them pleasure and relaxation in preparation for the socio-economic activities of the new calendar year. This led to excess production of food for consumption and exchange. Therefore, the festival was capable of enhancing fundamental economic growth of the entire Igede society. Another major significance of the Igede New Yam Festival was the unity and uniformity of all Igede clans in the celebration of one event. The Igede lived in clan units and there were no socio-political organizations that ever cut across all the clans as the New Yam Festival had done. Thus, the festival helped to portray Igede culture to many non-Igede people in Nigeria. It helped the Benue State Government to recognize the Igede as a distinct ethnic group in the state.

Furthermore, the festival helped the farmer the farmers reevaluate the importance of their occupation. Thus, in Igede nation as a male child, cultivation and production of yam is seen as one of the paramount occupation and those who produces yam in large quantities are often regarded as rich men among their peers. Moreso, the Igede New Yam Festival added structure to our social lives and connects us with our families and background. It helped in passing legends, knowledge and traditions of our society to the younger generation. Finally, the festival usually brings a lot of economic fortune to the Igede people. It is important to note that, during the festive period, all types of business normally witnesses high level of patronage be it the fashion industry, food items, transport among others and this goes a long way to boost the economy of Igede society.

Conclusion

This paper has established the fact that, culture is always expressed in people's daily life and mirrored in events such as festivals. Festivals are common to all human societies including Africa and it is one of the ways through which man expresses his awareness of transcendental beings outside himself. Festivals are held for the purpose of reunion, developments and to strengthen beliefs of society. An example of such is the New Yam Festival celebrated by the Igede people right from the 1950s to the present time. The festival was a unifying point which brought all the Igede people together to offer thanksgiving to God for keeping them alive to see the beginning of the new planting season in Igede calendar. It was also a festival used to ask the Igede ancestors for peace in the land, prosperity, fertility and all the good fortunes the land deserved. The festival was celebrated whole heartedly in the colonial period since the inaugural celebration in 1957.

The paper therefore suggests that, the government must see a way of funding the festival and make it a tourist event that would attract global attention to compliment and serve as source of income and employment. In this direction, the government can laise with the Igede people to open up the ancestral home of the people “Ipinu Igede” where the Igede people first settled after arriving from “Oral” in Edo State, the particular area where river Oyongo parted ways by breaking into seven tributaries for the Igede people to cross because of the advancing oraa warriors. It is observed that the stressful times as a result of our pushing and pressing lifestyle could be easily resolved and addressed when one have some unapologetic and non-guilty pleasures with fun which are readily available through celebration of the Igede Agba New Yam Festival.

Thus, the opinion of the contributors of this article is that, we should never leave any opportunity to celebrate, whether it be festivals, birthdays, promotions and whatsoever. In fact, I would want to say that not only we should celebrate festivals of our religion; we should celebrate festivals of other religions too

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