

## CAN CULTURE UNITE? AN EXPLORATIVE GESTALT OF IWA AKWA AND SEIGBEIN FESTIVALS

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### ABSTRACT

*Festivals are important cultural values in an African society. In the modern times, people often tend to divorce themselves from these celebrations. Their argument is often based on religious grounds: festivals are fetish and offer nothing to human society. This paper then investigates the importance of festivals as it concerns societal harmonious co-existence. It poses the question: Can Culture Unite? IwaAkwa and Seigbein festivals of Ndi Igbo and the Ijaw people are chosen as case studies while ethnographic research methods involving participant observation, non-participant observation and interviews are adopted. At the end, it is observed that not only that festival unite people, they also serve major form of ethnographic identity. Their celebrations also encourage tourism and attract economic gains. The paper recommends not just a continuous sustenance of festivals but also investment in them for their longevity.*

**Key words:** Culture, Festival, Unity, community and communal living

### Introduction

Different ethnicities in Nigeria share cultural values that make a communal roll call. These values preclude primordial and ethnographic values which are not limited to language, feeding habit, artefacts, festivals, dance and music patterns. These cultural values can be said be “primordial bonds” (Hutchinson and Smith, 1996:3) that cumulate to define a group of people as a “self-perpetuating biological” sect with “cultural criteria of symbols [...] and normative behaviour” (Otite, 2000:10). Among the major ethnicities in Nigeria that number over two hundred and fifty (250) are (in no special order): Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Ijaw (Izon or Ijo), Tiv, Kalabari, Itshekiri, Urhobo, Ishan, Edo, Ibibio among others. The members of these independent ethnicities individually reside in a defined geographical location where they nurture and call home. There is a high level of communal living amongst the people. Festival is often the bedrock on which this communal life is demonstrated.

It is on this note that this paper examines culture. It poses an investigative question: Can Culture unite? To effectively tackle and address this question, two festivals (*iwaakwa* and *Seigbein*) from two ethnicities (Igbo and Ijaw respectively) are explored.

Festivals have been part of the human society “and have their origin in religious belief, historical events or some socio-political desire for social bonding” (Akporobaro, 2006:366). Festival is a gestalt of dance and music with the accompanying drumming that moves the celebrating community (which includes passers’ by who stop over to watch) to a cathartic, emotive and unrestricted purgation of relief. This further engenders unreserved declaration of love and embrace of fellow kinsmen. This act has branded the Nigerian (indeed Africans) as “emotive and intuitive” in his “intent to express a need that will bind him together with [his] society and culture” (Ogunsuyi 2001) and further positions festival as a vehicle that provides “education of the young towards an understanding of the cultural life and traditions of the people” (Akporobaro2006:366).To this end, festival then remains a “major communal event that expresses the people’s general philosophy, attitudes, culture, norms, and the likes which receive general acceptability and participation by the members of that community” (Odogbor, 2004:1-2) and further elicit a harmonious relationship in the community.

## Methodology

To effectively investigate this enquiry, ethnographic methods were adopted. These methods are participant observation, non-participant observation and interview techniques. Participant observation ensures that the researcher spends a quality time in the environment of study for a first hand observational experience. Over a period of six (6) years (2007 to 2013), this researcher observed the communities and festivals under review. He concluded the observation April 2013. In the course of the observation he patiently witnessed two (2) celebrations of the *jwaakwa* and *Seigbein* festivals. Since *Seigbein* involves ritual practices which are known and strictly open to initiated members, this researcher then adopted non-participant observation as method to get desired information. This proved useful and effective. Later personal interviews were conducted with some useful personalities to confirm some issues. Direct and open ended questions were asked and follow-up made where applicable. For instance, a Chief was asked: "Please narrate how *Seigbein* is celebrated" and as a follow up, "What really is *Olo*?"

## Exploration of the festivals

*JwaAkwa* (Wearing Cloth) festival:

To better situate the *jwaakwa* festival, it will be better to appreciate the environment of the festival first. *JwaAkwa* festival is celebrated by *Ndilgbo* (Igbo people), an ethnic group in Nigeria who trace their ancestry to the Jewish world. These people travel a lot and are noted for their ability to thrive even in adverse conditions. Because of their ingenuity, creative minds and commercial prowls, they are often addressed as "the wise men". *Ndi Igbo* inhabit parts of Nigeria, East of the Niger.

Umunohu Nsu, a community in Ehime Mbano Local Government Area of Imo State, Eastern Nigeria is isolated for this cultural study. This community has two large families called *Umuduruikeji* and *Umudimn'ama* (or simply *Duruikeji* and *Dimn'ama*). *Umuduruario*, *Umudike*, *Umudibia*, *Umu 'wekenaduru*, *Ndiowere*, and *Umudimezejiare* kindreds in Umunohu community. The village Chief is at the head of administration (with executive, legislative and judicial powers). He is supported by his cabinet made up of select elders, *ndilchienaOzo*. Various age grades (and village vigilante in the present world) constitute the village police.

Umunohu Nsu is noted for her rich cultural heritage which festivals form a great part of. Farming is the major occupation of this community. While the men cultivate yam, the women cultivate cassava, cocoa yam, okro, and other domestic crops. They are mainly Christians. Some of the festivals found and celebrated here include *Iriji* (new yam festival), *Mbomuzo*, and *jwaakwa* festivals.

*JwaAkwa* celebration is a festival through which young adults are initiated/admitted into manhood/adulthood and taught the demands of their new status. *Jwaakwa* festival serves a function one can boldly term educative (Duruaku, 1997:25; 2000:17). Since the basic requirement of good institution is to prepare and infuse in the candidates an urge and courageous zeal to voluntarily and intuitively live out the tenets handed them at initiation when need arises, *Jwaakwa* festival can be regarded as an institution. This education collates the positive traits in individuals to build a positive, peaceful and progressive community (Umukoro2002:7-17) and further helps "to facilitate social integration through group interaction and a sense of mutual understanding" (13-14). This tells why the preparation for *jwaakwa* takes a long time of preparation as will be seen later.

## *JwaAkwa* ceremony

*JwaAkwa* (wearing cloth) is an occasional festival of passage celebrated every three years. This festival in Umunohu Nsu, is as old as the community itself. During the *jwaakwa*, all the male citizens born within an identified unity of three years constitute the candidates for the year's celebration.

## Preparation for the feast

The *JwaAkwa* has a nine year preparation period. This is because the celebrants form age grades that perform different roles in the community in some other feasts and occasions that precede the *jwaakwa*. The first three years of the nine is an age grade formation period. During the period, legible youths born within the specified three year bracket are asked to identify themselves for registration. This registration qualifies one to be part of the budding age grade. The age grade then identifies itself with a name. At this stage, often the girls out-number

the boys. There is often a prolonged argument over who should belong and who should not because some boys who do not for age reasons, belong in the age bracket would want to be part of it. This is either because they feel they have made some money or their parents would want them to join their seniors for reasons best known to them. This argument is often settled by asking the person(s) to present some gift items for *iheebiri* (adoption). These items may range from food and drinks to money or even all. Upon the fulfilment of the *iheebiri*, the person can then do the general registration formalities and thereafter becomes a bona fide member of the age grade.

Many a time, some person(s) abandon or withdraw their membership within this period or shortly after registration. In this first three years, their first task is *idọdọ* or *ichiogbo*. This is an act of forming walls or barricade for the main celebrants or those wearing cloth that particular year. They also participate actively in keeping the community clean especially during *Mbomuzo* festival. After this year, the age grade is seen to have been instituted.

The second three years of the preparation period starts after the *idọdọ*. This period is used mainly to fine tune and position the age grade and its members for the *jwaakwa*. During this period also, some elders attend the age grade's meetings to tutor and guide them on how to hold meetings and on the norms, tenets and taboos of the community. The job here is to construct and prepare the arena for the *jwaakwa* of this particular year. The climax of this second three years is the *IduAhja*.



Uniformed age grades at an *jwaakwa* celebration. Left are second grade age grade members for *IduAhja* (they escort the newly initiates and will be the next group for initiation) while middle, in white, are the first grade for *idọdọ* (they are at the formative stage and their job is to form guard for the celebrants).

The third three years of the nine years is marked by intense preparations. First, they will have to recognise and appreciate their immediate senior age grade by cooking a feast-like meal, a meal these seniors must hand them a list. Every item in this list is expected to be bought, cooked and served by these intending celebrants or initiates as a mark of respect and humility. After eating this meal, their seniors will bless them and only then would they be declared ready for the final preparations which embody individual feasts collectively called *isinriakwa*. The *isinriakwa* involves cooking elaborately for the celebrant's kindred and kinsmen, friends and well-wishers and all who would come. It equally serves as an invitation to the *jwaakwa* celebration. After cooking for the kindred, the celebrant (often when he is the first son) goes to his maternal home to do the same. If the first son does this in his maternal home, except his other brothers can afford it, it will cover for all of them. In fact, *isinriakwa* is seen as the heart of the *jwaakwa* since one must clear his debts with the community and make up for whatever problems he or his father has with the community before he can cook this meal. After this, he is then ready for the *jwaakwa* celebration or initiation. Should a candidate dies after his *isinriakwa* and before the *jwaakwa*, he will be buried as an adult.



Some escorted Masquerades at *anjwaakwa* celebration.

United crowd at *anjwaakwa*.

The *jwaakwa* itself is celebrated December ending or first week of January depending on the market day. About this period, most people are around on holidays. The occasion brings the whole community, friends and well-wishers together in an atmosphere of feast. In the morning of the celebration day, the immediate senior age grade goes to the homes of each of the celebrants to do the ritual tying of wrapper on the celebrants. This is to symbolically teach the initiates how to tie or wear wrapper and welcome them to adulthood. The celebrants will be thereafter led to the village square where they dance round the square. The celebrants stay in line according to their kindred with those from *Umudimezeji* at the rear position since they are assumed the last born of the village.



Crowd in *anjwaakwa* celebration. Carried shoulder high are the newly initiates. Around them are drummers beating dancing beats to the delight of all.

The village square celebration is a public exhibition of transition to manhood. In this celebration, the ladies here are mostly wives to the celebrants since the pioneer ladies are either married out or feel they ought to be in their husband's places. From the village square, attention finally shifts to the homes of the celebrants where guests are entertained according to the celebrant's purse. It is worthy to note here that it is always a thing of joy for proud parents of the initiate(s) to see their young son(s) become responsible men in the community.

In the aspect of responsibility (both to self and to community), *jwaakwa* instils respect, self-discipline, patience, financial responsibility, loyalty and obedience on the initiates. Considering the long period of preparation before the *jwaakwa* and the respectful obedience to the dutiful assignments that accompany, one will admit the fact that this festival builds the community.



Crowd in anjwaakwa celebration. Carried shoulder high are the newly initiates.

Debts, antagonism to custom and other acts which do not promote the unity and progress of the community are factors that expressly disqualify one's *jwaakwa* candidature. It is expected that people who engage in these acts must disassociate from them to avoid harsh penalties, caricature and disqualification from *jwaakwa*.

The *jwaakwas* an admission into adulthood, by implication, an admission into positive responsibilities in the community not limited to financial contribution for development. This celebration demands that the initiates become part of the elders' forum, Eze's cabinet (palace chiefs) and (some) members of *ndiNzenaQzq* whose duty it is to maintain peace in the community.

## SEIGBEIN FESTIVAL

### Origin

*Seigbein* Festival is an annual festival celebrated by the Kabowei Kingdom found in Delta and Bayelsa States, South-South region of Nigeria. The people of Kabowei Kingdom believe that Oproza was their ancestral grandfather. Oproza had three sons: Gbaranwei, Kumbowei and Kabowei. Kabowei, the last of the sons was not in the Kingdom when their father died because of a sour relationship with his elder brothers which made him to leave the Kingdom. He came back to the Kingdom after their father's burial and asked from his brothers pardon and permission to perform burial rite for his late father. These requests were granted and the elaborate funeral ceremony Kabowei performed attracted people from far and wide and later turned out to be an annual celebration. It is what is today celebrated as *KaboweiSeigbein* festival.

*Seigbeinis* derived from two words: *Sei*(evil) and *gbein*(throw away). "*Seigbein*" means then to "leave bad behaviour. It is all about repentance and funeral ceremony to remember his late father, Oproza".<sup>2</sup> These *seigbein* festival is termed *KabuoweiSeigbein* festival because it is celebrated by the *Kabowei* Kingdom of Ijo people. Different communities exist in the *Kabuowei* and they include Adagbabiri community, the Ogeinware, the Okru-Ware, the Osouware, the Trofani, and the Taware quarters. Their occupations are mainly fishing and farming.

The festival is celebrated annually often in the month of April. The date is not definite since its pronouncement is predicated on the sighting of the new moon. The *Seigbein* festival is a religious festival with several rituals embedded in it for peace and cleansing of the land. The festival affords an opportunity for cultural displays and reunion. Each town in *Kabowei* Ijo is expected to put up a cultural display during the *Seigbein* festival.





(Some *Seigbein* festival masquerades)

#### **RITUALS AND PREPARATION FOR THE FESTIVAL**

The "*Amateri*" ritual is a major ritual performed by Tawari people of the Kabuowei Ijo clan and it lasts for about twelve days. It emphasises on the people's love for their town. Within these days, playing of loud music, beating of drums and shooting of guns are highly prohibited. The atmosphere in Kabuowei is quite solemn and there is no burial rite for the dead during this period. Information concerning this ritual is restricted to only few initiates who know when, where and how this ritual is performed since it is not a public ritual. One of the members who pleaded anonymous said the items used in the ritual include native clay pots and white cloth. The pots he said

“are often turned upside down. This act is called “*Ter*”, in the local parlance and it signifies closure to calamities during the festival”. Women are not permitted to witness the ritual performance.

Usually, the first eight days out of the twelve days of the ritual festival are more significant in the process. It is within these first eight days that the principle of tranquillity is observed and subsequently relaxed a bit in the last four days. Since the occupation of the people mainly revolves around farming and fishing, everybody collects a reasonable quantity of yam, cassava, garri and fish that will carry the family and their visitors throughout the festival period. Every clan has her own lake or pond and expected to fish from there. Some of these lakes include the *Bullu-poulake* for Adagbabiri clan and *Onise-yen* lake for Patani clan. The *Onise-yen* serves mainly as a central lake. About four days to the start of the festival, people usually move to this lake for pre-festival activities.

#### THE FISHING

In the mid night preceding the starting day of the fishing, ritual sacrifices are made. This ritual is again repeated in the morning before the fishing commences. Often cannons are shot to mark the commencement of the fishing. Over time the size of fish one would catch in the fishing expedition would depend on where the person is in the lake, the type of fishing material he is using and better still, luck.



(Some people fishing for the festival)

#### PROHIBITIONS OF THE LAKE DURING THE FISHING

Fishing for the *Seigbein* festival is considered a sacred event, for this reason the water spirits in the lake prohibit certain actions in the lake in the course of the *Seigbein* fishing. These prohibitions are expected to be observed and kept religiously.

It is worthy to note that having sex in the lake is prohibited. Anyone who dares would, together with his family, experience calamities from the gods. No one is expected to use the “*akire*” (a basket-like fish trap) to fish. It is an abomination to give birth in the lake just as the mothers of children who did not cry at birth and “*birasebere*” (menstruating women) are barred from entering the lake.

#### THE AMAFINI OGELE

After the fishing and farming everyone is expected to return home and this makes room for the *AmafiniOgele* (celebration) performance. This performance is usually done by the *Perewari* and *Osuoware* in *Abare* and *Patani* respectively. It is an evening performance scheduled after farm since everyone must return early enough. This day significantly marks the last day of farming before the *Seigbein* feast commences. Significantly, the embargo on noise, burial and other noisy acts are observed between *Amateri* and *Amafiniogele*. The *Ogele* incorporates good music with dance and a procession round the town in aesthetic and affluent attires.

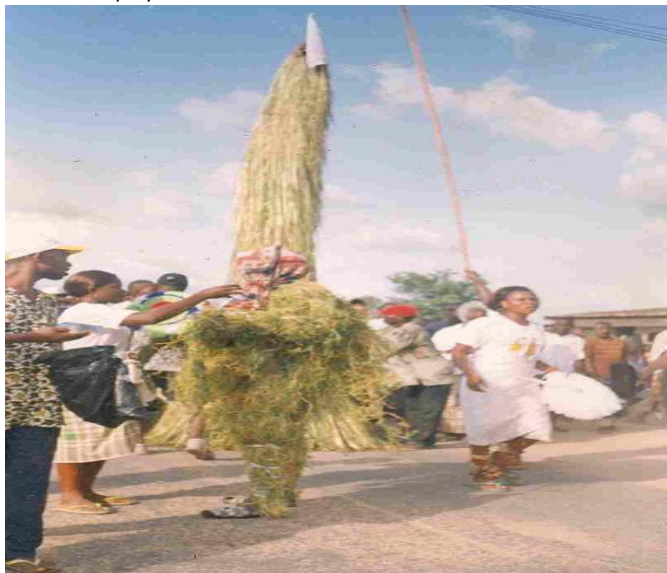
### THE SEIGBEIN FESTIVAL CELEBRATION

The festival normally is ushered in with an “*Olo*”. The “*Olo*” is a symbolic ritual procession of elderly women carrying firewood around the whole town singing and clapping. It is an all women affair done in the mid night during which they caricature and curse any man who has misbehaved or disobeyed the norms and traditions of the land. It is forbidden for any man to come out or see the *Olo* procession.

It is believed that the *Olo* will cleanse and keep off evil, sickness and calamities from the town. It also rededicates the town to the ancestors. On the third day of the *Olo*, ashes are gathered and thrown into the river. This throwing of ashes into the river marks a final cleansing. There is often plenty to eat and drink during this period. A warriors’ dance called “*apiaoge*le” (knife display) succeeds the *Olo*. The *apiaoge*le is performed wearing war attires and gears while holding cutlasses. *biri-eruooge*le also go simultaneously in other Kabuwei communities. Every unmarried woman in the town takes part in this celebration which prepares her for womanhood and motherhood. The women normally take part in a colourful and rich clothing procession around the town. The attire worn often signifies the level of material wealth in each woman’s family. Often during the procession, they are expected to change their clothes as many times as they can afford. The *oge*le lasts for four days with the fourth day marking presentation of gifts to participants by each quarter in the clan.



The *Apia Oge*le display. Participants are expected to dress in war gears with cutlasses in their hands. It is a colourful display.



*Biri-eruooge*le procession. Every Kabu-Owei woman is expected to pass through this process except one who is deeply religious. It is believed that the ceremony prepares her for woman-hood.



The *Opuendi* marks the climax and the final day of the Seigbein festival. The performance done in blue or sparkling white attires is usually greeted with heavy rain fall.

It is noteworthy here that during the Seigbein festival, different communities in the Kabuowei clan also do their unique performances and feasts. These performances include the *Kenaper* formed by the Adagbabiri community, the *Agadagbaby* the Ogeinware, *Pere-Ogele* (observed in red attire to commemorate the domiciliary of the royal throne in Okru-Ware) by the Okru-Ware, the *Omijno* by the Ekise, *Azoby* the Osouware, the *Amaaru* by the Adagbabiri, the *Oyubuware* by the Trofani, the *Opu-Obori* by the Taware quarters.

#### **VALUES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SEIGBEIN FESTIVAL**

The celebration of the Seigbein festival as seen above brings people, communities, towns and races together. It will be noted that peaceful co-existence is heightened during and after the festival celebration. Since it is part of the festival to expose, caricature and ridicule evil doers, many people avoid their names being dragged to the mud and to save their faces they try as much as possible to live blamelessly in the community. This encourages mutual respect, love and great peace in the community and its environs.

The *Ogele* (feast) affords people the opportunity to come, dance and merry together. This coming together not only fosters unity, it also endears people together thereby creating a lasting mutual experience.



A section of celebrating crowd during the Seigbein festival.

#### **Conclusion**

So far this paper has tried to explore the essence of festivals in uniting people for a harmonious living. A careful appraisal of the festivals x-rayed reveals that people during festivals, come together in a free atmosphere of love to share oneness. There is hardly any tide of grievance during celebrations as seen in the festival crowds. On this note, it is the recommendation of this paper that government should invest more in ethnic festivals. This investment would encourage tourism (for economic growth) and sustained unity devoid of or to a great extent, with reduced tribal conflicts.

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