

Igbo Identity: New Yam Festival as Cultural Drama

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Abstract

The Igbo ethnic group is mostly found in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. Their major identity indices are language, fashion, and various celebratory cultures. One of the major celebratory cultures of the Igbo people is the New Yam festival translated as (*Iri Iji Ohu*) marked annually at the beginning of the new harvest season between July and August. Beyond its recognition as a celebratory festival that reflects the Igbo identity, it has not attracted global interpretation as a cultural practice that expands the frontiers of drama as a genre of literature. Through cultural materialism, this study argues that the *Iri Ji Ohu* festival is a cultural drama rooted in imitation, ritual, sacrifice, and role-playing, all characteristics of the Greek Dionysian festival and therefore should be interpreted and appreciated as cultural drama. The *Iri Ji Ohu* festival is a symbolic dramatic genre that showcases the identity of the people as a primal consideration by which they are recognized. It deserves the same academic attention as the Greek Dionysian festival and other cultural festivals worldwide used to explain a people's history, identity, spiritual, and cultural provenance. That way, the Igbo identity can be better understood and appreciated.

Keywords: culture, Igbo, cultural materialism, identity, new yam festival, drama

Introduction

The Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria is found majorly in the South-Eastern part of the country comprised of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States. However, some of them are also found in other states like Delta, Cross-River, Rivers, Edo, and Benue. They are among Nigeria's three major ethnic groups with highly specialized and distinct cultural values. The two other major ethnic groups are Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba with different cultures. Igbo culture is inherently dynamic and flexible, rather than static (Amadi and Agena 2015). The fluency and flexibility of the Igbo culture ensure easy adaptation to minor changes which create room for the influence of cultural materialistic intrusions. However, there are inalienable cultures that are sacrosanct by which the people are identified and recognized. The New Yam festival (henceforth *Iri Ji Ohu*, in some translations *Iri Ji Ohuru*) is one such culture. Yam in the Igbo language is called *Ji*. To eat means *Iri*. new means *Ohu*. Put together, the three words constitute a linguistic triad that connotes Igbo identity whenever and wherever they are used together. *Iri Ji Ohu* has become symbolic as part of the Igbo traditional and cultural evolution which confers importance, recognition, and an enduring sense of belonging on the people. While many Igbo identity emblems have been eroded by Western civilization, especially the Christian religion, *Iri Ji Ohu* still maintains its cultural flavour even though aspects of it have been compromised to accommodate Western ideas and the steady incursion of cultural materialism in the modern era. In Igboland, *Ji* is regarded as the king of all crops and granted more respect than all other crops like cassava, cocoyam, and maize. Chinua Achebe captures the majestic identity of the New Yam festival in Igboland in his novel *Things Fall Apart* in the following words:

Men and women, young and old, looked forward to the New Yam festival because it began the season of plenty – the new year. On the last night before the festival, yams of the old were all disposed of by those who

still had them. The new yam must begin with tasty, fresh yams and not the shrivelled and fibrous crop of the previous year. (Achebe 1958)

Achebe's narration of the importance of the New Yam festival in Igboland is symbolic of the iconic recognition of yam and its festival among the people. The festival constitutes an aspect of the people's existential reality from where they also drew inspiration, motivation, and spiritual revival for continuities. The cultivation of yams was governed by strict rules. As a highly ritualised process, yam production often involved elaborate ceremonial rituals during the planting and harvest seasons (Korieh 2007). The *Iri Ji Ohu* festival is observed annually at the beginning of the new planting season between July and August. The festival is marked by fanfare, celebrations among the people, joy, and merriment. It is accompanied by rituals and sacrifices to cleanse the land of evil and to offer propitiations to the gods for long life, good health, and a rich harvest in the new planting season. However, this study seeks to establish the *Iri Ji Ohu* festival as a cultural dramatic enactment with all the characteristics of the Greek Dionysian Festival. Therefore, it deserves to be interpreted and appreciated as cultural drama.

The *Iri Ji Ohu* festival in Igboland is on the same echelon as the Dionysian festival in classical Greece. All the trappings of the Dionysian spectacle such as ritual, role-playing, sacrifice, costume, song, and dance are contained in the *Iri Ji Ohu* festival as a form of drama. However, while the Dionysian festival is studied both as the origin of drama which offers insight into tragedy as an element of drama, the Igbo *Iri Ji Ohu* festival, although mentioned and researched by some scholars, has not received the kind of attention the Dionysian festival has received within the global academic community. Indeed, some scholars have critiqued the *Iri Ji Ohu* festival and explained its constituents and processes of continuities simply as a cultural festival, no study, as far as this

paper is concerned has espoused the festival as a cultural dramatic genre which deserves recognition and appreciation as the Greek Dionysian spectacle. Using cultural materialism as a critical instrument of analysis, the *Iri Ji Ohu* festival in Igboland will be analysed and explained as a cultural drama with all the attributes of drama as a genre of literature. The festival also witnesses the slaughtering of goats and the sprinkling of blood, dramatic, cleansing rituals associated with Greek classical tragedy. In a way, we can argue that the Igbo is a symbolic ethnic group in Nigeria like Greece in Europe because there is no historical, archaeological, or anthropological evidence to prove that they migrated from anywhere like the other major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Therefore, we can describe them as original sons of the soil. And whereas every other ethnic or linguistic group or tribe that inhabits Nigeria today can trace their source of migration or origin, the Igbo arguably are the only group that was there before others (Nwafor-Ejelinma 2012). Indeed, *Iri Ji Ohu* festival as a symbolic identity of the Igbo and as a cultural drama merits a critical study as cultural drama. The identity of the Igbo person is portrayed in the general philosophy of the Igbo and illustrated in the cultural heritage of the people (Nnebedum 2018).

Cultural Materialism

The linguistic and vocabulary complexities associated with explaining cultural materialism have, to a large extent, mystified the easy understanding of the theory. Such terms as globalization, infrastructure, superstructure, sophistication, and human behaviour have all been used by researchers to bewilder the research community concerning cultural materialism. Cultural materialism is associated with Raymond Williams who posits that cultural materialism is a theory of the specificities of material, cultural, and literary production within historical materialism. (1977). Williams argues that cultural materialism is the totality of cultural influences in the historical evolution of literature and other artistic productions. However, Marvin Harris offers a somewhat penetrating explanation of cultural materialism.

According to him, the aim of cultural materialism in particular is to account for the origin, maintenance, and change of the global inventory of sociocultural differences and similarities (2001). Although the preceding observation by Harris provides a relationship between the source of the worldwide catalogue of sociocultural peculiarities and inherent departures as the basic commitment of cultural materialism, it does not clearly explain or give an explicit meaning of cultural materialism. Williams introduced this theory with his focus on historical context but with impacts on the economy, culture, society, politics, etc. with a broader perspective in literature (Singh 2021). To understand cultural materialism and its operational apparatuses, one must explain the two words separately. By doing so, we will set aside all the apprehension accompanying the theory. Generally, we can say that culture is the entire spectrum of people's attitudes, approaches, responses, and reactions towards various aspects of their existence. It also refers to customs, beliefs, practices, heritages, and habits associated with a society in a specified geographical location. Materialism on the other hand denotes the belief that matter or physical possession is the whole essence of human existence or the most important denominator of human life. Simply put, we can therefore say that cultural materialism establishes and continually lubricates the interface between the culture of a people in terms of beliefs and traditions, and how it is shaped or influenced by their material conditions. It is the interface between culture and materialism and how they dialectically influence each other. In all of its characteristics of grandeur, materialism or material conditions, expressed through the identifiable matrix of opulence and the attendant social euphoria, shape and impact the culture of a people.

This study is committed to analysing how material conditions have historically and contemporarily affected the *Iri Ji Ohu* festival as a dramatic cultural expression. During festivals, especially cultural festivals, the role of objects is integral to the creation of community lore and often demonstrates community

belief systems and values (Barriere and Finkel 2022). Many willing natives and adherents of different cultural expressions are unable to observe some cultural processions and festivities due to their meagre or lean economic, and material conditions. Material objects needed for sacrifices and rituals form part of different cultural celebrations. These rituals and sacrifices are carried out as propitiations to appease chthonic essences and grease the channel of human access to their esoteric realms. There are instances when the gods reject objects of sacrifice like goats and rams because they are not fat and plump enough. The Bible, the Christian religion's moral compass in the book of Genesis records how God rejected Cain's sacrifice because it was not juicy enough. The relationship between gods and humanity upheld periodically on the altar of sacrifices and materialism has suffered neglect due to the anaemic material conditions of many people, especially the natives who adhere to traditional religion. To a great extent, therefore, material conditions determine the expression of culture in all parts of the world. Besides the items of sacrifice for renewal and regeneration during some cultural practices, other aspects of a people's culture require colourful ceremonies, expensive fashion, many guests, food and drink, music and dance, and many more. In Igboland, the majority of the cultural processions and their continuities require appreciable material ostentation.

Cultural materialism determines how technological and scientific factors influence cultural beliefs, inclinations, values and practices. In many parts of the world, the armoury of modernism such as electricity, iron, language, religion, painting, and sculpture are infused into cultural practices as inexorable ingredients. In Yorubaland South-West of Nigeria, the image of Sango, the god of thunder and lightning adorns the front of the National Electricity Corporation. Sango, a sixteenth-century ruler of Oyo, is an anthropomorphic deity who was in his lifetime reputed to have had the ability to "call down" lightning to destroy his enemies and burn their houses and homesteads (Garuba 2003).

The foregoing is symbolic of the god's control of electricity in the modern era even if there is no direct proof of this belief. Thus, the traditional elite have appropriated an aspect of modernity into the resources of their cultural beliefs. Motor mechanics and other vocations that require the use of iron also appropriate Ogun, the god of iron as their primal guardian. Local languages are today transmitted through sophisticated modern channels such as radio, TV, phones and sundry gadgets. Painting and sculpture are captured and advertised through diverse modern instruments such as cameras, TV and radio. The intersections of these modern cultures and traditional cultures are determined by material conditions. The material conditions of many people determine their interest in a particular culture and are not necessarily due to cultural convictions or the expediency of such cultural practices.

Literature Review

Many critics have examined drama as a genre of literature from different perspectives. Dramatic literature is the record of the attempts of playwrights to express and communicate their ideas about man's hopes, dreams, ideals, feelings, thoughts and experiences, and his relationship to society (Betti 2015). Betti ties his interpretation and meaning of drama to a playwright's conception of society, social realities, and all the animating tensions that determine social evolution. Dramatic practices such as hot seating, role-play, tableaux, and writing-in-role are some of an always-expanding repertoire of performative, embodied and pedagogical tools that provide opportunities for students to become critical observers and effective problem solvers as they actively and playfully negotiate meaning within and around texts (Medina et al. 2021). 'Hot seating', 'role-playing', 'tableaux' and 'writing-in-role' are aspects of dramatic performance that create opportunities for students to appreciate their environment as critical solution providers. But among all the three categories mentioned, role-playing is composed of more immediacy in festivals and rituals as forms of cultural drama. The divergences in opinion point to the multiple hierarchies in which drama

communicates both as a form of entertainment and as a ritual, an irreducible process, especially festivals, through which man accesses the esoteric realm of chthonic gods. Although drama has always been intrinsically intertextual with other literary forms, its primary relationship is, of course, with the actualities of theatre and performance, and thus with the material culture and ideological practices of societies (Greenhalgh 2004). The foregoing emphasizes the transmutation of drama from a textual literary formation to performance enabled by material culture. In this case, drama can be understood in two ways. First, as a medium of enacting or mirroring life's multiple realities including the socio-economic, gender, and class dialectics depicted in a literary text. Second, as a creative process that offers communal binding which provides an avenue for cultural renewal through rituals where the channel between humanity and the supernatural is constantly lubricated. The Iri Ji Ohu falls under the matrix of the second designation of drama as a cultural practice. Derek Wright posits that drama is the most primal of artistic expression mediated by no pigment, print, or lens, it communicates directly through the raw material of the pulsating human body, its rhythmic movement, sounds, and presence. (1993). Wright exalts the human body, its movement and sound as major components of the dramatic mode. In this case, festivals primarily thrive on the human body, movements, music, and dance all encapsulated within the spatial depiction of reality.

The Iri Ji Ohu also serves a symbolic purpose as a form of tourism that attracts many people from different parts of the world. In that sense, it is portrayed as a rich cultural identity that reflects the origin and sometimes spiritual inclination of the people. Festival celebration is connected to the growth of tourism in recent times. This is probably because the increasing wave of globalization gave rise to the need to reinstate identity (Okoye 2020). Okoye argues that globalization is a factor that necessitates the annual celebration of certain festivals as a form of identity renewal. The New Yam festival is a general cultural phenomenon

across Africa and Nigeria especially but in Igboland, it has morphed into a more significant exhibition associated with the identity of the people across the world. Lawrence-Hart shares the same view that festivals serve as a form of tourism that enables people to travel and share the culture of other people peacefully. According to him, festivals provide visitors the opportunity to see how the local communities celebrate their culture thereby creating room for intercultural communication and help people to enjoy and meet their leisure needs (2014). Sometimes, foreigners who visit parts of Igboland for the Iri Ji Ohu obtain permission to capture the proceedings through video recordings and use them as documentaries overseas. By so doing the identity and culture of the people are transmitted abroad and global recognition is accorded to the ethnic group. Some Igbo people living in different parts of the world also celebrate the Iri Ji Ohu festival in their foreign places of sojourn. That kind of cultural migration generates revenue for the people but unfortunately, it is still seen as a celebratory festival and not a cultural drama.

The dramatic import of the Iri Ji Ohu in Igboland also encapsulates the people's fundamental spiritual proclivities. Besides the celebration and fanfare, the festival serves as a means of relating with the ancestors and seeking their blessings in the new planting season. The traditional chief priests in different Igbo communities usually stand in-between the deities, the ancestors, and the people. They offer sacrifices, pouring libation and prayers to the deities for the new yam and other blessings, which the adherents respond to by shouting solemnly Iseeeee (So, shall it be) (Unya 2021). In most parts of Igboland, the procedure of that spiritual connection with the ancestors is not just verbalized but involves different kinds of rituals which many times involve the killing of goats and fowls and the sprinkling of their blood on a designated patch of the earth. We can refer to this as ritual theatre. Ritual theatre, let it be recalled, establishes the spatial medium not merely as a physical area for simulated events but as a manageable contraction of the cosmic envelop within which man – no matter

how deeply buried such a consciousness has latterly become – fearfully exists (Soyinka 1976). The ritual drama creates a charged cosmic environment where man and gods commingle. The blood of animals killed in such sacrifices does not symbolize death but indicates renewal, rebirth, and regeneration. It also revives the Igbo cosmological inclinations towards birth and dying and the cyclic observable procedure of continuity. According to Ukachukwu Manus:

Like yam, the Igbo recognize humankind's trajectory in life to be born, to grow, to reach maturity and old age, to die and to regenerate among one's own as a necessary fact. For the Igbo, there is a strong belief in life-after-life. The phenomenon directs attention to the Igbo belief in the cyclic return to new life (2007).

The ritual process, as a dramatic cultural expression during the Iri Ji Ohu, points to an underlying awareness of the local people between them and their environment, which their ancestors control in the supernatural realm. Therefore, the festival allows them to recognize chthonic existence and uphold their protective powers through libation and propitiation. Thus, earth and cosmos, humanity and spirits continually co-mingle in a mutual relationship.

Dramatic Elements in Iri Ji Ohu

The Iri Ji Ohu festival accommodates characteristics of drama both as a genre of literature and cultural practice. The festivals which combine dances, songs, music, chants, speech/dialogue, spectacle, and so on, are examples of traditional drama. While some performance forms such as religious rituals, comedies, and storytelling enactment, as suggested above, may or may not have all these elements, each possesses the central feature of drama known as mimesis (Eziechine 2021). The most outstanding and

significant aspect of the festival is the ritual dimension. Ritual in drama or ritual theatre is a form of dramatic enactment that formed part of the Dionysian spectacle in classical Greek drama. Although some critics argue that ritual does not qualify to be drama because it does not have a plot, the presence of other dramatic elements in rituals qualifies them as drama. It is one thing to say that drama performs a ritual function, includes rituals, or adopts ritual forms and quite another to prove that drama has a ritual origin. Sceptics are quick to say that the historical link between drama and ritual has never been proven (Csapo and Miller 2007). If the Dionysian festival, a ritual drama, could be referred to as drama and provide a historical origin of drama, other ritualistic festivals also qualify as drama. The ritual aspect of Iri Ji Ohu celebrations involves the slaughtering of animals like goats, fowls and in some cases rams according to the social and economic status of the celebrant or community. The ritual process initiates a channel of interaction between the living and the dead, between the people and their ancestors. It is symbolic as an enabling regenerative process of continuity that ensures peace and harmony between the physical realm and the supernatural realm.

The ritual process during the Iri Ji Ohu festival serves two main purposes for the people – it cleanses the land of all defilement and desecrations and it urges the gods to guide, protect and preserve the people, granting them rich harvest, long life and prosperity. In many parts of Igboland, the goat is the symbolic animal slaughtered during the festival. In the Greek classical period, the goat was regarded as the symbol of tragedy because it was slaughtered during the Dionysian festival. Its appearance shows a proud, frontal, sometimes arrogant visage while the rear is dirty. It signifies hubris that trails a man without his knowledge but which leads to his ultimate tragedy or downfall. While the goat in Igboland is not seen or viewed from this perspective, its role as a symbol of propitiation and sacrifice is tied to the people's understanding of the cyclical nature of human existence. Therefore, there is a perpetuating parallel between the Greek

Dionysian festival traced as the origin of drama and the Igbo Iri Ji Ohu festival. Both festivals are dedicated to fertility gods. While in Greece, Dionysus is the recipient of that ritualistic offerings, the Igbo god of the earth Ala, is its counterpart. While there is a man, Thespis who led the goat to be slaughtered in the Greek account of the origin of drama, the lack of uniformity in celebrating the Iri Ji Ohu in Igboland denies us the opportunity of identifying a particular character as a Thespis counterpart. However, the goat slaughtered during the Iri Ji Ohu is led by a man with divine or spiritual responsibilities.

Improvisation is another important element of drama found during the Iri Ji Ohu festival. Improvisation means to react creatively and spontaneously in a given situation that provides a substitute seamlessly aligning with prevailing events in a dramatic situation. The basic elements of improvisation are spontaneity and creativity. The heart of the creative process is a journey to the unknown or, in other words, improvisation. There is no creative process if there are only known procedures (Shem-Tov 2015). During the Iri Ji Ohu festival, there are procedures and processes to take that are recognized by the people as appropriate. These procedures in terms of enchantment, movements, and order of offering prayers are determined by the expertise of the elders who are involved in the cultural festival. Sometimes, the rhythm of the procedures may be broken and in such situations, it behoves the participants to improvise and carry on with the performance without the knowledge of observers and the public. Besides the broken sequence of procedures in the festival, there is also another kind of improvisation which is a reaction to a sudden development during the ritual process. For example, a goat meant for sacrifice may run away or vehemently resist its handler leading it to be slaughtered. If the goat meant to be used for sacrifice runs away, it is a bad omen and the participants must improvise immediately without the knowledge of the public or spectators present. Improvisation as an element of drama and theatre is a veritable aspect of the Iri Ji Ohu festival which embodies an aspect of local

creativity within a cultural arena. Improvisation can also take the form of entertainment. A vocalist may suddenly emerge, overwhelmed with emotions and spurred on by the spectacle of the moment, he can break loose and start chanting panegyric, eulogizing some gods or a revered hero of the past to the admiration of the public. It adds to the marvel and thrill of the occasion even though it may not have been in the original plan of the festival.

Costume is an inexorable aspect of drama and theatre found in the Iri Ji Ohu festival. No successful theatrical production can take place without a consummate costume structure. The success of many theatrical productions, movies, and dramas at any level depends on effective costumes. Costume constitutes one of the most formidable and versatile cultural agents for the transmission of knowledge and values across ethnic, national and international boundaries... culturally and through dress and grooming, rare clothes which may not be seen on ordinary days are displayed (Kwakyee-Opong and Adinku 2013). It reflects the image of representation, character transition, role-playing and diverse forms of duplicate and semblance manipulation. Besides the ritual aspect of the Iri Ji Ohu, costume is the next most important aspect of the festival. Because the occasion is celebratory, the celebrants adorn their best clothes to create an atmosphere of joy and happiness which reflects the general ambiance associated with the festival. During the festival, dance groups, women, youths, and sundry categories of people adorn colourful dresses sometimes in diverse degrees of uniformity to add to the aesthetics of the environment. In addition, some men masquerade as spirits by transforming their appearance with weird costumes, altering their voices through specialized theatrical sound devices to produce esoteric sounds reminiscent of a spirit. Many times, one assumes that these masquerades are spirits from the netherworld but the transformation is achieved through costuming. In the case of community celebration of the festival, the designated venue is decorated to create a beautiful atmosphere sometimes with

photographs of very big yams harvested in the season. From the Ezeji to the elders who perform the ritual, to the women dancers and youth processions, costuming plays an important role in the entire dramatic enactment of the Iri Ji Ohu festival in Igboland.

Chorus and chants, music and dance are also dramatic elements associated with the festival. During the ritual process, the eldest man in the family or village chants various forms of existential assertions which draw a chorus of answers from observers. For example

ELDER: It shall be well with us in the new year

CHORUS: Iseeeeeeee (so shall it be)

ELDER: We will prosper and have a good yam harvest in the new year

CHORUS: Iseeeeeeeee

ELDER: We will have enough rainfall for our crops

CHORUS: Iseeeeeeeee

ELDER: Our wives will have children successfully

CHORUS: Iseeeeeeeee

ELDER: When we get sick we will recover

CHORUS: Iseeeeeeeee

ELDER: We will all be alive to celebrate the next iri ji ohu

CHORUS: Iseeeeeeeee

The chorus during the festival is different from the chorus of the classical Greek drama. In Greek drama, the chorus provides background information about plot development in the play. But in the Iri Ji Ohu dramatic enactment, the chorus only serves as an affirmation group that agrees with the pronouncements of the eldest man in the family or village who performs the ritual. Chants and incantations are part of any ritual in almost all the cases of ritual engagements. So, when animals are slaughtered as sacrifices to the gods, certain forms of arcane chants are rehashed to quicken the spirits of the ancestors and invite their benevolent presence. Music and dance as components of drama accompany every Iri Ji

Ohu festival in almost every situation. The music could be produced in two ways - through local musical instruments like ogene, udu, osha and flutes or through amplified modern musical instruments like a compact disc, turn-table, and loudspeakers. The music could last for a whole day. Dance could be provided by women groups, youth groups, age-grades or other associations in the community. Overall, the Iri Ji Ohu festival is a dramatic exhibition which should rank alongside the Dionysian festival in drama and theatre.

The Significance of Ji and the Iri Ji Ohu Festival in Igboland

Yam (Ji) in Igboland is significant in many ways. It is the people's major staple food. Men who have demonstrated comparable success by planting and harvesting large quantities of yam and have a large yam barn for storing yams always take the title of Ezeji which means King of Yams. While the Iri Ji Ohu festival is not mandatory for ordinary folks across Igboland, an Ezeji must celebrate it to demonstrate his wealth of yam seed. It was expected that an aspirant should have at least one hundred stakes of the approved yam type to take the first title. Because the titles were in hierarchical order, the successful farmer who could boast of up to 400 stakes was qualified to take the highest yam title (a stake could take as many as 200 yams depending on the length of the stick and preference of the farmer) (Iwuagwu 2010). If a man fails to have a good harvest during the planting season, it is interpreted to mean that the gods are angry with the man and therefore, propitiation would be required to appease them.

The significance of Ji as an aspect of the Igbo identity is demonstrated during marriage ceremonies. It is one of the most important items that must be presented by the bridegroom to the bride's family as bride price. To steal Ji in Igboland is an atrocious abomination with severe spiritual consequences and the thief, if caught, must carry out certain rituals as prescribed by the unwritten laws of the land to appease the gods. It is this symbolic patch occupied by Ji in Igboland that necessitates its special

festival as an inexorable part of the people's identity. When one recognizes the importance of Ji in Igboland, then the Iri Ji Ohu as a primordial festival of substance will be appreciated. The New Yam Festival holds significant cultural and historical importance in many communities, particularly in regions where yam cultivation is a vital part of agriculture (Onwuatuegwu 2024). There are multiple categories of yam and all the ceremonies that surround it in Igboland. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to examine all the categories of yam as an identity crop of Igbo people. This study is concerned with portraying the New Yam festival in Igboland as a cultural drama. Therefore, it examines the process of the festival, its dramatic characteristics, the cultural elements and how they conform to our understanding of drama.

The Iri Ji Ohu festival is an annual event and the period of celebration is fixed between July and August. New yams are harvested from May to July. The celebration, led by male family heads is a way of identifying with the rest of the ethnic group and showing appreciation to the gods for life, rich harvest, and supplication for better harvest in the new planting season. There is no common day set aside for the festival. Every family can decide when to celebrate it although it must fall within the stipulated period. Sometimes, a whole village or clan can collectively celebrate the festival and at such times, it is always like a carnival with masquerade dance, women's dance, and other forms of fanfare. The Iri Ji Ohu whether celebrated within the family unit or at the community level is accompanied by rituals, sacrifices, prayers and supplications to the gods. During the festival, the yam seed is made into various edible varieties. It can be roasted or boiled and eaten with any sauce like palm oil and vegetables. It can also be cooked and eaten with the local pepper soup and served with palm wine. Before the yam is eaten, the eldest man in a family or the community would, first of all, bless the kola nut and offer fervent prayers for more increase in the new planting season. With

the kola nut, the elder calls upon the ancestors and different gods depending on the community. While doing this, he enacts a chorus or chant session with a response from the crowd such as Iseeee which means 'so shall it be'. After breaking the kola nut, the elder proceeds to pour libations on the ground. The libations consist of palm wine or local gin. The libation is followed by a chant of Iseeee as the elder makes affirmation of peace, prosperity, good health and long life. This is the ritual process of the yam festival. The slaughtered animals are used to prepare delicacies with the harvested yams for consumption by the family unit or community. Thereafter, the celebration starts. People can eat yams in any way they deem fit. There are also gifts of yams to the less privileged, especially by the Ezeji in the community.

Conclusion

As a cultural festival, Iri Ji Ohu accommodates various aspects of the people's traditions through which they express their origin and identity. However, this study has argued and demonstrated that the festival, besides its Igbo identity elements, is also a cultural drama that deserves the same recognition as the Greek Dionysian festival. The festival encompasses all the dramatic components which provide entertainment and an avenue for the living to mingle with the dead, the physical realm and the supernatural realm to associate and perpetuate a mutual co-existence. Because the festival is an annual event, it gives the people the opportunity to lubricate the gulf between them and their ancestors through diverse forms of rituals. As a dramatic festival, role-playing, acting, and audience participation are enacted. It reflects the people's belief in the cyclical nature of human existence where birth and dying constitute the evident processes of continuity. Thus we can say that the festival like every drama, reflects the reality of existence. But the difference is that cultural drama does not ridicule, it is not a satire that mirrors the ills in society. It is not also Marxist. It does not expose the socio-economic class dichotomy in society. However, the festival can be seen as advancing patriarchal sensibilities because it is essentially a

festival for men. During the festival, most of the activities like the ritual process, the prayers to the ancestors, and the breaking of kola nuts are all performed by men. The yam title is also an exclusive preserve for men. Women do not take the Ezeji title in Igboland no matter how industrious they may have proved in cultivating yams during the planting season. In some parts of Igboland, women are not allowed to partake in some of the Iri Ji Ohu rites. The abiding argument here is that the Iri Ji Ohu festival is intricately attached to the Igbo identity and as a cultural drama, deserves crucial recognition at the same level as the Greek Dionysian festival.

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