

CULTURAL RETREAT, ANCESTORAL HOMELAND AND THE GLOBAL FEATURE: THE OGBA PERSPECTIVES

Obodoegbulam, Agi Otto (Ph.D)
Religious and Cultural Studies Department
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education
Rumuolumeni Port Harcourt
obodoagi@yahoo.com

Executive Summary

The Egwu-Ogba (new yam festival) of Ogba people in the Niger Delta area of southern Nigeria, is a cultural heritage which demonstrates the peoples' perception of order in the universe. The activities which characterize this observance are encapsulated in their cosmology. Its tenets are packaged, preserved and transmitted in a month-long ritual which the young and old freely participate. During the "Egwu-Ogba" (new yam festival), celebrants including indigenes, their friends and well-wishers come from different works of life to take part. As it were, this annual ceremony is an institution of cultural reconstruction. The study noted that the participants not only take part in the social activities, they also learn those salient religious features of the people which are not expressed in words. However, owing to the fact that the nuances of the festival are preserved in the memory of participants, those who miss any aspect or could not be part of the celebration, will always be neophytes. The aim of this research was to reconstruct the motivating force behind the idea of cultural retreat, ancestral homeland and the global future, especially the Ogba perspective. The paper employed Abraham Maslow's motivation theory as the lens of the study. To this end, the work adopted the descriptive phenomenological approach in data collection, presentation and analyses. It observed that reconstructing the religio-cultural heritage of indigenous people was an indispensable tool in ensuring sustainable global future. The study concluded that indigenous societies like the Ogba with rich culture should be encouraged to preserve their tradition for global sustainability.

Keywords: Cultural retreat, homeland, festival, inheritance and solidarity

Introduction

Without overstating the obvious, it is a truism that every human society is uniquely constructed by nature or culture. This distinctiveness expresses itself in language,

history, religion, political structure or social organization. Bearing his mind on this, Onwuejeogwu (2007) calls it a culture area. To him, this is simply a geographical area occupied by people whose culture exhibit a degree of similarity with each other as well as significant degree of dissimilarity with the cultures of others. From time to time, such a people may call up one of their cultural heritages to remind themselves of their distinctiveness or journey so far. Among Ogba people of the Niger Delta, this statement cannot be over emphasized.

The Egwu-Ogba (new yam festival) celebrated by Ogba people, is a cultural heritage which gives them identity, existence and continuity. It demonstrates the peoples' perception of order in their universe. The activities which characterize this observance are encapsulated in their cosmology. Its tenets are packaged, preserved and transmitted in a month-long ritual which the young and old freely participate. During the "Egwu-Ogba" (new yam festival), celebrants including indigenes, their friends and well-wishers come from different works of life to take part. As it were, this annual ceremony is an institution of cultural reconstruction. The study notes that the participants not only take part in the social activities, they also learn those salient religious features of the people which are not expressed in words. However, owing to the fact that the nuances of the festival are preserved in the memory of participants, those who miss any aspect or could not be part of the celebration, will always be neophytes.

Highlighting the importance of culture in any society, Ekwueme (2021) argues that The compound word landmark stands for the overt or covert defining features of the society which enables such a society to mark its location.....To him, this appertains to an event that has great significance or importance and influences how other things develop. According to Wariboko, (2007), in Kalabari culture, the excitable, the loveable, the acceptable or the ideal, does not stand apart at the hill top nor dwell in the valley. All are intertwined into a single whole to achieve a purpose. Therefore, cultural authentication is the mechanism by which the composite ideal type is constituted or created.

To members of the Diaspora community, the argument for cultural retreat is a welcome development. Obviously, participation at such cultural retreat, offers them the avenue to reminiscent on their ancestral homeland. Cultural retreat refers to the act of rolling backward or reverting to traditional values, practices and beliefs in response to the perceived erosion of societal values. This manifests in various forms, such as resurgence of religious fundamentalism, nostalgia for past era, or a rejection of global influences (Faster capital, 2024). Advocates of cultural retreat argue that indigenous communities around the world desire to revive their traditional languages, customs and knowledge systems, recognizing the importance of maintaining their distinct cultural

identities. Unfortunately, indigenous people worldwide are vulnerable to a range of social and economic factors that affect their human rights (U.N. 2023).

The aim of this research is to reconstruct the cultural retreat, ancestral homeland and the global future, especially the Ogba perspective. The paper employs Abraham's theory of festival as the lens of the study. To this end, the work adopts the descriptive phenomenological approach in data collection, presentation and analyses. It observes that reconstructing the religio-cultural heritage of indigenous people is an indispensable tool in ensuring sustainable global future. The study concludes that indigenous societies like the Ogba with a rich culture should be encouraged to preserve their tradition for global sustainability.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts Abraham Maslow's motivation theory as the lens of the study. Maslow (1970) is identified as the modern proponent of the motivation theory. He asserted that theory of motivation is holistic and dynamic and applies to both work and non-work spheres of life. Maslow was of the opinion that individuals' needs present themselves in a hierarchical order. Beginning from the physiological to self-actualization as follows:

1. Psychological- hunger, thirst, rest, activity.
2. Safety- security, freedom from fear and anxiety.
3. Belonging and love- affection, giving and receiving love.
4. Esteem- self-esteem and esteem for others.
5. Self-actualization- personal self-fulfillment (Maslow, 1970).

As it were, an understanding of motivation is the key to understanding the question of why people travel (Cooper et al 2005). Motivation describes a state of being in which an individual experiences the energy and desire to pursue a specific goal. It can be seen as a psychological feature that arouses an organism to act towards a desired goal and elicits, controls and sustains certain goal directed behaviours. Motivational theory includes different explanation for how motivation helps propel and direct people's behaviour and addresses possible reasons for why people try to achieve goals. Fodness (1994) as cited by Batubo (2023), explained that while motivation is only one of many variables in explaining the enthusiasm of participants in a cultural retreat. it is possible to describe the who, when, where and how of participants in a cultural retreat, together with the social and economic, characteristics of their host, but not to answer the question "why", The most interesting question of all participants.

Motivation theory suggests a dynamic process in internal psychological factors (need, wants and goals), causing an uncomfortable level of tension within the individual's

minds and bodies. In such a circumstance, resulting in actions aimed at releasing that tension satisfying these needs.

Relating the above theory to this study, it is apparent that motivation generally accounts for all human undertakings. This being the case, when indigenes and their friends retreat to attend a cultural festival, the driving force is to reunite with their kits and kins. In addition, their participation will renew their allegiance and cement their fraternity, as the succeeding discussion shall show.

The Concept of Cultural Festival

Awolalu and Dopamu (2005) reveal that every society have special ceremonies or events that calls for the coming together of people to celebrate. These ceremonies may be secular or religious. However, the “celebration of these events is known as festival and it is marked by public enjoyment or religious ceremonies.” Thus, these “series of performances, entertainment, merry-making, rites and ceremonies” serve as the climax of the festival. As it were, Obodoegbulam and Lawrence-Hart (2019) explained that festival periods are times when a people remember the blessings they had received and also use that as a medium to repair or amend the “broken fences in the socio-religious sphere” so as “to restore order.”

Cultural festival refers to the act of organizing events that are particularly set out for cultural purposes, having authentic nature and contributes significantly to the community (Frey, 1994). To these scholars, festivals have regular similarities as powerful products and a cultural occurrence which happen as a resultant effect from a compact program that is organized with a particular target. Festivals are therefore not just an act of gathering different phases of culture that are being displayed, they are intricate phenomena. Perhaps, this is why cultural festival forms a major cultural heritage of any given society. Analytically, cultural festival is a phenomenon in the field of culture which is multifaceted in nature with its instrumental formation and characteristics, often reflecting a vigorous process (Frey, 1994).

Without mincing words, cultural festivals offer a wide range of action because they are based on a life performance and are held in places of historical significance. Supporting the above, Fernández (2006) avers that the value attached to cultural festivals can be appreciated from different dimensions: leisure, amusement, artistic delight, intellectual worth and value of existence.

In view of the above, celebration of a traditional festival plays prominent roles in the community which are very important in the social, economic and cultural context. Ejizu (2007), argued that festivals whether seasonal, annual or bi-annual as the case may be,

play an important role in the recreation, sustainability and transmission of culture from generation to generation. This paper emphasizes the need for preservation and maintenance of vital components of culture such as drumming, dancing, art, songs, belief systems, values, norms and practices for posterity.

Cudny (2014) as cited by Onwumelu (2024) argues that a festival:

1. Is a social event;
2. Makes it possible to establish the social identity and capital;
3. Strengthens human relations (socialization) and consolidates communities;
4. Is related to the broadly understood human culture;
5. Is a part of the cultural heritage;
6. May be combined with a competition or review;
7. Is a one-off or regular event;
8. Is organized and takes place around a certain predominating theme;
9. Is a public celebration combined with fun; and
10. Takes place at a specially designated time and outside the everyday routine.

As it were, the above agrees with what Piette (1992) posited that: “festival is portrayed as reinforcing established society. The antithetic behavior of the festival is said to destroy social convention in order to reinforce it. Thus, the festival is displaced from its proper logic, that of ritual, rules and regulations, play and ambivalence.”

According to Kloskowska (2005), the features of a festival are closely linked with the culture of the people comprising power, beliefs, art, morality, laws, customs and skills, and habits developed by the people of the society in question. However, in festivals there are required organizational basics which the participants look up to and where such is absent, something serious will be missing.

To Awolalu and Dopamu (2005), festivals have certain characteristic: all festivals have a source. And this source or origin are revealed in the myths or stories related to the festival. Thus, these myths or stories reveals the “when, where, why, and how” of these specific festivals. So, in the course of the festival celebration, these stories are told in relation to their religious importance. In fact, “celebrations of these festivals remind the people of the origin of such festivals.” In the view of Mbiti (1990), adequate preparations are necessary for any festival to be celebrated. Since the observance or celebration of the festival does not occur accidentally. This is true because in virtually many African societies, orders of festivals are determined following the ancient customary “practice of counting the sacred calendars.” That is to say: “a careful calendar is worked out to fix the date of the festival and ensure that several festivals do not clash in a particular town or village.” However, some festivals are celebrated in a precise month(s) of the year or day(s) of the month. Whereas, some are associated with

particular seasons, either rainy, dry, planting, or harvesting. Still, in some case, it is planned to fall on specific market days. The duration of festivals can be for days, weeks, or months, as the case may be; hence, the need for adequate preparation. More so, information/invitation is passed to friends and loved ones. Certain areas, like the town hall, playground and the sacred places of the community is kept clean and adorned in view of the celebration. Also, items for the festival celebration, including food and drinks, are made ready and available. In fact, for some, festival periods are times new outfits are made in order to look cute. And in some quarters, heavy or extravagant spending is done in the course of the festival celebration.

Onwumelu (2024) avows that merry-making, entertainment, singing, dancing, processions, feasting, skillful displays and so much fun are associated with festivals. Consequently, there is a large coming together of people, from far and near. To some, it may be the first time in a long while. So, there is this socialization and re-uniting. There is also exchange of visits and gifts, including food and drinks. Indeed, festivals as a form of cultural retreat, offers a once in a long while moments of reunification, re-evaluation and strategizing for the coming months, seasons or years.

On the aspect of procession, sometimes on the first or opening day of the festival, sacred and symbolic movements are made from one point of the town or village to another. Points like the palace or house of the paramount ruler, market, town hall/playground, and shrine. And in some cases, the procession ends where it began (Onwumelu, 2024).

The global future: In the light of the above submission, various festivals have various purposes for which they are celebrated. For Awolalu and Dopamu (2005), festivals function, first, as a religious phenomenon which is “functional to social cohesion and solidarity.” Since festivals are agents of socialization, “they give rhythm to the social, political, religious and everyday life of the society where they are celebrated.” In other words, festivals are sources of knowledge acquisition, with respect to the “customs, religion, social relations, institutions and values” of a people. In addition, attitudes and social values are also expressed through festivals. In the same vein, “existing order, important social customs and political authority” are confirmed by the celebration of festivals (Anyanelechi, 2013).

In addition, festivals function as a means of “renewal of covenant, relationships and solidarity.” And the renewal of relationship includes both that of human to the supernatural (that is the spirits, divinities and ancestors) and the human to human. In addition, through festivals, the problems of “disputes, quarrels, misunderstanding, family and community” can be solved. Also they can be media for which “sad memories of the previous years are forgotten, the enemies are forgiven and door is

opened for new beginning.” As it were, , during festivals, gratitude is being expressed to the divinities and ancestors and their continuous blessings and protection is sought, since they are universally believed to be existing and are possessors of powers.

Again, festivals function as an avenue to achieving unity. They solidify the “communal spirit by claiming kinship to the same ancestry. They foster clannish and kinship solidarity and enhance the spirit of togetherness that may lead to loyalty to one another.” Next, festivals serve the purpose of cultural, religious, and philosophical preservation for the people. Meaning that, as long as the festivals are celebrated frequently, various parts of the culture of the people will be preserved. “Ancient songs, ritual dance, traditional beats and tunes are preserved in festivals”.

Egwu-Ogba (new yam festival: According to Obodoegbulam (2019) Egwu-Ogba new yam festival which is celebrated by Ogba people of Niger Delta, is the highest celebration in Ogbaland. However, the pattern differs from one clan to the other. This notwithstanding, the essence is the same all over. Among the Ogba people, those from Egi call it *Egwu-Ogba*, those from Igburu and some part of Usomini call it *Nchaka*, those from Idu autonomous community call it *Igba-ogwe*, those from *Ohali-Elu* and some part of Igburu community call it *Egwu-Ohali*, those from Okposi call it *Egwu-ijonube*, and those from Ohiauga, Ama, Osiapku and Ikiri call it *Ebiahm*.

Egwu Ogba is celebrated yearly by the Ogba people. As part of the celebration, everyone tries very well to live in peace and love with everyone around. It is a time to give and share with loved ones. Customarily, *Egwu Ogbais* celebrated between the month of August and December every year, which is seen as the end of the traditional calendar year. One important aspect of *Egwu Ogbais* that new yam is harvested.

Furthermore, Obodoegbulam, (2019) explains that date fixing in other to start the New Yam Festival in Ogba land is highly important. Commenting on this, Wokoma as cited by Obodoegbulam (2019), reveals that the festival date is normally fixed “not less than six to eight market days away (*Nkwo Ishini/Nkwoesato*).” two kindreds from two notable communities in the Egi clan of Ogba land are responsible for the fixing of date for the festival. And they are the *Umu-Ollori* family of Oboburu and the *Edihuru* family of Erema communities. For the Idu people, the date for *Igba-ogwe* festival is fixed by the *Umu-Ezeidu*. While the *Umu-ebe* family of Ikiri fixes that for the *Nchaka* and the *Umu-Ezeali* family of Ohiuga fixes that of the *Ebiahm* festival.

As a way of preparation for this festival, three *Nkwo* market days ahead were usually fixed for the clearing of all major roads and streams. And this is related to the entire community by the town crier on the day before the third. The essence for which the cleaning and clearing is done, particularly on the day before the *Nkwo* market day fixed,

is to “deceive the evil spirits who may come on the real date to malign the people”, on the last market day to the ceremony, young men are observed tying yellow palm frond at their door posts to scare evil spirits. And all through the night, before the festival morning, among numerous activities that take place, is a general prayer for a peaceful celebration. Commenting on *Egwu-Ogba* festival, Amos (2007) revealed that this festival time in the traditional religion of the Ogba people is a time of where they passionately interact with the different deities in the land. Once the fixed date for the festival is announced, everyone is high in spirit and the bad spirits are chased away as bamboo made canons are shot by young adult males. In fact, throughout the festival, each day is marked with series of activities.

On the day one of the festival (called *nkwo-egwu*), the eldest man in each lineage will acknowledge the presence of their ancestors invite them to the festival by pouring local gin and presenting kola-nuts. And it is believed that the ancestors will respond to the invitation by joining their kinsfolk in the celebration. As stated by Obodoegbulam (2002), the libation chant is:

Ndenmoonubia. Didindegekagbo, Onubia.
EgwuOgbarume. Bianibia to oji.
Ndenmoonubia. Didindegekagbo, Onubia.
EgwuOgbarume. Ka m' gbabunmiyaocha.
Bianibaranmiya. Ekwuatubia a ranmiya.
The spirits come. Our forefathers come.
It's time for the festival. Come and share kolanut with your people.
The spirits come. Our forefathers come.
It's time for the festival. This is white dry gin.
Come and drink. *Ekwuatu* come and drink.

More so, housemaids are not supposed to celebrate the festival outside their homes. So they are sent home to go and celebrate with their parents, siblings and other relatives. They sing and dance around the communities and receive gifts that they will take home, as a way of appreciation. The song sang to escort them home is:

Eye ihenwabia la bia la. Bia la nkwo-egwu (2 times)
Egwuogbarumani Ogba.
Eye ihenwabia la bia la. Bia la nkwo-egwu
Ka ye diguariwegwu Ogba.
Housemaids come and go, come and go.
Come and go nkwo day (2 times).
It's time for the Ogbas to celebrate.
Housemaids come and go, come and go.
Come and go nkwo day (2 times).
So that we can continue our feast.

Still on that first day, by evening, married young men, will customarily visit their in-laws with a jar of palmwine and a log of wood, as a gesture of appreciation for them for their daughter's well behavior. This also, is a way of strengthening the relationship between them and their in-laws. Members of various lineage will assemble at the house of their eldest man, who by right will carry the fire of his lineage. And he will welcome his lineage members by presenting them with drink and kola-nuts. After the sharing of the drink and kola-nuts, there will be folktales till midnight at family hall (Ibrakran) believed to be the dwelling place of the ancestors. More so, the eldest man will edify the younger ones by relaying their history (*Eguagugu*). Here, the most elderly man makes supplication, with kola-nuts and a bottle of dry gin, to the ancestral spirits to bring blessings and drive away evil on the land.

On the day two of the festival (called *eke-egwu*), which is the high point of the festival, the eldest male of each kindred, in the company of some members, will carry their fire and go through the community, then proceed to throw it in the forest. By this, it is believed that the land is being cleansed of evil.

After the throwing of the fire, a new cloth is worn as a way of rebirth. Thereafter, they return to *accompany each elder to his home* where kola-nuts and drinks are offered. When this is concluded, everyone returns to his home. As part of the cultural retreat, masquerade display takes place in eight of the Egni communities where the masquerade society exists. As festival gradually ends, it features "masquerade dances on the second week of the festival which last for seven days" (Amos, 2007).

Although, there is no one pattern of celebrating this festival all through the villages in Ogba land. But one prominent ritual or symbolic act found in all is the carrying of large fire by heads of lineage for the driving away of evil spirits. For the Egi people, the lineage head alone is duty-bound to carry the fire and throw. While in Omoku town, the women who are old and not widowed throws the fire first. Then four days later, the men throw theirs. This festival lasts for nine days. Then from the next market day, "lineage heads and heads of various compounds settled down to attend to the various deity associated with the festival.

According to Obodoegbulam, (2019, Edozie (2021), *Nchaka*, as the new yam festival is called in Igburu and some part of Usomini of Ogbaland, is celebrated to cleanse the land. In other words, it is a "period of rebirth, when diseases, evil and calamities are repelled from the kingdom." In this regard, to celebrate bountiful harvest, Abali as cited in Edozie (2021) reveals that *Nchakais* the "most prominent among the cultural celebration of the Igburu and Usomini people" where gratitude to God is expressed for

“fertility, cleansing and protection and to mark the end of the planting or harvesting season.”

Recommendations

In view of the arguments advanced in this paper, the work recommends as follows:

- i. The custodians of Ogba religion should demonstrate the practical essence of this cultural festival as a way of attracting national and international recognition.
- ii. The cultivation of yam among Ogba people should be re-invigorated since yam is the main item used during this celebration.
- iii. Participants at this ceremony should avoid being mere unlookers. They should get involved in one aspect of the ceremony or the other.
- iv. The tourism potentials of this festival should be explored and encouraged for revenue generation.
- v. Adequate publicity should be given to this cultural festival so that those who do not know much about it can be properly educated.

Conclusion

Without fear of contradiction, cultural retreats the world over, serves as a spring board for cultural reawakening. It provides the avenue for indigenes who by way of exploring the opportunities available in the outside world, reunite with their kits and kins to refresh their memory about their culture, existence and continuity. When the celebrants gather in this manner, their memories are refreshed and their commitment to their origin renewed. This being the case, the benefits offered are enormous. Despite the new commitment of celebrants, the fact that their memories are refreshed, they return to their places of abode with a new sense of self-worth. The benefit of this is that it makes for quick integration with their hosts.

At the global sphere, the participation of non-indigenes opens the door for a better understanding of the culture in question. This will then obliterate whatever wrong impression hitherto perceived. The resultant impact of this is that it will promote better understanding and global integration.

References

- Amos, R.C. (2007). The dramatic aspects of Egi new yam festival (Egwu-Ogba) in Ogba land Babcock University of Language and Literary Studies, Faculty of Education Arts and Humanism.
- Awolalu J.O. and Dopamu, P.A. (2005). *West African traditional religion*. Macmillan publishers.

- Ayinelechi, A. (2013) West African festivals; West African Religious Heritage.
- Batubo P.O.R. (2023). The commodification of Kalabari cultural heritage for tourism development: A socio-religious approach. Unpublished M.A. thesis submitted to the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt.
- Cudny (2016). *Festivisation of Urban Spaces and Geography*, Springer International Publishing.
- Edozie (2021). *Nchaka festival: where humans commune with spirits*. *Daily Trust*. <https://dailytrust.com/nchaka-festival-where-humans-commune-with-spirits>
- Ejizu, C.I. (2007) “The meaning and significances of Festivals in traditional African culture and life” in Kiabara, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt.
- Ekwueme, G.E. (2021). Violation of Nigeria’s ancient landmark: The bane of Nigerian’ indigenous education system. An Inaugural lecture No 28.
- Fastcapital.com (2023).
- Fernandez (2006). *Managing successful organization change in the public sector*.
- Kloskowska (2005). *Kulturamasowa. Krytykaiobrona*. Warszawa: PWN.
- Lawrence-Hart, G. (2012). *Religio-cultural festivals and tourism in Rivers state*. A Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation: Department of Religious and Cultural Studies. University of Port Harcourt.
- Mbiti, J.S. (1990). *Africans traditional religion and philosophy*. Heinemann educational books.
- Obodoegbulam, A.O. (2002). *Ogba religion and change*. A PhD thesis submitted to the Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt
- Obodoegbulam, A.O. (2019). *Ogba Religion the pre-Christian heritage*.
- Obodoegbulam, A.O. and Lawrence-Hart (2019) “Festival and poverty alleviation in the Passover narratives “The Niger Delta experience. *International Journal of Integrative Humanism*. Faculty of Art, University of Cape Coast, pp. 136-140.
- Onwumelu, P.C. (2024). *The impact of Christianity on Igba’ogwe in Iduogba*. An Ma dissertation submitted to the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies.
- Piette (1992). *Play, reality, & fiction. Toward a theoretical and methodological approach to the festival framework*. *Qualitative Sociology*15/1: 37–52.
- Shaw, T. (n.y.). *Why darkest Africa? Archaeological light on an old Problem*. Ibadan University Press.
- United Nations Organization (2023).
- Wariboko, N. (2007). *Pattern of institutions in the Niger Delta*. Onyoma Research Publication.