

## **Modernity and identity preservation: The *Ila Oso* festival in perspective**

**Idara C. Aniefiok-Ezemonye**

Department of History and International Studies

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

[ic.aniefiok-hanson@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:ic.aniefiok-hanson@unizik.edu.ng)

### ***Abstract***

*Modernity has brought about changes that have challenged traditional cultural beliefs, norms, values and practices; it has also provided new opportunities for cultural expression, exchange as well as development. Cultural festivals play a pivotal role in preserving and celebrating a community's heritage, customs, beliefs and values, fostering cultural empathy and unity among diverse groups, and contributing significantly to community development. Even though these cultural festivals create a sense of place and provide useful means of transformation and can meet global as well as local needs, they are faced with either rejection of modernisation or being absorbed into its streams. This paper analyses the Ila Oso festival in Uzuakoli community, a vital cultural marker of the people which celebrates the community's identity, unity, and cultural continuity and also shows how such a cultural event that lasts only for days enlivens towns and villages, engages residents and attracts a large number of people across different communities including tourists. It also explores the festival's historical evolution and its present manifestation as influenced by modernity. The festival symbolizes Igbo civilization, preservation of cultural heritage and traditional beliefs, intra and*

*inter-communal unity, and the transmission of traditions to future generations. The qualitative method of research was adopted where oral and documentary data collected which includes unstructured interviews with certain persons and relevant published literature were analysed and the content extracted for writing the paper. The findings of the paper reveal that the Ila Oso festival is characterised by rituals and ceremonies which embody the collective identity, beliefs and values of the Uzuakoli community. It also provides insights into how the festival has retained its core cultural elements and remained resilient in the face of emerging modernising forces.*

**Keywords:** *modernisation, culture, festival, traditional beliefs, identity*

## **Introduction**

The heterogenous nature of the African society signifies its richness in cultural festivals which showcase the rich and diverse heritage of the African continent as well as celebrate centuries-old customs, beliefs, rituals and history that have been passed down through generations. Human societies are distinguished by their cultural heritage and identity which encompass knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Tylor, 1871).

Culture is a dynamic, multifaceted and comprehensive framework encompassing a group or society's diverse patterns such as values, attitudes, shared beliefs, and behavioural norms that are commonly shared among individuals within a particular social group (Spencer-Oatey and Kadar, 2021, pp. 44-47). The existence and use of culture to a large extent depends on the rational ability possessed by humans alone. It constitutes a learned,

negotiated system impacting societal thought processes and interactions; it evolves through interactions and exchanges with other cultures and the transmission of cultural elements enhance individual and collective identity formation with societal contexts. Cultural heritage is a continuum of traditions and practices passed down through generations (Frigo, 2004); it also encompasses physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present for the benefit of future generations.

Roger Caillois, in *Man and the Sacred*, interprets festivals as commemorations of both sacred (religious) and secular events, the latter pertaining to family or tribe, characterized by an exuberant spirit, providing an escape from mundane routines (Caillois, 2001). Cultural festivals hold immense importance for a society as they serve as vibrant reflections of a community's heritage, traditions, and values. These events provide a platform for people to come together, celebrate their unique identities, preserve culture their and share their cultural richness with other people. They also promote tolerance and appreciation, while fostering a sense of unity and cohesion among diverse groups within a society.

Cultural festivals play both historical and evolving role in fostering communal ties. Festivals appear in diverse forms and are associated with personal and significant life milestones such as birth, marriage, death, passing seasons (harvest festivals) and even historical occurrences (Vliet, 2019, pp. 1-17). Festivals though multifaceted, challenge conventional practices and disrupt societal norms while simultaneously reinforcing established cultural structures and societal framings (Piette, 1992, pp. 37-52). Cultural festivals provide a platform for the achievement of specific objectives in relation to community economic development and increased participation.

From ancient times, celebration of festivals is an integral aspect of people's cultural lives. Cultural practices vary from one society to another; take place at different seasons, depending on their significance. Festivals are rooted in tradition; they influence social interactions, and economic activities are now increasingly shaped by modernity, globalisation and the rise of new forms of entertainment. They encourage interpersonal relationship and promote social connection; they serve as a means of preserving cultural heritage and traditions in a rapidly changing world; they serve as platforms for artistic innovation and expression where new forms of art, music and performances are showcased. It is also an avenue for marginalised communities to reclaim their identity and assert their cultural values in the face of modernity.

### ***Ila Oso Festival (War Dance Festival)***

Uzuakoli is located in Bende Local Government Area of Abia State; like many other Igbo communities east of the Niger, it is a community with cultural history; its culture is heterogenous, dynamic and holistic. Secret societies, age groups and women organisations play vital roles in the socio-cultural life of the people (Anosike C. et al, 2015). Before the advent of Christianity, there were many traditional belief systems Uzuakoli people believed in. The people believe in the existence of the supreme God who does not function in isolation but carries out his multitudinous array of functions through the instrumentality of lesser gods called deities. These deities include Njoku, Obasi-Oha, Chukwu- Obiala, Chi-Erima, Obasi-Ebo, Ahia-Mmiri Ozu among others (Okoronkwo, 2015). Uzuakoli people engage in socio-cultural activities that include *Iru mgbede*, marriage ceremony, wrestling (ekwe mgba), *Mmanwu* and Okonkwo festival, Osirisa dance of Amamba among others. Before now, Uzuakoli had been the centre of trade; the

Agbagwu market fair lasted several days compelling visitors from neighbouring towns of Abiriba, Arochukwu and trading groups from Awka, Onitsha and the Delta areas to settle around the town. The people have traditional and political organisations that enable them govern their community and make political decisions respectively; their traditional Eze title institution which usually come from Amamba village has effect on the political organisations of the people because they act a bridge between the state and the community thereby facilitating government communication and providing a degree of legitimacy. Villages in Uzuakoli consist of various Umunna groups whose members trace their ancestry to a shared founding father. The village council, serving as the highest legislative, executive, and judicial body, includes representatives such as elders, titled men, secret society members, and shrine custodians.

*The Ila Oso* festival is a major cultural festival in Uzuakoli kingdom. Historically, the festival is a communal celebration of members of different age grades, commemorates longevity, accords honour and awards titles to octogenarians who are exempted from communal duties and levies. The *Ila Oso* tradition is an integral part of Uzuakoli culture and with a history spanning over centuries, *Ila Oso* festival is deeply rooted in the traditions and historical heritage of the Uzuakoli community. It is a rich cultural festival that originates from the Uzuakoli people in commemoration of the military victories and bravery of the Uzuakoli warriors who successfully averted the invasion of the Akoli people in Awuja (Onuorah, 2023). It is celebrated biennially in the month of December (usually from the second week of December until just before Christmas; a time when many natives return to their homeland to celebrate and reconnect with their roots) and alternates with the masquerade dance known as the *Iza Mbara*

*Ama*. The festival is organised and celebrated under the guidance of the *Eze* (king) with the support of the cabinet members; it is marked by an elaborate display of traditional regalia and customs. The festival is a captivating cultural celebration that unites the five villages-Amuzu, Ngodo, Elu, Umuebere and Afara thereby fostering camaraderie, transforms Uzuakoli into a stage of tradition, pride and community spirit and draws locals, diasporas and cultural enthusiasts to witness tradition that honours artistic talents and communal bonds (Offiong, 2007).

The responsibility to declare the festival celebration open is usually done by a family in Amuda Eluoma. A member of the family known as *Onyeisi Oso* restricts himself from activities that could distract him from prayers which he has to offer to seek the face of God for a successful *Illa Oso* festival celebration; he also must sight the new moon before he can declare the festival open. He first makes the pronouncement to his immediate kinsmen, the Amuda people who in turn will alert all and sundry with shouts of joy, the sounding of Ikoru, and some parade movements to reach other Eluoma people known as *Ikwofu Oso* (Ogbonnaya, 2023).

Vigil known as Imu Anya Oso is kept for few nights for rehearsals of old songs and new ones. Izo Imenyi is performed in commemoration of the mass exodus of Imenyi people during the fracas in Ezere and the parade made by selected strong men afterwards the rescue mission at Awuja follows immediately. The people assemble in a central square known as Ama Ukwu at the end of the parade. At Ama Ukwu. Elders of the community known as Ndi Uche Nkwo Ukwu address the people and pass instructions on how the year's festival rituals should be performed and the festival celebrated. *Illa Oso* symbols and apparatuses are allotted to respective age grades to bear throughout the festival. For instance, the age grade allotted the ota (shield) apparatus is known as Uke

Ota (Shield age grade) and they will maintain the title till the next *Oso* season when they will either be given another title or asked to retain the same title. On the day of the festival, the people step out in their full traditional regalia-akwa George, akwa mbasa, Iba ocha, okpu egwuruegwu, traditional beads, nzu, uri, carrying primitive weapons of war like ota (shields), uke mma oso (wooden knives), egbe ntu, mma oge (swords), aku (bundle of arrows), uke egbe (gun wielders), odu enyinnaya and akpaka as used by their ancestors. The men are dressed in war-like attires, embodying the spirit of their warrior ancestors while the women dress in elegant traditional outfits, carry and dance with the mkpoola, a dance accessory that enhances their rhythmic movements during performances. Every Uzuakoli person is grouped by their various age grades, dancing round the whole village singing war songs and celebrating past victories. The *Ila Oso* is not just a festival of dance; it is a re-enactment of war and victory where age-long war artifacts and spoils of war captured by their warriors are displayed (Okeke, 2023).

*Ila Oso* is celebrated by the five villages that constitute the Uzuakoli community- Amamba, Eluoma, Amankwo, Ngwu, and Agbozu. Each village takes turn to participate in the festival as the five villages cannot participate all at the same time; Eluoma village being the custodian of the festival kicks off the festival while the other villages follow suit. During the festival, new marriages and family ties are formed; the marriage of one maiden or the other is determined during the maiden outing. The festival is performed by seven conglomerate groups: The male and female children's group called the *Uke-Nma Oso Nta*, the male teenage group called the *Uke-Nma Oso Ukwu*, the middle-aged group called the *Uke-Oge*, the hybrid group called the *Uke-Egbe*, the young men's group called the *Uke-Aku*, the women's group and the elders group called

the *Uke-Osu*. All these groups have their peculiar names and one can only join one group based on their age and status. The cultural value of the *Ila Oso* celebration is closely connected with every age grade and their pivotal roles in its observance (Odiike, 2025). It fosters a sense of togetherness and shared identity among the people; its rich cultural ceremonies and rituals reaffirm the importance of peace. It endeavours to transmit knowledge of traditions, customs and values as well as educate generations of Uzuakoli people about the significance of the celebration and preservation of their cultural identity and cultural heritage and the importance of transgenerational continuity. The *Ila Oso* festival holds a special significance as a time of homecoming for the Uzuakoli diaspora; many indigenes journey back home to actively participate in the festivities demonstrating their strong ties to their community and those who are unable to return make meaningful financial contributions to support their family relatives. It has in recent years, gained recognition beyond Uzuakoli, drawing cultural enthusiasts and historians who desire to witness the rich traditions first-hand (Eke, 2020).

The *Ila Oso* festival brings great benefits to the Uzuakoli community socially, politically and economically. Socially, the festival serves as a unifying occasion that begins at the family level and trickles down to kindreds, villages and the entire community. It avails the people an opportunity to understand, appreciate and celebrate their origin, identity, purpose and meaning while also showcasing the hierarchy within the community (Nwankwo, 2020). Economically, the festival brings economic benefits to Uzuakoli community. It attracts tourists of local and foreign origins whose patronage of local hotel accommodation, food especially local cuisine and souvenirs positively stimulates the economy; traders and business owners who sell dance attires and traditional

accessories also leverage the festival period to boost their revenue as they make huge profits from their sales. the festival is also an avenue for fundraising geared towards community developmental projects with primary focus on education and healthcare provision. Politically, the festival serves as a platform for facilitating interactions between the people of Uzuakoli and their traditional institutions; the people get to access the Igwe and his cabinet members who have been given the opportunity to demonstrate their authority over and solidarity with the community. It also provides a platform for the inclusion of women to participate and be represented in Uzuakoli political landscape.

### ***Ila Oso, Modern Relevance and Continuity***

Modernity refers to a period of scientific, technological and socio-economic and cultural changes in humanity. It is a philosophical movement born out of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is centered upon rationalisation, verification, and empiricism, as a result of rapid scientific and technological progress and innovation.

Modernity has significantly impacted on festivals; on the one hand, it had led to increased tourism, transformations emanating from the incorporation of technology, and evolving cultural expressions even though it poses risks to traditional practices and values (Kohol, 2017, pp 124-136). On the other hand, it has also led to the dilution of and decline in traditional practices and community participation thereby potentially eroding the authenticity of cultural festivals (Umeonyilorah and Mabayoje, 2025). Social media has allowed for wider promotion and engagement with festivals thereby reaching broader audiences and fostering a sense of community across geographical boundaries. Festivals have become major tourist attractions and also boosted

local economies. Modernity facilitates cultural exchange and gives room for the incorporation of elements from different traditions and cultures. It serves as a platform which can be used to document, preserve, and promote traditional festivals, ensure their continued relevance and intergenerational transmission (Singh, 2025).

The *Ila Oso* festival has remained resilient in its continuity in the face of modernisation. The festival has evolved over time, reflecting changes in societal norms and influences. The traditional attires worn during the festival have also been transformed, moving away from the primitive hairstyle and going barefoot to more sophisticated regalia such as *akwa* George, traditional beads and wearing of footwears (Okonkwo, 2012). Community elders, cultural custodians and local organisations play a significant role in ensuring that the festival retains its authenticity. As a result of modernity and technological integration, the festival can be viewed by the Uzuakoli people in diaspora through live-streaming performances. Social media and has contributed to creating a wider awareness of the festival by documenting and sharing its vibrant customs with a global audience. In 2023, the festival which began with Eluoma village launching the month-long festival of songs and dances across the five villages, attracted a large crowd, with various village groups showing their unique performances. This evolution signifies the community's adaptability and the integration of modernity while ensuring the festival's relevance and continuity in contemporary times. Modernity has brought about changes in social structure and values, which has influenced how the festival is perceived and even celebrated.

Uzuakoli continues to be the centre of trade, education, culture and Igbo tradition through the *Ila Oso* festival which reconnects the people to their glorious ancestry. The *Ila Oso* festival, over the

years has sustained its usual glamour, rituals and sacrifices that accompany its celebration in spite of modernity and the infiltration of political intrigues. It is significant in ways such as preservation of history, community bonding, cultural expression, tourism and recognition (Ezeme 2025).

## **Conclusion**

This paper contributes to the discourse on rethinking culture, cultural heritage, cultural identity, cultural relevance, cultural preservation and continuity in the face of modernity. Culture is dynamic and intertwines with threads of history, tradition, and shared experiences; it constitutes a fundamental aspect of a community's identity. Modernisation, technological advancements and globalisation trigger significant shifts in society. It poses possible threats to the preservation of cultural richness on the one hand and offers opportunities for cultural evolution and innovation on the other hand. Traditional practices face the risk of being marginalised or forgotten amid societal changes if a balance is not struck between nurturing cultural heritage and continuity and change and adaptation. However, technology can serve as a powerful tool in promoting and preserving cultural heritage through digital archiving, virtual reality and social media for cross-cultural understanding and appreciation; the coexistence of cultural identity preservation and modernisation is complex yet enriching. While cultural festivals can adapt and diversify in response to changing societal affiliations, preservation entails allowing cultural heritage to evolve organically whereas safeguarding its core essence and ensuring its relevance in an ever-changing world. To safeguard and pass down the *Ila Oso* festival to future generations, awareness campaign and documentation efforts (this can include educational materials, digital archives and organising

cultural workshops) should be initiated and sustained; through these, the festival will retain its cultural authenticity and continue to play its role in preserving cultural heritage and fostering communal unity. Since *Ila Oso* contributes significantly to tourism and economic prosperity of the Uzuakoli community, a sustainable tourism strategy where the state government and private sectors can go into partnership should be developed and implemented. Intergenerational dialogue and participation should be encouraged especially in the planning, preparation and organisation of the festival to help bridge the gap in understanding and appreciation of the festival's cultural significance.

## References

- Anosike C., et al (2015), *History of Uzuakoli from the Earliest Times to the Present*. Ibadan: Mosuro Publishers.
- Caillois Roger, *Man and the Sacred*. Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2001.
- Ezeme Idenze (2025), The War Dance Festival (Ila Oso) in Uzuakoli accessed March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025 <https://ozikoro.com/the-war-dance-festival-illa-oso-in-uzuakoli/>
- Eke, Chioma (2020), "Impact of Ila Oso Cultural Festival in Uzuakoli, Abia State" *Interdisciplinary Journal of African and Asian Studies (IJASS)*, Vol. 6, No. 2.
- Frigo M. (2004), "The Influence of Domestic Legal Traditions in the Elaboration of Multilingual International Conventions". *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 86 Issue 854.

- Kohol Sylvester (2017), “Modernity and Threats to Traditional Values: The Echi’ja Cultural Festival in Idomaland”, *RUN Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 1.
- Nwankwo, E. Okezie (2020), “The Traditional Ila Oso Festival and its Significance in Uzuakoli Community” accessed October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023. <https://www.academia.edu/41920601/the-traditional-ila-osofestival-and-its-significance-in-uzuakoli-community/>
- Ogbonnaya, Nnamdi c.65 businessman interviewed in Umuahia, December 15, 2023.
- Odike Chuka (2025), “Ila Oso Festival Uzuakoli: A Dynamic Display of Igbo Culture and Unity” accessed June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2025. <https://ozikoro.com/ila-osofestival-uzuakoila-dynamic-display-of-igbo-culture-and-unity/>
- Offiong E. (2007), “The Ila-Oso Festival in Uzuakoli: An Appraisal”. *Sophia: An African Journal of Philosophy*.
- Okeke, Anthony c.75 retired lecturer from Abia State University interviewed in Umuahia, September 19, 2023.
- Okonkwo, Edwin Onyebuchi (2012), *History of Uzuakoli*, Lagos: Viceddy Ventures.
- Okoronkwo Uche (2015), *History of Uzuakoli*. Lagos, Viceddy Ventures Ltd.

Onuorah, Nwogo c.75 retired civil servant interviewed in Uzuakoli, September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

Piette Albert (1992), “Play, Reality and Fiction: Toward a Theoretical and Methodological Approach to the Festival Framework”. *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 15, No. 1.

Singh Ajay (2025), “The Blend of Tradition and Modernity: Celebrations and Entertainment in Today’s World” accessed March 20th, 2025. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/blend-tradition-modernity-celebrations-entertainment-todays-singh-mzone>

Spencer-Oatey Helen and Kádár Daniel (2021), *Intercultural Politeness: Managing Relations Across Cultures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tylor B. Edward, (1881) *Anthropology: An Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilisation*. London: Macmillan and Co.

Umeonyilorah, C. Uzodinma and Mabajoye O. Abigail, “Cultural Festival Management in Nigeria: A Critical Examination of the Challenges and Opportunities in Udiroko Festival”. *International Journal of Current Research in the Humanities*, Vol. 28, No. 1.

Vliet Harry Van (2019), “What is a Festival?” Research Gate, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330359431>

*Idara C. Aniefiok-Ezemonye is a lecturer in the Department of History and International Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka*