

UNDERSTANDING ESSENTIALS OF IGUE FESTIVAL OF BENIN PEOPLE IN PROMOTING TRADITIONAL PEACE

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Abstract

In Benin Kingdom, African traditional religion predated Christianity. Therefore, culture is a way of life of a particular society connected with its own beliefs and customs. The Igue cultural festival is the celebration of an event associated to specific activity of Benin people for a unique traditional presentation and entertainment. In Nigeria, there are harvest of festival celebrations by different ethnic groups and social organizations that share common cultural traditions for purpose of sociocultural reawakening through art, music, films movies, dance and literature. This study examines the Igue cultural festival, makes a conceptual discourse and as well as includes significance of the celebration. Often a religious one done in days, period of the year, as a special event within the ancestral guidance of Oba of Benin pronouncement. The methodology relies on both primary and secondary sources of its data. The study further show-case the Igue festival as spiritual enrichment of cultural heritage of Benin Kingdom, promoting sustainable traditional peace and tourism in Edo State.

Keywords: Culture, festival, tradition, Igue, Benin.

Introduction

The *Igue* Cultural festival is one of the cultural festivals that have survived various modern onslaught. Of course, cultural rites have established the important relationship between identity formation and historical belonging of Edo people. The popular festival of *Igue* was instituted by one of the greatest of Benin called Oba Ewuare the Great. According to Eweka:

It is festival heralding good luck and it began in era of Oba Ewuare the Great who reigned over Benin in the 15th century, between 1440 and 1473.¹

Historically, Benin Kingdom civilization was founded on the control and manipulation of arts, religion and ritualistic influences of Benin which had permeated the socio-economic life of Edo people. *Igue* festival celebration has continued to boom and bloom more than it did in the previous years, as a result of the innovative and creative works of individuals and groups in the local communities. This festival contains peoples' code of conduct, views, customs and general ways of life, which mirror the activities of the societies.

Abiodun on the importance of festival declares thus:

Festival is taken to be a time to show appreciation to the ancestors for having seen them through the planting season and for protection. During the festivals, there are displays of traditional music, magic, masquerading, dressing pattern or styles among others during festival period. Festival attracts people from all walks of life and serves as a form of reunion to all indigenes.²

African cultural festivals manifest events, by indicating originality and natural phenomenon, that is with all intents and purposes, of which her traditions never slumber nor sleeps, because of her infectious belief on

spirituality, thus, exposing more of the social issues that bind the people together. However, this genre of the *Igue* festival celebration blossoms more because the stories usually inspire one generation to another. In Benin kingdom, there were many festivals celebrated but the most acknowledged, recognized and engrossing and gratifying cultural festival amongst Edo people is the *Igue* festival.

Aside cultural revolution that is presently experienced in most traditional communities, the Christian missionary activities have enormously affected the African tradition cultural and religious practices.

Odeke explained that:

*Imperialism remains the one traffic by which the greed of European nations was satisfied by using all available means missionaries; trade and gun-boat diplomacy to conquer Africa.*³

Notwithstanding, the monarchical political system of administration in Benin kingdom is hereditary and that has helped to sustain the cultural norms and beliefs, while the authorities was entrusted on the spiritual leader, the *Oba* of Benin, considered as a divine king whose mystical powers were celebrated in *Igue* cultural festival. According to Eweka; *it is the belief of the Edo people that the luck of their monarch is inter-twined with the people over which the monarch reigns.*⁴

Basically, the Benin has a consanguine relationship with traditional value of African culture. *Igue* cultural festival is the shield our identity and our borders. The *Igue* festival of Benin people was quite fascinating and a legendary festival known for welcoming visitors into their homes with respect, depicting love and brotherliness. Isichei wrote that *'the people are very gentle and lovely.*⁵

Although Christianity and modernization have drastically affected the satisfaction with which people hitherto flanked their cultural heritage; a good number of people still take active part in the festival exercise. It was therefore, with awe and great admiration that: Ozioruwa reported:

*The Oba of Benin, the majesty, Omo N'Oba N'Edo, Uku Akpolokpolo, Oba Ewuare II, has commenced the 2022 Ugie, otherwise call Igue Festival, with Ugerhoba rites heralding of the year.*⁶

In Nigeria with multicultural communities and ethnic nationalities, cultural festival can create amongst ethnic groups durable peace, which have been harnessed to generate more revenue for government agencies and improve our tourism potentials through cultural exchange programme. In this regards, cultural festival performance has salient functions of serving as sources of entertainment, enlightenment on cultural orientations and traditions of people and educating the young of the various aspect of society. Olurotimi observed that; *Cultural identity is both characterization of the individual as well as a means for the cultural identification of group of members sharing the same cultural identity or upbringing.*⁷

Thus, this traditional practice portrays the values and beliefs of Edo people before the arrival of Christian missionaries in the area confirming the above claim. Thatcher asserted that:

*The Edo people of Benin succeeded in creating a highly developed system of centralized government, which survived almost unchanged until the conquest of Benin by the British in 1897.*⁸

Hence, *Igue* festival celebration has a larger participation of the people as the more the community are involved, the more understanding is established and more grateful the Benin monarch is *Igue* festival. Of course, the audience during celebration sing chorus in Edo language, clap hands and dance to the song. That is why one can rightly assert that the festival is a cultural identity of Benin kingdom. Isichei affirmed this thus:

The Oba had two functions as ritual priest and warrior king. They were perfectly combined in Ewuare the Great, who ruled in the fifteenth century, a great Magician whom tradition credits with

*the capture of two hundred and one towns, and who built an enormous ditch and wall around his capital, part of which still survives.*⁹

Therefore, culture in conflict period is important as this war is not just about territory but also people memory, history, language and creativity. Moreso, cultural festival stems from man's desire to communicate the traditional peace to others, share his views of life to direct members of the society, the *Igue* festival satirise deviant characters in the society, through songs and dance and to instill the spirit of love for community amongst members of the society without force. Moreso, Osarumwense declared that *Igue festival represent the sovereign nature of Benin Kingdom.*¹⁰

Conceptual Discourse

Igue cultural festival is a captivating festival that takes place in Benin Kingdom, Edo State, Nigeria. Infact, it seems as a remarkable display of cultural values and spirituality with reference to our ancestors in promoting traditional peace. Igue festival is a testament to beautiful celebrations of traditions, that provides a platform for people from various ethnic backgrounds in Edo State. The participation of the Oba of Benin in the festival signifies the unity of Edo people and their connection to ancestors and promoting Edo cultural heritage of peace. Gumut stated that *culture of peace is built from values, attitudes, behaviour and ways of life base on non-violence, respect for life liberty, justice, solidarity, tolerance, human rights, equality between men and women, appreciation of cultural diversity and respect for others.*¹¹ From that declaration, Igue festival reminds us of our differences that should not divide us, but rather serve as a motivation for unity and for governance within the framework of traditional peace. Fish, Abdi, Ludin, Smith, Williams and Williams contended that *culture of peace cannot be imposed from outside, it is a process that grows out of the beliefs and actions of the people themselves and develops differently its history, culture and traditions.*¹² Of course, the Igue festival is deeply rooted in ancestral and traditional reference. It serves as a time for community to pay homage to ancestors and seek for traditional blessings and peaceful co-existence. Moreso, Igboke-Ibeto & Akhakpe further explained *the concept of culture as a tool for describing differences and similarities between groups of people.*¹³ The colonization of the African state has resulted in distortion in their way of life. In the Nigeria situation for example, Nigeria is a product of two separate cultures, the first is indigenous traditions while the second is western culture. In the light of the above, Odetola & Ademola sees *culture as configuration of learned and shared patterns of behaviour and understanding concerning the meaning and values of things, ideas, emotional and actions.*¹⁴ Of course, culture relates with the beliefs and values of the people of given society and the social change and the perfect society they seek for durable peace. Essien stated that *peace is not the absence of war, but the provision of peoples' basic human needs.*¹⁵ Benin view the Igue festival as a source of true security of her heritage and traditional peace. The Igue festival perpetuates social justice which is crucial element of sustainable peace and development. The adoption of the Igue festival has become importance for its people-centredness, for development of mutually beneficial relationship and as the needed platform for inclusion, tolerance and participation.

Historically, Onyemuchara & Jacob posited that *a festival in the African society does not exist in vacuum but, happens as an expression of willingness of people to recreate and give gratitude to their ancestors and particularly, their creator.*¹⁶ However, festivals are usually accompanied with local season of entertainment, annual cultural celebration as to herald mutual respect, co-operation, benefit and non-aggression. Benin people have continued to sustain the growth of the Igue festival despite the emergence of Christianity and Islam.

Traditional peace is a conviction that is believed to have a spiritual authority from generation to generation through their customary pattern of thoughts, actions, behavioural practice in promoting desired peace within a society or group of people. Infact every specific tradition, every utterance, every thought must be understood within a much larger and broader context of festivals celebration. Following conceptual discourse, culture is a system that is indispensable to the people’s identity, their history, their hopes and aspirations. This conceptual discourse has classically established an unbroken chord between the Igue cultural festival and traditional peace that can easily be articulated in knowledge, belief, art, moral, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society as might be needed for constructive engagement during the Igue festivals.

Lending credence to the role of cultural festivals in promoting peace, Nwaka explained that “The Igbo maintained peace and stability in their society through blood covenant called “Igbandu”. This is the performance of the rite of extra sanguinary ties between villages, groups or individual. Animals like goat, sheep and fowls were slaughtered at the boundary of the village where those involved converged for the ceremony. The blood of the slaughtered animal was mixed with human blood taken from those involved in the covenant after which they drink it. The slaughtered animal was cooked and eaten by all after which a tree was planted at the spot as a reminder. Hence, those involved in the covenant became brother compelled to settle their dispute amicably and to desist from whatever may harm any member of the blood covenant.¹⁷

Some cultural festival celebrations in Nigeria include:

1. Ofala - Onitsha - Anambra State
2. Omaluke Festival - Igheli Kingdom (Urohobo)
3. Isele Festival (celebration of tradition of Yoruba people in Nigeria, United State, Brazil, Benin Republic)
4. Ologo Festival - Ife, Osun State
5. Eyo Festival - Lagos State
6. Ijakadi Festival - Lagos State
7. Iriji Festival - New Yam Festivals, in Igbo Communities

It should be noted that the Igue cultural festival is a practice that commune with gods and tradition of Benin people.

Igue Festival Celebration and Performance in Benin

Basically, one of the focuses of great Benin Kingdom has been the spiritual understanding of Igue Festival celebration which usually involves contacts and interaction between the Oba of Benin, Princes and Princesses and Benin people. Also, they show case their performance at different date and that influence each other and even integrate them for cultural re-awakening. Of course, it can be political, social, spiritual and economic through the cultural fusion and which ever form it manifest sustainable peace development. Moreso, the historical consciousness of Igue festival, over the years, have been reinforced by the uncommon experiences, peculiar to the social cultural pattern of Oba of Benin. Therefore, the values and tradition of Igue festival are modelled on rules and regulations set by the Benin King (supernatural Being) for the promotion of traditional peace.

Culture is an important aspect of societal way of life. And as Omo-Ojugo averred;

Culture has so many connotations, as it embrace all of the totality of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, acts, belief, institutions and all other products of human work and thought.¹⁸

History has it that ancestors of Benin Kingdom were renowned as recognizing the Igue festival as a great tradition which is an essential part of the people's identity. *Igue* festival is an ancient festival celebrated by the Benin people of Edo State, Omera affirmed that *Edo South comprises of seven local government areas of Oredo, Ovia North-East, Ovia South-West, Orhionmwon, Egor, Uhunmwonde and Ikpoba-Okha*.¹⁹ In the conduct of the Igue festival Egharevba observed that:

The king first made his offering to the God of goodluck, usually sacrificing a leopard and other victims; next the princes and princesses, then the people of Benin made their offering of the goats and coconuts. This festival usually takes place in November. Dances are displayed with the lucky or blessing leaf "Eb Ewere" around the whole city or from door to door and gifts are given and received.²⁰

The *Igue* festival of Benin kingdom is on the global map because its celebration has continued to provide the platform for Benin people to showcase its rich cultural heritage to the world. Nwaka averred that; Annual festivals which required all the village members to come together for celebration may be part of social cohesion among the group.²¹

The whole people look up to the *Oba* for leadership as the *Oba* is an embodiment of the Edo culture, and so his luck becomes their own. It is for this reason that the *Igue* festival is celebrated every year. The *Igue* cultural festival is statutorily a seven days celebration of culture, glamour, candour, beauty of royalty sons and daughters of Benin kingdom. The cultural festival always recognized the traditional market days in fixing dates, participation, performance and prayers which offer worshippers of several traditional religious such as *Sango, Ogun* and *Olokun* to showcase their identities within the framework of *Oba* of Benin blessings. Furthermore, the *Igue* festival places traditional priest' like imperial in their look during the festival celebrations. Eweka contends that;

The festival usually begins with the anointing of the *Oba*'s head with chalk signifying purity and the blood of the sacrificed animals which are usually slaughtered during the festival which is characterized with merriment. The chiefs usually pay homage to the *Oba*. After the *Oba* has performed his own *Igue*, members of the royal family perform their own *Igue*, members of the royal family perform their own on the third day, and thereafter (three days later) the Benin celebrate their own *Igue*.²²

During the *Igue* festival, local drums are used along with songs rendered in Benin language. Everyone, including community leaders like *Chiefs, Enogies and Odionweles* dance to enjoy the celebration. The traditional singer praises the family household, the traditional ruler and other personality at the scene of the celebration with a song of *Ebe-Ewere*-lucky leaves, sang the following according to Egharevba;

Ewere de, kie n'Ewere - *Ewere is coming, open for Ewere*
Ewere d, kie n'Ewere - *Ewere is coming, open for Ewere*
Ewere de, kie n'Ewere - *Ewere is coming, open for Ewere*.²³

Furthermore, the centerpiece of the *Igue* festival celebration shifts to the of families as each Edo people performs offering of she-goat or cork and coconuts, kolanuts on basis of your financial status. The festival usually takes place between November and December. All depends on the pronouncement of the *Oba* of Benin Kingdom through ancestral guidance. Eweka maintained that, "ever since, the festival has continued to be celebrated by the Benin kings (or *Obas*).²⁴

Igue Festival and its significance to Culture

Truly, the *Igue* festival manifests characteristics of culture that has helped to differentiate human being from other animals through the constructive pattern of human behaviour and then emancipating characters. Above all, these characteristics have generally, contributed to generate indigenous knowledge that has greatly influenced *Igue* cultural festival, in the context of socio-economic development of Edo people nay Nigeria. Meanwhile, Olurotimi described characteristics of culture as follows;

Culture is learned, culture is symbolic, culture is dynamic, culture is a set of shared ideals, values and standards of behaviour; culture is the sense of community life, culture is the sense of good human relations, culture is the sense of sacredness of life, culture is the sense of hospitality, culture is the sense of sacred religion, culture is integrated and culture is continuous and comprehensive.²⁵

Similarly, Ezewu also identified six characteristics of culture as follows:

Culture is organic and supra-organic, culture is overt and covert, culture is explicit and implicit, culture is ideal and manifest, culture is stable and yet changing and culture is shared and learned.²⁶

Of course, African traditional festivals enabled individuals to locate themselves and celebrate their roots within the consciousness of existence, thus, promoting social identity and communal relationship on the basis of beliefs, values, customs, norms and attitude to which people's actions are appropriately evaluated and possibly related to their culture.

Meanwhile, culture is a way of life of society or groups of people that possess the same behaviours, beliefs, values, and symbols which they accept within a common understanding and acknowledged by membership. Therefore, culture is socially transmitted by total report of human action and its products such as festivals and harvest of celebrations. Nevertheless, the *Igue* festival celebration resumed in modern and contemporary times.

Originally, the Edo festivals and ceremonies were held for ritual and traditional purposes for sustainable peace, power and territorial expansion in local communities which are associated with the historical part of Benin Kingdom. However, brief account of these festivals and ceremonies are historically highlighted by Eweka as indicated below;

- a. *Ikhure – it marks the fertility of the soil.*
- b. *Ugovie – festival for cleaning and washing of Royal Coral Beads.*
- c. *Ugiro – For commemorating affluence.*
- d. *Ugiogun – In memory of the god of iron.*
- e. *Ikpoleke– in mentoring of the Deity – “Okhuaihe”.*
- f. *Eghute – to ward off evil spirits of war and troubles.*
- g. *Eho – in memory of the spirits of departed parents.*
- h. *Eho-Ema – this ceremony is in memory of the spirits of departed paternal parents of Enigie and Princes and princes.*
- i. *Ihiekhu – this festival is a thanksgiving ceremony to the Hands which are considered to be the creator of many things.*
- j. *Ugie-Eihoba – In memory of reigning Oba's father.*
- k. *Igue – It is a festival heralding good luck and the Igue festival celebrated every year.*
- l. *Emobo – In memory of the defeat of Arhuanran by Oba Esigie at Udo.*
- m. *Isioku – The festival is in honour of the Ogun (the implement of war) which was used for the destruction of the man-eating monster “Osogan”.*
- n. *Ugie – Ododua (or Aguosa). It is to commemorate Odudua.*

- o. *Ague – Benin traditional fasting period.*
- p. *Ugie-Azama - This ceremony commemorates the struggle between Esigie and Arhuanan.*
- q. *Ugie-Ewere – This ceremony is a re-enactment of the Oba Ewuare’s good-luck for God’s blessing which enable him to have male children to succeed him.*²⁷

Presently, the *Igue* Festival has been transformed into source of entertainment and tourists attraction and destinations to tourists, thereby, yielding revenue for the government, organizers and the *Igue* custodians. Thus, Edo people perception of the *Igue* festival can equip the adherents with the prerequisite insight to design strategies for cultural developmental programmes especially in an heterogenous country like Nigeria. Generally, the reign of Oba Ewuare the Great (1440 – write in full), was very notable in the cultural emancipation of Edo people through *Igue* festival celebration. Of course, he was very powerful, courageous and sagacious during his rule.

Similarly, the *Igue* festival has continued to develop mechanisms of social-political integration which kept the society stable, among them were, the age-grade system, the oracular system, inter-village marriages, title taking and secret societies initiations. Oko et al opined that:

Festivals are institutionalized aspects of people’s culture, and they have been present in people’s life for ages. They are celebrated to commemorate one important event or another. Festivals have many facets such as, Ikeji (new yam festival), mgba (wresting festival), iko (masquerade festival), ukpo (initiation festival) and others. In Afikpo and Edda clans, festivals serve as platforms for the people to meet and demonstrate or display their culture to the entire world.²⁸

Festivals therefore have transformation tendencies for development and presentation of traditional values of the communities to global community. Then, it has tremendous significant economic, socio-cultural and political contributions to make towards the local society as an instrument for sustainable peace and development. Also, the cultural festivals have helped to promote sense of identity and protect the traditional heritage which have strengthened the communities. Abiodun states that, “festivals are special events which have significant role in communities’ lives”.²⁹

Furthermore, the relevance of the *Igue* cultural festival has created positive transformation in tourism industry in Benin communities, which has improve the livelihood of residents and visitors. Then too, it that has created significant impact in stimulating social and economic development and increased investments in Edo culture, through revenue, job creations and business opportunities. According to Abiodun:

Festivals can also help to enhance distinction image of both residents and visitors. Therefore, they are very useful marketing tools to promote the distinctions and their attractions to generate positive community image.³⁰

The *Igue* festival have continue to showcase the administrative skills of the communities’ leaders among Benin people through set-out obligations, rights, responsibilities, entitlements, permissions, authorizations, duties, levies and development projects undertaken with strict compliance of Oba of Benin. Abiodun further explained that, “festivals can also improve relationships between hosts and guests and enhance understanding among them since festival provide atmosphere for cultural exchange between them”.³¹

The *Igue* cultural festival manifests a system of oneness, progress, peace and unity and also propagate unselfish norms among the communities in general. Also, the *Igue* festival helps to maintain law and order

and uphold public mortality among in the communities of Edo people. Besides the spiritual aspect of the *Igue* festival, it is a form of entertainment and tourism. Odeke claimed that:

The emphasis has been on the origin and impact of European imperialism on Africa, without any or much reference on how African leaders in their quest for benefits from the presence of European, gave opportunities to the foreign system that eventually consumed them and their cherished state.³²

However, Olaniyi also maintained that, “African civilization cannot be divorced from religious beliefs in supernatural force as the architect of their destiny...”.³³

For that reason, several interrogations were conducted in Benin Kingdom, that reveals the cultural imperialism as a threat to African cultural revival. According to Elder Fred *Ehigiator*, from *Iguoshodi Negbemaba* village, in *Ovia* North-East LGA, Christianity has driven away initial impetus of the *Igue* festival.³⁴ Also, the His Royal Highness *Osagumwenro Ekiroguaghen Ogbomwan Eresoyen Enogie* of *Uhorgua* in *Ovia* North-East Local Government Area, attested to the fact that the *Igue* festival is dying out because people are afraid of being laughed at worshipping idols in the community and describe the *Igue* festival as fetish by cleric of both religion which reduces acceptability among local tourists.³⁵ More so, according to Madam *Osaro Asemota Amasihuhu*, *Ihogbe* Village of Benin City, *Oredo* LGA opined that *Igue* cultural festival celebration usually herald traditional peace in Benin Kingdom. Within this period, there is absence of kidnaping, sexual harassment, stealing, killing, violence and even burial ceremonies are considered as taboo during the *Igue* cultural festival, which often showcases, merriment without religious dividing line in the society³⁶. Meanwhile, Hon. Foster *Iyangbe* of Benin City *Oredo* L.G.A contends that the *Igue* festival is a spiritual bond between the *Oba* of Benin and Edo people, he further added that for both tourist, adherents and traditionalists, the festival offers them different satisfaction³⁷. Then, Egharevba declared that; “since that time, it has been the prayer of the Bini not to make a journey on *Ubi* day, but only on *Ewere* day, so that the journey might be as happy and prosperous as that of *Ewere*, *Okhien-Ewere*”.³⁸ Joseph *Oko* of *Orhiwonwon* Local Government Area, opined that “during *Igue* festival *Anti-witchcraft status* are suppressed in the village”³⁹. Furthermore, Clifford *Egbon* of *Orhionwon* Local Government Area also confessed that “the period of *Igue* festival Benin people have unrestrained appetite for local foods and peaceful atmosphere during celebration”⁴⁰. Therefore, *Efosa Agho* of *Ikpoba-Okha* Local Government Area contended that “no one looks down on another as an idol worshipper during the *Igue* festival celebration as each person dances and sing along with the lead singer”⁴¹. *Igname Edionwele* of *Esan West* Local Government Area reported that “like travelling to Benin City during *Igue* festival celebration because traditional peace experience in the communities”⁴².

Conclusion

The paper examines the *Igue* festival in Benin kingdom and demonstrates that the *Igue* cultural festival is a configuration of a number of social interactions of cultural pattern, which reflect the care for the young, elderly and religious practices, ideals of life in promoting traditional peace among Benin people. The *Igue* festival showcases attitude, belief, ideas and judgment that are shared with passion and among Benin people from one generation to another generation. Of course, the festival is a total social inheritance and a way of life of the Edo people indeed, it is not only historical but relatively equipped to the past and functionally concerned with present reality. The *Igue* festival is pure traditions of Benin kingdom that has been continually, deliberately transmitting her cultural heritage through materials goods, object and ideas to sustain traditional peace. Therefore, the *Igue* cultural festival has ensured the preservation of Edo people’s

integrity, identity and continue existence. And so, in spite of modernity, the festival has continued to be celebrated with pumps and pageantry by the Benin people. Hence, Edo people are proud in professing their culture especially the *Igue* festival as a tradition.

Of course, if the government has the right policies in place, it can be a major tool to revamp Nigerian's tourism sector and promote peace.

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42. Interview with Ignose Edionmele, Ekpoma, Esan West LGA. 26 November, 2023.