

IKEJI FESTIVAL AND THE PRESERVATION OF IGBO CULTURAL HERITAGE: A HERMENEUTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper questions the relationship between festivals and cultural preservation by analysing the Ikeji festival of Arondizuogu. Ikeji festival is a significant annual cultural event celebrated in the Igbo community of Arondizuogu of Southeastern Nigeria, by Aros at home and in the diaspora. This study specifically seeks to determine whether festivals are a sufficient means of preserving and transmitting cultural heritage and the African Traditional Religion. Much has been written on the impact of festivals on tourism and the economy, with little or no focus on the role of festivals in preserving African traditional religion and cultural heritage in the face of globalization. As the subject matter is not well researched, this study contributes to a more in-depth understanding of the role of the Ikeji festival in preserving Igbo religious and cultural heritages. To provide a well-rounded perspective, a hermeneutic approach of historical analysis was employed to determine the festival's contribution to the preservation of cultural heritage. This paper also examines the specific ways through which the Ikeji festival promotes essential Igbo values, such as ancestor veneration, masquerade, communal living, prayer, thanksgiving, history and mentorship, while offering a learning opportunity for the younger generation. The research findings will enrich the growing body of literature on African cultural history and will be of great value to scholars, researchers, historians, and cultural enthusiasts seeking to understand the significance of festivals in preserving cultural preservation.

Keywords: Ikeji festival, Igbo, Arondizuogu, cultural heritage and preservation, African Traditional Religion

Introduction

Cultural heritage is a way of living a community has inherited from previous generations that it passes on to the following generation. It refers to cultural sites, monuments, folklore, religious beliefs, languages, customs, artistic expressions, values, etc. that are considered vital to be preserved for future generations¹. The concept of cultural heritage is characterised by the idea of a shared connection and sense of belonging among members of a community. It embodies the historical and identity-related elements that define a particular group, serving as a link between the past, present, and future. In the contemporary era of globalisation, cultural heritage plays an important role in reminding us of our diverse cultural backgrounds and can facilitate mutual respect and meaningful dialogue between different cultures. By acknowledging the historical and cultural significance of our heritage, we can cultivate a greater appreciation for our differences and a more inclusive global community.

Given the above, it therefore holds that the preservation of a society's cultural heritage is fundamental to its identity. This is because cultural heritage comprises the shared values, customs, beliefs, and practices that define a people. Consequently, it is critical to maintain and safeguard cultural heritage to preserve the identity of a society. Festivals have long played a crucial role in cultural heritage preservation as they provide an essential platform for the promotion and preservation of the traditional values and practices that form the basis of a society's cultural heritage. In Arondizuogu town of Southeastern Nigeria, the annual Ikeji festival is a prime example of such a festival.

Cultural festivals represent a type of intangible cultural heritage that is characterised by its absence of physical manifestation, in contrast to other tangible cultural artefacts such as historical monuments and relics. The intangible nature of festivals is rooted in the traditions and living expressions that have been inherited from prior generations and passed down to descendants, encompassing elements such as oral traditions, rituals, performing arts, social customs, knowledge regarding nature, religious ceremonies, artisanal crafts, music, dance, literature, theatre, language, and cuisine². The safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage is particularly challenging due to its experiential nature and inability to be restricted to a physical space, necessitating collective efforts by the community as a whole to ensure its preservation.

The Ikeji, loosely translated as (yam tying), holds a significant cultural position within the Igbo community of Arondizuogu, situated in Southeastern Nigeria. Ikeji is a festival that primarily centres around expressions of gratitude and propitiation. Moreover, it functions as

¹ The Significance of Cultural Heritage, Ministry of Information Eritrea, October 2, 2019. <https://shabait.com/2019/10/02/the-significance-of-cultural-heritage/>. Accessed on February 19th, 2023.

² UNESCO, The Intangible Cultural Heritage. <https://www.unesco.org/en/intangible-cultural-heritage>. Accessed on February 19th, 2023.

a platform for the community to collectively recount and recollect the history and stories that bind them together, as well as for the resolution of disputes and reconciliation between different lineages³. The genesis of the Ikeji festival can be traced back to the "Emume Itinye Aka N' Ubi"⁴ feast, an event initiated by Mazi Iheme, the regent of Mazi Izuogu, who was entrusted with the administration of the new Arondizuogu settlement while Mazi Izuogu, the famed warrior from Arochukwu, continued his military campaigns. The Emume feast was a means for Mazi Iheme to obtain the blessings of his master Izuogu before embarking on land cultivation and crop cultivation, and it was from this feast that the Ikeji festival of Arondizuogu was born.

This paper puts forward a central argument that emphasises the enduring importance of festivals in preserving and transmitting Igbo culture and traditional Igbo religion despite their ephemeral nature. The study argues that this is particularly relevant in a world that is rapidly becoming increasingly globalised, and thus, it is crucial to investigate the specific contributions that festivals make towards cultural conservation. To accomplish this, the paper employs hermeneutic and thematic approaches to historical analysis, with the goal of identifying and elucidating the key ways in which festivals sustain the Igbo culture. The research findings highlight specific aspects of cultural promotion that are manifested through the Ikeji festival.

Overall, the paper contributes significantly to the ongoing discourse on religio-cultural preservation and offers valuable insights into the importance of cultural conservation. By the end of this study, readers will have gained a more thorough understanding of the critical role that festivals play in preserving cultural heritage, maintaining social identity, and their significance for the African society.

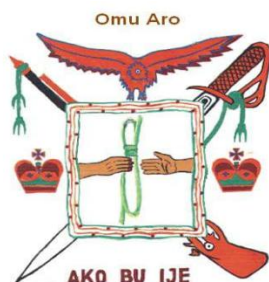
³ Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu and Precious Onyekachi Okoye, *Tourism, the Diaspora and the Ikeji Festival of Arondizuogu: Culture and the Exigencies of Modernism*. Ochendo: An African Journal of Innovative Studies, vol. 3 no 2, 2022. P. 2.

⁴ Ibid

The People of Arondizuogu

The etymological transcription of the name Arondizuogu is thus:

Arondizuogu, a large settlement spanning across three local government areas in Imo State, Nigeria, has a rich and intricate history that traces back to its parent community of Arochukwu. During the 18th and 19th centuries, Arochukwu established a confederacy that spread its influence and presence throughout Eastern Nigeria, the lower Middle Belt, and some parts of Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea⁵. The Aro people, who were headquartered in Arochukwu, revered the Chuku shrine, which housed a powerful oracle called Long Juju by the Europeans. The oracle acted as a judge for the Igbo supreme deity, Chuku, and played a crucial role in the recruitment of slaves who were deported to America and Europe from the port of Bonny and other coastal areas. The British forces destroyed the shrine and its powers during the Anglo-Aro war of 1900-02⁶.



Source: Adamazi.com⁷

Today, the Aro people can be found in over 250 settlements worldwide⁸, but none more prominent than Arondizuogu, which spans across 20 villages collectively known as "Ndi Izuogu na Iheme" (people of Izuogu and Iheme).

⁵ Chikezie Okoronkwo and Gibson F. Okoroafor, Value of Masquerades in Igbo Land: a Study of Ikeji Festival of Arondizuogu, *International Journal of Strategic Research in Education, Technology and Humanities*, Vol. 7, No 9, June 2019. P. 5.

⁶ A. E. Afigbo, the Eclipse of the Aro Slaving Oligarchy of Southeastern Nigeria, 1901 - 1927, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 6 no 1, December 1971. P. 1-2.

⁷ Uche Ohia, the Origin of Omu Aro, Published October 9th, 2017. <https://adamazi.com/2017/10/the-origin-of-omu-aro-by-uche-ohia/>. Retrieved on February 21st, 2023.

⁸ Chikezie Okoronkwo and Gibson F. Okoroafor, Value of Masquerades in Igbo Land, P. 6.

According to local history, the origins of the settlement currently referred to as Arondizuogu can be traced to Mazi Izuogu Mgboko, a renowned warrior and slave dealer from Arochukwu who maintained the Aro confederacy in any new community he conquered. Among these communities was Arondizuogu, where he appointed his chief servant, Mazi Iheme, in the mid 14th century to oversee the administration of the newly established settlement. Today, the settlement has expanded to encompass 20 villages, collectively known as 'Ndi Izuogu na Iheme' (people of Izuogu and Iheme), and spans three local government areas in Imo state of Nigeria, namely Ideato North, Onuimo, and Okigwe, with other adjacent communities.

IZUOGU COMMUNITIES	S/N	IHEME COMMUNITIES
Ndi Uche	1	Ndi Aniche
Ndi Awa	2	Ndi Onuoha
Ndi Njoku	3	Ndi Eze
Ndi Imoko	4	Ndi Okonkwo
Ndi Amazu	5	Ndi Ogbuonyeoma
Ndi Ejezie	6	Ndi Akeme
Ndi Adimoha	7	Ndi Ukwu
Ndi Anyake	8	Ndi Akunwanta
Ndi Uwaonu	9	
Ndi Ucheagwu	10	
Ndi Ndubuisi	11	
Ndi Ekwulu	12	

The Ikeji Festival of Arondizuogu

The origin of the Ikeji festival in Arondizuogu is shrouded in mythology as many versions exist. Uche Ohia, however, suggested that Ikeji began as a ceremony to mark the end of one planting season and the beginning of another⁹. According to Oghaji, the festival has its roots from its variant celebrated in Arochukwu, the parent community of Arondizuogu¹⁰ where Mazi Izuogu resided. Oghaji further narrates that Ikeji Arondizuogu originated from the parent community - Arochukwu where it was celebrated around the month of September, in line with the Igbo calendar of new yam festival celebration. During that time, Mazi Iheme, who was a regent placed by Mazi Izuogu in the new Arondizuogu settlement to manage it, would travel to Arochukwu to celebrate the feast in his master's household and to pay him all the homage rites due to him as his master and lord, in accordance with Aro tradition.

Upon return to Arondizuogu, Mazi Iheme would return the favour the next year by extending an invite to his master Izuogu to the new settlement-Arondizuogu to officially seek his permission to till the land¹¹. This was usually done in March/April and was a celebratory occasion where Mazi Iheme would entertain his master to a grandiose feast and colourful masquerade displays during his stay. He called this ceremony *Emume itinye aka n'ubi*¹²(occasion of laying hands into the farmland), where Mazi Izuogu would bless the land before the people cultivate crops.

Ikeji, which is a four-day festival of great cultural significance to the Aro people, was originally a festival of eight days held annually in March or April according to the Igbo calendar (Eke, Oye, Afor and Nkwo). Each of these days have special names and hold special significance that adds meaning to the Ikeji celebration. The last day of the festival is on Eke day, the beginning of a new week, and is called Eke Nwusa Akpata¹³. It is on this day that masquerades assemble at the market square to stage their final display in the festival. At the end of the displays, all masquerades are expected to discard their whips (akpata), hence the title - Eke Nwusa Akpata (Eke for the discarding of whips)¹⁴. The festival is a period of propitiation, thanksgiving, and feasting, and is marked by a series of events that embody the essence of Aro tradition and culture. The festival is based on the Igbo calendar, with each of the four days of Ikeji corresponding to one of the four market days (Eke, Oye/Orie, Afo and Nkwo) in an Igbo week. Each day of the festival represents a

⁹Uche Ohia, Ikeji Festival of Arondizuogu: An Introduction. Silverduck Publishing Press, Nigeria, 2014. P. 2.

¹⁰ Nat Okafor- Ogbaji, Ikeji Festival Arondizuogu, ancient and modern. Lagos Printing Press, Nigeria, 1998. P. 11-12.

¹¹ I. A. Kanu and Precious Onyekachi Okoye, Tourism, the diaspora and Ikeji festival of Arondizuogu: Culture and the exigencies of modernism. OCHENDO: An African Journal of Innovative Studies. Vol. 3. No. 2. 2022, P.3.

¹² H. A. P. Nwana, Arondizuogu Traditional Values. Standard Publishers Ltd, Nigeria, 2005. P. 24-27.

¹³ I. A. Kanu and Precious Onyekachi Okoye, Tourism, the diaspora and Ikeji festival of Arondizuogu: Culture and the exigencies of modernism, P. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid

unique dimension of Ikeji, which is renowned for its colourful performances, fascinating masquerades, and pulsating rhythms. The traditional musical instruments used during the festival include wooden slit drums (ekwe) of various sizes, metal gongs (ogene), bells, and wooden flutes (oja).

Ikeji is a period of togetherness and forgiveness, and is marked by various cultural displays, seminars, and lectures on Aro cultures, visits to historic cultural sites, pouring of libation, exchange of kola-nuts, and paying homage to Aro traditional institutions. The festival is also a period for communication with ancestors, reconciliation, peace building, conflict resolutions and development projects. This period is often marked by joyful celebrations of sonship. The festival is a unique platform for the observance of Aro tradition and culture in its pure and varied forms. It is a ceremony that promotes tourism and cheerful dispositions and provides an opportunity for the Aro people to come together to celebrate their culture and promote their heritage. During this period, burials are postponed and cases are resolved with equanimity, highlighting the importance of peace and development.¹⁵

On the prominence of the festival in Igbo land, Chikezie asserts that the Ikeji is: “One of the longest reigning festivals in Igbo land and the biggest pan-Igbo cultural community festival with strong heritage and international recognition. Perhaps, Ikeji remains the biggest cultural festival in Igboland.”¹⁶ Notably, the Ikeji festival represents the most significant cultural celebration for the people of Arondizuogu. The festival is an annual manifestation of the community's cultural heritage, which is characterised by elaborate processions, traditional dances, and the display of various cultural artefacts. It is a time when the community members come together to celebrate their unique cultural identity, which has been shaped by a rich and complex history spanning centuries.

The Concept of Cultural Preservation and Heritage

Gilman asserts that cultural conservation efforts in Africa are focused on preserving indigenous cultural practices linked to ethnic identity and heritage, which are gradually waning due to various factors such as colonisation, globalisation, and urbanisation¹⁷. Given that festivals are intangible cultural heritage that are sustained only when the communities make concerted efforts to preserve them, it is imperative to explicate and accentuate the salient features of festivals that advance a people's culture. This is the only way to ensure the continuity of a culture in a rapidly evolving world. Albeit fragile, intangible cultural

¹⁵ Chikezie Okoronkwo and Gibson F. Okoroafor, *Value of Masquerades in Igbo Land: a Study of Ikeji Festival of Arondizuogu*, P. 8.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Lisa Gilman, *Festivals, Tourism and Cultural Conservation: Comparing the Livingstone Cultural and Arts Festival and the Nc'wala Traditional Ceremony in Zambia*

heritage is an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalisation¹⁸.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO popularized the concept of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) during the 2003 UNESCO convention; to protect indigenous cultures' non-physical aspects¹⁹, which are vulnerable to fading away. Cultural preservation is a significant issue for African countries, given the continent's diverse and abundant heritage, encompassing natural, cultural, and intangible elements. These components are interwoven through various ways of living, believing, healing, dying, and celebrating²⁰. For centuries, Africa's diverse intangible heritage has influenced the world through processes such as diffusion, acculturation, and movement. The continent's ICH is expressed through numerous traditions, practices, and beliefs, including the knowledge of its elders, artists, builders, and musicians, among others. It is also present in its poetry, drum beats, historical sites, landscapes, and works of art²¹. Despite being dynamic and rhythmic, Africa's ICH is fragile and vulnerable after enduring centuries of discrimination, destruction, and displacement under colonialism and religious acculturation.

Ikeji Festival and the Preservation of Religio-Cultural Heritage

The Ikeji festival has been found to significantly promote the Igbo culture through numerous aspects; some of which include but are not limited to: ancestor veneration, masquerade and masquerading, communal living, prayer, thanksgiving, enriching of history, promotion of mentorship and transfer of knowledge from the young to the old, reinforcement of the Igbo cultural sense of sportsmanship and the preservation of Igbo oral history. We will look at these aspects in succeeding paragraphs:

1. Value of Ancestor veneration:

Ancestor veneration means obeisance to the spirits of the dead. This is based on love, respect and honour for the dead. It is related to beliefs that the dead have a continued existence and may possess the ability to influence the fortune of the living. In the Igbo religion, death is not a sufficient condition for becoming an ancestor. Only those who lived a full measure of life, cultivated moral values, and achieved social distinction attain this status²².

¹⁸ UNESCO, What is Intangible Cultural Heritage, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>. Retrieved on February 21st, 2023.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Abungu, George. "Africa's Rich Intangible Heritage: Managing a Continent's Diverse Resources." In *Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*, edited by Michelle L. Stefano, Peter Davis, and Gerard Corsane, 8:57–70. Boydell & Brewer, 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt81mt8.10>.

²¹ Ibid

²² Encyclopedia Britannica, African Religions. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/African-religions#ref810959>. Retrieved on February 21st, 2023.

One of the intrinsic aspects of Igbo culture that the Ikeji festival promotes is ancestor veneration or worship. One symbolic representation of ancestor veneration practiced during the Ikeji is the application of the *Ofo*. Kanu avers that during worship, the Priest uses the *Ofo*, which is an insignia of authority among the Igbo obtained from a specific sacred tree. It is also used by every man who has family and kindred (*Umunna*). It is usually portable so that it can be carried in a goat skin bag by elders. The *Ofo* symbolises justice and a clear mind. Thus, in the Igbo world, nothing important can be done without the invocation of the *Ofo*. Through it, the righteous dead, good spirits are invoked to uphold justice, decisions and settle disputes²³.

Another symbolic representation of ancestor veneration during Ikeji is in the breaking of *kolanut*. Among the Igbo, *Kolanut* is a sign of communion, not just among the living, but also between the living and the dead. During the breaking of the kola, heaven and earth come together and this is seen in the invocation of God (*Chukwu Abiama bia taa oji*), the heavens and the earth (*elu na ala bia ta oji*), the deities (*amadioha bia ta oji*), and the dead ancestors (*nnam... bia taa oji*)²⁴.

2. Value of Masquerade and Masquerading,

According to Nwoga, there exist three forms of being that impinge on a person's life - the physical that can be touched, weighed, eaten, that can touch one through the usual sense; the spiritual which may not be seen or touched except by specially "washed" eyes, but which all the same can affect the shape and nature of physical being; and then the abstract which exists and may affect reality by becoming realised in either of the other forms, physical or spiritual²⁵. The idea of masquerade in Igbo tradition relates to all three senses.

Drawing from popular Igbo belief, Masquerades are very important spiritual elements of society. They have symbolic representation and serve many important roles in society. Depending on the locality in Igbo land, Masquerades can have replica images of deities and important ancestral relatives of the society. Consequently, the identities of the masquerade are well-kept secret from children, women, and the uninitiated men of society. Kanu posits that the idea of masquerades in Igbo African ontology is drawn from the understanding of ancestors among the African people and that they are symbols of the dead forefathers of the visible world. One of the ways through which they visit human beings, that is, the living is

²³ Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, on the Sources of African Philosophy, *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*, vol. 11 no 4, 2022, P. 12.

²⁴ Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, on the Sources of African Philosophy, p.12.

²⁵ Nwoga, D.I., *NkanaNzere: Focus of Igboworld view*, 1984. <https://www.ahiajokuIgbonet.com>. Retrieved on February 21st 2023.

through masquerades²⁶. Ogbonna further alludes that Masquerades (**Mmanwu**) are held in accordance with local native calendars during festivals such as Christmas and New Yam Festivals, burial rites and other serious social gatherings. The masquerades are adorned in esoteric regalia and colourful masks made of wood and other fabric materials²⁷.



Source: BBC Igbo²⁸

By Arondizuogu tradition, it is a taboo for any part of the masquerade to be exposed by anyone, it is also a taboo to fight with, unmask or to call a masquerade by a human name²⁹. Also it was not unusual to witness a tough masquerade walk up to certain individuals and loudly berate them publicly for their hidden abominable bad habits such as coveting a friend's wife, serious crimes such as poisoning someone or other adjudged misbehaviour to society. As crude as this style seems in present day and age, they were very effective in instilling corrective measures to many would-be deviants of society. Thus the traditional norms and values of the community were preserved without sacred cows flouting them on the basis of economic and political status. Since Masquerades were regarded as spirits, they were no respecters of individuals. Every member of society paid attention.

The Ikeji is regarded as a festival of masquerades due to the wide array of masquerades that manifest during the festival. The Ikeji masquerades speak in a guttural voice, sometimes it recites traditional poetry like a troubadour; other times it displays acrobatic dance steps to thrill the crowd of spectators. Each masquerade bears a specific name. Some very important

²⁶ Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, Masquerades in African Philosophy and the Issue of Nation Building, Indian Journal of Applied Research, Vol. 4: Issue 9, September 2014, P. 1.

²⁷ Mazi Ogbonna, Igbo Masquerades and their Importance to Society, Ekwendigbo. <http://ekwendigbo.com/index.php/ar-aa/entertainment/item/29-igbo-masquerades-and-their-importance-to-society>, retrieved on February 21st, 2023.

²⁸ Ikeji Festival: Ihe BBC Igbo huru n'Arondizuogu <https://www.bbc.com/igbo/afirika-47944818>, published April 16th, 2019. Retrieved on February 21st, 2023.

²⁹ Kanu, I. A. and Precious Onyekachi Okoye, Tourism, the diaspora and Ikeji festival of Arondizuogu: Culture and the exigencies of modernism, P. 6.

Ikeji masquerades include Mgbadike, Ojionu, Okwomma, Onyekuruye, amongst many others. Each of these masquerades have special significance to the people of Arondizuogu.

1. **MGBADIKE** is regarded as *Nna mmonwu* or father spirit. He exerts authority and exhibits physical strength and fearlessness, presumably dumb and must always have an *otimkpu* (mouthpiece).
2. **NWA ABUJA** is the *Nne Mmonwu* of mother spirit. She is the mother figure of the masquerade family. reputed for her stories and comics. The picture below shows the Mgbadike masquerade (left) and Nwa Abuja (right).



Source: Twitter³⁰

3. **OJIONU** is the most ubiquitous masquerade at Ikeji festivals. It is the athletic, whip wielding and fear inducing masquerade that chases cheeky spectators around. Ojionu is regarded as the male child of the masquerade family because he exhibits the agility and vitality of youth.
4. **OKWOMMA** is the king of all masquerades in Arondizuogu in much the same way that Ijele is the chief masquerade in Anambra areas. As such, Okwomma never walks alone, as he must be accompanied by other masquerades such as Ojionu and Mgbadike who make way to herald its appearance. Okwomma symbolises prestige and power in Arondizuogu.
5. **ONYEKURUYE** is a night masquerade who moves about singing in the village. In his songs, he criticises whoever has perpetrated evil in the community and warns them to stop their evil practices. It is a common practice for the community to listen

³⁰ <https://twitter.com/ukpuru/status/1033425750521769984>. Retrieved on February 21st, 2023.

with rapt attention and learn about the wrong actions of other people through Onyekuruye's melodies.



Source: Nairaland.com³¹

The Ikeji masquerades perform an array of roles in the community which include representing the will of the community - they do not do or act just the way they want or order people around. When they enforce obedience and discipline, they do that because that is what the community wants done³² and enforcing good morals through discipline and exposure of wrong behaviours as exemplified by the singsong Onyekuruye masquerade.

Kanu notes that Igbo masquerading is an exclusive society or cult for men and this aligns with the Igbo traditional structure which places a lot of value on the men. He further avers thus:

This does not imply that masquerades are anti-feminine. Many masquerades dress like women, displaying women's features and prefer being in the company of women. In some Igbo societies, aged women are admitted into the cult of masquerades because it is considered inappropriate to frighten them. The general reason why women are excluded is because they are considered incapable of tolerating hazards and keeping secrets.³³

3. Kinship

As observed by Alyward, the African traditional life is centred around the family. The family is where life is generated, a basic unit of life which represents in miniature the life of

³¹ <https://www.nairaland.com/6084092/mysterious-onyekulum-masquerade-adazi-nnukwu>. Retrieved on February 21st, 2023.

³² Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, *Masquerades in African Philosophy and the Issue of Nation Building*, P.2.

³³ Ibid

the entire people; it is in the family that the values of the clan, the tribe and of Africa are transmitted whether the individuals are in Africa, Europe or elsewhere in the world. Kinship can be understood as a culture's system of recognized family roles and relationships that define the obligations, rights, and boundaries of interaction among the members of a self-recognizing group³⁴. It could be defined through genetic relationships, adoption, or other ritualised behaviour such as marriage and household economies.

The Igbo perception of Kinship is aptly summed up in the writings of the prodigious novelist, Chinua Achebe. During one of the feasts organised by Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, his uncle Uchendu revealed the essence of the Igbo-African kinship: “We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him.”³⁵

The Aro's perception of kinship is hinged on their belief of ‘Aro Oke Igbo’ which means Aro of the Great Igbo. The economic and religious dominance enjoyed by the Aro in the 14th to 16th century Igboland made them closely knit together despite the fact that they were migrants. So no matter the new settlement occupied by the Aro, he recognizes his kin and addresses him as ‘Nwa Mazi’ (son of Mazi) or ‘Ada Mazi’ (daughter of Mazi) and Mazi (for older males). In more recent times, the Ikeji festival has reinforced the Aro philosophy of kinship and has become the chief reason why Aro men and women spread across several countries of the world return home every year to sit together with their kin, and celebrate the values of a festival that knits the community together. Based on the foregoing, it can then be inferred that the Ikeji festivals strengthens cultural heritage by fostering familial relationships and community pride.

Duke argues that festivals are performative dimensions of cultural praxis that strengthens bonds of cohesion in society³⁶. Therefore, festivals are an excellent platform for social interaction within a community because they are often characterised by communal activities such as dancing, music, and communal meals. As people participate in these activities, they create an atmosphere of unity and shared experience, which fosters a sense of belonging among individuals. Festivals create a space for social exchange, where people can come together, socialise and interact with one another in a way that may not be possible during the regular course of daily life. Festivals also provide a platform for individuals to explore

³⁴ Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, Kinship in African Philosophy and the Issue of Development, International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE) Volume 1, Issue 9, September 2014, P. 1.

³⁵ Achebe, C. (1949). *Things Fall Apart*, Britain: Heinemann. P. 132.

³⁶ Emmanuel Duke, from Festival to Social Communion: a Nigerian Experience, Social Space Journal, <https://socialspacejournal.eu/19%20numer/From%20festival%20to%20social%20communion%20a%20Nigeria%20experience%20-%20Emmanuel%20Orok%20Duke%20Stella%20E%20Osim.pdf>. Retrieved on February 21st, 2023.

and express their cultural identity, which is essential to developing a sense of belonging and connection to their community

Most importantly, festivals provide a unique opportunity to strengthen family bonds. Many festivals are rooted in family traditions, which mean that they provide a chance for families to come together, spend time with one another, and create new memories. For example, the Ikeji festival is often celebrated with family members coming together to cook, eat and celebrate together. As individuals engage in these activities, they develop a closer relationship with their families and create shared experiences that promote a sense of unity. Festivals are not just celebrations of past events; they are a way of bringing people together and creating new traditions, which help to strengthen the social fabric of a community.

4. Prayer

The Igbo people were primarily worshippers of the God of the earth, sky and seas before the advent of Christianity. This accounts for their reverence and titles referred to God, some of which include:

Obasi bi n'elu~~~~~ (God who lives in Heaven),

Chukwu Okike~~~~~ (God the Creator),

O'sebuluwa~~~~~ (the maker of the world)

Igwekala ~~~~~ (the heavens above the earth) and so on.

Frazer argued that the mind of man refuses to acquiesce and settle in the phenomenon of sense, and hence man seeks for something more abiding and supernatural than the sensible world and conceives the idea of spiritual being³⁷. This was exactly the case of the Igbo man. The Igbo man believes in one God called Chukwu (a collapsed form of Chi - Ukwu meaning Great God).

African traditional prayers also reveal so much about the African traditional philosophy of religion, especially about the relationship between the human and the divine. In many African prayers, God is approached as a Dependable Being, Friend and as Benevolent. The general format is usually the giving of praise to God, then the need of the worshipper is put forward, and such needs include protection, procreation, and prosperity.

Beyond the belief in God, is also the African belief in ancestors and forefathers as earlier stated. The Africans believe that the land is a historical tie between the dead and the living, and the natural world vs the supernatural world as it is on the same land that their fathers before them lived and were buried. Therefore, the Africans in their prayers, remember their ancestors and call their names, praying that they guide them in celebrating a tradition which they themselves did not invent, but which was passed onto them by their forebears.

³⁷ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, a study of Magic and Religion, Palgrave Macmillan, 1922.

Drawing upon this, this explains why during the Oye Egbugbu day (Oye of Slaughter) which the second day of the Ikeji festival is, families bring out all the livestock they purchased the previous market day (Eke Odu). These animals are then slaughtered, and the male patriarch of each family visits the *Obi* (family altar), where prayers are made to the ancestors and the animals offered. This is a ritual that must be completed before the animals are cooked for the celebration. The Aros believe that on Oye Egbugbu day, the good ancestral spirits visit the *Obi* to commune with their descendants. The significance is that people are very careful of their words and actions so as not to anger the ancestors who would come visiting³⁸.

Generally speaking, the Ikeji is a relic of the *Emume Ibinye Aka N' Ubi* feast where Iheme hosts his master Mazi Izuogu, seeking his permission and blessings to farm the land which was given to him to manage. The general spirit of the Ikeji festival is that of prayer and thanksgiving and seeking the blessings of the ancestors before cultivating the land, and praying that their efforts be blessed with a bountiful harvest later in the year. The Aro culture is intertwined with religion and the belief in a high Chi, which is greater than the personal chi of every individual. During the prayers, libations are poured in the family obi and the spirits of the forefathers are welcomed again to the place they called home in their lifetime.

5. Value of History:

Some may argue that festivals are simply a form of entertainment, and that their historical significance is incidental. However, research has proven that festivals are a valuable tool for preserving and promoting the value of history in a community. By celebrating cultural events and traditions, festivals provide an opportunity for people to connect with their heritage and learn about their ancestors' beliefs and customs. Festivals are not just a form of entertainment; they are an essential tool for preserving and promoting the value of history in a community. As the great writer and historian Marcus Tullius Cicero once said, "To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child." Festivals help communities to avoid this fate by ensuring that the wisdom and knowledge of their ancestors are passed down to future generations.

The celebration of festivals offers a unique opportunity for communities to gather and commemorate their shared past. Festivals serve as a space for individuals to convene, share their narratives, and connect with their cultural heritage. In numerous cultures, festivals are occasions where family and friends assemble to partake in food, music, and dance. The act

³⁸ Ibid

of congregating in a communal area promotes a sense of belonging and fosters collective memory that can be passed down through generations.

Moreover, festivals are also effective vehicles for cultural education. The Ikeji festival, for example, incorporates educational initiatives, workshops, and exhibits through the Arondizuogu Patriotic Union (APU), that imparts knowledge about cultural heritage to participants. Many articles have been written about the Ikeji festival and the rich cultural representations it provides, not just about the people of Arondizuogu, but for the Igbo man. Festivals showcase traditional clothing, music, and art, allowing people to learn about cultural practices that might have been forgotten over time; thereby, preserving the intangible aspects of cultural heritage.

The Ikeji festival of Arondizuogu is a prime example of how festivals can preserve and transmit culture. The scholarly conversation around this festival serves as a testament to the fact that cultural festivals have the potential to maintain and promote cultural heritage. Overall, festivals are a valuable means of cultural preservation, education, and community building, and they should continue to be celebrated and supported.

6. Value of Mentorship by the old for the young

Mentorship occupies a central theme during Ikeji, and it is deeply ingrained in the traditional customs and practices surrounding the event. One way in which the Ikeji festival emphasises mentorship is through the participation of elders in the festivities. During the festivals, *ndi Ichie* (elders) are given a place of honour and are respected for their age, knowledge and experience. They are responsible for leading certain aspects of the celebration, such as the offering of prayers and blessings for the harvest. This not only reinforces the importance of the older generation in the community but also provides a valuable opportunity for them to pass on their wisdom and guidance to the younger generation. It is during Ikeji that the fathers explain to their sons and daughters the cultural meaning of some of the festival activities; for example, the different types of masquerades and what each represent. Furthermore, the Ikeji festival is a time for the community to come together and bond over shared experiences. This sense of community and togetherness is important for building relationships between the old and young. It provides a space for elders to share their stories and experiences with the younger generation, and for the younger generation to learn from and connect with their elders. Through this, the young are mentored by the old, learn about the cultural values of their community, proverbs and their meanings, the importance of kolanut in Igbo events and the hidden meaning in the different kolanut lobes, taboos etcetera.

7. Reinforces Igbo cultural sense of sportsmanship

One of the festival's most anticipated activity is the *Ito Ebune*. This event is a test of bravery and juju powers among the participants. A ram is tied to a pole with a single thread in a market square, and the person with the strongest juju protection is expected to leisurely walk to the ram amidst heavy attempts by other people to knock him down, maim him, or kill him. This activity is only for the courageous, and those who are not brave either abstain from it or remain with the crowd as spectators.

The contenders face attacks from forces beyond the scope of this article, with a view to stopping them from reaching the ram. If overwhelmed, the contenders beat a retreat back to their starting point. However, the bravest among the masquerades participating in the competition for that year's festival, after overcoming all odds, will reach the ram and untie it to a thunderous applause by the spectators. This achievement is celebrated by fellow kinsmen who visit the winner's house with food and wine to celebrate his victory³⁹. The annual event is a recognition of individuals in Arondizuogu and neighbouring towns who possess the strongest juju or voodoo power. Over the years, several participants have earned recognition, including the renowned Pericoma Okoye who emerged victorious in multiple contests⁴⁰.

8. Promotes cultural preservation through entertainment e.g, dance, music, folklore

The ikeji festival encompasses various fundamental elements, with two essential components being the flutist and the *ima mbem*. The flutist's role in the festival is vital as they adeptly communicate with the masquerades through soulful melodies that blend seamlessly with the rhythmic beat of the drums. The flutist's gestures and steps, coupled with the melodies, are infused with esoteric messages hidden from the ordinary eyes, which mesmerize and captivate the audience. Another captivating feature of the ikeji festival is the *ima mbem*, a gifted raconteur who delivers imaginative stories with a musical cadence that only the initiated can comprehend. This element adds an extra layer of intrigue to the festival, creating a sense of mystery that enhances the cultural experience for attendees. The image below is that of a man playing the flute during the Ikeji festival of 2014.

³⁹ "Pericoma Okoye: When a big masquerade exits the stage". *businessday.ng*. 19 February 2017 <https://businessday.ng/arts-bdlife-arts/article/pericoma-okoye-big-masquerade-exits-stage/>. Retrieved 2019-12-04.

⁴⁰"Pericoma Okoye: When an ancestor travels". *www.thenigerianvoice.com*. <https://www.thenigerianvoice.com/amp/news/244932/pericoma-okoye-when-an-ancestor-travels.html>. Retrieved 2019-12-04.



Source: Obindigbo⁴¹

The ikeji festival is more than just an annual celebration for the people of Arondizuogu; through entertainment such as dance, music, and folklore, the festival promotes and preserves the unique cultural identity of the Igbo people. Dance is an integral part of the ikeji festival, with various traditional dances performed by men and women during the celebration. These dances are not just for entertainment purposes but serve as a means of passing down traditions from generation to generation. The intricate steps and movements in the dances are a physical representation of the Igbo culture, and as such, their preservation ensures the continuation of the culture.

Similarly, music is a powerful tool for cultural preservation, and the ikeji festival makes use of music to maintain the Igbo culture. The festival features the flutist and the *ima mbem*, who both use music to communicate and tell stories. These musical performances are not just for entertainment purposes but serve to pass down the Igbo culture's oral traditions, values, and beliefs.

Folklore is another important component of the ikeji festival, with the *ima mbem* using storytelling to pass down cultural values and beliefs. These stories serve to entertain the audience, but also serve a more critical purpose of preserving the culture by ensuring that the next generation is aware of their cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The rapid pace of globalisation and westernisation has led to increased interest in the role of festivals in preserving cultural heritage. In this context, the question of whether festivals are

⁴¹ Photos from Arondizuogu Ikeji Festival 2014 in Lagos. <https://obindigbo.com.ng/2014/05/photos-arondizuogu-ikeji-festival-2014-lagos/>. Retrieved on February 21st, 2023.

capable of entrenching and transmitting culture is frequently posed. This study focuses on the Ikeji Festival of Arondizuogu, which is seen as sufficient for preserving the cultural heritage of the Aro people through ancestor veneration, masquerading, sportsmanship, and other cultural practices. Despite the importance of the festival, there is a lack of research on its role in preserving Igbo religious and cultural heritage. This study contributes to a more in-depth understanding of the festival's significance in this regard. The Ikeji festival makes significant contributions to the preservation of Igbo cultural heritage, and its values need to be rekindled through greater recognition and digital promotion of the event.

The festival has the potential to attract cultural tourism and international recognition, thereby providing economic benefits that can transform the community and state. It is important to recognize that festivals are not just celebrations but have significant cultural significance. Therefore, it is essential to preserve this intangible cultural heritage by reviving the various aspects that make the festival and culture unique.

In summary, the study shows that the Ikeji Festival of Arondizuogu plays a critical role in preserving the cultural heritage of the Aro people. The festival has the potential to provide economic benefits to the community and state through cultural tourism and international recognition. It is essential to rekindle the festival's values and promote it digitally to preserve this intangible cultural heritage. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of festivals in preserving cultural heritage, and it highlights the need for further studies in this area.

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