

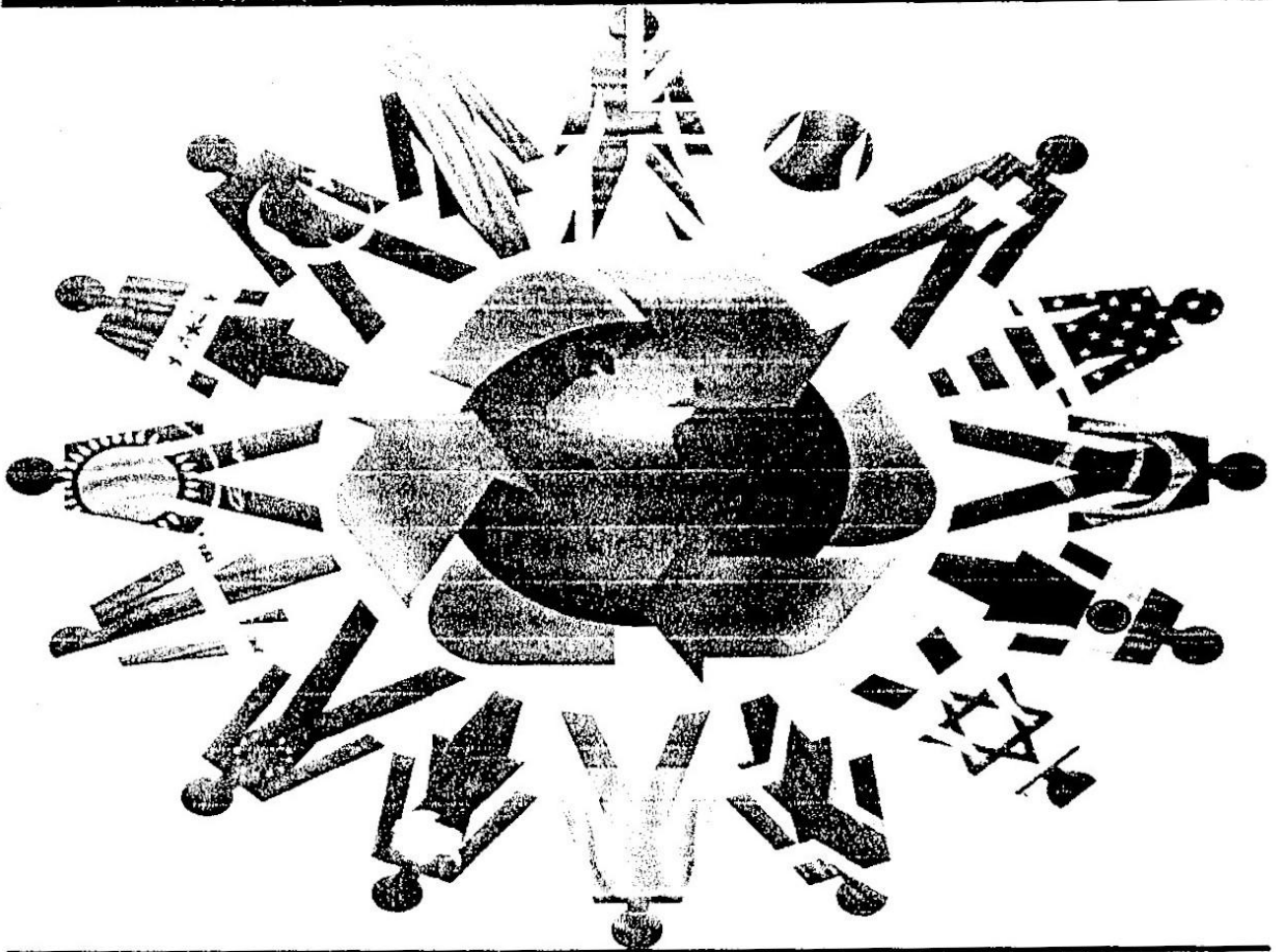
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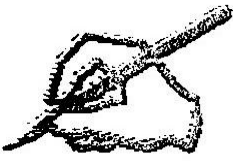
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NIGERIAN FESTIVALS: THEIR SIGNIFICANCE AND ROLE IN PRESERVING THE AFRICAN HERITAGE

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Abstract:

This paper examines the origin, nature and significance of some major festivals in parts of Nigeria. Among the festivals being studied are Argungu, Osun-Osogbo and Leboku festivals. One common feature of these festivals is that, they are usually characterized by long periods of merry making. Their duration however varies from society to society and from one event to another. Their significance cut across religious, social and economic factors. Secondary sources and personal communication constitute the methodology used in carrying out this research

The research concludes by encouraging the organizers of the various festivals to ensure the continuous survival of these events as a means of preserving African values and culture, enhancing group re-union, and encouraging business and tourism.

Keywords: festivals, tourism, culture, sacrifice, entertainment

Introduction:

Nigerians love to celebrate, and festivals are occasions characterized by much celebration. There is virtually no Nigerian ethnic group devoid of an annual festival. Birth and death, adolescence, adulthood, kingship, planting and harvesting, and even victory in warfare are all commemorated through festivals.

Festivals are a people's identity, constituting part of their traditional and religious activities. For this reason, rituals, incantations, retreats and sacrifices in some sacred places almost always form part of the celebrations. Festivals are also social events characterized by long processions of people drumming, dancing, singing and making merry. Masquerades, gaily dressed men and women, irrespective of religious affliction add colour and grandeur to such occasions.

Nigerians have many festivals, some of which are observed annually and others after a longer duration. For example, the Argungu Fishing Festival of Northern Nigeria is an annual event while the Omabe festival of the Nsukka people is held every two years. Their duration also differs from one society to another. While some festivals last a day or two, others like the *Eyo* festival of Lagos and the *Leboku* of the Ugep in Cross River State last for two weeks. Regardless of these differences, it is evident that one plausible factor that binds Nigerians to their society are their various festivals. These festivals serve as sources of cohesion and continuity for the diverse Nigerian ethnic complexities. From the Argungu Fishing Festival, to the Leboku Festival and the Igwe Festival in the South and from the Osun-Osogbo in the West to the Ofala in the South-East, all predate the arrival of Europeans into Nigeria. Some Nigerian festivals are merely social events like the *Sharo* of the Fulani, yet many are religiously inspired, like the Osun-Osogbo festival which is performed as a mark of honour to the Osun River goddess.

The next section examines three major Nigerian festivals. They are the Argungu Fishing festival of the Kebbi people in Northern Nigeria, the Osun-Osogbo Festival of Western Nigeria and the Leboku Festival of the Yakurr in Southern Nigeria.

THE ARGUNGU FISHING FESTIVAL:

Sixty-four kilometers from Sokoto, the seat of Nigeria's Caliphate is the town of Argungu where the annual fishing festival is held between February and March. The Argungu Fishing Festival is one of Nigeria's oldest and most celebrated festivals in Northern Nigeria. Indeed, very few festivals have attracted so many national and international acclaim and elicited so much support from the government of Nigeria as this Festival.

The Argungu Fishing Festival which spans several days marks the end of the harvest and the beginning of the fishing season in Argungu, a riverside town presently located in Kebbi State of Nigeria. About 30,000 fishermen and villagers participate in a week-long traditional fishing competition which includes other cultural events (Dantata, 2007). Its origin can be traced to the sixteenth century, the era of great *Kanta*, founder of Kebbi (Nigeria Magazine, Dec., 1969/Jan., 1970; Vol 103.). In 1934 the reigning Sultan of Sokoto , Dan Muazu, paid a historic visit to Argungu town (www.onlinenigeria.com/festival). As a mark of honour to the Sultan, the Emir of Argungu, Mallam Muhammadu Sama organized this grand fishing festival which later became an annual occasion. Initially, the Festival was not celebrated every year, but from the 1960's, it became an annual event attracting both national and international presence.

Argungu, the town whose name was obtained from the festival, was originally called Birnin Lelaba Dan Baden. It was later renamed Argungu from the Kebbi saying "Ar! Mu yi gungu"- a fishing expression meaning, "let us get together in one place" (Nigeria Magazine, Dec 1969/Jan 1970, Vol. 103).

The Argungu Fishing show has been held in the same location for many years- the Northern end of the town where the river sweeps through a rice field. For a whole year preceding the festival, fishing is prohibited on the river, venue of the event, and traditional rituals are performed to prevent all the fish in the water from migrating to neighbouring waters (http://www.africa-ata.org/Nigeria_3.htm). On the eve of the main show, the *Homa*, traditional chief of the fishermen, and the priest of the *Kebbawa* people (from Kebbi) along with the *Sarki Ruwa*, chief of the river and *Jirgi* the chief of the ferrymen arrive at the riverside. There, sacrifices of honey, rice, flour, a she-goat, chickens, onions, paw-paw, watermelon, kola nuts and milk, are offered by being thrown in the river (Nigeria Magazine, 1981: Vol. 136). In addition, supplications are made to the gods and ancestral spirits for peace, good health, progress and good fortune in the years to come .

At dawn, young men numbering about 5,000, equipped with only two hand nets with hooks at both ends, and a large gourd assemble in a line around the river bank. Once the signal is given, the fishermen dive excitedly into the waters with their nets aiming for the biggest catch. This is usually done amidst singing and drumming from canoes filed with local musicians, in praise of the participants. At the end of the show, all kinds of fish are trapped in the nets; examples include the Huge Nile Perch weighing up to 63kg, and the Balloon Fish (<http://www.e-nigeria.net/festivals.html>). This festival which lasts between forty-five minutes and one hour, has today incorporated many other attractions like the *Kabanci* display, craft exhibition, traditional wrestling and boxing, agricultural fair, canoe racing and diving

competitions. Although the festival season showcases the best of kebbawa culture, yet Yusuf (1982) maintains that there is an intensive intermixture with other people from Sokoto, Gobir and Katsina which has influenced Kebbawa cultural patterns such as its dress code.

Argungu, the festival town has over the past years, undergone modernization especially with the involvement of the state and federal government. This has impacted positively on the erstwhile riverside town. The town which lacked infrastructural development, today, prides itself with the presence of hotels, water reservoirs, banks, clinics and transportation to satisfy the needs of its teeming guests that visit annually. It has also become a tourist haven, attracting presidents, ministers, government personnel, businessmen, artisans and many more. People in the community, young and old, rich and poor, male and female from within and outside Nigerian have in addition seized the opportunity to socialize with one another and Job seekers as well as business men benefit from being part of the organizers of the festival.

One other impact of the Argungu Fishing Festival lies in its ability to create wealth for the local people who thrive on the sales of relics and souvenirs associated with the festival, foodstuff and water as well as transporters who convey guests to and from the venue. The importance of the Argungu Fishing festival to Nigerians cannot be in doubt. It is an avenue for social entertainment, economic enterprise and religious rejuvenation. It is also a means of preserving cultural bonds and preserving African heritage.

THE OSUN-OSOGBO FESTIVAL

The Osun-Osogbo Festival is an annual event spanning sixteen days of rituals, drama and festivities (Badejo D, 1996). It is held in Osogbo, a town situated in Osun State, South West of Nigeria. The festival is celebrated in honor of the Osun goddess and renews the pledge between the latter and the people of Osogbo. The Yoruba goddess of the Osun River is highly revered among the Osogbo people, known to be very powerful and the only female of the sixteen major Yoruba deities (Badejo D, 1996). She is also perceived to be the goddess of love and beauty, healer, diviner, dyer, giver of children, goddess of fertility, protection, blessing and a leader of women (Murphy and San, 2001). As the goddess of fertility, Osun is also invoked by women during difficult pregnancies.

Historically, the Osun-Osogbo festival can be traced to the river goddesses' significant role in the rise of Osogbo town. Yoruba scholars like Bolanle Awe, F. A. Falade, D. O. Farotimi, amongst others are unanimous in their assertion that the founding fathers of Osogbo namely Laroye, Lajomo and Olutimehin migrated from Ijesa land as a result of water scarcity and

settled on the banks of the Osun River (Awe and Albert, 1995, Falade S. A. 2000, Farotimi D. 1990). Siyam Oyeweso adds thus;

In their bid to clear the bush around their new settlement,
 a tree fell on the river and the water surface turned blue
 immediately. To the astonishment of the people, a voice
 came from the river saying: “Laro, Timehin, gbogbo
 ikoko aro mi le ti fo tan” meaning “Laro, Timehin, you
 broken all my indigo dye pots” (Oyeweso 2013).

It was in a bid to placate the goddess for the unfortunate incident that they offered special sacrifices which was accepted.

History recounts that Laroye who later became the king of Osogbo made a pact with Osun when he offered sacrifices at the river bank and in response; a mighty fish (Osun’s messenger) appeared and spat some water into his palms (Nigeria Magazine, 1981, Vol. 136.). This event earned him the title “Atewogbeja” meaning one who receives god-fish on his palms. Henceforth, this became the traditional title of the natural rulers of Osogbo (Awe and Albert, 1995). After this incident, Oyeweso maintains that the deity appeared to the men and instructed that the sacrifice must continue annually, while she (Osun) would continue to protect the settlement (Oyeweso, 2013). She also instructed how the sacrifice should be carried out and promised to send her messenger with curative water poured into a calabash for the cure of illnesses (Oyeweso 2013). The event that unfolded between the goddess and the founding fathers of Osogbo led to the inception of the Osun-Osogbo festival.

The Osun- Osogbo Festival is usually accompanied with drumming, dancing merry-making and a long procession of people making their way to the Osun grove from the palace. Sacrifices are offered to the goddess by the *Ataoja*- Chief priest of the deity – and other worshippers for peace, harmony and protection. The Festival commences with sanitation of the town and progresses to other activities such as sacrifices to the late wives of the past *Obas* (Kings). The last point is significant because Osun herself was believed to be the favourite wife of *Sango*, the god of thunder, the famous 17th century king of Oyo. The fifth day of the festival is significant as on this day, the *Ataoja* proceeds to the riverside to renew his pact with Osun (Nigeria Magazine, 1981, Vol. 136). He is followed by a large procession of

people among them, barren women who advance to the river bank to worship the goddess and seek divine assistance. The women invoke the goddess and drink the water believing that Osun will grant them children. A beehive of activities accompanies the Festival, and the town of Osogbo is usually crowded with devotees adorned in white garments, a sign of peace and purity.

Although the ancient shrine or sacred grove of Osun is located in Osogbo, her devotees come from within and outside Nigeria to do obeisance annually to this goddess referred to as the “Venus of the African Continent” (http://www.africa-ata.org/Nigeria_3.htm). From Cuba, West Indies, Brazil and North America, Osun devotees arrive in great numbers during the month of August. In 2005, an Obatala priest from Cuba, Manuel Mendive Hoyo was in Osogbo during the festival to pay homage for the second time to the Osun goddess (True Love magazine, 11, November 2005).

The climax of the Osun-Osogbo Festival is usually the appearance of the *Arugba*, the teenage virgin from the royal family who carries on her head, the sacrifice to the goddess covered with a thick orange cloth. The *Arugba* is believed to be divinely appointed by the goddess who makes her decision known through *Ifa* Oracle. People wait anxiously to have a glimpse of this teenage virgin who is accompanied closely by body guards and *Iya Osun*, the Chief priestess of Osun. The *Arugba* is usually under a powerful spell, one who gives her strength for her journey and the rigours of the day (Aderogba Ajayi, personal interview, 08/11/2014) and although she may feel weak, once in a while, chants of incantation revive her.

Sacrifices are offered on arrival at the sacred grove, and the *Arugba* returns again to the grove to make prophecies for the year (Nigeria Magazine, 1981, Vol. 136). While in a trance, other priests and priestesses prostrate before her, for it is believed that Osun is speaking through her.

It is important to emphasize that the Osun –Osogbo Festival has brought about an awareness of the need to preserve African values and culture. In realization of this fact, the festival has been largely witnessed by Africans in the Diaspora. It has, in addition, served as a focal point for the people of Osogbo, Osun devotees, artists and tourists from far and wide (Aderogba Ajayi, personal interview, 08/11/2014). Aside the unity created by this festival, the gathering has enabled the indigenes to do brisk business by selling goats, chicken, pigeons, and other sacrificial items to Osun worshippers for sacrifice. Moreover, because of the international recognition the Osun-Osogbo festival has attracted, it is gratifying to note that the Osun Sacred Grove has been included in the UNESCO world Heritage list thereby

enhancing its tourist image (*The Capitol: The Authoritative Tourism Magazine*, 2006, Vol 1 No 2).

In spite of the above, the Osun-Osogbo Festival has been influenced by modern trends, for it has not only become rowdy, but an avenue for politicking. Don Berber, one of the Nigeria's foremost photographers who attended the festival in 1979, 2004 and in 2005, maintained that, in 1979, "it was a solemn affair then, you could come and see people praying". In 2005, he asserted that, "the essence of the Festival is completely lost now. It has become a platform for noise making and politics"(True Love magazine, 11, November 2005).

Regardless of this observation, the Osun-Osogbo festival continues to be an annual ritual attracting people from diverse background and a symbol of identity for the Osogbo people and Nigeria in general. The festival is a re-enactment and a commemoration of the people's origin, history and tradition. Renowned scholar, Okon Edet Uya has succinctly highlighted the danger of neglecting our culture and heritage in these words, "Our nation building efforts have had a stormy history precisely because we have tended to disregard the valuable lessons that come from a critical study of our cultures, heritage and history" (Uya, 2012). Hence, the Osun-Osogbo festival should not just be seen in the light of merry making only, but a way of preserving the rich cultural heritage of the Osogbo people for the benefit of the Nigerian nation and Africa in general.

THE UGEP LEBOKU FESTIVAL

Yam is a crop widely celebrated, particularly by the people of southern Nigeria. The crop occupies a premier position among other crops in the lives of the traditional communities and constitutes the peoples most important diet. Yam, referred to as the king of crops is very sacred to the southern communities. Its importance is such that in the past, thieves stopped stealing the crop to avoid a death sentence (Nigeria Magazine, 1981, Vol. 136).

Leboku is a yam festival celebrated by the Yakurr people of Cross River in the southern part of Nigeria to thank the gods of the land for a bountiful harvest. The Yakurr people are inhabitants of Ugep and basically farmers of various crops notably cassava and yams. The Leboku festival is an annual festivity which is held for fourteen days during the month of August. The festival is characterized by carnivals and other social events, as well as religious rites in the various shrines located in parts of Ugep town (Okoi Ibiang, personal interview, 01/10/2014).

The Festival commences on the first day with “material fetching”. At dawn, the women walk excitedly to their farms to harvest the new yams while the men (Palm wine tappers) leave to tap palm wine. As both groups depart for their designated chores, selected men are stationed along all routes leading into the town to wait for both parties. On return, every female deposits one new yam and piece of wood with the road collectors while the men do the same with a specified amount of palm wine. In the afternoon, these items, yam, wood and palm wine are conveyed to the palace of the Paramount Chief where all the *Yabol* (chiefs) and *Bi-ina* (High Priests) are gathered in preparation for the thanksgiving and religious rituals. The religious rites occur only at night and out of the sight of everyone except the participants. The high point of this exercise is when the *Obol Lapon* (Paramount ruler) picks out a splinter from the fire and hands it to an *Ina* who in turn bears this torch around the town. This signifies the commencement of the *Leboku* festival. (Arikpo Ibiang, personal interview, 01/10/2014)

The second day is dedicated to merry-making which is held in the Paramount Chief's domain. A ritual dance, *Ekoi*, is performed as early as 4:00am until 9:00am when they take a break. Entertainment continues during the day in the presence of the chief priests, and the guests, after which people are allowed to dispose of their yams, eat or sell them (Utum Bassey, personal interview, 03/10/2014).

At about 2.00pm, talking drums begin to announce the arrival of the different batches of priests. The last to be ushered into the arena by the talking drums is the chief of one of the secret societies who is seated conspicuously at the center of the dance floor. Intermittently, he stares at the large magical charm lying on the ground before him, occasionally picking it up, he walks around and swings it before returning to his seat to neutralize all other harmful charms brought by any individual (Utum Bassey, personal interview, 03/10/2014). Dancing and drumming continues, and at the end of it all, the *Ekoi* dance gives way to *Ekeledi* dance, a popular female dance. Young women file in groups and dance around the town towards evening.

The third day is also for merry making and friendly visits as young maidens, adorned in beautiful attires walk around the town to the admiration of the young unmarried men and exchange gifts with their admirers. The fourth day is a popular female dance, which serves as an opportunity for young men to choose their would-be-brides. The dance is restricted to young unmarried women in their early twenties (Okoi Ibiang, personal interview, 03/10/2014). These girls are gracefully costumed in a pair of *Liman*- spiral leggings of heavy brass which stretches from the ankles to the knees. They are also decorated with various types of beads, *ezigiza*, which are worn on the waist. Their hair is worn in plaits or left flowing

with peacock feathers, *njelikanda-se*, tucked into the hair. Artistic drawings made with chalk, cam wood and indigo are reflected on the trunk and on the hand, a bracelet – *Leniga*- made from elephant tusks is worn. A horse tail is held by every dancer, as they dance in circles singing and praising the gods for enriching their harvest. This celebration continues on the fifth day, and on the six day, magical displays are held. This is also a day when people make jest of themselves, playing pranks- *yekpi*- on each other. The day is also set aside for soothsaying, and making of predictions and revelations.

The seventh day of the festival marks the closing ceremony. Elderly women, convene with their leader carrying a carved calabash containing a potion called *Libowe* (Utum Bassey, personal interview, 24/02/2011). With this they move around the town, and sprinkle water intermittently while declaring the festival closed.

The *Leboku* festival is very significant in the life of an Ugep man. Its major objective is religious, that is, to show gratitude to the gods for the abundant blessings of good harvest and fertility bestowed on the community. Besides its religious character, the festival is a form of social entertainment for the Ugep people and the innumerable guests that participate in it. Cultural dances, acrobatic displays, masquerade performances are the order of the festival (Mofi News, 2011). Correspondingly, the traditional beliefs and customs of the Yakurr people of Ugep are exhibited when the *Leboku* is celebrated. Differences are forgotten and bonds of friendship are renewed.

Interestingly, this New Yam festival is celebrated in almost every community in South-Eastern Nigeria and parts of the South-South- although with some variations. For instance, among the Igbo, the yams are cooked with palm oil, water and chicken (Nigeria Magazine, 1981, Vol. 136) and eaten publicly. In addition, only dishes of yam are served since the festival is symbolic of the abundance of the produce (www.motherland.nigeria.com/festivals). The oldest man of the community or the king eats the first yam because of the belief that their position gives them the privilege of being intermediaries between the communities and the gods of their land.

To assert that the *Leboku* festival has become a focal point for tourism is to state the obvious, although westernization has taken its toll on the festival. Today, attractions like beauty contests, “Miss Leboku” and “Mr. Leboku”, best farmer of the year, wrestling matches and their like have been co-opted into the festival to enrich its content. Cash awards and gift of cars for the contestants have made it more sophisticated, with the Cross River State government being one of the major sponsors of the festival. In addition, prizes are awarded to the most supportive house wife and the best harvester (Mofi News, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Nigerian festivals renew the relationship between man and his ancestral roots. Their significance also encompasses all facets of human existence- religious, social and economic. Religious rituals performed during festivities preserve the life of the community thereby enhancing continuity. Interestingly, most Nigerian festivals include religious rituals without which the festival is incomplete. Socially, festivals are means of entertainment and relaxation, a channel for re-union, making new friends and adding more contacts. It is also a medium of showing off the rich culture of the people – their identity. Economically, festivals encourage enterprise through the sales of souvenirs, sacrificial items, food and drinks to participants which serves as a source of wealth creation for the local populace and their environs. Nigerian festivals such as Argungu, Osun-Osogbo and Leboku festivals portray all these traits and continue to be appreciated by all who love tradition. In this era where Westernization is holding sway among Nigerian youths and tradition is fast fading away, it is our opinion that Nigerian festivals should be encouraged as a means of preserving the rich cultural heritage of the Nigerian people and by extension people of African descent.



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