

THE PLACE OF FESTIVALS IN PRESERVING THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF A PEOPLE: A STUDY OF THE ODI OGORI BA UGE FESTIVAL OF ODI IN KOLOKUMA/OPOKUMA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF BAYELSA STATE, 1957-2020

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Abstract

This paper examines the place of festivals in preserving the cultural heritage of a people, using the Odi Ogori Ba Uge as a case study. Festival is an occasion usually celebrated by a community or social group in which named events are celebrated in the company of guests. It is centred on very significant aspects of that community. The Odi Ogori Ba Uge festival is an annual festival that the people of Odi celebrate. Its origin is traced to 1957 when a wild beast which was tormenting the people and destroying lives and properties was killed. It is the celebration of the death of this animal (Ogori) that birth the festival that has brought fame to Odi. This paper, therefore, discusses how the Odi Ogori Ba Uge festival helps to preserve the culture of Odi people and by extension, Kolokuma clan and the rest of the Ijo nation. The paper reveals that the people of Odi use the festival to display or showcase their culture to the world in that cultural dances, sing songs, wrestling competitions, canoe race and other cultural performances are prominent features of this festival. It also creates an avenue for community cohesion and attracts tourist from many parts of the world to the community. The paper adopts historical methods, which include the use of primary and secondary sources.

Introduction

Festival is an event usually celebrated by a community, social group, or a religious sect. It is a ceremonial occasion in which named events are commemorated in the company of invited and uninvited guests occasioning merry making, eating, drinking, and/or dancing (Alazigha, 2005). It is centered on very significant aspects of that society. Festivals are carefully planned with different exciting events and practices to entertain and educate the inhabitants of that community. It is used as a tool to educate people of their culture and bring about unity and cohesion in families. There are different types of festivals in the universe including customary and traditional festivals. Christians celebrate Christmas, New Year and Easter festivals while Muslims celebrate Salah. Also, certain people celebrate their own festivals to mark some significant occasions in their history (Wikipedia, 2020). Happy people call anything a name to make a festival.

Ekpeyong (1981) postulates that, “festivals are periodic re-occurring days or seasons of merry-making set aside by a community, tribe, or clan, for the observance of sacred celebration, religious solemnities or musical and traditional performance of social significance”.

For a long time, festivals have been part and parcel of human life and have been in existence in various parts of the world. Some people celebrate deities and ancestral gods in the name of festivals to prevent famine, untimely death, and to bring rain, bountiful harvest, fertility, etc. Most festivals are intertwined with cultural and religious significance in their practices even though they have religious backgrounds. The history of festivals in Nigeria precedes the advent of Christianity and Islam in the 18th century (Macdonald,1992).

The festivals cover enormous range of events from harvesting of crops, initiation, hunting, fishing, coronation of chiefs and funeral ceremonies. Most festivals in Nigeria are celebrated on yearly basis, but there are some that are celebrated every five to seven years as it is with the tradition of the people. Some of the most celebrated festivals in Nigeria are; Argungun Fishing Festival, Eyo Festival, Osun Festival, Ofala Festival, Durbar Festival, etc (Omojola, 2006). Every festival involves the promoter giving it a date and the reasons for the merry making or celebration.

The Odi Ogori Ba Uge festival takes place every 27th of July to 2nd of August since its inception in 1957. It is celebrated by the people of Odi in Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. It is a celebration to commemorate the historic killing of a wild Buffalo. It is recorded that this buffalo tormented the people of the Odi from October, 1953, when it was first seen in the forests of Odi and started launching attacks on innocent people which led to the death of four women and a man (Larry, 1993, Agedah, 2007).

It defied all attempts to kill it by the people of the community until an herbalist was consulted in faraway Benin Republic before it was eventually killed in July, 1957. It was the celebration of the death of this notorious animal that led to an annual festival that is celebrated with pomp and peasantry and has brought fame to Odi.

The Founding of Odi

Odi is a town in present day Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. It is located on the verge of the upper part of the Nun River. The town is bordered on the north by Odoni/Agbere, on the south by Sampou/Kaiama, west by Patani/Abari and east by Okordia/Zarama. Like other communities in the coastal region, the prevalent climate of Odi is dry and rainy seasons. The dry season starts from November and ends in February while the rainy season begins from March and ends in October. In one or two seasons in a decade, most of the arable land is submerged in the seasonal floods of the rainy season. This usually happens in September and October which is the height of such floods.

The fauna of the area comprises of Antelopes, Elephants, Bush Pigs, Grass Cutters, Monkeys, Squirrels, Giraffes, Crocodiles, and birds of different kinds. On the other hand, the flora of the area comprises of raffia palms, palm oil trees, cotton, mahogany, cane ropes, abura and so on. More so, there is an arable land suitable for agriculture, therefore, the people farm on the land and water linings when the flood recedes and leaves behind fertile soil suitable for cultivation. According to Gesiye Larry (1993), "movement of people from one place to another-migration is as old as the primitive man for reasons of food and shelter. Avoidance of aggressive neighbouring communities and marauding enemies for peaceful and easier means of livelihood are the essence of migration. The above explains the movement of the founders of Odi to their present settlement".

The traditions of origin discovered in the course of this research all point to Imgbela and Amasain as the founders of Odi. The above discovery notwithstanding, migration patterns differs from one account to another. According to Alazigha, the ancestors of Odi; Amasain and Imgbela escaped from Benin during a period of war with their families. They first settled at Ikpepremo Bou, south of Igbedi. Amasain died there and Imgbela and others moved to Puipa. They further moved from Puipa to Opuiya together.

This movement was done together with the family of Amasain. From Opuiya, they moved to Ago, north of Kaiama (Alazigha, 2005), opposite the present day Ubaka compound in Odi (Larry, 1993). According to Alazigha's account, "some men from Umoru who were settled at the present site of Odi saw Imgbela by the River Nun and his handsomeness and huge size attracted these visitors. They summed up courage and approached him with offers that he may go and live with them. Imgbela accepted this offer and with his people moved to join the people of Umoru" (Alazigha, 2005).

He further stated that Imgbela accepted this offer and moved with his people to join the Umoru people. There, they entered into a covenant of fellowship and agreed that if any of the parties was proved to have a hand in the death of any member of the other party, the guilty side must pay to the other, a full grown girl. The people of Imgbela took advantage of the covenant and succeeded in causing the Umoru people to pay them very many able bodied girls as the soothsayer who determined the causes of deaths came from the Imgbela family. Consequently, while the Imgbela population increased, that of Umoru decreased over the years. The Umoru people became very frightened by this development and decided to run away, leaving their land and other properties for Imgbela. At that time, fish hunting was the most prevalent occupation of the people and the material used for fishing at the Imgbela village was Odi. Others came for the Odi and to fish there. The name Imgbelama gradually gave way to Odiana now known as Odi (Alazigha, 2005).

Mayor Komonibo (2006) also traced the foundation of Odi to Amasain and Imgbela. According to him, Imgbela left his family and his brother Amasain at the Igbedi creek and sojourned to Opon, a lake located in present day Odi territory. From Opon, he moved to Ago and settled there. While at Ago, he occasionally came to bath at the River Nun when he saw a cloud of smoke and crossed over only to discover that Ugbama and his family are residing there. After interactions between Imgbela and the Ugbama's, he moved back to the Igbedi Creek to bring his family and that of his brother to his new found home.

On arrival at Igbedi Creek, he was told that his brother, Amasain had died in his absence and so, he left for his new found home with his family and that of his elder brother which was now headed by his eldest son whose name was given as Kala-Amasain and together, they came to their new home and became co-founders Odi through the manipulations of the soothsayer as recorded by Alazigha. Thus, in spite of the differences in migration patterns, it is obvious from the aforementioned accounts that Odi was founded by Imgbela and Amasain and up till this day, these families are the royal families in Odi.

The Odi Ogori Ba Uge Festival

Odi Ogori Ba Uge Festival, literally meaning, festival of victory over a Buffalo in Odi or the Odi Buffalo killing festival has persistently featured as a festival of festivals in the Niger Delta. It all began in the 1953 farming season, when members of the community started

complaining about being attacked by a beast on their farmlands in the bush. This was after reports of the presence of the beast in the forest had been made by members of the community. However, the stories were regarded as mere hear-say until the first victim was murdered by the Buffalo on the 22nd of October, 1954. The name of this first victim was identified as Mrs. Doruiyefagha of Ubaka community. This was followed by the killing of three other women and a man (Larry, 1993, Agedah, 2007).

Although it was believed that the misfortune was a diabolical and spiritual imposition of a wicked person, people still tried so many possible avenues to track this mysterious animal down. The pioneers in this regard were the hunters in the community. One of such fearless hunters was late Accra Edike, whose bullet eventually killed the Buffalo. There is a long list of indigenous hunters who put in fruitless efforts to end the activities of the Buffalo. In April, 1955, the District Officer in the then Brass Division, Mr. F.D.B. Summerset came to assess the problem and tried his hand to save the pitiable situation but to no avail. In the same year, a team of hunters who came from Northern Nigeria on a hunting expedition also tried their skills on the mysterious buffalo without success (Larry, 1993). Assistance was sought from all available avenues as oracles were consulted, sacrifices were made and prayers offered.

The people concluded that the animal was not ordinary, for it only attacked natives of Odi. It did not attack strangers and so when non-natives are going through Odi bush paths, they would announce themselves by singing special songs composed during the menace. The song they usually sang was, "*Ari Odi Ere gha, Ari Kaiama Ere, Ogori Egele Kumo*" which is translated to mean, I am not from Odi, I am a stranger, please do not hurt me. And true to type, the animal would not appear nor hurt such persons. Thus, this made people to conclude that it must be some influence of wicket spirit (Agedah, 2007).

Despite the indomitable nature of the problem, some deeply concerned individuals did not budge but forged ahead to tackle the impending problem. Great minds of progressive thoughts saw it as a task that must be done at all cost. One of such personalities was Thompson Nengi Agedah, a community leader of Amakiriebiama compound who continued to search for spiritual solution instead of the unrewarding physical tact and combats. He left home in silence for Lagos and in the company of his daughter, Racheal Agedah, left for Northern Nigeria. He met another Odi citizen in Kano by name Guagha Tamukunoun and the trio left for Tara, a village in Benin Republic where they met an herbalist who revealed the root of the problem to them.

According to Larry (1993), it was revealed that "it was an indigene of the community who used herbal power to transform into that deadly beast just to brutally destroy lives". He then gave them herbs which he instructed the leader of the team to bury at the outskirts of the nine quarters of the town when they get home, assuring them that it would make the beast impotent even if not killed and it will graze in the company of other animals without hurting anyone. Agedah returned home with the herbal substance and did as instructed (Larry, 1993). Dennis Agedah in his book, *Odi Ogori Ba Uge: The True Story* also gave a similar account but referred to Niger Republic as the place Nengi Agedah and his daughter Racheal went to see the herbalist while retaining the name of the village as Tara (Agedah, 2007).

Barely three days after the charm was buried, the buffalo was spotted wandering harmlessly on the grass lawns of St. Stephen's Anglican Church premises and was shot down

with just one trigger by Late Edike Accra on the 27th of July, 1957. When the beast was confirmed death, it was tied with a rope and hauled along the main road of the town, stopping at every compound for all to see. This conquest ushered a new lease of life to the people of Odi and the people celebrated for two market weeks as revealed by Gesiye Larry (1993).

This enabled neighbouring communities to come to Odi to witness the incredible story. All the activities that took place in the course of the two markets happened unplanned, hence in 1958, these activities were properly planned to avoid a confused atmosphere of clash, duplication, and overlapping which would breed acrimony. From the foregoing premise, therefore, the maiden Odi Ogori Ba Uge Planning Committee was inaugurated in 1958. Thus, from 1958 to date, a Planning Committee has been inaugurated yearly to plan this festival that has become one of the most famous festivals in Bayelsa State that lasts for a week with flamboyant cultural displays.

Organization of the Festival

The Odi Ogori Ba Uge festival is a week-long celebration that begins on the 27th of July and ends on the 2nd of August. It usually begins with the dramatization of the history of the festival with the parade of a masqueraded Buffalo which is the sensation of the festival and the fuel that stirs the minds of everyone in attendance. It prepares the people for the eventful week of fun and traditional entertainment.

Once the festival is declared open, exciting activities are rolled out one after the other. During the festival, the night life in Odi becomes lively with lots of activities (Agada, 2016). On the eve of the festival, there is usually a procession called *Amafiniegele*. The procession begins from the southern end of the community and terminates at the northern end where the Owigiri Love Boat will sail from. In the course of the procession, certain traditional rites are performed, welcoming all and sundry to the community for the festival.

The week-long festival has events that are lined up for each day, starting with the Owigiri Love Boat which is the major event on the first day of the festival. This is followed by various cultural dances from various dance groups. There is always an Owirigi Night on the first day of the festival. The next day has the Reggae Love Boat as its major event, followed by Canoe Race, Wrestling Competitions, Boat Regatta, Tug of War, Masquerade Dance, and other activities carefully planned in the programme of activities. The first day of the festival is noticeably the most important of all days in the festival as it is the opening ceremony of the festival and usually graces several important dignitaries and government functionaries. In attendance these days are secular artists who thrill the crowd.

The first and second days are filled with fun filled events. On these days, a gigantic boat which the people calls "Love Boat" is stationed at the water front at the southern end of the town, well decorated with artistic designs and loud music. Interested persons, both old and young, climb aboard the boat after paying a fee and when it is full, the boat sails away on a fun cruise, branching each quarter in the community where drinks are presented to them until it gets to the end of the community (Iti, 2021). The boats as mentioned earlier are called, Owigiri Love Boat and Reggae Love Boat respectively.

Often times, the third day begins with Canoe Racing. Different compounds in the community come together to compete in canoe race and ends with dancing when a compound wins the race. One unique feature of the festival is that on the third and fourth days, all

members of the community are dressed in an attire (uniform), selected specifically for that purpose. There is also a street carnival called “No Big Man for Road” where everyone, irrespective of age, class, tribe, or race dances to a mobile musical band that plays across the town (Udisi, 2021).

Wrestling competitions are another major feature of the festival as champions from neighbouring communities are invited to come compete with their supporters. Winners are usually rewarded with prizes and are called *Olotus*. They are highly respected as the Ijo people still hold high regards for the physical strength of their men. Beauty pageants are also held during the festival, thereby adding colour to the festival. On the last Saturday of the festival, there is a beach party organized by the people of the community.

In the past, the beach party usually takes place at the sand banks in the community but with erosion taking away the sand banks in the community, it now holds at a place cleared by the community and specially prepared for that purpose. The beach party features great musicians of Ijo extraction such as the late King Robert Ebizimor, Grand Master Pereama Freetown, Late Gen. S.S. Alaska, Alfred Izonebi, Barr. Smooth, to mention but a few. Furthermore, popular Disc Jockeys (DJs) and music stars are brought to entertain while friends, families, and lovers litter round the very sandy fresh water beach to have fun and unwind (Agada, 2016). This is in addition to other side attractions that feature during the Beach Party such as Draft Competition, Snooker Game, etc.

As a matter of fact, the festival brings people, from all works of life from different states across the country to Odi during this period, making Odi a center of tourism. It ends on the seventh day with a thanksgiving service where the entire community comes together to thank God for the success of the festival. There is also a traditional rite known as *Igoni arumo siimo* that is performed by indigenes of the community in the evening of the last day of the festival. This exercise is intended to send both the good and bad spirits that came to celebrate the festival with the Odi people back to their respective abodes. Let me quickly add that, in recent times, the festival is celebrated beyond the original one week in some years.

This becomes the case when the first day of the festival is Thursday or Friday, reason being that the Beach Party which has become a major feature of the festival holds on Saturday. Thus, if it is allowed to hold on the second or third day of the festival, it would be tantamount to bringing the festival to an early end, as the main events in the festival are the Owigiri Love Boat, Reggae Love Boat, and Beach Party.

Significance of the Festival

Festivals have social, political, economic as well as religious significance in African societies. An important and visible social function of festival is recreation. Festival affords lineage groups and kinsmen as well as friends to come together to eat, drink, and make merry. It is a period when the living and the death reunites as it is believed that even the death ancestors participate in the festival. The elders believed that the festival is of great significance because if not for this festival most persons, especially the youths would have long forgotten about the attacks of the buffalo on members of the community and the story would have been a myth by now.

The festival is also used to showcase the tourism potentials in Odi and by extension, Bayelsa State and her cultural heritage. The festival equally generates significant economic

benefits for the community and provides an avenue for community reunion and celebration while concomitantly strengthening and enhancing cultural knowledge. It serves a vehicle for fostering social and community development. In fact, the most visible impact of this festival is the creation or provision of an avenue for community cohesion, social solidarity, cultural presentation and continuity. It is evident that the festival has exposed the potential of the people of Odi to the world as it enhances the creativity of the people. The activities lined up in the festival are very exciting, entertaining, and informative. These activities depict the culture of the people.

The festival is an opportunity for the people to come together and socialize, enhance their sense of belonging and community identity. It also plays a significant role in strengthening the traditions and values held by the people as it imbues in them an increased sense of community spirit. It also contributes to the increase in knowledge of the cultural heritage and values among the youths just as it helps to preserve the culture of the people and fosters cultural integration (Aniso, 2021). Categorically speaking, this festival preserves the culture of the people through the cultural dances, sing-songs, Owigiri, and other events that are undertaken during the festival.

It is these events that fun seekers troops to Odi to witness that have made the community a center of tourist attraction during the festival. The period of the festival is also utilized by community members to hold town hall meetings where they discuss matters bordering on the development and well-being of the community. Furthermore, government officials also utilize this period to intimate and educate the people on government policies and critical issues affecting the people of the area. They equally use this avenue to make donations and declare government's plans for the community to them. (Obudah, 2021).

Conclusion

The Odi Ogori Ba Uge festival comes up towards the end of the harvesting season and the next planting season. It affords the people an opportunity to relax and have fun. It is a known fact that culture plays a vital role in moulding peoples' interests and values and tastes. When the difficulties of life in the city that emanates from socio-economic problems eclipse one, he or she runs home to seek comfort via the tradition and culture of the people. It is, therefore, important that these cultural institutions be preserved.

This work has examined the place of festivals in preserving the cultural heritage of a people using the Odi Ogori Ba Uge as a case study. It gave a background history of the people of Odi by tracing their origin, migration, and settlement and also states that the people engaged in agriculture by virtue of the environment they found themselves. Going forward, the work traced the origin of the Odi Ogori Ba Uge festival and demonstrated how it is used to preserve the cultural heritage of the people.

This is done with the help of a planning committee set up by the community to plan the activities of the festival yearly and through this festival, Odi has set the pace of events which other communities emulate. The Owigiri Love Boat, Reggae Love Boat, No Big Man for Road, and Beach Party are some of such events. The people of Odi now use this festival to display or showcase their culture to the world. Cultural dances, sing songs, wrestling, and other cultural activities are exhibited by the community during the festival.

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