



Research article

The Role of Traditional African Festivals in the Sustenance of the Ecosystem: Ikenge Festival in Utagba-Uno, Southern Nigeria as a Paradigm

Augustina Ashionye-Obah Obamwonyi^{1*} & Joyce Austen Onyekuru²

^{1,2} Lecturer Department of Theatre and Film Studies: Faculty of Humanities Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State. *Corresponding author.

Abstract

This study examines the role of indigenous African festivals in the sustenance of the ecosystem. It aims to demonstrate how Ukwuani/Utagba-Uno indigenous festivals, cultural taboos, and sanctions have played a crucial role in preserving the environment and preventing its degradation. It explores the imperative of Ikenge festival in Utagba-Uno, in South-South Nigeria in environmental sustainability. Indigenous festivals are of special importance in the collective existence of a people because they represent their way of life and help them understand their natural environment. The conservation of biodiversity, therefore, calls for the integration of indigenous festivals in curbing the destruction of the ecosystem. The paper argues that an indigenous festival like the Ikenge in Utagba-Uno plays a significant role in the peaceful coexistence of the Utagba-Uno people and their immediate environment. The study employs the ethnographic research design which is a valuable tool for understanding the cultural practices, beliefs, and traditions of a particular community. In this case, the research design explores the natural resources conservation potentials of the Ikenge Festival in Utagba Uno.

Keywords: Festival, Culture, Ecosystem, Utagba-Uno, Ikenge, Sustainability



Climate Action, Life on Land

Introduction

The ecological crisis has garnered significant global attention in recent times due to the hazardous effects it has on both humans and non-human entities in the environment. This has led to a growing need for the promotion of environmental protection measures to ensure a clean and healthy environment, which is crucial for sustainable development in any locality. Francis cited in Ikeke is of the view that:

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Ecology studies the relationship between living organisms and the environment in which they develop. This necessarily entails reflection and debate about the conditions required for the life and survival of society, and the honesty needed to question certain models of development, production and consumption. It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected... Just as the different aspects of the planet – physical, chemical and biological – are interrelated, so too living species are part of a network which we will never fully explore and understand (Francis2005, cited in Ikeke).

Ecosystems are complex networks of living organisms and their surrounding environment, including both biotic (living) and abiotic (non-living) components. These systems are essential for maintaining biodiversity, regulating climate, and providing numerous ecosystem services that are vital for human well-being. However, human activities such as industrialization, urbanization, deforestation, agriculture, pollution, and extractive industries have led to the destruction of ecosystems worldwide. Some of the consequences of human activities on the ecosystem are increasingly evident and can be manifested in the form of habitat loss, species extinction, soil degradation, water pollution, climate change, and other adverse effects. These have led to a growing concern among environmentalists and other stakeholders worldwide and the need for immediate intervention to arrest the crisis.

People around the world have a deep and enduring ancestral connection to their lands and natural resources. This relationship is rooted in their cultural beliefs, traditional practices, systems of knowledge, and social norms. It is a collective bond that has been passed down through generations, shaping their identity, way of life, and overall well-being. They view themselves as an integral part of the ecosystems they inhabit, recognizing the interdependence between humans, nature, and all living beings. These beliefs often emphasize a deep Indigenous respect for the Earth and a responsibility to protect and sustain it for future generations. Indigenous Peoples possess rich systems of knowledge that have been accumulated over thousands of years. This knowledge encompasses a deep understanding of the environment, biodiversity, weather patterns, medicinal plants, agricultural techniques, and much more. It is transmitted orally from one generation to another, ensuring the preservation of traditional wisdom. The above statement is vividly captured by Barnhardt and Kawagley 2005; Bebbington 1990; McGregor 2004; Simpson 2002, 2014 as cited in Tom et al that:

Indigenous knowledge systems and their manifestations, including traditional ecological knowledge, farmer knowledge, and other forms of ecological knowledge have served local populations for generations by facilitating thoughtful and deliberate human-environmental interactions leading to what is broadly referred to as environmental sustainability (cited in Tom et al, 2019).

African festivals are deeply rooted in the culture and history of the people who celebrate them as Egwuda points out "...festival is a way of life of a people. It takes several facets and dimensions..." (Egwuda, 2014).

Culture is defined as the way of life of a people. It encompasses a wide range of elements, including the arts, sciences, and social institutions, systems of beliefs, rituals, material and spiritual values, and unique ethos that endow societies with their distinct identities. It also involves various aspects such as the language of the people, their mode and styles of communication, clothing,

food preferences, social interactions, and societal norms. Culture is learned by the people; it is the sum of the aspects of life that make meaning and helps them in the understanding of their environment. Culture can be both tangible and intangible, with elements that can be seen, heard, or felt, as well as those that are not directly observable often deeply rooted in the history and traditions of a particular culture and can provide valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of a group of people. It is in line with this that Verhelsh asserts that culture is:

The sum total of the original solutions a group of human beings tend to adopt to their natural and social environment. Culture is therefore every aspect of life, know-how, technical knowledge, customs of food and dresses, religion, mentality, values, language, symbols, socio-political and economic behaviour indigenous method of taking decisions and exercising power, methods of production and economic relations (Verhelsh,1987).

Culture is a many-sided concept that encompasses various dimensions of human life and society. It shapes individuals' identities, behaviours, beliefs, and interactions with their environment and each other. Verhelsh's assertion on culture is closely related to Odetola and Ademola's definition of culture as the:

Configuration of learned and shared patterns of behaviour and of understanding concerning the meanings and values, of things, ideas emotions and actions. It is in general, the learned portion of human behaviour, the way of thinking, feelings and doing these things that man in his own capacity has developed as part of his environment (Odetola and Ademola, 1985).

What this means is that culture is learned by the people, it is the sum of the aspects of life that make meaning and helps them in the understanding of their environment. African festivals play a vital role in fostering social cohesion and community bonding. These events bring people together from diverse backgrounds, creating a sense of unity and solidarity within the community. By participating in shared rituals and festivities, individuals strengthen their interpersonal relationships, build trust, and reinforce communal ties. Festivals derive their origins from the cultural and religious practices of the people. Duruaku lends credence to the above when he said that:

Traditional African drama refers to indigenous-African performing art forms that have not been corrupted by modernization over the years. They include those found in festivals which combine dance, singing etc...Consequently, the root of African theatre are largely found in religious ritual festivals and folklore... (Duruaku, 1997).

Festivals are often held annually or as agreed upon by the local community, providing an opportunity for people to come together and reaffirm their shared traditions (Okpadah, 2018). Amankulor describes a festival as, "a periodic or occasional celebration, merry-making or feast day of, special significance in the cultural calendar of the celebrants. Festivals are celebrated within a specific period according to the calendar of the celebrants" (Amankulor, 1985). Festivals are held within a specific period; It can last for several days or weeks, it could be bi-annual, annually as with the Ikenge festival, once in two years or according to the calendar followed by the celebrants. This timing may be determined by astronomical events, religious calendars, historical anniversaries, or other cultural considerations. It is in line with this that Anigala asserts that,

"traditional drama which can also be referred to as festival drama is an organized artistic community experience in the cultural calendar and social life of the African..." (Anigala, 2006). Through music, dance, visual arts, and other forms of expression, festivals provide a platform for communities to showcase their unique cultural heritage and traditions. The above aligns with the view of Anigala that:

Festivals are works of art with various forms which can be composed into songs dance, mime, poetry, sculpture etcetera and these forms are integrated into a unified form hence festival displays are actually a celebration of people's culture. (Anigala, 2006).

Traditional African festivals are vital celebrations that bring people together to share their unique cultural heritage and traditions. By understanding and appreciating these festivals, we can gain a deeper understanding of the diverse cultures and traditions as well as the natural environment. Some of the festivals are the Osansukwa festival in Utagba-Uno, Ifejioku festival in Ossissa, Igwe festival in Benin, Ekpe masquerade festival, Olololu of the Ibadan people, Oro masquerade festival, Ekuechi masquerade festival and Sango in Oyo. Traditional festivals are deeply rooted in indigenous cultures and are celebrated to honour nature, deities, ancestors, or specific ecological events. Traditional festivals emphasize respect and reverence for nature through various rituals and customs. These practices reinforce the idea that humans are an integral part of the natural world and should live in harmony with it. By acknowledging the sacredness of nature, traditional festivals instil a sense of responsibility and stewardship towards the environment. Doki and Odeh corroborate this, saying that: "Festivals also aid in cultural transmission, and in this instance, the history of the people, their norms and values, and so on are passed from one generation to another; they as well mobilize, entertain and educate members of the society" (Doki & Odeh, 2017). Festivals often feature re-enactments of historical events, traditional ceremonies, and storytelling that convey the history and collective experiences of a community. These activities serve as a means of preserving the cultural memory of a society, ensuring that important historical events and traditions are not forgotten. By participating in these re-enactments and rituals, younger generations gain an understanding of their cultural roots and the values that have shaped their community over time. Omoera lends credence to the above when he asserts that, "all festivals and ceremonies anywhere in the world represent the experiences of human beings. They are either the experiences of a person, a group of people or a nation" (Omoera, 2008). The foregoing indicates that Festivals and ceremonies around the world encapsulate the diverse experiences of human beings at various levels – individual, group, and national. These cultural celebrations provide a window into the beliefs, traditions, histories, and identities of people from different backgrounds. By participating in festivals and ceremonies, individuals not only connect with their own experiences but also engage with the collective stories that bind communities and nations together. Festivals have always been an essential part of Ukwuani/ Utagba-Uno communities' culture. These events serve multiple purposes, including the celebration of nature, the appreciation of natural resources, and the reinforcement of environmental conservation values. Utagba-Uno community, which is in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, has a long history of environmental conservation. This practice is deeply rooted in their cultural beliefs and traditions, which have been passed down through generations. In what follows, we examine the role of indigenous African festivals in the sustenance of the ecosystem.

Methodology

This study employs ethnography as its method. Ethnography focuses on the detailed study of people and their cultures. It is an essential tool for understanding the complexities of human societies and how they function. By interacting with the people whose culture is being studied, the researchers gained insights into the intricate patterns and practices that shape the group's way of life. One of the key aspects of ethnography is the use of qualitative research methods. Unlike quantitative research, which relies on numerical data and large sample sizes, ethnography focuses on the interpretation of individual experiences and the unique contexts in which they occur. In indigenous performances such as the Ikenge Festival, participation is not limited to the group participants as even the researchers were actively involved through keen observation and in-depth interviews. Based on the data and pieces of evidence gathered, a conclusion is drawn on the nature of the festival. The Researchers used various techniques for data collection, such as interviews, observation and informal conversations, to gather information about the subjects' perspectives and experiences which are then used to conclude how society and individuals function. Bronislaw Malinowski is widely recognized as the father of the ethnographic method, a foundational approach in the field of anthropology. Appleton proposed what he called:

Critical ethnographic respect is a way to discuss ethnographic data and conversations with respect for the narratives of interlocutors, without abdicating critical analysis of the spaces and materialities from wherein these narratives emerge (Appleton, 2022).

In other words, the concept draws on and builds on the term 'critical respect' as articulated by Gill which involves attentive, respectful listening, to be sure, but it does not abdicate the right to question or interrogate. According to Gill, "Respectful listening is the start of the work of feminist scholars when the context is laid alongside the narratives of women's lives and experiences" (Gill, 2007).

Critical ethnography therefore becomes a qualitative approach to conducting research that explicitly sets out to critique hegemony, oppression, and asymmetrical power relations in order to foster social change. It goes beyond outward behaviours to focus on the implicit values expressed within ethnographic studies as well as unacknowledged biases that may result from such implicit values. Soyini identified it as a "critical theory in practice" (Soyini, 2005; p. 1). It is against this backdrop that critical ethnographers have gone ahead to explore different compatible and contrasting epistemologies whereby indigenous ways of knowing and creating knowledge have influenced an increasing number of researchers.

Apart from Malinowski the father of ethnography, Dell Hymes proposed what is called the "ethnography of communication" in 1962 which has since developed into a comprehensive philosophy, theory, and methodology for systematically investigating communication practice.

Closely related to the ethnographic method is the performance theory which Richard Schechner was one of the first to explore and concluded that performance is an integral part of life. In the African context, festival performances are an integral aspect of the culture of the people. Schechner maintains that performance accompanies every human interaction: from the expression of emotions at a meeting to the consideration of a criminal case in the courtroom. A person is always involved in playing roles, even if she is not aware of it. To show how diverse and

broad the concept of performance is, Schechner turns to anthropology, philosophy, and aesthetics. "Performance Theory" is intricately connected with the practice of Schechner as a director who has staged ancient dramas, and plays by Shakespeare, Chekhov, and Brecht at theatres throughout the world, and as a researcher of rituals in different cultures. Also, other theorists like Peggy Phelan, José Esteban Muñoz, E. Patrick Johnson, Rebecca Schneider, and André Lepecki have been equally influential in both performance studies and related fields.

Performance, therefore, includes artistic and aesthetic performances like concerts, theatrical events, and performance art, sporting events; social, political, and religious events like rituals, ceremonies, proclamations and public decisions; certain kinds of language use; and those components of identity that require someone to do, rather than just be, something. Performance Studies draws from theories and methods of the performing arts, anthropology, sociology, literary theory, culture studies, communication, and others (Wikipedia). According to Elger:

The Theory of Performance (ToP) has developed into six foundational concepts to form a framework that can be used to explain performance as well as performance improvements. To perform is to produce valued results. A performer can be an individual or a group of people engaging in a collaborative effort. Developing performance is a journey, and the level of performance describes the location in the journey. The current level of performance depends holistically on six components: context level of knowledge, levels of skills, level of identity, personal factors, and fixed factors. Three axioms are proposed for effective performance improvements. These involve a performer's mindset, immersion in an enriching environment, and engagement in reflective practice (Elger, n.d).

The Theory of Performance (ToP) offers a comprehensive framework for understanding performance dynamics and guiding efforts toward continuous enhancement by considering the various influencing factors or components holistically. By taking into account these influencing factors in a holistic manner, ToP helps in identifying areas for improvement and implementing strategies to enhance overall performance outcomes.

The ethnography method is relevant to this study as it allowed the researchers to gain a deep understanding of the cultural practices, social dynamics, and environmental implications associated with the Ikenge festival. The researchers uncovered valuable insights that contribute and promote harmonious interactions between communities and their natural environments.

Brief Overview of Utagba-Uno Community

Utagba-Uno is a community in Ndokwa-West local government area of Delta State in Nigeria. It is bordered on the North by Ika and Aniocha local government area, on the East by Ossiya, on the West by Akoku towns and villages and on the South by Onicha Ukwuani clan. Utagba-Uno is a confederate clan of seven independent autonomous quarters owning their land, shrines and festivals. The quarters are Isumpe, Ikilibi, Etua, Umuseti, Umusadege, Umusam and Umusedeli; the first four quarters being the original settlers, but even they probably did not come together and were of different families.

The origin of Utagba-Uno has been the subject of various oral accounts and investigations over the years. These accounts sometimes conflict with each other, adding to the complexity of understanding the true history of the area. Oral tradition plays a significant role in preserving historical narratives in many African societies, including Utagba-Uno. These accounts are passed down from generation to generation and provide insights into the community's past. However, it is important to note that oral traditions can evolve and may be subject to variations and interpretations. For this study, the reports of investigations conducted by different District Officers in the late 1920s, known as the "Intelligence Report on Kwale Ibo," will provide further insights into the origins and settlement patterns of Utagba-Uno. According to Egwuenu,

Oral tradition has it that Utagba-Uno was not named until all the seven quarters had settled and until all the seven quarters existing independently stopped fighting one another and entered into a covenant of unity-Igide eka- whereupon the seven quarters solemnly agreed with one another that henceforward their bows and arrows *Uta* will no longer kill one another- *Uta me-gbuwenu* (my bows and arrows will no longer kill you), said by each one to the other. From this covenant word, it is said Utagba derived its name. It was after the founding of Utagba-Ogbe in later years that the name *Uno* was added to Utagba-Uno to differentiate *Uno* which means home from *Ogbe* which means an outskirt... (Obah, 2013).

Ezekalogwu is said to be the founder of Umu Nsukwa group/settlement in Utagba-Uno. Utagba-Uno existed and consolidated about 1300 AD before the invasion of Oba Ewuare to Ukwuani territories in 1440 AD popularly known as Agha-war (Igwalá).

The Ikenge Festival, Purpose and Significance

The significance of traditional festivals can be understood through their impact on various aspects of life, such as social cohesion, religious beliefs, cultural expression, economic growth, and education. These events not only provide opportunities for people to come together and celebrate, but also serve as a means of preserving and promoting cultural heritage, fostering a sense of identity, and contributing to the overall well-being of communities. According to Opoku

Festivals are rituals which recur at regular intervals and which have as their purpose the expression of beliefs held by a particular community. There is also the conscious expectation that certain very specific ends will come about as a result of the performance of the festivals and the performance is motivated by the desire to gain some form of satisfaction and is expected to be affected. Festivals take place at special times set aside by a community in order to commemorate some events of historical, cultural or religious significance and by the performance of certain rituals; such events are re-enacted, giving both individuals and their communities a sense of meaning and cohesiveness (Opoku, 1990).

Echeruo corroborates this asserting that, "... Drama, as festival reinforces common values, shared bonds and common taboos. It re-established links with the past and compels the living to participate in the hilarity and comradeship of a communal happening" (Echeruo, 2014).

From the above, festivals not only reinforce common values and shared bonds but also serve as a platform for addressing common taboos within a society. By portraying taboos during festivals and sensitizing people about the dangers of indulging in them, it helps in shaping societal norms and promoting responsible behaviour.

The Ikenge festival emerged to commemorate those who fought valiantly during these challenging times. In a personal interview with Chief Mathias Osogbue,

The Ikenge festival is an annual celebration that takes place in the month of June to honour and remember the heroes who fought for the people to have a place they can call their own. The festival itself takes place within one day during which various rituals and ceremonies take place. These include traditional/hero dances, music performances, storytelling sessions, and feasting. The festivities are accompanied by vibrant costumes adorned with colourful beads and fabrics that hold cultural significance. Overall, the Ikenge festival is a time of celebration, reflection, and communal harmony for the people of Utagba-Uno. It allows them to honour their heritage, express gratitude for their blessings, and strengthen familial ties through the shared experience of the festival (personal interview).

The Umusadege quarter since ancient times, has held the responsibility of determining and fixing the date for the Ikenge festival. This tradition has been passed down through generations, and it is a significant role that they play within the community. Ikenge is a significant festival celebrated by all the groups of settlers in Utagba-Uno. The festival has deep cultural and historical roots. The festival is an ancient celebration that holds great significance in Utagba-Uno community and is also celebrated in other communities. This festival has been a part of their culture for centuries and is deeply rooted in their history and traditions. One of the main aspects of the Ikenge festival is its commemoration of past heroes who fought tribal wars to retain their land. Chief Mathias Osogbue further explains that:

The Utagba-Ogbe, which is now known as Kwale, was one such land that was won during one of these wars. Additionally, Ndemili, a part of Utagba-Uno, which is bounded by the Ika community, and Oliogo, bounded by the Idu (Benin) kingdom, was also fought for and retained by the people of Utagba-Uno in ancient times. The festival serves as a reminder of the sacrifices made by these heroes and is a way for the community to honour and pay tribute to them. It is a time when people come together to celebrate their heritage and remember their roots (personal interview).

Another key aspects of the Ikenge Festival is the clearing and leaning of the community, which is known as "oluosa" (general work). This process takes place before the commencement of the festival and it involves the youths known as (Otu Uwai) who work together to clean and maintain their community. This aspect of the festival highlights the communal spirit and strong sense of responsibility that the people of Utagba-Uno hold towards their community and their immediate environment.

During the Ikenge festival in Utagba- Uno community, traditional warrior medicine, also known as "ogwu dike" or "ogwu agha," plays a significant role in the preparation and performance of warriors during festivals. These warriors comprising of young boys and men go through a period

of seclusion once the festival is fixed to maintain their spiritual purity and readiness for the festival. According to Osogbue:

The boys use various types of medicines to recreate and showcase their war experiences, often displaying supernatural resilience to weapons and harmful substances. Different types of medicines are employed by the warriors to demonstrate their prowess and strength. For instance, some warriors use "ogwu egbe" (gun medicine) which prevents bullets from penetrating their bodies and even turns the bullets into sand upon leaving the gun. Similarly, others utilize "ogwu nma" (cutlass medicine) that makes them immune to the sharpest cutlasses, ensuring they remain unharmed. Another form of medicine is the "acid medicine," which renders concentrated acids harmless, as they turn into ordinary water upon contact with the warrior's body (personal interview).

The festival involves various traditions and customs that have been passed down through generations. One of the most significant aspects of this festival is the preparation and serving of "Ikenge" by the male heads of the family. This is a time-honoured tradition that signifies the importance of family and community bonds. In the morning, the male head of the family serves his Ikenge with a prepared delicacy known as "Igige" (yam portage). This dish is an essential part of the festival and is enjoyed by all the family members as well as well-wishers who had come to celebrate with them. The Ikenge and Igige are considered symbols of prosperity and good fortune, and their consumption is believed to bring blessings and protection to the families and the community as a whole. In the afternoon, the members of the community gather in a central place called "osuye ogene" in Eke. This gathering is characterized by a procession led by young boys or youths known as "Otu Uwai." The women and young girls also join in the dance as they move towards the central location. Each quarter of the community has its own youth leader called "Eze Uwai," who prepares the participants for the Ogene procession in their respective quarters. The procession begins by heading to a meeting and sacred place called "Obi Ndueze", where they pay respects to the elders of the community. After this, they continue dancing towards the "osuye ogene" area, where they perform for a certain period before returning to their quarters. Once back in their quarters, they first visit the house of the "Okpala Uku," who is the oldest man and leader of the quarter. The Ogene procession and dance hold cultural significance within the community, serving as a display of heroism by male participants and a celebration of unity and tradition among all members. According to Chief Obah, the second aspect of the festival is dedicated to:

Celebrating success and achievements, Individuals, who have accomplished significant feats, such as building a house, buying a car, acquiring a certificate, or other notable accomplishments, utilize this opportunity presented by the festival to celebrate their achievements. They invite their families and well-wishers to join them in commemorating their accomplishments through various activities like singing, dancing, storytelling, drinking, eating, and merry-making (personal interview).

During this part of the festival, individuals showcase their achievements to their loved ones and the community as a whole. It is a time for them to express gratitude for their accomplishments and receive recognition for their hard work and dedication. This celebration not only serves as a personal milestone but also as an inspiration for others in the community. The Ikenge ceremony is not only a celebration of individual success but also an opportunity for the community to come

together and show support for one another. It reinforces the values of hard work, determination, and perseverance within the community, inspiring others to strive for their own successes.

Another important aspect of celebrating achievements during the festival is inviting family members and well-wishers to join in the festivities. This gathering provides an opportunity for individuals to share their joy and accomplishments with their loved ones. It strengthens family bonds and creates a sense of community support and solidarity. This tradition reflects the interconnectedness and unity within the extended family system. The unity within the family is reinforced in the statement of Izibiri when he said that:

Africans do not talk about individualism because it is abhorrent to the traditional African mentality. This constitutes the heart of African traditional ethics. The whole extended family, share in the fortune or misfortune as the case may be, of its members. This takes different forms. For example, traditional African calls and treats any relation as brother or sister. There exists no sharp distinction... (Izibiri, 2013).

The festival holds great importance for the people as it serves multiple purposes. The festival holds great cultural and historical importance for the people of Utagba-Uno and serves as a platform for preserving and showcasing their unique traditions, beliefs, and practices.

IKENGE FESTIVAL AND THE SUSTENANCE OF THE ECOSYSTEM

Environmental sustainability refers to the concept of utilizing the environment and its resources in a manner that is beneficial for future generations while minimizing harm to the environment. Morelli's description of environmental sustainability lends credence to the above:

Environmental sustainability can be described as a condition of balance, resilience, and interconnectedness that allows human society to satisfy its needs without exceeding the capacity of the supporting ecosystems to continue generating services without diminishing biological diversity (Morelli, 2011).

A look at the festival of the study shows that there are aspects of the events that promote the sustainability of the ecosystem. These aspects will be discussed below.

Sacred places that are connected to Ikenge festival in Utagba-Uno

Utagba-Uno community is known for its rich cultural heritage and traditional practices. Within this community, several sacred places hold significant importance to the people. Two major sacred places in Utagba-Uno that have a relationship with the celebration of Ikenge are Obi Ndueze and Osuye Ogene. Additionally, each quarter within the community also has its sacred place.

Obi Ndueze

Obi Ndueze is one of the major sacred places in Utagba-Uno. It is a place of gathering where the elders discuss issues affecting the community. It is a location that holds great spiritual and ecological significance to the community. Obi Ndueze is the first stop of the Ikenge procession

where the various groups gather to receive the blessings of the elders who await the procession. This location holds symbolic value and it is where only the men of the community gather to commence the procession. The presence of the community elders signifies wisdom, guidance, and the passing down of traditional values to the younger generations. After receiving the blessings at Obi Ndueze, the various groups proceed to osuye ogene. However, it is important to note that women are not allowed inside Obi Ndueze. The reason behind this restriction is rooted in traditional beliefs and customs specific to Utagba-Uno. Below is a photo that shows Obi Ndueze.



Figure 1: Obi Ndueze. (Source: Mr. Henry Uwadia)

Osuye ogene

Osuye ogene is another significant sacred place in Utagba-Uno. Like Obi Ndueze, it holds cultural, spiritual and ecological importance to the community. It is located in "eke onu ogbe Umuseti" in the heart of the community. Osuye ogene is where the actual warrior dancing and exhibition of gallantry take place during the Ikenge festival. The exhibition of gallantry at osuye ogene involves a series of performances by individuals and groups, demonstrating their prowess in combat-related activities such as mock battles, weapon handling and other displays of physical skill and courage like the shooting of guns in the air and each other, cutting themselves with sharp cutlasses, bottles and other sharp objects which does not inflict any form of harm or injury on them because they have bathed themselves in traditional charms that protect them during the festival. These exhibitions serve as a way to honour historical warriors, commemorate significant events and entertain and inspire the audience. Access to this land is strictly prohibited to ensure its preservation and protection. This restriction serves as a protective measure to prevent any potential damage or disruption to the ecosystem and cultural heritage associated with the site. It can only be accessed once every year during the Ikenge festival and it serves as a vital component in the conservation and sustenance of the local ecosystem. The land serves as a natural habitat for various plant species, contributing to biodiversity preservation. Below is a pictorial depiction of the site.



Figure 2: Osuye Ogene. (Source: Mr. Matthew Obah)

Sacred Water

The rivers Adofi Etua and Adofi Ikilibi play a significant role in the daily lives of the people living in Etua and Ikilibi quarters. These rivers provide essential resources such as water for household use, bathing, and washing clothes. However, the rivers are also protected from pollution and contamination to ensure their continued use and preservation. One important aspect of the river protection is the restriction of access to certain areas, particularly the "Isu Adofi" where the Adofi shrine is located. Only the "Obi Adofi" is allowed to enter this area, and no other activities are permitted there. This ensures the sanctity and preservation of the shrine and its surroundings. Another protected area is the shrine at Umusedeli known as "Adofi Uka Eke." Access to this location is strictly limited, with only the person serving the shrine allowed to enter. This prevents potential contamination and maintains the spiritual significance of the site. The individual who serves at the "Adofi Uka Eke" prepares for the Ikenge festival at the shrine before participating in the procession to osuye ogene. The river ecosystem supports a diverse range of aquatic species. It provides habitats for various fish species, amphibians, reptiles, and invertebrates. The preservation of the river helps sustain these species and maintains the overall ecological balance.

Olu Osa: Cleaning and Clearing

The oluosa tradition is a significant part of the Ikenge Festival. It entails a thorough cleaning and clearing of the community, including public spaces, streets, and individual homes. The purpose of this activity is to create a clean and welcoming environment for the festival and to promote hygiene and sanitation within the community. The otu uwai, a collective group in Utagba-Uno, plays a crucial role in organizing and executing the oluosa tradition. They are responsible for mobilizing community members, coordinating efforts, and ensuring that all areas are thoroughly cleaned. The otu uwai members work together as a team to sweep streets, remove debris and trim overgrown vegetation. The oluosa tradition during the Ikenge Festival highlights the strong communal spirit and sense of responsibility that the people of Utagba-Uno hold towards their

community and immediate environment. By actively participating in this cleaning process, community members demonstrate their commitment to maintaining a clean and healthy living environment for themselves and future generations. This aspect of the festival fosters a sense of unity among community members as they work together towards a common goal. It also serves as a reminder of their collective responsibility to preserve their cultural heritage and protect the environment in which they live. The oluosa tradition is not only about cleaning the community but also emphasizes the preservation of the environment. By removing debris and clearing overgrown vegetation, the community members contribute to the overall cleanliness and maintenance of their surroundings. Additionally, this process helps prevent the accumulation of waste that could potentially harm the ecosystem or pose health risks to residents. The emphasis on environmental preservation during the Ikenge Festival reflects the community understands the interconnectedness between their cultural practices and the natural world. It serves as a reminder of their role as stewards of the land and their commitment to sustainable living. The oluosa tradition, a key aspect of the Ikenge Festival, showcases the communal spirit, environmental consciousness, and sense of responsibility within the Utagba-Uno community. By actively participating in clearing and cleaning their community, they create a welcoming atmosphere for the festival while promoting hygiene, sanitation, and environmental preservation.

Celebrating the Ikenge festival during the day

Unlike other festivals in Utagba-Uno like the Osansukwa festival where an aspect of it is celebrated at night, The Ikenge festival is celebrated during the day and utilizes the sunlight; therefore, there is no room for artificial lighting from generators which emits smoke thereby polluting the environment. Unlike artificial lighting, which often requires electricity generated from non-renewable sources, natural sunlight is a clean and renewable energy source. By harnessing this abundant resource, daytime festivals can significantly decrease their carbon emissions, contributing to a more sustainable environment. Artificial lighting, like generators, can have detrimental effects on the environment. Generators emit smoke and other pollutants that contribute to air and noise pollution. Additionally, the use of non-renewable sources of energy to power artificial lighting adds to the carbon footprint, as these sources often involve the burning of fossil fuels. This further aggravates climate change and environmental degradation. So the Ikenge festival by harnessing the abundant resource of sunlight significantly decreases its carbon emissions and promotes a more sustainable environment.

Semiotics of costumes

During the Osansukwa festival, the celebrants usually wear white and red costumes. White colours hold special meaning in various cultural, social and religious contexts. In many African societies, it is associated with purity and cleanliness. Within the Utagba-Uno community, purity of spirit, body and the environment is highly valued and emphasized, and the white costume worn during the Ikenge festival reflects this emphasis on spiritual and environmental purity. The white costume, therefore, symbolizes purity of the environment, spirit, unity, and harmony within the community. There is also a mixture of the colour red in the Ikenge festival. Red has been associated with

various meanings in different societies. It could mean love, life force, energy, power, vitality and also danger as is used with street signs. In the context of the Ikenge festival, the colour red signifies the energy and vitality with which their ancestors fought and won the various wars which are the reason for the commemoration of the festival. This power and vitality is visible in the war dances during the festival. Below are photos that show the celebrants in their costumes.



Figure 3: Celebrants in their costume. (Source Mr Okomogbo

https://www.nairaland.com/attachments/9626778_img20190614wa0011_jpege50d39e1fd743d0f294fd1399bbcf325)



Figure 4: Celebrants including females in their costumes. (Source: Mr. Okomogbo

https://www.nairaland.com/attachments/9626779_img20190614wa0010_jpeg443e6705ff90dbac7a64212833c13d3b)

Conclusion

In African societies, festivals play a crucial role in maintaining cultural continuity and fostering a sense of belonging among community members. These celebrations often revolve around significant events, such as harvests, rites of passage, or spiritual observances, and serve to reinforce social bonds and shared values. Furthermore, festivals in African cultures are deeply intertwined with the natural environment and serve as a means of preserving the ecosystem. Festivals hold a unique place in human culture, as they often represent a collective expression of identity, beliefs, and values that play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting cultural traditions from one generation to another. The importance of festivals cannot be overemphasized. Amankulor reiterates the importance of festivals in the lives of a community using the Ekpe festival as an example, saying: "... Ekpe is celebrated every year because it is an important cultural event in the life of the people being the culmination of their yearly rites... it is only tragic event such as the

death of a hero, or permission from the gods that can stop the staging of Ekpe" (Amankulor, 2014). Many of these celebrations of which Ikenge is one involve rituals and practices that promote sustainable resource management, such as the conservation of water, soil, and wildlife. This interdependence between culture and nature is a key aspect of traditional African societies, as it highlights the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship with the environment. Ikenge festival is much more than mere entertainment; it is a vital expression of collective beliefs, identity, and cultural continuity. Getz et al affirm the above statement that "festivals celebrate community values, ideologies, identity and continuity" (Getz et al. 2010). By promoting social cohesion and environmental preservation, the Ikenge festival celebrations play a crucial role in maintaining the vibrant and diverse traditions of African societies. The study on the Ikenge Festival highlights the importance of re-establishing indigenous and cultural practices that are essential for maintaining a healthy ecosystem. The festival, with its various rituals and ceremonies, helps preserve the natural environment by encouraging responsible resource management and sustainable living practices. Another key aspect of the Ikenge Festival is the promotion of traditional knowledge and practices, which have been passed down through generations. These practices are deeply rooted in the community's relationship with the natural world and have been proven to be effective in conserving the ecosystem.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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Oral Interview

Osogbue, M. Retired civil servant. 26/12/2023

Obah, M. K. Retired civil servant. 26/12/2023

Augustina Ashionye-Obah Obamwonyi PhD is a lecturer in the Department of Theatre and Film Studies at the Faculty of Humanities, Federal University Otuoke in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Her passion for teaching stems from her upbringing by parents who were educators, instilling in her a deep appreciation for knowledge dissemination and academic growth. As an early career researcher, she is committed to making significant contributions to knowledge production in her field. Her research interests are in Performance Studies, Dramatic Theory and Criticism, and Film. Through her teaching and research endeavours, she aims not only to expand her own knowledge but dedicated to shaping the minds of students and contributing meaningfully to the academia.

Joyce Austen Onyekuru PhD, is an early career researcher, and teaches Traditional African Festivals Performances in the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State. As a beginning Scholar she has few published articles in some local Journals which can be assessed on Academia.edu and Google Scholar. Having research interest in Theatre and Media Arts; it is her desire to explore innovative and cutting-edge research topics that can contribute to the advancement of the field. Also she is open to considering interdisciplinary approaches to research, as the intersection of theatre and media arts can open up new avenues for exploration and discovery. Ultimately, her vision for the future is focused on making meaningful contributions to the field and expanding her collective understanding of the role that theatre and media arts play in society.
