

**THE TRANSFORMATION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE
NEW YAM FESTIVAL IN CONTEMPORARY IGBO
SOCIETY OF NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

The Igbo as one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria has a unifying factor or group identity they all commonly subscribe to. And new yam festival celebration is one of the main tenets that are shared by all Igbo-speaking people, although in matters of participation, it remains locally organized. The festival is so significant that it is linked to the Igbo agricultural calendar and the ritualization of the celebration by honouring the god of yam and offering of prayers to it for a bountiful harvest. However, with the emergence of western education, Christianity and the development of urban centres, the celebration of the new yam festival got transformed and modified, although, the ceremony is still a strong tool for group integration, identity and cohesion. The aim of this study is to assess the historical transformation of yam and yam festival in some selected communities in Igboland, examine the contemporary relevance of the festival and the modifications that occurred as a result of the influence of western culture. Basically, the study is qualitative; therefore, oral tradition and written sources were utilized. The findings of the study reveal that new yam festival celebration among the Igbo is a dynamic culture that responds positively to both change and continuity which led to its continuous relevance and appeal. Thus, the study concludes by recommending constant reforms of the festival celebration and the partnership of the Igbo communities with different tier of governments in order for the



festival to continue to serve as an instrument of social cohesion among the people.

Key words: New yam, Festival, Contemporary, Igbo, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Generally, yam is considered a staple food in West Africa. But among the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria, yam is regarded as the king of all crops, thus, yam is the only crop ritualized by having a cult dedicated to it. Therefore, the new yam festival is a celebration in honour of the prominent role yam plays in the socio-cultural life of the Igbo people. According to Ukpokolo, Okoye and Lawuyi¹, the yam crop is symbolic in the context of kingship as well as being indicative of God's gift to mankind. As the king of crops, it is superior to all other crops, and its festival is the celebration of the harvest of all crops which symbolizes the conclusion of the harvest season and the beginning of the next work cycle. As a culturally based festival, the new yam celebration provides social and group identity to the Igbo communities by promoting their cultural heritage and affording them the opportunities to celebrate with their friends and relations which ultimately leads to a renewal of friendship and the formation of new ones. Geographically, the Igbo are located in the South Eastern part of Nigeria with five Igbo speaking States of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo; although some Igbo speaking communities are also found in Delta and Rivers States which are located in the oil-rich South-South zone of Nigeria. The new yam celebration is one of the festivals that unite the entire Igbo nation although different communities have various names for this festival.

A study of the new yam festival in Igboland according to Ukwumah² reveals that some communities have different names for the festival such as: *Ike Ji, Iwa Ji, Iri Ji, Onwa Esato, Ahiajioku, Ofala, Ihinjoku, Ifejioku* among others as dictated by dialectal differences. In terms of importance, significance, popularity, and patronage, the New Yam festival in Igboland is comparable to the Christian Christmas and similar festivals. And it



is only yam, out of the crops cultivated in Igboland that has a cult dedicated to it (Njokuji deity) and that is why Basden³ regarded yam as the Igbo staff of life. Thus, the cultivation of yam is the major traditional source of wealth and social status in pre-colonial Igbo society, as the size of the barn and the number of yam tubers an individual possessed was used to measure a man's wealth. Most men married many wives to beget children who would help out on farm work. Titles associated with yam include *Eze Ji* (King of yam), and *Di Ji* (expert yam cultivator) were conferred on accomplished yam farmers with large barns⁴. Annually, yams come into the barn at harvest time and go back to the farm at planting time. This cyclical process constitutes the object of the annual ritual act of fecundity, generation, and regeneration.

To be sure, among the Igbo, the new yam festival is symbolic of enjoyment after the cultivation season. That is perhaps why invitation to the festival is open to all and sundry – friends, neighbours, kin relations, acquaintances, in-laws and others. The carnival mood and graciousness at extending invitations and welcoming every visitor and guest means that there is plenty of food to enjoy as opposed to lack of food to live on⁵. It was this concept of plentifulness associated with the new yam celebration that motivated Chinua Achebe to declare in his work *Things Fall Apart* that “the pounded yam dish placed in front of the partakers of the festival was as big as mountain. People had to eat their way through it all night and it was only during the following day when the pounded yam had gone down that the people on one side recognized and greeted their family members on the other side of the dish for the first time”⁶.

The new yam festival in Igboland is not only prominent; it dominates and permeates all aspect of Igbo engagements. Apart from the fact that the festival is linked to the agricultural calendar, philosophy and economic structure, it also involves a celebration of existence and paying homage to the ancestors. For instance, Ugo⁷ asserts that the festival is a period of reverence and open show of gratitude to God for his protection and kindness in leading them from lean periods to the time of bountiful harvest without



deaths resulting from hunger. This therefore explains the three aspects of Igbo worldview, which according to Onwutalobi⁸ are that the Igbo are pragmatic, religious and appreciative.

Having established the importance of new yam festival among the Igbo, the study is aimed at investigating the transformation and contemporary relevance of new yam festival in Igboland. To achieve this objective, the paper is structured into sections. With this introductory overview, the study proceeds by tracing the origin of yam among the Igbo because of their strong belief that yam originated in their land. Section three discusses the processes involved in the celebration of the new yam; section four examines the significance of yam among the Igbo and the misconceptions associated with new yam festival; section five examines some of the modifications new yam celebration had undergone in order to remain relevant; while section six concludes the study.

The Origin and Development of Yam

Yams are flowering plants of the family *Dioscoreaceae*, consisting of more than 800 species of climbing vines and woody shrubs. People started to cultivate yams, rather than digging up wild ones, as long as 10,000 years ago in both Africa and Asia, and some time later in the New World (the Americas). Yams are distributed widely throughout the tropical and warm temperate regions of the world, though current geographic distribution has almost certainly been influenced by human translocations. Today yams are widely used as an important food staple and as a fallback food in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Pacific islands, and South America⁹. In West Africa yam plays key roles according to IITA¹⁰ (International Institute of Tropical Agriculture) in food security, income generation, and the socio-cultural life of at least 60 million people. The IITA Report further says that in 2013, the West Africa yam belt produced a total of 54.5 million tonnes of yam on 4.4 million hectares. This represents 90.6% of the total



global production and 88% of the total world area planted to yam. In another study, IITA asserts that Africa accounts for almost 96 % worldwide yam production most of which derived from West Africa, with Nigeria alone producing 71 % of that total¹¹. Since some species of yams are indigenous to Africa, how did the cultivation start in Igboland? This sub-section will examine the origin and development of yam production in Igboland.

Yam is the number one crop of the Igbo. So important is the crop that G.T. Basden¹² claimed that to be deprived of it, creates a condition of absolute distress. Thus, Coursey and Coursey¹³ contend that among the peoples of West Africa, none is dedicated to the cultivation of yams as the Igbo, and the crop is one of their most important religious cults. Whatever substitute may be offered, cannot satisfy the Igbo man's desire for his favourite food. For instance, Thurstan Shaw¹⁴ believes that the history of the yam crop in Igboland dates back to over 5,000 years ago. Various stories about the origin of yam in Igboland exist in many communities. We shall group the available oral evidence about the origin of yam into two: those claiming that yam crop is as old as human existence in Igboland thus, that God presented yam as the first food to the Igbo man; and, others who claim that yam consumption in the area though of relative antiquity was the result of experimentation or accident¹⁵.

For instance, among the Nri community of Anambra State, their myth on the origin of yam states that there was a time when a severe famine struck. Eze Eri (King of Nri) considered what should be done to remedy the situation. He was asked by Chukwu (God) to kill his son and daughter. He later took the drastic course of killing his eldest son and daughter, cutting their bodies into small pieces and burying them. Strangely, yam and cocoyam were observed to be growing at the very places where the dismembered parts of the bodies had been buried. In the same mythology, another version avers that Eri killed male and female slaves and buried them in separate graves. From their graves emerged yam and cocoyam¹⁶.



A similar story according to Iwuagwu¹⁷ is recorded among the Ohaji community of Imo State, one of the largest yam producing areas in Igboland. According to the tradition, in an Ohaji village called Umuoboike Obile, one Nde Asaa, who was dying of hunger with his children, consulted Chukwu who advised him to kill his son, and to eat whatever came out of his grave. On the fourth day, he killed his first son and buried the toes and fingers separately. The first plant that sprouted from where the toes and fingers were buried was **Ji Aga** (a specie of white yam). From the head came another specie called **Ji Ocha** and from the intestines came **Ji Avula** (Water yam and **Ona** (three-leave yam)).

On the other hand, some traditions, buttress the notion that yam cultivation, just like the other crops in Igboland, may have resulted from the people's experimentation with the different plants in the area with a view to identifying the edible ones. For instance, among the group of communities in Afikpo, Ebonyi State, their myth on the origin of yam is of two fold --- one claiming the God-factor while another supports continuous experimentation. According to the God-factor mythology, the acclaimed founder of Afikpo community, Igboekwu, had a younger sister called Nne Oriete Imomo who disliked the taste of wild yam (bitter specie that were common then). So, Nne Oriete Imomo communed with *Obasi n'elu* (God) and she was instructed to clear a portion of arable land. In order to have her wish of good yams, she was asked to offer a male child born of one of her brother's seven daughters. She summoned her seven daughters-in-law (as they are known in Afikpo tradition) and narrated the revelation. One of them, Aliocha Imaga Orie, offered her son. After the sacrifices, four or five months later, good and edible yams sprang out from where the boy was buried, and God warned her that she must at all time accord great respect to yam¹⁸.

Similarly, Afikpo people also traced the origin of yam to Enohia Nkalu, a community Ottenberg¹⁹ described as one of the earliest inhabitants in Afikpo. According to their oral tradition, yam was first cultivated, eaten and domesticated by the Nkalu



people. Till date, the community holds primacy in matters related to the celebration of new yam festivals. Unlike other communities in Igboland where the Kings or the oldest men in community moderate in the celebration of the festival; in Afikpo, the date and the celebration must be announced by the Yam Deity Priest called *Eleri*. No community in Afikpo celebrates the festival or eats the new yam until the Priest performs the rituals associated with the celebration of indigenous specie of yam called **Akiri**.

Among the Ezza people of Abakaliki in Ebonyi State, their oral history claim that their ancestor, Ezekuna, stumbled upon yam while digging in his farm. He ate it and was able to quench his hunger. Following this, he took it home and planted it. From then, the eating of yam became part and parcel of the people's tradition²⁰. A closer tradition widely believed in Abakaliki, comprising the three clans of Izzi, Ikwo and Ezza, has it that:

One day, the father of Ezekuna, Nodo and Noyo called these boys and asked them to go and find food for the family. They obeyed their father and went to look for food. Nodo returned with wild yams and Noyo came back with some fish and roots, while Ezekuna brought a human head. Each presented what he brought to their father as a trophy. Their father, Ekuma Enyi blessed each of them according to what he brought²¹.

According to this history, Nodo was blessed with yam production and Noyo with plenty of meat and food, while Ezekuna was blessed with gallantry in warfare and was given charge of their father's compound. Following from this, even till this day, Izzi clan is the greatest producer of yams in Abakaliki. The Ikwo are renowned for the production of all types of food stuffs and meat while Ezza are noted for their militarism in the whole of Abakaliki and beyond²².

The annual Ofala festival in Onitsha, Anambra State is also linked with the discovery of new yam in the area. According to Iwuagwu²³, the people say that at the beginning, nobody knew anything about yam in the area. However, when the people finally



discovered yam, which grew like any other plant in the area, many were scared of what to do with it. Some feared that it could be poisonous. The different villages therefore decided to experiment on the crop one after the other. The period of this test automatically became a time of meditation and supplication for the king who feared for the safety of his people. By the fourth day, when no life was lost, the king came out to celebrate the survival of his people. The Ofala therefore is essentially the Obi's royal festival for the survival of his people. Since it is difficult to say when the first Ofala was held in Onitsha because Ofala has always been held by Obi of Onitsha for centuries, it therefore follows that the antiquity of yam cultivation in the area is indisputable.

These oral sources go a long way to show the antiquity of yam in Igboland. No matter the variations or similarities of the stories of the origin of yam in Igbo society, some inferences could be drawn from these myths and legends, namely:

- i. Yam cultivation has been part and parcel of the agricultural economy of the Igbo.
- ii. The belief that yam was instituted by God for the benefit of His children.
- iii. That yam was (and is still) regarded as crop cultivated by men²⁴.

The New Yam Celebration: The Processes Involved

A yam is a tuber that is cultivated annually on a loamy, clay or humus soil. In Igboland, the cultivation of yam is done between mid January and late March, and it is usually harvested between mid August and late December, depending on the farmer's preference²⁵. Yams in Igboland are typically harvested by hand using sticks, spades, or diggers. Wood-based tools are preferred to metallic tools as they are less likely to damage the fragile tubers; however, wood tools need frequent replacement. Yam harvesting is also labour-intensive and physically demanding. It involves standing, bending, squatting, and sometimes sitting on the ground depending on the size of the mound, size of the tuber, or depth of tuber penetration. Care must be taken to avoid



damage to the tuber, because damaged tubers do not store well and spoil rapidly²⁶.

In terms of celebration of the new yam festival, the style and methods may differ from one community to the other, but the significant component that make up the festival remains the same. In some communities, the celebration lasts a whole day, while in many places it may take the whole four Igbo traditional days of Eke, Orié, Afor and Nkwo. For instance, KayCee²⁷ reports that among the Arochukwu communities of Abia State, that the New Yam festival lasts for the entire four Igbo traditional days starting with Eke, which is the first day of the new yam festival and also the first day of the week in Igbo culture. According to him, Eke day is the day the new yams for the festival are harvested. On this day, women and children are charged with the responsibility of sanitizing the entire environment around the home.

Orié Market day is the second day of the new yam festival and also the second day of the week in Igbo culture. It is the day of the new yam festival proper. It is a day of great merriment – eating of new yam prepared in various forms. On this Orié day, every animal tagged for use during the new yam festival is butchered with the belief that the animal will die to avert impending sicknesses and deaths that may occur in individual families and the entire community as a whole. The third day which is Afor market day and the third day of the week in Igbo culture, is a day certain sacred parts (such as: blood, head, intestines etc) of the animals butchered on Orié day are brought to the house of the eldest male member of every clan for prayers, preparation and consumption by all members of the clan. The fourth day which is Nkwo market day and the last day of Igbo cultural week is the last day of the new yam festival. It is a day that all Igbo sons and daughters who returned home for the festival are allowed to go back to their places of residence within and outside Nigeria²⁸. It should be observed that these four days description of the celebration of the new yam festival is not universal to all Igbo communities, except in Arochukwu. Almost



all communities in Igboland have their own unique ways of celebrating new yam festivals.

In summary, the new yam festival celebration in Igboland is symbolic of enjoyment after the cultivation season. Apart from the folk dances by different categories of people, masquerades display and drinking and eating special delicious foods, new yam festival is a season of thanksgiving and supplication to God for his protection and kindness in leading them from seasons of scarcity and lack to period of bountiful harvest. It is a season the people make offering to the spirit of the field with special reference to the presiding deity of the yam crop known as *Njoku Ji*.

Title Taking Associated with Yam in Igboland

Titles, festivals and ceremonies form a significant aspect of the Igbo food culture. Hence, the Igbo, as if to show the importance of the yam crop, hold that “**ji buno**” (yam builds a home, a community and a town). Yam is money, it is wealth, it is food. The Igbo culture, therefore, may not be divested from the people’s economic life. The fact that some of these crops have been ritualized shows how important they are to the general well-being of the people. Thus, a successful Igbo man would, as it were, register and legitimize his success with a title. This was an important aspect of the people’s culture.

The accumulation of material wealth depended on one’s skill in agriculture which incidentally was the primary occupation. Accordingly, a successful farmer according to Ottenberg²⁹ celebrated his achievement through the acquisition of titles, which indicated wealth and nobility. But, the range of titles and conditions for admission varied from one community to another. It has to be noted though, that persons who achieved the highest titles did so after saving for long and often at great personal sacrifice. This may be the reason for the enormous prestige that usually went with these titles.

The titles associated with yam include: **Ezeji, Nji oke, or Di ji** (yam king). These titles were principally related to



success in agricultural produce, particularly yam. This was so, given the fact that the Igbo from the pre-colonial times had depended on agriculture for their livelihood. Hence, proceeds from these crops were used either as a qualification for titles or for entertainment during title-taking ceremonies. It is germane particularly in the light of the foregoing for us to review the various titles in Igboland that had to do with yam³⁰.

Ezeji title is centred on the yam crop. It is essentially a male title which cuts across the entire Igboland. To be initiated into the yam title-hold according to Uchendu³¹, the aspirant required a long period of indoctrination, resocialization and motivation by the lineage elders. The aspirant was not only expected to work hard on farm, but needed the labour of a large network of relatives with his extended family showing leadership, dedication and devotion. This underscores the elevated status which the holders of the title enjoyed in Igboland. We shall review the processes of yam title-taking in two Igbo communities of Imo and Ebonyi States.

In Mbaise, an Igbo community in Imo State, an aspirant to the **Ezeji** title must be an acclaimed yam farmer. Equally, the title was open to all free born. During the title-taking ceremony, which usually lasted two days, only pounded yam was served. Also, the *Nkwaji* (special yam dance) was held. In the past, none of the yams used for the ceremony was bought or borrowed. Before the title was conferred on the aspirant, sacrifices were made to Ala (the earth goddess) in gratitude for a successful farming season, since the yams were planted on earth owned by Ala. To be admitted to the *Ezeji* title in Mbaise, the aspirant must have at least one hundred stakes of yam in his barn. He then invited the title holders to a feast where he made known his intention to join their title association. The title holders followed with four routine inspections of his barn. The aim was to confirm whether he actually had the means or he borrowed the yams to acquire the title. Once, they are satisfied, the barn was locked, pending the day of the title taking ceremony. On the day, the entire community was invited to the ceremony; at the end of



which all title holders took home at least one tuber of yam each. A goat was slaughtered at the ceremony and everybody was feasted to the yam meal. Also traditional dancers were invited (*Nde nkwa ji*). At the end, the last initiate formally admits the aspirant to the fold by presenting him with a shirt, wrapper and towel which were his insignia of office³².

Similarly, in Abakaliki, the Igbo town in Ebonyi State, the yam title is called **Nji oke** or **Ji oke**. According to the tradition of Ikwo people of Abakaliki, since the title taking was quite expensive, it was expected that a son would play a major role to enable his father take first. The anticipation according to Iwuagwu³³ was that by so-doing, the god will bless his farm in the coming seasons. The people believe that no matter the level of one's wealth, a man is not regarded as complete until he had taken the yam title. The title-taking ceremonies usually involve neighbouring villages. Each group that attended took home a goat, food, drink and baskets of yam. The title could be taken more than once, since this will influence the level of the individual's right at related ceremonies. Indeed, a popular belief among the Ikwo is that **Nji oke** is a spirit. Hence, once, an individual was ripe to take the title, he could not avoid it, otherwise, it could bring disaster as the locals believe that it could lead to the death of those who had earlier taken the title.

In summary, it should be noted that yam title-taking in Igboland was a highly prestigious ceremony before and after the colonial era, although westernization and urbanization had reduced the major role of agriculture in the life of the people. Commenting on how important yam title-taking was among the people of Afikpo in Ebonyi State, Ottenberg³⁴ gave example of a prosperous Afikpo trader, who, by 1952, had built himself a concrete blockhouse with a tin roof and filled it with carpentered furniture and the luxury of a gramophone. In spite of all these, he was still not highly esteemed by his neighbours, because he had not taken a title. Therefore, the significance of yam as the king of all crops can also be seen in the titles associated with it.



Uses and Roles of Yam in Igboland

Of all the crops (root crops) cultivated and consumed by the Igbo, yam stands out excellently. The versatile roles and uses of yam can be classified into different categories such as staple food, industrial usage, ritual symbol, social and economic or wealth creating ventures.

1. Yam as a Source of Food and Dietary

Yam is an important dietary element for Nigerian and West African people. It contributes more than 200 calories per person per day for more than 150 million people in West Africa. Yam is an attractive crop in poor farms with limited resources. It is rich in starch, and can be prepared in many ways. It is available all year round, unlike other, unreliable, seasonal crops. These characteristics make yam a preferred food and a culturally important food security crop in some sub-Saharan African countries³⁵. Tuber is the main part of the yam plant which has high carbohydrate content (low in fat and protein) and provides a good source of energy. Unpeeled yam has vitamin C. Yam, sweet in flavour, is consumed as boiled yam (as cooked vegetable) or fufu or fried in oil and then consumed. It is often pounded into a thick paste after boiling and is consumed with soup³⁶.

2. Industrial and Medicinal Usage of Yam

Industrially, yam is also processed into flour for use in the preparation of the paste. Its medicinal use as a heart stimulant is attributed to its chemical composition, which consists of alkaloids of saponin and sapogenin. Its use as an industrial starch has also been established as the quality of some of the species is able to provide as much starch as in cereals³⁷. The tubers of certain wild yams, including a variant of 'Kokoro' yam and other species of *Dioscorea*, such as *Dioscorea nipponica*, are a source for the extraction of diosgenin, a steroid sapogenin. The extracted diosgenin is used for the commercial synthesis of cortisone, pregnenolone, progesterone, and other steroid products. Such



preparations were used in early combined oral contraceptive pills. The unmodified steroid has estrogenic activity³⁸.

3. Ritual and Religious Role of Yam

The importance of yam in the economy and socio-cultural life of the Igbo has led to its ritualization. For instance, yam is taken as the man's crop "the Igbo staff of life", while other crops like cocoyam and cassava are relegated to a subsidiary status. Generally, yam stood for manliness and anyone who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to other was indeed accepted as a great man³⁹. The importance of yam in Igboland can best be substantiated by the fact that no other crop has a taboo and festival connected with the date when its harvesting may commence. Also, the fact that yam alone has several festivals attached to it indicates that it occupies a singular position in traditional agriculture of earlier times and that there is considerable sentimental attachment to it⁴⁰. G.I. Stockley⁴¹ in his "Intelligence Reports on the Ekwerazu and Ahiara clans of the former Owerri Division", indeed saw yam crop as being synonymous with Njoku, which he called the "*juju of yam*". According to him, Njoku is everywhere in Igboland since yam is everywhere. Every man is a priest of Njoku and sacrifices straight to it since every man has yam.

4. The Social Functions of Yam

Yam has different social functions in the society. During weddings, funerals, naming ceremonies, thanksgiving etc., yam forms part of the menu accompanied by vegetable or white soups. Such ceremonies as title-taking involve the presentation of tubers of yam and consumption of pounded yam. The ability to own several barns of yam and hosting the entire community is a mark of wealth, self-sufficiency, and hard work in the past. Anyone who boasts of large barns of yam is conferred with the title "Diji" and respected by all and sundry. Yam presentation and consumption is part of the traditional marriage ceremonies in most parts of Igboland and bridegroom's capability is measured by the tubers of yam he presented to his in-laws⁴².



5. The Economic Importance of Yam

Yams do not only serve as the main source of earnings, but also serve as the major employer of labour in Igboland. In the traditional Igbo society, the wealth of a man is measured by the quantity of yam he harvested in his farm, in this contemporary period, yams can be exported to other countries to earn foreign currency and improve the economy of Nigeria with enormous wealth to the yam farmers.

The Contemporary Modifications to the Celebration of New Yam Festival

As we noted in our introduction that the new yam festival is observed in the entire Igboland as a mark of appreciation to God, the deities and the ancestors for the protection and kindness in leading them from lean periods to the time of bountiful harvest without deaths resulting from hunger. Therefore, it can be argued that an outstanding aspect of the festival is the fascination it exercises for all Igbo people throughout the world. The celebration depicts the Igbo as a religious people, a people who annually acknowledge their duty to return gratitude to *Chukwu*, their God, for providing them with such a gratuitous gift as yam, a major food that satisfies their gastronomic requirements by ensuring their physical and material well-being.

Presently, the new yam festival in Igboland is not only relevant in this contemporary age, it has also gone through series of changes as a result of western education, Christianity, economic changes and increase in population; in the process, purging itself of those rituals and fetish practices that were associated with it. These transformations or modifications that occurred trigger off ramifications everywhere in the conduct of new yam festivals in Igboland, because the Igbo sons and daughters in diaspora and other major cities in Nigeria celebrate the festival without the traditional rituals associated with the new yam festivals. It was as a result of these changes that made Ukwumah⁴³ to declare that efforts have been made by various Igbo communities to play down on the traditional attachments like offering sacrifices to the god of



yam. In fact, Christians now frown at this practice but certainly not against the idea of new yam festival in Igboland.

In reconstructing the festival celebration, the aspects connected with the autochthonous deities and ancestors are assumed to have been removed and replaced with Christian symbols in order to make the festival more acceptable to people of various religious leanings. In the old order, the traditional chief priests in different Igbo communities usually stand in-between the deities, the ancestors and the people. They offer sacrifices, pouring libation and prayers to the deities for the new yam and other blessings, which the adherents respond to by shouting solemnly *Iseeee* (So, shall it be). But in the new order, the traditional rulers are more significant than the traditional chief priests. In the modern new yam celebration, the traditional ruler (king) represents the collectivity, and standing in the gap between the living and the ancestors in the old order, and in the new order, the living and Jesus Christ. Ukpokolo, Okoye and Lawuyi⁴⁴ report that the King of Igbo-Ukwu community while blessing the new yam during the festival prayed thus:

I take this knife in the name of (on behalf of) Igbo-Ukwu community. As I cut this yam, may the devil be defeated in the name of Jesus, Amen. May he flee from our community for we have nothing in common, may the angel of God come and stay permanently in our community in Jesus Name, Amen. As I cut this yam today, we will always cut it every year. So be it. We will cultivate and feed well; next year's harvest would be more than this year's. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, I cut this yam in Jesus Name, Amen.

Some elements of westernization have also been introduced. An announcement of dates for the celebration of the new yam festival is no longer the preserve of the dwindling ranks of the traditional priests. Dates for such feasts for each town are sometimes announced over the radio while some people add a touch of sophistication to it by organizing seminars, symposia and



conferences on new yam festival. There are also conscious attempts at infusing elements of Christian ideals into this important festival by incorporating Christian clergymen to officiate during celebrations⁴⁵. For instance, Catholic Dioceses and Parishes have acculturated *Iwa Ji* and *Iri Ji Ohuru* in Christian worship and celebration to the extent that *Iri Ji* Festival is called *Ji Maria*, *Ji Madonna* and *Ji Joseph* to venerate the Holy Virgin Mary as the Mother Earth and of whole produce to glorify God. This is a development that shows how dynamic cultures are embraced for change and continuity⁴⁶.

The modernization of the new yam festival in Igboland was to meet the expectation of those who clamoured for the abandonment of the festival and to reinforce Igbo collective identity, which has fractured due to modernization and missionization. Through the reconstruction, aspects of the festival connected with offering sacrifices to the gods were discarded. The venue of festival was shifted from the shrines of the traditional priests to the palaces of the traditional rulers of the community. Similarly, the Holy Bible replaces traditional symbolic objects. There is no need to slaughter a chicken for sacrifices as Christ has shed His blood for the atonement of sins of the whole world⁴⁷.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we have argued that new yam festival celebration exists in almost all Igbo communities in Nigeria and other part of West African region. The study's main aim was to systematically articulate the transformations that had occurred in the celebration of the new yam festival. We also briefly discussed how yam originated among some Igbo communities in order to clarify the conceptual ambiguities associated with it, and to examine the significance of yam among the Igbo; evaluate some of the modifications new yam celebration had undergone in order to remain relevant.

Furthermore, the work stresses the remarkable continuity in the ideas and practice of new yam festival in Igboland despite significant changes or challenges occasioned by Christianity and



westernization. Though Christianity and modernity have overwhelming impact on the festival and the importance of yam in Igboland, the ideas and practices surrounding it triumphed with remarkable virility and relevance in contemporary Igbo society⁴⁸. Typically, new yam festival provides a heritage of dances, feasting, renewal of kinship alliances, as well as mark the end of one agricultural season with a harvest to express gratitude and thanksgiving to the society, gods, friends and relations⁴⁹. The primacy of the new yam festival might have been recognized by Bolin and Dunstan⁵⁰ which made them to assert that festivals afford individuals the opportunity to interact with other community members regardless of class affiliations or social, religious, political or economic status.

In this present dispensation, the Igbo people outside Igboland scattered in different cities in Nigeria always gather together every August to celebrate new yam festival as a unique heritage of the Igbo to the world. In the course of the celebration, the Igbo federal civil servants and businessmen usually use the time of new yam festival celebration to invite federal government ministers and permanent secretaries to draw attention on the areas of neglect and interventions, while the Igbo in diaspora use the opportunity of new yam festival celebration to raise funds for project execution and scholarship award to the Igbo in the villages. One unique aspect of the celebration is that the festival is held without the traditional rituals associated with the new yam festivals of old.



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