

SIGNIFICANCE OF *ITO-OGBO* CULTURAL FESTIVAL IN OBOSI, ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

Old age is like a plane that has reached flying altitude and is flying smoothly at cruising speed. The engines are not straining for more height, but flying along smoothly until it reaches its destination. In Africa, old age symbolizes a fulfilled life, and often may earn one the right to courtesy and politeness. In the culture and tradition of Obosi, the elderly are valued and celebrated. The octogenarians, are believed to have reached their career aspirations, accomplished their family responsibilities, and are debt-free. They are seen as people who have nothing more to aspire for but happiness and peace. Obosi people celebrate and honour them. They are automatically exempt from taxations/levies. The people organize a triennial festival called *Ito-Ogbo Obosi* in honour of those who turned eighty within the three-year gap. Once honoured, they are given the title of *Ogbueshi* (for men) and *Ogbueshi nwanyi* (for women). The kind of honour that goes with the title encourages the elders to maintain decent health in order to live to the age of eighty and join their mates to receive the title. This article examines the origin of the festival, as well as its significance and impact on the life of the people of Obosi and Igbo society at large, especially within the larger context of the rites of passage.

Keywords: Culture, Longevity, Rites of passage, *Ito-Ogbo* Obosi

Introduction

Even though Igbo people have a common culture that unites them together, different communities within the Igbo society have customs and cultural practices that are peculiar to them. Obosi people have a rich cultural heritage known as *Ito-Ogbo* celebration (longevity cultural festival). It is the highest festival of the town which has encouraged homecoming of Obosi people as well as the healthy craving to grow old as to be honoured and celebrated. The festival is organized for Obosi men and women who attain the age of eighty within a space of three years. Since the people believe that at eighty one's perspective on issues must have been well enlarged due to his or her experiences in life, they look at such elderly people as repositories of wisdom. At such an age, one has seen triumphs and tragedies, booms and busts, maybe revolutions and wars too, as well as great achievements and deep ambiguities. He or she can take a long view and have vivid, lived sense of history not possible at an earlier age. So, the people revere them very much. The young revere them hoping that in their own time, their children will also accord them the same reverence. Undergirding this is their belief that whoever celebrates another's old age, will himself or herself reach old age and be thus celebrated. This is captured by the Igbo adage: "*onye fee Eze, Eze eruoya*" (literally, "he who honours a king will one day become king).

At the ceremony of *Ito-Ogbo-Obosi*, the *Igwe* of Obosi issues a certificate of merit to all the octogenarians for the past three years, and asks the people to give them utmost respect and dignity deserving of their status. This encourages people to strive to live long life. For the octogenarians, the festival makes them derive meaning from their age and existence, and not see old age as a boring period devoid of meaning. The appreciation shown them by the town makes them feel fulfilled and accomplished.

Origin of *Ito-Ogbo Obosi*

Ito Ogbo tradition is believed to have been part of Obosi culture for centuries. It is a unique event in which 80 to 82-year-old citizens are honoured by their families, friends, well-wishers and the whole community and is held triennially. It is a festival of longevity for the beneficiaries of long life and also preview of their funeral, which gives them right to enjoy with everyone. On the day of the occasion, as Okonkwo (2012) notes, the celebrants who are dressed up in traditional regalia are escorted by family members, and well-wishers and traditional music group to the town square called *Afor Adike*. There, the traditional rites marking the celebration are held, with the king and his cabinets in attendance.

After the traditional rites are completed, men are given the title of *Ogbueshi* and the women *Ogbueshi-nwanyị*. They are all adorned by the king with red caps befitting their status. The title *Ogbueshi* or *Ogbueshi-nwanyị*, as the case may be, is a powerful, prestigious, respectable, adorable, and admirable title in Obosi, which every true sons and daughters of Obosi pray to get in their life time. Non-native women can only get this title if they are married to Obosi men. Because of the importance attached to this festival, Obosi people, from long past, are very conscious of their ages, and keep accurate records of them. It is often said that Obosi town is first Igbo town known to celebrate such a longevity cultural festival as one of the cradles of Igbo civilization. Today, however, the festival is gaining currency in many towns in Igbo society.

The festival occurs in every three years, it is usually a week-long programme with different unique activities that attract people all over the world, such as free medical checks, free medical tips, cultural displays, free seminars, lectures, talk on how to live long, music concerts, the honouring of outstanding sons and daughters and good friends of Obosi kingdom who have been contributing in one way or the other for the progress of the town. There is also a beauty pageants, the winner of which is crowned *Ada-Obosi*.

The festival usually ends on a Sunday. Those of them who are Christians prestigiously go to their different churches for thanksgiving while the pagans decorate colourfully their native cows (bulls), take them to Eke Obosi (*Ipu-Eke*) for cultural displays, featuring the shooting of guns into the air in jubilation and to announce that they have attained the grand age of *Ogbueshi* or *Ogbueshi-nwanyị*.

The place of *Ito-Ogbo Obosi* Festival within the African culture

Ito-Ogbo Obosi could only be fully comprehended within the overall context of African culture in general and Igbo culture in particular. This is because it is within this larger cultural matrix that its meaning and significance can be well appreciated.

Africans have a specific culture that makes them distinct from any other group, so also do the Igbo. Their appreciation of festivals and its impact in their lives, and their understanding of rites of passage, and respect for elders will be very vital in understanding the emotional attachment that Obosi people have towards *Ito-Ogbo* Obosi and the attainment of the title of *Ogbueshi* or *Ogbueshi-nwanyị*.

Culture: The fabric of human society

The word culture comes from Latin root *colere* (to inhabit, to cultivate or to honour). The 19th century English anthropologist, Edward Burnett Taylor provided the classical definition of culture in the first paragraph of his *primitive culture* (1871) that culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society. It is totality of people's way of life. Every homogeneous ethnic group has a distinct culture that distinguishes it from every other ethnic groups Thus, culture is seen as that which keeps people together. Culture is very much about groups and a basic need of group is to be able to communicate, both at a superficial level and at a deeper level. At this deeper level, words, actions and things can become imbued with special and specific meaning for the group.

Festival Celebration in Africa

Festival is common feature in world religions and cultures. Festivals are occasions for commemorating certain events which are vital and important to the celebrating community. Onwubiko (1991) states that "some festivals normally occur at specific periods and they follow a certain calendar of events". Festivals in general are joyous occasions celebrated with specific aim or aims in view and, as such, they have some beliefs necessarily attached to them. Festivals can in most cases be said to be good measure of intensity of cultural richness of a people, because most feasts normally present celebrating community in its social cultural life's real context.

Some feasts are enacted to enhance group feeling and identity. Such feasts are social in their nature and celebration. In Africa, the social life and activities are punctuated with festivals because they give most people opportunity to establish extended relationship which bears with it the reciprocal bond of social interaction. This is so because feasts present to the individual, in practical terms and activities, the social, cultural and ideological matrix within which his/her personality must be shaped.

In Africa, two kinds of festivals exist such as: social and religious festivals. We can talk of religious festivals as purely distinct from social festivals, though both of them are interdependent and interrelated. Social festivals include all cultural ceremonies and celebrations which make birth, naming and initiation ceremonies, marriage, longevity celebration (*Ito-Ogbo*), death and funeral ceremonies, anniversaries of historical events among others. Some of these are occasional in the sense that they are celebrated as often as occasions present themselves, or when the celebrant has means to do so.

When we talk of these festivals as "purely social", it does not mean that there are no religious elements, like sacrifices, consultation of oracles, or offerings involved. These religious elements are secondary aspects of them. Onwubiko (1991) identifies three

groups of social festivals that exist in Africa as “socio-political festivals, socio-historic and occasional festivals”. Socio-political festivals are festivals whose aims are meant to emphasize the leader/led (king/subject) relationship in different communities in Africa. Socio-historic festivals are those festivals whose origins are based on some historic facts or legend or even on assumption connected with some known heroes whose lives were spent in protection of the people. Occasional festivals are determined by the occasion and time the celebrant has means to do so.

African sense of respect for the elders

In the words of Conton (1964), “Africans generally have deep and ingrained respect for old age, and even when we can find nothing to admire in an old man, we will not easily forget his grey hair has earned him right to courtesy and politeness”. The elders are respected for many reasons. First, they are believed to be teachers and directors of the young. Among the Akans, it is said: “The words of one’s elders are greater than amulets”. This means they give more protection than amulets do. In like manner, the Igbo say, “He who listens to elders is like one who consults oracle”. The oracles are believed to give infallible truths, thus the elders are also believed to say the truth and their words and instructions are heeded for promotion of good behavior among the young. The elders are taken to be the respiratory of communal wisdom and the respect given to them has its practical effect in the maintenance of culture and tradition. Hence the Igbo adage, “what an elder sees sitting cannot be seen by a young man standing”. The young are always looking forward to becoming elders and they are often told that if a child respects an elder, he or she would be respected by the young when he or she becomes an elder.

The care of an aged, as an African institution, is situated within the family. It is so cherished and organized that many argue that there is no need in the African setting, for the cheerless nursing home for the aged as exist today in Europe and America. But this need is gradually developing given changes in the demographics of the people, rural-urban drift, and the changing pattern of work schedule and schooling for children.

African sense of respect for elders explains better the reason for longevity cultural festival (*Ito-Ogbo*) in Obosi. It is celebrated with specific aim of appreciating their contributions toward the growth and development of the community.

Longevity Cultural Festival (*Ito-Ogbo Obosi*) as a rite of passage

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the rites of passage are rituals and ceremonies that punctuate the phase of life of man on earth such as birth, childhood, passage from puberty to adulthood, old age (longevity), death and passage into the next world. Rites of passage fall in three phases: incorporation, transition, and separation. To recognize the significance of any phase of rites of passage in the life of individual, society typically holds elaborate ceremonies. Each different culture or society may choose to make these rites in a very different way. Each ceremony is unique and meaningful to one’s own culture. According to Mensah (1989),

rites of passage are those structures, rituals and ceremonies by which age-class, members or individuals in a group

successfully come to know who they are and what they are about – the purpose and meaning for their existence, as they proceed from clearly defined state of existence to the next state or passage in their lives”.

Moore (1983) speaks of it as “a ritual action which the initiate is separated from one world and taken to another.” In other words, introduces one into a specific form of life which he was previously a stranger to.

In Obosi culture, *Ito-Ogbo* is the second to the last phase of the rites of passage. With it, one enters into the realm of an elder properly designated. Before then, he or she could be regarded as an elder in the general sense of the term, but without any ritualization to seal it. But with *Ito-Ogbo* one becomes a true elder. His or her elderly status is confirmed and sealed.

Ito-Ogbo festival serves as the rite of passage into this prestigious group of old men and women and it gives the initiates a new identity. That identity is what is entailed in the giving of the name *Ogbueshi* or *Ogbueshi-nwanyi*, as the case may be. They become oracles to be consulted in matters of culture and tradition of Obosi. They become repositories of wisdom who can easily arbitrate between people without fear or favour. In any gathering of the people, they are giving places of honour, and when a discussion is going on, if they want to make contributions, they are accorded the respect of availing the gathering of their revered opinions.

Inherent values of Longevity Cultural Festival (Ito-Ogbo Obosi) in the Life of the People of Obosi

Just like every rite of passage, *Ito-Ogbo* festival in Obosi, serves social, psychological, and spiritual purposes for the people. On the social level, with the festival, the celebrants attain a new social status in the society that earns for them unalloyed respect regardless of whether they are poor or rich. It is therefore a transformational event and carries with it a new status, role, responsibilities, and privileges. It is also an occasion to yoke the community together, beginning from the families to the kindreds, then to the villages and entire town. The festival gives members of the family opportunity to celebrate their aged parents while still alive and not spending only on their funeral and the celebrant in turn appreciates their children for the care and love shown to him or her during his or her life time. People living far and wide, within and without the country travel home for it. Besides, the celebration is meant to inspire the young ones socially to join age-grade groups and also participate in the affairs of the community.

From the psychological point of view, the festival gives the participants some sort of fulfillment for having completed a particular phase in life. It is a stage in which an individual or group of persons successfully come to know whom they are, and the purpose and meaning of their existence, so to say. By helping to maintain the order of seniority among people in keeping with the established genealogical tree, the festival gives octogenarians full assurance of their position in the community. This is psychologically reassuring.

Furthermore, the festival provides a reason for offering prayers of thanksgiving to God for the new phase of life. The celebration emphasizes an act of worship which is directed to God as appreciation and reaffirmation of the importance of His role in the life of the people.

In Africa, individuals are taught to respect their parents and to care for the elderly. Many cultures in Africa celebrate old age and their advice and wisdom are valued. *Ito-Ogbo* helps to instill in the young ones the respect for elders as a true value to be upheld among the people. This aids in proper ordering of the society, and promotes peace, and progress among the people.

According to Iweka (1924), many old people may be very sick but would hold onto life till they attain the *Ito-Ogbo* age and gets honoured, shortly after which they will then die happily. Their family members would be happy that their own attained *Ogbuishi* or *Ogbuishi-nwanyị* before death. This means the festival helps people to care for their old ones very well to make sure they celebrate it before death. It even engenders a sort of competitive spirit among the youth of Obosi in caring for their parents. According to Okonkwo (2012), people that live longer provide an opportunity for their children to return the care they have received from them.

The anticipation for the festival also instills hope in the elderly to cling on to life. It therefore leads to the appreciation of the value of life and avoid the disposable mentality that affects the modern man or woman who would ordinarily look for ways of disposing of the old who they may think have nothing else to contribute to the economy but are mere consumers.

Longevity cultural festival helps to promote the harmonious relationship among family members. Octogenarian becomes a source of inspiration to his/her children and grandchildren. The years have made him/her a priceless source of knowledge and experience for the coming generation and he or she guides them to make a better decision. Looking forward toward the attainment of this prestige, it brings the family together in catering for the wellbeing of their aged parents.

The festival enables members of the age grade to grow together, encouraging themselves to aspire for long life through healthy living and work together toward the development of the society. The age grade system has long been in existence in Africa and Nigeria, and has been recognized and used by Africa leaders to champion causes for the social, cultural, political infrastructure and economic development of communities. According to Max Ohuabunwa “age grade system has its greatest strength in Igbo land”. Age grades perform varied development-oriented functions, including defending their communities against both internal and external aggressions, carrying out civil and communal works, performing political duties in maintaining law and order.

Ito-Ogbo Obosi has contributed in giving every Obosi citizen a reason to desire to live long. Because they are fully aware that once they reach 80, they will be lavishly honoured by family, friends, and indeed the entire Obosi kingdom, the elderly continue

to be high-spirited to the extent that they cannot give up, not minding the challenges life throws at them.

The festival impacts positively on communal discipline and community development. Agbodike et al (2015) state:

Generally speaking, the various age grades in Obosi engage in healthy competition which triggered off the rapid development of the town. For instance, the members competed among themselves in terms of marriage, title taking, building of houses and attracting to their villages' useful innovations from the neighboring towns.

The celebration recognizes the octogenarian as an important member of the community. To whom much is given, much is expected. Thus, the octogenarians are traditionally obliged to tell the truth always. They are expected to be peaceful and reconciliatory in their dealings with their fellow human beings in their various communities.

The festival recognizes and honours the contributions made previous years by the octogenarians. All those who participate in the longevity cultural festival (*Ito-ogbo*) in Obosi are traditionally and customarily exempted from all communal levies, taxes and all sorts of labour, showing the great honour given to them. It also adds to their inclusiveness in the society.

Furthermore, *Ito-ogbo* Obosi promotes thanksgiving in the life of octogenarians. It provides an occasion for offering prayer of thanksgiving to God for the well-being of the octogenarians and the prosperity of the whole community.

Challenges of longevity cultural festival (*Ito-Ogbo*) in Obosi and way forward

Though interesting and good celebrating the gift of life given to humanity freely from God, the celebration of longevity cultural festival in Obosi is not without challenges.

The celebration has become more of competition among the people, where the haves display their wealth and the have-nots go extra miles to meet up with the challenges. In the earliest time of the longevity cultural festival, killing of cows was done communally by the celebrants marking their birthday as a group, but these days, cows are slaughtered individually, making it difficult for the poor among them to meet up. The poor equally go to the extent of getting loan in order to celebrate and make their parents feel belonged. The people of Obosi are encouraged to go back to the root and make it a communal celebration where killing of cows is done in common to enable the poor to avoid going beyond their limits.

To perform the *Ito-Ogbo* ceremony, the family of the celebrant will provide sumptuous meals for the merriment of their various family members and well wishes from far and near. Both those who can afford it and those who cannot afford will individually buy things and feast in their homes, thus, making the celebration very expensive. It is encouraged that the Igwe of Obosi and his cabinets make a policy on the limits of the

things to do and not do during the festival. The entire community, especially the rich should be encouraged to assist the poor in their midst during the period of celebration.

The financial load is usually heavy on the ancient Obosi kingdom. The federal and the State governments need to join hands to sponsor this festival to make it an internationally recognized festival, which will also boost tourism industry in the country and improve the economy.

Conclusion

Longevity cultural festival which has assumed wider publicity has become the most popular festival in Obosi, since it is celebrated by all and sundry. It is also being copied by other towns and communities. Longevity cultural festival (*Ito-Ogbo*) is a gift from the forefathers which Obosi people now give to the whole world to celebrate old age. In a country where life expectancy hovers around 54 years, it is important to encourage the celebration of this festival or similar ones in different communities, in order to make people value aging and look forward to it. The *Ito-Ogbo Obosi* has contributed in giving every Obosi citizen a reason to desire to live long. The celebration enhances the spiritual growth of the people through gratitude and thanksgiving to God.

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