

Nembe Cultural Festivals of Nigeria: African Culture Notes

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Abstract

Cultural festivals are increasingly becoming arenas of discourse for scholars to express their innate views about the cosmological component of a society on a wider social, cultural and political scales. Thus, galvanizing debates that invariably polarizes between those advocating change and those preserving tradition in the face of globalization. This paper however analyzes the significance of cultural festivals among the Nembe people of Ijo ethnicity of Nigeria. Thus, the paper informs that generally festival and its cultural contents is the livewire that have been appropriately utilized to keep alive the cultural history of what becomes the collective or historical memory of the people concerned; which links them to their past. This ostensibly underpins the collective sustainability of the meaning, importance, as well as the role festival plays in the history of Nembe society of all ages. The findings revealed that festival was and is a major source of history as well as history in its own right among non-literate societies of the globe for historical, aesthetic, as well as existential purposes. The methodological approach in this paper was historical anthropology where primary and secondary data collection were subjected to varying content analysis for utilization informed the conclusion reached.

Keywords: *Cultural, Festival, Tradition, Historical, Anthropological, Nembe, Ijo, Nigeria*

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Background to the Study

The Nembe people are from the Ijo ethnicity of Nigeria. On account of their migratory and environmental characteristics naturally cultivated and practiced customs and traditions that were adapted to resolve their environmental challenges. These customs and traditions they developed help them, to actualize their fullest potentials for existential purposes. This became the bedrock for them to have attained a higher culture or civilization that flourished for centuries, and which, ultimately became a standard to many Ijo communities west to east of the Niger Delta, as brokers and entrepreneurs of the European trade in the 15th and 19th centuries (Eferebo, 2017:107; Jones, 2009; Dike, 1956). Accordingly, traditional African societies tell their histories through festivals, as this is the expression of the lived experiences of their ancestors that are celebrated practically connecting them with their living traditions.

Cultural festivals are not only important for the observation of time which can be seen in reality through the seasons of the year, but can also serve the function of social mobilization and cohesion among the people. This belief system was and is still held as the social engineering of their cultural traditions. These activities ranged from the preparations to the performances as well as other sociocultural activities. These festivals involve sacrifices and rituals which are symbolic thanksgiving, atonement, rededication, as well as communion between the ancestors and the Nembe people. The performances of rituals in these festivals make the Ancestral heroes or Gods or Goddesses symbolically manifesting and dwelling amongst them. Thereby building bridges of linkages as the entertainment of these guests (Gods) with special spiritual communion with their celebrations that showcases their relevance not only to the particular society but also in global contexts as well.

Despite the incursion of the two major world religions among the Nembe communities such as Islam and Christianity as elsewhere, every aspect of their lives is marked with one festival or the other. Festivals are in form of rituals, sacrifices and ceremonies occasioned to keep alive the historical memory of the people concerned. This is because festival is a public event celebrated by a community connected with a particular activity and centering on some characteristic aspects of that community and its religion. Festival however serves to fulfill specific existential purposes, especially with regard to commemoration or thanksgiving (Wikipedia, 2022), as the link between the gods and the Nembe people. Among other things festival celebration offers a sense of belonging to religious, social groups, enhancing group cohesion, entertainment, and provide information on common traditions of the people. Thereby, it constitutes typical examples of glocalization process, as well as the high frequency for cultural relativism of lived experiences.

There are countless numbers of festivals celebrated in Nembe society from antiquity such as Ogidiga, Isemi, Suo and Ekine-Sekiapu among other important festivals celebrated over the centuries. As such, these festivals tend to give a general analysis of festivals on the African continent. The aim of this paper therefore, is to investigate the relevance, importance of festivals to the contemporary life of Africans, especially the Nembe of Nigeria. This is whether festivals still continue to play their role in their present social life. And why festival celebration of the lived experiences, culture and heritage has been sustained over the centuries?

Cultural Festival: A Conceptual Clarification

This layer is to make a constructive elucidation of the main concept of festival as used by the Nembe worldview in context; as there are a large number of conceptualizations of festivals are used in the literature. The word “festival” became popular first in the 14th century, that derived from Latin via Old French was handed down in varying forms, however, its usage most often refers to a religious or cultural rather than a film, art, feast festival, etc (Wikipedia, 2022). This is as many festivals have religious origins and entwine cultural and religious significance in traditional activities. Examples are replete in history such as Christmas, Eid al-Fitr, among others, serve to mark out yearly.

Expanding further, the Webster's New Explorer encyclopedia dictionary (2006 edition) expresses festivals as “a time or periodic season marked with a program of cultural celebrations and special observances” (Webster, 2006:678). Thus, cultural anthropologists sees festival as special celebrations which are embedded on mythical and super natural beliefs instituted around customs and traditional practices of indigenous peoples. Hence, they are occasions to mark a range of activities including worship, purification, songs, music and dances, ritual processions and sacrifices at shrines, incantations, as well as sharing significant historical lived traditions.

While the scope of festival is varied, ranging from arts, agricultural, cultural, sport, among others, but there is the commonality of characteristics being identified. It therefore substantiates the fact that, festivals are events marked at a particular point in time; as such, they are repeated and open to the public. Accordingly, Uysal and Gitleson (1994:3) contemplate festivals as “traditional events staged to increase the tourism appeal to potential visitors”, while Saleh and Ryan (1993:290) subscribed that, “by their nature, festivals are of short duration, and generally based around a theme”. Furthering the importance of festivals, Getz, Anderson and Carlsen (2010:30) contends that “festivals celebrate community values, ideologies, identity and continuity”. This is so especially that festivals often create a sense of belonging and pride among the local social communities.

As it were, festivals are highly a function of key personalities or institutions within its framework on a regular basis, to renew periodically the lifestream of a community by creating new energy, and to give sanction to its institutions. The expression is that the only symbolic means to achieve this is to represent the primordial fantasies of creation, or a historical mythsization before the establishment of culture, society, regime where the festival happens to take place (Falassi, 1987). As Berridge (2007) citing relationship between festivals and cultural celebrations sees cultural celebration either secular or religious, created by and or for the public, schedule alone or in conjunction with other events. It has also been stressed that festivals are marked beside other events that may share some features of cultural- temporary while also having obvious differences, for example.

For this preferences, Harry van Vliet (2019:5-7) has shown festival characteristics among others in their relation to a specific public place, defined period, planned and organized activities, unique experiences, as well as non-everyday situation and actions. Such that “festival

create the sense of unique, one-off experiences, for which it is...and which therefore bear their own authenticity” (Giorgi, Sassatelli & Delanty, 2011:18). And, of course, this is a really unique experience for one to enjoy to the fullness of all times as “people are now searching for new ways to fill in the unique aspect...learning, sensory, and emotional stimulation are elements of design that promise to engage and fill individuals” (Getz, 2015:27).

This is perhaps why Harry van Vliet (2019:9) stressed that “A festival is a gathering of a relative large group of people in a specific public place and during a defined period, where visitors are offered a unique experience that is planned and organized based on a certain goal and where use is made of transformations and play so visitors have the possibility to behave and feel differently than their everyday reality”. The implication is that this conceptualization does not clarify whether a certain event is a cultural festival or otherwise. Thus, the above definition of festival is in line with Falassi's view, which however puts more emphasis on the cultural anthropological lens.

According to him festival is, “a periodically recurrent, social occasion in which, through a multiplicity of forms and a series of coordinated events, participate directly or indirectly and to various degrees, all members of a whole community, united by ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical bonds, and sharing a worldview. Both the social function and the symbolic meaning of the festival are closely related to “series of overt values that the community recognizes as essential to its ideology and worldview, to its social identity, its historical continuity, and to its physical survival, which is ultimately what festival celebrates” (Getz, 2007:31). This is a broader conceptualization in which, the African worldview is articulately captured, hence, is adopted as the operational definition that guided this study for analysis.

Festivals in Africa: A Historiographical and Anthropological Note

The importance of interrogating specific cultural traditions in historical analysis has been noted (Vansina, 1990:8), constitutive of the ways that traditions adds value (Cohen, 1980), for the reconstruction to serve contemporary purposes (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). This is alongside the collection of oral tradition, the symbolic study of festival objects can provide useful evidence of ideational change. As symbols, these things not only condense multiple narratives within a single event but convey meanings that may change over time. Festivals, for example, may relate to a complex of beliefs, ideas about a cultural system which is part of a wider religious cosmology (Renne, 1998:310). This is especially in the case of anthropological or historical reconstructions of the past, as Ohnuki-Tierney (1990:18) has noted, what is “needed in future research are close examinations, both theoretical and ethnographic, of symbols as lived experiences.”

However, one easy way of unraveling the meaning of such symbols “in lived experiences”, Peel (1995:606) informs is through the study of narratives. Expressing this view, he states that “...narratives as lived are the proper subject matter of an historical-anthropology and that any anthropology that takes seriously the idea of human agency will be concerned with how narratives as lived are shaped by narratives as told”. Although there are exceptions to this viewpoint but what is paramount is the use of these festivals as a function of elucidating

possible explanations or reconstructions of past traditions for contemporary uses. For example, Alagoa (1968:17) has combined linguistic analysis with contemporary ethnographic data on religious practices among the Ijo people of Nigeria.

This is why the lived experiences of Africans are significant as a result of their multiplex, revealing and manifesting the nature of reality to African people in their own unique ways (Ogbenika 2016:xiv), a role played especially by festivals. The lived experiences is marked with many festive celebrations that accompanied varied ceremonies. The aspect of these lived experiences that strike the ethnographers about indigenous African societies was and is the sheer numerical importance of ritual festivals and ceremonies. As a result the earliest Europeans who came to Africa were struck by the number and frequency of these festivals that they thought Africans had nothing else to do (Hontoundji, 1966:54). But in fact every human society is dotted with its peculiar norms, values, customs, and traditions which not only characterize it but also determine the life of that society.

In Africa, as elsewhere, this role is played by festivals and its concomitant ritual ceremonies (Beier, 1950:70). The significant thing attached to all of this is that social and moral life is encoded in festive manifestation which played the function of social and moral control measures as well as provide entertainment for the society concerned (Emeife, 1992:67), and tells the ethno-history in ritual forms. Therefore, festivals are important indicators of group interest and values and various aspects of social life, as distinct from western climes, is a religious society that strongly believes in the existence of God or Gods (Idowu, 1973:80) whose wishes they must conform with and whose lived experiences they must strickly adhere (Brelsford 1948:3). This viewpoint stress further that there exists forces that control the spiritual realm which in turn control the universe (metaphysical and physical) that limit man's actions and he is therefore obliged to conform for existential purposes.

This is the realm of taboos and moral restraints. The viewpoint expresses the constant factor of morality as a relevant and basic principle within the community is encoded in the Ijo cultural history. This is indicative of a society rooted in values able to guide it through turbulent and critical times, was and is, clearly, a moral community (Alagoa, 2011:78). One obvious source of evidence of festival is the heritage of collective wisdom encoded in the oral literature of Ijo communities of the Niger Delta. This is as festival reveals the existence of a time honored code of right and wrong (ebi-na/sei-na) conduct among the Gods and between members of that society in which dwells the Gods (owu-ase/oru-ase) what the Nembe refers to as “tonton” “bgololo bo or bgololo ongu” (ancestral spirits and deities), as well as defines taboo (miegha yai, bunu yai or gbobosi-gbobosi) meaning committing taboo (Egbenimi Yousuo, High Priest of Onyoma Pere, personal communication 21/6/2022).

This sphere of man's existence according to Ogbenika (2020:292) is associated with the sacred realm and the Gods. This is a situation whereby the two (metaphysical and physical) worlds meet, life and the world as a whole are visualized in relationship with the sacred realm concurrently. It is through this process of continuous interaction between the realms that the continuation of social life are guaranteed through well determined and periodical contacts

with the divinities during which the society reiterates the essential factors of life and death. It also brings together the whole social community and provides an occasion for the renewal of fellowship between the physical world and spiritual world, creating a sense of balance worldview. This is as Beyer (2010:4) emphasizes “everything and everyone is connected to everything and everyone else”. As humans “leap into the framework of the sacred” (Schmidt, 1980:150). As festival rites is the bridge that connects the realms (Sundermeier, 1999:89), networking into a full cosmic cycle.

This is factored on the ground that there is cause and effect in creation myth that constituted human beliefs and behaviors that have become mythical events in living traditions. These events are therefore of vital importance to contemporary man. For example, the major occupation of the Nembe and by extension Ijo generally is fishing, it is because the ancestors of Ijo performed this activity in the dim past, as they are today, is a direct function of these conjugated mythical traditions. These provided an information as to why Ijo people should make their living in this way (Eliade, 1963:54), and same mythical is explicable to farming in a predominantly agricultural society vis-à-vis other fields of indigenous activities known to human societies.

What all this implies is that a traditional Ijo (African) feels that, in performing the essential activities that determine his existence such as fishing, he is repeating acts performed by supernatural beings (gods). Doing so at different mythical time and since these acts were all part of creation, he feels that by repeating them, he is participating in the creation exercise. The Nembe society therefore revolves around this cyclical view of history as the whole cycle goes on adinfinitum. This is certainly true of the elaborately systemic myth built around the origin of fishing among the Ijo people of Nigeria. Sociologically, all their festival ceremonies are patterned accordingly to serve the important purpose of keeping the lived experiences to re-enact the precept of recreation and regeneration of this harmonious whole. In Africa, the concept of God is functional; only through needs, preoccupations and aspirations of the society that determine the Gods it creates for itself. Because the functionality of God also explains the proliferation of gods and festival ceremonies among traditional societies of Africa, especially the Nembe of Nigeria.

Of interest is the characterization of these festivals where the priesthood institution among others, play a significant leading role with special incantations and consultations with Divinities through “ofe bibi” (speaking in tongues); a proto Ijo language that is endangered (Thompson Samuel, High Priest of Ogidiga, personal communication 27/5/2022). The priests serve as a link between man and the Divinity. During festivals in traditional African society there is a general feeling of joy and collective paroxysm as man invites the Gods as guests. The climax is manifestation of the gods as actors in the mythical festivals leaping humans into Divinity, where they have to participate as actors, to showcase their superhuman qualities even in Divinity (Elder Okienkuma Scent Itua, Priest of Oriyai, personal communication 13/5/2022), as a characterization of deification in living traditions.

Nembe Festivals

There are many festival ceremonies undertaken by the Nembe people of Nigeria. They are a sub-group of Ijo ethnicity in Nigeria's oil rich Niger Delta region. Precisely, they are found in Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas of Bayelsa. They developed what Professor Kenneth Dike and Glyn Jones referred to as city states or trading states (1956; 2009) whose influence reached as far as the Niger-Benue confluence region, especially during the pre-European era. As a result of their migratory, as well as environmental challenges the Nembe are predominantly fisher folks, salt makers, canoe makers and traders from prehistoric times. They distinguished themselves with their dialect (Nembe bibi in the Ijo language), unique customs and traditions, dressing, and the canoe house institution (Eferebo & Eferebo, 2021:62), the pivot of local administration.

As aforementioned, there are a number of festivals celebrated by the Nembe people, some annually and others may take several years, on requested by the divinity associated with such celebrations. It is however important to categorize them according to how these festivals are being celebrated. They includes but not limited to this list: Ogidiga Olali, Isemi Olali, Suo Olali, and Ekine-Sekiapu Olali (festivals). The drive for this categorization is to enable create the trend for each of the category to establish circumstantial evidence, even though there are fundamental cases of overlap, as recognized elsewhere (Eferebo & Eferebo, 2021:65), as well as their significance. To this end, naturally we begin with Ogidiga festival.

Ogidiga Olali (Festival)

The available literature attributes most of these festivals to coronation of kings but it is crystal clear that monarchy as the instrument of governance is comparably a recent institution to priest-kingship in Nembe historiography. What is clear about all of this is the most reasonable suggestion that the origin of some of these festivals now categorized as Ogidiga, are elements of Senengimo-Pere (or Olodi-Pere) of which Ogidiga is ascribed today clearly corroborates the hybridization theory (Eferebo & Eferebo, 2021). Prelude to all of Ogidiga ceremonies was Oru-Fou (juju market). This is encoded in the buying of a special specy of yam at Ebe (the Nembe name for Aboh) by the kings of Nembe and Okpoma) and chiefs lead by a juju war canoe for the purchase.

As Ogiriki (2008:280) informs that, “it was not the usual ordinary yam, but a yam emblematic and non-constrictor coiled blood with its head at the top”. The high point is that after purchasing the yam and other accessories, at night they loaded the items proceeded home with pride. When they arrived at Oruamabiri (Juju Town) through the strait “buru-dogu-ongu” presented same to Ogidiga; if accepted, were kept in a sacred place against the day of the festival (Thompson Samuel, High Priest of Ogidiga, personal communication 12/5/2022). This was to be followed by Indi-Olali (feast of fish) a code name for human sacrifice (male) who was caught by a search party designated for that purpose by Ogidiga and also kept in a house specially built for that purpose with an attendant.

An eyewitness account informs that, “having spent twenty-eight holy days (seven kakas, a week of four days), he was to be sacrificed to Ogidiga. He was daily attended lavishly. On the

hey-day, he was conducted through Ogilolo to the drumhouse while he awaits his end, all the respective priests were seated at Opu-Bio (the sacred apartment), and awaits arrival of the High Priest of Onyoma-Pere who would perform the sacrifice. The Onyoma priest having dressed in full regalia, was paddled by an orphan girl singing a dirge that rendered thus: “Egbein-tekeleba sei mindi korogha, Egbein-tekeleba sei mindi korogha x2” (meaning the king fisher never wash in foul waters) finally landed at Ogilolo scene. The priest holds brazen double-edged swords on both hands made straight and sat on a special stool at the center of Opu-Bio. When the time was right for the sacrifice proper “at the signal of the talking drum, the lamb (human) having being blind-folded was conducted to the sacred spot and on the third signal, the Onyoma priest would stand up at once with his brazen sword (iseno-ogidi) and sever the head off with a single stroke. Having perform this rite returned home singing in fulfilment” (Piri Firstman, personal communication 12/2/2018).

Another interviewee adds that “as soon as the head fell on the holy grounds of Ogidiga, the High Priest came out from his chambers, took the head to conduct a ritual invocation calling on all the known Divinities followed by a loud ovation with seven canon guns salute. While the invocation last the Ogidiga priest would throw the severed head towards the entrance of Opu-Bio; if it fell facing the entrance, Ogidiga had accepted the sacrifice was complemented by egele processions heralds Ogidiga festival. This was quickly followed by the orphan priest who took the head into the sacred chambers for preparation and served everyone present” (Chief Azaka, personal communication 2/6/2022). He went further to say that in pre-Christian era sacrificial lambs came from among families and communities but over time the Abuans served this ritual essence. Accordingly, (Ockiya, 2008:282) avers, “in order to stop this dastardly act the Abuans and Nembe reached a mutual agreement in 1904”.

Thereafter a succession of ceremonies followed not necessarily in this order. The end of one ceremony is the beginning of another, sequentially lined up during the festival period that last for a maximum of fourteen days. These include viz:

- i. Erevugba/Erevuma (procession of naked women round town for cleansing lead by Ziba priestess);
- ii. Orutiri You (feast of wrestling);
- iii. Okpotu Olali (feast of throwing broken pieces of clay pot);
- iv. Fini Olali (feast of fire);
- v. Goba Olali (feast of clapping and jumping);
- vi. Ilu Olali (feast of darting plantain stem);
- vii. Obolomabiri Aru Olali (feast of Oboloma canoe display);
- viii. Oboloma-Suo Olali (feast of Oboloma Divinities);
- ix. Ogoni Olali (feast of Ogoni masquerade);
- x. Kikoliya Prebo (feast of drowning adulterers or adultresses); and
- xi. Abadi-Prebo (feast of appeasement of the sea).

While the festival lasted the high priest alongside other subordinate priests and priestesses accompanied by kings and chiefs of the two moieties (Bassambiri and Ogbolomabiri or theirselves' styled Opu-Nembe and Nembe city), as well as the king and chiefs of Okpoma with

Idi-ama Pere (Chief Deity of Okpoma) in attendance. Of importance the presence of the High Priest of Onyoma Pere is a prerequisite of the festival, though formed her own Community by seating separately to distinguish herself (independent status) of Ogidiga. Also spotlighting as the conqueror of Bile (first executor of external conquest in Nembe historical development), that prized Onyoma pere Opu-Bile, Kalabile (who founded settlements named after them Kalabile-ama (or Kalabilema) for example, to the south of Nembe metropolis about the 15th century that exists to this day and Igani, the eldest of the trio captors from Bile (Pogu Tom, a centenarian, personal communication, 2/10/ 2022). The climax of the festival was and is singing and dancing capped with series of offering and presentation of sacrificial items. Such items among others cows, rams, cocks, drinks in seven folds for the final sacrifice which brings to an end of the first segment and herald the commencement of the last (imobimo) segment of another seven days to end the festival (Ebiene Forcebery, personal communication, 2/12/2021).

Isemi Olali (Periwinkles Festival)

Isemi Olali was and is one of the most important festivals in Nembe, which is very prominent with the women folk. Preparatory to this all important festival is a major function of the women folk, they subscribed them, in most cases, from the various canoe houses and set aside a date for picking of periwinkles, led by a Opu-Ziba (high priestess). On the appointed date, those chosen for the exercise proceed to Olodiama (in earliest times) presently to Oruamabiri with their baskets constructed against the day. The myths surrounding this tradition is that old baskets are not entertained, as they joined the league of women here. There was a special sacred mangrove swamp designated for the harvesting of periwinkles only for festival purposes. The expedition is filled with festive atmosphere that changed the mood of participants as they sing songs of praises to the Isemi Divinity rendered as “Ekipayo numomi na suoyo numomina: AnyanZiba AnyanZiba AnyanZiba Isemi dimi Nembe Se Iwobo x4” (Ebiene Forcebery, personal communication, 2/12/2021).

The significance of these songs expressly tells of the importance of Isemi to the Nembe society. They would leave the sacred periwinkle mangrove forest to another sacred swamp region to cut firewood, thereafter returned home with singing to Oruamabiri. And after discharging all from the canoes to a sacred yard, they went to their different homes (Ockiya, 2008:284). According to Pogu Tom, “early the following morning which was a holy day at Oruamabiri the women roasted and removed the periwinkles from their shells, and prepared different delicacies. During this process there was singing and dancing to complement the Divinities, as well as the good will of periwinkles to the Nembe people. Adding that after the preparation segment by the women, the High Priest of Ogidiga having performed the ritual incantations and prayers to the Gods, appointed a subordinate priest to dish the food and drinks to the kings and all chiefs, who were to enjoyed with their subjects” (2/10/2021), which lasted for three days.

She adds, when the contingent arrived home at Oruamabiri the high priestess of Opu-Ziba would off-load Isemi with a basket in praise of her for four consecutive times, and the song begun each time she off-loads until this process was completed. She rendered the song as follows “Isemi dimi Iwobo Iwobo Iwobo Anyanziba Isemi dimi Iwobo Nembe Se La.

Anyanziba Anyanziba Anyanziba Isemi dimi Iwobo Nembe Se La” x4. Thereafter, all ladies in the boat would at this point jointed to off-load the Isemi boat. This is a significant and symbolic revival of the bond between the people and their Gods, are gifts of social cohesion, as well as seek to inform the community of faith of their traditions, as living heritages.

Suo Olali (city creating Divinities festival)

There are historical or clinical proof to support the argument that the process was referred as Idumange (banana race) as one of the festivals celebrated by the Nembe people, especially for male dancers that lasted three days. This festival takes a long period of time to be prepared. Accordingly, the symbolic angala pole erected by a chosen individual to fetch this from a sacred mangrove forest with drink and food items to appease the spirits of this special grove to allow utilized one of it to built a home of life for the divinities. After libation and prayer to Owuamapu or Owuama-ongu (water spirits) with songs for appeasement of these spirit beings, they allowed him to cut off the mangrove pole to the canoe flowing with the tide until arrived at Suotugu (cradle or the Nembe Garden of Eden) with jubilation and admiration. Such dramatic manifestation of the Gods to pilot the canoe without being steered by the Angala priest was a delicacy of a lived experience (the author was a participant of the festival in 1995 and 2009 respectively).

There are native bananas grown close to the mangrove pole erected, what these symbolically represented was the first fruit planted in the garden of the founder Olodi-Pere and mangrove pole the altar he built to house the spirits who inhabited the area before his arrival. As it were, this place is the Nembe Garden of Eden comparable to the Biblical creation of the world. These lived experiences were remembered through ceremonies in commemoration of the great spirits as they co-existed in the area with the living. During the festival people thronged in their numbers to celebrate by dancing round the Olodi-Pere square at intervals taken cognizance of the drumbeats. This is as each troop or individual to appear in its uniform, and accordance with their occupations. For instance, the fishermen would carry fishing implements, the blacksmiths, canoe makers and so on have to dance with their professional tools. This mythical dance is a reasonable suggestion of the many migratory origin and claim of descending from the sky as evidenced in the drum tradition rendered: “korobo igbangiya korobo” eulogized and responded by dancers pointing the sky as the symbolic sphere of the Gods as they chorus: “Olodi Pere yo, Obolo Pere yo, Onyoma Pere na re suo koro be” x2 (meaning the trio Olodi, Obolo and Onyo descended from heavens).

The Nembe people believed these ancestors were part of creation in their living traditions. Therefore the Suo Olali was to simply re-enact what the ancestors did in the dim past was being commemorated in grand style, hence, employed the Gods to come witnessed themselves. The high mark of this festival was that the banana tree that were planted the previous ceremony and upon the fall of the mangrove pole (symbolic house of life) need to be rebuilt. Having done so, it was time to clear the weeds and replant new banana seeds to grow for the next cycle of celebrations. Therefore, on the third day the priest of Suo would invoke all ancestor heroes according to their ranks and related Divinities of other Ijo communities such as Ke, Bonny, Kalabari, Okrika, Bile and so on to participate in the recreation exercise (Stephen Ebifate, Suo Priest, personal communication, 14/5/2022).

The chief dancer (Mr. Ebinyefa Tubu) was chosen through divination with the Arch-Divinities, as such leads the dance, consultation and procession of the recent past festival. The drum master having provoked the Gods, they quickly took possession of the chief dancer (Suo Olali priest) as the atmosphere became tense with singing, dancing and jubilation. He being possessed, greeted all the seated priests, chiefs and ancestral heroes as the drummer called out their drum praise names. On this note, the priest had moved to the last stage of the festival on the third day. He was to cut down the sacred “banana tree” with fruits marked with ritual emblems, he would attempt twice and on the third occasion cut it down with a single stroke. The implication was that should it fell to his right, this was a successful outing and jubilation followed or contrawised was rejected. This was to begin the festival process all over again, as tradition demands (Teilanyo Oba, drum Priest, personal communication, 28/4/2022).

Ekine-Sekiapu Masquerade Festival

The cultural history of the Nembe people, like that of any other people around the globe, represented the story of a continuous interplay of what C. W. Jenewari referred to as two phenomena: change and continuity (Jenewari, 1973:27). As they expresses those old good days of the past, there is always a feeling of pride and nostalgia in their narrative. Curiously, change has confronted the Nembe people on many fronts but, still, there are a few institutions which have survived the odds, serving as strong links between the old order and the new order. One such institution is the Ekine-Sekiapu masquerade festival. The Ekine-Sekiapu (Dancing people) Society, which had its origins among the Ijo people of Kalabari, that was introduced to (Bassaambiri, now Opu-Nembe) by Prince Orugbani (son of King Jacket Mein) in the early 19th century. This Association rapidly spread to other Nembe and Niger Delta communities, and proved to be the most effective medium of Nembe cultural expression. The importance of Ekine-Sekiapu, like many a folkloristic art, integrates religion and art.

In spite of the tremendous changes in the religious lives of the Nembe people by Christianity and Islam, all the same, traditional religion remains the base of the entire social system and provides the key to a full appreciation of the art, and by extension festivals. There are three classes of free spirits namely Oru/Owu (national heroes), Duien (dead ancestors), and Owuamapu (water spirits), constitute the tripod on which the worldview of the Nembe and Ijo generally rests. These three classes of free spirits are complementary in their functions, and together offer means of explanation and control of things in the social community (Horton, 1962; Horton, 1960). Of importance, they are capable of being dramatized, and the most spectacular means of dramatizing them was and is through the masquerade plays during festivals.

Of interest in these free spirits, the Owuamapu received the greatest attention in the Ekine-Sekiapu festival. This is according to Chief Teibeinyo, “of the multiplex masquerades well over thirty major and fifty subsidiary ones tended by Ekine-Sekiapu represent actual water spirits and other aquatic mammals, reptiles and fishes as symbolic water spirits, by general conception, to be representations of water peoples” (Chief Dike Amadi Teibeinyo, the Opusian-head of Ekine-Sekiapu in Opu-Nembe, personal communication, 2/6/2022). These various masquerades are performed in a festival cycle which begins with a process called the

drumbeat of Opu-Okumo, Akusa and Akankpo (messenger's drum) to surmon members on the orders of Opuasian (Head of Ekine-Sekiapu Society). Ekine-Sekiapu is a male elite association, after series of meetings, a date was fixed for processing around the community, which also herald or unveiling of new entrants.

Thereafter, there was rigorous practices and rehearsals to fixed the beginning of the festival, especially during the months of December through January, yearly. The “festival culminates in the ceremony called OWU ARU SAI (procession of water people spirits or masks regatta). Although because of the elaborate nature of this cycle, and the expenses involved in bringing these processes to fruition, Owu Aya Aru (mother of masquerades canoe display) is one example, turned out to be a rare event among the Nembe Ijo people of Nigeria (Deputy Chief Dieneseigha Sam, an inner-cycle member of Ekine-Sekiapu, personal communication 27/6/2022). Adding that in other cases Agbor Aru (masks regatta) is the choicest dietary of this cycle, another example.

In all these cases, either OWU AYA ARU or AGBOR ARU (generally, OWU ARU SAI) playing masquerade on the creek has dual purposes. At the end of one festival cycle when all the masquerades in Ekine-Sekiapu have been played, a particular masquerade, like the Agbor Aru (Bassambiri/Opu-Nembe) or Owu Aya Aru (Ogbolomabiri/Nembe City) is given the right to usher in the next cycle of Ekine-Sekiapu festival by being displayed first on the creek. Masquerades are played on the creek for adoration of the mask spirits and also serve as a prolusion to the main play in most cases, during festival. However, at about 4 a.m depending on the tide, especially during flow tide Owu Aya Aru set out for action while Opuasian and members of Ekine-Sekiapu gathered at strategic water fronts dressed elegantly in India madras tied round the waist and an eagles' feather sticking out of the headgear. Some wear etibu, woko or anga-pu, don etc. while headgear ranges from the richly decorated ajibule to ordinary hat (Elder Berepelebo James, personal communication, 18/12/2021).

As Jenewari (1973:28) attest that “a few, particularly those with ajibulu, wear the heavy coral beads...leopard's teeth as necklaces. Some hold an ivory tusk in one hand, and a fan in the other; others hold a walking stick to complement”. Also, the masquerades present a corresponding, if not more spectacular, display of color and variety. This is especially because each of them has behind it a story, which explains its origin, its role in the Ekine-Sekiapu, its dance-steps and drum rhythms, its costume and headpiece for artistic glamor. The masquerades constitute the focal point of the festival, representing a continuum of living creatures ranging from fishes, through amphibians and animals, to humans. Each masquerade was robed in the special garb and headpiece of the water spirit it represented drum rhythm (Horton, 1963). The Akwana-Alabo (drum master) would call each of the masquerade, and play its drumbeat to connect the water spirits. Beginning with Fangu (fan spirit), oarsman of the boat of the water spirits, Tikpoli, Gbasa, Isegi, Otoba, Angalaya, Ebe, Egu, Mgbela, Ofini, Alagba, Agiri and so forth (Alagoa, 1967). The various masquerades took turns to display in a boat paddled by Owu Aya (mother of masquerades). When the procession cycle was completed, Owu Aya long-sided at the water front to be received by Opuasian and members singing and dancing to Ekine-Sekiapu House.

Then, begun the land cycle of the festival as every masquerade spirit was duly appeased; after a day or more rest. Like the water display, the land aspect followed similar procession round the ancient square, this time led by the Onogi or Segi-Azana (dance priest) who leads the circuit and dance-steps of all masquerades. As the drum master beats the special processional drum rhythm maskers and non-maskers alike stylistically danced the slow, graceful, and majestic step that involved swaying gently from side to side (Abara mie). At this stage charm, grace, and splendor descended upon the whole arena like benediction. Accordingly, the orchestra sounds the rhythms of the hero-Gods (kule tin), and dancers and maskers point to the directions of the owner's shrines. As dance experts showcases their talent with vigor and splendor, one observes on the faces of the non-maskers a sentimental satisfaction, a clear expression of joy for members of the most prestigious cultural society of all times.

This is as Jenewari (1973:31) noted the climax of Ekine-Sekiapu dance in Kalabari as elsewhere, there are four dance-steps, each with its characteristic drum rhythm and tempo. First, there is the Aliya (Abara mie) a slow graceful step in which the dancer sways gently side by side and gracefully moves his fan or tusk in consonance with the sway. Then comes the tu seki (ebeki) which involves lowering the head and wriggling the back while at the same time making subtle movements with the foot. The tu seki culminates in a subsidiary dance-step pekele (tokoro koro, igbiri naga or elu) a brisk dance that entails a short jump on one foot and landing on the other foot. What follows the pekele or tiye is a kind of gesture of appreciation; each dancer lightly touches the hands of both the dancer behind him and the one in front of him. Finally, comes Itaki Mangi (Igba bogo, sogotoi) which, in contrast with aliya and tu seki, involves taking the dance at a fairly quick pace—something intermediate between normal walking and slow running, and embellished with grace.

After taken the procession of all the masquerades owned by the Society, it was believed that the Water Spirits have ended their sojourn in the land of the living, and returned to their abode and in return for abundance of blessings. Then at night, they rolled Ikirigo and Igbirigbana (orchestra and special drums) into the society's sacred chamber for safekeep herald end of the festival. What is central to all of these, after fulfilling the necessary obligations through appropriate rites to these perpetual guardians of their destiny, the Nembe people are assured of their gods blessings. This is graphically captured that “the gods have no cause to angry; evil days need not come upon the people”. The religious aspect, “though significant, operates, as is to be expected, at the level of the imperceptible and therefore comes less readily to mind than the visual. From the artistic standpoint...provides a memorable spectacle in masquerade dancing; in the general dramatic representation of the rich store of pre-Christian...mythology; and in the splendid finery and aristocratic costume that brings...past close to the present” (Jenewari, 1973:30-31), gives expression to this religious feeling through the dramatic medium of the Ekine-Sekiapu masquerade festival.

Significance of Festivals

The significant festival celebrations in Africa, especially those of the Nembe of Nigeria are an expressive way to celebrate glorious heritage, culture and traditions. They play an important role to add structure to our social lives, and connect us to the past, as well as source of

inspiration to remember the important things and moments in life that are carried forward as the legends, knowledge and tradition onto the next generation. All festivals are cultural in one way or another, as there are typologies of cultural festivals, the essence is happiness to lives as well as strengthen our sense of community (Zalmay, 2017; Raimi, 2011). This is so as nothing brings a social community together like festivals. They play pivotal role in nation-building; bringing people from every facets of life together. It is as one informant contends “a social heritage, with a mixture of customs, traditions, norms, moral values, attitudes, folklores, ideal and beliefs not only makes a strong, cohesive community but also binds us to the past from one generation to another, in which they re-invent events of historical significance, such as war, migration and utilize festivals to dramatize lived experiences” (Chief Meshake Odu, personal communication, 12/3/2022).

Festivals have historically been a great source of entertainment especially during the pre-European mass-produced entertainment. Festivals divert peoples' attention from their demanding lives and amuse them in their leisure with songs and dances, are gifts that need to be celebrated. They also form an important part of our lives. As they come in various kinds, especially cultural festivals. Despite the differences in which they come, they all mean one thing and that is celebration. They represent an occasion to celebrate which becomes an essential part of human life, and are often the socially sanctioned means to break monotonous cycle of daily lives. Cultural festivals are religion in contents, have historical and mythological underpinnings on the connect between humans and nature and worship the forces of nature. Many festivals attract a large number of tourists from all walks of live and also encourage economic activities (Christopher Egai, personal communication 5/4/2022), beneficial to the social community.

Furthermore, their significance lies in the fact that they illustrate among other things historical events, coming of age, harvesting of crops, and appeasement to the various Gods for protection against enemies, evils, diseases (Ayeni, 1983:3), and so on. The festivals are indicative of a cycle of stages of life. The living dead or ancestors are into a web of interconnectivity with their living descendants. This is expressive of the belief in life after dead. Again, through festivals celebrations, the social community remember their past leaders and ask for their help and protection (Oduyoye, 1998:150), as the occasion arises. Also, festivals are used to purify the whole social environment so that the people can enter the next cycle of life with hope and dignity, fulfilling communal recreation, as well as social revival exercises such as Erevuma/Erevugba (nude women procession round town) and Ziba priestess throwing itoru alongside it (throwing of native chalk and rendering archaic speeches) as rites of purification (Erenkaye Magnus, Ziba Priestess of Tundubaziba, personal communication, 12/1/2020).

The point to emphasize is that creation is a special province of God, it is recreation that men revitalize God's creation so that it does not become ancient history but a present reality. It is the recreation of history aspect of festivals which makes the participation of kings, chiefs, and priests obligatory in the drama of festivals (Oduyoye, 1998:152), re-enacting the living traditions of the community's sense of history. For as the descendant of the founder of the social community the king acts the role of the founder at festival celebration, for example.

Aside the aesthetics that characterized festivals, it turns a dual world (spiritual and physical) into a single sphere during festivals.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has highlighted the significant cultural festivals in Nembe Se over the centuries. This is essentially the cultivation of nature and the celebration of history, is the inventive mechanism to recreate nature in their living traditions. This is as though indicative of participation in God's special province of creation, and revitalization of God's creation to be alive so that it does not become a remote activity but as part of the existing reality. It is in this sense that festivals serves a splendid harmony for the good of the Nembe people of Nigeria, and by extension Africans. This discussion of cultural festivals in the Nembe society, is therefore a representation of the African worldview, a perspective of the thought expressive of the connect between the living dead (hero-Ancestors or Gods) are into a web with their living descendants, is indicative of a cycle of stages of life. For it is believed that their ancestors never died they only changed their states relevant to their previous status, as they participated in every sphere of life among others festival celebrations.

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