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## NEW YAM FESTIVALS IN IGBOLAND

*Yam*,<sup>1</sup> the principal cash crop of the Igbo of Nigeria was the mainstay of the people's economy until recent times. However, it still remains the main occupation of the backwood communities. Hence the dominating importance of yam festival both in the past and in contemporary times.

Today the phrase *ji na ede*, yam and cocoyam, is literally the Igbo man's equivalent of the English phrase 'bread and butter.' There are evidences that *ji*, yam, plays a role as dominating as the potato in Ireland and rice in China. No other food crop has ever challenged its hegemony. There is, therefore, hardly any one in Nigeria who has never seen yam. Many have eaten it and love it, while a few detest it. But children at school are taught that it is one of the most important food crops in the wetter parts of the tropics particularly in West Africa, the Carribbean and parts of South East Asia.

Botanically there are many varieties, both wild and cultivated. Some species twine clockwise and some anti-clockwise when they are climbing up a support. The tubers which contain a lot of carbohydrate can be boiled, pounded, roasted or made into flour.

Before the advent of money economy in this part of the world, Igbo people were basically an agricultural community whose economy was based on the chief crop, yam. At that time, affluence was assessed not in liquid cash but in the size of one's barn as evidenced by rows of yam stakes and livestock. So prowess at growing yam was a fundamental aspect of male status in the community. Furthermore, the Igbo social order was governed and determined by the prevailing agricultural season. For instance, there are festivals celebrated during the clearing and tilling of new farm land. Others are celebrated during planting, weeding and harvesting periods. Thus everything about yam culture is followed very religiously as it is believed that good harvests are dependent on the god

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1. "Yam" in African Encyclopaedia. Oxford University Press 1974 p. 547.

of yam called *Ahijoku*<sup>2</sup> whose shrine called *Ajoku* or *Njoku* is represented by a circle of *abosi* tree, *baphia nitida* or camwood tree.

### The Origin of Yam

Historically yam is said to have been introduced into West Africa by the Portuguese,<sup>3</sup> but traditionally it is associated with myths, truths and half truths. Infact its origin, planting and harvesting altogether evoke prestige and ritualization.

There are as many accounts as there are old men concerning the origins of the yam and New Yam festival in Igboland. But the most popular is the account that yam is the reincarnation of the first son of an Afikpo woman sacrificed on the orders of *Ibinukpabi*, the Long Juju of Arochukwu.<sup>4</sup> According to this legend, when people were starving in Afikpo as a result of famine, they consulted the oracle, *Ibinukpabi* who, through his priest, demanded the sacrifice<sup>5</sup> by a woman called *Orianta Imomo* of her son to the god. But instead of using her real son for the said sacrifice, she substituted a slave and the community accordingly got a bastard yam, *ji abana*, water yam (*Dioscorea glata*). This was not what the people bargained for. So they went back to the oracle who confessed that he gave them "the slave of yam" because they offered a slave for the sacrifice !!! It then dawned on the people that nothing short of *Orianta's* first son would produce the food they needed. When she was constrained at last to sacrifice her true son they got the real yam, the white yam (*Dioscorea rotundata*) and this gave the promised satisfaction.<sup>6</sup>

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2. *Ahijoku* sometimes called *Ifejioku* in some parts of Igbo land is the yam-god. It is believed that this divinity makes all seeds to grow and the earth to become fruitful.

3. *African Encyclopaedia* op. cit.

4. The Long Juju of Arochukwu was probably the most revered oracle in Igboland long before the arrival of the whitemen. It used to be the highest arbiter in any serious dispute involving individuals, villages, groups or communities.

5. According to A.U. Aguda, *Orianta Imomo* was to plant something under a tree, tie her son to the tree and set fire to both. The child, of course, would be burnt to death. After a time, a plant would germinate under the tree grow and yield what would give the people food satisfaction.

6. D. Ozurumba and A. Nnwere: "Yam Festivals in Igboland" in *Sunday Statesman*, Sunday, July 8, 1984 p. 8.

As the yam was the reincarnation of the first son of an Afikpo woman sacrificed on the order of the oracle, it is revered in all localities in Igboland. Henceforth, yam festival tends to reenact a periodic "return to origin" of the Igbo race,<sup>7</sup> and although the stories connected with yam festivals have trappings of idol worship, they are the folklore which form the corpus of the people's cultural heritage.

### The Distinctive Peculiarities of Yam in Igbo Culture

Yam occupies such a very important place in the economic, social and cultural life of Igbo people to the extent that in some places the ceremonies performed in connection with yam relate both to the annual agricultural cycle and to the taking of yam-related title which expresses status in the society as a whole. Certain peculiarities and attributes are associated with yam, even though it is difficult to assess how many of these are kept today.

The peculiarities are as follow :

- i. Yam, according to oral accounts in Afikpo, is a man's crop, held not only as a human being, but an *amadi* a free born.
- ii. People do not defecate in a yam farm.
- iii. Yams hate blood-shedding and this was probably why there was a visible dearth of yam during the Nigeria-Biafra war.
- iv. Menstruating women do not enter the barn where yams are stored.
- v. Salt and pepper are not allowed to come in contact with stored yams.
- vi. After touching a corpse, one is not allowed to touch the yam in the barn until he has purified himself.
- vii. Women do not untie yams or take yams from the barn.
- viii. Yams should not be stored by putting the head upside down.<sup>8</sup>

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7. Ibid.

8. O. Kalu and E. Okereke: "New Yam Festival in Igboland" in *Sunday Statesman*, August 10, 1986, p. 9.

### The New Yam Festival

The New Yam Festival is not an exclusively Igbo ceremony. Geographically, there exists what is known as the West African Yam Belt stretching from the Cameroon to the Ivory Coast and the New Yam Festival is celebrated in this zone although in different degrees.<sup>9</sup> The most plausible explanation for the time and degree of celebration has underlining economic and social bases. For instance, the sixth lunar moon when it usually begins, coincides with the first yam harvest or the beginning of the season of plenty and the end of the season of scarcity, *Unwu* or *Ugani*.

The New Yam Festival in Igboland is usually held in honour of *Ahiajoku*, the yam god. Its origin dates back to memory since it is part of the oral tradition handed down from the forebears. However in consonance with the dynamic culture, there has been a remarkable change in the concept and perception of the festival. The details vary from locality to locality but generally, it is a festival in which sacrifices usually animals and thanksgiving are offered direct to *Ahiajoku* the yam god as a token of public gratitude on the part of the community for a fruitful and prosperous year. More than this, the termination of this, not only marks the end of the native year but serves also as a form of public notice that farming has to commence.<sup>10</sup>

In various parts of the Igbo speaking areas of Anambra, Bendel, Imo and Rivers states, the festival is called *Otite*, *Iwa ji* or *Iri ji*. At Mbaise in Imo state, for instance, the preparations start with the announcement of the day of the festival well in advance, usually a month ahead, by the *Nne ji*, priest of the yam god, who also controls the yam rituals. The *Nne ji* is usually chosen from the descendants of the founder of the village and consequently, he must be an *amadi*, a free born of the town.

Generally following this announcement, people would start purchasing all that they would need for the great annual celebration and the preliminary activities begin almost immediately. For instance, all roads leading into the village, the village square and homesteads are cleared and swept. Invitations are also sent out to friends, well-wishers and

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9. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

10. Leonard, A.G. *The Lower Niger and Its Tribes* London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd. 1906, p. 439.

inlaws. Other attractions include the teenage *Ulaga* masquerades who would parade the streets as from mid day, singing melodious songs and molesting young girls and non-initiates of the *muo* cult on their way. Elderly people offer protection to the youngsters and lead them out of the danger zone while the unprotected ones change their course and take a more peaceful thoroughfare.<sup>11</sup> And at night, when the moon is up, different youth clubs practise their dances while on a particular market day, young men engage in wrestling, first intra-village elimination bouts followed at the end by the inter-village wrestling competition. These activities are common all over the Igbo land.

But on the vigil of the feast at Mbaise, women and children in the homestead would wash the cooking pots, mortars and pestles in readiness for the reception of the new yams. The festival begins in the early hours of the following morning when the *Nneji* and all the members of the *Ezeji* society<sup>12</sup> would go to the barn of the priest and sacrifice a he-goat, *mkpi*, the blood of which is sprinkled at the shrine of *Ahiajoku*. Solemn prayers are made to the yam-god with kolanut and libation for a successful planting season and request is made for a continuous bountiful harvest. After which they would return to join their families. Private people can also sacrifice to *Ahiajoku*. Some would kill fowls or goats or even cows, each according to his financial disposition. The blood of the animal would be spilled on the entrance or at the head of the family's barn. Then follows a solemn celebration during which the priest eats new yam ceremoniously.

At Maku in Awgu Division of Anambra State, the tradition is for the priest of *Ifejioku* to plant a few yams about two months before others. Thus he would harvest first and offer the whole thing to the yam-god. Only after this could human beings begin to eat yams. Speaking of this practice, Meek says: "Not only is it an offence to eat new yams before the performance of the rites, but it is also an offence to introduce new yam from another town."<sup>13</sup> On the eve of the festival in this area, all heads of the *Umunna*, the extended family unit would take a yam each

11. Bosah *The History of Onitsha* p. 141.

12. "Eze ji Society" is a guild of owners of atleast 100 stakes of yam. A member is simply called *Eze ji* which literally means yam chief. The plural form is *Ndi Eze ji*.

13. Meek C. *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* London. Oxford University Press, 1937 p. 34.

to the shrine of *Ifejioku*. The titled men and the wine tappers among them would each get a fowl and a keg of palm wine respectively while the priest himself would provide the kolanuts and the *nzụ*, white chalk. All these items would be gathered at the shrine. Some of them would be cooked and consumed by the elders after offering them to the yam-god. Whatever remains belongs to the priest.<sup>14</sup> After this ritual sacrifice the elders would return to their homes to preside over the family celebration. And at Onitsha, a fowl is slain in the farm and the blood sprinkled on few choice yams. These yams are then taken home and laid before the *Ifejioku* shrine together with all the farming implements. Kolanuts are also offered. Then follows the feasting.<sup>15</sup>

### The Celebration Proper

On the appointed day, the atmosphere is charged with intense mood. At about mid-day, the *Ikoro*<sup>16</sup> would boom summoning people to the village arena. Soon after all roads would lead to the venue. Women singers take the field heralding the great day. Later the *ndichie*, chieftains, gaily dressed in their traditional regalia begin to arrive at the village square. As they arrive it is impressive to hear women singers extolling the prowess of the chiefs and praising the personality of their forebears.<sup>17</sup> It is a day all citizens appear in their best.

Soon a gargantuan crowd assembles comprising *Ozo* titled men, age grade societies, dancing troupes, youth clubs and numerous other social organizations all rapturously rent with melodies of heart-pervading music. The real event begins when the *Eze* of the autonomous community arrives in the arena. His arrival is announced by a barrage of canon shots. The titled men dance and respond to the cryptic rhythm of the *Ekpe* dance. Others then join in the celebration dance. Then the ritual session begins.

The *Nneji* authorized by the *Eze* then performs the ritual ceremony. A preparation of certain herbs with which pieces of roast yam are mixed

14. The priest is normally maintained with the gifts brought by worshippers to the divinity while his main duty is to propitiate the gods to ensure a bountiful harvest for the people.

15. Basden, G.T. *Niger Ibos*. London: Seeley, Service and Co., 1938 p. 67.

16. *Ikoro* is a huge wooden gong that always steps in majesty inside a building at the village square. It is sounded only on very important occasions.

17. Bosah op. cit. p. 145.

is then eaten ceremoniously by the priest. At each mouthful of the mixture, the onlookers who are standing round give a loud shout, so as to indicate to the gods the faithful observance on the part of their father regarding the divine instructions relative to the prohibition placed on the eating of new yams. Following the example of the priest, the young men according to custom are the first who are obliged to eat of the new yam. Chiefs of the lowest rank follow them, and so the feast is continued on the ascending social scale until it comes to the turn of the *Eze* King who closes the ceremony.

The reason for this distinction is at once apparent, amounting as it does, to a merely precautionary and protective measure taken on behalf of the *Eze* and royal family. So that in the event of the existence in the crop of impurities – that is, of malign or poisonous influences – the person of the *Eze*, representative as he is of ancestral authority, will remain safe and unharmed.<sup>18</sup>

At the close of the ceremony, everybody is feted by *Ndi Eze ji* in the area. There is always enough of everything to eat but prominent among them is yam which is either pounded, boiled or roasted. Visitors are received and entertained sumptuously, and on their departure gifts of new farm produce are sometimes made to them.<sup>19</sup>

### The Socio-Cultural Significance of the Festival

The New Yam Festival attained pre-eminent position in early historical times and it is the foremost traditional festival and the most widespread in Igbo land. A survey of traditional festivals conducted by the cultural branch of the Information Unit of the Cabinet Office, Enugu, reported that in 1979 a total of about 377 important festivals were held in 99 towns from 22 local government areas. And out of that number, 103 were New Yam and Yam-god festivals. These festivals were held in ten out of the twelve months in the year reaching a climax between August and September.<sup>20</sup>

In terms of stature the various Igbo yam festivals range from sub-village to village, town, ethnic and national festivals. It is a solemn event

18. Leonard, A.G. op. cit., p. 437.

19. Bosah op. cit., p. 151.

20. Asika, N. "Significance of New Yam Festival" in *Daily Star* Friday, October 24, 1986, p. 6.

everywhere in Igboland.<sup>21</sup> The celebration always brings together sons and daughters of Igboland from all walks of life. But it is pertinent to point out that this festival is not used for the raising of funds for any developmental projects. However titles, both honorary and real, are usually conferred on worthy and deserving sons of the land as a mark of respect for their contributions to the community.

The main celebration is preceded by a number of side attractions. Masquerades feature prominently by dancing in the streets and in the village square amidst jubilant crowds. The period witnesses many interesting events such as the traditional wrestling on the village arena. These contests are staged in villages when the moon is up. This kind of recreation provides a golden opportunity for able-bodied young men to display their physical agility. Expert performers are invariably objects of admiration by damsels who, during the occasion, chant the praises of those who bring honour to their villages by beating their opponents. It is also marked by several dancing groups some of whom make their debut in the village squares. Huge crowds are usually attracted to the scene to watch the new dance steps. At the end of the display, gifts in cash or kind are made to the dancers individually or collectively by admirers.

### **The Religious Significance of the Festival**

The festival is a period of peace when both young and old exchange gifts and wish themselves well. It is a time of joyful thanksgiving to the almighty God for granting them a successful planting season. Apart from the rituals and sacrifices made to the god, there are certain lesser features, namely dancing, singing and feasting. These, for the people, constitute a sincere and genuine form of adoration, a manifestation of joy and gratitude for favours received. They are the external demonstration of those higher and inner emotions which, in natural man, are instinctive and inexpressible. But when oblations have been offered and the gods have expressed their entire satisfaction with the people by showering on them the material blessings which they stand in need of, the dancing and singing by the people is but an upliftment of their souls and the outpouring of their bodies in the sheer delight of an existence over which the doom of the react and the unexpected is always hovering.<sup>22</sup>

21. Arinze, F. A.: *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion* Ibadan University Press, 1970, p. 27.

22. Leonard, A. G. op. cit., p. 439.



### Modern Developments in the Festival

In the olden days, the *Ahiajoku* festival was perceived as a wholesome pagan festival because of the integrated sacrifices. Then it was the initiated and titled men, the elderly first sons of each family and their wives who participated actively – for whereas the men cultivated the white yam, their wives cultivated the three-leaved yam or bitter yam (*Dioscorea dumetorum*). It was common, therefore, for them to make sacrifices in their respective shrines to the *Ahiajoku* thanking and praying for protection against sudden and unexpected vicissitude within the yam cycle. Today the attitude has simmered to what could be rightly termed an “across-the-board participation.”

Everybody now takes part in it, christians and non-christians alike though the degree of participation varies.<sup>23</sup> So the ritual of yam festivals in Igboland is changing from the erstwhile traditional celebrations of pre-christianity era.

As for the celebrants, there has been a split in two parallel new yam priesthoods. For the older pagan generation, the old order priesthood still presides. But for the generality of the population of the town or clan, the place of the old order priests has been taken over by institutionalised “priest-kings” – the new *Ezes*, *Igwes* and *Obis*. A third priestly group includes the christian priests and pastors inching into the festival to conduct and bless the ritual thanksgiving and bazaar celebration. Thus cannibalized, the ancient ritual has taken a modern characteristic.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, though at present the festival is a private affair of persons, villages and towns in the sense that its celebration is neither declared a public holiday nor a state function, it is beginning to gain government recognition. Again, though its timing and periodicity are determined exclusively by the local people; and although it is more or less a village or town level festival and each village celebrates it at its own time and place, and in its own way, it is beginning to be celebrated at an agreed date and place by more and more groups of Igbo villages who trace their origin to a common ancestor.<sup>25</sup> Consequently many towns are beginning

23. O. Kalu and E. Okereke : op. cit. p. 8.

24. Asika, N. op. cit.

25. Ibid.

to surrender their independence in fixing dates for the festival in favour of a date common to all. No wonder then there is the move by the Igbo Cultural Association of Nigeria (I.C.A.N.) to fix a specific date in the year for the festival, thereby elevating it from its sectional celebration to an All Igbo National Festival in which classical papers are presented by some eminent Igbo scholars<sup>26</sup> on the various aspects of Igbo life and culture. Thus, the catchment area of individual new yam festival is widening daily.

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26. This seminar popularly known as "Ahiajoku Lecture" is one of the most auspicious projects initiated and sponsored by the Imo State Government for public enlightenment. One of the objectives is "to create a challenging situation for scholars to undertake relevant research on Igbo Culture." So the Lecture has provided the forum annually for knowledgeable persons to air their views on various aspects of the Igbo society.