

## **Ehugbo Women in Ikeji Cultural Festival, 1970 - 1982**

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### **Abstract**

This article examined the significance but unsung roles of women in Ikeji cultural festival in Ehugbo of the Cross-river Igbo. In Ehugbo the Ikeji festival concerns more than the consumption of yam. In its totality, it is a thanksgiving festival in appreciation of nature's kindness and concern to have her children feed well by blessing them with this all-important crop that can be prepared in different forms. Primary data for the study was collected from ethnographical information on the involvement of women in this custom by some well-custodian of Ehugbo culture. Interview schedules with some elders and a ritual master (ome erusi) of this kind of traditional custom were conducted. The aim is to provide an insight into the indispensable but unsung roles of women during this festival. Matters of great interest such as a descriptive account of the festival, its rituals and dances, the Eleri iwa o ji, incantations and the participants at various stages are discussed. The research revealed, among other things, the depth of the ikeji cultural festival like others is continuously losing the prominent position it once enjoyed in Ehugbo Society owing to the onslaught of Christianity and urbanization.

**Keywords:** Ehugbo, Festival, Ogo cult, Eleri, Ikeji, Culture, Ngindingidi

## **Introduction**

Ehugbo is an Igbo community in Ebonyi State of Nigeria that spans an area of approximately one hundred and sixty-four (164) square kilometers. It is about ninety kilometers north of the Atlantic coast, in a transitional region between the tropical rain forest and the savanna. The area is a hilly region with sandstone ridges which run in various directions. The altitude is not high, being about five hundred feet (500 ft.) above sea level.<sup>1</sup> Archeological findings support the claim that Ehugbo civilization existed as far back as the Neolithic age. The population of the town in the 2006 census was 156, 619 (one hundred and fifty-six thousand six hundred and nineteen).<sup>2</sup> The people live in villages ranging in sizes of about 125 to 3,000 inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> The Ehugbo are classified as belonging to the Eastern or Cross River Igbo group. Ehugbo was Anglicized to Afikpo by the Europeans who could not pronounce it well. In 1976, the autonomous communities which constitute the area of the present study were created. They include Itim, Ohaisu, Ugwuegu, Nkpoghoru and Ibii/Ozizza.<sup>4</sup>

Festivals are fundamental aspects of Igbo culture. They are an integral part of the people's culture organized around major events in the history of an ethnic group, agricultural yields, coronation of the rulers; important deities<sup>5</sup>. In Ehugbo society, the place of culture in reality of everyday life cannot be neglected. The rich cultural heritage of the people directly and indirectly influences not just the inhabitants of the clan but also visitors and non-indigenes who live in the community. The criteria in which traditional societies have presented the status of women in terms of everyday reality are such that women occupy neglected positions. Even in traditional

politics, women are also considered less important, and this is also applied in social and cultural festivals in which women are restricted and are allowed to participate in only few of the cultural festival activities. From the beginning of the year to its end, one community or the other celebrates a major or minor cultural festival. As Ekpenyone puts it,

Festivals are periodic recurring days or seasons of gaiety or merry – making set aside by a community, tribe or clan, for the observance of sacred celebration, religious solemnities or musical and traditional performance of special significance.<sup>6</sup>

Every festival in Ehugbo has its timing in the traditional calendar. Festivals are necessary because they are the tools for the perpetuation of certain Ehugbo social structures and institutions, and served also as sources of ascertaining the calendar year. Their different aspects provide a lot of entertainment and recess for the people, as the dictum is well known that “all work and no play, makes jack a dull boy.” Some of them aim at setting very high moral standards for the people.

Women featured prominently in most of the cultural festivals even though, their participation in some aspects was restricted because of the secrecy that shrouded the ogo cult. The Ogo with the Egbele deity as its soul is aside from being the secret place of traditional cultist activities served as a stadium and playground for masquerade displays, important gatherings and meetings in Ehugbo. Thus, this paper seeks to investigate the female gender roles on this cultural festival as well as the impacts of this festival on women. More so, the 1980s marked a period of heightened religious conflicts between the

adherents of the traditional religion and Christianity, which reached its climax in 1982 when Christians in Amachi one of the community manhandled one of the iko festival masquerades.

## **Methodology**

Three approaches have been adopted for this study; the historical approach, documentary approach, and phenomenological approach. The historical approach attempts to unravel the tradition of Ehugbo people, who in spite of the onslaught of Christian missionary activities and urbanization has remained largely intact or unchanged. In the documentary approach, much of the information on the practices and customs, especially those related to women and the New Yam Festival is derived from the works of other scholars who had worked on related topics. Their works were used as source materials to bring to the limelight the roles of women in a culture that is cherished but is gradually going into extinction. In the phenomenological approach, the focus is on the rites associated with the festival as they appeared to me during my participatory observation session at the Eleri iwa oji and the other aspects of the festival. The methods however reveal that the complex but ordered Ehugbo culture is the consequence of fundamental religious traditions, as is exemplified in the role of Ehugbo women in Ikeji cultural festival.

**Ehugbo:** Ehugbo which is today known as Afikpo is an Igbo community found in the southeastern part of Nigeria.

**Festival:** Festival is an organized series of event, typically held annually in the same place. To Ehugbo people, it was a sort of recreational activity.

**Ogo cult:** This a central place where Ehugbo people meet for important events and its cultural activities. It is also a play ground.

**Eleri:** He is the custodian of *Elom ji* who is the priest that sits at the shrine of the god of yam at *ekete* in Enohĩa Nkalụ.

**Culture:** Culture is all the qualities which group people together and distinguish them from the rest of the animals. It enables people to regulate their life because it has its root in the heart of the people.

**Ngindingdi:** This is a meeting that was characterized by meditative consultations with the gods of the land and the ancestors.

### **Woman in Ikeji Festival**

Except the Igbo traditional kola nut, no other crop is revered in Ehugbo and the whole Igbo land as the yam. The climax of this reverence is seen in the new yam festival or Ikeji in Ehugbo. This is the festival commemorating the apotheosis of Ahiajoku, the god of yam.<sup>7</sup> Yam in Igbo land “played a cultural role of primordial importance in the society that valued it so much.”<sup>8</sup> The Ehugbo people, like different communities in Igbo land, have very high social regards for yam. Ikeji festival concerns more than the consumption of the yam. In its totality, it is a thanksgiving festival in appreciation of nature’s kindness and concern to have her children feed well by blessing them with the all-important crop that can be prepared in different forms – boiled, fried, pounded or roasted. This festival serves as a period of exchange of gifts, ranging from firewood, yam, stock or smoke fishes. It is also a time to

purify homes, make peace and bring orderliness into the communities. In the past, it had served as a period for marriages. The festivity is as old as Ehugbo traditional society predating and advent Christianity of the Europeans and still surviving to the present generation, although, farms are going into extinction in Ehugbo due to Urbanization.

Oral tradition has it that a human life was sacrificed for yam in Ehugbo. A woman called Nne Oriete Imomo, the founder of Ehugbo's sister Igboekwu, communed with Obasi n'elu (God above) for her wishes of a better yam as a substitute for the wild yam called "Kpokopokume" because she was tired of eating it. She was ordered to clear a portion of arable land, burn the dried cut bushes and grass, engage labour and make mounds and she obeyed.

Nne Oriete Imomo was instructed to make a human sacrifice of a male child. She summoned her seven daughter's in-laws told them about the sacrifice. One of the women Aliocha Imagi Orie, offered her son. Her husband raised no objection probably because the woman and her children are of the same matrilineal descent.<sup>9</sup> On the agreed day, the boy followed his grandmother to farm ignorant of what fate had in stock for him. The place of the sacrifice had already been prepared as was directed by *Obasi n'elu*, so the boy was told to climb up a tree to help prune it. While he was doing the job as directed, fire was set on the base of the tree by his grandmother, and he was suffocated and then burnt to ashes as a sacrifice to the yam god for a gift of good edible white yam. (igum). Four to five months later, white yam was dug out of the place of the sacrifice. She was told to treat the yam with great respect. It is instructive that it used to be recounted annually in Ehugbo folk tales, proverbs, traditional songs and moonlight stories

that *Alịọcha Ịmagị Orie*, offered her son to the yam god in quest for white edible yam hence, *.Alịọcha Ịmagị Orie, nde ịjri nwawo zua ji.*

Another tradition holds that the Nkalụ people who migrated to Ehugbo from Ikom on the side of the Cross River, brought with them the “ekete”, otherwise known as “Elom Ji” the god of yams. The ekete was installed at *Ọhịa ekete* which up to date is located between Ehoma (local fish pond) and Enohịa Nkalụ on the Otu-eke Ndibe beach) road. *Ọhịa ekete* is still the forest where Enohịa Nkalụ maidens are camped before the Egwu Imo (maidens dance during Eleri ịwa ọjị).

Eleri ịwa ọjị (breaking of kolanut) is the first phase of the new yam festival. Eleri is the custodian of *Elom ji* who is the priest that sits at the shrine of the god of yam at ekete in Enohịa Nkalụ. Eleri ịwa ọjị is a prerequisite to ikeji festival in Ehugbo. Eleri therefore celebrates ịwa ọjị annually in the month of July, some seven to eight market weeks (izu) to the Ikeji cultural festival in Ehugbo. During that period, young maidens (virgin from the communities in Enohịa Nkalụ were separated from their families and taken to the shrine to live with Eleri, the priest of the shrine of the god of yam. Within this period of seclusion, nobody saw nor heard from the young maidens. It is the exclusive role of very old women who also lived in the forest to teach the young virgins the Eleri dance, and also perform the festival rites on the yam shrine. Ogeri Uhers<sup>11</sup> noted that these old women were those with impeccable character who must have passed the age of child bearing. It was believed that these virgins were presented to the shrine for bountiful harvest. Their lives were under the whims and caprices of the deity who determined

which of the girls would be sacrificed. It is a tradition that at least, one of the girls must be sacrificed before the harvest.

For women, it was a moody and sober period with mixed feelings because they secretly and silently prayed that their daughters returned home and on the other hand wished that their daughters would be found worthy of sacrifice or at least be part of the dance to the deity. This is because participation in the Eleri ritual and dance brought accolade to both the girls and their families who passed through Eleri's assessment, since some of the girls who were no longer virgins would be rejected and they either secretly go back home in the night to live with the humiliation or run away from the community. However, the virginity assessment of the maidens at the shrine was the responsibility of the old women of impeccable character through a traditional means.

During the day of the Eleri *īwa ojī*, the chosen girls apart from the one that had been sacrificed would file out naked to dance to entertain the audience who came to witness the Eleri celebration. It was normally done at the outer part of the shrine. During the dance, the girl who was not among those dancing was concluded to have been chosen for sacrifice or rejected because they had lost their virginity. There were rules guiding this ritual dance and the observers too. The girls were not supposed to miss any step or face the consequences. The spectators were not supposed to look back at the arena immediately the Eleri made incantations and throw pieces of broken kola nut around the surrounding. Spectators normally ran out of the arena at the last declaration of the Eleri, therefore it was a celebration which was not attended by many people because of its dreaded rules and regulations.



After the Eleri ìwa oji, the second stage of the new yam festival began on the Orie market day. This period witnessed the gathering of respected and top echelon of the society. All the members of *Ekpuke Essa*, (the highest decision-making body in Ehugbo) and the Onikara's (men known for their wisdom) from every village in Ehugbo met at *Obu Amangbala* for seven consecutive Orie market days since after the Nigerian Civil War in 1970. It was in the course of such meetings that they often fixed the day for the new yam festival of Ehugbo as a whole.<sup>12</sup> worthy of note is that the meeting was characterized by meditative consultations with the gods of the land and the ancestors. That is why the meeting is called *Ngidingidi* (quiet and contemplative meeting). The Aho and Nkwo market days that followed provided another opportunity for the meeting of the same elders, Essa and Onikara but this time, they were joined by the Ekpuke Eto age grade (the enforcement). Women did not attend these meetings but organized a very big banquet for the men. It was after the meeting and eating of the sumptuous meal prepared by the women that the Ekpuke Eto age grade would be mandated by the elders to announce publicly the agreed date of the ikeji festival at Ahia Eke Ukwu (Ehugbo Central Market). The date was fixed in the month of August between 23<sup>rd</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> and on a Eke market day of the Igbo calendar every year.

The next stage was the day of harvest usually on Aho market days; Girls all over Ehugbo carried bundles of firewood (nku) to their parents' relatives, friends and well wishers. The firewood gift from these young ladies to the female relatives remains significant. It is the show of love, friendship and high regards from the givers to the receivers and to maintain the bond between the members of the society, especially the

matrilineal group. But more importantly, it is both a reminder and a facilitator in the actual cooking of the new yam.<sup>13</sup> The firewood gifts represented a mark of hospitality as many young girls went the extra miles to fetch excess firewood for aged women members of Ehugbo. This culture is important because it teaches children to identify with their parent's relatives, friends and well-wishers wherever they live in Ehugbo. By so doing, the age-long circle of friendship and relationship is sustained. It should be noted that when the yam was harvested, it is the women that conveyed the yam from the farm to the house carrying it on their head. In support of the above, Ottenberg has this to say:

Few days before this festival, in Afikpo, people prepare for it, the men will go to their farms to inspect the one which is more ready and probably closer home since all the yams harvested must be carried on the head. The women on the other hands make sure they get enough food and ingredients to make soup on the festival day and the next four day in the Igbo calendar since nobody is expected to go to the market or to the farm but to stay at home, wining and dining.<sup>14</sup>

The popular question on the day of harvest is *ji o gbari gi egbe?*, meaning was the harvest poor? Or literally, “did yam shoot you gun”

By mid-night, on the day of harvest and the early morning of the celebration day, Ehugbo was overtaken by fire works using cultural materials and the act is *ichu ahọ* (chasing out famine). Families woke up to usher in the New Year and to chase out the misfortunes they experienced in the past year.

The Women were at the head of this ceremony. She feeds her children what to say to their gods called *chi* and they also recites what they would tell their own *chi*. These children were the female ones who slept with them in their hut while the male ones sleep with their fathers except in the case of an *enna*.<sup>15</sup> (A young boy who has not been initiated into the ogo cult, the hallmark of all cultural festivals in Ehugbo.) It is regarded that such has not become a man and, in that case, the boy would be one or two years.

The woman and her children having prayed made their wishes for long life and prosperity of the family, left the house for the ogo arena for the *ichu ahọ*. It is important to note that, no new yam would be fried, cooked or boiled until this ceremony was done, and no old yam was expected to be seen around during this festival period. In fact, bringing in or cooking old yam in the compound or even putting it for sale in the market is a taboo and usually carried heavy penalties. The whole family would also be ridiculed with pejorative song. *Ikeji* is the first festival to be held in Ehugbo before every other one. *Ikeji* day marked the beginning of a new year in Ehugbo traditional calendar, while the *ichu ahọ* is likened to 31<sup>st</sup> December night in modern day calendar. The festival proper was held on special Eke day, special because market would not be in session. It was the one day in Ehugbo society, the entire Central Eke Ukwu market was out of bound for any activity. In Ehugbo parlance, it is called “*Eke gbaga gbaho nnani*”<sup>16</sup> meaning Eke market has remained only one for the calendar year.

On this celebration day, the oldest man or family head would appease the earth goddess of yam following a belief that the ancestors must first eat the food made of new yam, prepared

by women before the people. The various family units also gather together to have special communal consumption of pounded yam and sumptuous white soup, *ohe saarara*

The second day of the Ikeji festival was *ojiji n' Nja* (meaning visit to Nja) which took place on *ahọ* market day. No such festival is complete without a visit to Nja, we will come back to this. To an Ehugbo man, Ikeji not only served to help review the progress of the traditional agriculture of the people but is also a forum for fraternizing as kindred return home from all their places of abode to celebrate the super fabulous festival with other members of the family or community and also attend their age grade, compound, village meetings, make arrangement for marriages and more importantly, the matrilineal meeting which means *ojije na Nja* in Ehugbo as earlier said. Nja was the term for the spirit associated with a shrine. The shrine was the central symbol of the matrilineal clan. The priest made sacrifices at it for the whole matrilineal clan on the annual meeting day. There, men and women of the same matrilineal group met, asked questions about other members of the lineage and fed from a common pot, *nja*. It was a sort of a roll call and renewal of matrilineal convention. A parcel of arable matrilineal lands was mapped out in preparation for the next planting season.<sup>17</sup>

### **Impact of the Ikeji Festival on Women**

The impact of women involvement in new yam festival cannot be neglected in Igbo land in general and in Ehugbo Society in particular. Basden called yam, “*the Ibo staff of life*”.<sup>18</sup> The Ikeji festival is very significant as it enhances societal unity, cultural sustenance and respect for the traditional political institutions. It also promotes benevolence

and sense of sharing. These cannot be effectively achieved without the enormous contributions of women. The training received by the young girls while preparing for the new yam festival ritual dance as well as other forms of nurturing at home remain a long-life asset. By the time she was ready to go to her husband's house, she had mastered the basic skills such as child care, cookery, beautification, craftsmanship and tolerance, to mention a few.

Young Ehugbo women were trained in line with the ethics of the Eleri dance during this period as earlier discussed. To achieve this goal of chastity, parents, especially mothers constantly restricted the movement of their daughters to avoid pre-marital sex. This festival had a way of molding the women. The festival promoted the respect and recognition of yam as the lord of all crops among the people of Ehugbo. It promoted the needed discipline on Ehugbo men and women not to harvest the new yam until the festival as celebrated and also promoted social reunion among men and women.

### **Changes and Continuity**

Two major phenomena in the history of Ehugbo account for the changes which have occurred in the practice of Ikeji festival in Ehugbo and these are Christianity and colonialism. Aja is of the opinion that "Christian missionaries came to Ehugbo to sweep aside the culture which they considered uncivilized" and devilish" and planted in its place, a culture which they considered "civilized and holy"<sup>19</sup>. Colonial rule encompassed policies and mechanisms perfectly orchestrated to relegate African culture, Ehugbo culture inclusive to the background. These phenomena laid the background for the

dialectics of the people's culture and the dynamics in the ikeji festival.

It is worthy to note that Eleri dance by virgins and the sacrifice of a virgin for bountiful harvest have been abandoned and replaced with sacrifices of fowls and goats. The renewal of matrilineal convention and a forum for fraternizing as kindred and family re-union which characterized the Ikeji festival has been totally forgotten by the people as most of the women who spearhead these activities have joined the Christian faith, yet others are in the urban centre where they eke out their living.

Another significant change is the practice of house cleaning, painting and decoration by the women during the period which has now been abandoned. As a result of urbanization or western civilization, most houses are now plastered with cement and have concrete floors and therefore, do not need the green leaf paste formally used.

The quest to provide the necessary items needed during festivals often ignited the creative activities of the men who would not like to be scorned by their wives. Men owned and cultivated large expanses of land in Ehugbo in the traditional society. This situation has changed with women now taking the center stage of either cultivating almost all kinds of crops including yam which was hitherto the exclusive preserve of men or trading in yams. They travel as far as Onitsha in Anambra state and Zakibiam in Benue state to make sure that there are new yams in Ehugbo during this festival period. Incidentally, most of these men buy from these women to present to their families during this period.

It is an indisputable fact that some aspects of the Ikeji festival have been changed as a result of the external influences that had impacted on the Ehugbo society. Yet some aspects of the festival have remained unchanged. One aspect of this culture which has continued irrespective of the pressures of western civilization is the bringing in of new yams into Ehugbo before the festival. Nobody still cooked nor ate the new yam within the villages and communities in Ehugbo prior to the Ikeji festival and this was ensured through their cluster settlement pattern where each person watched each other, but now that settlements are dispersed people have started to secretly eat yams in their homes before the Ikeji festival.

However, the Ehugbo people have also remained resilient and committed to the rituals performed before and after the harvest. Some who have not joined the Christian faith for example, still commune with their ancestors through rituals to ensure their continued protection for the living and as a medium through which they appease the gods of the land.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the month for the festival has not changed Ikeji festival in Ehugbo has always been on the eight months of the year even though, the date varies and the people still celebrate it.

## **Conclusion**

This paper discussed Ehugbo Women in Ikeji cultural festival. Based on the foregoing discussion, it is hereby, concluded that the earliest Ehugbo men and women were culturally active and had ideas on how to run the day to days affairs of their communities. The work showed how this festival has affected the life of Ehugbo women socially and economically and the

women tried to uphold the culture as a way of preventing evil in the traditional Ehugbo society and make peace amongst the people. It also showcased a pattern through which cultural norms are inculcated to the younger generation by getting them actively involved in the different stages of the festival. However, the research revealed that the Ikeji cultural festival is fast losing its significance and popularity in the face of the multidimensional attack from urbanization and the Christianity in Ehugbo.

Finally, there is therefore, the need to strengthen the positive aspects of this cultural festival before it dies out completely. Ehugbo women should also fight to ensure their socio-political and economic relevance to contemporary nation building process through Ehugbo cultural festivals.

## Notes

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