

Agricultural Celebration in Nigeria: A Look into the Feast of Ipem-Ihihe in Bekwarra Land

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Abstract

Culture according to Mathew, Z .P (2012, PP154-164) *is generally depicts many aspects of the life of a society. In many respects, the current customs and practices of a society is a reflection of its history and culture. In this regard, the feast of Ipem-Ihihe (New yam festival) is one of the most important aspects of the Bekwarra culture that has been preserved by the people over time. Ipem-Ihihen remained the earliest indigenous celebration of agricultural success among the people. Historical study on the Bekwarra society is yet to be given wider attention. A few written works on the Bekwarra lacked detailed information on the people's cultural festivities. The reconstruction of the feast of Ipem-Ihihe is very fundamental as this will not only broaden our understanding of the people's history, but fill the gap not attended to in the people's culture. The thrust of this paper therefore is to establish the significance of this cultural festival on in the life of the Bekwarra society, and the changes that had been effected in the celebration of Ipem-Ihihe in recent time, with the attempt in identifying the consequences. The study is generally descriptive and depended largely on primary sources and supplemented by secondary sources.*

Introduction

The economy of most pre-colonial societies in Nigeria like the Bekwarra was based on agriculture. In line with the above, the Bekwarra people cultivate varieties of local food crops such as:

lyum (red yam), Igeh (water yam), Ebechie (Cocoa yam) Achaka (sweet potatoes). They had also engaged in the cultivation cereals like Iwu-ayinyan (rice), Ebetuo (black beans), Ikuru-Achichankuru (local maize), Ikuru-Ikum (local maize), and Ikuru-Abung (local millet) Anankere (Groundnut), Anang (beneseed), Ashi (ground pea). Other crops cultivated include, Iguam (local banana), including vegetables like Achuu (pepper), Achehe (pumking), Itibi olamu (short local okro), Uchu olamu (local bitter leaf), Ishun-ufaa (scent leave), among others. (Mary Abua, 12/08/2015)

They grow tree crops like *Uwuo (cotton), Uluim-owiriwiri (local oranges), Ituo (oil palm), Igwam (paupau) Ojeme, O, 12/08/2015*, etc. In the course of time, new crops were added to the existing ones.

They came at different stages. (Erim, P.O. 1988, p5) *the first stage was reached when European traders and merchants linked West Africa with America and the Carribean from where certain species of yams, cassava, banana, pineapples, oranges, mangoes, cocoa-nut, gwaver, paupau, and cereals like rice, guinea corn, millet, and maize---* were brought. These new crops according to Erim were largely accepted and their cultivation spread rapidly through out West Africa by the 17th century. The Bekwarra were not left out of these developments as the cultivation of these crops in addition to the indigenous ones were made possible, thereby making it possible for the land and the social units to support a large population of the existing society up to the colonial era. Among all the crops, yam has remained a symbol of the people's prestige of economic prosperity, and had continued to be the major agricultural celebration in Bekwarra land.

Background Issues

Bekwarra migration and spread within the extreme north of the present Cross River State of Nigeria between the 17th and 18th century following the sack of the popularized 'Kwararafa Kingdom' in the middle Benue region, brought them into contact with several ethnic groups like Iyala, Ishibori, Mbube, Utugwnag, Iyache, Ogbudu, and their Tiv neighbours in the present Benue State. The exchange relations with these groups brought a lot of socio-economic advantages and transformed in to the socio-economic setting of the Bekwarra people. The diffusion of yam into Bekwarra land, with its attending result was one of the major highlights of the Bekwarra relations with her neighbours. Several species of yams in Bekwarra land presented identified their routes. Late Olofu Ogar, (a father to this writer) had revealed that Yams species such as Ajibor, Efala, and Akwara, Isenge were derived from neighboring Tiv villages like Vandieka and Tsar. Across sections of the Bekwarra elders had all agreed that species of yams such as Ogakwu, Oble, were obtained through trade with the Ital and Iyache groups. There is however no doubt that there are species of yams that is indigenous to the Bekwarra. They include, the traditional *Iyum, achuam, Ebechie, Okunna, Ige etc.* (Egene Ushie, 14/09/2015).

Overtime, yam had continued to be one of the major symbols of agricultural existence of the Bekwarra people. Also illustrating the primacy of yam in Bekwarra traditional economy, was the institutionalization of nomenclatures like Ohioro and cuhu-uten (chief farmer) titles among the Bekwarra. Achu Akwaji clearly indicates that:

This title society was opened only to free born Bekwarra as were successful farmers who planted the right type of yams and could boast of at least a certain quality of yams (counted in unit of Uno- 1000 tubers in their yam barns). Members of this society served as experts in yam cultivation, and their opinions were generally sought in disputes over yams and farming land. They had always brought the young men in to yam farming business by donating special species of yams to start them up.

The expression above is an indication that in Bekwarra land as is the case in other societies in Nigeria, *the measure of a man's success was neither the size of his compound or the number of wives and children, but more importantly, the size of his farm and the quantity and quantity of yams he produced.* (Ochefu, Y. A., 2002, p49).

Yam is not only celebrated as a prestige of the people's economic prosperity, but a symbolic idea that the people remained one among the yam producing societies in the upper Cross River State, with attending profile of being among the food basket of the state and the nation at large. By and large, the feast served as a platform that has defined Bekwarra unity and the collective existence of the Bekwarra people over the year. Though the actual date of origin for the celebration of Ipem-Ihihe cannot be ascertain, Omagu, D, (2012, P223) However suggests that, *the celebration must have started long after the Bekwarra had assumed a sedimentary life styles and engaging in agricultural activities*. The occasion is highly symbolic in the sense that, the feast did not only speak volume of the people's rich cultural heritage, *it marked the end of one farming season and ushers the beginning of another* (Omagu, p224).

Preparations and Traditional Rites Guiding the Celebration of Ipem-Ihihe

The feast of Ipem-Ihihe is usually a single day celebrated festival which before now was celebrated on the last day of August yearly is now celebrated on the last Saturday of September every year. The date fixed as it is today evolved from deliberate attempts at integration with kiths and kins of the other Bete speaking groups making up of Bekwarra, Igede, Obudu. Guided by the people's belief that yam remained the *king* (Odey, P.O. (2014, P2) of all crops in the land, the consumption of yam at harvest is usually preceded by some customary based religious sacrifices. This practice remained an annual event in the history of the Bekwarra people. Prior to festive day a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the gods of harvest and the ancestors was observed in the families across the Bekwarra land. This involved rituals undertaking by family heads at the family levels and elders at village levels. During such sacrifices, the Ewuabie (daughters of the soil) did the cooking of yam and prepared soup which was consumed by the elders at the spot. All this was aimed at soliciting for better harvest and more blessing in the future. This is usually a closed ceremonies in which guest were not invited.

As is the custom, *an elder of the village/family kills the sacrificed animal and sprinkles the blood on the family/community symbol, giving thanks to the spirit for the role they played throughout the farming season, to the period of harvest*. (Omagu, p22). The above development (Odey, P.O 2014) argued, *this signifies the people's mutual relations ship and reverence for the ancestor and the gods of the land. While the living remembers the dead in their sacrifices, the dead provides and protects the living*. The youths were not left out of the preparation for the feast of Ipem -Ihihe. They had always engaged in clearing the road tracks connecting one village to the other. Adie Odey (17/10,2015) *the village squares and footpaths to village streams were appropriately kept in food shapes to allow the ancestor, the gods and the living have better assess to good water to drink during the festivity*.

As was the case with other ethnic groups in the Cross River area, tradition demands that, *on the feast day, before consumption, the heads of each household boils a tuber, marsh it, mixed with palm oil, get a handful and raised above his head about three times and sprinkles it at different points around the compound*. (Ojeka, O, 14/10/2015) This is an indication that, the ancestors and the family/community deities must first take the step by consuming the celebrated new yam as to set the space for the living. After this reverence of the family ancestors and deities, the new yam is set for consumption by the

household and indeed, the community at large. In each household, the man being the head of the family provides yams, goat or chicken (usually the biggest cock), slaughtered and prepare for the feast.

He made available enough palm-wine to contain his immediate family, and extended ones as well as the visitors. The women prepare the food, cook such soup like okro mixed with Eguisi , beneseed, and groundnut depending on what the family wishes. They also brewed local beer (sweet bikati or Irimi and Itashi or brukutu) for the occasion. (Emuru, P.E, 2015)

It is generally a belief among the Bekwarra that the new yam festival is peculiar with the people attitude towards charity placing high the responsibility on every member of the society to be generous to their neighbours, the ancestors, and the deities. Charity generally to the Bekwarra is an investment. During the period of the festival, many families with opened arms heartily welcome visitors to their homes and entertained them. Children took delight in this occasion to obtain permissions from parents to visit relatives, grandparents and friends. The festival begins at family level and degenerated into community –wide celebration. Music and dancing, among other forms of entertainments are common events in the course of celebrating Ipem-Ihihe in Bekwarra land. Peculiar in this sphere is that, after the ritual thanksgiving and eating of the new yam, members of the community gathered at the village squares and were entertained by different cultural dance groups which Omagu identified as Iwali, Ijor, Ayita, Abakpa, among others.

The event captured the interest of both young and old members of the Bekwarra society, invited guest, friends from other neighbouring communities within the old Ogoja Province. Attracted in the celebration and entertainment was wrestling sport. This has remained one of the recreational sporting activities that had promoted unity and mutual understanding and cooperation among the Bekwarra youths in particular. This is because illegibility to wrestling sport is opened to children from the age of five (5) years and above.

Emerging Trends in the Ipem Ihihe Celebration

The various traditions and customs guiding the celebration of the feast of Ipem-Ihihe began to erode gradually following the advent of Christianity and the introduction of colonialism in Bekwarra land. As (Odey, P2) rightly pointed out in his study on the subject, the new yam feast today has a Christian dimension in all communities in Ogoja and its environs. According to him,

with the conversion of many indigenous groups to Christianity, specially to the Roma Catholic Faith, Christian participants offers their sacrifices of thanksgiving to God in the celebration of the Holy Mass either at local Parishes or Church community squares. Indigenous Catholic Priest co-celebrates Mass with their non-indigenous Pries as the case may be.

This change in the from traditional mode of sacrifices to modern ritualism in celebrating the feast of Ipem-Ihihe is not only note in the Christian dimension, it is rather one of the first step to the popular saying that culture is not static but dynamic. It is very important to note that agricultural celebration among the Bekwarra was purely much more a farmer's affair. Today most Bekwarra celebrate yam but never grow or farm yam. During the period of celebration, many had bought yam not only to identify with their family members at the feast, but to adhere to their cultural heritage, especially the Diaspora Bekwarra. Preparation towards the feast which usually takes traditional religious sacrifices and others mentioned earlier, had given way to a new methods of gearing up to the feasts period.

As Odey, (p3) pointed out; *there is an Osusu scheme through which members contributes toward the feast of Ipem-Ihihe. On the agreed day towards the new yam period, the capital was shared and the profit from loan is used to purchase a cow or goat which is shared equally to members.* Bekwarra land witnessed the British conquest and imposition of colonial rule from 1900s. Coupled with formal introduction of the British colonial administrative structures in the land, the traditional cultural heritage was confronted by the European life style which had impacted on the socio-cultural and political landscape of the people. The Bekwarra new yam festival was not an exception. Indeed, the local Bekwarra rulers came directly under the authority of European officials who were not interested in the display of Bekwarra music and dance, hence the principle guiding the celebration of the festival were breached. In the circumstance, the festival has recently been characterized by jubilation by young girls and boys entrenched by modern musical entertainments.

This merriment is not occasioned in its former way to thank the ancestors and the gods of the family and the community at large for bountiful harvest in the ending season and in the forthcoming one. Though is not always a competition or context, the dancers nevertheless tried to showcase their individual skill in a Europeanized cultural life style before their spectators, devoid of customary implications.

Significance of the Feast of Ipem-Ihihe on the Bekwarra

The feast of Ipem Ihihe is one of the most celebrated cultural festivals in Bekwarra history. The fact that the festival was celebrated in equal time and date in all villages that makes up the Bekwarra country account for their historical experiences in the course of their migration, cultural language, religious belief, marriage customs, among others, which had given them a distinguishing identity as a single ethnic group. The feast of Ipem Ihihe remained a reflection of their past history and culture. It is on this account that we examine the social, economic, and political impact of the feast on the life of the Bekwarra people.

Citing Johnson, B oral interview granted on 02/02/1983, Ecoma, Chinyere S, (2013, p28) *the human being begins his socialization in the society made up of the people. Each society develops a culture which moulds the behaviour of its members, thus the local culture becomes a basis for further socialization.* The general participation in the feast of Ipem-Ihihe by every member of the Bekwarra society both at home and way is an indication of emphasizing oneness and annual re-union among the people. It is a period when kinship ties are rekindled. The standing relationship between the living and the dead ancestor as

well as the deities is enhanced through the sacrifices of thanksgiving to the ancestral spirits and the gods on the eve of the celebration and on the eventful day. The period offers a golden opportunity for the Bekwarra neighbours to set their feet in Bekwarra land and assess the many aspect of the rich cultural heritage associated with the people. The feast of Ipem-Ihihe by implication is a period of interaction among people of all ages. The enthusiasm with which people look forward to this day confirmed this argument.

The socio-cultural impact of the feast of Ipem-Ihihe cannot be overemphasized. Odey (2014, p5) rightly argued, *the new yam feast has earned a place on the tourism agenda of the state. The beauty of the cultural content of the people's is exhibited.* In practical term, every village Bekwarra land was invited by the Local Government Authority to showcase their rich cultural heritage in music and dance, masquerade, and their tourist sites. The introduction of beauty contest among the girls and the well dressed male partners add colours to the celebration. Enare Egbenta, 30/12/2015), *through this, the cultural traits of the people are appreciated and transmitted to the young generation for emulation.* This event usually takes place at the Local Government Headquarters at Abouchiche, on a specified day approved by the council chairman. The feast however stimulates some forms of emotional traits among the youths in Bekwarra society and the visiting one. Since the occasion was characterized by jubilations, the festive provides the best opportunity for boys and girls to come together and makes choices of friendships. *It was during this period that the boys courted the girls and eventually marry them* (Agbo Olofu, 20/12/2015).

The period also marked a religious re-unification with God. According to Abua, Theresa, Liwo (22/12/2015), *several Masses are booked in the Catholic Churches across the whole community, while the other denomination activities are noted in the same day. Thanksgiving are offered while the Church authorities took the opportunity to carry out special launching to execute some Church projects, as a way to expand the Church.* The feast of Ipem-Ihihe apart from ensuring food security, the event also influences some cultural fulfillments such as marriage, burial ceremonies and coronation and titles warding events. In such events pounded yam featured prominently as one of the delicacies for the guest. The feast ushered in a new wave of sanitation in the land as the old aged clearing of roads, streams, public squares, and farm roads were not only sustained improved.

Economically, the feast of Ipem-Ihihe in Bekwarra land served as a forum to popularized yam as the king of all crops in the land and to emphasized, improved and enhanced farming as major economic activities in Bekwarra land. It also helped exposed and improved economic prosperities of some members of the society, after outstanding performances, especially by farming title holders. It helped exposed some socio-cultural practices of the Bekwarra people to the younger generations and visitors in the area alike. Particular here is the demonstration in the period that agriculture in Bekwarra land was highly ritualized. This was however opened to the public in the beginning of harvest season which marked by the very important feast of new yam festival. Yam is not the only agricultural crop produced in Bekwarra land, but it constituted the back-bone of Bekwarra agriculture, hence marked by festive and ritualized.

Politically, the feast of the Ipem-Ihihe in Bekwarra land shares certain attributes with the tradition among other societies in Nigerai. Discussing the significance of the Mandyeng festival among the Berom

group in the present Plateau State of Nigeria, Mathew, Z.P (2012, p154) indicated that, the Mandyeng served as a forum to enhance the popularity of chiefs among their subjects. This he further stated helped to strengthen the chief's administration. The feast he emphasized was the biggest gathering that offered the chiefs and elders best opportunities to meet, celebrate, and interact in their hamlets and at the village levels. The feast of Ipem-Ihihe in Bekwarra land served the above political purposes. Indeed, the period served as a forum for politicians in the land to resolve their differences, integrated into one political party platform, interact and found a way forward for the betterment of the Bekwarra unity, progress and survival, the existing political dispensation.

Conclusion

Agriculture in Bekwarra land is highly ritualized. From the beginning of the farming season to the period of harvest is occasioned by rituals. It is the harvest season that is marked by the feast of the Ipem-Ihihe (new yam festival). The above point to the fact that occupation and to its antiquity in the land is very important. The feast of the new yam became paramount because yam in the people's belief is the king and master of all food crops associated to the Bekwarra. The feast did not only mark the era of food security, it upheld and ushered in some socio-cultural, economic and political impacts associated with its celebration in Bekwarra land. However, with the intensification of alien culture ushered in during the colonial era and confronted with the activities of the missionaries, there are strong indications that, the popular annual Bekwarra cultural feast of Ipem-Ihihe gradually depreciating in its unique values and traditional heritage.

Its revival, sustainability, and preservation depend largely on the efforts of government, traditional rulers and elders in council. To achieve this, there is need for adequate creation of cultural awareness in the internet wares where Bekwarra sons and daughters within Nigeria and abroad can assess to understand the significance of the cultural study and practices. The other way of promoting cultural study and practices by government is to enforce cultural study as a curriculum in all primary and secondary schools in Bekwarra Local Government Area. The various village chiefs and elders in council should Endeavour to teach their subjects many important aspects of the Bekwarra culture through deliberate laws and organized forums prior to festive period. This writer is of the view that the Bekwarra cultural identity and the rich cultural heritage in the land can also be preserved, sustained, and promoted through individual moral attachment to the principle that upheld our history and culture.

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