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**Cultural Reconstruction of Iwa Ji Festival  
in Igbo-Ukwu, and Fractured Igbo Identity**

**Abstract**

*Indigenous festivals in many African societies are under the threats of extinction as a result of modernisation and the impact of the Christian religion on the life of the people. In southeast Nigeria, Iwa Ji Festival, which is an annual yam festival celebrated to thank the Supreme Being and the gods for the provision of subsistence, has faced the challenge of abandonment in recent decades. Scholars have noted the cultural meanings associated with the festival and its potentials in the sustenance of the people's cultural identity, as well as the promotion of tourism, and have consequently suggested the need for its reconstruction for general acceptability. This reconstruction has been carried out. This paper examined reconstructed Iwa Ji Festival as a fusion of the indigenous Iwa Ji Festival and modern practices and argued that the reconstructed festival is a reflection of Igbo fractured identity. Using Turner-Schechner Model of performance as social dramas for an explanatory model for this study, the authors argued that the advent of modernity and Christian religion created a breach in the people's cultural experience. The redressed stage is represented in the reconstruction and repackaging of the festival for more acceptability. Re-integration stage set in as the festival gained more acceptability following its reconstruction, and subsequently, participants experience transformation. An ethnographic approach was employed for data generation. Data were analysed descriptively.*

**Keywords**

Iwa Ji festival, fractured reality, cultural reconstruction, fusion of the old and new, Igbo-Ukwu

**Introduction**

The word 'festival' derives from 'feast' and connotes a time of celebration. Various scholars have defined festival in different ways. Falassi (1987), for instance, defines festival as a sacred or profane period of celebration marked by special observances. To Adegbite (2010), festival can be considered as an event usually and ordinarily staged by a local community that focuses on unique aspects of that community. He maintains that a festival is a series of performance involving music, plays, dance and so on organised annually or at other times that people of a particular community assemble to eat and drink to celebrate and share a common tradition. In the same vein, Okpoko (1990) presents festivals as generally encompassing spectacular displays, enjoyment of music, food and wine. People express their happiness through dance, indicating the hedonistic characteristic of the festival. Festival provides the opportunity for people to celebrate with friends, relatives and well-wishers, leading to a renewal of friendship and the formation of new ones.

Most religious festivals are indigenous festivals. Thus, Iye and Aluede (2007) describe traditional African festivals as proprietary, sacrificial and laudatory ceremonies during which Africa's ethnic groups recognise the blessings of the Supreme Creator, the lesser deities and ancestral spirits, manifested in good health, good harvest and children. Ritual performances characterise the celebration of festivals, and through these, the supernatural beings are appeased. As Lawuyi (2011) aptly observed, festivals impact the space with meaning and identity as well as serve as a means of cultural reinvigoration, and form of visualising and imaging the community, assigning the space origin, lives, meanings, practices, and values for community bonding. It is through this bonding that their historical narrative helps to define and articulate a state of being such that a cultural festival, for instance, predicates an identity. There are several motivations for festival participation which include the fulfilment of a cultural obligation, education, enjoyment of music and dance, and most importantly to view spectacular displays. He further noted:

“In anyway, the sense of the dramatic, of the spectacular is very fundamental to the existence, promotion and sustenance of some festivals which are now patronised.” (Lawuyi, 2011:168)

Recently, there has been a significant increase in festival attendance and countries with unique cultural festivals have benefited immensely as a result of tourist influx. The recent increase in festivals is, indeed, connected to their tourism potential. The potential, according to Quinn (2009) has become major contributing factor for the growth and reinvention of festivals to provide a series of development outcomes in terms of economic restructuring and revitalisation, destination repositioning, inward investment and tourism revenue generation. Festivals now have significant economic, political and socio-cultural implications on host communities and not only contribute to increase in domestic consumption but improve the beauty of rural areas which host the festivals.

New yam festival in Igboland is variously referred to as *Ifejioku* (Nzewi, 1979), *Iwa ji* (Okere, 1996), or *Iri ji* *Ọhuru* (Ukachukwu, 2007). Because of its centrality to the construction of Igbo identity, *Iwa Ji* Festival has attracted quite a reasonable scholarly attention. Looking at the dimensions that characterise *Iwa Ji* celebrations, Nzewi (1979) identifies two perspectives common to the festival wherever it is staged: The theatrical, which unfolds as events in time and space, and the ideational, which involves the values, philosophies and principles embedded in, and manifested as actions and symbols. Okere (1996) considers the fundamental issues of yam cropping from the dimension of cosmology, culture and tradition. He argues that yam is at the core of social and religious life of the Igbo people and, therefore, occupies almost a sacred position in Igbo cosmology. This perspective might have led Basden (1983) to refer to yam as ‘the Igbo staff of life’. Missionisation and modernisation have impacted adversely on Igbo cultural practices, including the yam festival, which has been condemned by some Igbo people as a ‘heathen’ feast, and, therefore, needs to be jettisoned.

On the other hand, the clamour for the revival of Igbo culture and values, a development which is attributable to globalisation and identity dynamics characterising the modern world is also echoing from some quarters. The proponents posit that the *Iwa Ji* Festival deserves to be celebrated among the Igbo with pride. This has necessitated the need to reconstruct the *Iwa Ji* Festival for general acceptability.

Cultural reconstruction entails the remodelling of cultural practices for various reasons which include meeting current social realities and needs. This

also entails change, which, when achieved makes room for creative expression, reinforcement of cultural identity, and restoration of confidence of the people in their tradition. This study examined the reconstructed *Iwa Ji* Festival and the impact of the reconstruction on the fractured Igbo ethnic identity and the preservation of the cultural identity of the Igbo using Igbo-Ukwu people of south-eastern Nigeria as a case.

## Study Context and Methods

The study was carried out in Igbo-Ukwu, a town located in Aguata Local Government of Anambra State, Nigeria. It is about 40 kilometres southeast of Onitsha and 16 kilometres from Awka, the capital of the state. The town consists of three quarters, namely Obiuno, Ngor and Ifite. According to the 2006 Nigerian population census, Igbo-Ukwu had a population of 75,000. Igbo-Ukwu operates a patrilineal system. Thus, inheritance is through father. Members of Igbo-Ukwu community are predominantly Christians though there are few members who are adherents of Igbo Traditional Religion. The archaeological finds excavated by Thurstan Shaw in the 1960s dated to 9th century A.D. attested to the artistic expertise of Igbo people of southeast Nigeria. Members of Igbo-Ukwu community believe in the Supreme God, *Chukwu*, *ndiichie* (ancestors), *alunsi* (gods and deities) and *ana* (the earth goddess). The people believe that sacrifices and supplications are offered to the Supreme God through the autochthonous deities, for they believe the Supreme God is too awesome for them to contact directly. The ancestors are in constant communion with the living. Indeed, they appear in the form of masquerades during traditional events in Igbo-Ukwu. They offer sacrifices to the divinities to ensure a bountiful harvest. This paper is an outcome of the fieldwork carried out in Igbo-Ukwu between 2012 and 2014.

Participant observation, interviews and focus group discussion were utilised in data collection. Participant observation was used in observing and recording the festival events. Key informant interviews were conducted with 32 community leaders of Igbo-Ukwu community and four members of Mbido Igbo Cultural Association, and these include the traditional leader of Igbo-Ukwu; the wife of the traditional leader; the chairman Mbido Igbo Cultural Association; the chief priest of the festival; the chief priest of *Udo* deity; 9 cabinet members; 10 members of *ozọ* institution in Igbo-Ukwu; the leader of *umuada* Igbo-Ukwu; the secretary, treasurer and provost of Mbido Igbo Cultural Association, 3 executive members of Igbo-Ukwu Youth Council. These people are knowledgeable about *Iwa Ji* festival and the customs and traditions of the Igbo people in general and the Igbo-Ukwu people in particular. Documentary data complemented data from the primary sources.

Turner-Schechner Model of performance as social drama is adopted as the explanatory model. Richard Schechner's theory explores the relationships between practical and theoretical work in theatre and, adopting Turner's Model of Social Drama; he develops a theory and poetics of historical performances. In contrast, Turner's concept of social drama is based on the earliest 20th-century work of Arnold Van Gennep (1960), titled *Rites de Passage*, which developed the pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal states. Turner (1974) applied these phases to performance in terms of separation – transition – and reintegration of social statuses. The major difference between Turner's (1974) and Schechner's (2004) theatrical approach is that Turner locates the essential of drama in conflict and conflict resolution while Schechner locates it in

transformation (Avorgbedor 2004). Again, Turner's (1974) model can be represented as Breach – Crisis – Redress Action – Reintegration. A combination of Turner and Schechner's models, referred to as Turner-Schechner's model is of the form: Breach – Crisis – Redress Action – Transformation. The Turner-Schechner Model is, therefore, a combination of the two forms of representations of performance. It admits that there is a breach. In the context of *Iwa Ji* festival, the advent of modernity and missionisation, both of which have brought about social transformation in Igboland, and has consequently led to the perception of the festival as a *heathen* feast that needed to be jettisoned, depicts a breach, a crisis, and hence a fracture. The redress stage is, therefore, the reconstruction and repackaging of the festival to make it acceptable to people of different social groups. The re-integration stage sets in when those that had earlier stop participating in the festival are drawn into participation, and subsequently experience transformation.

### ***Iwa Ji* Festival: The Ideological Context**

Yam is a staple food that is highly revered among the Igbo people. It occupies almost a sacred position in Igboland. Thus, Coursey and Coursey (1971) contend that among the peoples of West Africa, "none is so dedicated to the cultivation of yams as the Igbo, and the crop is one of their most important religious cults", and noted the importance of the New Yam Festival among the Igbo" (Coursey and Coursey, 1971:452). There are certain taboos and abominations associated with the yam crop, which according to an informant, Ichie Dominic Ogbueli, and an indigene of Igbo-Ukwu, include: *e jighi nkita ebụ ji, ada atupụlụ mmadu ji, eje enye ya n'aka. Oge gboo onye zuo ohi ji akwuwuo ye* ("You don't carry yam with an ordinary basket, or throw it at someone. You directly give the yam by hand to the person. In the olden days, whoever stole yam was clubbed to death.") (Personal Communication, July 22, 2013). In the same vein, Basden (1982) affirmed that among the Igbo:

"The planting of the yam is serious and important business to the native (...), and under the old system of government any breach of the farming etiquette led to grave consequence as yam stealing whether of freshly planted seed or the matured root was punishable by death." (Basden, 1982: 36)

In a land dispute, the party that cultivates seed yam first on the land possesses the land temporarily as his opponent, even if he is the actual owner of the land, must wait for the yam crop to be harvested before he can reclaim it. Thus, people say: *Agbalụ aka na-azọana, onyejiji a na-akonye* ("If one fights over a piece of land empty-handed, the person with seed yam will continue to cultivate the land.").

The cultivation of yam is the major traditional source of wealth and social status in precolonial Igbo society, as the size of the barn and the number of yam tubers an individual possessed was used to measure a man's wealth. Most men married many wives to beget children who would help out on farm work. The title associated with yam includes *Eze Ji* (King of yam), and *Di Ji* (Husband of yam) was conferred on accomplished yam farmers with large barns. In Igbo-Ukwu, yam was and is still used almost in every religious, social, and cultural event such as ritual activities, appeasement and appreciation of autochthonous gods, marriage ceremonies and for Thanksgiving in churches. Tubers of yam are given as gifts to women after child delivery and are used in traditional marriages as gifts to the bride's family. Through these various social activities, yam serves wealth redistribution purpose in Igbo communities. As a result, *Iwa Ji* Festival is celebrated in all Igboland. In Igbo-Ukwu, *Iwa Ji*

Festival is an integral part of the people's culture and has been celebrated from time immemorial. The chief priest of *Udo* deity in Igbo-Ukwu describes the festival as *ozo oku*, that is, a 'relay race'. Like a relay race, Nwankwo (1988) maintained that it holds meaning "from the past, runs through the present and is geared towards the future, the actualisation of the life of an Igbo man" (Nwankwo, 1988:19). *Iwa Ji* Festival engenders social consciousness and promotes Igbo cultural heritage. Despite certain common beliefs about the festival, there are areas where the festival is perceived differently by individuals and communities. For instance, it is generally perceived as a cultural event celebrating the position yam occupies in Igbo culture, and secondly, it is seen as a celebration of the successful harvest of the yam crop, and a welcoming of new yam. These meanings are captured in the statements of an informant, Ichie Ezechukwu Umeokwonna, the secretary of *ozo* society in Igbo-Ukwu:

"The New Yam Festival is organised to celebrate the harvest of all crops. They didn't need to begin to mention all the crops. They simply mention the king of all crops, yam." (Personal Communication, August 20, 2013)

During the festival, appreciation is shown to the autochthonous gods for the king of all crops, and by extension, other crops. The yam crop is symbolic in the context of kingship as well as being indicative of God's gift to mankind. As the king of crops, it is superior to all other crops, and its festival is the celebration of the harvest of all crops. On the other hand, some Igbo people see it as a heathen practice.

Generally, *Iwa Ji* Festival is a period of thanksgiving to God for His guidance and protection throughout the planting season and the autochthonous gods for a bumper harvest. An informant, Charles Ughalah, a staff of National Gallery of Art, Igbo-Ukwu, states that it is done to appease the gods of fertility and also to thank God for keeping the farmers throughout the farming season (Interview, August 16, 2013). *Iwa Ji* festival is done at the beginning of harvest when everybody is free from farm work, and the war in the case of Ohafia warriors. This view corroborates Arua (1981) position that the ceremony is majorly about Thanksgiving as well as reckoning with other social factors. In precolonial times, he argued:

"The yam ceremonies were held in Ohafia at time when men are back from war, and were an occasion for general festivity and thanksgiving to *Obasi di n'elu* (the Supreme Being), just as they are now occasion for family and community reunion." (Arua, 1981:695)

An Igbo adage states *Etoo dike na nke o mere, o mekwa ozo*. ("If a brave man is praised for what he did, he does more."). An expression of gratitude to the supernatural is to attract more blessings. The festive period is an opportunity for family and community reunion, for socialising and celebrating with friends and relatives. Hence, Eboh (2012) submitted that the communal celebrations portray the spirit of African communalism; they bring about good tidings of general merriment and good wishes to everybody in the community. In Igbo-Ukwu, lineages use the opportunity of the festival to organise family and village meetings for the peace, unity and development of their respective villages.

*Iwa Ji* Festival is also regarded as a time of merriment and socialisation as it is a period that ushers in abundance of new crops. Everybody is happy that *ugani* (famine) is over. An informant, Ichie Dominic Ogbueli, a member of *Iduu*'s cabinet declares:

"*Iri ji bu age iji wee ghua ugani, maka na o wuru na ji koo, ugani adaa ugani a bugh i ezigbo ihe. Oge iri ji, e nwee anuri na ji a putago. Oge ahụ bu oge mmekorita because na obi anuri adigo na ji aputago.*" ["It is a festival celebrated to make jest of famine because if there is scar-

city of yam, there will be famine by June, July and this period is not a happy period. So, during the New Yam Festival, there would be joy that new yam is out.”] (Interview, 22 July, 2013)

Thus, the period marks rites of passage, passing from lack and hunger to abundance of food, and a period of oldness to newness, a ritual that brings about a transition or changes from oldness to newness. Interestingly, to some Igbo people, *Iwa Ji* Festival is *nzukọ ekpere*, that is ‘a prayer meeting’. This is traceable to the fact that the festival is characterised by prayer sessions, particularly those made during kola nut rituals. Household heads, chief priests and traditional leaders of communities pray for good health, longevity, bumper harvest in the coming season and success for the people in all endeavours. As Ichie Ezechukwu Umeokwonna, the secretary of *nze na ozo* Igbo-Ukwu community submits:

“*Iwa Ji* Festival, formerly *Igwansi* is a ritual according to history, to beg God in case there is any poison associated with new crops, that it should harm nobody. After which, there is feasting.” (Personal Communication, August 20, 2012)

There is a general belief that new crops come with sicknesses, and it is necessary to pray for good health for the people who will consume the crops. Moreover, In the Igbo-Ukwu community, *Iwa Ji* Festival was formally known as *Igwa Nsi* (‘neutralising poison’), based on the belief that the festival rituals neutralise the poison in new crops. Among the Igbo people, there is a prohibition on the eating of yams before the festival celebration. Coursey and Coursey(1971) give an explanation for this:

“[T]he earlier part of the growing season, the yam tubers are poisonous or, otherwise, inherently harmful owing to the presence of alkaloids and or steroidal sapogenins. Several species are actually used for the preparation of poisons for hunting, fishing or criminal purposes in various parts of the world including Africa” (Coursey and Coursey, 1971:474)

We would agree with Eboh (2012) that the people use the festival to celebrate the experiential phenomenon of harvest, plenitude, recreation, renewal, accomplishment and freedom from hunger.

In the next section, we look at the ‘traditional’ *Iwa Ji* Festival which is the form untainted by modernity and Christian religion. This form is still observed by the adherents of Igbo Traditional Religion, a relatively small number of people and constitute a small fraction of the indigene of Igbo-Ukwu.

### Elements of ‘Traditional’ *Iwa Ji* Festival: Performativity

Traditional *Iwa Ji* Festival in Igbo-Ukwu, which has been celebrated in Igbo-Ukwu from time immemorial, is still celebrated by members of Igbo-Ukwu community who subscribe to Igbo traditional religion. By all intents, the festive ceremony is a performance. ‘Traditional’ *Iwa Ji* Festival is celebrated in two parts: *I wekpu ji na muo* (Presentation of New yam to the deity) and *Ikpo ji na Nkwọ* (Mock yam sale at Nkwọ Market square). The festival in all its form is characterised by a series of performances. Performance, according to Schechner, is a “restored behaviour” present in theatre, rituals trances, shamanism and masquerades. Cultural performance, according to McKenzie (2001), includes the study of all manifestations of performance or performative behaviour in culture. Schechner (2004) submits that these performative activities share features, which include a special ordering of time, a special value attached to objects, non-productivity in terms of goods, rules that guide the processes and often, special places which means non-ordinary places, are set aside or constructed to perform these activities. ‘Traditional’ *Iwa Ji* Fes-

tival possesses all the attributes of performance, characterised by a series of activities that must take place in sequential order and at specific places.

### *I wekpu ji na mụọ*

Before the consumption of the new yam in Igbo-Ukwu, the chief priest of the community must perform *I wekpu ji na mụọ* which means the presentation of yam to the deity (see Plate 1). The ritual performance takes place at the shrine of *Udo* Nkwo Igbo-Ukwu, and are attended by the adherents of Igbo Traditional Religion. The chief priest of *Udo* deity and the *Ọzọ amụma* title holder preside over this ritual. On the day of this event, the chief priest of *Udo* deity lights incense and places it at strategic positions in the shrine. He plays different musical instruments for a while, uses white chalk to make inscriptions on the floor of the shrine, and kneeling in front of the shrine; he invites the autochthonous gods to come and partake in the festival. He offers sacrifice, pouring libation and invoking various autochthonous deities in Igbo-Ukwu to come and partake in the sacrifice. These deities, the people believe, have contributed to fruitful farming season. *Ifejiọkụ* (god of yam), is particularly appreciated for the new yam and other blessings. The content of the thanksgiving includes good health throughout the planting season and the harvest time, longevity, harmonious co-existence among members of the community, and successful festival celebration. He offered special prayers for the unmarried and childless women. He presents the sacrificial items to the autochthonous gods and continues imploring:

<i>Doo, asi na ugo chalu acha ada echu echu.</i>	Please, it is said that a matured eagle does not fade.
<i>Ekenelu m gu na etu isi welu bia nye anyi ji nke afo a.</i>	I thank you for the gift of the new yam this year.
<i>Nee ji, nenee okeokpa kaanyi ji n'aka, nee.</i>	This is a yam. See the cock we have in our hands.
<i>Doo anyi no n'ihu gi na-ayo, na-ekene gi na I chekwalu anyi ji anyi kolu.</i>	Please, we are in your presence in prayer and thanksgiving for protecting the yams we cultivated.
<i>Ji I melu anyi koo gwute.</i>	Yams you helped us cultivate and harvest.
<i>Anyi anwuhu anwu wee gwute anyi no ndu gwute ji nine wee puta be gi na-egosi gi ya taa.</i>	We are not dead but alive to harvest all these tubers of yam and have come to your house to show them to you today.
<i>Onye egwutehu, jee gwutekwo.</i>	He whose crop did not do well will do well.
<i>Onye chukwaa ya rie.</i>	Whoever worked hard shall enjoy the fruit of his labour.
<i>Onye koo ya gwute.</i>	Whoever cultivates, shall harvest.
<i>Onye chukwaa ya rie.</i>	Who worked hard shall enjoy the fruit of his labour.
<i>Ya gazie.</i>	So be it.

The chief priest offered sacrifice to *ndiichie* (the ancestors) because they started the festival and are believed to commune with the living whenever the ritual is performed. He presented tubers of *ji ocha* (white yam), and *ji asiri* (water yam), kola nut and palm wine to the deity. As a priest, he is a mediator between the people and the spiritual beings. They are to be respected and consulted on this and other accounts.

### ***Ikpọ ji na Nkwọ* (Mock yam sale at Nkwọ Market)**

This is also organised by adherents of Igbo Traditional Religion referred to as *Umụntu*. It is intended to inform all and sundry that the yam crop is mature and fit for consumption. On the eve of this occasion, the chief priest first performed kola nut ritual as members converge at the shrine before proceeding to the market. The market in Igbo belief system, according to Ukpokolo, (2011) besides being a place of exchange of goods and services, is also a space for information dissemination. In traditional society, messages are disseminated through the town crier to the members of the community on a market day. Because spiritual exchanges also take place in the markets, markets are associated with one deity or the other. Little wonder that the chief priest and the adherents of indigenous religion needed to move to Nkwọ market, the most important market in Igbo-Ukwu. Gunshots were fired twice as the procession of six masquerades, representing the presence of the ancestors, the chief priest (the ritual elder), and the *Ọzọ amụma* titled men proceeded from the *Udo* shrine to Nkwọ Market, with music accompaniment, *Ọzọ amụma* titled men supplying music with their flutes to sustain the mood of the occasion. Members of the community greeted the booming of gunshots with shouts of joy. As the procession marched to the market they sang:

*Omenana bu ka ọ di mma, mee ya  
gazie n'ọfọ. (2x)*

*Ọdinana bu ka ọ di mma, mee ya gazie  
n'ọfọ.*

*Nwanne m kwere e, kweren'okwu  
chukwu.*

*Kwere ka ọ gazie n'ọfọ.*

*Omenana bu ka ọ di mma, mee ya  
gazie n'ọfọ.*

Culture is for good. Do it and it shall be well.

Tradition is for good. Do it and it shall be well.

Brother believe, believe the word of the Almighty God.

Believe and it shall be well.

Culture is for good, do it, and it shall be well.

To the participants, the performance of this ritual is for the well-being of the collective. At *Nkwọ* Market garage, the *Ọzọ amụma* titled men distributed *nzu* (white chalk) to the adherents of Igbo Traditional Religion who flocked the arena enthused by the activities of the day. White chalk in Igbo culture symbolises good will and purity, indicating that they are performing the ritual with good intention. Each man, depending on his social status makes parallel lines with the white chalk, praying with kola nut in his hand. In Igbo-Ukwu, an *okoro* (untitled man), is known as *Nkwọ izu*. *Nkwọ* is one of the traditional Igbo market days and an *izu* comprises four traditional market days. An *okoro*, therefore, makes four lines. An *agwu* initiate, for instance, chief priest of autochthonous deities makes five lines, the additional one line is because as an *agwu* initiate, he has an additional responsibility. An *ọzọ* titled man is equivalent to two untitled men. An *ọzọ* titled man, therefore, makes eight

lines. With the kola nut in an outstretched hand, the *Ozọ amụma* titled man offered thanksgiving to God for everyone present and the gift of the new yam. He declared that the ritual was to inform all and sundry that the yam crop had matured and he concluded by praying for longevity and good health of members of Igbo-Ukwu community. To ensure a proper representation of the entire community, three men, each from the three-quarters of Igbo-Ukwu also performed kola nut ritual. Protection from evil spirits and welfare of men and women, thanksgiving to God and the sustenance of the festival were the subject matter of their prayers. They reinstated the strong relationship between the earth and humanity. Humans derive their food, wealth from the earth and will eventually be committed to earth after death. *Ana* (Earth goddess) desecrates whoever desecrates the earth and protects whoever respects her. Finally, one of the representatives announced that new yams would be brought to the market next *Nkwọ* day. He stated that the old and the new are always together, but due to shame, the old gives way to the new. This emphasised the transition that would occur after the ritual, that is, the transition from oldness to newness as the ritual is a form of rites of passage.

The chief priest announced the time for the Mock Yam Sale and invited individuals who do not have money to price the tubers of yam, probably because they are not intended for sale but to bring to the notice of all and sundry the fact the new yam is matured and suitable for consumption. The *Ozọ amụma* titled men displayed the eight tubers of yam for sale. A woman offered *nnu ego itọ* (N120). Another said *akpa ego ise* (N1000), and yet another *ohu akpa ego* (N4000). The titled man refused to sell and packed the good. The chief priest requested the people to clap their hands to express joy at the successful completion of the event. He thanked all present at the event, stated that the ritual performance was a cultural heritage from the ancestors. Adherents of Igbo Traditional Religion in Igbo-Ukwu perform ‘traditional’ *Iwa Ji* festival rituals to appease the autochthonous gods and ancestors to ensure a bountiful harvest. The group retreated to the shrine through another route, singing and playing the flute as they went. Back in the shrine, they feasted on the new yam, amidst singing and dancing.

‘Traditional’ *Iwa Ji* Festival is a performance, with rituals comprising many processes during preparation, which involves notifying adherents of Igbo Traditional Religion of the date of the festival. Other details are clearing and cleaning the shrine of the *Udo* deity and obtaining materials for the rituals. Needed materials included tubers of yam, palm wine, cocks, and white chalk. Yam is the most valued object in these rituals. Secondly, the performance spaces are uniquely organised. The chief priest of *Udo* deity and the *Ozọ amụma* title holders are key performers while the traditionalists, some traders and buyers in the market form the audience. All are active participants, or the performance will be incomplete, and in fact, will not take place. Performances embedded in *Iwekpụ ji na mụọ* (presentation of yam to the deity) include the ritual invocations to the autochthonous deities at the beginning of the ritual; other aspects are the kola nut rituals, killing and offering of objects of sacrifice to the autochthonous gods. For *Ikpo ji na Nkwọ* (Mock yam sale in *Nkwọ* Market), the performance includes the invocations by the chief priest before the procession to *Nkwọ* market, the procession and singing to *Nkwọ* garage, the kola nut ritual before the mock sale, the mock sale of yam by the *Ozọ amụma* title holder, clapping of hands by the audience at the end of the rituals, and masquerade display during the processions. The procession returned to the shrine of *Udo* deity. There is transformation at the end of the ritual when the festival ushers in the new yam. At the end of this performance members of

Igbo-Ukwu community are free to consume the new yam. New yam can then be bought and sold in *Nkwọ* Market.

### **Reconstructed *Iwa Ji* Festive Ceremony: The Fusion of the Old and the New**

The reconstructed *Iwa Ji* Festival is of two forms. The first is the one organised by the members of Igbo-Ukwu community, and the second, the one organized by the Mbido Igbo Cultural Organisation, which is a national body mandate to develop any Igbo cultural practice to promote Igbo culture through tourism development. Due to space constraint, our focus in this paper is the reconstructed *Iwa Ji* Festival carried out by the members of Igbo-Ukwu community. The second form will receive attention in another attempt.

*Iwa Ji* festival in Igbo-Ukwu involves elaborate preparations, especially by Igbo-Ukwu Development Union (IDU), the organisers of the event. Several meetings are held to discuss the festival's budget, selecting the *ad hoc* organising committee members, sending out invitation cards to friends, relations and well-wishers, and making the necessary arrangement for kola nuts, food and drinks and cultural entertainments. Rainmakers are contacted to ensure favourable weather during the celebration. The venue of the festival, which is the palace of the traditional ruler, (*Iduu*'s palace) is prepared for the occasion: cleaned thoroughly; roads leading to the compound are cleared by Igbo-Ukwu Youth Council. The palace building is repainted, the compound decorated to enhance its aesthetic appeal. The festival date is announced severally beforehand and on the eve of the festival further announcements are made to remind members of Igbo-Ukwu community of the coming event. Urban dwellers and members of the Igbo-Ukwu community in diaspora return *en masse* to participate in the occasion.

The day of the new yam festival is remarkable, and festivity fills the atmosphere. The arrival of the traditional leader and his entourage represents the official commencement of the day's event. Flanked by colourfully dressed members of his cabinet, the traditional leader is a representative of the voice of his people. Prayers and supplications to the Supreme Being are done using the kola nut as an instrument of communication to God. The essence of kola nut presentation at this stage suggests the traditional nature of the event and a sign of hospitality to all present. The peak of the moments in the new yam festival celebration in Igboland is the cutting of roasted yam, which is conspicuously in the middle of a beautifully carved wooden board placed on a table before the traditional leader and his cabinet members. Like the kola nut ritual, it is a solemn occasion where all must be silent except the voice of the traditional leader echoing and invoking the supernatural powers. He at this moment represents the collectivity, and standing in the gap between the living and the ancestors in the old order, and in the new order, the living and Jesus Christ. Cutting off a roasted yam is a solemn occasion and all present listening and participate as the echo of 'Aameen' is heard some distance from the arena while he prays. In the old order, the people would respond 'iseeee', meaning 'so be it'. As the traditional leader cut the roasted new yam, he said:

"I take this knife in the name of [on behalf of] Igbo-Ukwu community, as I cut this yam, may the devil be defeated in the name of Jesus. Amen. May he flee from our community for we have nothing in common. May the angel of God come and stay permanently in our community in Jesus name. Amen. As I cut this yam today, we would always cut it every year. So be it. We would

cultivate, harvest and feed well; next year's harvest would be more than this year's. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, I cut this yam in Jesus name. Amen."

Reference to Jesus runs parallel to what obtained during the 'traditional' festival celebration at the market square where the chief priest of the community called on the ancestors. Here we see the inclusion of 'Jesus', 'Amen', 'the angel of God', 'Holy Spirit', 'Jesus' name'. These are indications of cultural contact and diffusion. Rather than 'iseeee' or 'ofooooo', 'Amen' is used. As he cut the new yam, the music from the flute, followed by *Uhie* (special music for *ozọ* titled men), conveyed the significance of the occasion. *Iwa Ji* Festival is celebrated with a particular species of yam known as *Ji adaka* (*Dioscorea rotundata*) for some reasons which include the fact that the species is white inside, matures earlier than other species, the most popularly-cultivated in Igbo-Ukwu community (and in Igboland in general) and finally, it is prestigious because of its size. The Holy Bible was placed beside the new yam cut by *Iduu* (traditional leader) as an indication of the rebirth of the festival. The Bible placed side-by-side with the yam can also be interpreted as an attempt to replace the value place on the yam in Igbo cosmology with the Bible. Of course, the yam crop is sacred to the people. Undoubtedly, the celebration of *Iwa Ji* Festival in Igbo-Ukwu is no longer intended to reconcile the people with the cosmos. It has become about community integration for development. The presence of the three traditional prime ministers besides the traditional ruler as he cuts the new yam indicates the support of the constitutive community. When the *Iduu* cuts the yam, he is assumed to have severed any entanglement the community has with the Devil. To the people, *Iwa Ji* Festival has been 'Christianised'.

Authority and social hierarchy are respected in the distribution and consumption of the roasted yam, which is served with local condiments, prepared with pepper, palm oil, salt and locust beans. The traditional leader first tastes the new yam, followed by the cabinet members. Tubers of yam are then cut into smaller pieces and served with the local sauce, using several trays which are moved around, and people pick from the one nearest to them. This symbolises the communality of the occasion and gives a sense of equality of all humans. Little wonder that Bolin and Dunstan (1985) noted that festivals afford individuals the opportunity to interact with other community members regardless of class affiliations or social, religious, political or economic status.

The second day of the festival moved the event to the *umunna* (patrilineage) level. Before the day, philanthropic members of groups donate towards the festival. When the members of a lineage do not get sufficient donation for the successful festival, they task themselves and contribute to realising the amount of money needed. Patrilineage wives are in charge of feeding. They do the shopping for food stuff like yam, *abacha* (*tapioca*) and other condiments, cook and ensure that all attendees have some food during the occasion. It is on this day that all new babies born after the previous *Iwa Ji* festival are officially registered as members of a particular lineage. If the baby is a female, the parents present her to the lineage with a hen and two tubers of yam. If it is a baby boy, the parents present him with a he-goat (if they can afford it) or a cock and two tubers of yam. It is compulsory for every member of the lineage (adults and children) to participate in this celebration. The people discuss issues concerning their group and sometimes make donations to improve their welfare. During this event, meat is shared according to age. In the case of married women, they share the hips of all the animals slaughtered that day and took their share in turn according to their time of marriage.

The reconstruction of the *Iwa Ji* festival by the traditional leadership of Igbo-Ukwu started as a result of the breach that emerged with the advent of Christian religion and modernisation. In reconstructing the festival, the aspects connected with the autochthonous deities and ancestors are assumed to have been removed and replaced with Christian symbols in order to make the festival more acceptable to people of various religious leanings. It is significant to note that the traditional chief priest of the community has been dropped; hence he has no role in the new dispensation. Igbo-Ukwu Development Union (IDU) play a significant role in the organisation of the event. Ironically, rainmakers are still contacted to ensure favourable weather condition. Rainmakers are specialists in African Traditional religion and are assumed to employ supernatural forces to manipulate the weather and suspend rainfall. Contradictions such as these are what the Igbo people have to live with despite the reconstruction of *Iwa Ji* Festival, a product of their fractured cultural identity.

### **Reconstructed *Iwa Ji* Festival and Fractured Igbo Identity**

As Africans conform to the processes of modernisation, synonymous with Westernisation, imposed on them in the name of progress, they are increasingly losing their rich cultural heritage along with their identity. As Owen-Ibie (2008) observed, cultures of nations are their identity and sign of national pride. They give a sense of identity, dignity, continuity, and bind people together (Fridah, 1998). Similarly, Ejiofor (1984) contends that the only remedy that may eventually reverse the trend of centuries of white prejudice against the black race is a cultural revival. Does cultural revival entail bringing back the past in their undiluted form? The traditional *Iwa Ji* Festival as we presented above is a case in point. From our discussion, it is obvious that it was losing acceptability and patronage despite its rich cultural components. Reconstruction was carried out to make sure that it conforms to the current social realities. As the festival is a viable cultural practice of any African society, the need for its reconstruction to restore African culture and identity has become imperative. Enriched with a wide range of rituals, which are vehicles by which the people's cultural heritage is transmitted, *Iwa Ji* festival among the Igbo people, as a critical component of their cultural identity, stands a better chance of being retained but certainly not in the 'traditional' form. With the increasing wave of globalisation which Giddens (1990) explained as "the intensification of worldwide social relations, which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Giddens, 1990:64) no society or culture can afford to continue to hold on to the past as sacrosanct. Thus, Steger (2003) as cited in Adegbola (2006: 3–4) maintained that the four core features of globalisation are:

1. 'Globalisation involves the creation of new and the multiplication of existing social networks and activities that increasingly overcome traditional political, economic, cultural and geographical boundaries;
2. Globalisation is reflected in the expansion and stretching of social relations, activities and interdependencies;
3. Globalisation involves the intensification and acceleration of social exchanges and activities;
4. Globalisation processes also involve the subjective place of human consciousness.

Adegbola contended that from different dimensions that globalisation has been viewed, one could conclude that globalisation is “a set of processes that manifest in cultural, economic, political, technological, ecological and many other dimensions” (Adegbola, 2006: 4), which has underlying beliefs. Against the backdrop of certain beliefs underlying globalisation such as that the assumption that it benefits everyone, the ideological component is often undermined (Adegbola, 2006). This ideology is a product of ‘classical systems of beliefs’ upon which neo-liberal capitalism is built (Adegbola 2006, citing Steger, 2003). Of course, Adegbola does not seem to agree with the argument that globalisation ‘benefits everyone’. Using African languages as a case in point, he maintained that the ‘space of flows’ and the ICT had deprived African people of equal participation in the knowledge age. As many African languages remain unwritten, their participation in ICT, the driving force of the knowledge economy, is hampered. He, therefore, advocated for the review of linguistics programmes in universities in Africa, and the adoption of a multidisciplinary approach to the study of linguistics.

On a larger cultural scape, while we hold that globalisation is in its self is a fluxing concept, its capacity to accommodate multivocality is not in doubt, and can, therefore, be exploited by national cultures to revitalise their cultural heritage to face other cultures and, at the same time, achieve cultural homogeneity. Globalisation helps indigenous peoples bring their cultures to the market place of ideas. Cultural products intermix and become enriched through migration or borrowing. The emerging cultural mixing can engender a new global culture and the end of specific cultural values and practices (El-Ojeili and Hayden, 2006). On the other hand, another school of thought holds that rather than leading to the homogeneity of cultures, what emerges is heterogeneity in the cultural sphere of widespread cultural integration. Proponents of this argument, besides globalisation, also use concepts such as hybridisation, indigenisation and creolisation as replacement of local culture by a single Western culture. The issue here is that indigenous people can through appropriation and indigenisation inherit aspects of Western culture, and integrates same into their indigenous cultures. For instance, we talk of ‘Englishes’, and then ‘Nigerian English’, a version of English Language that incorporate Nigerian expressions and worldview, structural adjustment of ancestral English or in some cases, English words that mean different things in the Nigerian context. The argument is that the English Language as spoken in Britain cannot accurately convey the meanings inherent in African worldview, hence the need for its ‘transformation’. According to Precious (2010), with cultural adaptation and alignment, instead of copying Western cultures, Africans can retain their individuality. The extent to which that individuality can become a possibility is another question begging for an answer. Is individuality evident in appropriation, reconstruction and/or transformation? Does the reconstruction of *Iwa Ji* Festival mean retention of Igbo individuality? There are inherent contradictions in the reconstructed New Yam Festival that indicate Igbo fractured identity, even as the informants grapple with code mixing and code switching. Indeed, the fact remains that the fractured and schizophrenic identity of the Igbo personhood is a reality Igbo people have come to live with.

## Conclusion

*Iwa Ji* Festival is celebrated to preserve yam and ensure its continual production, and in contemporary times, symbolises the celebration of harvest in various professions, and the recreation of cultural heritage for identity con-

struction. We cannot agree less with Talbot (1927) when he noted that the yam festival among Igbo people is the crowning ceremony of the year, or with Arua (1981) who observed that the life of Igbo people would be impossible without *Iwa Ji* festival. The reconstruction of *Iwa Ji* Festival in Igbo-Ukwu was to meet the expectation of those who clamoured for the abandonment of the festival and to reinforce Igbo collective identity, which has fractured due to modernisation and missionization. Through the reconstruction, aspects of the festival connected with offering sacrifices to the gods were discarded. The venue of the festival was shifted from the shrine of Udo Deity to the palace of the traditional leader of the community.

Similarly, the Holy Bible replaces traditional symbolic objects. There is no need to slaughter a chicken for sacrifice as Christ has shed His blood for the atonement of the sins of the whole world. *Iwa Ji* festival has illustrated that any aspect of a people's culture that fails to address a people's needs at any point in time suffers abandonment. Change is inevitable, and there is the need for adaptation and reconstruction of culture to address the social, economic and political realities of a people, and thus enhance cultural development. Yet for the Igbo people, the reconstruction also brings to the fore their fractured identity that has come about as a result of colonial encounter.

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**Francesca C. Ukpokolo, Obiageli C. Okoye, Olatunde B. Lawuyi**

**Kulturna rekonstrukcija festivala *Iwa Ji*  
u Igbo-Ukwuu i razlomljeni identitet Igbo**

**Sažetak**

*U mnogim su afričkim društvima domorodački festivali pred istrebljenjem, što je rezultat modernizacija i utjecaja kršćanske religije na život ljudi. U jugoistočnoj Nigeriji, festival Iwa Ji, godišnji festival jama koji se slavi da bi se zahvalilo Vrhovnom biću i bogovima za osiguranje održanja, posljednjih desetljeća susreće se s napuštanjem. No istraživači su ustanovili kulturno značenje vezano za festival i njegov potencijal u očuvanju identiteta ljudi, kao i za promociju turizma, na temelju čega su predložili rekonstrukciju festivala da bi bio opće prihvaćen. Rekonstrukcija se provela. Rad proučava rekonstrukciju festivala kao fuziju domorodačkog Iwa Ji festivala i suvremenih praksi, argumentirajući da je rekonstruirani festival odraz razlomljenog identiteta Igbo naroda. Služeći se Turner-Schechner modelom izvedbe kao socijalne drame za eksplanatorni model u studiji, autori argumentiraju da su advent moderne i kršćanska religija stvorile procjep u iskustvu kulture. Obnovljena pozornica predstavljena je u rekonstrukciji i prepakiravanju festivala za bolju prihvatljivost. Reintegracija se provela kako je festival postao bolje prihvaćen povodom rekonstrukcije te su sudionici iskusili transformaciju. Za proizvođenje podataka primijenjen je etnografski pristup. Podaci su se analizirali deskriptivno.*

**Ključne riječi**

Iwa Ji festival, razlomljena stvarnost, kulturna rekonstrukcija, fuzija staroga i novoga, Igbo-Ukwu

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**Kulturelle Rekonstruktion des Festivals *Iwa Ji*  
in Igbo-Ukwu und die zerbrochene Identität der Igbo**

**Zusammenfassung**

*In vielen afrikanischen Gesellschaften stehen die einheimischen Festivals vor der Auslöschung, was eine Auswirkung der Modernisierungen sowie des Einflusses der christlichen Religion auf das Leben der Menschen ist. Das Iwa-Ji-Festival, ein in Südostnigeria jährlich stattfindendes, dem Höchsten Wesen und den Göttern zum Dank für die Erhaltungsgarantie gefeiertes Festival der Jamswurzel, blickt in den letzten Jahrzehnten dem eigenen Absterben ins Auge. Jedoch haben die Forscher kulturelle Bedeutung in Bezug auf das Festival und dessen Potenzial in der Wahrung der Menschenidentität entdeckt, als auch für die Tourismuswerbung, aufgrund dessen sie eine Rekonstruktion des Festivals vorgeschlagen haben, um ihn allgemein annehmbar zu machen. Die Rekonstruktion wurde in die Tat umgesetzt. Der Artikel erforscht die Rekonstruktion des Festivals als Fusion des indigenen Iwa-Ji-Festivals und zeitgenössischer Praktiken, indem er begründet, das rekonstruierte Festival sei eine Widerspiegelung der zerbrochenen Identität der Igbo-Ethnie. Indem sie sich des Turner-Schechner-Modells der Aufführung als soziales Drama für das explanatorische Modell in der Studie bedienen, argumentieren die Autoren, der Advent der Moderne und die christliche Religion hätten einen Spalt in der Kulturerfahrung geschaffen. Die renovierte Bühne wurde im Rahmen der Rekonstruktion und der Umgestaltung des Festivals zur besseren Akzeptanz präsentiert. Die Reintegration wurde parallel mit der anlässlich der Rekonstruktion verbesserten Akzeptanz vollbracht und die Teilnehmer konnten die Transformation erleben. Zur Datenproduktion wurde der ethnografische Ansatz verwendet. Die Daten wurden deskriptiv analysiert.*

**Schlüsselwörter**

Iwa-Ji-Festival, zerbrochene Wirklichkeit, kulturelle Rekonstruktion, Fusion von Neu und Alt, Igbo-Ukwu

**Francesca C. Ukpokolo, Obiageli C. Okoye, Olatunde B. Lawuyi**

**La reconstruction culturelle du festival  
*Iwa Ji* à Igbo-Ukwu et l'identité morcelée des Igbo**

**Résumé**

*Dans de nombreuses sociétés africaines indigènes les festivals sont près de s'éteindre, ce qui est le résultat de la modernisation et de l'influence de la religion chrétienne sur la vie des gens. Au sud-est du Nigéria, le festival Iwa Ji, festival annuel de l'igname qui se fête pour remercier l'Être Suprême et les dieux d'assurer la conservation de l'homme, a été déserté ces dernières décennies. Pourtant, les chercheurs ont démontré l'importance culturelle liée au festival et son potentiel qui contribue à la sauvegarde de l'identité des gens, mais également à promouvoir le tourisme, et ont ainsi proposé de reconstruire le festival afin qu'il soit communément reconnu. La reconstruction a eu lieu. Ce travail examine cette reconstruction en tant que fusion du festival indigène Iwa Ji et des pratiques contemporaines, en affirmant que la reconstruction du festival est le reflet de l'identité morcelée du peuple Igbo. En se servant pour cette étude du modèle explicatif de performance comme drame social de Turner-Schechner, les auteurs affirment que l'avènement de l'époque moderne et la religion chrétienne ont créé une brèche dans l'expérience de la culture. Cette scène qui a été repensée est présentée dans la reconstruction et dans de nouvelles conditions pour une meilleure acceptation. Le festival ayant été reconnu, le processus de réintégration a été mis en œuvre lors de la reconstruction et les participants ont pu expérimenter la transformation. Pour la production des données, une approche ethnographique a été appliquée. Les données ont été analysées de manière descriptive.*

**Mots-clés**

festival Iwa Ji, réalité morcelée, reconstruction culturelle, fusion du nouveau et de l'ancien, Igbo-Ukwu