

**IKORO DANCE FESTIVAL: A CULTURAL HERITAGE OF AKWETE COMMUNITY OF UKWA
EAST LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, ABIA STATE.**

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Abstract

The *Ikoru* Dance Festival has contributed significantly to the cultural and socio-economic development of the *Akwete* community. As a living expression of the community's cultural heritage, the festival fosters unity and brings the artistic skills and traditional identity of the people into prominence. This paper aims to examine the cultural significance and sustainability of the *Ikoru* Dance Festival, exploring how it has adapted to the modern environment while retaining its indigenous values. The study investigates the role of the festival in cultural education, particularly how it serves as a medium for transmitting heritage and identity across generations. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were gathered through oral interviews, participant observation, imitation, and active engagement in festival activities. These were complemented by secondary sources, including journal articles, books, conference papers, magazines, and credible internet materials. Findings reveal that the *Ikoru* Dance Festival is highly esteemed by the people of *Akwete* and is traditionally performed at the ancient kingdom building, highlighting its spiritual and historical significance. Based on the findings, the paper recommends that the festival be preserved and continuously supported to ensure the survival of this important cultural heritage and prevent it from fading into extinction.

Introduction

The culture of the *Akwete* community is deeply embedded in its music. A prominent cultural expression is the *Ikoru* Dance Festival, a socio-cultural event through which the community showcases its elaborate dances, rituals, and symbolic performances. As Lawrence (2006) notes, that "Traditional music in Nigeria is rooted in the pristine culture, rites and rituals, ceremonies, and social contact that governed or marked the rhythm of life in the traditional society" (p. 5). Adegbite (2001) further emphasizes that, "The heterogeneity of African music cuts across cultural barriers; in other words, there is music for every aspect of African life; ritual, religious, social, political, entertainment, and recreational" (p. 41). The *Ikoru* Dance Festival in the *Akwete* community exemplifies this view, as it is anchored in cultural ceremonies and embodies social, entertainment, and recreational music. It thus serves as a reflection of the community's cultural heritage and practices. The songs performed during the *Ikoru* Dance Festival encapsulate historical narratives, folktales, expressions of love, and various forms of entertainment. Music-making, therefore, is not just an art form but an intrinsic component of *Akwete's* cultural identity. As Nwanpka (2013) asserts, "A community music program provides an opportunity for members of the community to express, explore, create, recreate, and enjoy music and musical activities" (p. 3). The *Ikoru* Music Festival is not merely a celebratory event; it constitutes a vital part of the social and artistic life of the *Akwete* people. Through their dances, instrumentation, and songs, the community communicates its values, beliefs, and way of life in a richly aesthetic and expressive manner. Music, in this context, is not an isolated art but a performing tradition that serves as a dynamic forum for cultural identity and communal expression.

Oriloye (2011) informs that:

Twin-arts of music and dance are known to play important roles in almost all human cultures, music and dance appeal to the emotions. They enhance group feeling and solidarity, music and dance are also used for communication. Here the music and dance send messages across to the people, music and dance event are therefore, a reliable instrument for assessing the social life of any African society. (P.16).

Music and dance of *Ikoru* dance festival event are reliable instruments for assessing the social life of *Akwete* people and appeasing the gods of the land for a fruitful harvest and security of the community. Nkejia (1974) ascertains that:

The theme of songs tends to center around events and matters of common interest and concern to the members of a community or the social groups within it. They deal with everyday life or with the traditions, belief and customs of the society (P.189).

The Ikoro Dance Festival song texts are composed, transmitted, and learned within the *Akwete* community, serving as an essential vehicle for informal education. These songs form the basis for the socialization of young people, providing them with civic and moral instruction. During the festival period, children participate actively in musical activities, acquiring knowledge and internalizing societal values through communal singing and performance. As Okafor (2005) affirms, “Norms and values of the community are learned through music that ranges from simple folk tunes to highly specialized ritual music, including chants, incantations, and minstrelsy” (p. 209). Agu (2017) supports this perspective, stating that “The lives of the people are surrounded with music and music-making” (p. 20). For the *Akwete* people, music particularly the *Ikoro* dance music is deeply interwoven into daily life. Through its rich lyrical content and distinctive instrumentation, it not only expresses emotion and conveys communal ideals, but also functions as a rallying force during significant seasonal events, such as harvest festivals. The *Ikoro* Dance Festival thus transcends mere entertainment. It acts as a profound expression of the community’s cultural identity and social cohesion, symbolizing the values, beliefs, and collective aspirations of the *Akwete* people.

History of Akwete Community

Chizaram(2024) informs that The *Akwete* community, located in Ukwu East Local Government Area of Abia State, Nigeria, lies approximately 18 kilometers southeast of the commercial city of Aba and 18 kilometers northeast of Port Harcourt, the oil-rich capital of Rivers State (Okafor, Adeola, &Ituma, 2020) narrates that *Akwete* is widely recognized for its distinctive beadwork and cloth artistry, as well as its rich cultural heritage. Founded in the seventeenth century by the Igbo people, the community was originally called “*AkwaMiri*”, meaning “cloth of the water” in Igbo. This name likely reflects the town’s location on the banks of the Imo River. In the early 1800s, *Akwete* gained historical significance as a trading post for the Aro people, a powerful Igbo trading network heavily involved in the transatlantic slave trade. During this period, *Akwete* became a central hub through which enslaved persons were transported. Following the abolition of slavery in the mid-19th century, the town’s prominence waned briefly. However, in the early 20th century, *Akwete* experienced an economic resurgence due to its revitalized beading and textile industry. The town became renowned for its vibrant beading techniques, noted for their vivid colors and intricate patterns, which continue to be used in the creation of traditional Igbo jewelry and ceremonial attire. Today, *Akwete* is a thriving community of over 20,000 residents. It remains celebrated for its artistic beadwork, which has become both a cultural symbol and a source of livelihood. The *Akwete* Beadwork Market attracts both locals and tourists seeking authentic Igbo craftsmanship, while the *Akwete* Beading Museum provides valuable insights into the historical and cultural evolution of beading in the region.

Social Activities of Akwete Community

The *Akwete* people are highly sociable and engage in various communal activities that reinforce their cultural heritage. They are commonly recognized by their use of traditional Igbo greetings and the customary evening meal of pounded yam. Social life in *Akwete* is significantly shaped by the traditional Igbo market calendar, which consists of four market days: Eke, Orie, Afor, and Nkwo. Among these, Nkwo stands out as the principal market day. It serves not only as a commercial hub but also as a space for social interaction. On Nkwo days, men typically engage in trade, community discussions, and socialization often accompanied by glasses of native palm wine while women gather under leafy trees to converse and share news. As Oderinde (2002) emphasizes, “Women are very important to nation-building and must be actively involved in decision-making processes to ensure progress and sustainable development in the society” (p. 15). This sentiment is reflected in *Akwete*’s inclusive communal life, where marriage ceremonies, funeral rites, and festive gatherings form integral aspects of their social fabric. The people are known for their collective joy during celebrations and their solidarity in times of grief, highlighting a deeply ingrained culture of mutual support. Despite the spread of Christianity, traditional music and festivals particularly the *Ikoro* Dance Festival remain central to *Akwete*’s cultural identity. The *Ikoro* Festival is a unifying cultural event that draws together masquerade groups, who engage in energetic singing, drumming, and dancing. This festival exemplifies the role of culture as the foundation and guiding spirit of the people’s social structure. Ultimately, the social life of *Akwete* presents a vivid portrait of a community bound by tradition, communal values, and artistic expression. Their cultural practices range from the grand celebration of the *Ikoro* Dance Festival to more intimate settings such as evening storytelling sessions, all contributing to the preservation of their rich heritage.

Religious Life of Akwete Community

Chizaram(2024) in an oral interview affirms that in the *Akwete* community, Christianity and traditional Igbo religion are the two predominant faith systems, and they coexist with minimal conflict. There is a notable degree of mutual tolerance and understanding among adherents of both religions, which allows for peaceful coexistence and social harmony. While the majority of *Akwete* indigenes identify as Christians and adhere to Christian doctrines, many also retain a strong reverence for traditional Igbo religious beliefs and practices. *Akwete*

traditional religion maintains that God (Chukwu) is worshipped through a hierarchy involving divinities, spirits, and ancestors. These intermediaries serve as spiritual channels through which people engage with the divine. Interestingly, Christian practices such as hymns and prayers have in some cases been incorporated into traditional contexts, reflecting the community's adaptive approach to faith. For example, both Christian prayers to Chukwu and elements of traditional worship may be observed within cultural events like the *Ikor* Dance Festival, illustrating the fluid boundaries between religious and cultural expression. As Kponi (1989) explains, "The concept of God is twofold: first, God is seen as the creator and maker of all things, which includes the physical world, the world of nature, and the world of humanity" (p. 27). This belief aligns with *Akwete* cosmology, where Chukwu is venerated as the Supreme Being, the origin of all creation. Despite the growing influence of Christianity, traditional religion remains vibrant and actively practiced, highlighting its resilience and continued relevance in community life. Ultimately, the *Akwete* people's religious landscape exemplifies a syncretic coexistence, where Christianity and traditional spirituality do not necessarily negate each other but instead interweave to form a rich tapestry of belief systems. This pluralistic religious identity is vividly expressed in cultural events such as the *Ikor* Festival, which acts as a stage where faith and heritage are mutually reinforced.

Economic Life of the *Akwete* Community

He further states that The *Akwete* people are primarily engaged in agriculture, cultivating a variety of food crops such as yam, cassava, fluted pumpkin, maize, melon, and okra. In particular, the production of garri (processed cassava flour) and palm oil serves as a significant source of income for many local farmers. In addition to their agricultural practices, the *Akwete* people are highly skilled in traditional craftwork, which plays an essential role in the community's cultural and economic life. *Akwete* women, in particular, are renowned for their expertise in beading and textile craftsmanship. The community is famous for producing the *Akwete* wrapper, a locally woven fabric distinguished by its intricate patterns and cultural symbolism. This textile, predominantly woven by women, is a source of both cultural pride and economic livelihood.

Another important contributor to the local economy is tourism. The annual *Ikor* Dance Festival, known for its vibrancy and cultural significance, attracts visitors from across Nigeria and abroad. During the festival, traders and artisans seize the opportunity to showcase and sell traditional handcrafted goods, clothing, and artworks, which become highly sought-after commodities. In addition to farming and craft, men in the community engage in palm-wine tapping, basket weaving (using raw materials from palm trees), and the harvesting of palm fruits. Some also produce locally distilled gin, commonly referred to as *kaikai*, derived from fermented palm wine, a culturally rooted yet economically valuable practice. Moreover, many educated sons and daughters of *Akwete* contribute to the socio-economic development of the region through their involvement in both public and private sectors. They represent the community locally and internationally, fostering progress and enhancing *Akwete*'s visibility in wider economic and professional spheres.



A Woman Weaving *Akwete* Fabric

***Ikor* Dance Festival as a Cultural Heritage**

The *Ikor* Dance Festival is a living embodiment of *Akwete*'s cultural history and resilience, representing a symbolic archive of the community's capacity to endure, adapt, and thrive in the face of social and historical adversity. In an oral interview with Chidi Ogbonna, the former leader of the festival, and Iwuzor, the current leader, both emphasized that the *Ikor* Dance Festival has become a cornerstone of communal life, fostering unity and acting as a bridge across generational divides. Regarded as an institution as old as *Akwete* itself, the festival is celebrated annually, typically between the second and third week of January, as a New Year ceremony to offer prayers for divine protection and a bountiful harvest. Traditionally, every male child in *Akwete* is eligible to register as a member of the *Ikor* Dance Group, signifying their initiation into ancestral customs. The celebration spans three days and begins specifically on Eke Market Day, in accordance with

ancestral traditions. Historically, the main objective of the festival prior to the advent of Christianity was to appease the deity *IyiNwak Eke*, the revered Oracle of *Eke Market Day*. The entire community gathered to give thanks to the gods of the land for protection and agricultural abundance. This ritualistic function has since evolved to include Christian prayers and thanksgiving, yet retains its deep-rooted cultural character.

The first day of the festival serves as a community-wide announcement, during which drummers circulate through the town performing symbolic rhythms. This act is believed to "sanitize" the spiritual environment, creating awareness and mobilizing the community in preparation for the festival. Performances last through the night, allowing everyone to participate and attune themselves to the rhythm of the event. The second day centers on the performance of the *Ikoru* drum ensemble, joined by supporting traditional instruments. This segment draws together men, women, and children, who gather in shared excitement and unity to witness the ceremonial dances. Notably, these dances are performed without vocal songs, highlighting the complexity and power of instrumental communication within the tradition. The third day, the climax of the festival, sees the gathering of chiefs, elders, cultural custodians, and community members at the ancient kingdom, where they express collective gratitude to God for His mercies, benevolence, and guidance. On this day, *Ikoru* dances are performed from morning until night, creating an atmosphere of jubilation and spiritual fulfillment. Though the *Ikoru* Dance Festival is sometimes performed by invitation, its most authentic and sacred expressions are reserved for the forecourt of the ancient kingdom, beneath a historically significant tree associated with the festival. In pre-colonial times, the event was also a ceremony of ancestral reverence, held to celebrate successful harvests and to honor the spirits of the departed. As such, the festival has always been a time of unity, spiritual renewal, and cultural reaffirmation.

The process of participation and skill acquisition in the *Ikoru* tradition is largely organic and intergenerational, based on observation, imitation, and gradual engagement. From an early age, children are exposed to the festival by watching elders perform dances and by experimenting with *Ikoru* musical instruments. Over time, this familiarity evolves into active participation, nurturing a strong sense of identity and community belonging. In an oral account, Mr. Chizaram noted that age-grade cohorts serve as informal training collectives, where younger participants learn essential cultural skills such as drumming, mask carving, and beadwork from their elders. These cohort-based mentorship structures ensure that knowledge transmission occurs naturally, preserving the cultural integrity and vitality of the festival. Crucially, this community-based recruitment and training model allows each generation to contribute new talents and perspectives, ensuring the continued growth and dynamism of the *Ikoru* Dance Festival. It is through this evolving process that *Akwete's* cultural heritage is safeguarded, enabling it to thrive amidst modernization while remaining anchored in ancestral tradition.



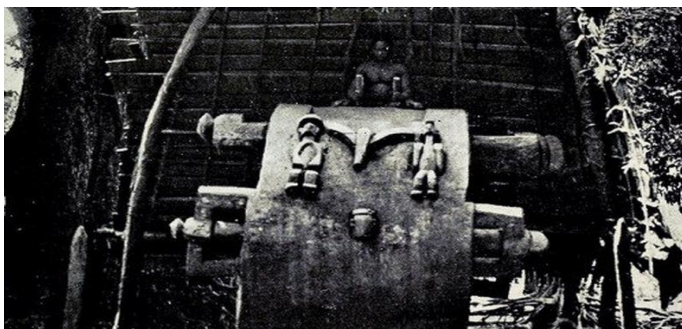
Akwete ancient kingdom where *Ikoru* Dance is Performed



A special tree close to the Ancient Kingdom

***Ikor*o Dance Festival Traditional Instruments**

Musical instruments serve as the lifeblood of the *Ikor*o Dance Festival, providing the powerful rhythms that drive the performances and animate communal participation. The percussive and melodic energy generated by these instruments compels dancers into motion and breathes life into the ritual. These instruments are passed down from one generation to the next, preserving not only their physical form but also the cultural and symbolic meanings attached to them. The semiotic richness of these instruments rooted in ancestral legacy makes them unique both as musical tools and as cultural artifacts. According to Goodluck, the central instrument of the festival, the *Ikor*o drum, is a hand-carved wooden drum covered with animal hide, tightly stretched across the drum head to produce a resonant tone. It is not merely a percussive device but is regarded as sacred, symbolizing the spirit of the community and functioning as a spiritual conduit between the material and spiritual realms. The *Ikor*o drum holds an esteemed position in *Akwete* cosmology and ceremonial life. Other key instruments include the slit wooden drum (*ekwe*), which is played using sticks, and the notched flute (*oja*), known for its sonorous and soaring melodies. The *oja* produces musical phrases that evoke emotion, resilience, and hope, reinforcing the festival's deeper messages of unity and endurance. The convergence of these instruments each with distinct tonal characteristics creates a rich tapestry of sound that fuels the dance and reinforces the communal atmosphere of the event. From an ethnomusicological perspective, the instruments used in the *Ikor*o Dance Festival fall under standard organological classifications: idiophones (such as the *ekwe*), membranophones (like the *Ikor*o drum), and aerophones (such as the *oja* flute). Together, they represent a diverse ensemble that integrates rhythm, melody, and spirituality into a unified performative experience.



*Ikor*o Instrument



*Ikor*o Drum



Ikoro Notched Flute



Ikoro drum dancers

Conclusion

The *Ikoro* Dance Festival is a significant annual event that unites the *Akwete* community, serving as a cultural cornerstone that embodies love, joy, progress, and communal success. The emotional and symbolic weight attached to this celebration makes it a truly unique and revered festival. During this period, *Akwete* becomes a vibrant center of activity as people from diverse backgrounds visit the community, effectively transforming it into a tourist destination. The festival, enriched with the presence of masquerades and ritual performances, is deeply spiritually charged. It offers the community an opportunity to pray for a fruitful harvest, invoke blessings, and seek divine guidance for continued growth and prosperity. Beyond its religious and cultural dimensions, the *Ikoro* Dance Festival plays a pivotal role in promoting cultural preservation and economic vitality. Through this annual celebration, *Akwete's* rich heritage has been projected to wider audiences, bringing attention to its artistry, values, and communal resilience. Despite the challenges introduced by the spread of Christianity, the festival has endured and remains a symbol of intergenerational continuity. It is passed down from one generation to the next, ensuring its survival amid shifting cultural landscapes. Interestingly, the festival's continuity is now shaped by a dynamic relationship between the Christian church and the traditional community. The church, while once seen as an opposing force, now plays a crucial role in the festival's survival, recognizing its value in uniting children, youth, and elders in shared cultural expression. Moreover, the music of the *Ikoro* Festival functions not only as a performative art but also as a medium for disseminating communal values and information. The messages embedded in their songs and rhythms carry social, moral, and historical narratives that cannot be relegated to the background. Within the *Akwete* community, the festival is highly respected, esteemed, and held with great cultural and spiritual regard, reinforcing its role as a unifying, celebratory, and educational event.

Recommendations

1. The cultural heritage of any community serves as the identity of its people; the *Ikoro* Dance Festival should not be allowed to go into extinction. Therefore, the cultural rites should be made compulsory for children within the appropriate age bracket to register as members of the community.

2. The *Ikoru* Dance Festival is a celebration that unites the community; it should be encouraged and supported by both the community and the Local Government Chairman to ensure its continuity.
3. The Church, Local Government, and State Government authorities should promote the *Ikoru* Dance Festival as a tourist attraction; this will also serve as a source of income for both the *Akwete* community and the government.
4. The song texts of the *Ikoru* Dance Festival should be sung in the indigenous language by all members of the community, including children, to promote and preserve the native language.

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