

CULTURAL FESTIVALS IN AWKA, 1970-2021: A CASE STUDY OF THE IMOKA FESTIVAL

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ABSTRACT

Festivals are special occasions with specific purposes tied to various aspects of community life. They offer people an opportunity to rest from strenuous activities and to enjoy leisure time while participating in cultural entertainment. Imoka, one of the major festivals in Awka, has long served as a platform for sustaining cultural identity and uniformity among the Awka people and their neighbors. The Imoka Festival promotes cultural unity and serves as a vital medium for strengthening community bonds in Awka. This paper seeks to examine the origin of the Imoka Festival, address the problem of insecurity often associated with its celebration, and suggest ways to regenerate interest in the festival among the people of Awka. It also aims to showcase the town's diverse cultural heritage and resources. The paper recommends that Awka festivals, particularly the Imoka Festival, should be preserved, developed, and promoted as tourist attractions. There should be increased youth enlightenment on the historical significance and cultural relevance of the festival. In addition, efforts should be made to create employment opportunities for the youth through the development of tourist centers and the preservation of Awka's cultural heritage. The methodology for this study includes both primary sources such as oral interviews and discussions and secondary sources, including published articles and books.

INTRODUCTION

Festivals are memorable events set aside to commemorate important events in the lives of people and the communities such as worship of gods, commencement of planting seasons, birth, death. According to Ekpanobi and Ezeako, "festivals are special occasions, observations or celebrations which maybe religious or secular in nature and which are generally marked by merry making, performances of music and the like."¹

Awka traditional shrine is a physical feature within sacred space depicting the abode of divinities. It originated from man's religious quest of unseen powers controlling the universe. Based on this impulse, he marked out certain spots as more significant than others with regards to this religious inclination.

The marked spots were symbolized with natural objects. These little buildings are known as shrine set apart to the house, the sacred emblem of the divinity and other objects of worship. In Awka, shrine is known as "Olulu" a sacred place usually located in an open ground or a grove of trees or under one big tree often decorated with a white cloth or palm frond to communicate its sanctity"². Each of the villages which make up Awka town is associated with a shrine but the shrine and deity to discuss in this work is Imoka, because it marks the beginning of planting season. Imoka is a medium through which the people thank their god for the past year, praying for a prosperous new planting season. The feast is attached to imoka god and is generally celebrated on the fifth week of Awka lunar Calendar (first lunar month May) it lasts for one native week.(four days) namely Eke, Orie, Afor, Nkwo. During the celebration a lot of display of masquerades and food are done.

According to Nnenweogo, the food presented at the feast are pounded yam, boiled white yam and avbulu(afulu) bitter leaf soup. She asserts that masquerades parade at different village squares entertaining people, and that there is also display of different dancing groups, mock battle of endurance pain by the young youth where sticks are used etc.³

EARLIEST AWKA PEOPLE AND THEIR ORIGIN

Awka as a territory has been lived by man for many years and centuries, "In the 1930's, stone tools were discovered in the area which belonged to the Neolithic stage of human development. It is because of the antiquity of man in this era that the 'core' Awka man or people did not have memories of migration from outside the Awka area. The first earliest people lived on the banks of the Ogwugwu Stream now Nkwelle ward/village in Awka"⁴

Their migration origin was all lost in the haze of remote history, but it was known that this earliest people consist of three kin groups: Umueri, Amenyiana, and Okpo collectively, they were called the Ifite-Ana which means people who sprouted from the earth. The Ifiteana people (old Awka people) were a settled agricultural society "They deal on elephant tusk as a very valuable trade."⁵

They were farmers and mastered art of smelting iron ore. They were also masters in war. Their first deity was an old deity called Okikanube (Okanube for short). The myth of Okanube was a supernatural being who was believed to have come from the sky and taught the Ifiteana people art of smelting iron and making medicine. Okanube means “he who is preeminent with the spare. He was a hunting god and he taught his people how to hunt with iron spear (Ube) laced with medicine, The god Okanube has a symbol called Okike (the elephant tusk).⁶

Awka people have this tusk kept in their family chapel as an important ritual symbol. It is usually kept in a place called “Obu” every hunting season. This tusk is used as a prayer to Okanube for a fruitful season. It will be brought from its sacred hiding place and unwrapped and a sacrifice will be made in front of the tusk (Okike) and the Okike will be taken back to its place and it will not be seen again till next hunting season. “It is believed that anyone that sees Okike before the fifth month of this ritual runs mad”.⁷ The Okike is also used for the storing of their hunting medicine, the Otolu medicine and the Ada-ngene. The Otolu made any hunted animal to have diarrhea stool until it died of dehydration and weakness while the Ada-ngene makes the animal seek for water and when the water is tasted dies immediately. This people believed so much in Okanube and they believed they received every medicine from him.

Amenyi (Elephant quarters) show that Awka was once a haunt for elephant. Their pond is called Iyienyi where it is believed that elephant used to gather to drink water. Elephant was so much hunted which led to their extinction, even before the coming of British. “The last animal was seen around 1910 by some hunters using Ada-ngene medicine. The scare of elephant made god Okanube less important and people stop worshipping him. The last spot that his shrine was spotted were marked by one spear struck in the ground.”⁸ It was from Ifiteana people (UmuOkanube) where Oka was coined from and a market was named after Okanube “Oye Oka”. It was the centre of business for Awka people till the invasion of British in 1928

HISTORY OF IMOKA

According to Emeka Ikegbunem, a young Awka girl named Nomeh fell seriously ill, her kinsmen brought doctors from the neighbouring town UmuezeUkwu to treat her, unfortunately Nomeh died,(Umueze-ukwu doesn't exist again) the Umueze-Ukwu war is the first remembered in Awka annals. Awka wiped the town out. Following the death of Nomeh, she was buried on the grounds that later became Imo-Oka's shrine. After a few years, the dead girl began to hunt her Awka kinsmen, children died prematurely. Awka people believed the spirit of Nomeh was angry because her life has been cut short and never got to marry and beget her own children, to calm her angry spirit and ward off her wrath, her kinsmen hired a team of medicine men (powerful from Idoma land (called Akpotos) by Awka people, it is quite possible that the medicine men were Igala) the Idoma-medicine men prepared a charm for Awka called AkwaliOmumuUmuoka) (i.e. a charm for the procreation of Awka people) the charm was buried on Nomeh's grave, in time, the charm grew in potency and became so powerful that the people began to rever it as god in its own right. They called this new god Akwali Umu-Oka or simply Imo-Oka.”⁹

Till today, Awka animists still regard Imoka, the great protector of the town. The Imoka carnival called Egwu Imoka carnival marks the beginning of the Awka native year and is practically the only pagan celebration in Awka that has survived to the present day. The Idoma medicine men who made the charm were not allowed to return to their own land. For the fear that they might go away and make a similar charm for a rival community. So Awka people gave them land to settle on and the medicine men started a community of their own which grew into the town of Okpuno, which is often referred to as Okpuno Okachi (Okpuno under Oka patronage) “until the coming of Europeans, Okpuno paid a yearly rent to their Oka landlords”.¹⁰

According to Emeka Ikegbunam, Imoka is celebrated around May/June. He opined that the history and the existence of Imoka cannot be traced by any man since it is the thing of the spirit. He further explained that every month has its own celebration in Awka like Ede Mmuo, Iwummia Alushi, IgbaajaIshiaro, Igbankwa. He also ascertain that it is in the hands of the chief priest of Imo-Oka to fix a date for the celebration of Imo-Oka within this month mentioned (May/June).He also said that another history of imoka idol was that it is originally a medicine, which a man from umueleke family of amachalla brought to Awka. This man was said to be a blacksmith and practiced his trade at Akpoto in Benue state from where he brought imoka.¹¹

Offodile asserts that “ the medicine brought by umueleke man was said to be very powerful and that it demanded public recognition by all Awka, it made this known to them through diviner. As more and more diviners and local priest saw imoka in their divination, people began to seek its protection. They sought its priest to seek protection by

the medicine and promise to pay homage if they come back. from their adventures in peace. Those who often experienced hostilities from robbers and warriors reported this marauder, instead of robbing or lynching them, they were simply guided through the dangerous areas and others reported that their customers besieged them to buy their wares. These and other revelations of how helpful and potent the medicine was, made it more famous. People therefore suggested that a house be built to shelter the medicine, so that they could have an official place of worship. After the house was built for imoka, thongs of people began to make frequent visits to the place to pay homage.¹²

Offodile also states that ‘‘Imoka fame became stronger after the ill-fated invasions of Awka by Okoli Ijeoma’s Army from Ndikelionwu. Before the invasion, Awka sacrificed ikpukpa a bush rat to imoka because ikpukpa was dedicated to imoka, and they were not hunted for food. Consequently they became very large in number and damaged the farm crops, Awka pleaded with imoka to restrain the rodent but to no avail. One day Okoli ijeoma mercenaries marched steadily through the imoka valley towards nkwo imoka to launch a surprised attack on Awka, the forest along this path densely forested with trees. This forest was home to the black monkeys and the mercenaries marched through the forest. They startled the monkeys which then let a loud shriek that alerted Awka. This invasion has been rumored for a very long time which made Awka to let down their guard. However, when they had the monkeys shriek, Awka rushed to see what agitated the monkeys only to find a large invasion of army, a big fight ensued and the invasion army was beaten back. From then, Awka substituted the black monkey for ikpukpa as a dedication to Imoka. it is now the new symbol of Awka. (Enwe Imoka)-¹³

According to Ego Nwanna, she said that an incident happened back in the days when a woman raised an alarm that a trader brought dried meat of black monkey to sell to Awka people and wanted to bring the wrath of imoka upon them, upon hearing it, all the people at the market chased the woman out of the Nkwo, hauling sand and missiles at her, it was not important how the alarmist got her information, the fact that Imoka’s black monkey was mentioned was enough to send the crowd into mob action.¹⁴

AWKA LUNAR CALENDER

Calendar is the system of measuring time for the needs of man, it helps in dividing time into hours and minutes and days, days into weeks, weeks into months, months into years. calendars are divided based on the earth movement and regular appearance of sun and moon. one day is the average time required for one rotation of the earth on its axis. the measurement of a year is based on one complete revolution of the earth round the sun and is called seasonal, tropical or solar year. The conventional solar year contains 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes and 45.5 seconds. the ancient calculation of the time between the two full moon or when the moon circle the earth is known as lunar month or in Awka as Onwa (which literally means moon)

Awka people did not calculate their time based on minutes, hours or seconds but were guided by the movement and appearance of the sun, the direction and size of shadow of subject cast by the sun, day light, darkness, cockcrow. According to Nonso Arinze, when light appears after darkness, Awka people assume that it was day and when sun cast a long shadow toward the opposite direction of its rising, the people know that the time is between the first light and the mid day. The native was guided by the intensity of the sun to know what segment of time the day was, when the sun was directly overhead and cast the shortest shadow almost at the foot or very close to an object, they know it was mid day. At night the people are guided by cockcrow, hens and livestock were conventional livestock reared by most families. The Awka people segmented their day and still use it. They use some terminologies like ututu(meaning morning)uzu ututu meaning early morning, Edeli uboshi means mid day, evbibvio mean afternoon, mgbede evbibvio means late afternoon, mgbede means evening, Anyashi means night, Ndeli means midnight, ime ndeli or ndeligheli means dead night, This was their daily cycle that was arranged into market days Eke, Oye, Abvo, Nkwo to make up the Igbo week known as Izu.¹⁵

The process of counting time by Awka people resulted in a lunar year with 336 native days in Igbo calendar since one month (obvu onwa) was made up of seven natives weeks, the calculation was 29 days shorter than the 365 days. In Awka, the month was rigidly aligned with the appearance of the moon.

Awka traditional year was divided into 12 lunar months, twelve calendar months and seventeen days made up the Awka year. In naming the months, Awka people used numerals as counted in Awka dialect. The first onwa nvbu

corresponded to May of a present year and it terminated in April of the succeeding year, Their months are tied to festivals. They also arrange the calendar thus ngwu aro chronicling which is the responsibility of Amikwo quarters.

Onwa nvbu: This was the first month corresponding May, it was also locally known as ONWA EGWU IMOKA ,egwu imoka remains the most colorful of all Awka festivals .

ONWA IBOO: This was the second month(June)the month was the period when the ukwu feast was observed .It is also the month for amanwulu ceremony, So many activities are held in this month like entrance into OZO Awka, Nfu ije(Travelling) ,nku na mgbu nkwa, a folklore observed by Amikwo and Umueri village.

ONWA ITO: The third month is referred to as onwa obvuvbu amanwulu, the month in which amanwulu ceremony which started in the second month was completed. The udo feast was also organized during the month in honour of the udo god of purity). It was the guiding spirit or the patron god of all the celebrants of amanwulu.

ONWA INO: This was the fourth month(August). The month is significant because no activity was crafted into it, It was referred to the lost month.

ONWA ISE: The fifth month and it corresponds with September. In this month, the chi feast is observed.

ONWA ISHI: This was the sixth month and it corresponds with October. The month was noted for the Alor feast, usually celebrated on the twelfth day of the new moon (third native week of the month) on an avbo market day.

ONWA ASAA: Onwa asaa corresponded with November. This month is the month of otite feast, This feast was held in honour of the chi gods.

ONWA ASATO: Onwa asato was the eighth month (December) which is referred to as onwa owuwaji or onwa ji alushi .this is the new yam festival of awka people during which uncooked yam is offered to ngwu god.

ONWA TEGHETE: The ninth month corresponds with January. This was an important month for ede ozo or ede onwa selukwu celebration, the celebration was mostly done by women in honour of the OZO titled men.

ONWA ILI: This is the tenth month which corresponds with February and also known as onwa egwu ovbuvbe. Ovbuvbe is the next in rank to chi ukwu in Awka religion.

ONWA ILI NA OVBU: This corresponds with march and is the Agbala imoka feast month.

ONWA ILI NA IBOO: This terminates Awka calendar, the month is known for the celebration in honour of all the gods known as onwa ede mmuo.

EGWU IMOKA

Egwu imoka has undergone dynamic changes over time, in primordial Awka. They feel good that the festival organized began to be noticed even from the first day of the month in which imoka was celebrated. With the passage of the preceding year in onwa ili n' iboo(April) the last month of the annual or lunar calendar, Yhe people are expectant of the new moon which practically brought fourth the new year and ingenuously the first month onwa nvu (May) which is very important for the imoka celebration. The significance of Egwu imoka on the lives of Awka culture is very pronounced and is still so presently.

Between 1905 when Awka became subjugated by the British and 1967 when Nigeria civil war began, the city states had lost or abandoned many of its traditions .It perhaps important to understand how the imoka festival survived through the ages, considering that almost all the other feasts of the city states had become moribund by the mid 20th century as a result of the reason stated above. However, the impaction might have been owing to the rebirth of cultural values in the 1970s, when Awka people began to restore their traditional heritage after nearly seven decades of denigration and near total abandonment.¹⁶

According to hezekiaiah, the civil war negatively impacted on the corporate existence of Awka town and after the town was overrun in 1968, it lost all that was left of its traditions only partially practiced in Diaspora where possible . But during the post war years from about 1970 came a period of re awakening and Awka people began to re- invent and preserve many of their lost traditions against the backdrop of defeat, with the attendant emasculation and deprivation meted out to the people at the end of the war. The need to forge a common front became an important factor for corporate identity and existence .The community therefore , sought a common purpose that could bring the people together and possibly put back the city states in limelight and reintegrate it into states and regional consciousness. Evidently, the people reasoned that reinventing lost values perhaps held the key for success, so from about 1971, the entire community through the mechanism of village structure began to reinvent some of its traditions for instance, masquerade and feasts. The imoka festival thus became a platform for reinventing masquerade to go public.¹⁷

Every month of the Oka year had a Feast attached to it, by which the month was known. The only month that had no Feast was the 4th month. All others had one Feast or another attached to them. Oka year had variable months because of the need to follow the seasons for farming hence “ngu aro” system arose, the “counting of the year”, meaning, arranging the calendar for the coming year. The Feasts were festivals in honour of the gods. Like everything Oka did, their Feasts were tied to their religion. A Feast day was a day of rest; it was also a day of worship to a named god. The Festival was called “Egwu Alushi”, the Dance of the Gods.

The First month of the Oka year was Onwa nvu, (onwa, month, nvu, first) and the Feast attached to it was ‘Egwu Imoka’ hence the first month of the year was also known as Onwa-Egwu-Imoka. Egwu Imoka has always been the most colourful of all Feasts. The Feast was celebrated in the 5th of the lunar month (Izu-onwa-nese); and it starts on an Avbo day. (Four days made the Oka week- Eke, Oye, Avbo, Nkwo). In the Oye evening before the Avbo day, the announcement of the coming festival was made late in the evening between 7.p.m and 8.p.m. The announcement was made by the Opu-Eke, followed by the beating of the Ikolo drum (the huge musical wooden drum of the god, Imoka) beaten only on ceremonial occasions or in times of danger. The drum was housed in a small hut in the three trumpets and the abia made up the ensemble called “Opu-Eke”. A week before the festival day, a message was sent to Umuokpu Villagers living on the border of Oka town that Egwu-Imoka was one native week away. Masqueraders and young men wielding sticks took the message to Umuokpu; and were entertained by the Umuokpu Villagers. Expectation was heightened consequently. In the evening of the Oye day, the leading trumpet started off with a blast’ ‘Okeke Ukozu – e – e – e – e Iga agbakwa Opu Eke – e – o – o! (Okeke Ukozo, Are you ready to dance to the gods, Imoka?) Okeke Ukozo was the father of Adibe, and was the Imoka Priest (Eze – Imoka) at the time the Opu Eke musical instruments were captured from the Uvume in the Uvume War and dedicated to the god, Imoka¹⁸.

In the olden days, when Opu Eke was being danced, the dance took the form of a mock battle called “nro ota” performed exactly in the same way as when the Opu was captured from the Uvume people. Villages were pitted against Villages, all dressed in battle dress. Machetes and Ekpeke (shields) for defence. Because it was a mock battle, no one can kill, but blood could flow. Only four fingers without the thumb were used in grasping the machete, so that it could not deal a mortal blow. Everyone was expected to cut, but to pull his blows.

According to Ikechukwu Adum, Udenabo was killed during one of the imoka fighting, he asserts that Amachalla was fighting Umunnoke; Amudo was fighting against Umuayom, and Umuzocha against Umuoramma, when the incident occurred. It was said that Udenabo was cut in the stomach, and he died of the wound. The person who did it was never known, and the consequences was hanging, Amachalla people were pained that they did not know the person, Hence, Amachalla invoked one of their gods and said: “Whoever killed Udenabo and will not confess, may the god kill him, and kill his household and all his extended family! .This resulted to hostilities at Egwu Imoka in order to stop them from that time forth and ‘anyachu’ (sticks) were substituted for machetes. ‘Nro ota’ at Egwu Imoka, was a test of strength and of endurance of pain. The festival lasted one whole native week Avbo to Avbo, and this was a reason while non Awka indigenes that know nothing about the celebration always believe that it is devilish feast and has alleged that people always die during imoka celebrations.¹⁹

IMOKA DAYS OF CELEBRATION

First day: According to Ejike Okafor the festival begins in Avbo day, The Opu Eke resumes at about 5 a.m. All roads and Squares and compounds are kept clean. After breakfast, the preparation of the food for the feast begins. Plenty of yams are cooked. women of every household prepares a special meal which takes the whole morning, they prepare bitterleaf soup and cooked yam called avbulu in Awka language. Bitter-leaves were usually crushed at the streams in order to reserve water at home because of the quantity. When the food is ready in the afternoon, the invitees and neighbors usually come in to eat and merry and food is served with palm wine. Those who went to purchase palm-wine return home, as well as those who went hunting²⁰ Ego Nwanna noted that in the evening of the first day, people begin to move to the Nkwo Market place, where the Shrine of Imoka was situated; taking with them gifts and offerings for the deity. They took so many things with them, money, yams, food, chalk, the women usually took chalk with them²¹ Ejike Okafor also noted that on the appointed day, when the women get to the Shrine, they laid the chalk down at the altar of the god, and prayed to the god to give them their desires²² They would say: “Nnanyi, mam nzu”, “our father, cleanse me with chalk, give me your blessing”.

The Imoka Priest would receive the yam of the men, the yam had its bottom sliced off a little, and touch the men's forehead with it, his left and right breasts, and pass it over their heads, and then put the yam tuber in front of the god's altar. The men would tell the god their desires and would ask the priest to intercede for them: "nya gba dozie! Imoka" speak to them in the way acceptable to them!. The Priest would reply: Our father you have heard their requests. After making the offering, the men usually take a piece of chalk from the front of the altar and dabbed their eye-lids. The women dabbed their breasts and their feet. They then left the Shrine, rejoicing. After the offerings at the Shrine, men, women and children went to the open Square where the Opu Eke was being played, to dance. (A woman under menstruation would not do any of these things, but would stay at home, or, if she came to Nkwo at all, would stay far away from the Shrine). People danced with great enjoyment, beneath the iroko tree to the music of the Opu Eke with the peculiar steps of the Imoka dance. To close the day's celebrations, after all offerings had been received, the Eze – Imoka took up the Ogene of the god (his gong) and striking it invoked the god by name several times, giving him his praise-names. After the invocation, one of the assistant Priests —not the Eze Imoka himself pulled up the altar of the god, called "uvbo Imoka" —his nkwo or altar), and proceed to the Opu Eke Square for the dance of the god. 'Uvbo Imoka' was the 'nkwo' or movable altar of Imoka, for making sacrifices to him. This was always placed at the Obu or Hall of Imoka at Amachalla Village, and was only brought to the Shrine for purposes of sacrifice. It was an iron frame with folds of white cloth and a sprinkling of red, swathed round it. The Chief Priest, Eze Imoka, dressed for the occasion in white loin cloth and decorated his neck with coral beads. He wore on his head 'Okpu-nwagwali (war cap) with an eagle feather stuck in it. He dabbed both eyelids with white chalk. When the assistant Priest got to the open Square, from the inner sanctum of the Imoka Shrine, he would raise the "Uvbo Imoka" aloft, and begin the dance of the gods. This was the high watermark of the day's celebration. The dance-steps were peculiar to the dance and were learnt by every Oka person from his infancy. All men and women, young and old, joined in the dance. The men begat their sticks together over their heads to the rhythm of the dance, while the women dancing, repeated, And the Abia drum would keep saying: 'Mgbavbulu elie, mgbavbulu elie' (Eat when you have it, feast when it is the time).^{23!}

SECOND DAY: The second day is usually Nkwo. According to onyeka nwaogwali, in the morning of the second day, the Opu Eke starts again, the oldest woman in Awka will go to Nkwo alone. She will display her wares in the market as if it's a real market day and praise to the gods. Then, after sometime, she will repack the wares and go home, meaning she have sold for the gods which signifies that nothing will make the market close, he also said that it is the reason why nkwo market always hold but not in nkwo sites during the celebration till date. Masquerade moved from house to house, receiving presents. After which they converged at Nkwo market-place, all masquerade in Oka came. It was the day for masquerades, There are different types of masquerades, the gentle ones, fearful ones, beautiful ones, ugly ones, Each with its followers consisting of both young men and boys, wielding anyachu sticks²⁴ uzoka opined that they danced and merry along the streets of Oka town. They had their lunch and gifts were shared to many people. People celebrated and exchanged gifts, they also sang the Egwu-Imoka anthem.²⁵ Amanke stated that imoka anthem is thus Okolo agbaghi azi, Nya jene n'egwu Imoka! Ajam mmem hem!! Alo – o – oja ta eme! Ajem mmem hem!! Olo – o – olo – lo! Ajem mmem hem!! (The young man with an empty stomach Must not go to Imoka dance, Today is today, trial of strength was in display!).²⁶ uzoka also stated that a special rhythm of abeam drum was beat for the masquerades and they danced, hopping first on one leg and then on the other. Kpom kpom, i - yam! Kpom kpom, i- yam! Kpo – kpo – nkpom, i – yam! They danced and beat one another mercilessly with their sticks. All around one heard the swish of whips descending and the thwack of them. The dancing lasts into the evening.²⁷

THE THIRD DAY: : The third day is usually Eke day. People moved from village to village getting entertained. Masquerades ran about, causing excitement everywhere, masquerade of the youth perambulated the community followed by scores of young boys. In the evening, they converged at the village squares, from where they dispersed after their display and dances. Masquerades like iga, aji buusu, mbubu udo, oji onu, and ayolo were particularly noted for their fleet footedness, chasing people around to whip them. Ijele masquerade and izaga also showcase their uniqueness and izaga always left people in bewilderment, fathoming the magic behind its long slender wooden legs. There was merriment till night fall.

THE FOURTH DAY: : Oye day, According to nwanno, People relaxed in their homes because it was a holiday and the opportunity was taken to settle affairs. Masquerades continued to move from house to house, accompanied by their followers and they were entertained. Young boys, who had not yet been initiated into the mysteries of masquerades would be initiated in their fathers obu. Their mothers provided the coconuts for the entertainment of those who had come to initiate their sons.²⁶ Amanke stressed that during the initiation, the boys were tested in various ways, the

purpose being to infuse in them the necessity to keep secrets, and never to reveal the nature of masquerades. For example, they would be shown a strand from a spider's cobweb. They would be told to take hold of it and climb it. Of course, the thread would break in his hands and they would be embarrassed. Then a handful of raw bitter leaves would be given to them, and they would be asked to chew it, and to laugh at the same time. This used to be an impossible feat, because the bitter-leaf, as its name implies, was very bitter, and it was impossible to smile, let alone to laugh. While eating it; one was bound to make painful grimaces: but the boys were urged to go on laughing, until they munched the whole handful. The comic appearance of the candidate's face, as he strove manfully to overcome the bitter taste and laugh at the same time, provided the spectators with their amusement. But the most alarming test was usually the last. The masquerader raised his visor, and the boys were asked: 'Who is this?' if they answered truthfully, 'it is Okonkwo, —a person they knew), the whole audience would shout in dismay. The masquerade would slump down as if dead, and the audience would reproach the boys with 'killing' their masquerade. they would be ordered to carry up the masquerade they had killed, through revealing its secret. While the hapless boys strove to lift the fallen masquerade, the spectators would sing: "Nweke", —if the culprit's name is Nwekel egbuo mmanwu, ewu – o – o, ejem mmem hem! Nweke egbuo mmanwu, ewu – o – o, ejem mmem hem! (Nweke, has killed the masquerade, What a pity!). At last after the poor boy had been sufficiently punished, the masquerade would get up, to the boy's relief. But the boys would be warned to learn a lesson, never to say that a masquerade was a human being; that masquerades were not men but Spirits (mmuo). After that ordeal, the boys were initiated; and they could pick up their own whips, and follow masquerades about in Oka town. It was said: "Oba go mmanwu" – he has been initiated.²⁷

FIFTH DAY: Avbo DAY was the last day of the Feast. People still eat and drink and are entertained just like the other days. People went to the Nkwo market, Three traditional masquerades closed the celebrations. They were Didimbanaka, from Amudo Village. They held a mock trial, making a case against one another. As each came out to speak, it satirized the foibles of its village of origin; it made people laugh at the idiosyncrasy of its village. For instance, when Onyekulie came out to speak, it would say sly things and act with cunning, and cause a lot of fun, for Umunnoko people were reputed to be trickish and crafty; Didimbanaka would intersperse its talk with dances, for Amudo were noted for dancing; and Onwobolo would show anger, draw its sword to fight and stretch its bow to shoot at the slightest provocation, just like Amachalla, ever ready to fight! All these masquerades were clowns and caused lots of fun and laughter. Egbu Imoka ends on that note. ²⁸

CULTISM AS A SECURITY CHALLENGE IN AWKA DURING IMOKA FESTIVALS

Cultism can be define as a system of worship, especially one that is different from usual and established forms of religion in a particular society. They are characterized by the use of secret initiations or other ritual, oaths, grip or sign of recognitions by members.(handshakes or hand claps). It emphasizes the ritual devotion to deity or person or practice. It is therefore a group of persons devoted to deity or persons or practice.

Cultism in Nigeria began as far back as 1952. It started out as fraternities, and they were confined within universities' campuses with the motives of maintaining law and order. There are different confraternities, but the pirate confraternities started by seven students among which was the popular Nigerian nobel laurette Wole Soyinka.²⁹

Cultism degenerated to something else in Nigerian universities of today. Earlier cultists believed that the secret societies were formed on genuine grounds. The genuine objectives were destroyed by over zealousness and the youthful exuberance which they claimed led to the betrayal of the objectives set up by contemporary cultists. Student cultists believed that their societies were established to achieve many objectives which include

1. Protecting members from victimization by lecturers
2. Protecting their members from intimidation and terrorism by rival groups.
3. Granting financial assistance to members when in need.
4. Acting as a militant group for students in the event of intimidation by the management of institutions.

Crimes like rape, arm robbery, fraud in Government ministries, banks and other finance houses that young people see and watch on television motivate them to join cultism. The gap between the poor and the rich encourage immoral people to become cult members.

There are so many factors that led to growth of cultism in our educational institutions which include

1. Collapse of Educational system: those who are not supposed to be in school join the school system through "man know man syndrome". Nwoye assert that this help barbarians that know nothing about the educational system to join the system which made them to pursue cultism with awe inspiring single mindedness. They are barbarians in institutions of higher learning. For instance, one of the cult groups known as KKK which shows how barbaric they

are. Their name is derived from American experience where the KKK stood continued enslavement of Africans. Also black axe is a symbol of African liberation and does not share any symbolism with the event of black axe cult today.

2. The Economy: economic uncertainties gave rise to different crimes and cult activities. Period of survival of the fittest, students are now claiming smartness to survive which lead them into joining cult and into different crimes. This has found its way into our place of higher learning.

3. Political Instability: violent changes in government causes chaos in the society and the higher institution got more than their share of troubles. Thuggery became aspect of our political and social life. Thuggery has been seen as a lucrative business as some Government legalizes thuggery (agboro) as a means of livelihood, they are hired to do dirty jobs, rig elections and overtime they became part of their nature.

4. Availability of Weapons: they have easy access to weapons due to numerous communal conflicts and also due to access to weapons smuggled in from distress or war countries. This free use of weapon has increased activities of cultism and brought about numerous crimes like arm robbery and so many other crimes.

5. Frequent Government intervention: Government has been making different pronouncements and intervening on the affairs of the institutions. They for example interfere and asked that some expelled students be re-admitted. Some of this can erode the power and prestige of the administrator of the higher institutions and tend to encourage indiscipline. Some of the available spaces in our institution have been replaced by unqualified students that know someone in government leading in many cases of lowering standards. Some of the admitted students do not have the ability to cope with academic loads and therefore resort to individual and group efforts to succeed, but in a way not acceptable to decent and civilized society. This has also resulted to use of hard drugs and dangerous drugs by the students. The damaging drugs which include cocaine ,marijuana, crystal meth, colos, etc. The use of these drugs by students has perpetuated all kinds of crimes. Most drug addicts are from the age of eighteen to thirty years.

Cultism degenerated from academic environment to street through different means. One of the major means are through university cult members who drop out from school. They move into the streets to form their own junior cult and initiate young and vibrant children who know nothing about the original objective of cultism.

Secondly, As a result of sponsoring the young or newly formed cult groups, they move into arm robbery ,kidnapping, assassination, all sort of crimes to acquire more money and members

It also entered the street due to quest for power. The young illiterate ones seeing how a university cult members are respected will prompt them in joining cultism, they also join cult for revenge and for protection.

During imoka celebration constant cult activities have marred the entire festive objectives. Instead of being the celebration of culture, joy and welcoming of sons and daughters of the soil, the celebration now turned by the street cultist to battle field for cultists in the state. This has led to incessant killings of both innocent and cultists as well. Most of the cultists during the celebration see it as an avenue of revenge> They recruit and initiate not only secondary school students but also other artisans. According to obialiofvu, cultism has cut across tricycle riders, motorcycle riders, bus shuttle drivers, vulcanizers, and wheel barrow pushers, as well as other artisans.³⁰ Okafor opines that the issue of cultism during imoka celebrations is a serious one. According to him, some of the trade union leaders in Awka markets are also cult members despite their level of education and exposure and that they are the one sponsoring terrorism during imoka festival celebration, and that some of those security agencies like vigilantes are also cult members which made them to compromise their duty of protection, they have been infiltrated by cultists, they have failed to provide the much needed protection of lives of the people. Instead of doing their work, they are protecting members who are cultists which slow down their effort in nipping the crime in the bud.

On 29th October 2021, History was made during the celebration of the great imoka festival. The chief priest of imoka onyebuchi ikegbunem was assassinated inside the imoka shrine, making it first of its kind. According to ozuome, it is the greatest taboo recorded in the history of Awka. This pose a great security challenge to the imoka celebration.

POSITIVE IMPACTS OF IMOKA CELEBRATION

Awka traditional festival is one of the big festivals in Awka. It is of great importance to the solidarity of communal life in Awka. It unites all the sons and daughters of the land serving as a medium through which all come to achieve one purpose during Awka festival. It is important to Awka and her neighbours because during the celebrations charms might be used but just for protection and not for the purpose of harming people. In Awka, it is an abomination for anyone to use charm (nshi) during festive celebration in Awka.

Awka people see it as a medium to communicate between gods and man. They thank the gods for past year and bringing new planting season for them. Through this, people's faith are strengthened and covenants are renewed. It also serves as a medium to renew hopes, resolve issues between friends and also where political thoughts are nurtured. During this celebration, titled men are crowned and those men are enthroned before the gods which will make them to be upright in their judgement. Some use the celebration as a family reunion.

Awka festival serves as a medium to preserve tradition and culture of the land, for the sake of posterity and also for tourist attraction. Through this, cultural bonds are strengthened. It helps in preservation of rich cultural heritage which is displayed during the celebration. The mass return of people promotes unity and also match making usually takes place to commemorate marriages.

The holiday time for the festival allows workers to rest thereby creating leisure, promoting health and also creating job opportunities to skilled women on making weaving and pottering leading to the opportunity to make wares for public display.

Awka traditional festivals attract visitors for tourist attraction during the festival celebration which in turn promotes the economic wellbeing of Awka. The money spent during this celebration enhances the local economy. Restaurants, hotels etc get enriched through these economic activities. Tourism is a business that relies heavily on the environment physically and socially and cannot do without the environment.

The celebrations also promote age grade activities (ichiko ulo). It serves as a medium for promoting bond between age grades as they share contacts. The young ones are initiated into ulo and ite ogboo to preserve the age grade system.

NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF IMOKA FESTIVAL

Just like in urbanization of any environment, tourist attraction leads to pollution of environment and making it dirty. After the celebration of imoka festival, the air is polluted by all sorts of gunshots (knock out) which is hazardous to the body,

Imooka celebration which was once a festival of peace turned bloody with the introduction of cult activities during the celebration by hoodlums. This has led to the killing of Late eze imoka Onyebuchi Christopher Ikegbunem Akajiofor(Eze Imoka nkonnabuchi), who was assassinated in the imoka shrine.

The celebration negatively serves as a medium for jealous people to attack their victims without their knowledge through assassination or poisoning. Some non-indigenes of Awka go beyond the celebration to causing havoc in the society.

CONCLUSION

The Imoka Festival is a period during which people engage in cultural and religious activities that they may not normally practice in their daily lives. It is a time of religious and cultural significance that recurs at regular intervals and serves as an important expression of communal identity. The festival provides an opportunity for cultural entertainment and allows the community to showcase its rich heritage. It is used to honor the gods and also acts as a medium for family reunions and social bonding. The Imoka Festival promotes unity and helps preserve the traditional values and customs of the Awka people. As a masquerade festival, it gives the Awka community the opportunity to display their cultural practices, such as traditional music, dance, and costume art. The sense of unity experienced during the festival has played a key role in ensuring its survival, even in the face of modernization, which has caused the decline or extinction of many other traditional festivals. Moreover, the Imoka Festival serves as a powerful tool for strengthening social ties and holds significant potential for tourism development.

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