Modernity and Threats to Traditional Values: The *Echi'ja* Cultural Festival in Idomaland

Sylvester Kohol
Department of History & International Studies
Redeemer's University, Ede Osun State, Nigeria

Abstract

In 1966, the first World Festival of Black Arts (FESMAN) was held in Dakar Senegal. The event attracted mainly great minds of African descent from over thirty-seven countries that converged to celebrate the African heritage and culture, as well as to demonstrate practically the essence of cultural rebirth. Over a decade later, in 1977, the second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77) was held in Lagos, Nigeria. With over 17,000 participants cut across fifty-seven countries around the world, the event also provided the opportunity of celebrating the great minds from Africa and the Diaspora. Indeed, the festival, based on available records, remained one of the most glamorous and most significant cultural events ever hosted on the African continent in contemporary history. It is against this background that this study examines the Echi'ja cultural festival within the general context of cultural renaissance in Idomaland, Nigeria. Data collection was based on oral interviews, articles in learned journals and books, newspapers, as well as scholarly essays on the internet. The study adopts the historical-analytical method in interpreting these documents. Findings from this study, apart from contributing to the existing body of knowledge, demonstrates the relevance of cultural festivals in reviving African identity, especially in Idomaland, Nigeria.

Keywords*: Cultural festivals, Echi'ja, Idomaland, Nigeria*

Introduction

In 1966, the first World Festival of Black Arts (FESMAN) was held in Dakar Senegal. The event attracted mainly great minds of African

descent from over thirty-seven countries that converged to celebrate the African heritage and culture, as well as to demonstrate in pragmatic "term the theories of cultural renaissance" (Ademuleya and Fajuyigbe23). Over a decade later, in 1977, the second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77) was held in Lagos, Nigeria. Like the first event, the main reason for the FESTAC '77 event was "to provide a forum for the discussion of the enormous richness and diversity of African contributions to world culture" (Ademuleya and Fajuyigbe 24). With over 17,000 participants cut across fifty-seven countries around the world, the event also provided the opportunity of celebrating the effulgent minds from Africa and the Diaspora. Indeed, the festival, based on available records, remained one of the most glamorous and most significant cultural events ever hosted on the African continent in contemporary history.

In the same vein, the *Echi'ja* cultural festival, which was first held in 2019 in Otukpo, Benue State is targeted at reviving the cultural heritage of the Idoma people. Apart from serving as a connecting channel for the reawakening of other unrecognized grassroot festivals in Idomaland and its environs, the *Echi'ja* festival demonstrates some of the cultural heritages that blossomed even after the FESTAC 77 event, which took place over four decades ago. Indeed, the *Echi'ja* festival serves as a continuum of the FESTAC 77 event at the micro-level; and synergy among some other cultural festivals in Benue State, such as the popular Kwagh-Hir and Eje Alekwu festivals. Thus, adopting the historical-analytical method, this study examines the *Echi'ja* cultural festival within the general context of cultural renaissance in Idomaland. However, before exploring the historical antecedents of the Idoma people, it will be opposite to give a brief review of relevant literature, as well as theoretical background of culture, modernity, and cultural festivals.

Review of Literature and Theoretical Background.

There are several debates on the concept of culture (Spiro; Rosaldo; Muecke; Cowlishaw; Barry; and Johnson). Tylor, in his classical work published in 1871, opined that "Culture ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1). But Tylor, in his argument, did not make it clear that culture is the specific right of humans; instead, it is applied phenomenon (54, 124). According

to him, culture was the nomenclature ascribed to all events and things that are special to man. However, these conceptual clarifications as pontificated by Tylor continues to influence subsequent epistemologies of culture with some dynamics. For a period of about three decades, 1920 -1950, there were about one-hundred-and-fifty-seven different definitions for culture (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 149). Indeed, culture is an elusive phenomenon (Johnson 97). The central argument about culture is on its "relationship to society and civilization as well as its function and role in the human" (Johnson 97). Adopting the eudaimonia and the normative epistemologies of social goods, Johnson discusses the "symbolic, functionalist and structuralist approaches to culture" (97) to come up with suitable contemporary analysis. He finally concludes that: "talk of 'cultures' should be replaced by talk of 'culture', with recognition of the mass of complexities which enter into our cultural lives; culture should serve particular ends…" (Johnson 97). Thus, Johnson's argument falls in line with the normative functionalist account, which states that culture should serve specific purposes. And it can only be understood within the context of its historical development. Therefore, this study adopts the normative functionalist theory because of its historical underpinnings, which is useful in analysing clash between culture and modernity.

According to Arnold, the term culture means "a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits…the culture we recommend is, above all, an inward operation" (190).

The conceptual clarification of culture will not be complete without looking at the influence of modernity on it. It is the clash between culture and modernity that culminated in the postulate of cultural revival. According to Madsen, "the word 'modern' stems etymologically from the Latin *modernus,* meaning the 'just now.'… 'modernity' refers to the social, cultural, and intellectual condition that helps to fix the distinct with Western society." (1199) And the concept of modernity is used as an expression to depict:

> the condition of the world, often as a replacement for capitalism, industrialization, rationalization, secularization,

the media and communication society, or other ideological or institutional traits that are believed to be characteristic for the West in contrast with preceding epochs or more primeval existing civilization. (Madsen 1199)

Historically, modernity is classified into various periods: the early modernity, spanning from 1453 to 1789 which witnessed the collapse of Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire; classical modernity lasting between the 1789 French Revolution and 1914; and late modernity covering the period of 1914 to 1989, which saw the outbreak of World War I and the fall of the Berlin War (cf. Hobsbawm; Madsen). However, one aspect of modernity that has gained currency among scholars over the last decade is cultural modernity. The contemporary discourse of cultural modernity is confronted with the challenge of reconciling the dilemma between the promise of general characteristics and openness, as contained in the theory of modernity (Mirsepassi 1).

Equally more challenging, according to Mirsepassi, is "the blatant Eurocentric narrative of modernization that forecloses the possibility of real "local" experience and of their contribution in the realization of modernity" (Mirsepassi 1; Lash and Friedman). In Africa, particularly in Nigeria, the global idea of cultural modernity seems to pose a threat to its cultural heritage. Thus, there is no gainsaying that the sweeping wave of 'modernity' clashes with the cultural values of the African society. It is against this historical background that African cultural enthusiasts and scholars during the 1960s and 70s, clamoured for a cultural rejuvenation within the continent, and even beyond.

Omorodion, in his study "The socio-cultural context of health behaviour among Esan communities, Edo State, Nigeria," argues that the health beliefs affect the nature and dimension of treatment decisions and character of the Esan people in Mid-west Nigeria (125). He further opined that "the traditional health-belief system one which placed most responsibility and blame upon women, and a system of social control over the adult female population." (Omorodion 125) He finally concludes that cultural health beliefs have a strong influence on cultural heritage in Esanland. Extending the cultural narrative to cover the revivalist perspective, Fatimah Palmer investigates the utilisation "tattoo as a curative process for the illness called *Udeh* among the Esan ethnic people of Edo State, Nigeria." (59) The thrust of Palmer's argument is anchored on recapturing traditional culture, which is being threatened by

'modernity'. Crespi-Vallbona and Richards give a detailed conceptual clarification of cultural festivals by arguing that it has provided an avenue for the expression of mans' views on a "wider cultural, social and political issues". (103) Their article examines the cultural festivals in Catalunya from the dimension of policy-makers involved in traditional and popular culture events. They further state that the general agreement on the social responsibility of cultural activities between the different policy-makers might be one position for the seemingly Catalunyan cultural festival (103). However, the aspect of cultural renaissance, especially in Nigeria remains hanging in the literature reviewed above. Some scholars who have not been mentioned above (Yerima; Akpa; Esu and Arrey; and Erim), have dwelt on the relevance of cultural rejuvenation. Nevertheless, this study, apart from contributing to the body of literature on cultural rebirth in Nigeria, examines the place of minority ethnic groups and the drive for cultural revival in the country, using the *Echi'ja* cultural festival in Idomaland.

Historical Antecedents of the Idoma

Idomaland is located in the southern part of the Benue river in the present-day Benue State of Nigeria. Available records indicate that the Idoma is the second largest ethnic group in Benue State (Onaji). Benue State is situated in the north-central region of Nigeria, with the Tiv being the largest ethnic group in the State. Occupying an area of about 5,955 square kilometres, the Idoma covers Otukpo, Ado, Okpokwu, Apa, Agatu, Ohimini, and Ogbadibo. Their territory lies within Latitude 60° 30° North and Longitude 80° East. They are bounded by Benue river to the North, by parts of Ogoja, and Igbo lands to the South part, by the Tiv and Igede lands to the East and by Igala land to the West (Okpe and Ochefu; Erim). Their traditional world view is shrouded in the belief of ancestral veneration (*Alekwu*), whom they regard as a link to the supreme and powerful being *Owoicho* (God). In an ethnographic study carried out by R. G. Armstrong, he stated that;

> Idoma is the name by which the people of Idoma ethnic group designate themselves, and are addressed as such by their neighbours. Idoma is also the name of the language of the group as well as their land (Armstrong100)

The origin and early beginnings of the Idoma is a complex aspect of its pre-colonial historical antecedents (Okpe and Ochefu n.pag). Like most ethnic groups in Nigeria and Africa, scholars have given different historical origins of the Idoma (Armstrong; Okpe and Ochefu; Onaji; Akpa). As argued by Okpe and Ochefu, "it has been observed that the early history of the people indicates that Idoma ethnicity is a contemporary phenomenon." The interpretation of this statement is that the various groups that are merged under the linguistic umbrella "Idoma" never had a collective ethnic identity prior to the coming of the British colonialists in the land. Indeed, at the turn of the nineteenth century, this historical ambiguity must have affected the documentation of their early beginnings by the colonial authority.

Figure 1.1. **Map of Idomaland, Benue State**
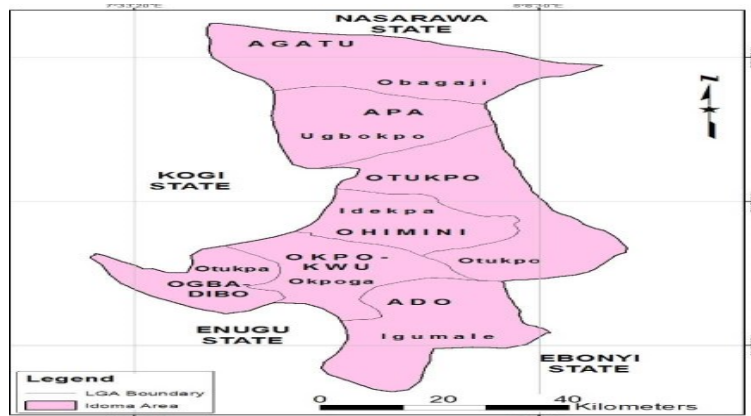
Source: Onaji: 2013.

The Akpoto (Okpoto) tradition is one of the earliest postulates of the Idoma origins. This traditional ethnic group, which must have gone into extinction, is believed to have occupied a specific portion of land in present-day Igbira, Igala, and Idoma (Crowther and Schon). There is still ongoing research on the actual identity and intergroup relations among the three ethnic groups mentioned above. There are several arguments to support Akpoto tradition; however, one prominent position states that the "Akpoto should be perceived as an autochthonous group that

gave birth to or played a fundamental role in the formation of modern Igala, Igbira and Idoma societies." (Ukwedeh) Also, available evidence from oral tradition indicates that "the Igala, Igbira and Idoma ethnic groups showed undoubtedly that the Akpoto were the earliest inhabitants of the present locations of these peoples." (Okpe and Ochefu)

There are other arguments as to the origins of the Idoma. Some studies have traced their roots to Igala land, Yorubaland, Igbira land, etc. (Okpe and Ochefu). However, according to popular oral traditions, the Idoma are reported to have traced their origins to Apa (Beipi), which was formerly the capital of the legendary Kwararafa confederacy. Internal crises and constant warfare must have forced the Idoma to migrate away from Apa to their present location. It was in the course of their dispersal that they founded several clans that are collectively known as the Idoma (Onaji).

Despite the different clans in Idomaland, the historical, sociocultural heritage, as well as ancestral homeland, the people have this feeling of a joint family bound and affinity. Thus, the compound serves as the primary segment of the Idoma cultural heritage. The compound, according to Armstrong, is made up of the man, his wife(s) and their children. The man in the traditional Idoma setting is regarded as the head of the family. Like most African societies, polygamy has a commonplace in Idomaland. Hence, the man has the traditional right to marry more than one wife (Onaji 19).

Religion plays a fundamental role in pre-colonial Idomaland. Their religious believes was tied to the *Alekwu* system. The *Alekwu,* as already mentioned earlier, is a popular deity among the Idoma people, which is regarded as the spirit of the late ancestors, and reverenced by the people, especially during the pre-colonial era. This deity is "seen as one who protects the community from evil, provides for them and control the general ethics and lifestyle of the people. *Alekwu* occupies a compassionate and delicate aspect of the Idoma [religious] belief system." (Onaji20)

Cultural Festivals and the Place of *Echi'ja* in Idomaland
The Idoma people have a vibrant cultural festival with deep historical underpinnings. The celebration of these festivals cut across diverse sociocultural areas of the peoples' life. These feasts cover aspects of human lives such as seasonal farming yields, marriage, hunting, fishing,

burial, chieftaincy affairs, etc. And they are usually celebrated annually or as agreed by the community. However, it should be noted that these festivals are medium of demonstrating the cultural heritage of the people. For instance, there is the *Alekwu* festival, which is common among the people of Idoma. It is a ritual feast which is performed mainly during the funeral ceremony of a devotee of the *Alekwu.* The age and social status of the devotee determine the nature and dimension of the celebration during the burial rites. In the case of a young member, the number of masquerades is usually limited in numbers as they dance around the village showcasing to the community that an *Alekwu* member has died.

Nevertheless, when an elderly member dies, the traditional display by individual masquerades lasts for a more extended period. However, three days to the final burial day, "masquerades parade the different corners of the town or village indicating that an elder has passed on." (Onaji, 31) The Ekwu-afia masquerade conducts the performance of the funeral rites by breaking the door of all elders. This is done by placing a symbolic curtain at the doorpost of each elder in the community. The *Ekwuafia* divides the curtain into two pieces to perform this rite. This house of the diseased is not usually left out. During this period, women and visitors are usually restricted from participating in the ceremonies. The reason for this restriction is still not clear.

Having given a foreground of cultural festivals in Idomaland, it will be necessary at this juncture to go fully into the thrust of this study, which is to examine the cultural significance of the *Echi'ja* festival in Idomaland. The *Echi'ja* festival is designed to be an annual socio-cultural event to demonstrate the rich cultural heritage of the Idoma people. It was inaugurated in Otukpo in December 2019 by the *Ochi'Idoma* Agabaidu Elias Ekoyi Obekpa, the Paramount rule of Idomaland. According to its founders Prince Davinci AmeduIklaga, EdigaAkpa, Fred Ogli Adogo, Lordsam Ogbole, and Chief Adakole Elijah, the *Echi'ja* cultural festival was created to rejuvenate several aspects of Idoma culture specifically. Most of these cultural practices, according to them, are fast going into extinction (Iklaga; Emmanuel).

Echi'ja, which simply means in Idoma language 'a play day,' has robust cultural infinity attached to its celebration. The cultural festival celebrated to showcase the rich traditional music and dance steps of the Idoma people. Equally integral is masquerade display, traditional food

fair, as well as a fashion display. One common feature among the masquerade performance is to showcase the *Atu* cultural identity. The *Atu* is a unique Idoma dress code or emblem made up of two colours, red and black, with a gold lining in between the two colours. The significance of this emblem is to foster unity and cultural identity among the Idoma (Akpa 4). The black colour signifies death and a reminder that human creatures are mortals and vulnerable. Therefore, all humans are encouraged to apply some form of moderation in all their activities. Idoma cosmology emphasizes the place of death and life after death.

On the other hand, the red colour of the Idoma traditional attire indicates power, authority, and "invincibility of every Idoma person as bestowed on him/her by the spirit of the ancestors "alekwu" (Akpa4). According to oral tradition, it also symbolizes "the blood of their heroes who were slain in the course of defending the Idoma in their various wars and battle for emancipation" (Akpa4). And finally, the gold colour stands for hope for the younger generation.

Figure 1. Masquerades showcasing the *Atu* (Idoma dress code) identity in Idomaland

Source: www.idomavoice.com.ng

Figure 2 *Ekwu 'kaAduma* from Igbanomaje community

Source: *Daily Trust Newspaper* **<**www.dailytrust.com.ng**>**

Integrally, the *Echi'ja* cultural festival serves as one of the contemporary avenues fora cultural renaissance in Idomaland. It brings together all the various groups in the land, as well as its environs. The 2019 feast attracted representatives from Upu, Otukpo'icho, Asa, Igbanonmaje, Ugboju, Adoka, Akpa, Ogbadibo, Okpokwu, Agatu, Apa, Ohimini, Ado, Obi, Oju, etc. The non-indigene, especially in Otukpo, was not left out.

The celebration usually starts with a procession of every participant to the palace of the Och'Idoma to receive royal blessing from the paramount ruler. The visit to the palace also symbolizes the acknowledgement of the supremacy and authority of the Och'Idoma. After paying homage to the Ochi'Idoma, the entire people move in procession to the Och'Idoma's Square in Otukpo for some cultural displays and competitions. The competitions range from the most entertaining masquerade, most beautiful masquerade, most ugly masquerade, most innovative masquerade, Best costume group, Best instrumental by group, most disciplined group, and Best dancing group, etc.

Conclusion
Cultural festivals play a fundamental role in the historical development of Idomaland. They serve as pillars of unity and infinity among the people. However, the advent of Western and Arabic civilizations, coupled

with the introduction of British colonial rule in Idomaland, there has been a gradual diminishing of the traditional cultural practices in the land. Inasmuch as the above-mentioned form of civilization contributed to an extent to the development of Idomaland, it also negatively affected the socio-cultural heritage of the people.

One major setback of cultural rebirth in Nigeria, especially in Idomaland, is the threat of cultural 'modernity'. However, the efficacy of this idea is still debatable. But the fact still remains that over the last five decades, there has been a call for a cultural renaissance in Africa, particularly in Nigeria. And the *Echi'ja* cultural festival in Idomaland, gives more fillip to the clarion call for cultural revival in the country. Beyond these annual celebrations, both government and the masses, at large should put in more effort in addressing this cultural apathy. Apart from the several policies by governmental and non-governmental agencies, the searchlight should be focused on some traditional practices that are yet to be documented. More awareness of the importance of cultural heritage should be given to the younger generation who are prone to the sweeping wave of cultural modernity. This can be achieved by systematic inclusion of threatened cultural festivals in the country's educational curriculum.

Indeed, there have been several attempts at rejuvenating the cultural heritage of the Idoma people; however, this study, which focuses on the *Echi'ja* cultural festival, is an attempt to demonstrate some of the measures put in place to create a cultural revival in Idomaland. There is no gainsaying that a study of this length might not be able to do historical justice to the topic of cultural rejuvenation in Idomaland. However, it will stimulate further research by scholars, especially as regards the place of *Echi'ja* cultural festival in Idoma historiography.

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