

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MBOM FESTIVAL TO THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF ITEM COMMUNITY

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Abstract

The *Mbom* New Yam Festival of Amaokwe hem is an annual event associated with the *Ikperikpe-Ogu* (war) Dance for which the entire old Bende Province of the then Eastern Nigeria was well known. The role of this festival which is displayed through the dance music (*Ikperikpe-Ogu*) cannot be under estimated especially at the ancient inter tribal and slavery periods. The music of this festival serves as an instrument of unity, communal identity, social commentator and a historic narrator of the Item cultural heritage. Other significant aspects of the festival are highlighted in terms of socio-political, economic, cultural and educational values. Recommendations such as documentation of this cultural art in the national museum and the publication/recording of the music for international research and consumption would no doubt, help in projecting the culture to a greater height.

Introduction

Every African community is virtually endowed with one form of traditional festival that is celebrated annually, bi-annually or spaced up to three or more years. These festivals include the new yam harvest celebrations, wrestling contexts, puberty initiations, fishing and hunting expeditions, deity and ancestral worships etc. According to Okafor (2005:4),

Festival is that chain of activities, celebrations, ceremonies, foods, drinks and rituals, which marks the continuity of culture in an environment. These festivals occur at appointed times in the lunar calendar and mark the rhythm of life.

Similarly other musicologists such as Bame (1991:12), Hornby (1995:429), and Onwuekwe (2005:99) see festivals as "seasonal, propitiatory, sacrificial events by means of which people with common cultural and religious identity come together to celebrate and request or acknowledge the blessing of the supreme God as well as the lesser deities and ancestral spirits".

From the foregoing, festival could be seen as a cultural centre of a community in that it brings people of common ethics and ancestral heritage together regardless of their socio-economic and political status. This implies that festival accommodates *both* the rulers and the ruled, literates and illiterates, the rich and the poor, male and female, young and old etc. It provides abundant opportunities for the practice and exhibition of the communal musical arts such as praise songs, satire, dances, dramatization, miming and sacrifices to the gods and ancestral deities.

Background of *Mbom* festival

Mbom festival is a new yam celebration performed annually among various villages within Item autonomous community in Bende Local Government Area of Abia State. This community is bounded on the east by Nkporo and Ariba, on the west by Ugwueke, on the North by Akeze, and on the South by Alayi and Igbere communities. The town is made up of nine villages; namely Apuanu (the capital), Amaeke, Amaokwe, Okoko, Okagwe, Okayi, Akanu, Amaekpu, and Umuakpa.

Historically, Item people are great farmers and traders. They have rich loamy soil for the production of different types of arable and cash crops such as yams, cassava, oil palm and cocoa for which old Bende province ranked second largest producer in Nigeria. To buttress on this, Isichei (1975:206), observed that:

In the extreme South East of Igbo land near Arochukwu, the absence of forest was compensated for by the number of palm trees extending in all directions round the villages ... The fields seemed to be almost entirely devoted to yam cultivation, although, maize was scattered in patches between some of the yams, and in the small gardens around each house and compound.

Apart from the farm work, Item people are highly industrious in areas of trade and craft. They travel far and wide in search of good fortune. These movements in the past resulted in series of wars for which they were known and remembered. The development of Aba town, for example, was primarily borne out of the business activities of most early traders from Item. This quest for fortune which was often marked with wars brought about the *Ikperikpe Ogu* dance presently associated with the Mbom festival in Item.

The Mbom as a New Yam Festival celebrated by the entire Item community features the Ikperikpe-Ogu dance. This dance serves as the life-wire of the festival. The *Ikperikpe-Ogu* dance actually originated from the neighborhood Ohafia community and was imbibed by the Item people in view of the relationship that existed between the two communities. Initially, the dance was performed exclusively to announce the return of warriors and to celebrate with those of them that made successful exploits in the war. During the celebration, each successful warrior is often praised by the Ikoro and in response to the call, he presents his human exploits and demonstrates his actions during the encounter with the enemies. This henceforth, marked the beginning of military prowess which was then celebrated with the war dance. It also became mandatory that every male adult of Item must accomplish this warring task for human exploits in order to be recognized as a full fledged adult in the community. Besides, only heads of adult male were used for the celebration.

However, the advent of the western civilization has led to the drop of the old custom for the current practice involving the use of sculptured wooden heads in place of the human exploits. In addition, some of the instruments used for this festival dance have been replaced. For example, the *Ikoro* is now replaced with membrane drum for easy movement while the war daggers (*opia*) that used to serve as clappers have been replaced with wooden clappers. The only instrument that is still retained is the horn (*opi*). This new development is often reflected in one of the festival's chants:

"M'obughi nwa Bekee, Igbo amara ihe anyi geme. English translation;

If not for the white man,

Igbo would 've known our reaction.

As people are no longer engaged in head-hunting, the *Mbom* new yam festival therefore, became the main avenue for the *Ikperikpe-Ogit* dance performance. This does not however, mean that *Ikperikpe-Ogu* cannot be performed on other occasions such as burial of prominent member of the community, for welcoming August visitors, commissioning of projects in the community or for honouring some illustrious sons and daughters of Item who have distinguished themselves in various fields of life.

Preparatory Event for Mbom Festival

Before the commencement of the festival which usually takes place on one of the *Eke* market days known as "*Eke Mbom*", certain preparatory events are usually put in place. These include religious and material preparations.

Religious Preparations

This comprises those items needed for the consultation of the gods, fortification of the chief priest for the sacrifices, purifications of the land as well as selection of the actual date for the celebration. During this preparatory time, some gods and ancestral deities such as '*Kamalu*'* (god of thunder) and '*Agwu*'* (god of war) are usually appeased through various ritual activities which usually involve dance performances. For instance, 'the *Igwa Agwi*' ceremony takes place between the 8th and 4th day to *Mbom* festival. This ritual is first performed by the Amukabi Kindred in line with the tradition. Other sections of the Amaokwe village perform similar sacrifices two days after Amukabi. Failure to perform the '*Agvuu*' ritual ceremony implies that the entire Item community will not be able to celebrate the new yam festival. Certainly, history has never been told of any year the celebration did not hold.

Material Preparations

The material aspect involves the cleaning of the paths leading to the shrines, renovation of the shrines' houses, purchasing of all the materials needed for the celebration as there will be no more markets or farm work some weeks after the celebration. This preparatory event also includes performance rehearsals which usually takes place on the eve of the celebration. This rehearsal is usually referred to as '*Igba Mbom Anyasi*'* (evening celebration). To highlight on this, Ehiwario (2005:68) remarked that as soon as the date of the festival is fixed, the community was kept in a

festival mood with series of activities such as thorough sanitation of the entire community, clearing of the route leading to the deities of *Osiezi* juju shrine... The clearing of the path leading to the *Mbom* shrines covers a period of two weeks. This exercise is known as '*Ikwa Mbom*' and it involves every adult male member of the Amaokwe village which is the core centre of the *Mbom* festival. The last preparatory event is the *Ilu-ilu* dance which takes place on the eve of the festival. It is an all might affairs. Participation is free to both male and female indigene of Arnaokwe as well as their friends and neighbouring villages.

The Core Event

The core events are the actual sacrifices that take place on the day of the festival. They are the worships or ritualistic aspects of the *Mbom* festival in which few elects are involved. Before the celebration begins, a ritual known as '*Ituda Ofo*' is usually performed at the early hours of the *Mbom* day. As soon as the *Ikoru* drum is heralded, each family head of the elects, brings down the family *Ofo* (staff of authority and righteousness) in readiness for the family's sacrifice which has to be made before they leave for the celebration. The nature of the sacrifice depends on the family. Some families use fowls and kola nuts while others prefer yam and kola nuts. Whichever way the sacrifice is made, one basic fact is that all pray for God and the ancestors to guide and protect them throughout the ceremony and to live and witness the next year's celebration. This act is akin to some other African communities as Tamuno (1968:97) observed:

Before and during the *Odwn* festival display, customary sacrifices would be made so that the festival would take place under favourable auspices.

In the same light, Omibiyi - Ohidike (2005:29) confirmed that:

Festivals are periodic celebration in acknowledgement "I" blessing already received, and means of requesting for more blessings, protection, and guidance from the Creator through lesser gods and ancestors.

At the end of *Ituda Ofo*, each family comes out in full ceremonial regalia and joins other celebrants at Amafo central village square. Costume for the celebration comprises a single George wrapper or multiple of assorted wrappers tied round the wrist in war-like fashion, a ram fur worm on the upper left arm, war cap (*opu-ugbogou*) on the head. The upper part of the body is left naked and decorated with spotted white chalk (*nzu*) which helps to cool down the body heat. It is also a symbol of peace and vision when rubbed within the left eye lids. Other celebrants that are not part of the *Ikperikpe Ogu* group, often add small jingle bells round their waists, and hold either single or double metal gongs which they beat in rhythm to their chosen war chants.

From Amafo, the group proceeds to salute the *Ikoru* at Amaefi. At the end of this exercise, the journey to the historic *Mbom* shrine through the ancient war paths begins with the *Ikperikpe-ogu* group on the lead. This event is then followed by the '*Itu Omu*' sacrifice which begins from *Uduala* the first *Mbom* shrine. According to Ogali (1985:15),

This ritual is performed by an elderly man who says the prayers; thanking God and the ancestors for preserving them to see and eat the new yam. He prays for peace and prosperity of the entire Item community.

At the end of each prayer, one fresh *Omu* (palm tendril) is thrown into the shrine. This is done four times to reflect the four market days of the Igbo lunar calendar week - *Afo*, *Nk\vo*, *Eke*, and *One*. At the end of this event, the group proceeds to the main *Mbom* shrine known as '*Kama/it ogbu*' (god of thunder situated at *Ogbu* - a special ritual tree) where a ram is usually sacrificed in addition to the *Itu Omo* that is performed in all shrines. From this shrine, the group moves for the final phase of the core event known as '*Ikpa Nid AgwiC*' (harvesting of the yam). This event is performed at "*Egbugbo*" shrine situated at the border near Ndi-Uko family of Akarm village. At the end of this ritual that is exclusively for the elect, the dance group returns to the Amafo village square for the actual ceremonial entertainments. However, the journey from the shrine to the village square known as *Igba oso Mbom* (*Mbom* race) is usually in segments of three or four age grades while the *Ikperikpe* dance group comes last. Each of these groups decorates their bodies with the *Omu* as a mark of reaching the last place of the sacrifices.

Celebratory Event

The celebratory event which is usually the climax and most exciting part of the celebration is

regarded as the nucleus of the celebration which every spectator or visitor would never dream to miss. It often determines the success or failure of the festival since it serves as a yard stick for comparing the past with the present.

As soon as these groups return, they dance round the village square, charting various war tunes accompanied with their *Ogene* (metal gongs) and the dangling sounds of the bells tied round their waists. In all, the *Ikperikpe Ogu* dance group are usually the most celebrated as every spectator would want to watch them perform. On the arrival of the *Ikperikpe Ogu* group, the bearer of the '*si nwa Ebulu*' (the war exploits) in the company of his two side attendants moves to the elders' shade (canopy) for salute, returns to the group who now dance to the arema for display.

Apart from the dance performance, another interesting event performed simultaneously is the '*Ichu fyr*' (fetching of water). This is entirely a role played by all the women of Amaokwe village that gave birth to babies after the last *Mbom* festival. This group who are customarily forbidden to go to the stream after delivery, takes their earthen pots to the '*Avu*'* stream and fetch water for their personal use or for their friends and relatives; passing through the village square in a single file. This exercise serves as a census instrument since the number of women involved in this ceremony determines the number of children born between the last and the present celebration. Perhaps, this is the reason why Uche (2005:116), sees festival as "some of the measures for evaluating a true member of the society". At the end of the *Mbom* celebration which is usually in the evening, each celebrating group retires to *Amaefi* section of the village to drop their *Omu* as a signal for the end of the ceremony. Besides, *Amaefi* is the custodian of the *1st Nwa Ebulu*.

The Role of Music in the *Mbom* Festival

The role of music in the *Mbom* festival of Amaokwe Item community cannot be underestimated in that music occupies a predominant position throughout the celebration. According to Iyeh and Aluede (2008:93), "Chernoff said that a village where there is no musician is not a place where human being can stay".

Music is said to be the *life-wife* of the *Mbom* festival. Various aspects of musical activities displayed at the preparatory periods of the festival help to create awareness as well as awaken the spirits of the gods and ancestors that are consulted or worshiped.

Secondly, the *Ikperikpe Ogu* music serves as a social commentator especially as it employs the declamatory speech technique to recount some historical events of the community in addition to praises on both past and present heroes. This situation is similar to Stone's (1998:411) observation that "People enjoy a passion that moves them to dance, sing, and weep when occasion demands it." The musical effects of the *Ikperikpe Ogu* dance often drive the celebrants into trance and frenzy state especially at the climax of the instrumentation. Apart from the above, *Ikperikpe* dance and other aspects of chanting from the youths make the atmosphere quite exciting and entertaining as some members even dramatize their occupational trades as they dance.

The Significance of *Mbom* Festival to Item Community

The *Mbom* festival is usually a period for general assessment of the entire Item community. It is a time when citizens of Item see to the general sanitation of their environments. They use this occasion to scrub, sweep, renovate and even decorate or paint their houses; cut down all heavy bushes and weed the paths leading to their streams, farmlands as well as the entire markets and their village squares.

Political Value of *Mbom* Festival

Mbom festival is a symbol of dignity as well as a period of open door policy to all citizens of Item. During the festival, every member of the community is free to enter anybody's compound to exchange greetings, gifts and be entertained without fear of molestation. It is an occasion that calls for exhibition of certain historical artifacts and recounting of some past events associated with the community.

Social Value

The *Mbom* festival has tremendous impact on the social life of the Item people. It is one of the most crucial periods when families return home to join their relatives, friends and in-laws in the celebration.

It creates opportunity for eating and drinking, exchange of ideas, discussions on family matters and settling disputes or misunderstandings if any. Individual social status is also manifested in terms of family strength, children, marriage, and wealth. It is an occasion when friends and age mates that have been separated for years meet to exchange ideas and re-affirm their relationship. It is on similar ground that Nketia (1975:22) noted that;

The degree of social cohesion in such communities is usually very strong. Not only may the members know one another but also may be bound by network of social relations.

Similarly, Ehiwario (2005:65) remarked that:

Festivals create room for people to renew their friendship since members of the feasting community travel from far and near to facilitate with their friends, well-wishers, families, relations, and other members of the community at home.

This is certainly true as children born in the big cities often use this forum to know more about their home, brothers, uncles, aunts and other relatives. Besides, members of the community that were absent from home for a long period of time, use this opportunity to fulfill such personal and social obligations as paying of condolence or congratulatory visits to friends and members of their lineage.

Economic Value

As a ceremonial event, the *Mbom* festival calls for lot of expenditure on the people. This is due to the importance Item community attaches to it. People spend huge sums of money to invite their friends, distant in-laws and business associates to witness the ceremony. A lot of money is also spent on drinks and food stuffs used for the entertainment of the people. Some of these items serve as presents to friends, in-law, their intending suitors and other relations. In appreciation, these friends and relations give them some farm products such as palm oil, garri, yam tubers, melon, pepper etc. In the same view, Ehiwario (2005:5) noted that "during festivals, the society spends its energy and income towards providing the best entertainment in arts and hospitality to its visitors".

Apart from the above, spectators and the invited guests in expression of their excitement during the celebration, present money/drinks to the individual dancers they admire most or to the entire group. Sometimes, business matters are often discussed by the invited guests. A lot of video and cassette works on *Ikperikpe* dance are now in the markets.

Cultural Value:

The *Ikperikpe ogu* is the core dance music for the *Mbom* festival. It encourages the continuity of the people's customary practices, ensures a broad scope for revitalizing and promoting the artistic and aesthetic norms and values of the Item people, hence, the festival constitutes unique avenue for both cultural and social education of the children and the youth alike. For instance, the artistic decoration of the celebrants' bodies with the *white chalk* dignifies strength as it reflects the leopard's colour. This is also portrayed in the celebrants' mode of dressing as well as in the dance steps such as the *'Ije Nwa Agu* (Young leopard's steps). In addition, stories and histories associated with the community and her past heroes, often chanted in the *Ikperikpe* music, are all of some educational value to the youth and visitors to the town. Culturally, the festival helps to re-affirm and sustain people's belief in their ancestral deities.

Influence of Western Education / Technology:

This factor is of great effect on the *Mbom* New Yam Festival. A lot of innovations are presently seen in the celebration. Some educated youths no longer strain themselves in the dance but merely turn to western disco/reggae styles of dancing.

Again, some participants take along with them, sophisticated audio recording and visual equipment such as cameras, video tapes, and cassette recorders for filming and recording during the celebration.

There are many changes in the costumes and instruments used for the dance. Some visitors also record, film or take photographs of the events for research and documentations, or for other educational purposes within and outside the country. This has even made it possible for the *Ikperikpe Ogu* group to embark on overseas tours in the past. This was made through the able work of James Iroha (alias Gregory Akabogu); an illustrious son of Amaokwe Item who incidentally, belongs to the

ikperikpe Ogu dance music. This new dimension makes it accessible and cheap for both the rich and poor within and outside the community. Many researchers from various parts of the world such as America, India, China, Germany etc. visit Item regularly to update their knowledge. This has in no small measure, contributed to the socio-cultural and economic development of the community.

Furthermore, all those cannibalistic and hostile attitudes of the ancient warring days are no more in practice as they have all been replaced with modern facilities and concepts. None indigenes interested in the dance can now participate at any occasion that calls for the performance.

Summary

in spite of the fact that the *Mbom* festival is associated with the new yam celebration in Item, one cannot summarize its benefits without emphasis on the *Ikperikpe Ogu* dance which is the core music of the ceremony.

Although the dance was initially a symbolic dance associated with the historic wars and socio-cultural beliefs of the people, it has undergone series of useful modifications which gave it a ticket as one of the most famous popular and memorable cultural dance for which every Item citizen and Bende is proud to be identified with. It is indeed considered as a unifying factor as well as an institution for manifestation of both individual and communal fame. It is presently a symbol of strength, love, unity and identity throughout Item. As Ogali (1984) pointed out, "Its unifying force has helped the people of Item to work in one accord towards the development of the town to its present enviable position.

Recommendations

In view of the musical potentials inherent in the *Mbom* Festival, the Federal Government should assist the community in the documentation of all the activities associated with this festival for study in various National Museums in the country.

Since the world is becoming a global village where every nation is ready to sell out its musical heritage for recognition and acceptance in the field of study, it is therefore important that professional scholars in Musicology should assist in the notation and publication of this war music for interested researchers and students of Ethnomusicology worldwide. It is therefore expected that if these are accomplished, they would help to promote and project this culture to all parts of the world.

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