

Kola Nut (Oji) Cultural Festival in Ezinihitte Mbaise, Imo State

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Abstract

The common saying in Igboland is that every other culture group in Nigeria eats kola nuts, but it is only in Igboland that kola nut oji is not only eaten, but also celebrated. This position is true of the Igbo who do not cultivate kola nuts in abundance as a commercial venture like the Yoruba, but have deep reverence for the fruits because of its significance in the Igbo worldview. The Igbo do not eat this fruit like other groups in Nigeria, who essentially eat it for its sedative qualities as well as a hunger therapy, or who use it because of its role as stimulant and aspirin, nicotine and caffeine put together. The social significance of this fruit has lifted it from a mere unprofitable luxury to a vital necessity in the social and cultural settings of the Igbo, particularly the Ezinihitte Mbaise group in Imo State. Here kola nut cultural festival is celebrated annually and on rotation amongst the sixteen communities that make up the local government council area. The Oji Ezinihitte Mbaise cultural festival is not only an occasion for the communities to examine their progress and challenges, but also one for attracting visitors, friends and well-wishers from far and near to be part of a cultural fiesta that entertains guests to their souls. It is also used as a medium to attract government in their developmental projects as well as brain storm on other possibilities. No doubt, the social relevance of the Oji ceremony now out-weighs the traditional especially with the passage of time and the stripping off of the ritualistic aspects of the ceremony. The paper will examine the social ramifications of the Oji Ezinihitte cultural festival and its significance to the overall life and culture of the people of the area.

Background

The area known today as Mbaise is situated at the very heart of Igboland; located in the central part of Imo State (Njoku: 1978, 36), with the Imo River separating the eastern part of the area from Ngwaland in the present day Abia State. Mbaise as a culture group has a land area that is approximated to be about 479 square kilometers, and has a population whose figure has been digested to be 374,793 by the then East Central State of Nigeria Statistical Digest of 1971. Prior to this report, the earlier controversial census of 1963 allotted a population figure of 307,712 to the area. But most questioningly, the population result of the 1991 census which was highly flawed by irregularities as usual, allotted a total figure of 304,338 to Mbaise, showing an absurd decrease of 20,789 in 28 years to the area from the 1963 census without any epidemic or catastrophe (Agulana: 1998, 30); even the civil war did not take that toll of lives in the area to occasion such sharp decrease in population. Though the 2006 population census of the area is not available to

the authors as at the time of writing the paper. The Igbo nucleus of population density appears to have its focal point in Mbaise area; as the population density appears to exceed the mark of 1000 to 2.6 square kilometers, making the area one of the most densely populated area in West Africa. (Njoku: 1978, 36). As a result of the high population density of the area and the limited land mass, the soil has over time been over-cultivated which has in turn, affected the level of productivity of the soil there.

The Mbaise people, like other interior groups in Igboland, encountered colonial rule quite early. The imperialist forces started first when on 31 July 1901, the Secretary of State telegraphed Sir Ralph Moor approving military operations against the Aros in the approaching dry season, (Nwabara: 1977, 101). This planned attack on the Aro which eventually took place and was concluded by 1902, exposed other Igbo groups to the expeditionary forces of the British imperialists. Mbaise's turn came in late 1905 when Dr. Stewart, a medical doctor appointed to the West African Medical Staff, and attached to the Southern Nigeria Expeditionary Force in 1905, was murdered at Obizi in Mbaise. (Douglas: 1905). From this date, Mbaise, especially the villages suspected to have had hand in the murder were visited with British fire fury. Since the precise location of the murder was being speculated, but Dr. Stewart having disappeared from Ahiara, the British forces planned to deal with Ahiara in the dry season of the same year, (Colonial Office: 1932). All the communities on their way leading to Ahiara down to Onicha and Obizi, got the baptism of fire, and from thence, British forces became stationed in Nkwogwu area of Mbaise.

By 1909, a court was opened in Nguru area, following the administrative reorganization, which the British colonial administration had introduced in Southern Nigeria. A court was also opened at Okpala during this period, and the people of Ezinihitte were attending the Okpala court, but were anxious to return and join their brothers in the Nguru court. Matters came to a head during the 1929 women's riot, which saw the destruction of the Nguru court, forcing the colonial administration to restructure the court areas after the riots. The Itu court was created during this post-riot era, for the Ezinihitte people, and those of Ahiara for the Ahiara people and Enyigugu for the Agbaja group, Oke Ovoro for the Oke Ovoro group and Obohia for the Ekwereazu groups. The creation of court areas according to clans was a major boost to the development of group consciousness in Mbaise, thus convincing the colonial administration that there was a strong tie and web of relationship linking the groups together. Consequently, the idea of a federation was suggested by the colonial administration, and after several meetings sponsored for this purpose, the five clans agreed to form a federation in 1941, under a single administration having a common treasury and took the name Mbaise, meaning five towns. A common treasury was opened for the area in 1942 at Enyigugu and later shifted to Aboh Mbaise in 1948, making it the new administrative centre of Mbaise (Nwala: 1978, 15-16). This was how Mbaise emerged as a unified group and has remained like that

till today. Currently, the area has three local government areas viz.: Aboh Mbaise, Ahiazu Mbaise, and Ezinihitte Mbaise.

It is natural that the fusion of culture groups in the Mbaise project will enhance the preservation and development of the varied cultural festivals of the people for social harmony and their common good. These cultural festivals range from *Iwa Akwa*, commonly associated with the Ahiazu group and the Udo community in Ezinihitte, to the *Ikoro*, *Mbari*, *Ekpe* dance performance, *Mgba* (traditional wrestling), *Iri Ji* (new yam festival), *Okonko* secret society, *Ese* music, *Abigbo* dance, *Mmanwu* masquerade, the *Oji* (Kola nut) festival of the Ezinihitte, and many others. Many cultural festivals have eroded away as a result of the over-bearing influence of Christianity in the area, that if care is not taken, the people may have their cultural heritage completely eroded. The paper therefore intends to look at the origin of the *Oji* Ezinihitte cultural festival, its celebration as well as its overall social significance to the culture and people of Ezinihitte today and how best to sustain it.

Kola Nut in Igbo Tradition

The common saying in Igboland is that every other culture group in Nigeria eats kola nut, but it is only in Igboland that kola nut *oji* is not only eaten, but also celebrated. This position is true of the Igbo who do not cultivate kola nuts in abundance as a commercial venture like the Yoruba, but have deep reverence for the fruits because of its significance in Igbo tradition and worldview. This explains the saying among the people that *Onye we tara oji, we tara ndu*, (meaning he who brings kola, brings life). The Igbo do not eat this fruit like other groups in Nigeria do; some of them like the Hausa essentially eat it for its sedative qualities as well as hunger therapy, they can also eat it because of its role as stimulant or as aspirin, nicotine and caffeine put together (Nzekwu: 1961, 298).

The social significance of this fruit, has lifted it from a mere unprofitable luxury to a vital necessity in West Africa where it belongs (Nzekwu: 1961, 298). Not only does the nut serve as a symbol of friendship between a host and his guest, it is also used in declaring open every ceremony in Igboland, and serves at the same time spiritual and religious purposes. To an Igbo, if kola nut is not presented to a guest by his host, no matter how lavish and sumptuous the entertainment, the guest would not feel welcomed. Indeed no ceremony whether wedding, traditional marriage, naming ceremony, burial, family, village or town's meetings commences in Igboland without, kola nut being presented, prayed over and broken according to tradition. If a titled man is present at the occasion, he says the prayer and directs the breaking of the nuts. In his absence, untitled persons preside. Because of the premium placed on this nut in Igbo cosmology, women do not break the kola nut.

Nevertheless, women in Uguta community after menopause are allowed to break kola nuts. Ordinarily, women do not break kola nuts in Igboland. Generally, kola nut is shared according to seniority. In the village assemblies,

kola nut is taken in turn according to seniority of the villages. For instance, Ezinihitte Mbaise is made up of sixteen communities, so whenever there is any function at the local government or involving two or more communities, the presentation of kola nut is done according to seniority; the same applies in its sharing. In rituals, the nuts are extensively used by the Igbo, because of the common belief that for one to commune with the ancestors, he has to break and throw out kola nuts and pour libations on it, to show respect to the ancestors and the spirit of the land.

Not only that kola nut is used in ceremonies in Igboland, the nature of the ceremony determines the number of nuts and this varies from place to place. Also the nature of the ceremony determines the type or specie of kola nuts to be used. For instance, traditional marriage ceremonies usually require the use of *Oji* Igbo (*Kola acuminata*). This is a specie of kola nut that has from three to four, and above cotyledons. The other specie that is called *Oji gworu* (*Kola nitida*), usually eaten in the Northern and Western parts of Nigeria and in other areas of the country, is not used for this purpose.

The Ezinihitte people and the Igbo in general are conscious of this, as their tradition demands and not otherwise. The same applies to the performance of burial rites as well as the celebration of the *Oji* Ezinihitte cultural festival. Also in divination and oracular consultations (*afa*), the diviner uses *oji* Igbo and it must be one that has four cotyledons. When broken, the diviner throws the lobes on the ground and subsequently begins to read meaning into the way they fell (Nzekwu: 1961, 299). This is so because in *afa*, odd numbers are ominous sign, and therefore any *oji* that has three cotyledons does not portend good. The *oji gworu* does not have more than three cotyledons, and can not be up to four; it is *Oji* Igbo that is used in all of the traditional festivals or occasions in Mbaise area. In a place like Agukwu Nri, the way kola nuts are broken differs remarkably from other Igbo societies. For instance before the Eze Nri, only a little boy or girl, a representative from the *Adama*, the priests of the kings divinity, or a midget may break a kola nut to be shared by the king and his visitors (Nzekwu: 1961, 301).

By and large, kola nut is significant in the socio-cultural life of the Igbo, and that explains the aura that surrounds the fruit and reverence given to it by an average Igbo man. Though kola nut business or trade has not been a significant feature of Igbo economy, there are people who trade on it and subsist by that. Kola nut traders buy from those who have the trees, and this is usually done after the harvest. Whereas these local traders buy from local people who may have the trees, they move the nuts up North where it is profusely consumed as stimulant and used in the making of dye for cloths and threads. Also the kola nut buds are used for medicinal purposes and in the treatment of wounds. Ironically, this all-important fruit, which is so much celebrated in Igboland, does not seem to have any festival specifically dedicated to it by other groups in Igboland apart from the Ezinihitte Mbaise people. Ezinihitte Mbaise celebrates *Oji* cultural festival on the 1st of January

each year to rededicate themselves to love, unity, progress and above all, to thank God for keeping them safe all through the past year. This ceremony is rotated amongst the sixteen communities that make up Ezinihitte Mbaise in order of seniority.

The Ezinihitte People and the *Oji* Cultural Festival

Ezinihitte is the largest of all the other clans that make up Mbaise. The area is bounded to the North by the Ahiara and Nguru groups, to the South, by the Ngwa group in present Abia state, and separated by a stretch of river lane; on the East by Obowo in Okigwe zone of the state, and on the West by Oke-Uvuru, (Osuagwu: 2000, 2). The genealogical line below shows all the clans in order of seniority, and it is in this order that the *Oji* cultural festival rotates. They are Oboama-na-Umunama (the first born and the first to collect *oji*), Ife, Chokoneze, Ihitte, Akpodim, Amumara, Eziudo, Itu, Okpofe, Eziagbogu, Udo, Obizi, and Onicha. Even during the procession, for the collection of the *Oji* from the *Okwa Oji* on the day of the festival, it follows the same pattern. This is the normal order for the hosting of the *oji* festival. But the Intelligence Report of 1932 represented the towns in this order: Umunama, Oboama, Ife, Amumara, Umueze, Umuchoko, Akpoku, Umudim, Itu, Eziudo, Obizi, Udo, Okpofe, Ihitte, Eziagbogu and Onicha (Dickenson: 1932, 9-10). The Report does not seem to reflect the traditional order of seniority as indicated earlier, thereby raising questions as to how the colonial administration elicited their information, neither does it contain any information related to the *Oji* festival-a vital traditional cultural festival of the people of Ezinihitte. With regard to the seniority question in the area during traditional festivals, no recourse is made to the order represented in the Intelligence Report of 1932 on the Ezinihitte clan.

At this point it is necessary to comment on the evolution of the *Oji* Ezinihitte festival. To the Ezinihitte people, the origin of the *Oji* festival is linked to the history and migration of the communities that formed Ezinihitte. It is commonly believed that the people migrated to their present habitat from Ngwaland. This migration story has it that the people were among the group that traveled in search of settlement along with other groups, and when they became hungry, they stopped to roast yams to eat and quench their hunger, but the Ngwa group continued the journey in their bid to secure a better domain; thereby passing through to their present location before the river closed up and hedged a barrier between the two migrant groups, making the Ezinihitte group to be left out on the other side of the Imo river. This myth is the most popular and commonly recited in the entire area, and that accounts for why till this day, the Ngwa group refer to them as the *Ohuhu* people, meaning, those who roast. Because of the deep dialectical resemblance between the Ngwa dialect and those of the Ezinihitte, there is this belief that they are of the same stock. Afigbo also observed that *Ohuhu* (the name with which the Ezinihitte are called), and Ngwa were in the same migrating party until they came to the eastern bank of the Imo

River. There they sat down to rest awhile, and the Ngwa managed to cross while the “sluggish” Ohuhu could not before the tide became too high for them, (Afigbo: 1981, 11). This view tallies with the commonly held view on the origin and migration of the people, and it is also supported by related cultural practices of the two groups, like burial rites, *Eze Ji* title taking, *Okonko* secret society, *Mgba*, (wrestling), bearing of *Njoku* and *Mmaji* names etc. This same strand of thought on the origin appears to be supported by Njoku, who conjectured that Ezinihitte people were part of Ngwa sub-tribe, the remainder of who live on the other side of the Imo river in the south of Bende Division, (Njoku: 1979, 21). The story goes on to say that the people after settling down at Orie Ukwu, founded a god or deity for themselves known as *Chileke Oha* (the god of all). The idea of a *Chileke Oha* was a universal god, governing all the people, and under whose guide everyone operated. It was their common belief that this *Chileke Oha* protected them during the long duration of their journey in search of a permanent abode; and to it, all the people submitted. At the time of their settlement, the people of Ezinihitte lived together and worshipped the *Chileke Oha*, but with the passage of time, they began to increase in population and there arose the need for dispersal of the group to other areas of Ezinihitte to settle. This dispersal continued till the time it was only the Oboama and Umunama people that were left to inhabit the present area close to the confines of the Orie Ukwu; thus becoming the custodians of the shrine of Orie Ukwu and incidentally the priest of *Chileke Oha*. The movement to other areas did not stop the groups from worshipping the *Chileke Oha*, as they continued to gather yearly for the worship of the deity for his protection all through the year.

The worship of this deity called *Chileke Oha* by the people of Ezinihitte continued till the 1970s; though before this time, Christianity had started taking deep root in the society and people no longer revered *Chileke Oha* as the supreme force in life. The first assault to the veneration of *Chileke Oha* was its encounter with the ferocious powers of the British. As pointed out earlier, the pounding of the communities in the present Mbaise area because of the death of Dr. Stewart, and the subsequent attack on the *Ifanim Eke* Amumara, another oracle in Amumara, for the persistent killing of twins and every male child born by the courtiers of the chief priest of the oracle was a direct result of colonialism, which sought to attack and destroy deities known to have had gripping influence on the people in an apparent attempt to subjugate the indigenous groups. Also the progressive evangelization of traditional societies, which came in the wake of colonialism, somewhat affected the worship of *Chileke Oha*, with the resultant effect that its worshippers began to abandon it in preference to Christianity and baptism. The hitherto mega image of the *Chileke Oha*, soon became history. Surprisingly, a church group destroyed the shrine of *Chileke Oha* few years ago with the assistance of the youths of Oboama and Umunama where the deity is situated. The worship of *Chileke Oha* was always on Orie market day-

the big Orie. The Igbo have a four day market structure- that is Eke, Orie, Afor and Nkwo. During the worship, the people gathered at the Orie Ukwu with yams, *Oji* (kola Nut), *Nzu* or *Ufara* (native chalk), goats, sheep, fowls, and other sacrificial items to supplicate to *Chileke Oha*, ironically called *Iro Mmuo* (the delighting of the gods). The priests of other lesser deities participated in the exercise before the chief priest and the *Chileke Oha*, thanking the god for its protection and preservation all through the preceding years. The ceremony was done yearly, and involved all the towns in Ezinihitte, whose leaders and elders came in turn in order of seniority to present their offerings and sacrifices before *Chileke Oha* and partake in the associated rituals.

This yearly offering was used to rededicate the communities to *Chileke Oha* and to reaffirm the bond of unity among them, and ultimately between the people and *Chileke Oha*. After the sacrifice, the remains would be prepared for the feast that follows. Kola nuts *Oji Igbo* and *Nzu* (white clay chalk) used in the ritual would be broken into pieces and put into the *Okwa Oji* (wooden receptacle) and shared among the villages, which came in turn in order of seniority to take them. This marked the high point of the *Iro Mmuo* ritual and served as a symbolic roll call for all the communities; absentees were instantly noted and the reasons for the absence promptly addressed. This was a yearly communion to identify with brothers and to demonstrate a bond of unity, oneness and love (Okpofe: 1984, 3). Over time, this practice formed part of the people's culture and came to be known as *Ichi Oji ndi* Ezinihitte (the taking of kola nuts by Ezinihitte groups). This practice has continued to be modified in tune with the overbearing influence of Christianity in the area. The Church antagonized all those aspects of the *Iro Mmuo* deemed to be fetish and unchristian; thus making the festival to change both in colour and outlook. From the *Iro Mmuo* leading to the *Ichi Oji*, it was changed to *Ichi Oji na Nzu* (the *nzu* here signifies peace, and as people take the *oji*, they also rub the *nzu*, the removal or *iro mmuo* meant removing the fetish aspects of the festival) and other entertaining activities. Also people no longer gather at Orie Ukwu for the festival; it now rotates amongst the communities in Ezinihitte, starting from the most senior.

The *Oji* festival has been looked upon, not only as a symbol of love, unity, brotherhood and oneness, but also as a medium through which the people rededicate themselves to the cherished values of *Onye Aghala Nwanneya* (let no body leave behind his brother). While the *Oji* is a symbol of life, friendship, trust, hospitality and cooperation amongst the people, the *Ufara* (white clay chalk), represents love, peace and transparency. In the past, and even in some places today, the *Ufara* was and is still used as a cosmetic for nursing a new born baby, because it is believed to have medicinal attributes that enhance and strengthen the bones. Pregnant women use it to sooth their body and calm their nerves; while nursing mothers lick it and rub same on their neck as they rejoice with a new mother and welcome a new born baby into the world. Thus the combination of *Oji* and *Ufara* was a

sacred communion for the people and was meant to serve as a unifying bond (Obizi: 2002, 12).

The Social Significance of the *Oji* Cultural Festival

As we noted earlier in this paper, it is the Igbo among all other groups in Nigeria that see kola nut not just as a mere stimulant when eaten, but also as a symbol of friendship. And a show of hospitality and welcome to a visitor. Ironically, the production of this fruit is not done in commercial quantity among the Igbo, but rather its production is concentrated mainly in Yorubaland (Njoku: 2001, 164); but the Igbo have come to celebrate it most. Among all the Igbo communities, it is only the Ezinihitte Mbaise group that has a ceremony solely dedicated to kola nut, *Oji*. To them therefore, the *Oji* cultural festival signifies a bond of primordial unity among the constituent, as well as pointers to their common origin and connection with *Chileke Oha* at Orié Ukwu. It is also a forum at which their cultural heritage is showcased to the entire public, through the presentation and exhibition of various dance groups of the participating communities. This occasion affords the opportunity for the wearing and tying of wrapper of assorted design and make and a stylish procession for the collection of the *oji* (kola nut) and *Nzu* by each community. The best dressed and danced community in this colorful and pomp procession, takes home a prize.

The *Oji* festival presents a medium through which the people of Ezinihitte Mbaise interact with one another, introduce suitors to respective brides or bridegrooms. The various maiden groups came in their best dresses to mark the occasion. The Ezinihitte people use the occasion to organize themselves politically and developmentally. For instance, each year it is celebrated, the invited guests will always include the governor of the state as well as other political big wigs from within and outside the state. During the occasion, the host community in collaboration with the Ezinihitte Eze-in-council usually makes demands from the governor on any pressing issue that needs the attention of the government in the area. This includes roads, electricity, water; education, scholarship, healthcare and any other project that is of public interest.

The ceremony is used as a platform for identifying social and economic challenges faced by the people of Ezinihitte. Each community that has any social challenge such as youth anti-social behaviour is free to present it for the larger body to look into and find a way forward. It also serves as a medium through which communal disagreements are resolved; in the spirit of *onye aghala nwa nne ya*, wealthy sons and daughters of Ezinihitte are enjoined at the occasion to assist those in need, through scholarships, employment, and empowerment. The people also use the occasion to identify with government and in turn benefit from the location of projects in the area. Example of this was in 2002, when the then governor of Imo state attended the *Oji* ceremony at Obizi, the people made some requests before him which included the rehabilitation of the bridge linking Obizi to Umu Nwawa in

Umuahia Abia State. In the previous *Oji* festival, the people demanded for the rehabilitation of the road linking Achi Ngali in Obowo, to Obizi from the government, and thereafter the project was executed. Thus the Ezinihitte people use the *Oji* festival as an instrument to read out to the government of the day the needs of the communities in Ezinihitte and Mbaise in general. The occasion is also used as a medium to assess the successes recorded in Ezinihitte by its political leadership. The politicians also use it as a means to extend their contacts with the electorates and grassroots.

The *Oji* festival also serves as an avenue through which oratory and the art of breaking and sharing kola nut in public functions amongst the people is mastered. This is because a similar procedure is used in sharing kola nut in public functions; the seniority of the communities is generally recognized in the process. This refreshes the people's knowledge on this strand of social etiquette, for kola nut is at all times to be respected in Igboland. This aside, it affords the people as well as the ordinary visitor the opportunity to move around and appreciate the age-long cultural materials *Okwa Oji* used for the sharing of the kola nut, and other landmarks in Ezinihitte. Through this yearly festival, the communities assess their growth and development on the one hand, and on the other, reflect on their being as a people and how they have fared the past years.

The festival aided the establishment, development and the growth of Ezinihitte Development Association (EDA) an umbrella body whose responsibility among other things is to champion the development of Ezinihitte in all its ramifications, thus deepening the culture of *Onye Aghala Nwanneya* among the people. The Association has been at the forefront of the struggle to obtain the rightful position of the Ezinihitte in Imo State political terrain. For instance it effectively presented the case of Ezinihitte at the Ukairo Panel on New Government Reforms in Imo State in 1976 for the creation of Ezinihitte into a separate division. In the past too, it presented the case of Ezinihitte to the Local Government Panel on Reconstruction of Local Government in November 1976, for the creation of Ezinihitte Local Government-this was realized years after this presentation was done. Apart from these, (EDA), has also made a case to the State Government on the need to recognize the autonomous communities in Ezinihitte, including the creation of new ones. In achieving all these, the Association has collaborated with all town unions in Ezinihitte as well as monitored their rate of development and progress. (Osuagwu: 2000). By-and- large, the *Oji* Ezinihitte cultural festival, has succeeded in uniting and consolidating the peace and harmony enjoyed by the Ezinihitte people over the years, and has continued to grow till date.

Conclusion

The *Oji* Ezinihitte cultural festival is as historic as the origin of the people of Ezinihitte. Right from the earliest days till today, this festival has continued to be a singular and the most potential source of unity within the

Ezinihitte group. The festival has continually been challenged by modernity especially with the Christianization of the area and the consequent criticisms of the rituals associated with the festival. These aspects have been modified and in its place other features added to enliven the festival. *Oji* as a show of welcome and love is not eaten because of its nutritional values, but because of its social and cultural significance to a people. We have clearly noted the saying that while others eat kola nuts, the Igbo celebrate it; thus the *Oji* Ezinihitte festival is a clear vindication of this saying. We have also pointed out that the Ezinihitte is the only group that has a festival associated with kola nut in Igboland. There is therefore every need to recognize it as one of Nigeria's significant cultural heritage, and to give it both national and international publicity as in the case with Arugungu fishing and Osun Oshogbo festivals in Kebbi and Osun States of Nigeria, respectively. The festival has not received the desired recognition and attention by both our State and National governments. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism ought to take interest in this festival and help make it attractive to visitors from far and wide. This will generate revenue not only to the host community and Ezinihitte, but also to the government.

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