

An Assessment of the Significance of the Celebration of Ocho Festival by the Indigenous Igala People of the United States of America

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Abstract: The aim of the study is to assess the significance of the celebration of Ocho festival by Igala kingdom of the United States of America. The festival has one of its functions as the avenue for the appreciation of the god of the land, Godalmighty and the ancestors, for the protection so far, and to pray for a bountiful harvest in the incoming farming season of the people. As a result of the numerous roles the Ocho cultural practice plays in the society especially among the Igala people, it was concluded that Ocho festival is very significant to the Igala Kingdom of USA and Igala Kingdom of Nigeria.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the study

Ocho festival is a hunting and agricultural festival of the ancient Igala Kingdom of Nigeria. It is a festival celebrated before farming season and is normally referred to as a pre-farming season festival. Ocho festival is celebrated in Kogi State Igalaland between April and May every year by Attah Igala; the King of Igala people worldwide. Outside of Kogi State, some indigenous Igala communities such as those in Delta State, Edo State, Anambra State, Benue State, etc also celebrate the pre-farming festival.

During the festival which is supposed to last for nine days, though the major events being the ones on the eighth and ninth days, many activities are done. One thing about Ocho festival either in Kogi State Igalaland or other indigenous Igala towns outside Kogi state or Nigeria, it is celebrated before farming season, mostly in April or May. Ocho festival is celebrated by the Ogbe-Olu community of Illah people of Delta State. It is also celebrated in Ifeku Island Igala town of Edo state. While it is called Ocho in Illah, it is called Era-ane festival in Ifeku, Edo state. Era-ane is an Igala term for earth god; the one in charge of the land for farming. In addition to Ifeku Island and Illah towns, Ocho festival is also celebrated by Ukala community, Oko community, and Aika Ezeolu Kingdom, all in Delta state of Nigeria. It is also celebrated by the Igbedor Igala community of Anambra state under the name; Eka, and this is done before their yam farming period in November. It is to pray to gods of fertility and agriculture to enable sufficient rainfall and good harvest in the coming farming season.

In Igala Kingdom of USA; that is; the indigenous Igala people of the United States of America, it is called Ocho festival and it is being celebrated in April or May every year. Though there are many other festivals in Igala land, Ocho festival is one of the important ones especially as it relates to prayers for bountiful harvest (good hunting and fishing expenditures by hunters and fishermen respectively) from farm which was the major occupation of Igala people then. It is worthy of note here that among the entire ethnic groups in Nigeria, Ocho festival is exclusively celebrated by Igala people.

As a result of the uniqueness of this cultural festival, it is well attended by Igala people from across the country when held in the palace by Attah Igala in Idah, Kogi state, and who in most cases come out in their very expensive and colourful wears to the occasion. This is as said by Labija (2020: 314), "an average Igala man nevertheless, spends much time and care, to decorate his body with colourful traditional attire, for different ceremonies such as, Ocho and Egwu ceremonies". This tells how important cultural festivals are to Igala people. But in as much as this festival is very important, adequate studies have not been carried out on it especially outside Kogi state Igala lands, and this is the reason for this research work.

B. Aim

The aim of the study is to assess the significance of Ocho festival among the indigenous Igala people of the United States of America.

Objectives:

To study the origin of Ocho festival in indigenous Igala communities of USA

To examine the mode of celebration of Ocho festival by Igala people of USA

To study the importance of Ocho festival celebration among the indigenous Igala people of United States of America.

C. Statement of the problem

Culture is simply described as the way of life of the people. But beyond this, the culture in which one practices reflects on him or her. In addition, the culture one practices must have its role to play in the lives of those people, those around them as well as the entire society. The Ocho festival celebration in the United States of America by the indigenous Igala people of USA, started recently in Charleston which is the location of the headquarters of Igala Kingdom of USA where the head of the Kingdom, Onu Edibo Idih Abba Nizar has his palace. Indigenous Igala people of USA are descendants of the Igala people who were forcefully taken from the Kingdom during the trans-Saharan trade as well as war between Igala and Benin which was ignited by foreign agents, but were able to retain and preserve their identity, cultures and values after their regular resistances which led to their liberations.

As a result of new introduction of the festival in the far away USA, there is need to assess the mode of celebration of the Ocho festival in the area as well as studying the importance of the festival to the Igala Kingdom of USA, Igala Kingdom of Nigeria and the USA government.

II. ORIGIN OF OCHO CULTURAL PRACTICE

The culture of a people is a heritage, and so it is passed from generation to generation either through oral form, folklore, poetry, active practice or participations, etc. This makes ancient cultural practices to be preserved and practiced till this day by many ethnic groups in our society with little or no modifications. In 1954, the Ocho festival of Igala people was banned by the British colonialist based on false allegations which were later found to be false. It was during this conflict between Attah Igala and the British government that the Earth god pyramid in Idah was destroyed leaving the ruins which are still found in the area. The Ocho festival along with other four Igala festivals (Egwu, Ogbadu, Ogaganyi, Iyalo/Uchu-Ebutane) remained banned for about 64 years until it was unbanned in 2018 by Gov Yahaya Bello; the executive governor of Kogi state through the effort of Attah Idakwo Ameh Oboni II, who was the Attah Igala then.

Igala Ocho festival which is an agricultural and hunting festival originated from ancient Egypt where Igala people originated from. Religion was very important in the daily life in ancient Egypt, and many of the religious observances were based on the observation of the environment, the Nile river and agriculture, such that the religions were used to explain natural phenomena like the cyclical flooding of the Nile and agricultural yields, (Nermeien, Mohammed, Rasha & Mohammed 2020: 309).

Igala people are believed to be the descendants of Pharaoh Ata, the fourth King of the first dynasty Pharaohs of Egypt. Ata/Djet was said to have ruled from ca 3000 BC to ca 2990 BC after his father King Ateth/Djer (3050 – 3000 BC), who ruled after his father King Teta/Hor-Aha (ca 3100 - 3050 BC), who ruled after his father King Mena/Narmer (ca 3150- 3050 BC); the one who unified lower and upper Egypt, Mark (2016: 1). The history of origin of Igala from ancient Egypt has been proved to be true with several evidences such as the red and white crown combination of Attah Igala with the cobra god image at the front which is same as that of ancient Egyptian Pharaoh's crown; the wearing of earrings by Attah like Pharaoh and other ancient Nile valley areas kings; the same burial processes including the three months "sleeping" duration before the burial as well as the use of funeral boat for Attah just as the Pharaohs of those days; the several same vocabularies between Igala and ancient Egypt languages such as hill as *Oke* in both Igala and ancient Egypt, snake as *Ejo/edjo* in both Igala and ancient Egypt, death as *Ku* in both Igala and ancient Egypt, *Ata* as father, elder and great one in both Igala and ancient Egypt; festival of the dead in both Igala and ancient Egypt; burning of properties (execration) by Pharaoh in ancient Egypt like the burning of hut of Attah during his coronation; the moving round of the white walls (seat of the Egyptian government) by Pharaoh as a demonstration of right or power of the throne (Circumambulation) which is same as Attah Igala own, etc.

In ancient Egypt, Ocho festival was called Sokar festival or Khoiak festival. It is the festival which commenced from around 3150 BC. It is celebrated before the ploughing of the earth starts. Just like in Igala Kingdom of Nigeria and other Igala communities including those in the USA, Sokar festival was held in April in ancient Egypt. As stated by Hill (2016: 2), on the 26th day of 4th month of Akhet (sowing) of the 12 calendar month, the Sokar festival would be held in Egypt. He went further to add that Egyptians performed the rituals of hoeing the earth and driving cattle, implying that Sokar was an agricultural deity and the statue of the god was carried

around during the procession. Sokar was said to have been celebrated in Memphis (first Nome/territorial division of Lower Egypt) the first headquarters of the unified lower and upper Egypt, and later moved to Abydos; the new headquarters of the first dynasty rulers of ancient Egypt in which the ancestors (Ata, his father, grandfather and Great Grandfather) of Igala people founded.

The Ocho festival in Igala Kingdom is celebrated in the same way it was done in ancient Egypt, and this include the carrying of the god of agriculture to the Ocho ground which is where Attah will perform a hunting of buffalo as well as other prayers and sacrifices to the god of agriculture.

III. HOW OCHO FESTIVAL IS CELEBRATED BY THE IGALA KINGDOM OF USA

Ocho festival is a core Igala festival and often carried out by the King; Attah Igala or the heads or traditional rulers of the community (Chiefdoms) in the case of the indigenous Igala communities outside Kogi state, just like it was done in ancient Egypt by Pharaoh, the head of the Egypt Kingdom. As a result of this coupled with other factors, the Ocho festival celebrated outside Kogi state does not involve hunting expenditure done by Attah Igala. Apart from this which some attributed to unavailability of buffalos coupled with laws regarding the restriction on the hunting of some animal species, all other aspects of Ocho festival is still being practiced by indigenous Igala people outside Kogi state including those outside Nigeria.

In USA, the Ocho festival is held in Charleston, South Carolina, which is the location of the palace of the Traditional ruler of Indigenous Igala, USA. Charleston is also the headquarters of the Igala Kingdom of USA as many Gullah people have reconnected with their Igala root through DNA results, culture and historical sources. Just as the Nago people of Brazil and Haiti maintained their Igala identity; Nago which is Igala greeting meaning Thank you or sorry, Olukumi people of Cuba maintained the Igala identity Olukumi, which is "my friend", the Gullah people of USA or North America maintained the Igala identity Igulah which Igala Kingdom of Nigeria had been described with by different researchers and authors including Ejiogu (2004:17) and Palmer (1928:5) in their separate works "Abstract Title of Dissertation: The Root of Political... - Drum, at www.drum.lib.umd.edu/handle" and "Installation of an Attah of (Nigeria), available at www.jstor.org/stable" respectively. Though headquartered in Charleston South Carolina, indigenous Igala people are located in North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Virginia.

Gullah people of USA are not all of Igala ancestry, but a greater percentage of them are Igala, and this is found in their culture, language and occupations. "The Gullah are African Americans who live in the low country region and are known for the preservation of African linguistic and cultural heritage than any other African-American community in the United States of America. During the Ocho festival, all these Igala people travel down to Charleston where it is celebrated. It is a one-day event.

It begins with the gathering of the people in an open field or outside. Just like in Idah, Kogi state, headquarters of Igala people worldwide, the Ocho festival also involve the libation making the Earth God which is Erane in Igala, and Geb god in ancient Egypt. Land or earth is everywhere, the believe is that the ancestors are connected between Igala kingdom of Nigeria and Igala Kingdom of USA through the land. In other word, the ancestors from all over the world are gathered in the venue during the celebration and sacrifices are made to them through

the land or Earth god. In this case, water libation is made by the Onu Igala, who is the representative of Attah in the indigenous Igala community of USA. While the people are gathered in the open place, forming a circle, the Onu takes a cup of clean water, pray to the ancestors and god of the land and he pours the water on the ground little by little. Water is life. Without water, no plant can grow, no human can survive, no animal can survive; in fact, no life will exist. He then prays to the ancestors, God almighty and the earth, for blessings in the various occupations of the people which is now the substitute of our farming occupation of those days. He prayed for peace, growth and development. He also thanks god and the ancestors for the previous blessings on him and his kingdom.

After this libation, a procession of the people is done to the hall where other activities will continue. In the hall or the celebration ground, they will be joined by the representative of Attah Igala; The Attah Igala General Ambassador and Head of Diaspora Igala Affairs; His Excellency Amb Ayegba Abdullahi Adojoh, who will then deliver the message of Attah Igala Worldwide to the people at the event through zoom or Facebook live.

After this, traditional musical performance and dance by our black people will be done. This is a great African music mostly done in African and Gullah-Igala language with many dancers who dance to the beautiful sounds of the drums.

After this music and dance, comes a lecture on Igala kingdom of Nigeria, USA indigenous Igala Kingdom, Igala culture, Igala heroes and heroines, Ocho and its significance, etc.

The lecture also goes along the telling of stories to the children who may be seated in other room or hall. The story includes but not limited to the story of Princess Inikpi, the obedient child and daughter of her father who sacrificed herself for the upholding of victory in the Igala-Benin war of 1515-1516. The occupations of some of our people in USA such as rice farming, fishing, net making, weaving, etc. and how they carried them from Igala Kingdom of Nigeria to the US will be part of the interesting stories for the children.

Goodwill message from Charleston city officials or other government officials will be delivered at this time. The event will later end with eating of foods and sharing of drinks.

A. Oma Igala Museum

Oma Igala museum is a museum of Igala people also known African redemptive struggle and interpretive Centre is the only indigenous African Museum in United States. It is located in Charleston, South Carolina. Oma Igala museum is the America's largest collection of Anti-slavery Collective Resistance Art. The museum chronicles the multilayered history of "The Gullah" people of North America and the Igala (Igulla) Kingdom of Nigeria. The Oma Igala Museum has among other collections the portraits of Princess Inikpi, Attah Igala, Aboko Ocheje Royal navy of Attah Igala, Igala warrior and medicine man called Onoja Oboni, the symbolic return of Benin warriors at the end of Igala-Benin war, etc.

The museum has witnessed a large number of guests including students who visit the museum to learn about the ancient Igala kingdom and her people as well as the role played some of the enslaved Igala people in the U. S. for their liberations and that of other Africans. Igala Kingdom of USA has over five traditional leaders headed by the Onu (Head) Igala Kingdom USA, HRH Onu Edibo Idih Abba Nizar. Igala Kingdom of USA traditional leaders are Iye Emah Ahliellah; Queen mother of Igala kingdom of USA. Princess Ufedoojo Agula Johnson;

The Oma-Onyete Igala Kingdom of USA, Abeneche Unyo Ojochamachala; The Abeneche Onu Igala, Florida, Queen Patricia Linen-Cox; Queen of the Brown Ferry Gullah Territory, Georgetown.



Fig 1: Oma Igala Museum, Charleston, USA



Fig 2: Picture from Ocho festival 2021



Fig 3: Some Historical works in the Oma Igala museum



Fig 4: HRM Agabaidu (Dr) Mathew Alaji Opaluwa Oguiche Akpa; Attah Igala Worldwide; the 83rd Attah Igala



Fig 5: His Excellency Amb. Ayegba Abdullahi Adojoh; Attah Igala General Ambassador



Fig 6: Chief Edibo Idih Abba Nizar, Onu Igala Kingdom, USA



Fig 7: Iye Emah Ahliellah, Iye (Queen mother) Igala Kingdom, USA



Fig 8: Princess Ufedoojo Agula Johnson, Oma-onyete Igala Kingdom, USA.



Fig 9: Abeneche Unyo Ojochamachala, Abeneche Onu Igala, Florida, USA



Fig 10: Queen Patricia Linen Cox, Queen of the Brown's Ferry Gullah territory, Georgetown, SC

B. Importance of Ocho festival celebration

1. It is the time to pray for the growth and development of the homes and society.
2. It is the avenue for praying to God and the ancestors for bumper harvest in the incoming farming season
3. It is celebrated to draw the people closer to their God and their ancestors as the pray for blessings.
4. It is the occasion for the people to express their undying gratitude to the gods for their protection and other blessings.
5. Ocho festival celebration is the avenue for the king and head to re-appeal to the gods of the land not to allow natural disasters in the society
6. It helps in the preservation of Cultural heritage of Igala Kingdom of USA
7. It generate revenue to the government through tourism.
8. It makes the younger Igala children in USA to know about themselves, their history and culture
9. Ocho festival celebration helps to promote the culture of Igala Kingdom of Nigeria as it has been exported from Nigeria to America.
10. 10.Ocho festival celebrationin America helps in the promotion of African cultures in America.
11. It makes other people in Charleston who are not Igala to learn about this unique Igala culture and people.
12. It brings the people together from different locations in the U. S. During the Ocho festival celebration,

indigenous Igala people from North Carolina, Florida, Georgia and various parts of South Carolina will converge on Charleston, the location of the palace of the Onu Igala Kingdom USA, for the event.

[10] 55 years after the Proscription, ancient Ocho festival holds in Idah. <https://guardian.ng/55-years-after...>

CONCLUSION

This study of the celebration of Ocho festival by Igala kingdom of the United States of America has been carried out. The festival has one of its functions as the avenue for the appreciation of God almighty and the ancestors for the protections so far, and to pray for a bountiful harvest in the incoming farming (farming, hunting, fishing) season. It was also observed from the work that the festival brings indigenous Igala people from various states across America especially those in North America to meet at Charleston and celebrate as one Igala family. It can therefore be concluded that Ocho festival is very significant to the Igala Kingdom of USA and Igala Kingdom of Nigeria.

Recommendation

Ocho festival is the same as the Sokar agricultural festival that began around 3100 BC in ancient Egypt, and which was practiced by the ancestor of Igala people, King Ata, the fourth king of the first dynasty rulers of Egypt. This culture despite its age has remain very relevant and very important among the Igala people of Kogi state and across various states of Nigeria as well as the Igala Kingdom of America, Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad, Kenya and other indigenous Igala communities outside Nigeria that will revitalize their own Ocho festival in future. I therefore recommend that the government should support this festival in order to develop it to a mega festival in the US as it will also help in the generation of revenue through tourism.

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