

A Study of the Importance of Ichu Ulor Festival of Asaba People of Delta State, Nigeria

Amb Ayegba Abdullahi Adojoh

Royal Archives and Museum, Attah Igala Palace, Idah, Kogi State, Nigeria,
Office of Diaspora Igala Affairs, Attah Igala Palace, Idah, Kogi State, Nigeria

Abstract: This research work is aimed at studying the significance of IchuUlor festival of Asaba people of Delta state. The study which adopted qualitative research technic in which interview method was used to obtain primary data regarding the practice and origin of the festival has been able to conclude that the festival which is celebrated biannually in July helps to remove evil, bad lucks, diseases from the societies and attracting blessings to individuals, homes and the communities. It also concluded that the festival also helps to usher in the new yam festival celebration in Asaba.

Keywords: Asaba, Culture, Festival, Ulor, Igala.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

Culture is the total way of life of the people. According to the cultural policy of Nigeria, Culture is “the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organization thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours”. This therefore implies that one can be differentiated from another or his neighbor through his culture, and this include festivals, dressing, food, etc.

IchuUlor or simply Ulor festival is a unique festival carried out in a special form in Asaba by the people. Although it has many spiritual and physical significance, little study has been carried out on it in the past, hence the need for this work. This work will make use of qualitative research technic to obtain information from elders especially traditional rulers of Asaba about this unique festival.

B. Aim

To examine the importance of Ulor festival of Asaba people of Delta State, Nigeria.

C. Objectives

- To study the what Ulor festival is and its origin
- To examine how Asaba people celebrate Ulor festival
- To study the significance of Ulor festival to the people of Asaba

II. ABOUT ULOR FESTIVAL

A. What is Ulor Festival

Ulor festival is a cleansing festival which is carried out in Asaba and some other indigenous Igala towns in Delta state. According HRM Obi (Dr) Ada Nwanneamaka Biosah, The OmuAhaba, Ulor means blessing, and freedom from evil. This is because, the festival is meant for cleansing the people and the environment or society of various evil, challenges and sicknesses. It is called Kwulor in some Igala communities and also called Uchokwolo or Kwolo in some Igala land. Some

other communities that celebrate Ulor or Kwulor festival in Delta State are Illah in Oshimili North local government area of Delta state, Umukwata in Ukwuani local government area, Onu-Aboh in Ndokwa east local government, Aika-Ezeolu in Oshimili kingdom North local government area, Ebu in Oshimili North local government area all in Delta State.

B. Origin of Ulor festival of Asaba

The Ulor festival or Ulor traditional practice originated from Igala Kingdom headquarters, Idah, Kogi state, Nigeria, where the ancestor of Asaba (Ahaba) people originated from. In Kogi State Igalaland, it is called Unyiegworinyo or uchokwo or uchokwulo. Also, in Kogi state Igalaland, it is not celebrated in a big festival form but it is a regular cultural ritual which is done either in the community as a whole or at family level especially before another festival or feast of the ancestors is celebrated. The priest carryout the purification or cleansing using the materials that are used. In most cases, *Oma onobule*(the child who is related with the family or clan just through the mother) is the one that conducts the cleansing ritual under the instruction or guidance of the priest. But the bottom-line is that both Uchokwo of Kogi state Igala land and Ulor of Asaba serve the same purpose- cleansing of the environment and the people.

C. Brief Origin of Asaba People

Asaba is the capital city of Delta State. It is located in the western bank of River Niger in Oshimili South Local Government Area of Delta State.

Asaba people are descendants of Nnebisi who was the son of an Igala Prince, warrior and medicine man called OnojaOboni (who is also known as Oboli, Ogboli, etc by different authors). Nnebisi's mother was called Diaba, from Ntejein the present-day Anambra State. Coincidentally, Nteje (Utueje; Exit route of leopards) people were part of Igala group who left Idah with Ogala Eri, the father of Nris in those when Eri settled at Eriaka in the present day Aguleri. Although they lost almost their complete Igala language due to various factors, they still maintain many Igala cultural practices as well as Igala tribal names. Diaba, the mother of Nnebisi was from here but she was at Asaba when she met OnojaOboni in which they had an affair that resulted to Nnebisi.

But just like Asaba, there are other communities founded by the descendants of OnojaOboni such as Ogurugu in Enugu state, Oboli quarters in Illah Delta State, Obikporo in Onitsha Anambra State, Umuonoja in Nkalaha, Ishielu Ebonyi state, Ekele in Bayelsa, Umuekete in Umueri, Umuonoja in Nsukka, etc

OnojaOboniwho belonged to AjuOcholi Attah Igala ruling house paternally was said to be of the 17th century era. The title of the King of Asaba is Asagba of Asaba. The present Asagba of Asaba is HRM Obi (Prof) Joseph ChikeEdozien. Asaba has

many Obis too including a female Obi who is the OmuAhaba. OmuAhaba is the Queen mother of Ahaba (Asaba), and she has some responsibilities in the society including a traditional ones. She is in charge of all market women in Asaba. OmuAhaba also plays important role during Ulor festival celebration.



HRM Obi (Prof) Joseph Chike Edozien, Asagba of Asaba



HRM Obi (Dr) Ada Bisoah,
Omu Ahaba



Obi (Dr) Benibe Ugboko, Obi
of Onaje Quarters, Asaba



Obi (Barr) Mohammed Nduka Elunor, Obi of Iyagba Community, Asaba, with HRM Agabaidu Mathew Alaji Opaluwa; The Attah Igala during his courtesy visit to the Ayyah Igala in his palace, Idah on May 18, 2022

III. ULOR FESTIVAL CELEBRATIONS

A. How Ulor festival is celebrated in Asaba

Anioma people in which Asaba is one of the towns celebrate various festivals which may differ from one Anioma community to another, and in some cases, these festivals are observed on holy days either annually or not, to thank the gods of the land for the productivity and may also serve as the cleansing and exorcism of evil spirits from such communities. Esogbue (2018:2).

According to OmuAhaba; HRM OBI CHIEF DR ADA BIOSAH 'Ulor which means' blessing or free from evil' is biannual festival celebrated by Asaba people of Delta state. It is celebrated on the last NKWO (Ukwo) market day in July of any even year. It is a forerunner to the new yam festival in Asaba.

The festival which itself is a cleansing festival starts with each family cleaning their houses and environment completely then gather all the debris, burn all up and gather all the ashes from these burnt elements and each family proceeds to the river Niger with all the burnt debris pour all in the water. The throwing of these debris into the water is believed to be the dumping of evils and ill lucks into water to be taken away forever. While the people take these fire debris to river Niger from the location the fire was set, they all chant in Igala language (in Yoruba language, according to the Asaba history, probably as a result of the wrong classification of Igala as Yoruba in 1850s by Samuel Ajayi Crowther due to some similarities not knowing that Igala originated from ancient Egypt in 800 BC when the Kush kingdom conquered Egypt, and that Igala first settled in a location presently called Attagara under then Kanem empire, and later moved to Attah Igala (Attagara/Tangara) under the ancient Kwararafa, an later to Idah, the present capital of Igala Kingdom in 500BC, while some Igala moved to Opi in the present day Enugu State around 400BC. Ajayi also did not know that some Yoruba people like Ijebu people of Ogun state migrated from South Sudan through Benue confluence now Kogi State to their present locations) "agbakwuro/Kwulo" which means "we sweep it away". It symbolizes the sweeping or removal of evils and problems from the homes, communities into the river. When they are coming back from the river, they also sing in Igala ("yoruba") language as "Olokotoipo/Ikwo", meaning "am coming from far with abundant blessings"

Also, while collaborating the explanations by OmuAhaba, another traditional ruler of Asaba, Obi (Dr) Ugboko Benibe, added that while they are coming back from river Niger, all the people who went to the river Niger with the debris must come back to the location of the fire where the debris were taken from. Before their arrival, the OmuAhaba; the Queen mother of Ahaba (Asaba) will be seated waiting for them for other rituals. In fact, this is a very important part of the festival. It is called purification.

The Omu while at the location has local white chalk with her. It is called Afu in Igala. Each person would put his or her two palms and Omu will put or rub some chalk on them. In the same way, the person will put the back of the hands and the same thing done on the palms will be done on the back of the hands; that is, some chalks will be rubbed on the back of the person's hands too. This ritual is performed on all the people who went to drop the debris into the river Niger.

The white colour or chalk is to purify or cleanse the people and make them "new" again. It is also to make them free of all past troubles and diseases.

After the chalk marking ritual, each of the communities will gather in their various locations in the communities where foods and drinks are shared. Music and dances are also performed during the festival.



Burning of the gathered firewood (Source: asabapost.blogspot.com)



Taking of the firewood to river Niger (Source: asabapost.blogspot.com)

B. Significance of IchuUlor festival celebration

- It helps to cleanse the society of various evils
- It cleanses homes and individuals of various sicknesses
- It helps to preserve the cultural heritages of Asaba people
- It helps to teach the young ones of their origin and who they are

Ulor festival allows the home to be free for ancestors to come home and eat their food as at when due. The festival marks the arrival of new yam festival.

It helps in healing the land. This is as confirmed by Nnamani in his work on “The role of music Therapy in the healing process of Traditional Africian Society: A case study of Igbo Area of Nigeria”, which he said that “the Iche-Ulor festival of Asaba is basically a music and dance festival where the cleansing f their homes, street and the entire town is done with chants, music and dance” Nnamani (2014: 455 and 456)

CONCLUSION

The meaning, origin as well as the celebration of Ulor festival of Asaba people have been discussed. It has been studied that the festival is a cleansing festival aimed at purifying the people and the land by “throwing” their problems into river Niger through the symbolic throwing of dusts and firewood debris into river Niger. It can be concluded that this festival is so significant to the people as no society can grow without receiving blessing from God and the ancestors.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the festival be replicated in other indigenous Igala communities across Nigeria as it teaches that it is not possible for one to live with “evil” and receive a blessing from God and the ancestors.

References

- [1] Asabablogspot.com
- [2] Dr Sunday N. Nnamani (2014): The role of music Therapy in the healing process of Traditional Africian Society: A case study of Igbo Area of Nigeria, Proceedings of international conference on Education and social sciences, Istanbul, Turkey. Pp 453-458
- [3] Emeka Esogbue (2018): Anioma Nation: Rich in culture; Rich in festival and feasts. Available online at emekaesogbue.blogspot.com
- [4] M. A. Iyeh and C. O. Aluede (2005): An Exploration of Therapeutic Potency of Music and Dance in Ichu-Ulor festival of Asaba People. Nigerian Musicology Journal. Vol. 1, pp 124 – 142
- [5] Oral interview with HRM OBI CHIEF DR ADA BIOSAH, OmuAhaba
- [6] Oral interview with Obi Dr UgbokeBenibe, Obi of Onaje Quarter, Asaba
- [7] Cultural policy of Nigeria
- [8] Omu Ahaba facebook page