

OF CULTURAL FESTIVALS AND RELATIONS IN WEST AFRICA: PERSPECTIVES ON MBANO OF SOUTHEAST NIGERIA SINCE THE 20TH CENTURY

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**OF CULTURAL FESTIVALS AND RELATIONS IN WEST AFRICA: PERSPECTIVES ON MBANO OF SOUTHEAST NIGERIA SINCE THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

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**Abstract**

*Africa is prominently known for its rich cultural heritage, festivals and traditional celebrations. The Igbo of southeast Nigeria are known globally for their addiction to their traditional way of life, belief systems and celebration of numerous cultural festivals. These traditional and cultural festivals form the basic foundation of the rich heritage of the Igbo. Most of these celebrations begin from birth. Usually, the birth of a new born baby is greeted with joy and fanfare by his/her parents and their relatives. The celebrations continue till the period of transition (death); from puberty to adulthood, marriage, title taking, old age till one rejoins his/her ancestors, then comes the final celebration. Mbanos people of southeast Nigeria have numerous traditional and cultural festivals which form the nucleus of their relations with their neighbours. In fact, the cultural festivals depict the rich cultural heritage of the people and are used to show in most parts, the kinship between the people and their proximate neighbours. This paper essays to demonstrate the import of these traditional and cultural festivals to the nature of relationship prevalent between Mbanos people and their neighbours in southeast Nigeria. The work adopts the orthodox historical method of narrative and analysis. The data are presented descriptively. It expresses the fact that Igbo traditional and cultural celebrations are not merely for entertainment, but are deep rooted mechanisms for human interaction, progress and societal wellbeing.*

**Keywords: Traditional, Cultural Festivals, Mbanos People, Igboland, Southeast, Relationship.**

**Introduction**

Human society is known to be controlled by the very many traditional and cultural festivals and celebrations that are significant in marking different epochs. Africa as a continent is known for its rich cultural heritage and adherence to traditional social norms and value systems. Such events are used to identify the similarities and differences that exist between groups, communities and states. They form the fulcrum of the nature of relations extant among diverse people. The traditional and cultural festivals are ultimately exemplified in the economic, political and social relations that humans share amongst them in their environment.

Mbanos people of Igboland and their proximate neighbours in southeast Nigeria seemingly enjoy many traditional and cultural festivals that serve as a bond to the people. The celebration of these numerous festivals in most part, serve as unifying factors and symbols of the kinship that exist between the people and their neighbours from the earliest times. It is in tandem with the above avowal that this paper journeys into the major traditional festivals of the Mbanos

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people and their proximate neighbours. The study x-rays the import of these cultural festivals as it affects the political, social and aspects of the people in relation to their neighbours.

### Conceptual Clarifications

Culture as a concept has been defined by scholars in diverse ways. This paper will certainly not bore its reader with further and lengthy insights into its definition. We will adopt appropriate definitions suitable for this *expose*. For our purpose, two definitions are adopted. First, according to Beats and Hoijer, culture is, “a social heritage that is all knowledge, beliefs, customs and skills that are available to members of a society.”<sup>1</sup> The second definition of culture adopted for our purpose was given by Linton who sees it as “mass of behaviour that human beings in any society learn from their elders and pass on to the younger generations.”<sup>2</sup> These definitions point to the fact that culture refers to all of what people do in a given environment to make life worth living. In Mbanjo and its neighbours many cultural traits exist. They are mainly made manifest through some common shared religious beliefs and other practices. However, our focus here is on the different festivals and practices that showcase the rich cultural heritage of the people. They were in themselves vents for human relations. They also show the extent to which the people are related and linked up through these cultural festivals. Among these traditional and cultural festivals are *Ekweji* or *Awa* or *Ahiajoku* or *ji Aro*, *Nta* festival, *Iwa Akwa*, *Mbom Uzọ* and *Ikpọ Oku*. These festivals would be discussed consecutively.

### Major Cultural Practices and Festivals

In the interaction of Mbanjo people and their proximate neighbours, these festivals served as instruments of peace, harmony and unity. At other times, they were sources of conflict, dispute and even war which in themselves are aspects of human interaction. These festivals mostly, were held in honour of the numerous deities worshipped by the people. The general cultural festival celebrated in Mbanjo, their neighbours and in most of Igboland is the new yam festival. However, among the Mbanjo and their neighbours, it served as one of the greatest factors of inter-group relations. It is called different names in the different villages, but its generic names are *nri m ji*, *iri ji* or *ekweji*.

### Ekweji Festival/Ji Aro/Aruru

In Imo state of southeast Nigeria, this is called *Ahiajoku* and is performed specifically to mark the arrival of the new yam. The importance of yam to the Igbo has received enough scholarly attention. Therefore, our focus is on how Mbanjo, a community in Imo state and their neighbours celebrate yam, as brothers in their interaction. The new yam celebration or *Isiajoku*, as it was also called is heralded by different feasts. In Ugiri area, it was heralded by the ‘*Nta* feast’, while in Ehime area it was the *ji aro* and *awa* feasts.

Ogu Onyirimba explained that “the *Isiajoku* cultural festival was performed on behalf of the Ehime by Umuihim, the most senior village in Ehime. It was associated with the new yam festival. It was held in July before the *Ji aro* and *Awa* feast. Yam was extensively cultivated in Igboland, and before yams were eaten in Mbanjo, the *Isiajoku* festival was first celebrated”.<sup>3</sup> It is part of the people’s belief that the earth goddess, *Ala*, was a generous giver of good yam harvest. In order for the people to thank *Ala* for the good harvest and purify the yam

<sup>1</sup> R.L. Beats and Hoijer, in Pita N. Ejiofor, *Cultural Revival in Igboland*, Onitsha: University Pub. Coy, 1980, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> R. Linton, *The Tree of Culture*, New York: Alfred knof Inc., 1955, p.3

<sup>3</sup> Onyirimba Godson Ogu, 76 years, retired teacher, interviewed at Umueze 11 Ehime Mbanjo, Imo State, 23/08/2010.

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before eating it, as the king of all crops, the *Isiajoku* festival was held. If a man ate the new yam before the celebration of this festival, such a man was punished by the *Ajoku* and the *Ala* deity. The feast was celebrated by sacrificing a cock, yam and wine to *Ala* and the ancestors. As Nze Boniface Alagwa noted, “this sacrifice was very crucial to all peasant farmers in the area. It was after its performance that they entered their farms, harvested yams and fed their families. However, the people of Umuezeala did not eat the new yam at this time. They waited until they celebrated their unique *ji aro* feast before doing so”.<sup>4</sup> The *Ji aro* was a form of new yam festival celebrated by some Mbano communities. It was usually celebrated in August which, in their tradition is called *Onwa ano*.

There was also *Awa* celebration usually done on *Eke* market day. The sounding of *Nkwukwuishi* drum signified the beginning of *Awa*. Onyirimba observed that “all compounds and roads in each village were kept clean. The cleaning was done preparatory for guests and people visiting from neighbouring communities. During *awa* festival, new contacts and relations are made between people from different communities.”<sup>5</sup> *Awa* is perceived as a unifying factor among the people and communities. *Awa* brings peace and enhances inter-group relations between Mbano people and their neighbours. The festival is attended by people from different communities in Mbano and beyond. It is a celebration of the cultural heritage of the people. Neighbouring communities usually attended *Awa* with cultural dances, masquerades and participated in wrestling competitions. *Awa*, a yearly celebration brought people in their numbers together from different communities to showcase their rich cultural implements. Interactions between people during the *awa* were usually massive.

In Ugiri and Mbama towns, the people have a belief that the new yam festival began with the man/woman and their relations who discovered yam –*ihe ji ndu* as the people call it. Different towns in Ugiri call it different names. Ugiri the head town in the clan call it *Aruru* Ugiri, while Obollo, Umuneke, Ogbor, Ibeme and Umuozu towns, call it *Ekwe ji*. The festival was not celebrated with yam bought from the market. It is indeed an abomination to sell yam in the market before the festival day. E.E. Obilor explained that:

The traditional new yam festival *aruru* or *ekweji* is celebrated on the third *Orie* Amaraku market day in September when Ugiri the eldest town must have finished their celebration, then, other communities followed. The *Orie* Ukwu market day coincides with the first day the *ihe ji ndu* was first eaten after it was discovered by our ancestors.<sup>6</sup>

A week after the *Orie* market day, the traditional priest of other towns sound the *ekwe ji* or *ekwe Ahajoku* drum. The *ekwe Ahajoku* usually generated shouts of joy and did put the people in a jubilant festive mood. From that day, clearing and cleaning of streets and path-ways began. In Obollo town, for instance, on the *Eke* day that proceeded the *Orie* day, there was a wrestling contest between villages and this attracted people massively from different places. Most of the villages or neighbours from Ata, Umudim, Eziama, Inyishi, Ihteafoukwu, Okwelle, and one of the closest neighbours, Agbaja Isu witnessed the event. At the end of the event, the victorious community was usually joined by the rest of the communities to celebrate until they reached their boundaries. The wrestling contest confers some respect and cultural dignity on the victorious community and its inhabitants. This showed that wrestling contest served as a cultural

<sup>4</sup> Boniface Alagwa Ehenamba, 73years, retired civil servant, interviewed at Umuagwu, Umuakagu Nsu, 25/08/2010.

<sup>5</sup> Onyirimba interview cited

<sup>6</sup> Ven. Dr E.E. Obilor, c.79 Years, retired Lecturer/Anglican Priest, interviewed at Alaiyi-ama Obollo, 20-4-2011

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celebration that helped people from different communities to interact and maintain significant relations.<sup>7</sup> The festival provided avenue for contact and interaction between people. New friendships that result to marriages between people are made during the festival. Traditional wrestling featured during *iwa akwa* and new yam festivals.

Before the ceremony began, the chief priest, in the company of other priests placed the “*Egwu*” across the roads through which visitors and neighbours came into the town. The *Egwu* was believed to have powers to stop or avert trouble during the festival. Fowls were killed by the chief priest and their blood and feather spread in front of the shrines.<sup>8</sup> After these sacrifices, the heads of the various villages, on hearing the sound of the cannon shots, collected their *ofo*, *okuko* (fowls) and *omu nkwu* and moved to the central shrine.

The main celebration of the new yam festival was accompanied by wrestling at the village square, masquerade displays and cultural dances of various types by different groups. Such cultural dances included *egwu alijah*, *egwu inwakirinwa* from Eziam Mbaise, *nkwa otele* from Umuri Ikeduru, *atiero* and *Ubo-ogazi* dances which attracted many people due to their uniqueness. People moved from one dance group to the other to feed their eyes. Some children often missed their ways as they followed the thrill of the masquerades and cultural dance groups to their homes.<sup>9</sup> Visitors retired to their friends and relations’ homes where eating and drinking continued. The festival lasted one week and four days. This was because different villages celebrated on their ancestral market days. The festival usually ended with the minor feast called *ima iyoro*. The purpose was to thank the gods and deities for protecting the people and their visitors before, during and after the festival.

The *iri ji* or *ekwe ji* is seen as an important factor of cultural relations between Mbano people and their Ikeduru neighbours to show their common ancestry. For instance as Chidi Onwubuariri stated,

In Inyishi Ikeduru, the new yam festival (*ahajioku*) as we call the festival is one way we show our relations with Amuzari in Mbano. It has been baptized as “*iri ji*”. During the month of June and July of every year, our people harvested their first yams and offered it to the *Ezealaogaku* deity. It was done on *Afo* market day. The elders, Nze and Ozo titled holders performed the rituals at the shrine. People feared to come out for fear they would be killed by the deity. Elders from Amuzari were usually, fully represented in their numbers. The attendance to the festival was inter-changed between Amuzari and Inyishi communities every other year. It was usually marked with the exchange of gifts and introductions between families from different villages. It showed how our people are related with Amuzari. It helps us reaffirm our brotherhood from the ancient times. It served as our cultural bond as *umunne*.<sup>10</sup>

The New yam festival though a cultural celebration, served as a veritable tool for inter-group relations between the people before and after the colonial times. However, a lot has changed in the process and mode of celebration during the colonial and post-colonial era.

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<sup>7</sup> Samuel E. Mbalisi, 71 years, retired teacher/community leader interviewed at Umuche-Amakwu Obollo 20-04-2011

<sup>8</sup> Obilor interview cited.

<sup>9</sup> Mbalisi, pp. 13-14

<sup>10</sup> Chidi Onwubuariri, 71 years, Pensioner, interviewed at Umuoti Inyishi, 24/08/2010.

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**NTA FESTIVAL /FEAST**

The history of *Nta* feast is interwoven with the culture history of the Mbaa group of towns (*Ihe Mbaa nwe*). C.T.C. Annals observed that,

The *Nta* feast was usually begun in August by Atta, the most junior town and that Ugiri, the head town, as well as other towns had to wait until the feast was held at Atta.<sup>11</sup>

This, according to Eze Azubuike, was as a result of how responsibilities were shared then.<sup>12</sup> *Nta* was a minor feast that signified the approach of the new yam period. The feast was celebrated not only in Mbaa and Mbama towns, but in all the areas served by the Mbaa River that has its source at Nkwo Mbaa in Ugiri clan of Mbano. These included some towns in present Ikeduru in Owerri zone. The commencement was signified with the cutting down of *Nkwu Nta* (small palm fruit) at Atta. The *nkwu nta* or *ikwo- Nta* began in the third week of August in two bits. The first part called *ikwo nta* began in Atta and move towards Umudim and thence to Ugiri. *Nta* began with loud shouting and chanting. The *Nta* song went thus:

Egwu:	<i>Nta ooo, nta ooo</i>	Translation: Hunting time,
	<i>Owo owo nta</i>	its hunting,
	<i>Nta abiala ooo</i>	hunting time has come
	<i>Owo owo nta</i>	its hunting time
	<i>Nta nke gara aga erighim ooo</i>	the past hunting did not eat us
	<i>Owo owo nta</i>	its hunting
	<i>Nke ugbua erikwalam ooo</i>	this present hunting will not eat us
	<i>Owo owo nta</i>	its hunting
	<i>Nta owo owo</i>	hunting time oo
Oziza:	<i>Owo owo nta</i>	<i>Choru:</i> it's the hunting time.

This song spreads to all *Nta* areas. Immediately the song started from Atta, all who heard joined the shouting and chanted with joy.<sup>13</sup>

The second part was the celebration of *Nta* feast by the different towns and village in the area. This celebration continued till the *Ekwe ji* or *Aruro* was celebrated. In Ugiri, it was believed that the *Agu* Mbaa came out from the Mbaa forest around the source of Mbaa River. However, the *Agu* Mbaa was harmless to people because it was symbolic of the Mbaa deity-*Dimolushi*. Its presence signified the approval of *Dimolushi* for the feast.<sup>14</sup>

In Obollo town, *Nta* was usually celebrated by married women a week after the *ikwo nta* ceremony on an *Orie* market day. Women bought hens which they gave to their husbands or elderly men in their families. The hens were killed at the *chi* shrine of the mother. *Ugba agworo agwo*, native salad was prepared and distributed to male family members in their families. Different kinds of food like *foo foo*, pounded yam with palatable soup- *ofe araga*, and palm wine

<sup>11</sup> C.T.C Annals, Intelligent Report on Ugiri Clan, Okigwe Division, 1926, OKDIST, EP. 1163 CSE 1/85/4502, p.6

<sup>12</sup> Eze C. Azubuike interview cited in Chidi Amaechi, "Oka Isiala Mbano, Politics and Society in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century" M.A Project, Department of History, UNN, 2002... p.31.

<sup>13</sup> . Mbalisi, "Change and Continuity in Isiala Mbano, an Igbo Society, 1906 – 2004" M.A Theses, Department of History and International Studies, UNN, p.8

<sup>14</sup> Lazarus Nwabugo, c.92 years, trader/ farmer interviewed at Amaraku 25-4-2011

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were used to entertain the men in anticipation that they would reciprocate the gesture during the *Ekwe ji*. This is in keeping with the saying among the people that “*o tara amu ebule, ji ibi ugwo*” (one good turn deserves another). Men supplied the native wine, *mmanya ngwo*, for the *Nta* ceremony usually done in the evening.<sup>15</sup>

In Oka Ugiri, the *nta* feast was celebrated in stages and all sacrifices connected with it were offered to *Iyieke* Mbaa deity. According to Chidi Amaechi, with the commencement of *Nta*, the entire ladies ready for marriage entered into *ikwe* or *oruru* (seclusion or fattening room) at *Ama Ejiuwa*. From there, they went around the farms at stipulated times, harvesting any crops they wished to without being questioned. This continued throughout their eight-day stay in *ikwe*. This was called *Nta Umu agboghobia*. It was followed with female wrestling between the ladies and their counterparts from neighbouring towns with their suitors in attendance. The mothers usually concluded the wrestling with a dance, at the Akpakama square. Sacrifices of cock were offered by the *opera* of each family, and visitors were entertained. This was known as *Nta ishi obi* and *Umuada* (married daughters) brought cocks to their families.<sup>16</sup>

The last stage of the *Nta* festivities was the *Nkwa Oka* dance, which lasted into the *Ekwe Ji*. Each person was expected to attend the *Nkwa* with one or two new tubers of yam (*ji ohu*) fresh from the farm. The purpose was for the individual to know how fruitful the harvest was that year, thank the gods and prepare for the coming planting season. The *Nkwa* marked the end of the *nta* feast; thereafter people were free to harvest their new yams.

*Nta* is significant to the people and their cultural relations. From its origin, process and spread, the *Nta* feast fostered unity not only among the descendant of Mbaa, but also between them and their neighbours, who usually came in their numbers from different communities to participate and witness the ceremonies. *Nta* is one of the festivals celebrated by the people to show their relationship from ancestry. The *Nta* provides strong evidence of the relationship between Mbano communities of Ugiri, Mbaa and Mbama with those of Ikeduru in Owerri zone, especially, in the pre-colonial period. It emphasized their common cultural affinity.

### **Mbom Uzo and Ikpo Oku**

*Mbom Uzo* or *Ibo Ama* is another important rich cultural practice of Mbano and their neighbours. The practice was/is observed in many other parts of Igboland. They were avenues through which the several roads and path-ways in the communities were cleared. These include the roads that connected one community or town and the other. As Herbert Oguine stated, it was usually done before any important annual or seasonal celebrations. The *Mbom uzo* or *Ibo Ama* preceded *ikpo oku*- which was the entertainment that usually accompanied *Mbom uzo*. *Mbom Uzo* is practiced by, Mbano, Ihiteafoukwu, Umuri in Ikeduru, Etiti, and Ihite Uboma, among other communities. In Oka Ugiri it was called *isu achara*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Mbalisi, ... pp.8-9

<sup>16</sup> G.I. Jones, *Trading State of Oil Rivers, London: O.U.P, 1963*, p.16

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Abanobi, “The Socio-Cultural History and Tradition of Ihiteafoukwu”, M. SC. Degree, Department of Library Studies, University of Ibadan, 1985, p. 30-32.

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Jonathan Abanobi said *Mbom uzo* is one of the numerous cultural practices of the IHITEAFOUKWU people. The festival features between the months of August and September. The dates differ from one village to the other, but dates were fixed according to the seniority of villages; the most senior celebrates first. On an agreed date, all males gathered at the village square where they received instructions. As soon as instructions were given, each family cleared its own road from its compound to the main road leading to the market square. This was followed by a festival called *ihio-ahia*. Friends and visitors from different communities joined the celebration. In the evening, villagers and their invitees gathered at the market square where various dances were displayed by members of male and female age grades. The ceremony was characterised by many comic and acrobatic displays. Men brandished their guns and decorated cutlasses in such dexterous but dangerous demonstrations as though the weapon no longer hurt or kill. At night fall, people retired to their homes. However, children moved round the village with songs and were given gifts. In the morning after the celebration, elders gathered at the *ogboto*-village square and drank the remains of the wine called *-mmanya ora*. *Mbom uzo* serves the purpose of keeping the town tidy to usher in the forth-coming festival- *Ekwe ji*. It provides entertainment for the entire people of IHITEAFOUKWU and their neighbours. It is a common cultural ceremony of our people.<sup>18</sup>

The *mbom uzo* and *ikpo oku* is significantly observed by Mbano their neighbours. As the roads that linked one town or clan were cleared, relationships were built and maintained. OGU ONYIRIMBA informed that *mbom uzo* emphasis good inter and intra neighbourly relations. As the roads that connect us with other neighbouring communities were cleared up to our common boundaries, such occasions were ended with entertainment usually contributed by both communities for festival. This naturally helped to build relations between the members of the participating community groups.<sup>19</sup>

Chijioke Obiukwu said that in Etiti, and IHITE UBOMA area, Chijioke Obiukwu said that, “*mbom uzo* is one the cultural practices of the people. It is a medium through which we maintain good neighbourliness with other communities. It is usually closed with entertainment between the Etiti, Mbano and Mbaise communities. It promotes interaction between our people. In fact, *mbom uzo* united the communities, especially, in the old Mbasaa before colonial rule. Through this means, we sanitised our roads and path-ways to the stream, market, shrine and inter-community linking roads”.<sup>20</sup> Obviously, *mbom uzo* provided the needed platform for group interactions. It is also a period for merry-making as cultural dances brought by the communities displayed. Such masquerades in Etiti include, *agba-agwuru*, *ese*, *utubere* and *agbachaa ekurunwa* entertained people.<sup>21</sup> Boniface Alagwa added that *mbom uzo* is a period that highlights the highly hygienic attitude of the people. They love luxury, wellness of work place and household. This reflects in the numerous *ibo uzo iyi*, *ibo uzo awam*, and *ibo uzo oru* in general. It shows the fact that the people and indeed the Igbo are very hygienic people.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> OGU ONYIRIMBA interview cited

<sup>19</sup> Chijioke I. Obiukwu, 61years, Security personnel, Umuezegwu, interviewed at IHITE UBOMA, Etiti, 25/05/2010.

<sup>20</sup> Chijioke Obiukwu interview cited

<sup>21</sup> Boniface, Alagwa interview cited

<sup>22</sup> Abanobi “The Socio-Cultural History...,” pp.32-34

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In Ugiri area, *ibo ama* and *ikpo oku* was also practiced. It also involved the same process of clearing the path way to the Mbaa River and the very many streams and markets in Obollo, Ibeme, Oka, Umuozu and Umuneke and other communities in the area. As in other villages, it usually ended with an entertainment called *ikpo oku*. Mbalisi said “*ibo ama* and *ikpo oku* were significant because both helped in cementing inter and intra community relations. The festivals were regular means of keeping the communities clean. The events were usually brought to a close with the display of different cultural dances. Villages and communities usually led the visiting community to their boundary.”<sup>23</sup>

In Oka community of Ugiri clan, it was called *isu achara* or *ibo achara* festival, which involved the clearing of the *Onuiyi achara* stream and *ishi achara* (field) by Umuwoha. This was done in the month of July every year. According to R. Eziefule,

During the festival, the first thing was the clearing and dredging of Onuiyi achara stream by able-bodied men after which they rubbed the mud collected all over their body for a show. The main celebration was the setting of ishi achara field on fire.<sup>24</sup>

Before the process, there used to be dancing and all forms of entertainment for strangers, during which drum beats were sounded inviting all animals that belonged to the deity to leave the field.<sup>25</sup> Usually, it was believed that the animals that belonged to the deity left peacefully while the ordinary ones were trapped in the fire. The people and their invited guests, in-laws and neighbours from Ikeduru participated in the catch out of which they received some bush meat. The animals included lions, antelopes, rabbits, grass cutters (*nchi*) and so on. The festival mainly served as a factor of intra- and inter-group relations. First, it helped to integrate of the people in the immediate and surrounding villages. Second, it provided the necessary and favourable platform for relations between the people and their neighbours.

### **Masquerades, (*Mmanwu/ Ojionu/ Owu/ Okorosha*)**

Masquerade societies, *nmanwu* (masked spirits) were another religion/cultural practices among the people. Almost all the communities had one form of masquerade or the other. These masquerades have existed from the primordial times to present, though with some modifications over the years. Masquerades appear in different forms and shapes, and bear different significant names. Eziamaka Mbaise, have the *ekpe*; Osu Isiala Mbanjo have *ogaranya-afoto-toro*, *agu ibu* and *oji onu*; Inyishi Ikeduru, have the *ekpo*. In Ugiri area there are many types of masquerades with different names. In fact, every community or village has one or two different types of masquerades. For instance, in Obollo, there is *oji-onu* brought from Arondizogu, there is the *Odumneshi* masquerade of Umuche; *Igbofunanyaekwe* of Umuanu village, *Iyieke* of Umuozu, *Ogburumadukwe* and *owu* of Ogbor, and *Okorosha* in parts of Ehime and many others. These masquerades featured prominently during cultural festivals such as *Ekweji*, Anara day, *iwa akwa* and on the days the communities celebrated their ancestors. The masquerades attracted people from far and near who came to witness and watch the beautiful display. Masquerades were a form of contact and interaction between Mbanjo and its neighbours. According to S.E. Mbalisi,

<sup>23</sup> R. Eziefule Interview cited in Chidi Amaechi, “Oka Isiala Mbanjo...”p.33.

<sup>24</sup> Chidi Amaechi, p.34

<sup>25</sup> Nzewuba Ugwu, *Ihiteafoukwu: The Echo of Igbo Culture*, (Ibadan: Cypress, 2004), p.94



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the *mmanwu* served recreational purposes, and came out periodically, especially, from the months of August to December, during the *Ekweji* festival and other festivals to mark the end of the year. Membership is voluntary. The process of initiation is called *ima mmanwu*. Non-initiates are called *ogbendu*, while initiates are known as *odukwu*. Female initiate members are called *umu erere mmanwu*.<sup>26</sup> An example of the type of masquerade found within the area could be seen below:



Mmanwu **Igbofunanyaekwe** of Umuanu, a type of nmanwu found in parts of Mbano  
Source: Field work

In Ehime area, the first type called the *oti igba*, never allowed women to come near it. This type of *mmanwu* was found at Umueleke and Umunakanu. On the other hand, the second type, the *owu*, allowed women to be its dancing members but were not initiated as members. According to Ogu Onyirimba,

The *mmanwu* society was only open to males who paid entrance fees and fulfilled all other requirements. Such males also showed ability to keep secrets.<sup>27</sup>

On the eve of colonial rule, the *mmanwu* performed some vital social and political functions aside the spiritual. It helped to ensure discipline and social harmony in the communities. Most decisions taken by the people at the village assembly meetings were enforced with the help *mmanwu*. For instance, if a man refused to pay his levy or any fine imposed on him for any offence he committed, the *mmanwu* went to his house to confiscate his

<sup>26</sup> Samuel Emeka Mbalisi, 71years, Community Leader, interviewed at Umuiche Amaukwu Obollo, 20/04/2011.

<sup>27</sup> Ogu Onyirimba interview cited

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property on behalf of the community. If a man wanted to protect his fruit trees such as pears, oranges and mango, the *mmanwu* would hang a tender palm frond, *omu nkwu* on the fruit tree. This served as a warning to people that the fruits were under the protection of the *mmanwu*, which was believed to be a spirit from the gods. Any trespass attracted heavy penalties to the culprit. If two persons were in dispute over the ownership of a piece of land, the *mmanwu* also placed *omu nkwu* on the land. This served as warning to the parties concerned not to enter into the land until the dispute was settled by the *nze na ozo* titled men. These political and social functions performed by the *mmanwu* in Mbano communities and its neighbours lasted up to the third decade of colonial rule. The establishment of the native courts in the area influenced aspects of the functions of the *mmanwu society*. The courts took over the settlement of such issues as land disputes. Christianity helped to whittle aspects of the masquerade society.

However, the masquerade culture did not disappear with the advent of colonialism and Christianity. Their roles during some cultural festival were modified.

As P. Okigbo observes,

In various festival and ceremonies, in Igboland, masquerades of various kinds regarded as representing the dead, usually danced to entertain people or participants in burial ceremonies.<sup>28</sup>

In spite of the modifications, most religious practices and beliefs remained resilient but with external influences in the various aspects of their operations. These masquerades brought about mass gathering of people who interacted in the process. There were massive movements from Ehime to Obollo, from Ogbor to Ibeme, Ugiri, Amaraku and Anara to watch these masquerades. Different people from communities in the area moved with their masquerades to other communities to participate in their cultural celebrations. In such celebrations, youths usually clashed for several reasons which caused fighting between peoples. Masquerade displays were done in both peaceful and conflict conditions.

### **Iwa-Akwa or Nwam Akwa**

The *iwa akwa* (initiation ceremony) was/is one of most important cultural ceremonies celebrated by Mbano and their neighbours. It is prominent among the Ehime Mbano, Etitu, Ihite Uboma, Ihiteafoukwu and Eziana Mbaise neighbours. The Obowo people also celebrate it. There are controversies concerning the origin of the *iwa akwa*. Opinions differed on whether it originated in Ehime or Ihiteafoukwu in Mabise or even Obowo from where it spread to other communities. What is certain is that *iwa akwa* is a cultural and initiation ceremony practiced by Mbano and its neighbours. It is a symbol of their cultural link as brothers from ancestry. The issue of its origin among the communities is not so important in our present discourse. Cultural borrowing is an intrinsic part of human relations. The communities within the area practice it as a rite-of-passage into adulthood.

The cultural significance as a factor of interaction, its process and role in the peoples' relations is our major concern. Nzewuba Ugwu writes that

*Iwa-Akwa* is for the youths -male between the ages of 21 and 25years. *Iwa-akwa* symbolises our youths match to social growth, independence, with family and community commitments and responsibility. *Iwa-akwa* takes place every three

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<sup>28</sup> P.O. Okigbo, "Ahajoku Lecture", Ministry of Information, Culture, Youths and Sports, Owerri: Govt., Printer, 1980, p.25

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years. During this time, all the male children in each village, meet and prepare themselves for the initiation. These youths had played major roles during the last *iwa-akwa* ceremony of their senior age-groups. Each *iwa-akwa* unifies the allegiance between the age-groups and their seniors, strengthens the bond between them and their juniors, all with a purpose, and in solidarity with the family and village past, present, and future.<sup>29</sup>

The above extract sees *iwa akwa* as not just an initiation ceremony, but also a period of inculcating in the youths, the values and virtues of their society. It was a period during which they were tutored with the life attributes that ensure good relations. The entire process of *iwa-akwa* is very vital to the growth and maturity of the male child and his ability to assume roles and make meaningful contributions to his societies.

*Iwa akwa* followed different processes. According to Chijioke Obiukwu, in Ihite Ubom and Etiti, *iwa-akwu* is done in three stages. The first stage is called *okoro apipia*. It is followed by the second stage known as “*okoro egbe*”. The third stage is called “*okoro nma akpara*.” It is after the last stage that a male youth is initiated into adulthood. After that, the ‘new men’ are qualified to take titles and pay taxes. They also qualify to attend village and clan meetings. The ceremony is performed every three years. Every stage of *iwa akwa* takes a year. It was at the completion of the process in the third year, that the final ceremony-*iwa-akwa* was done. The communities that participate in *iwa akwa* include, Umunomo, Umualumaku, Umuezeala, Odonkwume, Nkumeato, Umuakaagu Nsu and Agbaghara Nsu and so on. *Iwa-akwa* was more of a cultural unifying factor than just a ceremony. It helped to unify the male folk at an early age and also make them responsible early in life.<sup>30</sup>

However, Ogu Onyirimba observed that “*iwa-akwa* was not celebrated by all communities in Mbano, but mainly by Ehime and its adjoining villages. The Osu, Ugiri and Mbama towns do not celebrate *iwa akwa*. Even their brothers/neighbours in Ikeduru do not celebrate *iwa akwa*. They only celebrate the *Nta* feast and *mbom uzo* or *ibo uzo* and *ikpo oku*.<sup>31</sup> Merry making pervades the town, making people feel the importance and joy of the initiation through drumming, dancing and cannon fires from individuals and groups. Invited guests, friends, relatives and neighbours jubilate with their folks. Parents and families become extremely excited that their son or member of their family has come of age, with his name recorded in the community family tree. Each participant carries, a cutlass, tied to the left side of the waist- a sign of courage. C.Y. Iwuh highlights the general importance of *iwa akwa* thus,

The ritual is an empowerment by the ancestors of the land through the spiritual and priestly leader of the village-*oji ofo*. With his empowerment and blessing, the young male comes of age, he becomes not just a man, but a grown up man-*Dimkpa* (a doctor of responsibilities and master of difficult situations). He marries, gets children, receives his own *ofo* and enthrones *agwu* (shrine), he starts to pay tax, vote and could be voted for. He could represent the village and has become a free, independent citizen within the perimeters of the community, culture and tradition. Nothing else bestows these rights, these powers, on a man

<sup>29</sup> Chijioke Obiukwu interview cited.

<sup>30</sup> Boniface Alagwa interview cited

<sup>31</sup> Nzewuba Ugwu, *Ihiteafoukwu: The Eco of Igbo Culture...* p.95

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than the *iwa akwa* ritual and ceremony. With time, well behaved and hard-working ones, could rise to become *Nze* or *Ozo* or be decorated with facial mark of honour and bravery *igbu ichi*.<sup>32</sup>

The culture of *iwa-akwa* is highly significant not only to Mbano and its neighbours, but to the Igbo in general. This claim stems from the unavoidable roles the initiated members play in the society when they attain the status of and reaching the age of manhood. These roles apparently, are denied the community if the boys fail to perform the *iwa-akwa* ritual and ceremony. In this regard, Iwu noted that, in the pre-colonial times, *iwa-akwa* was seen as a means of adding to the work and military forces of the society. From the moment a boy performs the ritual and ceremony, he was counted as a citizen in the community, fit to contribute ideas or debate in the community, fit to pay tax, and fit to be punished if he committed any crime, fit to go to war or represent his parents in any occasion; fit to carry corpses for burial.<sup>33</sup>

L.U. Ugwunke quoted in Iwu stated that “*iwa-akwa* establishes a link between the past and the present. Since the past is very important in grasping the present and proffering solution for the future, *iwa-akwa* puts us- the men in the right track of understanding what our forefather’s world was like and how the future would look like. In fact, it makes the people feel that their forefathers left a legacy for their children to follow”.<sup>34</sup>

*Iwa-akwa* is financially profitable to the community and its neighbours. Ugwunke informs that “in preparation for *iwa-akwa*, a lot of farms are cultivated the previous year to provide for the needed food for the ceremony. Also traders do record fast turnover within the period. Besides, people from far and near bring their commodities to the markets to sell in the community. The taxes paid by the participants were also used for running local administration. It was usually a period of market boom and availability of hitherto scarce commodities”.<sup>35</sup>

Another significance of *iwa-akwa* in Mbano and its neighbours is the promotion of equality and non-discriminatory features. On this view, Ebem Njoku posits “*iwa-akwa* symbolizes the equality of men in the community, the rich and the poor, the high and low, and the *nwadiala* and *osuu*. This stresses the egalitarian oriented structure, features and significance of *iwa-akwa*. The ceremony does not discriminate. All the members of age grades, no matter the caste and family background are counted as equals.”<sup>36</sup> Besides, the conventionality of *iwa-akwa* is easily identifiable. This is because, as noted earlier, the ritual and ceremony were not compulsory and forced on the individual. It was only culturally necessary for a male to perform the *iwa-akwa* if he wanted to assume responsibility and recognition as a full citizen. Hence, he was seen as an *efulefu* -irresponsible or unimportant person in the community.

In fact, within Mbano and its neighbours, *iwa-akwa* signifies cultural relations and affinity between the people. It emphasizes their cultural relations and exemplifies the homogenous nature of existence between most of the communities in Mbano and its neighbours. It shows the extent of how the political, economic and social aspects of their relationship point to

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<sup>32</sup> C.Y. Iwu, “Iwa-Akwa Ceremony in Ehime Mbano”. B.A. Project, Department of History and International Studies, UNN, 2002, pp.30-32.

<sup>33</sup> L.C. Ugwunke interview cited in C.Y. Iwu, p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> Ugwunke cited in Iwu, p. 33.

<sup>35</sup> Ugwunke interview cited.

<sup>36</sup> Ebem Njoku interview cited in C.Y. Iwu. p. 33

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their common historical origin. The beliefs and religious practices linking the people are also showcased through *iwa-akwa*. Hence, on the spiritual significance of *iwa-akwa* Nzewuba Ugwu asserts thus,

Let it be emphasized that *iwa-akwa* simply means the dedication, the handing over of a young son to the ancestors (by the *oji ofo*), for protection and guidance, for good health and prosperity, for useful and abundant children, and above all, for their mediation through all his encounters with the society and the world. This is *iwa-akwa*. All other ceremonies, including eating and drinking, buying and wearing of expensive clothes and apparels, are all designed to showcase the ceremony- that a young son has been trusted unto the comfort zone of the ancestors and Chukwu.<sup>37</sup>

The brief *expose* on *iwa-akwa* explains its cultural significance in relations between Mbano and its Mbaise-Ihiteafoukwu, Etititi and far flung Obowo neighbours. *Iwa-akwa* helps to evoke a feeling of common origin and good cultural interaction within the neighbourhood.

### Findings and Conclusion

Africa has very rich cultural heritage. It is also a fact from our exposition that the Mbano people of Igboland, southeast Nigeria have rich cultural heritage. The import of these cultural practices no doubt distinguishes the people from their neighbours and the rest of Igbo, though similarities abound. It is a truism that every society is distinct on its accord but there exist areas of cross-cultural interjections which provide the needed link for human and intra/inter community interactions. From the study, Mbano possesses avalanche of traditional cultural practices too numerous to be discussed here that depicts the indigenous and nativity of the people. Through these cultural celebrations, the social, political, and economic aspects of the lives of the people are enhanced. The cultural significance of these celebrations touches on the very essence of the people's existence and indeed helps to enhance and retain their ethnic essence as part of Igbo and larger African culture. It portrays the Mbano as a people of a seemingly homogenous tradition and culture within the Igbo enclave and reflects the people's collective history as core Igbo of the larger Isuama extraction. The basic cultural identity and interactions of the Mbano and some its proximate and distant neighbours are exemplified in these rich indigenous cultural celebrations. They are the pivotal as the foundation of the continuous dynamic and largely peaceful relations extant between the people over the years.

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<sup>37</sup> Ugwu, *Ihiteafoukwu*...p.99