

The rejuvenation of *omabe* festival and tourism development in Nsukka – Igbo Communities, Southeastern Nigeria

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Abstract

Emerging studies on African Religion portray rejuvenation of indigenous beliefs and practices. Extant literature has shown re-enactment and increasing participation in masquerade/masking tradition. Others indicate the revival of indigenous episteme and practices connected to health systems. Drawing upon ethnographic method of observation and interview, this study investigates the influence of the revival of *Omabe* (masquerade) traditions on tourism development in Nsukka – Igbo communities, southeastern Nigeria. Participants of this study were purposively selected and the primary data collected were interpreted through thematic analysis. As discovered, the increased participation in *Omabe* festival and the attendant practices by mainly the youth has invigorated tourism and related activities. For over a century, adherents of African Religion were overwhelmed by hegemonic influence and domination from foreign religious elements in ways that made participating in *Omabe* festival unfashionable. In contrast to this trend, an unprecedented number of spectators from different religious persuasions visit Nsukka during *Omabe* festivals in recent times. Our findings are consistent with the ways in which revival of local knowledge and practices impact on tourism development in post contact societies.

Key Words: Omabe, festival, revival sustainable development tourism Nsukka

Introduction

Emerging studies on African religion portray rejuvenation of beliefs and practices. Extant literature has shown re-enactment and increasing participation in masquerading tradition (cf. Ugwuanyi, et al., 2021; Agbo, et al. 2022; Uwaegbute, 2021; Magadla et al., 2021). The growing participation in African religion has become the major drive for the reawakening and revival construct reshaping the masquerade tradition in recent times. The central thesis of this study revolves around analysing the influence of the revival of *Omabe* tradition on tourism development in Nsukka – Igbo communities, southeastern Nigeria. As observed through a pilot study by the authors, masking tradition of *Omabe* was affected negatively by forces of colonialism and Eurocentrism particularly during the 19th century and twentieth century respectively (cf. Uwaegbute, 2021). Agbo et al. (2022) study shows the revival of indigenous healing systems in Nsukka-Igbo, Southeast Nigeria. More studies had provided evidence on the revivifications of other cultural forms and traditions in different human groups particularly as they relate with racial culture and canoe practices (cf. Iyigun, et al. 2021; Knighton, 2017; Grossheim, & Grabowsky, 1997). Grunewald, (2002) specifically analysed the nexus between cultural revival and tourism development. Adding to this discourse, this paper discusses the influence and revival of *Omabe* masquerade on the development of tourism in Nsukka Igbo using the environment as the platform of operations.

The study drew on the ethnographic method of observation and interview to provide evidence that the increasing participation of members of the Nsukka-Igbo communities in masquerade tradition correlate with the reinvigoration of tourism and associated activities. Through a purposively sampling technique, 30 participants were selected for this study. 10 participants from each of the three quarters of Nsukka town- Nkpunano, Nru, and Ihe na owerre were selected. The participants are knowledgeable in the subject of the study. Nsukka town otherwise known as the University town, is among the towns that make up Nsukka Local Government Area (cf. Agbo, Opata & Okwueze, 2022; Madu, 2007). It is a heterogeneous and largely cosmopolitan town in Enugu state, southeastern Nigeria. The participants drawn from this community are custodians of the culture, spectators and youth. They are knowledgeable in the issues addressed in the study. We found that the increasing activities linked to tourism were influenced by the rejuvenation of *omabe* tradition. In the section that follows, we discussed the origin of *omabe* tradition.

Tradition of Origin: focus on *omabe*

Omabe is an ancient practice that has lasted for many centuries. Leaning on oral tradition, K. Ugwu (personal communication, 10 2023) argued that *omabe* masquerade is connected to ancestral spirits which are believed to be the living dead, they appear inform of maskers from the spiritual world. The indwelling of *omabe* spirit seems to be an annual event. With no documentary evidence, many narratives about *Omabe* are passed down from generation to another in an oral form. In this sense W. Ozioko (Personal communication, 12 2022) believe that the founding father of Nsukka town died and few years after his death; his spirit started to trouble and disturbs his son. When the trouble became unbearable to the son, he visited a diviner who informed him that it is the ancestral spirit of his father that was troubling him. N. Ugwoke (Personal communication, 12 2022) corroborated Ozioko's claim to maintain that the founding father requested for a solution from the diviner on what to do, the diviner told him that his father needed kola nut, animals like pigs, goat, sheep and fowl including cooked and uncooked yam, water, palm oil, palm wine, palm frond, ram, clay pot and fried ground pea. The son gathered all these as sacrificial materials and offered to him. From then, he started offering sacrifices to his ancestors. Although the aforesaid description is consistent with myth, the participants tenaciously trusted the stories. To avoid resentment from the participants the authors did not probe further on the veracity of the claim. It is interesting to note that is no scholarly substantiation of the aforementioned claims. Further narratives are also to be viewed in this light.

After the sacrifices, it is believed that the spirit of his ancestors appeared through the anthill (*mkpu ozo*) in form of *omabe*. In furtherance of this mythical narrative, it is believed that a woman popularly known as Adada Nwabueze Nwaeze Eworo encountered this esoteric happenings (E. Asadu, personal comm., January 4 2023). Afterwards the *omabe* mandated the woman to inform the community of his arrival which she obliged. She consequently informed the people and instructed them to build a house for *omabe* at the village square. As communicated by Ishiwu, (Personal communication, December, 8 2022) 'another instruction would be given to the woman to get water for the men that will take the *omabe* to its new abode. This is believed to enable the men return to their normal nature after bathing with the water. The woman would do as she was instructed after due consultation with gods. Conversely, the men would do the rituals that are believed to bring back the spirits of the dead in which the practices of *omabe* are tenaciously connected to. These narratives as earlier

indicated are consistent with myths (cf. Righter, 2024; Mills, 2020). In this sense, it is fittingly right to contend that the aforementioned narratives are linked to oral tradition in which much of the actual stories might have been lost or reframed. In the contemporary Nsukka society, even though that the stories connected to *omabe* may attract some kind of questioning in terms of the veracity and authenticity, the outward participation on the *omabe* festival for instance has been remarkable. People from different religious persuasions including Christians (Uwaegbute, 2021) are unprecedentedly participating in ways that increase tourist activities. Each year between March and April, spectators from within and outside Nsukka visit the popular Ugwunkwo and Ugwuoye masquerade arena for convivial interaction, entertainment and tourism. Much of the activities of *omabe* and the revivification of the tradition became increasingly noticeable in Nsukka at least from the last two decades to the present (cf. Uwaegbute, 2021). This pattern of reawakening had been reported in other aspects of traditional and indigenous practices among the different human groups (Agbo et al. 2022; Ugwuanyi, Ugwu & Okwueze, 2022)

The Festival

Omabe festival is an annual celebration which may fall within the first, second or third month of the Igbo traditional year (that is, February, March or April) (C. Ugwuja, Personal comm.. February 21 2023). It is one of the most recognized traditional feasts in Nsukka south eastern Nigeria. The festival starts with the public announcement made by the chief priest of *idenyi nkwo* Nsukka. After the announcement, the youth of every village is expected to participate in the preparation and planning of the festival. This includes the clearing of paths and rebuilding the masquerade house. As contended by K. Odo (Personal comm. February 21 2023) the arrival of *omabe* masquerade is welcomed by the people with great joy and expectation. People are invited from nearby communities and sometimes from outside Enugu state to witness the outing of *omabe* masquerade. Many of the spectators are usually with their families and friends. Most importantly, the arrival of *omabe* is usually in conjunction with *onunu* festival. As observed, *Onunu* festival is organized by the people to celebrate chastity. Virgins and women who had been faithful to their husbands are celebrated. It is believed that women who live with their husbands can only apply *oodo* (Yellowish substance that is believed to attract benevolent spirit) if they are faithful. Adulterers are believed to experience some sort of misfortune in an event they apply *oodo*. In this sense, women who use the *oodo* pride themselves as being role models. Few

days before its arrival, the fore runner of *omabe* popularly known as *onyekurunye* (who called me) appears every night shouting and asking questions who called me here? The masquerade normally moves around the village abusing evil doers and calling them names. This masquerade acts as agents of social control in the town. This in line with the earlier notion that *omabe* acted as police in the pre-contact Nsukka communities (K. Ugwuagbo, personal comm., November 4 2022). Its departure ushers in *omabe* masquerade festival.

On that day, those that are actively involved in the *omabe* preparations leave their house early in the morning to an isolated place outside the village to resurrect the masquerade while others find their way to the *Nkwo* square to await the arrival. At the arena, the group witnesses the procession of different villages with their own masquerade jubilating. At this juncture, every person in the arena will cheer the masquerade up as they display, dance round the arena some people with den gun and release it into the air at intervals. They run round the *Nkwo* market square in jubilation and afterwards put on the *omabe* attire. At this point, the jubilation and dancing becomes intense the people shot local guns (den guns) into the air while they watch the masquerades perform. At this point the great masquerade of the town popularly known as *echaricha ma* and *edi ogbene* appears at the *Nkwo* market square. *Echaricha* is decked with ornaments and expensive trinkets it wears brass anklets (*Izere*) that ratted musical sound as it blends with the melody of the *Igede nkwo*. It wears white woolen hand gloves and holds two edge words in one hand and *nza* in the other hand. The gun men get ready as the *echaricha* labours and swagger faster around the centre of the square and tactfully look a jump. It is the most costly among the *omabe* masquerade and elders including children revere it. It is majestic and commands an imposing presence and very elegant as a peacock.

The women and children who never wanted to lose sight of it were scattered at the arrival of *edi ogbene* properly held by two men holding it with a rope tied on its waste. It walks energetically and looks ancient on the dry *edi* skin it wears front and back and the smell could be likened to the wild animal known as *edi*. As the name suggests, it bears the name of the wild pig (*edi*) which it symbolically represents. It wills enormous strength and can flog people with two hands.

Our conversation with Ogbodo (personal comm.. January 3 2023), Ogbu (personal comm.. February 20 2023) Ezea (personal comm.. January 3 2023 etc) depicted more details of the *omabe* activities. As we learnt from the them, it is Twelve days after the arrival of *omabe*, that another festival takes place. At this point, *omabe* will go round the *orie* market

square showing off their various forms and act of dancing as well as informing people that *omabe* has arrived. Various categories/types of *omabe* appears ranging from *oriokpa*, *ishi ma*, *edi ogbene* and *ugwudele*. These *omabe* displays their act of dancing till late in the evening. After that one day, the *oriokpa* embarks on regular outings precisely every Sunday. It is worthy of note that *omabe* acts/serves the purpose of social control. It corrects societal ills and punishes offenders.

Few days before its departure to the spirit world, the *omabe* masquerades of different types converge at *ugwu oye* square for its departure festival and it must be on *orie* day. The *omabe* dances and entertain the people reminding them of its departure it marks a great feast in Nsukka as people comes from far and near to witness the festival thereby promoting tourism development on the area. Four days after that day, the *omabe* departs fully to the spirit world and some elders accompany it to a certain case at the outskirts of *Nguru* area of the town for some rituals before returning home.

Traditional Procedure involved in *Omabe* Masquerade

Omabe festival involves a chain of events that covers up to six months which includes preparation, arrival and departure.

1. ***Mgbagote omabe* (preparations):** This is the first event that marks the resurrection of *omabe*. This simply means that the masquerade is close by but yet to be seen physically. The event takes place at night when everyone had retired home after a day's work the sound of *omabe* music files the air as the music comes from the village square after three years. The music is accompanied by the voice of *omabe* masquerade as it moves from one village to another spending some time with the people. After this, a date will be fixed for the feast of its arrival.
2. ***Ulo okiti* (Rebuilding of *omabe* house):** At this point, the masquerade houses across the villages are rebuilt. The youths or every village take up the responsibility of rebuilding the *omabe* house while the women provide food the workers.
3. ***Eke-ma* (ihe eve):** This is the eve of *omabe* arrival. It is significant because that is a day set aside for eating of our traditional food known as *echicha* which is made from cocoyam. Through Nsukka town, nobody eats this traditional food until the eve of *omabe* arrival. The *echicha nwa ndima* marks the eve *ma* and the departure the forrunner of *omabe* (*onye kurunye*)
4. ***Uda-ma* (Arrival):** The festival commences around March depending on the quarter that will perform the *omabe* festival and it must be on *orie* day. The *Attama ma* (the priest of *omabe*) upon sighting the new moon

will summon the elders to brainstorm on the arrival of *omabe*.

5. **The morning of *Ahor* day (*ututu ahor*):** This is the day after the arrival of *omabe* and it is special in its own right the echoes of *omabes* music fills the air from the respective village squares. The music starts early in the morning and terminates on the evening. The day is usually a traditional public holiday and as such people do not go to work, they relax at home eating and drinking with family and friends some people use their spare time moving from village to village to witness how others are doing. In as much as it is very entertaining *omabe* masquerade does not appear that day.
6. ***Imaji onu okachi* (First market appearance) (*izu eno*):** This happens exactly six days after *omabe's* arrival (*uda ma*), the masquerade will first make its first appearance in the market (*orie* Nsukka) to register its presence before appearing regularly. This particular appearance is known as *Ashua udama* (first outing of *omabe* the market) it is also marks the second appearance of *omabe* after its arrival. It is a beautiful sight to behold since all the *omabe* masquerade from different villages makes their appearance that day and entertains the people while receiving money from the cheering public.
7. ***Ashua Ula ma* (the last market appearance):** Immediately it is time for the departure of *omabe* masquerade to the spirit world, it will make its appearance to the *orie* market square informing the people of its departure.
8. ***Ashua mgboto*:** This exercise is strictly meant for only *oriokpa* masquerade, this is the type of *omabe* masquerade that moves around with canes and acts as village police. Its appearance that day indicates the departure is close by. After four days of its appearance comes the last market appearance of the entire *omabe* masquerade
9. ***Ula ma* (the departure):** The departure of *omabe* is also celebrated widely as the arrival. The impact his highly felt within Nsukka and its environs. The elders appoint the escorts of *omabe* masquerade who are charged with the duty of escorting the masquerade which is spiritual done after some rituals to the spiritual world. Those who have questionable character do not get involved at this stage since it can lead to death of the person. It is always a serious business devoid of unrighteousness to avoid calamity. Early in the morning on a Eke day the

omabe masquerade goes round the villages with a song. Every non initiated adult stays in doors because any objection to that could lead to death. The elders of the land performs communal worship and sacrifices for the general safety of the community on that Eke day before the ancestors (*omabe*) embarks on their journey to the spirit world.

Impact on Tourism

One dominant presumption about tourism is in the ways it connects to development of communities or countries that have natural beauty and landscape (Vemekar, 2015). Other strand of argument indicates that festival's potentials lies in the fact that it drives tourism development (Richards, & Leal-Londono, 2022). Drawing inferences from the *onunu* festival among the Nsukka people, of Enugu state, Oji (2021) detailed the nexus between the aforesaid festival and tourism development. There are other festivals in Nsukka which include *iriji ohu* (new yam festival), and *onwa esa* that attract spectators from within and outside the town. Such activities connected to these festivals advance tourism in the area. I. Onah (personal comm. January 23 2023), T. Onoyima (personal comm.. January 23 2023) and N. Ogbodo (personal comm. January 2023) collaborated the presumption that links the *omabe* festival with the increase in tourism activities in Nsukka. The proposition is permissible considering the reasonable number of spectators during *omabe* festival. Specifically, *omabe* festival has been observed to attract large followers and spectators. The view of the aforementioned participants is in line with this latter observation. There are numerous benefits associated with the festival which include the followings;

Economic Benefit

Tourism is a human activity which arises from the economic circumstances and preference of the consumer (Holloway 1989). No doubt tourism has an economic impact on the host community because it provides the driven force for tourism development. The main reason for the inclusion of tourism as part of development strategy is its contributions to foreign exchange earnings, income generation and employment opportunities (Cooper 2005). Inferentially, it is reasonable to conclude that sustainable tourism is achieved when it is economically beneficial to the present and future stakeholders. *Omabe* cultural festival in Nsukka area contributes greatly to the revenue generation in the area and the proceeds from the revenue gotten from tourist stimulates the overall development of the host community. K. Ngwoke (personal communication, December 10 2023) talked about the unprecedented gain he made during the *omabe* festival in Nsukka. He maintained that

he had been in business of selling palmwine and other types of alcoholic drinks in a nearby street of Ugwunkwo for over four years. Within this period, he barely make profit of about five to ten thousand naira daily. However, as Ngwoke temporarily relocated his business near *Nkwo* arena during the *uda maa* he made profit of about one fifty thousand naira. Similar stories of business profits during *omabe* festivals were corroborated by J. Ugwu (personal communication, December 10 2023), K. Nnadi (personal communication, December 10 2023) and W. Ozioko, (personal communication, December 10 2023). From the views of the participants of this study, and considering the large number of spectators during the festival, it is reasonable to agree on the business gain construct.

Cultural Benefits

Tourism encourages and promotes the cultural heritage of the host community (Okpoko 2002). Among the different communities in Nsukka for instance, there is a growing consciousness as the people are dedicated to the task of putting their masquerade cult and houses in place organizing the festival and taking proper care of the costumes and musical instruments notwithstanding the hegemonic influences of Westernization and Eurocentricism. N. Nnadi (personal communication, January 11 2023) described how he funded the renovation of the house of *omabe* in his village. He said, ‘although I live in Lagos, I was concerned about the

Dilapidations in the ancient house of *omabe* in my village . I raised the money for the renovations. I am happy that numerous other people volunteered to fix the house. I paid for the procurement of other paraphernalia that would be useful during the *udamma* and *ulamama*

Culturally, the *omabe* festival and the associated masquerade performances act as agents of social control and as an imaginary social classroom for teaching the young generation the acceptable norms, values, folkways of the society. M. Odo (personal communication February, 2 2024) narrated his experience on how he learnt the art of *omabe* performances. He maintained;

‘ although the core issue surrounding *omabe* is consistent with secrecy, I will only say that what I learnt from my father had been vital in shaping my performance. I would follow my father to *Udamama* and *Ulamama* in ways that I learnt the *omabe* tradition. Among my siblings, I have performed credibly well. This is because of my close relationship with my father. I think, I am grateful for this exposure from my father.

It is clear that cultural behaviour is socially transmitted (cf. Norenzayan, 2006). Therefore, the presumption that Odo

learnt the *omabe* tradition through his father by socially associating with him could be permissible. Other participants that agree on the social transmission of the practices of *Omabe* include N. Onah (Personal communication November, 3 2022) and P. Ogbu (personal communication, November, 3 2022). Really, the norms, values, folkways etc of any human group are sustained through oral traditions, and written documents.

Environmental Benefit

Among the interesting peculiarities of environment as regards its place in tourism is its association with the ways certain beliefs and practices shape the protection of the environment . Bearing this in mind, it is important to maintain and protect the environment for present and future generation (Nwafor 2006). As observed, the people are very much aware of the importance of protecting the environment around them. Certain *omabe* grooves, and shrines are protected in ways that it is forbidden to cut down trees in the area. Such beliefs have helped in the preservation of some forests and bushes around *Onu idenyi nkwo* in Nsukka Nsukka and *Ohe Nsukka* near Odo, Nsukka. These locations in recent times especially *onu idenyi* have attracted tourists from different people including researchers from the University of Nigeria Nsukka. According to V. Eze (personal communication, January 10 2023), ‘I was surprised to meet so many young men and women at *onu idenyi* during our field trip to the area.’

Moreso, during the *udamma* or *ulamama*, some volunteers take up the responsibilities of clearing the bush paths and maintaining the sacred groves, *nkwo* and *orie* market square for the arrival and departure of *omabe* masquerade. The environment contribute immensely in tourist flow in the area, the availabilities of sacred groves, caves and shrines associated with *omabe* festival attract people from far and near and this has led to the development of tourism in the area. I. Okoro (personal communication, February 12 2023) maintained that he appreciates the natural environment. In his words; ‘ when I visited *ohe* and *onu idenyi* I was so happy that these areas still stand out despite the increasing deforestation and urbanization going on in Nsukka. I wish that the people sustain this by protecting the natural environment’.

Conclusion

Omabe Nsukka cultural festival contributes greatly in projecting the image of the people and boosting their local economy. It serves as source of national reputation. The festival influences the mind and being of the people to appreciable extent as a vital aspect of their culture. The festival have been known to unleash such potent forces that can produce tangible effects. To this end enlightenment campaign, public lectures and other means should be employed in

educating the people on the importance preserving this festival for posterity sake.

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