

IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON AGRICULTURAL FESTIVALS IN IGBOLAND: THE CASE OF *IWA JI*

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Abstract

In traditional Igbo society, a bountiful harvest begets an exciting festival which is used to celebrate nature's benevolence on the people and the appeasement of the respective gods and goddesses perceived to have aided the fruitfulness of the crops. Hence, agricultural festivals are determined and celebrated based mostly on that season or time of the year when the weather is most clement and the farmers are at rest in preparation for the next planting season. This study uses historical-analytic and direct observation methods to interrogate how climate and weather conditions affect agricultural festivals. It further seeks to understand the reasons why particular festivals are celebrated at specific periods of the year using the *Iwa Ji* festival of the Umudioka people as a paradigm. It finds that agricultural festivals are set and celebrated at seasons when the weather is most accommodating and perhaps productive. It further observes that climatic and weather conditions influence communal wellbeing and that the effect of a clement or adverse weather condition impacts heavily on the verve, and otherwise, of the community. This in turn, affects the nature of the festival and its attendant performances.

Keywords: Climate change, Agricultural festival, *Iwa Ji*, Traditional Igbo society, Harvest.

Introduction

The Igboland was predominantly an agrarian community before the advent of the Europeans and the subsequent western civilization that came with colonization. In spite of the attendant alteration occasioned by western education and Christianity as well as industrialization; the Igbo still subsisted through agriculture. This is evidenced in the numerous festivals that are celebrated in honour of nature deities and seasons as propitiation for the sustainability of the land through bounteous harvest and abundant crop yields. Consequently, the Igbo have various festivals that take place at different seasons and periods. Most of these festivals are annual celebrations while some are occasioned by times and seasons as well as happenings within respective communities; such could be bi-annual. Hence, there are festivals like *Elim ede*, *Ilọ Mmuọ*, *Iwa Ji*, *Ufe Ji Oku*, *Uzọ Iyi*, *Mkpukpa*; *Nwafọ*, *Ito Ogbọ*, *Iru Mgbede* and so on. It is worthy of mention here that although some of these festivals are celebrated among every Igbo community, like the *Iwa Ji*, others like *Uzọ Iyi*, *Mkpukpa*, *Nwafọ*, *Iru Mgbede* and the

likes, are peculiar to specific communities where they obtain because of their distinctiveness and associations with some indigenous deities/gods.

The *I wa Ji* and such connatural festivals that are dependent on earth's yield and are determined by the nature of the harvest as well as the time and season of the year; are directly or indirectly affected by weather and or climatic conditions. According to Audu, Audu, Binbol and Gana, "planting is usually delayed when there is late onset of rains, while the early cessation destroys the late crops thereby causing poor yields, poor quality crops..." (5). This presupposes that a bountiful harvest, as a consequence of good climate, begets a robust festival and on the other hand, poor crop yields, occasioned by bad climate, will adversely affect the glamour of the festival. These changes in weather conditions which impact either positively or negatively on the harvest are what is generally referred to as climate change. Climate, according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

Is the condition of the atmosphere at a particular location over a long period of time; it is the long-term summation of the atmospheric elements (and their variations) that, over short time periods, constitute weather. These elements are solar radiation, temperature, humidity, precipitation (type, frequency and amount), atmospheric pressure and wind (speed and direction). (1)

In other words, climate is the nature of the weather of a particular area or location within a specific period and this state of the weather is variable as it could be affected by natural forces such as temperature and humidity of the atmosphere and these reactions on the weather or climatic conditions ultimately result in climate change. Some human activities like bush burning and excavations equally contribute to climate change as the end results of such activities are changes in the natural environment. Climatic changes, most times, are seen to have occurred when there are longer periods of rainfall, as against what is usually obtainable. Equally, when there is a more prolonged season of drought, or when there happens to be a combination of both which in the long run could impact adversely on the weather and consequently affect crop yields.

Climate change, itself, is "the significant increase in the earth's temperature over a long period of time" (Nche 1). It could be taken to mean "a phenomenon whereby solar radiation that has reflected back off the surface of the earth remains trapped at atmospheric levels due to buildup of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases rather than being emitted back into space" (McLean and McMillan 29). Nche further explains that climate change is "a long-standing phenomenon as the mix-up of various gases that make up the earth's atmosphere has changed over long periods of time so, average global temperature has fluctuated" (1). It follows, therefore, that the climate changes as a result of variations in the earth's natural state whose agents are principally natural but could be man-made. Hence, "climate change can be due to natural external forcings (changes in solar emissions or changes in the earth's orbit, natural internal processes of the climate system) or it can be human induced" (Smith, Krishnamurti and Arnfield par. 3). Thus, as nature objects like crops and trees and other flora and fauna are sustained by the earth's yields, climatic changes directly or indirectly affect their productivity. This discourse focuses on *I wa Ji*, a festival

commemorating a successful planting season and a bounteous harvest and how climate change has affected the nature of the ceremony in recent times.

The *I wa Ji* festival is renowned throughout Igboland but emphasis here will be on its celebration among the Umudioka people of Dunukofia clan in the Central Senatorial District of Anambra State, Nigeria. Umudioka town is known for the art of *Igbu Ichi* (facial scarification). The community is principally agrarian and a good number of the male folks are traditional artists and medicine men who specialize in the art of *Igbu Ichi*, *Iwa Akpu*, *Nkasi Anị* and other forms of facial and bodily tattoos. The town is located along the old Onitsha-Enugu Road about fifteen kilometres from Onitsha. It is bordered on the east by Ogbunike and Oze towns, on the north by Umunya, on the west by Ifite Dunu and Umunnachi communities, and on the south by Ogidi and some parts of Umunnachi towns, respectively. The major traditional festival of the people is the *Mkpukpa* festival - an event that celebrates the goddess of the town which takes place in the month of July before the *I wa Ji*. Umudioka is administered centrally by an *Igwe* (traditional ruler) with the traditional prime minister, *Onowu*, the *Igwe-in-Council*, *Nze Oba Ojiani* and the Umudioka Improvement Union. The town is made up of ten (10) villages. The study used historical-analytic and direct observation methods to examine the object of its interest.

The *I wa Ji*

I wa Ji or *A wa m Ji*, as the name implies, simply means 'to cut the yam'. It is a simple way of saying that the yam is ready to be eaten after harvest. The *I wa Ji* ceremony is one of the highest traditional festivals of the Igbo. It usually takes place between the months of July and September depending on the season and the nature of the year's yield. On the average, the planting season, especially for yam, begins with the first rain of the year which usually occurs at mid-February. Subsequently, harvesting time begins in July. Traditionally, every town in Igboland has a priest who confers and consults with the town's deities in charge of crops. It is this priest who announces the date for the *I wa Ji* festival. It is expected that as at the time of announcing the date for the *I wa Ji* that all the yams of the preceding year would have been eaten save for the seedlings which are preserved for the next planting season. The Umudioka people celebrate the new yam festival, *I wa Ji*, in the month of September. The town celebrates it with other towns that make up Dunukofia clan: Ukpo, Ifitedunu, Umunnachi, Umudioka, Ukwulu and Nawgu. This is because the towns of Dunukofia are said to be the children of one man, *Okofia*. So, most traditional festivals like the *I wa Ji* are commenced centrally at Ukpo by the clan head who is the *Eze Ukpo* after which each town's *Igwe* will celebrate the festival in his home/town.

It is taken that the *I wa Ji* ceremony is the formal declaration that the new yam should be eaten. In other words, it signifies that the people are free to eat the new yam. No titled man in any Igbo community is expected to eat the new yam until the *I wa Ji* ceremony has been performed. *Ji* (yam), among the Igbo is taken to be the 'king of crops' and it is believed that it is the sole prerogative of the men to plant yam such that a man who has a big barn filled with yam is regarded as a very rich man. Such a man is popularly called *Di Ji*. In traditional Igbo society, a man is valued by the size of his

yam barn (*Oba Ji*). Even in recent times, the quantity of yam at a traditional marriage ceremony (*Igba Nkwu*) determines or is taken as a measure of the groom's social status. This further authenticates the claim that yam (*Ji*) is the king of crops. Hence, the special privilege accorded it through the celebration of the *I wa Ji*. It is usually celebrated with pomp and pageantry. In Umudiọka, for example, the *I wa Ji* is usually celebrated on an *Afọ* market day. Coincidentally, the *Afọ* market is the town's major market day. The popular *Afọigwe* market is owned by the Umudiọka people. Ordinarily, no occasion is scheduled to take place on a *Afọ* market day in the town but some highly revered ceremonies like the *Mkpukpa* and *I wa Ji* are done on an *Afọ* day to emphasize their importance to the people.

On the day of the *I wa Ji* festival, the people of the town will converge on the Igwe's palace to witness the first breaking/cutting of the yam by the traditional ruler. Umudiọka is a town that has had people who have settled in other towns and climes as villages but they still bear the name Umudiọka. For instance, there are Umudiọka communities in Awka (Umudiọka Awka), Awkuzu (Umudiọka Awkuzu), Neni (Umudiọka Neni), all in Anambra State, Orlu (Umudiọka Orlu) in Imo State, among others. Tradition has it that these communities were begot by Umudiọka men who had travelled to those places as traditional medicine men with their art and local science and were offered land by the communities they visited because of their good work and they eventually settled there. These communities usually come to the palace of *Eze Diọka* to pay homage as their traditional homeland during the *I wa Ji* of the Umudiọka people. Traditionally, these communities are not expected to eat the new yam until the *I wa Ji* ceremony has been performed by *Eze Diọka*. Similarly, the ten villages that make up Umudiọka will pay homage to *Eze Diọka* at the ceremony.

At the *I wa Ji*, the *Eze Diọka* prays for longevity and give thanks to the Almighty God (*Chukwu Okike*) and the gods of the land for the year's harvest. He prays for guidance and protection and for a more bountiful harvest in the coming season. The new yam is roasted and eaten with palm oil and some local delicacies like *Ukpaka* (oil bean) and *Utazi* (*gangronema latifolium*) vegetable. Prior to the ceremony at the Igwe's palace, the chief priest (*Eze Mmuọ*) of the town would have performed some traditional rituals at the shrine as propitiation to the gods for a bountiful harvest. This is because the *I wa Ji* is a communion between the gods and the people, hence, it is celebrated before the eating of the new yam. It is believed by the people that after consultations with the gods by the *Eze Mmuọ* and no positive response is got from the gods, that the date of the *I wa Ji* would be adjusted to such a time when the gods are favourably disposed to the eating of the new yam. During the festival, there are different dance displays by various groups ranging from age grades, villages and the visiting communities, women groups. Some children and teenage groups also present their own dances. The ceremony is usually marked by fanfare. It is a form of carnival because the people appear in their best attires; entertaining masquerades and dancers line the streets of the town and social visits are exchanged between in-laws and among friends and relatives.

The Impact of Climate Change on *I wa Ji*

The *I wa Ji* (new yam) festival, as already stated, is performed as thanksgiving and gratitude to the earth goddess in appreciation for a good harvest while praying for a better and more fruitful harvest in the coming season. The event usually marks the beginning of the eating of the new yam and by implication the commencement of a new season. Some communities like Enugwu-Ukwu in Njikoka Local Government Area of Anambra State begin the *I wa Ji* with the *I gy Aro* ceremony which literally means the beginning of a new year in the Igbo traditional calendar. However, this prestigious festival has been affected by climatic changes in recent times as is evident in the dwindling rate of the glitz and glamour that go with it. Climate change, in this context, means those significant changes in the weather conditions before, during and after the planting season which ultimately affect crop yields either positively or negatively. The changes being referred to here are not the periodic changes in the volume of rainfall or duration of harmattan or dry season. Rather they include those changes that happen and endure over a long period of time such that marked significant changes are noticeable in weather conditions. According to a United Nations report on climate change, *What is Climate Change?*

Climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns. Such shifts can be natural, due to changes in the sun's activity or large volcanic eruptions. But since the 1800s, human activities have been the main driver of climate change, primarily due to the burning of fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas... The main greenhouse gases that are causing climate change include carbon dioxide and methane. These come from using gasoline for driving a car or coal for heating a building, for example. Clearing land and cutting down forests can also release carbon dioxide...

(1)

Omoera and Guanah further note that climate change refers to the process of greenhouse gases being released into the atmosphere as a result of industrialisation (54). Similarly, Audu, Audu, Binbol and Gana state that climate change: is a single problem which has given birth to numerous known issues such as sea level rise, ocean warming, increasing temperature, rainfall variability, increasing evaporation and increasing tropical storms among others. These effects have also metamorphosed into some impacts such as the decline in agricultural activities, drought, migration, health problems, crises among farmers and herds - men, flooding, erosion, hunger and poverty among others and other numerous problems yet to manifest (2). Thus, as climate changes, weather conditions are affected and consequently, everything that is dependent on weather conditions for its existence is affected. It is not surprising, therefore, that an agricultural produce like yam is affected by climate change. The Umudioka, the community under study, is a relatively small town.

Findings reveal that the 2022's farming season did not commence on time as the rains did not come early as expected. Chikezie, Ibekwe, Ohajianya, Orebiyi, and Ibeagwa have earlier noted that "climate change leads to a distortion of seasonal patterns and consequently, changes in the pattern of rainfall and temperature" (4). The early rains that usually signal the beginning of the rainy season came and ceased almost immediately. This affected the yam seedlings that were planted at that initial stage

because with the abrupt stop of the rains, the soil dried up and scotched the planted seedlings thereby making some of the farmers who planted early to have some loses. Previous studies on the impact of climate change on agricultural products give credence to the claim as reported by Petra Döll thus, “farmers in Nigeria have reported that climate change is causing uncertainty in the length and onset of the farming season, longer and shorter periods of rainfall, and reduced harmattan (a dust-laden wind with very little humidity on the Atlantic coast of Africa)” (270). This, ultimately affected the harvest because the yams that were planted in the later months when the rains became consistent did not give as much yield as the farmers had expected.

Secondly, it was observed that due to consistent cutting down of trees as a result of urbanization and development occasioned by the fact that a majority of the youths of the town have acquired wealth and are desirous of moving into their personal houses (leaving their family compounds). Consequently, those traditional farmlands have been transformed into estates where homes are built at the expense of the farms. With the loss of the trees and natural vegetation induced by bush burning and the construction of houses, sinking of boreholes and other attendant developmental features, Umudioka town is fast losing its traditional ambience. It is yielding more towards modernity which in actual fact has drastically reduced the size of available farmlands and has adversely affected the farmers and their farming activities. Citing Ehrlich and Erlich in “How the Rich Can Save the Poor and Themselves: Lessons from Global Warming” and Adams, Brian, Stephanie and Leary in “Effects of Global Climate Change on Agriculture: An Interpretative Review, Apata argues that “humanity is now rapidly depleting fertile soil, fossil groundwater, biodiversity and numerous other resources to support the growing population” (33). This has invariably led to reduced portions of farmland and has culminated in very low crop yields not only in quality but in quantity.

Beyond the building of new houses in locations that were hitherto farmlands, there is the issue of erosion and flooding. As new houses spring up with fences and sundry developmental features like roads (which are not often well constructed), traditional water channels are blocked and runoff water from people’s homes usually flood the remaining expanse of farmlands which are not yet developed into residential areas. Even in the few places where there are tarred roads, the associated drainage is channelled into farmlands. This is a very major source of flood and erosion because the farmlands where the flood water is channelled into have become wastelands as normal farming activities could no longer be carried out there due to erosion that has occurred there. Audu, Audu, Binbol and Gana claim that “in most farmlands, rill, splash and gully erosion have devastated the lands as well as crops. Most farmlands have been turned into “badlands.” Sheet erosion in particular washes the top soil and nutrients thereby exposing the sub soil which is very poor in nutrients hence leading to drastic reduction in crop yield” (7).

Again, as the farmlands began to dwindle in size, there has begun an increase in urban migration. The youths of Umudioka have acquired western education and are more engaged in more modern jobs, businesses and vocations to the detriment of subsistence farming. This in itself has adversely affected farming activities in the town

because the few areas that are left for agricultural purposes are now being used as sites for factories and cottage industries. Thus, there is an increased pressure on the soil to produce more food with very little resources as the emergent industrialization coupled with increased population and urbanization with the consequent pollution emanating from industrial waste, emission of chemicals and bush burning have contributed to climate change. The effect of climate change on agricultural products and particularly on yam has impacted negatively on the *I wa Ji* festival within the time frame of this study. This is because the “increase in regional temperatures as a result of climate change, particularly in the tropics can lead to heat stress for all types of crops” (Gray 43), the consequence of which is very low crop yields because the “heat stress” does mitigate against proper development of seedlings in the soil. Thus, a poor harvest does not give the farmer and by extension the people enough reason to celebrate the *I wa Ji* with pomp and ceremony.

It was equally observed that a good number of farmers have lost their farmlands due to increased urbanization, flooding and erosion making the elderly and the titled men to rely on yam grown in other climes for the celebration of the *I wa Ji*. This singular fact has taken away a lot of verve from the festival because most men are now being neglected because they could neither cultivate yam nor own a yam barn. It is common knowledge that only a few farmers are operating in the town. Even the few that are left could barely grow enough yams for sustenance. So, there is little joy in inviting friends to one’s ceremony of *I wa Ji* when the yam to be celebrated was not got from one’s farm as used to be the traditional practice. Hence, the usual festivities are no longer what they used to be. The resultant effect is that the *I wa Ji* festival in Umudioka has become more of a private affair than a communal one as everyone can easily buy some tubers of yam at the *Afo Igwe* market and celebrate the festival with their nuclear family. Most men prefer to observe the *I wa Ji* in their residences rather than risking the long travels back home to Umudioka since the yam to be used is not harvested from Umudioka soil.

Conclusion

The study has shown that climate change is not clement to farmers and that this has impacted negatively on the *I wa Ji* festival in Umudioka. However, as the people are still desirous of keeping and maintaining the agricultural festival for posterity, it is advisable that the situation could be improved if and when certain measures are put in place to checkmate the adverse effect of the climate change. It is therefore, recommended that: principally, as the town is experiencing an increased population due to its proximity to some urban areas like Nkpor, Ogidi and Onitsha which has necessitated an increase in the construction of commercial houses in the community resulting in the depletion of farmlands, the community leaders could map out certain areas as farm settlements as a way of encouraging those who are still interested in farming. Equally, to checkmate flooding and erosion, the people could experiment with the erection of wind breakers and shading to forestall the devastating effects of flooding and heat waves, respectively. It is believed that when positive measures are taken to mitigate the effects of climate change that there will be renewed interest in agricultural

activities, particularly in farming and this would result in increased farm yield and in turn a revival of the vibrant and carnivalesque celebrations of the *I wa Ji* in Umudioka.

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