

The Annual Mbaise New Yam Festival: Influence of the Catholic Church (1885-2020)

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Abstract

This paper presents a discussion on the Annual Mbaise New Yam Festival (NYF), a major cultural celebration celebrated annually all over the land of Mbaise of Imo State, Nigeria. This culture-rich festival celebrated by all Mbaise is held in thanks-giving to God and the ancestors of the land in appreciation of their protection, and benevolence all through the farming season. In the traditional milieus of the people, the annual NYF marks the end of the year's planting season, which effectively ushers in the beginning of the new planting season. It is held by Mbaise communities at home, and even those in the diaspora. At home, the festival holds on the 15th of August yearly, which in the Catholic liturgical calendar is the feast day for the celebration of the feast of Assumption. The hosting of this annual festival is marked with elaborate feasting and entertainment of friends, in-laws, and relations from far and wide. It is an event which builds a strong bond of unity, brotherhood, and togetherness among the Mbaise wherever they find themselves all over the globe. Among the people, it stands out as one festival which literally concretizes the cultural cement that holds the Mbaise together, as well as defines those age-old traditional values which, in the words of authors, identify the Mbaiseness of the Mbaise in the midst of the numerous cultural communities embedded within the umbrella of the Igbo nation.

Keywords: Annual, Catholic, Church, Festival, Influence, Mbaise, New, Yam

Introduction

The New Yam Festival (NYF) is one unique cultural festival which is celebrated annually all over Mbaise land. It is a festival held in great commemoration of the official end of the farming year and marks the beginning of a new planting season all over the land. Known among the people, as *Emume Iri Ji Ohuru*, the NYF is one significant traditional festival which every Mbaise man is duty-bound to observe on the approved day. Among the people, this annual festival is usually held with great festivities; elaborate hosting of friends and relations to varieties of cooked and roasted yam meals, display of traditional musical entertainments, and a number of inter-village wrestling competitions. In the words of Achebe (1958), huge mountains of pounded yam meals, known among the people as *utara ji* are prepared and served with delicious vegetable soup, known in Mbaise as *Ugumanu*. Some families also serve their guests with okro cooked with fermented and sliced oil bean seeds, known in the local parlance as *Aragha* soup.

As an annual event, it holds on every 15th day of August, which is the Catholic Church's feast day in commemoration of the Feast of Assumption. In the Church's calendar, that is the day when the faithful celebrate the assumption of the body and soul of the Blessed Virgin Mary into

heaven. The choice of this historic date as the day for the celebration of this great and most important cultural festival in Mbaise marks the beginning of Christianization of this ancient tradition, which used to be celebrated with elaborate fetish practices by our unbaptized and non-Christian ancestors. Celebrating this festival on the Catholic Church's day of the Feast of Assumption separates every hands of fetishism and attitudes of idolatry from this great festival which places the Mbaise nation on the global calendar, which is significant for drawing all sons and daughters residing in different parts of the world back home to celebrate with their own kinsmen and women (Ogbalu, 1974; Ahamba, 1978; Agulanna, 2008).

Borrowing the words of the Ikemba Nnewi, Eze Odumegwu Ojukwu, in his speech at an Igbo new yam festival hosted by the Igbo in Lagos in 1997, he attested in categorical terms that the New Yam Festival is unshakably "the most Igbo of Igbo events" celebrated by the Igbo. In a similar vein therefore, it is without doubt that the Mbaise new Yam Festival is 'the most Mbaise of all other cultural festivals' hosted by the Mbaise people. In the traditional milieus of the people, families, communities, towns, and villages host this cultural event with elaborate pomp and pageantry in their various homes, and market squares where masquerade dances, cultural displays by men and women, traditional wrestling competitions, assorted fashion parades, as well as eating competition are showcased. Thus, among the traditional dance troupes that featured prominently on the *Iri ji* annual festival was the popular melodious Abiigbo traditional dance, and the hilarious Ekpe traditional dance, for which Mbaise is known all over Igbo land (Ahamba, 1978; Agulanna, 2008).

During the pre-Christian missionary era, the festival officially commences with the display and deposition of newly harvested yam tubers at the shrine of the different deities owned by specific communities. With yam tubers displayed by their owner-families at the vicinity of the local deities, it then became the responsibilities of the traditional chief priest to conduct the traditional prayers and incantations over the harvested yams. After praying over the yams and declaring them safe for consumption, all Mbaise families were then invited to prepare the yams and serve them to invited friends and relations who have travelled from far and wide to grace the '*emume iri ji ohuru* festival.' In some cases too, the responsibility of blessing the new yams were also performed by the eldest man in the family or local community. But in these days when Christianity has enveloped the land however, traditional rulers of different communities perform the rites of blessing the new yams, and then, enjoy the privilege of taking the first piece of yam (cooked or roasted) from the mountain of yam foods set at the village square, before others are allowed to do same. As it was then, the event is usually marked with lavish feasts of assorted dishes of yam-foods and accompanying drinks.

Among the Mbaise people, the NYF is significant for a good number of reasons. The occasion of the festival presents a beautiful opportunity for different Mbaise towns and villages to take stock of their own illustrious sons who have contributed immensely to community development, honour their worthy and able achievers, who have made indelible infrastructural legacies that have positively impacted community development, as well as bestow traditional titles such as *Nze*, *Okenze*, Chief, High Chief, *Ezeji*, and *Ozo* on worthy community members who have written their names on the sands of time and endorsed their signatures on the letters of gold on matters of improving the infrastructural and human capacity development levels of their kits and kin.

For communities therefore, the celebration of the '*iri ji ohuru*' festival presents a great opportunity to appreciate the contributions of sons and daughters who have literally elevated the developmental strata of their different communities through the generous donation of completed road projects, installation of pipe-borne water networks, execution of rural electrification projects, empowerment of the youth, widows, and unemployed community members, as well as the award

of scholarships to intelligent indigent children. These are some of the rare achievements which Mbaise communities sincerely need to 'grow up.' It is at the occasion of this festival then that different communities appreciate the contributions of their own sons and daughters who have genuinely impacted development through the award of traditional titles of recognition (Uchendu, 1965; Ekechi, 1971; Njoku, 1980).

Most importantly, the celebration of the NYF in Mbaise land presents the desired platform for the people to identify with tradition, celebrate culture, and answer his name worthily in the midst of invited friends and kinsmen. As peace loving people, a people who literally love oneness, endure unity and togetherness, as well as extend warm hands of fellowship to other persons within and outside the land, the festival presents a wonderful opportunity to celebrate together and fellowship over pots of assorted yam foods. Meanwhile, the place of kola nuts (Oji Igbo) as the number one item among the list of entertainment materials presented to guests on this occasion needs not be overemphasized, most especially as the culture of "kola nutting" among the Igbo still stands out as one fundamental traditional value of the people which Christianity and Western influence could not expunge from the indigenous milieu of the Igbo nation (Uchendu, 1965; Nwadike, 2007; Dioka, & Iwunna, 2021).

Thus, legend confirms that the ancestors of Mbaise who kick-started and for whom the culture of celebrating the NYF are made, were never Christians. They were of African Traditional Religion. Based on that, the festival was then held in the way of African traditional religion, which involved a number of traditional rituals by the eldest son of the family, kinsmen, village and or town at their ancestral hut. Among these were the sacrificing and slaughtering of goats and chickens for the ancestors via the ancestral cult symbols (okpeosi) by the eldest son, followed by series of incantations, prayers, and supplications to the ancestors of the land. It was at the completion of the necessary rites and rituals that the floors were declared open for the celebration of the festival by families and friends of Mbaise. At that, there were no churching activities involved; neither were there any celebration of church services in parishes and other Christian missionary outposts.

As the name indicates, Mbaise is conglomeration of five town-groups, otherwise known as clans, which include Agbaja (Enyiogugu, Nguru, and Okwuato), Ahiara, Ekwerazu, Ezinihitte, and Okeovoro. It was a homogenous political administrative entity created by the British imperial regime, with its headquarters at Aboh. As a matter of fact, it was the amalgamation of these five clans into a single political and administrative unit known as Mbaise by the British colonial regime in 1941 that gave birth to the present Mbaise as we have it today. The town occupies a geographical area of 185 square miles, and has an estimated population of more than one million people. Mbaise people are mainly Christians, majority of who are Catholics. The area is blessed with huge human resources, while education still remains the major developmental weapon prided by every single household, a development which has impacted the abundance of persons of all professional callings among the populations (Njoku, 1978; Nwala, 1978; Wikipedia, 2021).

Meanwhile, the geographical entity known as Nigeria was officially allocated to the British government as her overseas colonial territory at the end of the Berlin Conference attended by the United States of America, Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, and other European nations who had vested interests in acquiring colonial territories in Africa. Held in 1884/1885, the conclusion of the historic conference officially granted the mandates of managing the massive territorial estate, later named as Nigeria in 1914 by Lord Fredrick Lugard, as the responsibility of the British government. Prior to this development, Britain had in 1861 arrogated to herself total ownership of the territory of Nigeria, on the basis of which she positioned herself as the only authentic European nation with the legitimate rights to exploit the huge natural and human resources of the massive imperial estate, located in West Africa (Calvocoressi, 1987; Nkokelonye,

2005).

As the colonial territory of Britain therefore, the British government enjoyed the benefits of trade, exploitation and exportation of agricultural produce into European factories, imposition of imperial rule on the peoples of the territory, introduction of western cultures and values, which included education, Christian religion, and cultural transformation of the peoples that were placed under strict imperial governance. Among others, the introduction of Western education and the literacy skills they offered literally opened the eyes of the Igbo to a bigger and better world laced with abundant professional skills. As well, the introduction of Christianity exposed the populations to the greater awareness that some aspects of indigenous cultures were inhuman, fetish, contrary to the will of God, and tantamount to idol worship, and consequently called for positive transformation, and complete abrogation in some typical cases (Lugard, 1922; Calvocoressi, 1987; Iwunna, 2011)

Christianity entered Mbaise in the historic year of 1911 following the arrival of the CMS mission in Ife and Ubonukam in Onicha Ezinihitte Mbaise. The arrival of this mission was followed by the entry of the Catholic Mission in 1913, following the request to Rev. Fr. Walsh who was the resident priest at Emekuku, by one Njoku Akpaka of Umuopara Nguru, asking for a teacher/catechist to be posted to his village. His request was granted, and one Mr John Asuka was posted to Umuopara village, and he lived in the house of Njoku Akpaka. In 1914, Fr. Walsh visited Umuopara Nguru on a pastoral mission, and this prompted Warrant Chief Anyamele of Ogbor Nguru, an influential and powerful chief, to go personally to request for the Catholic Church's presence in his community on the promise that he would offer him and the teachers who would come with him protection. This request was granted, and the first Catholic Mass ever to hold in Nguru Mbaise area held at the Chief's compound. From there then, a piece of land was secured for the erection of a church at the present site of Regina Caeli Women Training Centre, Ogbor Nguru. The result of this foremost contact was that the Catholic Church continued to spread to several other Mbaise communities where schools and churches, manned by teachers and catechists were erected (Ekechi, 1971; Njoku, 1980; Omenka, 1989).

Having successfully entered Mbaise land therefore, the Catholic Church found itself as a key player in the overall development of the area. The church began early enough to engage in community development projects, which included the establishment of schools, as well as the erection of missionary outposts. These were replicated in the aggressive evangelizational strategies that were initiated and embarked upon, with the effect that greater populations of the people accepted the Catholic faith and consequently became members. The effect of this historic development was that the church largely impacted the religious, educational, infrastructural, human capacity development, and cultural emancipation of Mbaise within the 20th century and beyond. Today, Mbaise stands tall among Igbo communities who pride the lowest illiteracy ratios in Nigeria, and remains one major part of the country where Christianity has taken the deepest roots. The town also stands out distinction among those Igbo communities concede matters of community development as a personal thing, instead of waiting endlessly on the government. Thus, it is without doubt that greater majority of the infrastructural developments witnessed in Mbaise today were funded by local communities through levies and community-generated funds, as well as donations from wealthy sons and daughters (Nwala, 1978; Njoku, 1980; Iwunna, 2011).

Igbo Traditional Mythology of the Yam

Etymologically, mythology is a derivative of the word – “mythos”, which is a Greek word for fable, legend, or folklore. For the purposes of this discussion, this term simply refers to those folklores or stories which our parents and elders hand over to us, as their explanations of our world, the values we share, as well as the cultures and traditions we revere and celebrate.

Coming from this background then, authors come to the conviction that once upon a time, there was a severe famine in Igbo land. Hunger and lack of food were hitting hard on the populations. The situation continued to grow worse by every passing day. EzeNri (King of Nri) felt that something needed to be done urgently before his people were wiped away by hunger and starvation. Out of desperation, and in an attempt to appease the gods of the land, EzeNri took hold of his first son, killed him, cut his body into pieces, and buried them at a spot near his house. As the days went by, the hunger and food scarcity situation of the Nri people could not improve. In a further state of desperation, he got hold of his first daughter, and put her to the same brutal fate earlier meted out to his son, and buried her body at another distinct spot.

Sad as it was, five months after the brutal deaths of both siblings, yam tendrils began to appear at the spot where the king buried the body of his first son, while “Ede” – coco- yam, appeared on the spot where he buried the body of his dear daughter. After six months, Eze Nri began to dig up large sized tubers of yams from his son’s grave site, as well as coco yam from the grave of his daughter. He harvested both, cooked them and found them sweet and pleasant to eat.

Encouraged by this result, the king began to work day and night planting both crops. One day, one of the children of the village came to the king’s house in search of fire. Seeing that the child was terribly hungry and in dire need of food, EzeNri offered the child a piece of cooked yam, which he ate immediately, and hurried back home to his parents’ home. Arriving home, the child fell into a deep sleep, and the entire family was surprised. When he woke up, the family became so curious, and wanted to know what happened to him. It was then he narrated to them that the EzeNri gave him some strange pieces of food which he ate at his home. Driven by this level of curiosity, the family made the child repeats his visit to the king’s house a few more times, and pieces of yam food were given to him.

The people of Nri then converged at the king’s palace, and begged him to give them some yam and coco yam. As it were, the king demanded a huge price from the people, after which he handed out tubers of both crops to them, and instructed them on how to plant and care for them. From that moment till this day, yams and their sibling – coco yam, began to be planted, harvested, eaten, and celebrated as a God-given nutritional food in all parts of Igbo land and beyond. Over the years then, yam became the Igbo man’s king of crops and immediate panacea to hunger and malnutrition (Ikejiani; 2010; Iroegbu, 2010; Ihejirika, 2011).

History informs us that European contact with the Igbo through trade and Western evangelization led to the arrival of some high yielding species of yams onto the shores of Igbo land. Through these contacts too, the Igbo man acquired a number of modern farming skills needed to improve the yields of this tropical crop, with the effect that yam production continues to increase among Igbo communities today. However, the quest for mega city life, higher education, and cross-country migration has forced able-bodied Igbo youths to abandon yam farming, and migrate to bigger cities and even across the rich shores of Nigeria into foreign countries. The ugly effect of this trend is the sharp fall in yam production and food insecurity which Igbo land is witnessing since the past time. These affect the population explosion recorded in parts of the nation in the recent times, which therefore call for a return to agriculture as a way out of hunger, food insecurity, youth unemployment, and terrorism which are presently devastating parts of the country (Onuoha, 2010; Uduji, Edicha, & Oyaka, 2012).

Catholic Church’s Influence

There is no doubt that the arrival of Christianity, and most importantly the presence of the Catholic Church in Mbaïse impacted the mode and traditional patterns deployed in the celebration of the NYF in families and local communities. Usually, the festival starts with the celebration of Masses and church services in churches and worship centres all over Mbaïse. These are quite

unlike the earlier years of our ancestors when the festival usually commenced at the vicinities of various local deities under the auspices of some idol worshipping custodians of the shrines. With the doctrine of the Christian faith sown in all communities, adjustment to the rules of the new religion came into being. Consequently, doctrines of the new religion forbade her converts from engaging in any forms of idolatrous practices, partook in any fetish activities which attempted to undermine their faith in the Almighty God, or even associated with persons whose activities could endanger their belief in the omniscient powers of God – the Creator (Njoku, 1980; Ekechi, 1989; Iwunna, 2009).

Thus, it is a known fact of history that the conversion of the Igbo, and in the context of this paper, the Mbaise, into the Christian faith impacted the churching of the new yam festival. Following this development, it can be added with all certainty that the celebration of this festival literally received the sacrament of baptism and subsequent acceptance of the various church-approved traditional rites into the church. Remarkably, this historic development led to the celebration of the Iri ji Mbaise in the Christian way, and devoid of all local fetish rituals which were detrimental to faith. On the strength of this huge influence, the annual new yam festival in different Mbaise communities received a place of honour in various Christian churches housed within the area, and consequently turned the annual event into a major church event which is now held on the 15th of August each year, which is the Catholic Church's feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This is a festival which marks the assumption of the body and soul of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven. Thus, the rites of blessing the new yam began to be celebrated in churches in Mbaise as a major Christian ceremony. Following this development, the days of hosting the NYF at the vicinity of local shrines died naturally all over Mbaise (Achebe, 1958; Arinze, 1982; Iwunna, 2009).

The indication is that the celebration of the NYF in Mbaise now draws community members to various church premises where the activities are now celebrated with great pomp and pageantry. As against the pre-Christian missionary years when community members tramped into the shrines of local deities for the performance of varieties of fetish rituals, the hosting of the festival in these recent times is now properly arranged and held at the church premises where important dignitaries are lavishly entertained with assorted yam meals, while different traditional dance troupes displayed their skills with great expertise. Entertainment of invited guests and community members usually took an accelerated dimension at the vicinity of various church premises when invited live bands, professional comedians, and screen artists went on display. Usually, the mere presence of these professional entertainers always lighted up the whole arena and awakened dampened minds from slumber as the festival dragged on into the late evening hours (Iroegbu, 2010; Ihejirika, 2011).

Importantly too, the occasion of the NYF in Mbaise presents a unique occasion for families to host thanks-giving services in churches, in great appreciation of God's favour, blessings, protection, and endless love during the past farming year. Families and communities also use the occasion to pray for God's favour and continued blessings as they marched into the new planting season which was about to commence in a few short months. As well, families are also challenged by the biblical injunction which calls on the faithful to present their gifts and tithes in the house of God (Deut. 14: 22-29; Malachy: 3: 10-12). In compliance with this God-given injunction therefore, churches in Mbaise use the occasion to organize their green harvest ceremonies, during which parishioners present gifts of yam tubers, green vegetables of sorts, quantities of harvested cassava tubers, tomatoes, plantain, pineapple chickens, goats, and other materials donations found befitting to be presented at the altar of God in appreciation of His love and numerous blessings on their family members all through the year. Funds generated at this event are committed into the execution of church development projects such as renovation projects, procurement of public

address systems, electrification of church edifices, and furnishing of churches with necessary worship facilities.

Furthermore, the occasion of the celebration of the NYF presents the much-awaited moment to host their annual inter-parish football competitions. It is on the day of this great festival in Mbaise that many parishes hold the finals of their annual football competitions, during which winners go home with their trophies and the monetary rewards attached to such events. The indication is that prior to this great day, all the preliminary matches were already played and concluded. With the final matches slated on the NYF day, the two opposing teams in every parish usually put in their very bests to ensure they went home with the trophy. Soon after the winners and losers were determined at the football pitch, preparations for the next year's contests took off immediately among the various villages who registered for the tournament. Engagement of parishioners in these competitions is considered crucial in order to encourage the spirit of healthy sportsmanship, rich spiritual growth, and strong friendship among families, villages, and their entire community.

Another major area of influence which Christianity has made on the annual iri ji Mbaise is the annual August meetings and re-unions hosted by different women groups within the area. Since the past couple of years, several Mbaise women's groups have resorted to hosting their annual re-unions during this great festival when women from all over the country, including those in the diaspora are expected to travel back home for their annual get-togethers. During this occasion, various community-based women groups organize series of educative lectures, healthcare awareness symposia, fund raising activities, as well as embark on new development projects within their own communities.

The women also use the occasion to educate their folks on various moral lessons, and invite their members and their female children to desist from all immoral activities that could endanger their female dignity, hurt their physical bodies, expose their lives to dangerous situations, and desist from prostitution, fornication, and adultery. The women groups also use their Annual August re-unions to visit and support their needy members, most especially the widows and indigent ones in their midst. Most importantly, the occasion of the annual NYF in Mbaise presents the women the golden opportunities to ask critical questions and dig out answers on matters concerning the welfare of their members within their various communities. As Christians, it is their understanding that engagement in these activities could grow their faith in God, eliminate poverty among the women folk, and reduce the spate of immorality among their members (Anyanwu, 2015).

Another critical area of influence which Christianity made on the annual IriJiMbaise (NYF) festival is in the areas of the wider awareness it offers to the people. As a prelude, it must be appreciated that knowledge is power. This brings us to the understanding that the occasion of the NYF in Mbaise has also been turned into a lecture-series event in most communities. In most communities therefore, the festival can never be said to be concluded without hosting members to a number of intellectual tours by professionals in various areas of human endeavour, as are intended to educate members on issues that are critical for their wellbeing.

Thus, communities use the occasion to host lectures on various aspects of cultures which promote good health, promote skills acquisition, strengthen our faith in God's powers, as well as reduce criminality among the populations. At such lectures, members come to the awareness that it is not all cultures that are idolatrous and inimical to the Christian faith. Thus, in the course of such lectures, hosted as part and parcel of the annual NYF, community members are brought to the knowledge that healthy cultural practices neither hurt man nor God. Most importantly, the lectures draw members' attentions to the fact that indigenous cultures define who we really are, identify our uniqueness, and underpin those values which distinguish individual community members from the rest of humanity (Mbachu, 1998; Omolewa, 2001; Agulanna, 2008).

The Way Forward

Having arrived at this stage of this discussion, one can only add a few more comments. Cultures define who a community of people really is. Cultures and festivals identify what specific human communities celebrate and revere. It is therefore crucial that different human communities sustain and uphold those indigenous values and cultures of theirs which are found to be supportive of their faith as Christians, empowering to members in the areas of community development, and a capable of providing formidable muzzle to various areas of human capacity development. Secondly, attempts to deploy religion and various biblical injunctions to demonize and condemn indigenous African cultures need to be discouraged with impunity. Instead of using religion as a tool for the destruction and castigation of various aspects of our cultures, perpetrators of those dangerous faith-based criminal attacks on culture should learn to refine and re-adapt the affected aspects of our cultural practices to fall in line with those trends which both God and man refuse to condemn. Finally, Igbo communities should learn to adapt and adjust their indigenous cultural practices to come in line with the injunctions of the Holy Bible, and rather deploy them as instruments that dispel the fundamental doctrines of Christianity.

Conclusion

It is important to conclude this discussion on this note. Culture is a crucial aspect of the human person. Every human society, community of persons, or language group possesses specific cultures which distinguish them from their other neighbouring communities. Every culture has its indigenous owners who find great value and life in those traditional belief systems which say who they are, what they revere, what they celebrate, and why their belief in their locally-based values could never be displaced or replaced by another. This is an indication that there are no universal cultures. Different human communities have their indigenous cultures which are peculiar to them and them alone, which deserve to be respected by owners and non-owners. It is therefore timely to appreciate the fact that the Mbaise New Yam Festival constitutes one major cultural activity which unites all Mbaises together, builds strong walls of brotherliness, and strengthens the priceless sense of oneness and accommodation of the other which the people are known for, and share among themselves too.

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