

DIGITALIZING CULTURAL HERITAGE: A YOUTH LED-INITIATIVE TO PROMOTE CROSS-CULTURAL CONVERSATION THROUGH FESTIVALS

Kelechi Stellamaris Ogbonna PhD,
drkellyogbonna@gmail.com,
Department of Theatre Arts
Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education,
Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria
08067977597

Olayiwola Abdulqudus Lawal
olayiwolaabdulquduslawal@gmail.com
Department of Theatre Arts
Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education,
Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria
: 09132663652

Okwuokenye Isaac Ihieanyichukwu
Ihieanyi1990@gmail.com
Department of Theatre Arts
Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education,
Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria
: 08100584531

Abstract

Experimenting cross-cultural conversation dynamics in Nigeria has become imperative amongst the youth for a better understanding of their cultural groups/traditions. It is a powerful way to enhance understanding and unity among diverse communities thereby fostering cultural exchange and promoting social cohesion. Basically, for artistic and intellectual cultural growth amongst the youth, there is need to shake off cultural bickering, apathy and stagnation. Significantly, traditional festivals are the conduit for the younger generations to learn and unlearn. Through a several approaches, including face to face interview, observational data and actor-audience participation, the paper examines the impact of recasting and digitalizing festivals for cross-cultural conversations. The researchers highlight the importance of inclusivity, cultural sensitivity, empathy and community engagement in organizing festivals as well as the potentials of youth-led initiative to drive cross-cultural conversations. We experimented on inclusivity using Participatory Action Research Approach (PAR) as our backings. The findings suggest that digitalizing and recasting traditional festivals can be impactful as it provides opportunities for diverse voices to be heard, promote cultural conversation, cultural pride, and community engagement, among young people. The paper concludes that recasting and digitalizing cultural festivals are measures capable of providing the platform that could build bridges between different cultural groups and bring together young and older people to share cultural knowledge and experiences. It further demonstrates that a youth-led initiative can create a sense of pride and ownership among younger audiences.

Keywords: Youth-Led, Initiative, Promote, Cross-Cultural, Conversation, Festivals.

Introduction

Cultural festivals of African origin are bound with philosophical leanings around it which aims at preserving and promoting cultural traditions, norms and values, and, by extension strengthens the communal bonds as it fosters a sense of belonging. Unarguably, the pre-colonial Nigeria shared geographical boundaries with other pre-historic societies, and there were many traditional festivals celebrated before colonial invasion, such as, the New Yam Festival, birth and rites of passage, masking festivals as well as many coronation ceremonies that were expressive of the people's identity, beliefs, socio-economic and political alignments of a people with more than two hundred and fifty ethnic groups. Thus, the post colonial culture may be resting on "perhaps, in recognition of the founding fathers and heroes coined the philosophy of 'unity in diversity' as a cultural and philosophical state gem for purposes of co-existence, co-operation and survival" (Austin Asagba, 9). The role of culture in youth formation, peace building and sustainable development cannot be overemphasized because of its unique contribution towards nation building. While culture is the people's way of life, festival is expressive of the people's culture. Both materials, philosophical, institutional and creative aspects of culture consists of values as contained in The 1988 *Cultural Policy for Nigeria*, which states that culture is:

...the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempt to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organization thus distinguishing a people from their neighbors (P.1).

Hence, the imperatives of cultural renaissance are for the old with a faint idea of his African ethos and the youth with a vague understanding of his identity. So, to culturally reactivate the myth and significance of cultural festivals is to re-awaken the communal essence, and put into proper perspectives, the norms and moral codes that were over-turned by Eurocentric ideals. Austin Asagba, again, notes that these cultural confusion has metamorphosed the "...negative attitudes, unacceptable behavior patterns of our youth and citizens, inept and colorless leadership, corruption in high places by incessant urge and drive for material comfort and aggrandizement" (12).

Therefore, digitalizing and re-enacting cultural festivals for the benefit of youth orientation entails interpreting cultural events that will resonate with the youths, promote cultural heritage, and enhance understanding and appreciation. Significantly, cultural festivals are the conduit for the younger generation to learn and unlearn. The argument for digitalization and recasting cultural festivals stems from the need to re-orient the youth with their cultural heritage and identity. In spite of religious beliefs, socio-political and economic underlining of cultural festivals, the norms and values associated with these festivals are worth sharing, promoting and preserving. Though, younger audiences see traditional festivals as backward and static which probably leads to misconceptions and disconnection between the older generations and younger enthusiastic youths, there is need for cultural renaissance. We therefore agree with Austin Ovigie Asagba's statement that "in a globalized world of competitive virtues, desires and aspirations, cultural re-orientation, peace building and national development are imperatives and are key success indices for social transformation, especially in a complex and diverse country like Nigeria" (P.3).

More so, digitizing cultural festivals will build a 'mobility multiplier' that enhances visibility which allows audiences and public to exchange, interact and engage in cross cultural conversation. Again, Chris Nwamuo observes that "the mass media have the potentials to cause traditional societies to be less attached to their traditional and conservative beliefs, making them to view greater prospects in the modern system of life" (P. 15)., While the modernization paradigm that is development-centered and

purely euro-centric with a tone of de-culturation is not the focus of our paper, we acknowledge Schramm's (P. 27) assertion that:

The media of information and the new media of education constitute a "bridge to a wider world". Their fundamental task is "to speed and ease the long, slow social transformation required for economic development, and, in particular, to speed and smooth the task of modernizing human resources behind the national effort" (Cited in Chris Nwamuo, 15).

However, a youth-led initiative that is concerned with acquiring knowledge; digging deep into the past to learn and unlearn memories of primordial origins of their ancestry, culture and what constitutes the norms and values of their cultural heritage is timely. Thus, with minimal supervision and intervention, the class of 2024/25 Creative Arts Education, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, students in THA.101-Traditional African Festival/ Theatre, provided the platform for the Live Streaming of their cultural festival presentation that took place at the Theatre Courtyard on March, 13th 2025. The youth-led approach brought fresh perspectives, good understanding of the festivals as it affirms Otoabasi Akpan's assertion of a theatre that is aimed at "...raising the awareness of the audience to social problems that affect them...It is a theatre that is essentially pedagogic for it highlights the problem of the people, creates awareness and demands for action" (26). This approach empowers young people to experiment on the learning and unlearning process so as to redirect their minds, express their opinions, ideas and concerns.

Conceptual Clarifications- A youth-led initiative

The active participation of young people in the recently orchestrated festival by year one (1) students of Creative Arts Education of the Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, is innovative, youth-driven and a dynamic approach towards cultural renaissance. Motivated by the interactive class of 2024/2025 THA. 101- Traditional African Theatre Festival, the Year One (1) students enthusiastically took the challenge of recasting festivals from their communities. It was observed that students had challenges in understanding the concept of festival and its cultural and historical dynamics within the pre-colonial, post-colonial and modern contexts. To further illustrate the concept of festivals, students were assigned to watch a festival from their area/community. To them, this was the most odious duty, because most of them neither knew their roots nor have ever witnessed a cultural traditional festival. They lack the knowledge of the ritual, spirituality, communal essence and the artistic expression that make up a festival, not forgetting that:

"Rituals and festivals are siblings and by extension, ritual, festival and theatre/performance cum theatrical aesthetics... are ritualistic on one hand and entertaining on the other. In other words, it provokes pleasant amusement and at the same time facilitates spiritual purification." (Olusola Fosudo and Babafemi Babatope, 276).

The Process

First, we outlined the basic stages of traditional African festival/ theatre preparation which anchors on pre-production, production and post-production processes. Thus, for pre-production, the class of 54 students was shared into three (3) groups, each, by ballot, picked a festival from Yoruba, Igbo and Bayelsa respectively for intercultural conversations and interrogations. Another step is that we embarked on a face to face interview with cultural custodians of *Eyo* masquerade of the (Yoruba), *Nmanwu* Masquerade of the (Igbo) and the *Odi* festival of (Bayelsa), not forgetting that the *Iwa-akwa* and *ichi-echichi* festivals were also researched on.

Our primary focus therefore centered on uncovering the cultural significance and history/ myth surrounding African traditional festivals. Thus we staged a workshop where each student presented

origins and cultural significance of festivals from their background highlighting on how these festivals were presented during pre-colonial era, post-colonial and contemporarily. Emphasis was placed on storytelling, oral tradition, rituals, music and dance, and how these festivals impacted on the society. More so, we uncovered that it was festival wheels that rotate to remind the people of their traditional/cultural codes and moral values. The process freshened ideas, brought insight and ignited a spark that propelled discussions and interesting openings.

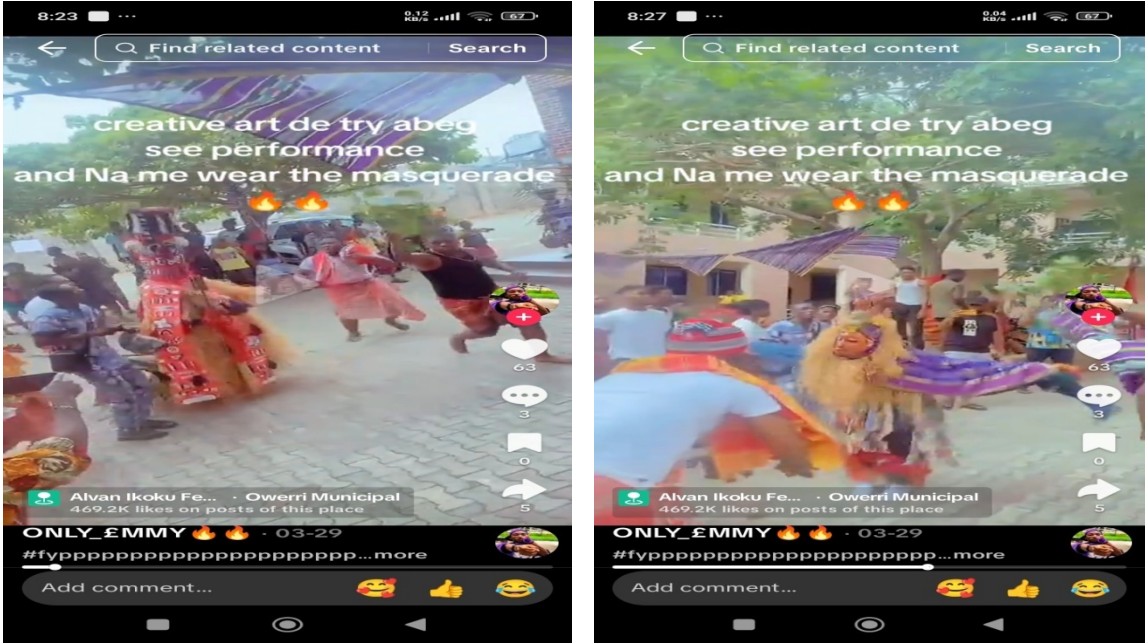
Conceptual Clarifications and Digitization

While we establish here that digitization and digitalization are used interchangeably, but means different things, both are used in the paper for their distinct meanings. The Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach has its roots on continuous inquiry, action and evaluation within the social and educational researches and practices of which Kurt Lewin is widely credited with developing the concept in the 1940s. Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) was a German- American Psychologist who developed the concept of action research. Lewin's work emphasized the importance of involving stakeholders in the research process to promote social change and empowerment (Somekh and Zeichner 2009, cited in Gogus, A, 2012. para 9). His concept then largely emphasized "...a continuous cycle of inquiry, action and evaluation, undertaken with marginalized groups. His work promoted empowerment and social equity, emphasizing the importance of involving the affected individuals in the research process" (para.1, line 9-18).

Therefore, in the context of this research, the affected are the students who in the face of a dying culture expressed the need to recast the traditional cultural festivals within their ethnic groups for their consumptions and digestion. Though, the Lewin's foundational works emphasized social equity, empowerment and inclusivity, evolving researches and practitioners have made some modifications "through conducting systematic research to generate new knowledge" (Flora Cornish et al, para.1). As a research approach that aims at investigating and resolving issue, Flora Cornish et al insists that:

Participatory action Research is an approach to research that prioritize the value of experiential knowledge for tackling problems caused by unequal and harmful social systems, and for envisioning and implementing alternatives. PAR involves the participation and leadership of those people experiencing issues who take action to produce emancipatory social change, through conducting systematic research to generate new knowledge (para.1).

The Participatory Action Research approach hereafter known as PAR applied in this research work focuses on the synergy between the student researchers and the youth-led participants (also students) whose active participation in the dynamics of cross-cultural conversation enabled gathering of data based on identification of problems and challenges as well as designing solutions, modes of presentation and discussion on the streamed/virtual festival presentation on [www.tiktok/dr.kelly6](https://www.tiktok.com/@dr.kelly6), on the 13th March 2025.



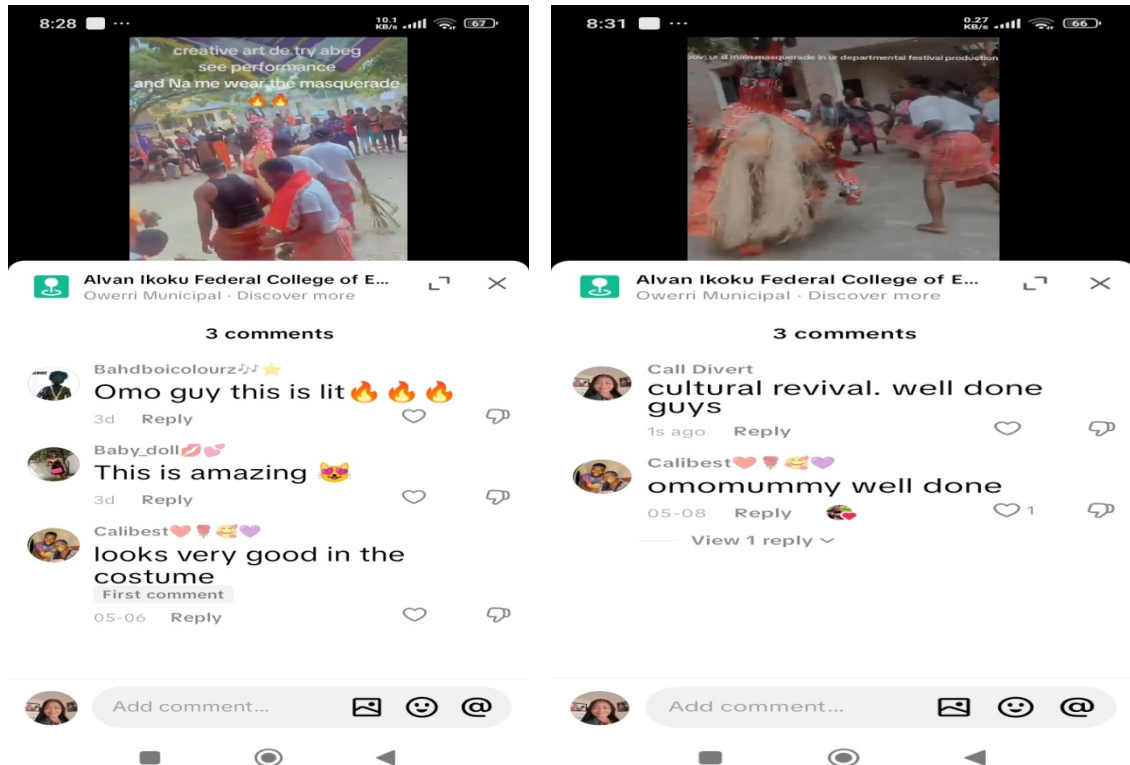
Plates 1&2: *Uploaded Presentation of the performance*

A diverse group of participants comprising students between the ages of 18 to 25 years contributed significantly to this research project. Also, three lecturers that are specifically from Nigeria's South Eastern, Western and the Middle Belt regions were supervisory guides. Additionally, cultural custodians from the Yoruba, Igbo and Ijaw communities were invited to participate in the process. The participants contributed immensely to the research as they turned in expertise and perspectives. Leaning on PAR, it empowered participants and enhanced their ability to make informed decisions and drive the process without bias or the need for subjective interpretations.

Thus, the PAR approach empowered participants to drive the process and make informed decisions. Again, by including the students, lecturers and cultural custodians in the process, it enriched the research outcomes providing diverse perspectives, and historical origins, significance and mythologies surrounding the festivals were authentically verified. More so, both the youth-led initiative and the PAR approach empowered the participants to take ownership of the research process. Again, the inclusivity of the youth and cultural custodians ensured that the project was culturally sensitive and relevant.

Digitization

The intersection of the theatre, technology and cross-cultural conversation amongst the youth through festivals highlight the role of the youth in the promotion and preservation of their cultural heritage. Cross-cultural conversation amongst the youth of Nigeria will definitely to a large extent, help to facilitate increased accessibility to cultural festivals and traditional norms; because by virtue of digitalizing the festival, geographical gaps are bridged and wider audiences are reached. More so, online spaces radiated with the exchange of ideas and shared experience that displayed diverse perspectives. Apart from promoting cross-cultural conversation among young people, national unity and a sense of shared identity is etched in the minds of youths, so confidently, connecting with global peers will enhance their collaborative ideas. Hence, the researchers leveraged on the Live Streaming of the cultural festival via the link dr.kelly6/tiktok.com which took place on the 13th day of April, 2025, between 2pm-5pm.



Plates 3&4: Live stream and comments of viewers

Other sources of technological application involved in the dynamics of this cross-cultural conversation include; the video recordings of tips on crafts making, photographs of the workshops on cultural education and other photographs of the festival presentations as displayed below:



Plates 5&6: Students designing crown and Masquerade costumes.



Plates 7&8: Students designing a masquerade costume



Plates 9&10: Students testing the costumes produced



Plates 11, 12 &13: Students manufacturing props for the performance

The role of digital photography in festivals is to capture moments -in- action, and the essence of the festival. These photos are shared digitally in other to reach wider audience and promote the festival as well. Again, attendees of the festival can share photos through digital sharing to a wider audience. Also, the photos are documented for preservation by creating a departmental digital archive of the event, and can be preserved for future promotional materials, reference and research purposes.

Festival Analysis

The stages of traditional African festivals were followed coupled with workshops, one-on-one interviews with cultural custodians, villagers and masquerade-cult-initiates who provided guidance, explanations and pointed out the myths and significance behind the selected festivals/ceremonies. From conception of the idea of re-casting festivals and selection of the three geo-political zones in

Nigeria. We made efforts that costume; props and scenery/setting were significantly represented; matching the festivities with its relative backgrounds. During presentation, spectators were able to identify the tribes of each cultural festival by their action, costume, props, and insignia as displayed



Plate 14&15: Eyo Masquerade (Yourba) in display



Plate 16&17: Iwa Akwa (Igbo- Mba-ano) in display



Plate 18&19: Ichi Echichi (Igbo) in display



Plate 20: Odi Festival (Bayelsa) in display



Plate 21 Nma-Nwu Masquerade (Igbo) in display



Plate 22: Nma-Nwu Masquerade (Igbo) in display

On cross-cultural interaction, the following questions surfaced: - Do you think that the re-enacted festival captured the actual essence of the festival and the background it represents? - Were there opportunities for you to interact with other youths from different cultural background? - Did the festival provide new thoughts, ideas or information about other cultures? - Can we say that festivals provide the platform for cross-cultural conversation and dialogue between cultures? - Are there corrections or recommendations on how the festival can better facilitate cross-cultural conversation in the future?

On youth initiative and participation, we interrogated the following areas: - Do you think that the youth-led approach brought fresh perspectives to the presentation? Would you say that the involvement of young people in the festival helped in audience engineering? - Was the festival appropriate, relevant and significant for the young audience?

To evaluate the performance and its technological interactions many questions surfaced. One of the questions includes: what extent did the digital elements enhance understanding and appreciation of the cultural festivals presented? Though, there were network glitches, the re-enacted-Live streamed cultural festival received positive wider audience participation and response from both the physical and online audiences, with appreciation for a re-enacted performance that captured the cultural diversity as well as engaging global audience. Also, the physical audiences were unaware of the digitalization of the cultural festival which accounts for the clear absence of digital tools within their view. Again, huge technical glitches and limited interaction were noted, perhaps because of the performance space/venue of the event. The performance received accolades for the innovative attempt to recast the festival within the ivory tower. Both the online and physical audience asked questions bothering on the significance of the festivals, the performers (artists) and the possibility of future

events. Below are some of the recorded comments received:

- (1) "Quite interesting, different cultures and traditions interest me, thanks for sharing".
- (2) Amazing masquerade display, good rhythm...music and dance performances were amazing".
- (3) "Without leaving my room, I have traveled to Africa, am glad I shared in this cultural experience".
- (4) "How often do you do this? Please do well to announce the next event".
- (5) "Which part of Africa is this? I am interested in your spectacle. Can you send the recordings please?"
(Messages/dr.kelly6/tiktok.com)

We also evaluated the youth-led festival design...Other responses bother on critical observations that the network interfered on the streaming hence the inconclusive storylines and buffering issues. Also, there were constructive criticisms on the lack of adequate representation from diverse cultural groups. Many questions were raised such as: (1) "I don't understand the significance of this cultural festival, can you tell me? (2)"Who are the performers, it means the artists and their background? (3)"Are the performers from the regions represented? (4)"Do you do this often? Will there be more Live events in the future?"

Impact Factor and Recommendations

Obviously, digitization has profoundly impacted on cultural festivals by bringing about transformative opportunities that facilitates global reach; transcending geographical limitations as well as encouraging global participation through live streaming, online cultural festivals, and virtual tours/workshops. Interestingly, someone in Owerri can virtually attend a music festival in America or a drama performance in France without leaving her home; this fosters broader participation/engagement as well as cultural exchange.

Also, digital technologies provide innovative methods to document and archive cultural heritage for posterity and reference purposes thereby safeguarding them from physical deterioration. However, loss of authenticity and personal connection may arise as a result of a shift towards virtual celebrations which may lead to a sense of disconnection or loss of personal touch that physical presence may provide.

On feedback and impacts made by the festival presentation, we understood the technical glitches, but the question to ponder on here is; were there adequate interaction and dialogue between spectators and viewers from different cultural backgrounds? Yes, actually, after the presentation of both physical and live Live streaming event, there was a viva of the performance by the lecturers/ Select audience from diverse backgrounds. Also, a discussion panel held on tiktok at dr.kelly6/tiktok.com, same day at 9pm (13/03/25). The participants were made up of people from different parts of the world that were opportuned to have viewed the live streamed event. They offered their views on culture, festivals, and the need for consistency, cultural change/dynamism and cultural adaptations



Plates 22&23: The course lecturer discussing with the students after performance and presenting them for viva



Plates 24&25: The students during Viva

Conclusion

The festival ceremony recorded a successful recasting of festivals from three geopolitical zones of Nigeria. Spectators, participant observers and organizers expressed a new approach of reviving and recasting festivals especially outside its natural space. More so, the young people in the planning, organization and execution of the festival presentation fostered a cohesive, positive and engaging atmosphere as they also played roles by participating artistically in the performance. Their engagement in props/ set/ costume making provided the skill, cultural education and knowledge of what constitutes the materials for the making of both masks and masquerade; thereby providing the platform for cross-cultural dialogue/conversation between them. Their initiative, involvement and creativity attracted more youths to be physically present and also virtually alert during the post production conversation. Specifically, Video recording, Live Streaming, and photography were employed as digital applications to enhance the visibility of the festival.

The following feedback mechanisms were used to collate data/information: Collection Methods; On-site physical surveys were applied. Though questionnaires were not distributed, but open-ended prompts mix-multiple questions were asked both on-site and online. Interactive feedback featured more during the online discussion, with questions, encouragements and applause coming from the comment section. Focused Group Discussion(FGD) with select group of attendees comprising two cultural custodians, few spectators and students from Ijaw, Yoruba, Efik, and Igbo deliberated on the innovation of recasting festivals, the challenges and benefits. While their discussion provided the

forum to delve into the challenges of recasting the festivals for posterity, preservation, cultural education and awareness, the communiqué emphasized on norms and values as basis for cultural orientation and sustainable developments.

Works Cited

- Asagba, Austin O. *Cultural Reorientation, Peace Building and National Development*. Being a Lecture at the World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development (2011). Abuja: National Institute for Cultural Orientation, 2011. Print.
- Cultural Policy for Nigeria. Lagos: Federal Government Printers, 1988. Print.
- Cornish, F, Breton, N, Moreno-Tabarez U, et al. Participatory Action Research, *Nat Rev Methods Primers* 3,35 (2003), <http://doi.org/10.1038/s43586-025-00214-1>. Accessed May 3, 2025. Online.
- Gogus, A. Action Research on Learning. N:Seel, N.M(eds) *Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning*. Springer, Boston, MA.http://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1428-6_488, 2012. Accessed May 5th 2025. Online.
- Nwamuo, Chris. *The Dynamics of International Communication*. Calabar; University of Calabar Press, 2016. Print.
- Olusola, Fosudo & Babafemi, Babatope. "Interrogating the Ritual Essence and Performance Aesthetics of Eyo Adamu Orisa". *Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies (JHUCS) Vol.2*. (pp.276-297). Awka: Centre for Arts, Culture and Humanities, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, 2017. Print.
- ### Interviews
1. Nnabugwu Cyril Onyinyechukwu (Obowo, Imo State)
 2. Nze Okey Ogbu (Agulu, Imo State)
 3. Olayiwola Abdulqudus Lawal (Agunpopo, Oyo State)