

“ERICHA AFUO ORU” CULTURAL FESTIVAL IN THE ERA OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY: THE PLACE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

AMARA M. CHUKWUMA-OFFOR, Ph.D
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION AND HUMAN RELATIONS
NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA, ANAMBRA STATE
am.chukwuma-offor@unizik.edu.ng
08064622205

&

EKENEDILICHUKWU A. OKOLO, Ph.D
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION AND HUMAN RELATIONS
NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA, ANAMBRA STATE
ea.okolo@unizik.edu.ng
08063344381

Abstract

Every facet of human society has witnessed technological impact. In fact, technology has shaped and continues to impact different aspects of human culture, thereby establishing a relationship between traditional celebrations and cutting-edge experiences marketed by digital innovations. Digital innovations have enabled a synthesis between culture and technology, in which culture leverages cutting-edge tools for visibility and expansion. “Ericha Afuo Oru” is a cultural festival that fosters human relations. Among other things, it encourages family and inter-communal ties and bonds, which make for peaceful coexistence. Unfortunately, urbanisation, poverty, and insecurity have eroded and continue to weaken the cultural practice, such that its socio-cultural values and significance are rapidly fading. This work attempts to explore Artificial Intelligence to enhance and propagate the cultural values that “Ericha Afuo Oru” embodies in human society. Through AI, techno-cultural development offers the global community the opportunity to participate in and experience traditional celebrations via virtual reality and data analysis. Such integration, no doubt, makes for transformation but not without challenges. This work will be done using Cultural Preservation Theory and therefore concludes that cultural heritages such as “Ericha Afuo Oru” should be preserved through proper measures for present benefits and for posterity.

Keywords: Cultural Festival, Digital Technology, Artificial Intelligence, Human Relations, Human Society

Introduction

“Ericha Afuo Oru” is one of the cultural festivals celebrated in Igboland and is dear to the Awuka people in Ogbunka, Orumba South Local Government Area of Anambra State. It takes place during the farming season and is usually held around March. This festival has existed, but with

changes due to advancements and societal changes. Against this background, it is imperative to note that cultural festivals are vital expressions of identity and indigenous heritage that foster social cohesion and preserve traditional values. In the modern era, digital technology has transformed how societies engage with culture, enabling festivals to reach wider audiences and remain relevant in an increasingly globalised world (Smith, 2019). This synthesis between culture and technology has given rise to what scholars call "techno-cultural development," where traditional practices utilise modern tools for visibility and expansion (Adekunle & Bello, 2022). The "Ericha Afuo Oru" cultural festival, celebrated for its emphasis on family, inter-communal unity, and peaceful coexistence, now faces significant challenges due to urbanisation, poverty, and insecurity, which erode its social relevance and impact. Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents a powerful avenue for revitalising cultural practices like "Ericha Afuo Oru" by providing innovative means for preservation, promotion, and audience engagement. Through AI-driven tools such as virtual reality (VR) and data analytics, communities can document and share cultural heritage more widely, allowing global audiences to experience traditional celebrations in immersive, interactive formats (Jiang & Zhang, 2021). This integration not only enhances visibility but also promotes cultural understanding across borders, creating new opportunities for appreciation and engagement. However, the application of AI in cultural preservation is not without its challenges, including concerns about authenticity, potential cultural dilution, and the ethical complexity of translating tradition into digital formats (Omar & Salim, 2020). This study explores the role of AI in enhancing and propagating the cultural values inherent in the "Ericha Afuo Oru" festival, analysing how digital technology can both preserve and transform traditional practices. In examining the opportunities associated with AI integration, this work underscores the importance of strategic digital preservation to ensure that cultural heritages such as "Ericha Afuo Oru" endure for present and future generations.

Concepts clarification

In writing this work, the researchers deem it necessary to examine key concepts to aid comprehension. Some of those concepts are viz:

a.) Artificial Intelligence (AI):

The concept of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been defined in many ways by scholars. In the opinion of Coursera (2024), artificial intelligence is the theory and development of computer systems capable of performing tasks that normally require human intelligence, such as visual perception, speech recognition, decision-making, and language translation. Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to computer systems capable of performing complex tasks that were historically performed only by humans, such as reasoning, decision-making, and problem-solving. It describes a wide range of technologies that power many of the services and goods we use every day, from apps that recommend TV shows to chatbots that provide real-time customer support.

Russell and Norvig (2021) maintain that Artificial Intelligence (AI), in its broadest sense, is intelligence exhibited by machines, particularly computer systems. It is a field of research in computer science that develops and studies methods and software that enable machines to perceive their environment and use learning and intelligence to take actions that maximise their chances of achieving defined goals. However, many AI applications are not

perceived as AI. Much cutting-edge AI has filtered into general applications, often without being called AI, because once something becomes useful and common enough, it is not labelled as AI.

According to Burton (2024), artificial intelligence (AI) is the ability of a digital computer or computer-controlled robot to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings. The term is frequently applied to the project of developing systems endowed with the intellectual processes characteristic of humans, such as the ability to reason, discover meaning, generalize, or learn from experience. He further maintains that since their development in the 1940s, digital computers have been programmed to carry out very complex tasks, such as proving mathematical theorems or playing chess with great proficiency. Some of the most common examples of AI in use today, in Burton's words, are ChatGPT, which uses large language models (LLMs) to generate text in response to questions or comments. Google Translate uses deep learning algorithms to translate text from one language to another. Netflix uses machine learning algorithms to create personalised recommendation engines for users based on their viewing history, and Tesla uses computer vision to power self-driving features in its cars.

b.) Ericha Afuo Oru:

This is one of the festivals observed by the Igbo people in the South East, especially in Anambra State. It is a cultural festival held by the Awuka people. Awuka is one of the five villages in Ogbunka, Orumba South Local Government Area of Anambra State. It is a festival that precedes the farming season. As the year begins and people expect rain to start farming, they also prepare for this celebration, because once rain falls around March, the festival is celebrated. During this celebration, the people come together to pray for God's grace and guidance as they begin the farming season and to ask for a bountiful harvest in the coming months. "Ericha Afuo Oru" is held every year and celebrated with family, friends, and relatives. It is a time when people invite their relations from other villages and communities to come and celebrate with them.

c.) Digital technology

Digital technology refers to electronic tools, systems, devices, and resources that generate, store, or process data using binary code. This concept encompasses a wide array of applications and platforms, including computers, smartphones, the internet, artificial intelligence (AI), cloud computing, virtual reality (VR), and digital media. At its core, digital technology transforms information into a digital (binary) format, allowing for efficient storage, transmission, and manipulation of data (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). The rise of digital technology has fundamentally altered the way people communicate, access information, and interact with the world. It has enabled unprecedented levels of connectivity and accessibility, linking individuals and communities across geographical and cultural boundaries. Digital platforms allow users to share ideas, participate in social networks, and engage in e-commerce, while AI and machine learning facilitate advanced data processing, decision-making, and predictive analysis (Rouse, 2020). In cultural contexts, digital technology serves as a bridge between tradition and modernity, offering tools to enhance cultural preservation, promote global awareness, and create immersive experiences. For example, VR enables virtual participation in cultural events. At the same time, AI algorithms assist in translating and documenting indigenous languages and customs, thus preserving heritage in a format accessible to future generations. As digital technology continues to advance, its applications across industries and fields expand, raising questions about

accessibility, data privacy, and the ethical implications of its use and development (Tapscott, 2015).

According to Lindquist (2019), digital technologies are tools, systems, devices, and resources that generate, store, or process data, including social media, online games, multimedia, and mobile phones. More so, the term digital technology is a broad term; it serves as an umbrella term for computer-based products and solutions, considering that nearly everything, every area of our lives, and every sector of the world workforce relies on computers in one way or the other. It covers a lot of things. In simple terms, it entails the use of digital devices that enable access to cyberspace, digital audio/video, and information and communication technology (ICT).

d.) Cultural Festival

A cultural festival is an organized event that celebrates and showcases the customs, traditions, values, and identity of a community or group. These festivals are deeply rooted in heritage, often reflecting the history, beliefs, and practices passed down through generations. Cultural festivals typically feature a combination of activities, including traditional music, dance, art, cuisine, storytelling, and rituals, providing a platform for participants to engage with and honour their cultural heritage (Falassi, 1987). Cultural festivals play a vital role in preserving traditions, fostering community bonds, and creating a sense of belonging among participants. They serve as a means for educating younger generations about their heritage, instilling pride in cultural identity, and promoting intergenerational continuity. Furthermore, cultural festivals attract people from diverse backgrounds, encouraging intercultural exchange and mutual understanding (Smith, 2009). Awuka people use this celebration to address social issues, highlight values, or commemorate historical events, making it significant for both personal and collective identity. In recent years, digital technology has started to transform cultural festivals by expanding their reach beyond local communities. Through live streaming, social media, and virtual participation, these festivals can now be shared with a global audience, creating opportunities for cross-cultural appreciation and engagement. However, this shift also presents challenges, as cultural festivals must adapt to maintain authenticity while leveraging digital tools for wider visibility and impact (Getz, 2010).

More so, cultural festivals are pivotal in preserving and promoting the rich heritage of communities, serving as platforms for artistic expression, social cohesion, and cultural continuity. These festivals, rooted in tradition, reflect the beliefs, values, and practices of the people, allowing them to connect with their history and reinforce their identity. As Odo (2021) asserts, cultural festivals are not merely events; they embody a community's collective memory and serve as a medium through which traditions are transmitted from one generation to another.

Theoretical Framework

This work adopts the Theory of Cultural Preservation. Cultural Preservation Theory, as articulated by Smith (2006), posits that cultural heritage must be actively safeguarded against the influences of modernization and globalization to maintain the unique identities and values of communities. This theory emphasizes the significance of preserving traditions, rituals, and cultural practices, asserting that cultural heritage is vital to social cohesion and community identity.

This theory applies directly to the "Ericha Afuo Oru" festival as it underscores the necessity of safeguarding Igbo cultural heritage amid the challenges posed by urbanisation and technological change. The festival, which encapsulates key social values and community bonds, risks fading into obscurity without deliberate efforts to document and promote it. Cultural Preservation Theory provides a framework for understanding how digital technology can be utilized to ensure that the festival's traditions and meanings are not lost over time. By leveraging digital platforms such as social media, websites, and virtual reality, the festival can be documented and shared beyond its local context. Smith's theory highlights the role of technology in preserving cultural practices; through digital documentation, the "Ericha Afuo Oru" festival can reach a wider audience, allowing for both local and global engagement. This engagement not only promotes visibility but also fosters appreciation for Igbo culture among diverse groups. Cultural Preservation Theory also emphasizes the involvement of younger generations in the preservation process. By integrating digital technologies into the festival's promotion, the community can encourage youth participation in documenting and sharing their cultural heritage.

This engagement is crucial for instilling pride and ensuring that cultural practices remain relevant in a contemporary context. As younger generations actively participate in promoting the festival, they contribute to the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. A central tenet of Cultural Preservation Theory is the need to maintain authenticity in the representation of cultural practices. As the "Ericha Afuo Oru" festival embraces digital tools for promotion, it is essential to establish guidelines that prioritise the accurate portrayal of traditions and customs. This ensures that the festival's representation aligns with its cultural significance and helps prevent the dilution of its authentic values amid modernisation.

Historical Sketch of the Festival

"Ericha Afuo Oru" is one of the cultural festivals held by Awuka village in Ogbunka. It is a festival celebrated before the start of the farming year. The celebration is held around March every year as a time to seek God's face before farming begins in earnest. The origin of this celebration in Awuka village, according to Emmanuel Okeke (oral interview, 02/11/24), can be traced to one Mrs Anya, who was married to Awuka from Awla in Enugu State. She was always gathering the village women for prayer, seeking God's help and provision, and asking for God's blessing upon their seed before they started farming. Over time, the men began to join the women in this prayer, and from then on, this festival was adopted and continues to be practised to this day.

According to Chief Michael Anozie, in an oral interview (25/10/24), there are five villages in Ogbunka, one of which is Awuka. Awuka celebrates this "Ericha Afuo Oru," and other villages have counterparts to this celebration in their own villages. Akwuoba celebrates Odimma; Umunebo celebrates Oganiru; Agbala celebrates Imammi; and Isiokpu celebrates Odimma. All these festivals are celebrated individually by the villages, but within the same period and with invitations from other villages to participate. The celebrations are held between February and March each year, and the villages can change when they hold them, which means no village always celebrates first; it can change. It is only Isiokpu that always celebrates last, even after other villages have celebrated. He further noted that "Ericha Afuo Oru" is mainly celebrated around March 15th each year, though this date may shift slightly due to calendar changes. He also posits that it is not generally advisable for people to start farming without "Ericha Afuo Oru", but that they can farm

within their compound. If anyone decides to go farming, nothing will happen to such a person because the celebration has no fetishism attached to it.

According to Chief Felix Ike (oral interview, 25/11/24), "Ericha Afuo Oru" is a time to thank God for his grace and care in the previous year and for his help in the present farming year. It is a time to share love and pray for continuous love and protection from God. In his opinion, the celebration always begins on Friday morning with a church service or a prayer from the priest. On this first day, the villagers gather at an agreed-upon place in the morning with their farm implements, such as hoes and machetes, and as many crops as they can bring. Some will come with Yams, Okro, Maize, Cassava sticks, and other crops. The priest prays for the people and blesses these crops as a point of contact to reach other crops. This is what is done on the first day, which begins the celebration. On the second day, which is normally Saturday, people will invite their friends, relatives, and other villagers to the main celebration, which involves eating, drinking, and other merriments. Normally, the village cooks a staple dish and buys drinks to entertain its residents and visitors. The celebration involves dancing, playing, wrestling, masquerading, and other things that bring fun and relaxation. On the third day, which is Sunday, there will also be a masquerade and a show featuring different cultural activities like 'Ida iya' and 'Ikpo ntu'. All of these are used to close the ceremony, and starting the next day, Monday, people can resume their farming.

Mr Silvernus Onwu, in an oral interview (26/10/24), says that "ericha afuo our" has existed since before they were born; it has always united the people and made them see themselves as brothers and sisters. He further emphasised that there is nothing wrong or fetishistic about the festival; it is simply a cultural festival that brings people together to share love and fellowship before they enter farming. He further lamented the way in which this festival is fading away. This is because he noted that before now, people would invite their relations, and some of their people would also come home, but now, the glory of the festival is no longer as it was. This, in his opinion, is because people are now more selfish than they were before, and many people are afraid of being killed even in their own villages. He noted a need for a revival of this festival.

Cultural Festival in the digital era

Cultural festivals in Igboland serve as vibrant expressions of the Igbo people's rich heritage and traditions, showcasing their values, beliefs, and communal identity. According to Nwankwo (2018), cultural festivals are deeply rooted in the historical and spiritual fabric of Igbo society, playing an essential role in reinforcing social bonds and fostering community cohesion. Various communities across Igboland celebrate distinct festivals that reflect their unique customs and practices. One of the most significant festivals is the "Ericha Afuo Oru", celebrated before every farming season, and the new yam festival (Iri ji ohu), celebrated widely across Igbo communities. Nwankwo (2018) asserts that the new yam festival marks the end of the harvest season and the beginning of a new agricultural cycle. The event involves ceremonial offerings to the earth goddess and ancestors, followed by communal feasting and dancing. The new yam festival not only celebrates the agricultural bounty but also serves as a time for the community to come together in thanksgiving, reinforcing social ties and cultural identity.

Another important festival is the Ofala Festival, primarily celebrated by the Obi (king) of Onitsha. Aneke (2019) states that this festival "honours the traditional ruler and marks the beginning of the new year in the Igbo calendar." The Ofala Festival includes a series of events such as parades,

cultural performances, and displays of traditional attire. It serves as a platform for showcasing the community's heritage and strengthens the authority of the traditional leadership while promoting unity among the people. The Ekpe Festival, celebrated by the Ekpe society in communities like Ugep and Calabar, highlights the importance of the Ekpe secret society in maintaining law and order within the community. Obinna (2020) notes that this festival "features traditional masquerades, drumming, and dancing" and is an opportunity for cultural education and the reinforcement of moral values. Through these festivities, the Ekpe society promotes social justice and ethical conduct among community members.

In recent years, the influence of globalization and urbanization has transformed the way cultural festivals are celebrated. Okwudili (2021) emphasizes that "digital media plays a crucial role in promoting these events, attracting tourists and enhancing cultural exchange." Communities have embraced social media platforms to showcase their festivals, thereby reaching global audiences and generating economic opportunities. For instance, the integration of modern technology during the "Ericha Afuo Oru" and New Yam Festival has attracted attention from beyond Igboland, leading to increased tourism and cultural appreciation.

The integration of digital tools and platforms has revolutionized how cultural festivals are organized, celebrated, and shared. Technologies such as social media, live streaming, and mobile applications have enhanced visibility and engagement, enabling broader participation and interaction beyond geographical boundaries (Nwafor, 2020). This digital shift offers communities opportunities to showcase their unique traditions, arts, and values to a wider audience, fostering greater appreciation for cultural diversity. As Ugochukwu (2019) highlights, the use of social media has allowed festivals to reach global audiences, creating virtual spaces for celebration that transcend physical limitations. In some Igbo communities, cultural festivals such as the "Ericha Afuo Oru" (the new yam festival), the Eri festival, and the Ofala festival play essential roles in reinforcing cultural identity and promoting communal ties. These festivals celebrate agricultural success, honour ancestors, and promote social harmony. By utilizing technology, communities can preserve their cultural heritage, engage younger generations, and foster a sense of pride in their identity. The challenge lies in finding a balance between embracing modernity and maintaining the authenticity of cultural practices. As cultural festivals evolve in the digital era, they must continue to serve as vital instruments of cultural identity and community resilience.

However, this digital transformation also raises concerns about the commercialisation of traditional practices and the potential loss of authenticity. As festivals become more visible globally, there is a risk that "the core cultural values may be overshadowed by economic interests (Okwudili, 2021). Therefore, communities need to strike a balance between modernisation and the preservation of cultural heritage. The commodification of culture can lead to superficial representations that do not capture the depth and significance of traditional practices. Furthermore, the digital divide may exacerbate inequalities, with some communities lacking access to the technologies needed to participate fully in the digital cultural landscape. Despite these challenges, the potential of digital tools to enhance cultural festivals remains significant.

Ericha Afuo Oru Festival vis-à-vis Communal and Human Relations Elements

The "Ericha Afuo Oru" festival is deeply rooted in communal values, symbolizing unity, togetherness, and the strengthening of inter-communal bonds. This festival is an essential part of

the cultural fabric, embodying the values of shared heritage and collective identity. It is designed not only as a celebration but as a means to reinforce familial ties, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence among community members. By bringing people together, "Ericha Afuo Oru" serves as a platform for nurturing relationships, bridging generational gaps, and fostering a sense of belonging, which is essential for social harmony and mutual support (Iroegbu, 2019). At its core, the festival encourages interactions among individuals, families, and even neighbouring communities, thereby building trust and empathy. Traditional rituals, dances, and storytelling sessions facilitate these connections, allowing participants to share in a common cultural experience and reaffirm their identity. This festival promotes the Igbo concept of *Umunna*, or extended kinship, where individuals see themselves as members of a larger, interconnected family. In this sense, "Ericha Afuo Oru" fosters mutual respect, shared responsibilities, and community care (Okeke, 2017).

Moreover, the festival is a platform for addressing community challenges and resolving conflicts. Elders and community leaders often play central roles, using the festival to impart wisdom, provide guidance, and encourage unity among families. As urbanization, migration, and modernization challenge traditional bonds, festivals like "Ericha Afuo Oru" become even more significant, offering a respite from individualism and a return to communal living (Nzeakor, 2020). The role of "Ericha Afuo Oru" in fostering human relations is not only cultural but also psychological, as it reinforces self-worth, community pride, and a sense of belonging. As participants partake in traditional rites and communal activities, they experience a profound sense of continuity and resilience within their cultural identity. In this way, the festival is instrumental in preserving both the social structure and emotional wellbeing of the community, contributing to a more stable, cooperative society.

The Place of Artificial Intelligence in the Preservation of Cultural Heritage

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a powerful tool in the preservation, promotion, and revitalization of cultural heritage. Through advanced capabilities in data processing, virtual simulations, and digital restoration, AI enables communities and institutions to document, analyze, and share cultural assets more effectively than ever before. By leveraging AI, cultural preservation efforts can go beyond mere documentation to create interactive and immersive experiences that bring heritage to life for a global audience, preserving cultural identity while enhancing accessibility (Mazzone, 2021). One of AI's significant contributions to cultural preservation is through digital archiving and restoration. By using machine learning algorithms, AI can analyse and repair deteriorated artefacts, artworks, and historical documents, enabling high-quality restoration. These techniques help protect artefacts vulnerable to physical decay, ensuring that future generations can experience these cultural items in near-original condition. Additionally, AI-driven data analytics allow for the categorization and retrieval of vast archives of cultural materials, making it easier to research and access specific aspects of heritage (Kenderdine & Shaw, 2020). AI also plays a critical role in immersive technology applications, such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). These tools enable users to engage with cultural sites, festivals, and practices virtually, allowing people from around the world to participate in cultural experiences that would otherwise be geographically out of reach. For example, cultural festivals and traditional ceremonies can be captured in VR and made accessible online, giving users an authentic sense of participation and thereby supporting the spread and appreciation of cultural diversity (Rahimi & Karimi, 2022).

Moreover, AI is instrumental in language preservation, especially for indigenous languages at risk of extinction. AI-powered translation tools and natural language processing (NLP) applications can analyze and translate spoken and written language, enabling communities to retain their linguistic heritage. Such initiatives contribute to the longevity of endangered languages and facilitate intergenerational transmission of knowledge. This is particularly valuable in societies where cultural and historical knowledge is primarily communicated orally (O'Hagan, 2019). While AI offers promising opportunities, it also presents challenges, including concerns about cultural sensitivity, the risk of misrepresentation, and ethical considerations when handling sacred or restricted knowledge. Communities and developers need to collaborate in AI-driven projects to ensure that cultural heritage is preserved respectfully and accurately, thus allowing AI to serve as a supportive tool rather than an intrusive force.

Leveraging Digital Technologies for the Promotion of Ericha Afuo Oru

In the digital age, technologies such as social media, virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI) present unprecedented opportunities to promote cultural festivals like "Ericha Afuo Oru" to broader and more diverse audiences. By utilising these tools, communities can not only preserve the festival's heritage but also foster global appreciation, enabling people worldwide to experience the richness of Igbo culture and values. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube allow organizers to reach wider audiences through live streaming, event promotion, and sharing festival highlights. By uploading videos, photos, and stories from past festivals, communities can create a digital footprint that captures the festival's essence and attracts new participants. Engaging content can be strategically planned and released to build excitement leading up to the event, encouraging local and international interest. Additionally, using hashtags and partnering with cultural influencers can enhance visibility, making "Ericha Afuo Oru" a recognizable cultural brand (Adekoya & Oluwagbemi, 2018). Virtual reality (VR) technology allows people who cannot attend the festival in person to experience it virtually. By creating VR tours or simulations of "Ericha Afuo Oru", participants from anywhere in the world can enjoy an immersive experience of the festival's traditional music, dance, and rituals. These VR experiences can serve as valuable educational tools, showcasing the festival's cultural significance to a global audience while helping local youths connect with their heritage in engaging, modern ways (Lambert, 2021).

Artificial intelligence (AI) also offers exciting possibilities for promoting "Ericha Afuo Oru". AI-driven tools such as language translation apps and voice recognition software enable the festival's unique traditions to be shared across language barriers, fostering cross-cultural understanding. Additionally, AI-powered analytics can track online engagement with festival content, helping organizers understand audience demographics, preferences, and behaviours. This data can be used to tailor promotional strategies and optimize future events, making the festival more inclusive and accessible to global audiences (Chen & Li, 2020). Through digital technology, the values and traditions of "Ericha Afuo Oru" can be preserved and shared in new ways that engage and educate people around the world. This digital expansion not only promotes Igbo heritage but also fosters cultural exchange, allowing others to appreciate the uniqueness and communal bonds that "Ericha Afuo Oru" celebrates. These tools thus ensure that the festival's legacy endures, adapting to modern platforms while honouring its traditional roots.

Conclusion

The "Ericha Afuo Oru" festival embodies the soul of Igbo cultural identity, reinforcing communal bonds, fostering intergenerational connections, and highlighting the rich traditions of the Igbo people. In today's digital era, preserving and promoting this festival through digital technology is not just an opportunity but a necessity to ensure its continuity and relevance. Digital platforms such as social media, virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI) have opened new doors, enabling local communities to transcend geographical barriers and share their heritage with a global audience. Social media offers powerful tools for increasing awareness and participation. By creating digital campaigns and visually engaging content, communities can capture the essence of "Ericha Afuo Oru" *and appeal* to both local youth and international audiences interested in cultural diversity. Live-streaming events and sharing stories and highlights enable real-time interaction, turning a once localised celebration into a globally accessible event. This digital presence also strengthens the festival's cultural brand, fostering pride among younger generations and enhancing local tourism, which can provide much-needed economic support for the community.

Virtual reality offers an immersive dimension to cultural preservation, allowing those unable to attend in person to experience the festival virtually. By creating VR simulations, the sights, sounds, and vibrancy of "Ericha Afuo Oru" can be preserved and shared, providing a sensory-rich experience that brings Igbo culture closer to those without direct access. Such experiences can be valuable educational tools, exposing the wider world to Igbo values and customs while also serving as an innovative way for local schools to engage young people with their heritage in an engaging format.

Artificial Intelligence technology holds a unique role in analysing, preserving, and documenting the festival's intricate details. AI-driven translation tools can break language barriers, making traditional Igbo songs, proverbs, and speeches accessible to non-Igbo speakers. Data analytics powered by AI can also offer insights into audience engagement, helping festival organisers understand the demographics and interests of viewers. This information can shape future promotional strategies, making the festival more inclusive and targeted in its outreach. Additionally, machine learning algorithms can assist in the digital preservation of cultural artefacts, songs, and oral histories associated with "Ericha Afuo Oru", creating a lasting archive for future generations. However, as technology becomes embedded in the festival's promotion, cultural custodians must guard against risks of commercialisation, superficial engagement, and potential cultural dilution. It is essential to balance technological innovation with the preservation of the festival's authenticity and sacred values. This calls for an ethical framework and collaborative input from community leaders, cultural experts, and tech professionals to ensure that digital representations honour the festival's core principles.

By integrating digital technologies, the "Ericha Afuo Oru" festival can thrive in the modern world without losing its traditional identity. This synergy between culture and technology not only safeguards the festival's legacy but also enriches it, providing new opportunities for learning, interaction, and appreciation. As a symbol of community and identity, "Ericha Afuo Oru" has the potential for greater impact, fostering mutual respect, cultural pride, and interconnectedness across cultures, thereby preserving the rich heritage of Igbo society for future generations.

Recommendations

To effectively promote and preserve the "Ericha Afuo Oru" festival in the digital age, several strategic actions are recommended:

- a.) Creating a comprehensive digital archive that documents the festival's history, rituals, music, dances, and oral traditions would be invaluable. Such an archive, supported by audio, video, and written records, ensures that key elements of "Ericha Afuo Oru" are preserved for future generations. Therefore, incorporating AI-driven search and retrieval tools can make this archive easily accessible to researchers, educators, and the public.
- b.) Artificial technologies could be employed to create immersive experiences of the "Ericha Afuo Oru" festival. These technologies can allow audiences worldwide to experience the festival virtually, even if they are unable to attend in person.
- c.) Given that much of the festival's cultural significance is conveyed through the Igbo language, AI-driven translation tools can help make this heritage more accessible to non-Igbo speakers. Language preservation initiatives, supported by AI, can document and translate oral histories, songs, and proverbs in ways that make them both accessible and culturally accurate.
- d.) Partnering with universities, cultural institutions, and technology experts can bring additional expertise and resources. These partnerships could assist with research, digital archiving, and the use of innovative technologies such as Artificial Intelligence. Grants and sponsorships from cultural preservation organizations could provide financial support for these efforts.
- e.) Creating a recognizable cultural brand for "Ericha Afuo Oru" would enhance its value as a unique cultural product. Brand elements could include official logos, slogans, and a website dedicated to the festival. This brand identity would help promote the festival consistently across all digital and physical channels, making it easier for local and international audiences to recognise and connect with it.

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List of interviewees

Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	Place of interview	Date
Apostle Emmanuel Okeke	53	Male	Pastor	Ogbunka	02/11/24
Chief Michael Anozie	73	Male	Self employed	Ogbunka	25/10/24
Chief Felix Ike	56	Male	Self employed	Ogbunka	25/10/24
Mr Slyvanus Onwu	43	Male	Self employed	Ogbunka	26/10/24