Cultural Leadership, Festivity and Unity
Rendezvousing in Benin Kingdom, Nigeria

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Abstract
Unity is an indicator of peaceful coexistence among a people. This is probably why people strive to establish unity in their society. The Benins are no exception. The annual Igue Festival is not the least of unifying cultural activities through which the cultural leadership (Oba) of the ancient kingdom enhances the peaceful coexistence of the people. In fact, it seems about the most efficient and definitely the oldest of such mechanisms. The fact that it has outlived several generations and is yet to be eroded by the culture of the West lends credence to its deep rootedness in the hearts of the people. The concern of this paper is to analytically discuss the relevance of the Igue Festival to the people of the ancient Benin kingdom of Nigeria in contemporary times. Particularly, it studies, descriptively, the overall significance of the major activities of the 14-day festival without leaving its history, key actors, stages and even economic benefits untouched. Looking at its subject-matter from the theoretical perspective of social participation, the paper concludes that the various activities of the Igue Festival, which plays the tripartite role of spiritual security, social unification and tourist attraction, are key to the continued existence of peace and unity among the Benin people.

Introduction
A festival is a customary as well as a civic event. More than any other homogeneous group in the world, Africa could be said to be a robust, dynamic repository of cultural festivals as the continent accounts for thousands of cultural festivals which have and are still poised to survive the tempest of time and westernisation. The reality that many festivals antedate modern civilisation and have survived from the earliest days of human civilisation cannot be in doubt. The world over, festivals, owing to their deep rootedness in cultures, are superlative institutions around which the ensemble of arts are coordinated (Oguniba, 1983). If we agree on the standard definition of culture as the total way of life of a people, reiterated and expounded by Edo (2007:1) to include the totality of human behavioural and thought patterns made up of religion, customs, traditions that run through the

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activities of a people, including the manner of kingship investiture and various festivals, there would then be no disputing the fact that humans, in their various unique societies, are inseparable from the festivals which are indisputably a sacrosanct part of their cultures. Therefore, under the conceptual shield of the aforementioned scholars, it could be postulated that many communal festivals in Africa, irrespective of temporal and spatial bearings, serve both secular and sacred functions, and the latter functions usually revolve around beliefs and practices that emanate from African Traditional Religions. Ero (2006:115) and Edo (2007:2-3) are of the opinion that the secular value of culture is assessed in terms of material things (houses, tools, weapons, clothing, arts and crafts, etc.), and non-material elements (language, music, dance, story, law, governance, etc.), while Ademiju-Bepo (2012:213) contends that its divine value is assessed through its attachment to a certain supernatural being or deified ancestor on whom adherents rely for foundation, inspiration, recognition and gratification. It is most probably as a result of the latter that the erroneous claim that cultural festivals are diabolical is predicated. Many people, especially in the quarters of fanatical religions, have charged them with being fetish and barbaric and hence called for their prohibition. The tragedy here is two-fold; apart from the aspersions that are cast on the metaphysical essences of these traditional festivals and belief-systems that underpin them, there is also a display of ignorance as to the role that these festivals play in guaranteeing peaceful and harmonious relations. Consequent upon this, there has been a proliferation in the extant literature of accounts which examine cultural festivals through the prisms of religion, identity, morality, tourism, demonology, barbarism, etc. (Reader, 1998:414), as against the scanty number of works which have approached the subject matter through the optic of how it sponsors social unification and peaceful coexistence.

To this point, adopting the age-long Igbe festival of the people of Benin Kingdom, Nigeria as paradigm, it has become incumbent to rethink cultural festivals as an apparatus employed by cultural leaders in Nigeria to establish social unification. Their relevance to the peaceful coexistence of Nigerians in an era where disunity appears to be the order of the day is worthy of appraisal. The choice of the Igbe festival stems from its status as one of the oldest cultural festivals in Nigeria in particular, and Africa at large, and one which has for centuries commanded the attention of foreigners the world over (Ryder, 1969). Another reason is that the festival is centred on the very revered Oba who, till date, remains the cultural leader of the people as well as the custodian of their culture and tradition.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of social participation theory has of recent become ambiguous due to technological advancement and the advent of the new (social) media. Not to be confused with the technologically-mediated social participation systems such as Wikipedia and TopCoder, Social Participation Theory within the context of the collectivism model projected by Argyle (1968:37-42) can be best understood only when the concept of
participation itself is clarified. Although Claridge (2004) postulates that there is no commonly agreed definition of participation, Lane and Hussein (1995) and Kelly (2001) have corroboratively contended that participation means different things to different people, in other words, it is a broad, relative concept. In contemporary times, political scientists have hijacked the concept of participation, having recourse to it for explaining several governmental issues, including politics, electioneering, resource control, etc., a situation that has led to its being dubbed "Community Participation". This therefore justifies Felling’s (1998:469-486) claim that participation is a concept resulting in a series of contending meanings and applications because of its ideological perception. As such, accepting the definition of a community as "a range of factors including geographic location, norms and interest" would coincide with admitting that community participation is synonymous with social participation. Interestingly, there are works that have defined social participation as the involvement of all stakeholders, at all stages, in development. Ndekha et al (2003:325-338) and Chimala (1995:5-42) are among those credited with authorship of such works. In their opinion, social participation would mean a social process whereby specific groups with shared needs living in a defined geographic area actively pursue identification of their needs; and establish mechanisms to meet these needs.

Such needs could be material, ideological or, by Azar’s (1994) standards, value or identity-based (distinctive identity, social recognition of identity and effective participation in the process that shapes such identities), whose satisfaction is highly likely to attract peace just as whose dissatisfaction may most likely result in mayhem in society. In the former case, development is assured, while in the latter it is impaired, hampered or completely unfeasible, hence Lane’s (1995) standpoint that participation is heavily influenced by theories of development. Undeniably, cultural identity is one of the basic needs of a people. It is a truism that a people would do anything to keep hold of their cultural identity, thus, a people deprived or rid of such a psychological, value-based need could fight with the last drop of their blood to regain it. This probably explains why Faleti (2012:50) considers identity (or deprivation of it) as the reason for the most dangerous and most violent social conflicts that take long to resolve - if resoluble. Now, there is no disputing the fact that a communal festival is one of the numerous mechanisms and about the most efficient medium through which Africans assert and maintain their culture (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2012:9) and solidify their identity. It also makes life meaningful and affords participants the feeling of social, physical, psychological and spiritual security. Therefore, when communal festivals are set aside, conflict inevitably sets in (Northrup, 1989:65).

This disposition is further and better illuminated by the psycho-cultural theory of conflict which explicates that social conflict could be induced by cultural alteration, thereby suggesting that cultural identity based on the ethnic origin of a people is a sine qua non to unity and peaceful coexistence. In other words, when access to psychological and aspirational needs on the pedestal of ethnic
identity is denied, conflict is inevitable (Faleti, 2012:51). Inversely, access granted to same is akin to relative peace and unity.

A Foray into Cultural Festivals

The dictionary meaning of the word "festival" has practically rendered its concept rather equivocal. The 7th edition of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2005) of the English Language presents three condensed but gravid explanations for the word. First, it refers to it as a series of performances of music, plays, films/movies, etc. usually organised in the same place once a year. It is also said to be a series of public events connected with a particular activity or idea. Thirdly, it is presented as a day or period of the year when people stop working to celebrate a special event, often a religious one.

The first definition presented here above may infer that a festival is traditional and ritualistic given that its venue, time of occurrence and, sometimes activities, as pointed out by Ogunba (1983), are not dynamic. More so, it is not a one-off activity. This is equally the suggestion of the second definition which, in consonance with Ademiju-Bepo (2012:214), further emphasises its public nature in terms of participation and its constancy in terms of idea. While all three definitions here above are somewhat related, the third one diverges where it introduces the idea of religion. Suffice it to say that whereas a festival may be of religious significance, not all festivals stem from or relate to a specific religion as there exist festivals that are exclusively secular. Further, another factor marries all three definitions presented above: a festival is connected to a special event.

Whether a festival is religious or secular, the fact remains that many festivals are commemorative, especially when communal in origin and participation, in the sense that they aim at honouring and/or remembering a person or event of importance. The commemorative and traditional (temporally and spatially repetitive) characteristics of festival lend credence to its cultural depth. Thus, it is quite obvious that festivals are organised in all societies, irrespective of geography or historical period.

Omoera (2008:114) apparently puts it better in affirming that festivals anywhere in the world represent the experiences of human beings, either of a person, a group or a nation, adding that every community in the world has its own sense of appreciating its art-performance through festivals. Outside Africa, for instance, there abound cultural festivals, extant and extinct, known to be of utmost germaneness if not to religion and spirituality alone, at least to the strengthening of the unity and economy of various nations. These festivals are too numerous to mention or even to be adequately navigated in just one paper. Notwithstanding, an attempt shall be made to point out some current festivals in Europe and Asia in addition to Africa, and one from each continent shall be discussed in brief.

In Europe, existing festivals include the Netting Hill Carnival of England; the Fringe Festival of Scotland; the Las Fallas Festival of Spain; the Oktoberfest of Germany; the II Palio Festival of Italy and the Boom Festival of Portugal. A culmination of art, music, culture and spirituality, the Boom Festival is described as a transformational festival held in central Portugal. It is a series of biennial
celebrations which feature a variety of musical performances, art exhibitions and holistic workshops. It is interesting to note that it shares certain themes in common with African cultural festivals such as the Igue festival though it is centuries younger. Since its inception in 1997, it has been considered not just as a festival but as a state of mind. It is inspired by the principles of oneness, peace, creativity, sustainability, transcendence, alternative culture, active participation, evolution and love. The week-long psychedelic festival is attended by festivalgoers from all around the world. The Boom festival has as its main focus integrating sustainability ethos with arts and culture, in order to accord visitors and participants alike a transformational experience. The spiritual-cum-ritualistic dimension of the festival cannot be overemphasised. It is primordially focused on "therapies to rebalance one's inner chi (spirit) through love, compassion, wisdom, beauty, forgiveness, patience, acceptance, kindness, and it has been said that to enter the Healing Area of the festival is to return to the Great Mother's womb". The festival is more than just a music festival although the four dance stages (dance temple, Alchemy circle, Sacred Fire and the Chill out Gardens) are integral to its success (www.fest300.com/festivals/where/europe).

In Asia, the Hong Kong Arts Festival of China; the Songkran Festival of Thailand; the Bali Spirit Festival of Indonesia; the Boryeong Mud Festival of South Korea and the Ati-Atiban Festival of the Philippines top the list of the most renowned festivals. Deeply rooted in the belief of intertribal acceptance, the Ati-Atiban is without any doubt a pro-unity festival. Historically, it evolved from the story of intertribal acceptance, immigration and transformation. According to Asian historiography, in the 13th century, the Ati tribe of Kalibo in present-day Aklan, Philippines, allowed Malay refugees fleeing Borneo to settle among them in spite of racial and cultural heterogeneity. Years later, when the Ati tribe was challenged by famine, the Malay refugees returned the favour by feeding them. The Ati then expressed their gratitude through songs and dance. The festival is a colourful nine-day exhibition of costume and dance. Soot-black painted faces, feather headdresses and animal bones create an arresting visual impression. Apart from drumming and dancing, which usually breakout at dawn and continue till the end of the festival, there is also a mass outdoor procession behind a sacred image of Santo Nino, the Saviour. It is noteworthy to mention that Spanish colonialists gave this festival a Christian Colouration. Residents come out in their soot-coloured best by early afternoon to perform the spectacular street dancing metaphorically known as sadsad. The climax of the whole festival is witnessed by thousands of people. This is the atmospheric torchlight procession that takes place in the evening in honour of Santo Nino. During this event, the famous masquerade ball romps through the night (www.asia.com/journeys/asia/asia-coms-top-festivals-in-asia-2012-2013).

In Africa, some significant cultural/religious festivals are the Abu Simbel Festival of Egypt; the Morija Arts and Cultural Festival of South Africa; the Mwakakogwa Festival of Uganda; the Os/m-Osogbo, Argungun, Sango, Oro, Eko Festivals of Nigeria; and the Ga
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Homowo Festival of Ghana (www.africaguide.com/culture/events.htm#nigeria). According to Thomas (2007:44), Homowo, literally meaning "hoot at hunger", is about the greatest social event of the Ga people of Ghana, hence it plays a significant role in the lives of the people. The four-month festival which begins in May is a combination of ritual, ceremonial, artistic and recreational activities which occur in different sites and according to a scheduled time frame. Ammah (1982) records that the festival, which marks the beginning of the Ga sacred year, commemorates the overcoming of a disastrous famine which took place hundreds of years ago in the course of their migration to their present abode. The festival is said to be the first food harvest to commemorate the great famine. Ga in the diaspora return home during the festive period to reunite with their families, remember their fallen heroes, contract marriages, settle disputes and purify themselves through ablutions. From the very first day of the festival, villagers converge in the city in order to partake in the festivities and would not return until the end of the celebrations.

From the foregoing, it could be inferred that every festival, especially one with religio-cultural bearing, is of immense value to its participants. As would be noticed in the subsequent part of this study, the three festivals discussed so far cut across three different continents, yet they all have certain features in common with Igue festival. They are loaded with socio-touristic activities such as music, dance, procession, art exhibition, etc. Also, they attract an international interest. Again, they have a touch of divinity. Significantly, they all are linked to historical events and/or one deity or the other, which make them sacred in the eyes of festival-goers and more significantly, they all indisputably have a unanimous goal and effect of oneness, hospitality and peaceful coexistence. Furthermore, they involve activities that necessitate and command social participation - and intrusive participation alike. Another noteworthy element of unanimity among them is timing, which aligns with Ogunba's (1983) chronometric observation that a festival could last from three, seven, nine or sixteen days to a month or even three months.

The Benin Kingdom: People and Culture

Tunde-Olowu (1990:11;16) and Ero (2006:1-6) think that African historiography has, till date, failed in its responsibility to ascertain the origin of the Bini simply because there is yet to be any definitive, authoritative pronouncement on the subject, thereby suggesting that the matter is as elusive as uncertain. However, they have a story to tell in unanimity with Bradbury (1957). They claim that the Benin kingdom, formerly Igodomigodo, formally Ile-Ibinu and formerly Ubini, was founded by the youngest son of Osanobua (The High God) while his elder brothers busied themselves with establishing the Ube (Ife) kingdom(s). They better contend that all siblings had ascended from the heavens, hence the original title of Benin kings, Ogiso, meaning "king from the sky", ogie being translated as "king", and iso as "sky". This view does not only imply that the Benins migrated from nowhere, it equally purports that they came into existence right from the beginning.
of creation, as against the claim of frontline autochthonous scholars of Benin Studies such as Egharevba (1968), Omorogie (1997) and Oronsaye (1995) that the people migrated from Egypt and/or Sudan "many, many years ago". Obviously, the trio's account constitutes but one of the several documented oral mythologies of the origin of the people. Apparently harnessing certain of such mythologies, Igbafe (2007:41) maps out three phases of Benin History related to its existence and origin, from the oldest to the latest: (1) the foundation or Ogiso Period of 900-1170 - which Omorogie (1997) fragments in his four-tome Great Benin, into four distinct periods namely the age of /so Norbo, the age of Odionwere, the age of Ogiso Foundation and the age of Ogiso Reform - (2) the Second or New Kings or Obas Dynasty and (3) the colonial Period.

The Benins, whether pioneer terrestrial indigenes or intrusive settlers, what is undisputable about them is that they are today relatively a minority group whose legitimate claim to terrestrial ownership does not extend beyond Benin City in present-day Edo State of Nigeria, as against their pre-colonial sphere of influence which extended as far as (hi) Dahomey and even Togo (Barnes and Amos 1983:8; Dike 1959; Ryder 1967; Oronsaye 1995:125). Remarkably, recent figures from the 2006 census presented by the National Population Commission of Nigeria show that the city has a population of about 1,147,188 persons within the Edo-speaking territory of Egor, Ikpoba-Okha, Oredo, Orhionmwon, Ovia North-East, Ovia South-West, and Ubunmwade Local Government Areas of the state. Right from the epoch of the transatlantic slave trade when the patriarchal kingdom was celebrated for its continually unparalleled export of guinea pepper, ivory, cotton, fine raffia textiles, beads, redwood, rubber and palm oil up until the early years of independence, the men were basically traders, farmers, hunters, fishermen, craftsmen and artists (Plankensteiner 2007:25; Eisenhofer 2007:55) while the women were involved in family upkeep, petty trading, hair and basket weaving and small-scale farming. The people are also renowned for their collectivist lifestyle as well as monumental arts and crafts which distinguish them from most African societies. Fabricated by guilds such as Igun Eronmwon, Igbesamwan, Enisen, Owina n’Ido, Isobian/Isekpokin and Igun-Ematon (Inneh 2007:103-112; Tunde-Olowu 1990:39-45), Benin art comprises works of impressive, aesthetic quality, monumental and original master craftsmanship including bronze, ivory carvings, brass objects, corals and elephant tusks with figurative carvings, commemorating kings, queens, history, heroes and heroines. Most of the output was regrettably seized by the British in the course of the Benin Punitive Expedition of 1897 (Ugboaja 2007:18-19).

In terms of spirituality, the Benin people are deeply religious. Over the years, the people, owing to their established cultural and religious affinity, have invented and imported innumerable gods such as Ayelala, Ebomisi, Isago, Ikpoba, Ogun, Okbuahie, Olokun, Orunmila, Ovia, etc. even before the introduction of foreign religions. Their traditional religion is deeply rooted in a belief system founded on deities, with natural forces acting as middlemen between divinity and
humanity. In fact, Oronsaye (1995: 129) records that there are two categories of deity with many branches. He further identifies that the first category brought from Egypt is made up of 3,000 branches. Interestingly, each deity is represented abroad with mobile and fixed shrines/temples of worship, and a lot of houses, till date, still retain their ancestral shrines each of which is dedicated to a particular deity (Gore, 2007:137) in spite of their conversion to foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam. It is noteworthy that their much celebrated military might of yesteryear, which reached its peak in the 16th and 17th centuries, was tied to their strong belief in deities, one of whom is the Oba. With lyase, Ezomo, Edogun, Ekegbian and Ologbosere as foremost military commanders, history records that the kingdom was defined by warfare and war episodes until its military supremacy eventually declined in the second part of the nineteenth century (Osadolor, 2007:73). As one would expect, freeborn and slaves alike were recruited and conscripted into the military for unforgettable mtra- and inter-kingdom conquests, such as the destruction of Udo, the conquests of Afemai, Agbor, Akure, Ijo, Ilesha, Itsekiri, Mahin (Eko), Northern Edo, Owo, Oyo empire, Urhobo, and the Benin Massacre, in which the British had to war on for six solid months to penetrate the kingdom despite their matchless military advantage (Ryder, 1969:50; Igbafe, 2007:49). Undeniably, the Benins are excellent in cultural inclination; they are also developmentally dynamic, flexible and receptive, notably in the aspects of economy, politics and diplomacy. No wonder that they embraced foreign educational and religious systems with little or no resistance. No wonder, too, that they and their kings found it uncomplicated to adapt to the multifaceted socio-political changes ushered in by colonialism. What makes them exceptional, again, is their ability to salvage their cultural ways and ceremonies from erosion under the onslaught of Western civilisation. In the words of Igbafe (2007:53), there is much that is old in the New Benin after British contact.

Cultural Festivals in Benin Kingdom

Benin has a very rich tradition of festivals (Otedo.com, 2011; Omoera, 2008). Besides the famous Igue festival, the kingdom boasts over a hundred cultural festivals celebrated each year, most of which are linked to one deity or the other and some of which have already gone extinct. It is instructive to mention that although most of these festivals usually occur in villages and are coordinated by Enigie (Dukes), Edion-were (Ruling Village Chiefs) and Ohen (Priests), the Oba, being the custodian of all the gods and deities in the kingdom, has control over all religious activities of the kingdom and, as such, he approves all religious activities especially festivals, before they are performed (Oronsaye 1995:129). The large majority of the existing festivals in Benin kingdom are annual in nature. Currently, the most renowned of them, as briefly elucidated in Otedo.com (2011), are presented below.

Ague festival: This has a lot in common with the popular New Yam festival of the Igbo people. It is an annual ceremony during which offering of new yam is made at all the altars in the Oba Palace. It appears
to be a Benin version of the popular New Yam festival. Although it is celebrated low-key by an initiated few, it used to be a festival for all and sundry in Benin, and until the festival was over and done with, it was a taboo for any household to harvest and eat yams - even theirs. The Oba had the exclusive right of being the first to taste yam in the harvest period of each year.

Eghute festival: Eghute is a festival with series of rites designed to protect pregnant women of the kingdom and to guarantee them sound delivery.

Isiube festival: This is a set of rites to ensure fertility of the soil of the kingdom. It is traditionally performed by Ogiefa lineage which happens to be, according to oral tradition, one of the earliest inhabitants of the land.

Olokun festival: This festival is named after and spiritually linked to Olokun, the god of fertility. It is a celebration of fertility believed to be responsible for bringing healthy children.

Osun festival: This festival is connected to the god of medicine. It has its root in the Osun River goddess of Osogbo and is predicated by the calendar and activities of the Osww-Osogbo festival of the Osun people. It is believed that the festival assures the celebrants menssana in corpore sano. The Ewaise ward is responsible for performing this festival in honour of Osin.

Ugic Ewere: This particular festival is sacrosanct to the Benins. It is a festivity in which all evil spirits are chased away with fire before dawn and the "leaves of peace" (Ebe-Ewere) are brought into the land and distributed to all inhabitants. This event was initiated by Oba Ewuare the Great around 1400 A.D. In contemporary times, it has been included as part of the events marking the end of the Igue festival - before the thanksgiving service.

Ugie-Oro: This is a celebration of the bird of prophecy initiated by Oba Esigie sometime around 1506 A.D. after his victory over Igala in a fierce battle.

Worth mentioning is the fact that only few of Benin festivals are purely secular, all others are rather sacred with socio-secular undertones. This should render explanations for why quite a number of them are more esoteric than universal in nature. Through festivals, the people appease the various gods and goddesses, purify the land and individual celebrants, initiate men and women into age-grades, and arrange get-togethers. The celebrations also afford occasions for re-union of members of families, friends and visitors who come to feel the rich cultural heritage of the Benin people. Oronsaye (1995:130) maintains that the priests fix dates for the festivals subject to the Oba's approval. The nitty-gritty of the festivals is the regular and bloody rituals performed and prayers offered for the Oba, his subjects and the entire kingdom. Other festivals of socio-cultural importance are the Ama Ikkube festival, Ayelala festival, Eho festival, Ekaba festival, Ekpo festival, Ikpoleki festival, Ovia festival, Ugie Azama, Ugie-Ivie, Ugie Ododua and Ugie-Ogten (Iyare 2004; Omoera 2008:111).
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**Igue Festival: History and Significance**

*Igue* festival has been the biggest and most popular cultural festival of the Benins for over four centuries. It is in fact the most important and widely celebrated of all festivals of the Benins. Ogbonmwan (2007) in consensus *ad idem* submits that it is an annual national festival of thanksgiving as well as the heart and soul of Edo nationalism, considering the fact that all Edo speaking groups, dukedoms and villages in the seven local government areas earlier mentioned above are full partners. It is difficult, if not impossible, to trace the precise commencement date of *Igue* festival. However, historians are in unanimity that this socio-religious "communal assemblage" antedates colonial times and dates to the period before *Oba* Ewuare the Great who reigned over Benin in the 15th century (1440-1473 A.D.) and made lots of modifications to the festival, making it particularly centred on the throne. It is vital to record that between this period and contemporary times, the festival has as well undergone a number of modifications to the festival, making it particularly centred on the throne. It is difficult, if not impossible, to trace the precise commencement date of *Igue* festival. However, historians are in unanimity that this socio-religious "communal assemblage" antedates colonial times and dates to the period before *Oba* Ewuare the Great who reigned over Benin in the 15th century (1440-1473 A.D.) and made lots of modifications to the festival, making it particularly centred on the throne. It is vital to record that between this period and contemporary times, the festival has as well undergone a number of modifications to the festival, making it particularly centred on the throne. It is vital to record that between this period and contemporary times, the festival has as well undergone a number of modifications to the festival, making it particularly centred on the throne. It is vital to record that between this period and contemporary times, the festival has as well undergone a number of modifications to the festival, making it particularly centred on the throne. It is vital to record that between this period and contemporary times, the festival has as well undergone a number of modifications to the festival, making it particularly centred on the throne.

Essentially, the festival marks the end of the Benin year and introduces a new one which the people hope will be peaceful, prosperous and characterised by good luck. The *Oba*, being the embodiment of Edo culture, is the convener and chief celebrant. The people look up to him for spiritual and cultural leadership and pray for good luck for him with the belief that his good luck is intertwined with theirs. This probably explains why the *Oba's* head is anointed with native chalk and blood of different animals during the festival, signifying purity. It also probably accounts for why chiefs pay homage to the *Oba* who is customarily the first to perform his *Igue* rites before members of the royal family, and then the others follow suit. The festival is also an occasion for thanking the ancestors for the peace, unity and fruitfulness enjoyed in the outgoing year, with beams of hope for a replication of same in the incoming one. To be assured of this, the gods are appeased; the land and individual celebrants are purified. Additionally, the celebrations also encourage inter-group integration not only at local and national levels but also at the level of international participants who show-up for touristic reasons.

**Social Participation and Unity Nexus in Igue Festival**

*Igue* is a 14-day festival with a series of significant and commemorative socio-religious cultural ceremonies. These ceremonies can further be classified into two major categories, i.e. esoteric and universal. While the esoteric ceremonies are sacred, secret rituals performed outdoors for and on the *Oba* and his ancestors, the universal ceremonies coincide with those performed outdoors for the viewing pleasure.
of all and sundry. Many of the performances of the festival are collectivist rather than individualistic in nature, as each individual is merged in the group to which s/he belongs; and the actors and activities might vary. This unveils the unifying nature and structure of the festival, demonstrating Nketia's (1964:1) postulation that a festival is an integrative force in a community life.

The current study shall therefore concern itself with the most unifying among the universal, rather than the esoteric, category of ceremonial activities which take place within ten days to descriptively highlight the social participation and unity nexus of the festival. These ceremonies are among the nine sequentially enlisted in Festivals of Bendel State, Nigeria (1975: 39), cited in Omoera (2008:113) as Otue-Ugierhoba, Ugie-Erboba, Ugie-Iron, Otue-Iguoba, Igue-Inene, Ugie-Emobo, Igue-Ivbioba, Igue-Edobia, and Ugie-Ewere, respectively. The tenth ceremony in the sequence, Ekponmwen, which takes place at the Benin Traditional Church, the Holy Aruosa Cathedral, is relatively novel. It is an innovation credited to Omo n'Oba n'Edo, Uku Akpolokpolo Akenzua, to mark the end of the whole festival.

During the first in the series, Otue-Ugierhoba, various groups and societies situated within and outside the kingdom, as well as chiefs in their full traditional regalia, armed with their staffs of office (eben), dance in the company of their various cultural musical troupes, friends, business associates and family members to the palace to pay allegiance to the Oba and offer prayers of prosperity and longevity for the reigning king. They go before the Oba, individually and collectively, portraying their artistic dexterity in dancing and manipulation of the eben. This activity unfolds in a designated location in the palace in broad daylight to the admiration and cheers of courtiers, guests, tourists and all present. A Master of Ceremonies is usually available to announce to the cheerful public the names of performing chiefs and ceremonies being observed. Similarly, a tour guide and an interpreter are traditionally assigned to tourists to ensure that they are adequately carried along. The ceremony, which must be brought to a close before dusk, lasts hours with all chiefs taking their turn, beginning from the highest to the lowest in the hierarchy. While this is on-going, wives, children, relatives and friends of the various chiefs get acquainted with each other, while those who are already friends and acquaintances seize the opportunity to re-unite. This ceremony, no doubt, richly represents the socio-cultural and economic aspects of the festival and enhances the unity and peaceful co-existence of the people.

In similitude and sequence, Ugie-Erboba is next in the series of activities in the festival. The ceremony is also focused on the Oba and is observed in two main activities, the first of which is esoterically ritualised and the second collectively attended. Here, the Oba does for his fathers what his chiefs do for him. While his chiefs reaffirm their loyalty to him and fervently seek his favour, he, likewise, pays tribute to his forefathers (predecessors) represented in form of images, sculptures and staffs in their shrines. During this ceremony, hereditary chieftaincy titles are conferred on the heir-apparent, while other titles are also conferred on eligible indigenes. As custom
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demands, chiefs-to-be as well as newly-appointed chiefs line up with their eben to elegantly display before the Oba. Once again, similar audiences as those of the previous ceremony appreciate their performances with songs and chants of "lyarel" to wish the performers success. The major points of divergence of this ceremony from the Otue Igue-Oba are the paralinguistic (significant and ritualistic, nonverbal vocal communication) participation of the Uzama n’ihiron (Kingmakers) and the active display by the Eghaevbo n’Ore order of chiefs (the third entity in the Benin monarchical structure, headed by the lyase).

Another unifying socio-religious ceremony of the Igue festival is Ugie-Emobo. The uniqueness of the Emobo lies in its purpose of ridding the kingdom of malicious spirits and rival challengers to the throne and also in its venue: outside the palace, right in front of the palace main gate. The major performers in this ceremony are the royal orchestra group, Ogbelaka, Osa/Osuan and the Oba. After all necessary rites and rituals, the Oba, accompanied by a royal entourage, takes a walk as far as he can go towards the city centre saluting and blessing the huge crowd, who unanimously receive same with joyous uproar. Later that evening, the Oba treats his subjects and other guests to a dinner at the palace.

Igue-Ivbioba and Igue-Edohia have a lot in common. They are as unifying at the grassroots level as the Otue Igue-Oba. While the former, which occurs about four days earlier, offers members of the royal family the opportunity to perform Igue rites in their various houses and dukedoms, the latter does same for all Edo indigenes home and abroad. Igue-IVibioba and Igue-Edohia are usually big feasts where any animal of choice and affordability is slaughtered and prayers offered by heads of families and local priests to the gods on behalf of families and individuals. Kola nuts, coconuts, native chalk and the blood of animals are the main ingredients for the festival. Significantly, friends, family members, acquaintances and associates constitute those who grace and participate fully in this all-integrative occasion. It is worthy of note that Benin indigenes in the diaspora, who can afford to, seize this opportunity to travel down home to reunite with their families while others, who cannot afford to make the trip, may perform the Igue rites in their countries of abode. Although there is no hard and fast rule as to when the celebration should take place, most families prefer to celebrate overnight, culminating it with Ugie-Ewere as early as four or five o'clock in the morning.

Ugie-Ewere in itself is a representation of unity and peace. Ewere means peace. It also means joy. The ceremony which re-enacts the story of the expulsion of Ubi, a devilish queen, from the kingdom, and her replacement with Ewere, a godly and loving one, was introduced into the Igue festival centuries ago during the reign of Oba Ewuare the Great. Thenceforth, Ubi "became synonymous with evil spirit and sundry bad things while Ewere personified good fortune and divine favour" (Omoera 2008:113). It is the belief of the Benin people that evil spirits bring about chaos and disunity and as such, this history must be reenacted year in, year out in order that evil spirits are driven away from the land and good spirits
welcomed for the assurance of peace, joy and harmony. To this end, the onus lies with the Ibogbe family of the kingdom to symbolically chase away Ubi with flaming firewood into the forest where they would eventually pluck the symbolic Ewere leaves, referred to by Isekhure (2007) as a symbol of hope, prosperity and peace, in superabundance, which they share from house to house amid prayerful songs chants and traditional dances. Two prayerful songs of peace and longevity are basically sung during this ceremony: "ewere dee kie ne ewere" (peace is coming, receive peace) and "omo okhuo gbi wu vbe owa na, ise! Omo okpia gbi wu vbe owa na, ise\ (No male or female shall die young in this house, Amen!). Residents receive these leaves with joy and paste them on their foreheads and reward the bringers with cash and/or food because it is conventional to believe that the leaves bring joy and peace while expelling death from households. On that same day, the whole kingdom converges in the palace of the Oba at dusk where the Ibogbe family members led by the Isekhure of Benin kingdom present the Ewere leaves to the Oba in a massive ceremony while making prayers for him.

Another significant participatory-cum-unifying activity of the Igue festival is the wrestling match, a novel practice in the festival introduced by the current Oba of Benin, Oba Erediauwa, probably to give the citizenry the opportunity to, through a vicarious experience, partake in the secretly performed ritual of Ugie-Iron, especially now that the ritual may no longer be in practice owing to "young age" and "ever increasing strength" of the Oba. Unlike Ugie-Iron, the wrestling match representing it is spectacularly a free-for-all affair which takes place live in the open air before the sitting Oba. Basically, it is a tournament of different matches, the first of which re-enacts the historical rebellion of Chief Ogiamien during the kingship restoration in the days of Oranmiyan from Ile-Ife, which was subsequently imitated in a mock-battle between the Oba and members of Uzama n ‘Thinron (kingmakers) at a historic place called Eki-Okpagba. This is a historical landmark in Benin history. Secondly, there are wrestlers who represent different prominent families in Benin history known to have been at loggerheads at one point or the other. At the end of the tournament, there is traditionally an exchange of warm hugs and handshakes between the victor and the vanquished. The central message of the wrestling match is that although conflict is inevitable in the society, it could result in unbreakable peace and unity if effectively managed.

The last but not the least in the sequence of ceremonies of Igue festival is Ekponmwen which marks the climax of all activities. Ekponmwen means thanksgiving. This, again, is novel. It is held at the Holy Aruosa Cathedral, the traditional church of the Benin Monarch since the era of Akenzua IT usually on the very Sunday after Ugie-Ewere. As tradition demands, the Oba, his family, courtiers, chiefs and interested indigenes of the kingdom converge at the cathedral to offer thanks to the ancestors and Osanobua (the High God) for the success of the whole festival. There, the chief priest (Oben) of the church offers prayers of thanksgiving to God on behalf of the Oba, his family and the entire kingdom. He also prays for the Oba and his subjects to enjoy peace, unity and prosperity.
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All in attendance render thanksgiving songs and join in praying for the kingdom. It is this thanksgiving service that marks the end of the annual Igue festival.

Conclusion

The traditional leadership of Benin kingdom rests on the Oba who significantly employs the Igue Festival as one of the many vibrant tools for cultural diplomacy, unity and peaceful coexistence among the Benins. Igue festival is not in the least different in primordial objective from all other cultural festivals the world over. It plays the tripartite guaranteeing role of spiritual security, social unification and touristic attraction. The festival is undoubtedly endowed with unforgettable and magnificent experiences of songs, incantations, dance, music, chants and recitals, wining and dining. All these activities put together are undeniably a summation of merrymaking, which in itself is at the same time an indicator and a propellant of unity and peaceful coexistence. It goes without saying that the line-up of events at the Igue festival, highlighted and discussed in this essay, typifies Africanness given that it can in no way be achieved on an individual basis but through social participation. No wonder that Argyle (1968:37) affirms that African life is generally more collective than individualistic - the feeling of one for all and all for one being more predominant in Western Africa than in Western Europe, and he adds that dancing and singing are again usually collective rather than individual activities. He further posits that dealing with Africans means dealing with solidarity with unlimited mutual responsibility. Thus, one can safely assert that social participation in the Igue festival engenders unity, social integration, cohesion, solidarity and consensus among the Benin people of Nigeria. This is apparently buttressed by Argyle (1968:37) when he emphasises that African and African-descended ethnic groups, or nationalities, are not organised on the basis of narrow interests and that at the bottom, one finds the families which are the basic units of affiliation; and then there are the age groups which cut across families; craft guilds which cut across families; and religious and secret societies which also cut across families. He further asserts that among all these groups, the emphasis is on cooperation, or the avoidance of sectional interests getting the upper hand.

Again, it would be unforgivably unjust to leave unmentioned the multidimensional benefit in terms of spiritual, social, economic, cultural and moral enhancement that the festival offers to the Benins and other Igue festival-goers across the globe. Considering the aforesaid, one cannot but come to the conclusion that Igue, as a festival of joy and peace, which paves way for the establishment, depiction and solidification of friendship and fraternity, is key to the continued existence of unity and peaceful coexistence among the Benin people of Nigeria.

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