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FROM RITUAL TO FESTIVAL: OFALA AS CULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN CONTEMPORARY IGBO SOCIETY

Charles Ikechukwu Nnaji
Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages
University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria

nnaji.ci@unilorin.edu.ng

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Abstract

Ofala is a historically instituted event in Onitsha, Umueri and other neighboring communities as a sacralised royal ritual that functions as a mechanism of spiritual renewal, political legitimation, and cosmological order, centering the Obi as both ritual and symbolic authority. In contemporary Igbo society, however, Ofala has increasingly been reconstituted beyond its original ritual context and homeland, appearing as a public cultural festival in many communities such as Okeani/Aniyi, Ohuani and Isienu Amagunze Autonomous Communities among others. This paper examines the implication of this shift, interrogating how a localised sacred institution is transformed through processes of cultural replication, aesthetic reconfiguration, public performance and public utility. Employing a qualitative comparative framework grounded in ritual studies and performance theory, the study analyses differences in ritual protocol, symbolic density, spatial organisation, performative authority, and modes of participation between Onitsha Ofala and its contemporary manifestations elsewhere in Igboland. The findings demonstrate that while the Ofala retains a strong ritual core characterised by restricted access, priestly mediation, and cosmological obligation, it now exhibits a marked shift toward inclusivity, spectacle, and cultural display, resulting in a partial desacralisation of ritual meaning. The paper argues that this transformation does not merely signify cultural loss but reflects broader dynamics of adaptation and identity negotiation within modern Igbo society. By situating Ofala within debates on ritual continuity, cultural ownership, and festivals, the study

contributes to scholarship on the reconfiguration of indigenous institutions in contemporary African public life.

Keywords: *Ofala, Onitsha Igbo, ritual performance, festivals, Igbo kingship, cultural identity, ritual change*

1. Introduction

Ofala is a traditional festival believed to have emanated from the traditions and custom of the ancient city of Onitsha and their ancestry neighbours. It is both a sacred spiritual and public event celebrated annually in the town from about the 16th century. It is royal per excellence. Originally, rooted in the spiritual reaffirmation of kingship. For a long time, it stood as a proud symbol of the cultural heritage of the people, for their oneness and as a reverence to the throne. The festival is similar to the Igue festival celebrated annually by the Oba of Benin. The Igue festival involves a period of seclusion, honoring the memory of past Obas and blessing the people and the land. Ofala has not only come to stay but is expanding and evolving beyond Onitsha to an increasing number of other Igbo towns and cities. The event was purely a sacred royal and ritual institution, a duty and not a festival as it appears now. The primary purpose of Ofala was to reaffirm or renew the authority and legitimacy of the Obi of Onitsha. This was because in the traditional Onitsha thought kingship was not automatic or permanent. It required periodic spiritual and temporal renewal. By this it captured the ideal of the democratic use of power and the need to always pay recourse to the people to whom power really belongs. Ofala served as the moment when the Obi emerged from ritual seclusion to show that he was ritually pure; remained in harmony with the ancestors and deities and was still fit to rule. This implies that nonclean king may not survive the seclusion and therefore not present himself as the custom demands and that will mark the end of the reign. The Obi was regarded as the spiritual pivot of the kingdom. His ritual cleansing during Ofala also symbolised the collective purification of Onitsha. The ceremony marked the end of ritual restraints placed on the king and the renewal of cosmic balance between the living, the ancestors and the land. Therefore, the Ofala could be said to be about the community welfare as it was about royalty. Traditionally, the Obi lived under strict ritual protocols and was rarely seen publicly. Ofala period is about the only legitimate occasion for the people to see their king in full regalia and glamour, and thus confirming that he is alive and healthy; his mystical connection to power and abundance; and his separation from ordinary human existence. Nowadays, kings of the communities that copied Ofala are using it in great intensity and with utmost zeal for that purpose and to establish their own stool too also and create a lineage of inheritance ancestry for their children to take over when they are no more. That is a new addition to the celebration than it was in Onitsha. It is good to note, ab initio, that Kingship and the accompanying royalty is a new comer in Igboland generally. The Igbo society is a republican and egalitarian society from the onset. Political power in Igbo land was not vested in individual monarchs. It was vested in the general assembly of the people with the elders and the chief priests coordinating. Today, Ofala has become a hybrid event of ritual, traditional songs, dance, performance, art exhibition, community participation, funfair, humorous enactment of rural wedding and burial ceremonies and tourism. It is also already being exploited for revenue generation for various state governments. The Ofala in Okeani/ Aniyi, Ohuani and Isienu communities of Amagunze is a make-belief mimicry of Onitsha Ofala. It lacks the spiritual luster of the original Onitsha

ofala. This study explores how Ofala's transformation reflects broader processes in cultural adaptation and performance in the contemporary Igbo society.

Ofala is now a celebration of opulence, wealth and extravaganza per excellence, entertainment and regrettably an avenue for the enthronement of commercial chiefs for the kings in false-claim of acting for the people and/or in the public interest. From the royal courts in towns and villages the festival has moved to distant school fields and popular events' centres to incorporate cultural, religious, folkloric and racial elements and borrowings. The festival is now mainly performed for enjoyment. It has its own roots; moorings, nourishment, growth, flowering and maturity. It plays a vital role in preserving Igbo rich cultural heritage by serving as a medium for expressing regional identities, traditional unity and community values.

Ofala now has significant social, economic, and touristic recognition. The year 2025 "Ofala Udo" of Okeani/Aniyi became popular for its impressively large turn-out and huge internal and external participation. Ofala is about the greatest civil/social community event of affected Igbo people nowadays. It is now contrived to take place at the most auspicious time of mass return of the people to their towns and villages. Usually held during the dry season when there would not be any disruption by bad weather/rain and when rural roads are passable and food is most abundant.

2. Review of Related Literature

A festival can simply be defined as an entertainment event. Drawing on Falasi (1987), Durkheim (2002), and Turner (1969), a festival may be defined as a periodically recurring, socially organised event involving collective participation and ritual performance through which a community expresses and reproduces its shared values, beliefs, and identity. A festival could be cultural, religious, agricultural, social, regional or national. Festivals are understood as cultural institutions that assist to maintain social cohesion; ritualised-performances that communicate meaning through symbols; sites of identity construction, where group belonging is affirmed; temporal markers, often linked to religious calendars, agricultural cycles, or historical events. Anthropologists and sociologists argue that festivals function as cultural institutions that promote social cohesion, communicate symbolic meaning, reinforce collective identity, and regulate social time, rather than serving merely as entertainment (Durkheim 2002; Turner 1969; Geertz 1973; Falassi (1987). The Ofala festival is a symbol of the Igbo people's cultural resilience and serves as a platform for the preservation and promotion of their traditional values. Through colorful performances, traditional dances, and symbolic rituals, the festival showcases the artistic prowess and creativity of the Igbo people (Azeez, 2024).

The festival also serves the function of intergenerational connectivity to heritage. It connects the younger generation in an irresistible form to the old ensuring, in the long run, that the custom and tradition survive for a very long time. It enables the younger generation to learn details of their history and relationship with their neighbours. It fosters in the young ones a strong sense of cultural identity and attracts them to the event from time to time. Ceremonies like Ofala are used to attract young children nowadays to their home towns and villages on regular basis or annually.

One of the most captivating aspects of the festival is the display of indigenous arts and crafts. Skilled artisans showcase their talents through their works in beadwork, weaving of all sorts,

carving, pottery and agricultural products like palm wine, palm oil, a wide range of other products as was the case in the last Okeani/Aniyi, “Ofala Udo” event.

Ofala is used to fulfil a ritual, sacred orders and royal authority as originally intended or as copied. It is used to fulfil the requirement of ritual reenactment of kingship. The emergence of the king after the rites of seclusion and sacrifices shows that he has renewed his spiritual mandate. The buildup to this is the formal processions, royal music, gun salutes and payment of homage to the king by the chiefs and subjects (Nnewi City, 2025). The Ofala in other Igbo areas outside Onitsha is seeking to gain the mystery of sacred kingship as is the case in Onitsha and institutionalise kingship hereditary in their areas. This is a case that would spell catastrophic consequences in future as the communities were not founded on that principle before and the people may not take it kindly when the undercover intention would become manifest.

Ofala is also an Igbo folk performing art that combines acting, music, dance, storytelling, and poetry. And as folk performing arts elsewhere, it is ingrained in the culture and traditions of the community and often involve religious and festive celebrations. It can be likened to “Oktoberfest” festival in India; the Ginga Tropical-Brazihari Samba and folklore show in Brazil; the Gahu Dance performance in Ghana among others.

The ofala funding scheme is complex. It is usually kicked off by the Igwe and his immediate family who are expected to bear a reasonable chunk of the cost. This is because as conceived from inception it was a royal event of the crown in search of legitimacy and followership. Next to the fund from the royal family proper are those from the friends, associates, admirers and colleagues of the royal court. The next batch of sponsors are the people of the upper class in the community who also use the occasion to broaden their fame in the community and beyond. The fourth source of fund for the Ofala is crowdfunding (Chiesa & Rykkja, 2026). This involves the whole community or as many people as possible contributing what they can towards the event, mostly online, and this usually brings in a lot of money especially if properly coordinated. The online crowdfunding for the Okeani/Aniyi, Ofala Udo, worked like magic. The entire event needs proper coordination and adequate communication and feedback. Reasonable amount of fund also came from the applicants for chieftaincy titles. The government seems to have discovered that the traditional institutions make a lot of money through the award of chieftaincy titles and therefore came in to share in it by charging tax on the award in Enugu State. This new development is a bastardisation of the tradition of the people. Chieftaincy titles were not meant to be sold. It was not meant for the highest bidder as they are pursuing it now. This new development is a corruption of the tradition. Chieftaincy used to be a sacred order with respect and dignity and with strict roles and responsibilities. Ofala also receive corporate sponsorship from corporate organisations and groups. In 2025, Globacom was the major sponsor of Onitsha Ofala festival.

The planning and execution of an Ofala programme takes a lot of wit, ingenuity and creativity. It is usually a collective duty assigned to a committee with sub-committees. The committee is usually saddled with the responsibility of hosting the Ofala from the beginning to the end. They draft the timeline, articulate the budget and contingency plan in consultation with the Obi/Igwe and his cabinet. If the programme is properly managed, the organising committee makes money from brochure subscription, advertisement and patronage. Well, planned and managed the brochure could be self-financing.

3. Methodology

There was a participant observation study, complimented with direct interviews and library research. The researchers were involved from the planning to the formal end of the Ofala 2025 programme. Notes were taken with notebook; pictures were taken with infinix Hot 6 phone. Interviews were conducted with the key players in the programme, members of the planning and execution committee, the members of the Igwe cabinet, members of the community and some participants from outside the community. A total of twenty informants were interviewed in all. Five people each from the Royal father's cabinet, the organising committee, the masquerade/dance groups and the ordinary participants. I was introduced to the informants by the chairman of the Ofala festival organising committee. The interview of the members of the Igwe cabinet took place a week before the festival. Some of the attendees were interviewed on the first day of the Ofala and the rest on the second day. The masquerade /dance groups were interviewed on the second day. The data obtained from the research was analysed qualitatively.

4. Discussion of Findings

4.1 Ofala as an Avenue for Raising Money for Community Projects

Despite being a ritual reenactment of kingship, Ofala festival generates fund for community service. Community development in precolonial African societies was largely sustained through indigenous social institutions rather than centralised state intervention or taxation. Among the Igbo people, community projects were funded through collective mechanisms embedded in social organisations, ritual obligations, and moral economy. Scholars like Green and Uchendu have written extensively that Igbo political and economic life laid emphasis on decentralisation, consensus, and collective responsibility. The Igbo fundraising systems is like what Polanyi describes as embedded economies as their economic activities are inseparable from social relations. The economic life is anchored in communitarianism; social capital theory and moral economy. Igbo people have sophisticated indigenous mechanisms for raising resources for public goods and utilities. These mechanisms are rooted in kingship, age-grade organisation, reciprocity, and communal obligations which enabled the construction and maintenance of roads, markets, shrines, meeting halls, schools and hospitals.

Igbo society is traditionally organised around the five pillars of: lineages, village assemblies, age-grades, title institutions and town unions. This decentralised structure accommodated and involved everyone.

4.2 Traditional Religious Elements of the Ofala Festival and the Colonial Construction of "Heathenism"

The Ofala festival, particularly as practiced in Onitsha, has frequently been described by the missionaries and colonial records as containing "heathen" or "pagan" practices. Such descriptions, however, reflect external Christian and colonial epistemologies rather than indigenous Igbo interpretations. From an anthropological and historical perspective, these practices constitute elements of Igbo traditional religion and sacred kingship, functioning as mechanisms for political legitimation, moral regulation, and communal cohesion. Some of the elements that necessitated such description include:

Ancestral Veneration and Ritual Authority. Central to Ofala is the ritual reaffirmation of the king's relationship with the ancestors. Libations, chants, prayers, and symbolic gestures performed during the festival are to acknowledge the ancestors as moral custodians and spiritual guarantors of social order. The early European missionaries misrepresented these practices as ancestor worship, equating them with idolatry. Contemporary scholarship,

however, emphasises that ancestral veneration in Igbo cosmology does not involve deification but rather reciprocal moral obligation between the living and the dead (Mbiti, 1990; Uchendu, 1965). It is part of the African traditional religion. Oral Incantations and Sacred Language: African traditional performances encapsulated in the performances involve use ritualised Igbo language believed to activate spiritual forces. They are powerful, very active and believed but outsiders unfamiliar with the linguistic and cultural logic dismiss them as charms and spells.

Sacrificial Rites and Cosmological Balance. The ritual sacrifices associated with Ofala are aimed at purification, renewal, and the restoration of cosmic equilibrium. Such rites serve to cleanse the land and reaffirm the spiritual fitness of the ruler to govern. Colonial Christian observers frequently classified sacrifice especially offering animals as evidence of paganism, ignoring its widespread presence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Anthropological studies situate these practices within a broader African religious logic in which sacrifice mediates relationships between humans, deities, and moral order (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979; Isichei, 1976).

Invocation of Deities. The acknowledgment of local deities during Ofala reflects the Igbo understanding of a plural spiritual universe governed by a supreme being (Chukwu) and subordinate forces responsible for specific aspects of life. Missionary discourse collapsed this complex theology into the simplistic category of “idol worship.” African religious scholarship instead interprets these invocations as functional and ethical, regulating land use, justice, and fertility (Mbiti, 1990). Invocation is a traditional way of supplication and prayer among the Igbo people. The invocations are cosmological and not diabolical.

Ritual Seclusion and the purification of the king. A defining feature of Ofala is the king’s ritual seclusion prior to his public appearance. It is a prerequisite for the celebration. This period symbolises symbolic death and rebirth, marking the transition from the profane to the sacred state of renewed kingship. Turner’s theory of liminality is particularly useful here, as the king temporarily exists outside ordinary social structures before re-emerging as a re-legitimised authority (Turner, 1969). Colonial interpretations framed such seclusion as occultism rather than as a structured rite of passage.

Sacred Regalia, Language, and Performance. Objects such as the *ofo* staff, white chalk, ritual dances, and incantatory speech function as symbolic media through which authority, purity, and communal values are communicated. To the missionaries unfamiliar with African symbolic anthropology, these elements appeared fetishistic rather than symbolic. However, scholars argue that they operate as semiotic systems, encoding moral and political meaning within performance (Basden, 1921; Okafor, 1991).

Reassessing the “Heathen” Label. The categorisation of Ofala rituals as “heathen practices” must therefore be understood as a colonial discursive strategy that sought to delegitimise indigenous institutions in favor of Christian and Western political norms. Modern African historiography and religious studies reject this label and emphasise that Ofala represents a sophisticated system of sacred governance rather than primitive superstition (Isichei, 1976; Ranger, 1983). Ofala is an indigenous sacred kingship renewal ritual, a system of political theology, and a mechanism for social cohesion and moral order.

4.3 Masquerades in Ofala festival

Masquerade is at the center of fun and entertainment in Ofala festival to the extent that the king and many of his cabinet personalities appear in the semblance of masquerades. Masquerades create most of the fun and sight delight during Ofala which relieves the people of anxiety and stress and sets them free from boredom and worries of life.

Firstly, masquerades combine spectacle, performance, symbolism, and social interaction in ways that captivate the community and visitors alike. One, masquerades appear in costumes featuring brightly colored fabrics, beads, raffia, animal motifs, mirrors, and carved masks. The sheer visual richness draws attention and creates excitement, Okoro (2022). During the Ofala festival, each masquerade group competes informally to appear more striking than the others, heightening the festive atmosphere.

Secondly, masquerades perform highly choreographed dances, accompanied by drums, gongs, flutes, and chats. Their movements entertain spectators while also showcasing creativity, physical skills, and mastery of traditional rhythms familiar to the audience. Many masquerades deliberately incorporate humour. They mimic exaggerated human behaviors, poke fun at social habits, or dramatise everyday situations. Through playful teasing, mock chases, and humorous gestures, masquerades provoke laughter and keep audiences actively engaged, making entertainment a key outcome of their appearance. Masquerades move through open spaces, approach spectators, and sometimes engage individuals directly. This action creates suspense and excitement, especially for children and young adults, Ugwu (2024).

Some masquerades entertain by demonstrating feats of agility, endurance, or daring movements that appear almost supernatural. Because masquerades are traditionally regarded as spirit manifestations, their performances generate awe and thrill, blending fear, wonder and enjoyment. Different masquerade groups aim to outshine one another in costume quality, dance precision, originality, and crowd response. This competitive spirit increases performance quality and sustains audience interest throughout the festival.

5. Conclusion

The theme of ofala festival has shifted from a purely sacred ritual of kingship renewal as if it was in Onitsha in the beginning to a community jamboree, carnival, political inclusion ground and fundraising programme. The kings of the communities copying the festival now try to use it to perpetuate themselves in the stool and colonise same for their children. The political intrusion into traditional and cultural programme is worrisome and dangerous. Efforts should be made to return to the original purpose of the programme, expand the adoption in new areas and sustain the original spirit and explore the tourism potential inherent in it. A panoramic view of People and Masquerades present during the 2025 Okeani/Aniyi Ofala Udo Festival.



Ijele



Evuvu



Enyimu Ekpe



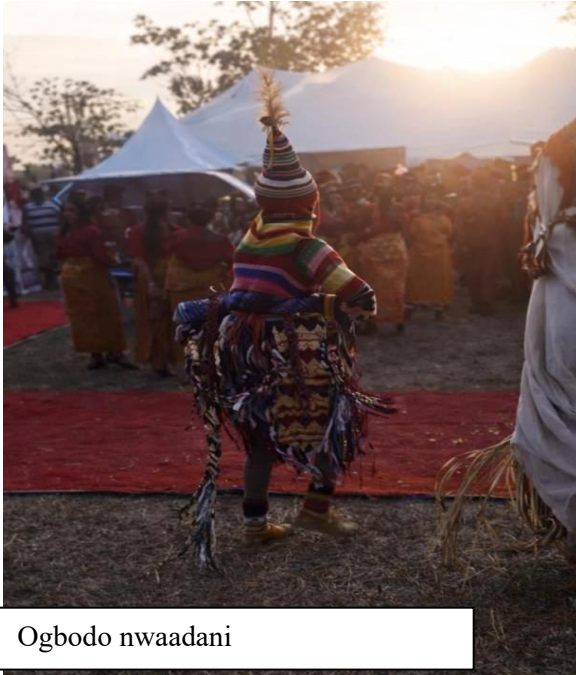
Ogbodo nwaadani



Iga



Oji onu



Ogbodo nwaadani



Iga



Okoro ocha



Ogbodo

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