

TRACING AN ANCIENT LANDMARK: *ISU ỌGWỤ IN ABATETE*

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Abstract: Abatete, a town in Idemili Local Government Area of Anambra State of the Igbo cultural area in Nigeria, like other African traditional communities, engages in various festivals, one of which is the New Yam Festival. Before the commencement of the New Yam Festival, traditional Abatete folks perform *Isū isū ọgwụ* ritual. This study sets out to investigate the processes involved in the performance of *isū ọgwụ*; identify the symbolic elements in it and their meanings; the essence of the ritual vis-à-vis the reason for its extinction. The data for this study was obtained through oral interviews. The Symbolist theory was employed in the analysis of the work. Findings reveal that two of the processes involved in *isū ọgwụ* are sacrifices and purification rites, that several symbolic elements abound in *isū ọgwụ*; and that the major essence of *isū ọgwụ* is for maintaining peaceful co-existence in the society. The performance is almost extinct due to foreign or outside influences. The study recommends that *isū ọgwụ* should be sustained due to its great essence.

Keywords: *Isū ọgwụ*, Abatete, ritual, festivals.

INTRODUCTION

THIS STUDY INVESTIGATES THE PROCESSES INVOLVED in the performance of the ritual practice of *isū ọgwụ* among the Abatete people as well as analyzes the symbolic elements involved in the ritual practice. *Isū ọgwụ*, an ancient practice among the Abatete is the rite of purification and absolution before the new yam festival. The ritual of *isū ọgwụ* and its link to yam cultivation is critical is understanding the importance of agriculture, especially yam cultivation to Igbo life and identity. According to Ndulue (1992: 131), Yam is highly ritualized among the Igbo and the new yam festival 'opens' the door of the New Year. Basden called yam "the Igbo staff of life."¹ He observed that yam "stands for [the Igbo] as the potato does for the typical Irishman."² According to Chima Korie, "The elevation of yam to a high status has its root in the people's agricultural past. Yam defined the agricultural landscape and its cultivation epitomized

mized Igbo male achievement and prestige.”³ Ndulue (1992: 131) notes that “No man who attained manhood in Igbo context would ‘enter’ the New Year and eat new yam without first performing the rite of purification and absolution.” This is to make sure that every member of the society is at peace with his/her neighbor, thereby, spiritually clean in readiness for the celebration of the new yam festival ‘iri ji ọhụụ’. This is achieved first by offering sacrifice to appease the earth goddess, *ala*. After the sacrifice, the chief priest goes from house to house to all community members who extended invitations to him for the *isu ọgwụ*. The essence of *isu ọgwụ* is to make sure that participants in the celebration of the new yam festival are pure and at peace with their fellow human beings.

The rich heritage of African societies is under trait due to several factors including modernization and colonial influences. Some of them have been transformed due to Western influence while others are on their way to extinction. According to Bosade Afolayan, “Africans were seen in the character of a stereotypical and demeaning image. In fact, their cultures were denigrated. This is the situation suffered by almost all the countries in Africa colonized, especially by the British.”⁴

In Igbo society, various festivals are carried out at various times in celebration and honor of certain deities and crops. Such festivals include the New Yam Festival, ‘*Ọfala* Festival’, and Ito ọgbọ ‘Celebration of old age’ festival. This study attempts to explore *isu ọgwụ*, an ancient ritual practice among Abatete people, which is on the verge of extinction due to the influence of the Western way of life that came to muffle the indigenous African way of life. The study also identifies and analyzes the symbolic elements in *isu ọgwụ* in order to bring the essence of the ritual practice to the fore. The data for this study was obtained through oral interviews, library searches and through the intuition of the researcher as an indigene of the town. The symbolist theory was employed in the analysis of the work to aid in the abstraction of the symbols contained in the ritual practice. Without a proper understanding of the symbols in the ritual practice of *isu ọgwụ*, its essence and significance will not be understood and appreciated, especially in the contemporary time.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

A festival is a special day or period, usually in memory of a religious event, with its own social activities, drinks, dances, food, various cultural displays and activities or ceremonies. Sally Wehmevier defines “festival” as a series of performances of music, plays, films/movies, etc. usually organized in the same place once a year; a series of public events connected with a particular activity or idea.⁵ O. A. Akintan perceives festivals as “celebrations of important events in every human society which bring

together people from all walks of life.”⁶ Traditional festivals most often than not culminate into performances, entertainment, rites, and rituals. Festivals signal times for planting and harvesting crops in many African communities.

Festivals usually take the form of rituals, sacrifices, and ceremonies in traditional African Society. Ritual, on the other hand, is a ceremony or action performed in a customary way that is usually attached to festivals, or religious celebrations. Wilson⁷ sees ritual as primarily a religious action directed at securing the blessing of some mystical powers since rituals can happen within the festival. It will not be wrong to say that most of the festivals are heralded by ritual ceremonies. Different communities in Nigeria have different ritual practices attached to some festivals or patterns of worship. That is to say that festivals and rituals are not just undertaken for the mere fun of it. They perform various functions, including symbolic functions as well. This also applies to the traditional Abatete people.

Many traditional rituals and festivals abound in Nigeria, and they include religious festivals, harvest festivals and rituals, installation festivals/rituals, and initiation festivals/rituals. Cultural festivals and rituals are an integral part of the people’s culture. It is obvious that a lost culture is a lost history and identity, and a lost identity is a lost society. According to Babs Fafunwa, “History is to a people what memory is to the individual. People with no knowledge of their past would suffer from collective amnesia, groping blindly into the future without a guidepost of precedence to shape their course. Only a thorough awareness of their heritage allows them to make their public decision as they make their private ones.”⁸ If Fafunwa’s claim is anything to go by, it becomes very imperative that various cultural rituals, festivals, and ceremonies being held in different societies be documented.

Festivals have always played the role of ‘connectors’ among people and their culture, heritage, and roots. Most of the African festivals have been in practice for hundreds of years and some of them are still relevant even in contemporary times. Nigeria, with over three hundred ethnic groups, have several traditional festivals that have been in existence for several centuries. For instance, the Eyo festival of the Yoruba, Ojude Oba festival of the Ijebu, and the Durbar festival in the North. The Igbo people also have several festivals including the New Yam Festival, the *Ofala* Festival, the *Mmṛṇwu* Festival, the *Ekpe* Festival, and the *Inne* Festival.

Festivals and rituals are parts of the Igbo life; hence most Igbo literary artists allude to them in their literary works. Achebe made mention of the festival of the pumpkin leaves,

The festival of the pumpkin leaves would fall on the third *Nkwọ* from that day ... It was true he named the day for the feast of the pumpkin leaves for the New Yam festival, but he did not choose it No! the Chief Priest of *Ulu* was more than that, must be more than that if he should refuse to name the day there would be no festival – no planting and no reaping”. ... “The chief priest approached the part of the circle and says, Great *Ulu* who kills and saves; I implore you to cleanse my household of all defilement. If I have spoken it with my mouth or seen it with my eyes, or if I have heard it with my ears or stepped on it with my foot, or if it has come through my children or my friends or kinsfolk let it follow these leaves.⁹

The above excerpt from Achebe alludes to some of the ritual activities associated with the new yam festival in Igbo society. Furthermore, Obodo referred to Akani celebrated in the land of Okporowo. He explains that Akani is a great festival, which usually takes place in the dry season, during the moonlight. It is the period that every farmer eats out of the best of his/her farm produce. People are expected to maintain peace during the week of Akani.¹⁰

Scholars have researched different aspects of African festivals and rituals.¹¹ M. U. Ushe examines the implications of ritual symbolism in the sustenance of culture and meaning in Africa, with a special focus on the Tiv of Northcentral Nigeria. He also discusses certain cultural traits such as festivals, dances, arts and crafts, body decoration and scarification, initiation, and funeral rites. The study concludes that Tiv Ritual Symbolism has both direct and indirect religious meaning on the customs, traditions, language, and beliefs (culture) of the Tiv people.¹²

Ogbenika's explores aspects of social mobilization and festivals in Africa. The main thrust of his study is the reiteration of the importance of festivals to present-day African people and showcasing its relevance to the world at large. The study discovered that festivals are not only important for the observation of time, which can be seen in reality through the seasons of the year, but they sometimes serve the function of social mobilization and cohesion. He also notes that festivals serve as entertainment, identification of times and seasons, the celebration of religious ceremonies and rituals, and also promote social cohesion among members of the society. The study, however, notes that the essence of the festivals has been abused by some social deviants in the society on many occasions, although that has not affected its essence in contemporary African society. The study concludes that festivals help to stabilize African traditional societies and ensure the preservation of Africa's well-revered and unique cultural values, wise sayings, proverbs, and folk tales among others¹³.

Though different scholars have carried out studies in the area of African festivals and rituals, no study has been carried out in the aspect of the *Isu Ọgwụ* 'ritual practice' in Abatete. Hence, the rationale behind the current study.

ISU ỌGWỤ 'RITUAL PRACTICE IN ABATETE

Abatete, a town in the Idemili Area of Anambra State of the Igbo cultural area in Nigeria, like other African traditional communities, engages in different festivals and rituals as well. However, most of these cultural heritages are becoming extinct due to obvious reasons of outside or foreign influences.

Abatete is one of the nineteen towns in the Idemili North Local Government Area of Anambra State of Nigeria. south-central of Nigeria. The principal occupation of the Abatete people is subsistence farming, while their secondary occupation includes trading and civil service. Abatete is made up of four major villages namely: Nsukwu, Agbaja, Ọdịda and Ogbu. Each of these villages is also made up of smaller villages respectively. Okoli Otie is believed to be the ancestral father of Abatete. According to Ndulue, Okoli Otie is the ancestral father of Abatete, Umuoji and Nkpor.¹⁴ Following Muoedu,¹⁵ Edeogu being the eldest son and heir to the throne and the residential quarter and the great palace, 'Nnekwu Obi' of Okoli Otie in accordance with customs and tradition was not allocated a residential quarter 'Ani Obi' by his father. He and his family lived with Okoli Otie in the present area of land called Abatete.

One such festival is the New Yam Festival. Before the actual commencement of the New Yam Festival, traditional Abatete folks perform *isū ọgwụ* ritual. *Isū ọgwụ* was religiously observed by Abatete indigenes before the advent of Westernization.

Isu ọgwụ is a ritual practice that heralds the harvest season and the new yam celebration amongst Abatete people. Yam is seen as the king of crops in Igbo society. It is the mainstay of the Igbo.¹⁶ Yam as a crop is farmed by men. That is not to say that women are forbidden to engage in the planting of yam in Igbo society. Yam occupies a premier position that highly successful farmers take the title 'Ezeji' "King of yam," *Obiji*, 'home of yam', and *Diji*, a husband of yams'; that is a person who is renowned for his exploits in yam planting and good harvests.

The importance attached to the successful cropping of yam at Abatete made prominent farmers go to seers at Nenyi, a small village near Anam to read 'Year Cycle'. The 'Year Cycle' tells them in advance if there would be a good distribution of rainfall and abundant harvest that year.¹⁷ Hence the celebration of the New Yam festival in many parts of Igbo land. In Ig-

bo society, the New Yam festival is usually celebrated annually in August after the harvest.

In Igbo, the concept of time, every month is owned by a particular deity. The Igbo calendar has four days – *Eke, Orie, Afo* and *Nkwọ* making up a week in Igbo society. Seven weeks then make up one month. Thirteen months (one hundred and sixty-four days make one year). There are two divergent views on which month comes first and which follows. Ndulue listed the Igbo lunar month with particular reference to Abatete as tabulated below.¹⁸

TABLE I: LIST OF IGBO LUNAR MONTHS IN ABATETE

Position of Month	Name of the Month	Activities Carried Out During Each of the Months
1 st Month	<i>Ufiejiokụ</i>	Period for offering thanksgiving to the deity <i>Ufiejiokụ</i> – “ <i>Alım Mmụọ</i> New Yam Festival after which new yams are harvested.
2 nd Month	<i>Ezigwe</i>	The deity that exercises protective power over Abatete
3 rd Month	<i>Ọmaliko</i>	<i>Ọmaliko</i> deity is the wife of <i>Ezigwe</i> . <i>Ọmaliko</i> is more powerful than <i>Ezigwe</i> in her destructive propensities, but both exercise protective power over Abatete. The month is sacred, and it is marked by the roasting of yams. It is observed as a “holy” month – no quarreling, no fighting, no letting of human blood through the town.
4 th Month	<i>Ọmaliko Obuikpo</i>	<i>Ọmaliko Obuikpo</i> in another capacity looks after the welfare of women farmers. The main crop cultivated by women is ‘Ede’ Cocoyam and it is during this month that women celebrate the new yam festival.
5 th Month	<i>Kamanụ</i>	<i>Kamanụ</i> is the deity that protects palm wine tappers. It is celebrated with feasting and drinking.
6 th Month	<i>Olisa</i>	<i>Olisa</i> is another name for <i>Chukwu</i> the Supreme Being. This is the month when important titles are taken.
7 th Month	<i>Aja</i>	The month when sacrifices are made to evil spirits
8 th Month	<i>Ogwugwu</i>	Female spirits and procreation and rejuvenation. During this month farmlands are prepared for planting.

9 th Month	<i>Eke</i>	The name of the first spirit that gave the Igbo the names of their market days. It is the month when the cultivation of yams starts in real earnest.
10 th Month	<i>Mmụọ Obodo</i>	Small spirits, help to look after the town and help with germination.
11 th Month	<i>Afọ 'Ọfọ'</i>	<i>Ọfọ</i> is the material symbol of conscience. It stands for truth, honesty, and fair play. It is dedicated to <i>Afọ</i>
12 th Month	<i>Nkwọ Ogu</i>	<i>Ogu</i> stands for equity. It is a female deity, and it always goes hand in hand with <i>Ọfọ - Ọfọ na Ogu</i> . It is dedicated to <i>Nkwọ</i> the last of the spirits in Igbo days and it means that the Igbo do not deceive in their commercial dealings with others.
13 th Month	<i>Agwụ</i>	<i>Agwụ</i> is the deity that helps native doctors in their search for herbs and cures for illness.

The second school of thought on the categorization of Abatete lunar month is the one identified in Muoedu. According to Muoedu there are thirteen Lunar months in the year.¹⁹ Each month has twenty-eight days. They are presented in the table below.

POSITION OF THE MONTH	NAME OF THE MONTH	ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT DURING EACH OF THE MONTH
1 st Month	<i>Onwa Eke</i>	The year starts with the appearance of the moon called <i>Onwa Eke</i> . The moon appears within the second week in January. Festival marking it is the cooking of cocoyam by Idol priests <i>Ndị Eze Mmụọ</i> in their respective shrines or <i>obis</i> . Feasting and merriments and display of various masquerade grace the occasion. The significance of this festival is to remind the community that planting season has arrived.
2 nd Month	<i>Onwa Mụọ Obodo</i>	This month is filled with festivals celebrated by villages and wards respectively at different dates.
3 rd Month	<i>Onwa Afọ</i>	the month of celebration of the <i>Afọ</i> market.
4 th Month	<i>Onwa Nkwọ or Onwa Ọmaliko Okọchị</i>	The festival marking the appearance of this moon is celebrated in Nsukwu and Agbaja villages.
5 th Month	<i>Onwa Ọmaliko</i>	On the appearance of the moon known as <i>Onwa Ọmaliko</i> , planting

		season ends throughout the town.
6 th Month	<i>Ọnwá Kamanu</i>	In this month, the palm wine tappers in Abatete celebrate the anniversary of the palm wine tapping knife (<i>Mma Nkwu</i>)
7 th Month	<i>Ọnwá Agwu</i> or <i>Ọnwá Igbakwu Afa</i>	This anniversary is celebrated by members of Agwu society, native doctors, soothsayers and fortune tellers throughout Abatete.
8 th Month	<i>Ọnwá Alọ Mmuo</i> (<i>Iwaji</i>)	This is the month in which <i>Isu Ogwu</i> is observed.
9 th Month	<i>Ọnwá Ọmaliko Udummili</i>	The appearance of this moon signifies the wrestling period in Abatete.
10 th Month	<i>Ọnwá Ọmaliko Obuikpo</i>	<i>Ọnwá Ọmaliko Obuikpo</i>
11 th Month	<i>Ọnwá Nnema</i> or <i>Ọnwá Ọzọ</i>	This is the month in which the cocoyam festival is celebrated and ọzọ title initiation.
12 th Month	<i>Ọnwá Aja</i>	The month of sacrifice.
13 th Month	<i>Ọnwá Ogwugwu</i>	This is the last month of the year. On the appearance of this moon, the houses of priests (<i>Ezeogwugwu</i>) are thronged by worshippers who offer sacrifices to <i>ogwugwu</i> goddess in appreciation of many good things. All men and women who are re-incarnated of <i>ogwugwu</i> goddess are duty-bound to offer yearly sacrifices.

An interview with Chinwe Akudu, reveals that the lunar months outlined above incorporate the calendar of the entire Igbo society, while Mouedu's own is peculiar to Abatete as a town.²⁰

In Igbo society, some festivals are carried out before the New Yam Festival or before the planting season. Achebe talks about the feast of the 'Pumpkin Leaves' marking the beginning of the planting season and the 'New Yam feast which marks the beginning of the harvest season. Achebe²¹ also talks about the week of peace. "You know as well as I do that our forefathers ordained that before we plant any crops in the earth, we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbor. We live in peace with our fellows to honor our great goddess of the earth; without whose blessing our crops will not grow." Achebe goes further to explain that "The feast of the New Yam was held every year before the harvest began, to honor the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan."²²

Isu ogwu is a form of sacrifice that purifies the soul and body ready for the celebration of the new yam festival of *Iwa ji* 'new yam celebration' Muoedu.²³

Yam is held in such high regard in Igboland at large and in Abatete in particular and the new yam festival 'opens' the door of the New Year; that no Igbo who attained manhood in the Igbo context would 'enter' the New Year and eat new yam without first performing the rite of purification and absolution. That rite transforms him into a state of 'holiness' before they celebrate the New Yam Festival. That rite is called *Isu Ogwu* 'ritual practice' Ndulue.²⁴

Every adult male who took part in wars and or participated in all the other exploits of male adulthood usually performed *Isu Ogwu* 'ritual practice' rite before he eats new yam every year. According to an interview with Ichie Okaka, the sacrifice is performed in the following order: Aged men followed by any person old or young, who intentionally or by mistake committed murder and then followed by any person, old or young, who intentionally or by mistake set residential houses ablaze. According to Ichie Okaka²⁵, the aged women are to perform the sacrifice before or after the new yam festival.

The *Isu Ogwu* ceremony is the time of the year when an Abatete man is purged of his sins in the Igbo traditional religious way. This ceremony is rooted in the belief that *Chineke*, 'the creator' is the source of all life and the giver of everything. They believe that it is a supernatural God that grants them the grace to be alive to complete the year cycle. They are also of the belief, that *ala*, the goddess of land gave the Igbo the king of crops – yam. Therefore, every adult male worthy of his manhood needed to be sanctified before he eats New Yam which ushers in the New Year. According to Ndulue, "An adult male worthy of his manhood in the Igbo context, must be an achiever."²⁶ This is because the Igbo believe in hard work. Some of their Igbo maxims are pointers to the above claim. Some of them include: '*aka aja aja na-ebute onu mmanu mmanu*' 'Dusty hands give rise to oily mouth', meaning that hard work leads to a good harvest. *Nwata kwochaa aka, o soro ogaranya rie nri* 'If a child washes his hand clean, he will dine with the elders' and *nkụ onye kpara n'okochi ka o na-anya n'udummiri* 'The firewoods which a person gathers in the dry season are the firewoods that that person will make use of in the rainy season.' All the above proverbs point to the importance of hard work, and the need for hard work. The Igbo do not believe in laziness; hence they do not encourage begging. Individual achievements are to be encouraged and admired because it contributes to the upliftment of the existential status of the community.

A non-achiever is regarded as *akarogoli* 'non-entity/riffraff.' A non-achiever is not expected to perform the *isu ogwu* rite. *Isu Ogwu* 'ritual prac-

tice' is performed at Abatete, for eight days (two native weeks before the celebration of the new yam festival).

THE PERFORMANCE OF ISU OGWU

Isu ogwu 'ritual practice' is performed by the chief priest. Before the commencement of the new yam ceremony proper, the chief priest is expected to conduct a particular sacrifice, to appease the earth goddess—land, *ala*. After the sacrifice, the chief priest goes from house to house to all community members who extended invitations to him for the *isu ogwu*. This is because the *isu Ogwu* 'ritual practice' is conducted on an individual basis. The chief priest carries a basket along as he goes. This basket is called *Ukpa Ekwensu* 'basket.' *Ekwensu* in Igbo belief is not a devil; it is a deity that possesses both good and non-virtuous potencies depending on what one wants. Hence the morphological components: *E+kwe+n+su*.

E = one (impersonal pronoun)

Kwe = agree/accept/allows (consents)

Su = occurs/takes place/takes effect. If put together then, *ekwensu* means 'if one consent (good or bad), it takes place.'

This basket, which is usually carried on the shoulder by the chief priest, contains various kinds of herbal roots, leaves, and bones of animals and birds. These items are symbolic. The contents of the *Ukpa Ekwensu* 'satan's basket' include – *Mkpologwu Ngwu* 'the root of a very strong tree that is not easy to break, *Mkpologwu Ike* 'the root of a very strong tree that is not easy to break, *Mkpologwu Gbachili uzọ*, 'the root of a tree that forms major obstructions across any foot path', *Mkpologwu Okwalenwe* 'the root of a very tall slippery tree very difficult to climb not even by monkeys', *Okpukpu Agu* 'Leopard's bones', *Okpukpu Enyi*, 'Elephant's bones', and *Okpukpu Ugo*, 'Eagle's bones' and some other herbal ingredients. (The essences of these materials are discussed in the last section of this work.)

As the chief priest arrives at the house of any participant to engage in the *isu ogwu* 'ritual practice', the person is required to provide certain items, which includes: *nzu* 'kaolin', *omunkwu* 'very tender oil palm fronds, *akwu kwọ abọsị* 'abọsị leaves', *ushe* 'native cosmetic', *okwa* 'small mortar and *oji* 'kola nut'.

The preferred *okwa* 'mortar' for *isu ogwu* is a newly carved one. Where it has already been used, it is to be thoroughly washed to get rid of any trace of palm oil. It is believed that palm oil is a powerful antidote to any strong traditional medicine. The chief priest will collect the items and put them into the *okwa* 'mortar.' He will also open his *Ukpa Ekwensu* 'ekwensu's basket' and begin to bring out the herbal roots, leaves, and bones one after

another. When he brings out any of the items, he would call it by its name and scrape a small portion of it into the *okwa*. He adds all to ensure proper blending. He will pound all the contents together. Once a person undergoes *isu ogwu*, it is believed that the person is already purified. As the chief priest pounds the contents in the *okwa* 'mortar', he invites the person undergoing the cleansing to sit on a small stool. The chief priest will bring out four seeds of *ose oji* 'alligator pepper' from his *Ukpa Ekwensu* 'puts them on the open right-hand palm of the person undergoing the absolution. The chief priest goes on to dab the pounded herbal roots, leaves, and bones on the forehead, chest, shoulders, and back of that person. After that, the chief priest will say to the person undergoing the process of cleansing, *a wuo m gi aru* 'I have bathed you'. The chief priest will, at this juncture, put some portions of the pounded herbal mixture into his (chief priest's) mouth and tells him/her that he is about to actualize the cleansing processes, *igba ya ogwu*. 'He is about to administer some medicine on the person.' The person will give his/her consent aloud before the chief priest proceeds. The chief priest will then spit the herbal mixture on the forehead, chest, shoulder and neck of that person. After this, the chief priest will make the following incantation:

<i>Ekwensu mbu</i>	'Ekwensu one
<i>Ekwensu ibo</i>	'Ekwensu two
<i>Ekwensu ito</i>	'Ekwensu three.

The chief priest then says to the person, *buchapu* and 'spit out a shower of saliva'.

The chief priest then continue with the following utterances:

*Ma i gbuu n'agha,
 ma i gbuu na mbeledede,
 ma i togbulu atogbu,
 ma i zogbulu azogbu,
 ma i nyegbulu enyegbu,
 ma i gbuu n'anyasi,
 mọbu n'efifie,
 mọbu n'ututu;
 ma i netaa n'anya,
 ma i metalu emeta,
 ma I kwutee n'okwu,
 ma i chetaa n'echiche;
 ma i lolu ajo nlo
 n'uchichi mọbu n'efifie;
 ihe ndi a guputara,*

*ma i mere ya n'ubosị Eke,
 mọbu n'ubosị Olie,
 mọbu n'ubosị Afọ,
 mọbu n'ubosị Nkwọ,
 agwala m Ekwensu
 ka o kpochapu faoo. Ndulue²⁷*

Whether you killed at battle or whether you killed accidentally

or by kidnapping
 or by mysterious powers
 or by poisoning.
 whether it was at night
 or by day or in the morning.
 whether you were covetous,
 or committed the offense by spoken word,
 or by action,
 or by thought.
 whether you had a bad dream tonight
 or by day.
 all these offenses whether
 you committed them on an *Eke* day
 or *Orie* day or *Afọ* day or *Nkwọ* day,
 I exorcise the devil
 to cleanse you of them
 and absolve you from them.

The rhythm of the above incantation is occasioned by syntactic parallelism except for lines 14, 15, 20 and 21. The use of dialect are also evident, as could be seen below: *n'efie* instead of *n'ehihie*, 'in the afternoon'; *ị lolu ajọ nlo*, instead of *ị roro ajọ nro*, 'you had a bad dream'; *ma i netaa n'anya* instead of *ma i letara n'anya*, 'whether it was through your sight'; *ubosị* instead of *ubochi* 'day'; and *Olie* instead of *Orie*, 'Igbo market day.'

Furthermore, the few offenses that are being enumerated by the chief priest represent any likely offense or sin that the person being absolved might have committed, knowingly or unknowingly.

The chief priest then puts the *abosị* leaves tied in an oblong position across the mouth of the person being absolved of his/her sins and tells him/her to listen while the chief priest continues with the following *ogholi* 'sins committed' incantation:

*Ogholi mbu,
 Ogholi ibo,
 Ogholi ito,*

Ogholi ino,

Ogholi ise,

Ogholi isii,

Ogholi isaa,

Ogholi isato,

Ogholi itenani

Sins committed unintentionally one.

Sins committed unintentionally two.

Sins committed unintentionally three.

Sins committed unintentionally four.

Sins committed unintentionally five.

Sins committed unintentionally six.

Sins committed unintentionally seven.

Sins committed unintentionally eight.

Sins committed unintentionally nine.

Ogholi means sins committed by the person being absolved unknowingly or unintentionally, such as if that person saw a widow on the way after 6:30 p.m. when cocks had gone to roost or ate any food prepared or served by a woman in menstrual period. This is because, in Abatete, widows are regarded as unclean, hence, they are forbidden from touching anything that would be eaten by men. They are equally not permitted to leave their homes once it is around 6: 30 p.m. because such would be regarded as unclean.

At the end of the above incantations, the chief priest tells the person being absolved to bring one yam and one cock. The yam is peeled on one side from the head of the yam to the tail. The chief priest spreads white powder, kaolin *nzu*, on the peeled part of the yam. The chief priest cuts open the neck of the cock with his thumbnail. The cock is neither strangled nor killed with any other sharp object. The speed with which the chief priest uses his thumbnail to kill the cock is the same speed as when a knife is used in killing the cock.

The chief priest at this point collects another *nzu*, 'kaolin' with which he draws a straight line across the door through which he came in. The line drawn symbolizes a demarcation between good and evil. This implies that the person has translated from evil to good. The person is then absolved, sanctified, and purified based on Abatete traditional belief.

The essence of this ceremony hinges on the fact that *Ekvensu*, in Igbo belief, is not a devil, but rather a deity, which possesses both good and non-virtuous potencies depending on what one wants. Hence, if one believes that he can absolve him or her from evil, it becomes effective. *Ekvensu* is a motive spirit whose course could be directed towards virtuous intent or non-virtuous intent. It is the belief of the Igbo people that

Ekwensu aids the living either to do good or to do evil. Hence, it is this deity alone which has the potency to do evil that can also absolve an evildoer from what he/she has committed against the earth deity, *ala*. This confirms what Fred M. Vinson in Alily 2000 says, that "what man has made, man can change." Hence, what *Ekwensu* has done, *Ekwensu* can actually change. This is because evil is not endowed by man, rather by *Ekwensu*. This contradicts the Christian belief, which holds that the power to absolve sin, entirely, rests with God.

The cock used for the ceremony is then cooked by the person being absolved from sin. Nobody is permitted to cook it for him or to partake of the meat. He eats it alone. He uses the pounded herbal roots, leaves, and bones as an ingredient for cooking the cock. After the celebrant had eaten the cock, he becomes 'holy' to join in the celebration of the new yam festival.

On the morning of the New Yam Festival proper, as a follow-up to the *isu ogwu* 'ritual practice' so as to enable people to start the New Yam Festival in a holy state, very young boys below the age of nine years old, goes from house to house to ward off any traces of any evil that might still be lingering behind a person's 'obi', a house belonging to the man of the house after the *isu ogwu* ritual rite had been carried out.

The young boys go to the person's *obi* with *omumu*, a 'preparation in egg shape.' When they get there, they will roll the *omumu* on the four walls and the floor of the person's house, and then on the seats. As they do this they utter the following incantation '*kpashi, kpashi*, 'exorcising the devil to cleanse the man and his household of any traces of evil.' At the end of the final cleansing exercise, the person gives the young boys yam.

The cooking and pounding of yam are symbolic of transformation from one realm (in this case, the realm of sin and impurity) to another realm (the realm of purity). The man being absolved is then clean to partake in the New Yam festival.

SYMBOLIST THEORY AND THE SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF *ISU OGWU*

Symbol refers to a concrete or familiar idea, story, action, character, convention, or an object that is used in reference to, or as an explanation of, an abstract idea or a less familiar object or event. Firth sees symbolism as "a component of human culture, with language as its prototype." Symbolism can be seen as the art of expressing ideas by suggesting what the ideas are, through their recreation in the mind of the audience through some symbols. The symbolists hold the view that ideas or concepts should not be

described directly but rather that they should be explained with concrete images.

Firth and Preminger²⁸ are of the view that symbolists operate on the principle that the power of word goes far beyond ordinary denotative verbal limits through suggestive developments in syntax and interrelated images and what they termed the 'phonetic symbol.'²⁹

Kottak, on the essence of symbolization, maintained that "Although other animals learn, only humans have cultural learning, dependent on symbols. Humans think symbolically-arbitrarily bestowing meaning on things and events. By convention, a symbol stands for something with which it has no necessary or natural relation. Symbols have special meaning for people who share memories, values, and beliefs because of common enculturation."³⁰

For Cohen, symbols are a metaphysical and religious activity involving signs to arouse emotion and conflicting desires in human beings for the purpose of social integration and dramatization of values in the society.³¹ Symbolic expressions give meaning and add value to things that otherwise, are inexpressible in the community.

Symbolists are of the view that there is a kind of inherent and systematic analogy between the human mind and the outer world, and also between the natural and the spiritual worlds. Hence, the items used for the *Isu ogwu* are very symbolic; in that beyond their physical representation, they stand for certain beliefs and things among Abatete people.

It then follows that beyond the physical activities carried out by the Chief priest that *Isu ogwu* and the items utilized are very symbolic in the above-named society. They appear in the form of ritual symbols.

Ritual symbolism abounds in African traditional society which is an important aspect of traditional religion. It is a religious action or channel which gives meaning to beliefs, customs, traditions, ideas, and practices in the society.³²

Isu ogwu 'ritual practice' is not performed in Abatete, just for the mere fun of it. It has some symbolic implications. *Isu ogwu* 'ritual practice' symbolizes absolution, cleanliness, purification, and freedom from all defilement. It is symbolic of inner purging, sanctification and cleansing.

It is the belief of Abetete people that any full-grown man that eats the yam in defilement will meet with some evil; hence the need for *Isu ogwu* 'ritual practice.'

The items used in *Isu ogwu* are also very symbolic. *Ukpa Ekwensu* 'Ekwensu's basket' that is carried by the chief priest symbolizes transference of evils and wickedness that are perpetuated by people from the offenders to the chief priest for absolution. Some of the content of the basket carried by the *dibia* 'medicine man' are also symbolic as seen below:

Mkpologwu Ngwu, 'the root of a very strong tree that is not easy to break', alludes to the fact that money and power are the root of all evil, such as snatching of a person's wife, killing or other evil vices.

Mkpologwu Ike, 'the root of a very strong tree that is not easy to break', *Mkpologwu Gbachiliuzo*, 'the root of a tree that forms major obstruction across any foot path' is symbolic of a stumbling block to one receiving his cleansing; *Mkpologwu Okwalenwe*, 'the root of a very tall slippery tree very difficult to climb not even by monkeys,' symbolizes a kind of inhibition or an impediment to one's attainment of higher status in life. *Okpukpu Agu*, 'Leopard bones', is symbolic of terrestrial or land predators. *Okpukpu Enyi*, 'Elephant' bone', is symbolic of oppression, while *Okpukpu Ugo*, 'the Eagle's bone, is symbolic of air predators.

The items to be presented to the chief priest by the person being absolved is also very symbolic. *Nzu*, 'white chalk' is symbolic of peace as the essence of *Isu ogwu* is to restore peace between the individual and his fellow humans as well as his creator. *Omunkwu*, 'very tender oil palm fronds' and *akwukwo abosi* 'abosi leaves' are symbolic of the seriousness and sacredness of the *Isu ogwu*. *Okwa*, 'small mortar symbolizes crushing to death of all the evils committed by the person that is being absolved. *Ushe*, 'native cosmetic' and *oji*, 'kola nuts', are symbolic of newness, beautification and peace that comes to the person after the absolution.

The pounding of the various elements during the period of *isu ogwu* stands for unity. While the chief priest in inviting the person undergoing the cleansing to sit on a small stool as he pounds the contents in the *okwa* 'mortar', is symbolic of the willingness of the person being absolved to undergo the process of *isu ogwu*.

The utterance of the chief priest to the person undergoing the process of cleansing *a wuo m gi aru*, 'I have bathed you,' symbolizes inner cleansing.

<i>Ekwensu mbu</i>	'Ekwensu one
<i>Ekwensu ibo</i>	'Ekwensu two
<i>Ekwensu ito</i>	'Ekwensu three.

The above incantation, being made thrice by the chief, stands for perfection and completeness. Whereas the utterance, *bu chapu* 'spit out a shower of saliva', signifies rejection of his old evil way of life.

CONCLUSION

This paper takes a look at *isu ogwu* 'ritual practice' in Abatete as one of the means through which members of Abatete society are purified. This ritual makes for mutual co-existence as everyone strives to maintain good conduct in the society to avoid partaking in the ritual process. This ritual prac-

tice, due to the influence of Westernization, and also due to the fact that women do not generally partake in the practice, has almost gone extinct. This study is carried out as one of the means of documenting this very important ritual practice, especially for consumption by the younger members of the society who may never have the opportunity to experience it.

Most Igbo rituals and festivals are attempts at sustaining and maintaining peaceful co-existence in society as it was in the primordial era; hence, this paper recommends, therefore that every effort should be made at documenting all known Igbo festivals and rituals as this will save them from imminent extinction.

NOTE

¹ See George Thomas Basden, *Niger Ibos: A Description of the Primitive Life, Customs and Animistic Beliefs of the Ibo People of Nigeria by One Who, for Thirty-five years, Enjoyed the Privilege of their Intimate Confidence and Friendship* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), 389-390. Cited in Chima J. Korieh, "Yam is King! But Cassava is the Mother of all Crops: Farming, Culture, and Identity in Igbo Agrarian Economy," *Dialectical Anthropology* (2007) 31: 221-232

² Basden, *Niger Ibos*, 389-390, 394

³ Korieh, "Yam is King! But Cassava is the Mother of all Crops," 222.

⁴ Bosade F. Afolayan, "New Toyi-Toyi" Troop: Chinyere Okafor and the Redemption of the African Society, *Ihafa: Journal of African Studies*, 6 (1) (2014): 95-116.

⁵ Sally Wehmevier, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (9th Edition), (New York: Oxford Press, 2008).

⁶ O. A. Akintan, "Traditional Religious Festivals and Modernity: A Case study of Female-Oriented Cults Annual Festivals," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 3 (9) (2013):140-1162.

⁷ M. Wilson, *Religion and the Transformation of the Society: A Study in Social Change*, (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁸ Babs Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria* (London: George and Unwin, 1974), 89.

⁹ Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (London: Heinemann, 1964), 50-51.

¹⁰ N. B. Obodo, *Uwadiagwu*, (Enugwu: Longman, 1980), 19.

¹¹ See for example, M. E. Zuese, *Ritual Customs: The Sanctification of Life in African Religions*. Ohio: UP Athens Publishers, 1979, Okoli, "The Influence of Christian Religion on Nsukka Traditional Practices." *Nsukka Journal of Religious Studies (NJRS)*. Vol. 2 (1) (2008): 47-58; Bentina AlawariMathias, "Socio-Religious Significance of Ikoro and Ekpe Festivals in Akwete Ndoki Community of Abia State, Nigeria," *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 4, (5) 2014; Ogwezzy-Ndisika & Faustino, *Extra-Mundane Communication: Insights from Festivals and Carnivals*, in *Culture and Customs of the Yorùbá*, Toyin Falola & Akintunde Akinyemi (eds.), (Austin, Texas: Pan-African University Press, 2017), 339-353.

¹² M. U. Ushe, "Implications of Ritual Symbolism in Sustenance of Culture and Meaning in Nigeria: a Case Study of Tiv in North Central Nigeria," *Journal of Communication and Culture: International Perspective* 2 (3) (2011): 30-40.

- ¹³ Gregory E. N. Ogbenika, "Festivals in Africa and Social Mobilization," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)* IV (III) 2020: 291-295. Festivals in Africa and Social Mobilization (rsisinternational.org)
- ¹⁴ Ndulue, *Abatete: Political and Economic History*, 23.
- ¹⁵ O. M. O Muoedu, *Abatete Cultural Heritage: A Magazine of Abatete Development Organization*, (n.d: 6.
- ¹⁶ G. T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (London: Frank and Company, 1966), 98.
- ¹⁷ Ndulue, *Abatete: political and Economic History*,131.
- ¹⁸ Ndulue, *Abatete: political and Economic History*,138-40.
- ¹⁹ Muoedu, *Abatete Cultural Heritage*, 25-28.
- ²⁰ Oral interview with a seventy-two year old Mrs. Chinwe Akudu from Abatete.
- ²¹ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958), 24-25.
- ²² Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. 29.
- ²³ Muoedu, *Abatete Cultural Heritage* 27.
- ²⁴ Ndulue, *Abatete: political and Economic History*,131.
- ²⁵ Oral interview with Ichie Okaka.
- ²⁶ Ndulue, *Abatete: political and Economic History* 132,
- ²⁷ Ndulue, *Abatete: political and Economic History* 134.
- ²⁸ Preminger, *Enlarged edition of Princeton Encyclopedia*, 836.
- ²⁹ Raymond Firth, *Elements of Social Organization*, (London: Watts, 1956).
- ³⁰ C. P. Kottak, *Cultural Anthropology* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002), 77.
- ³¹ D. A. Cohen, *The Circle of Life: Rituals from the Human Family*, (Album. San Francisco: Harper Collins Publications, 1991).
- ³² Firth, *Symbols: public and private*, 127.