

CULTURAL FESTIVALS AS TOOLS FOR RELIVING THE ANCESTORS: A CASE STUDY OF AGBON-URHOBOTRADITIONAL FESTIVALS

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Abstract

Traditional festivals have been an integral part of human culture and society, servicing as a means of expressing cultural identity, promoting social cohesion and preserving cultural heritage. In many traditional societies, festivals are not mere celebrations, but are deeply rooted in the cultural, spiritual and historical contexts of the community. They provide a platform for the community to share experiences and reconnect with their ancestors and heritage. This study explores the significance of traditional festivals in reliving the ancestors among the Agbon - Urhobo people of Delta State. Agbon - Urhobo festivals serve as a means of connecting and honoring their legacies. Primary and secondary sources were used for the collection and collation of data. Findings reveal that Agbon - Urhobo traditional festivals provide a platform for the community to relive the past, reenact ancestral traditions and reconnect with their roots. The festivals serve as a means of cultural transmission, allowing younger generations to learn and appreciate their ancestral heritage.

Key words: Ancestors, Festivals, Agbon-Urhobo, Culture, Traditions

INTRODUCTION:

Cultural festivals have been a veritable component of human societies, serving as a means of celebrating heritage, preserving traditions, and fostering community cohesion. These vibrant events are often deeply rooted in the history and mythology of a particular culture, providing a unique window into the past and a sense of connection to one's ancestors.

In many African cultures, traditional festivals play a crucial role in reliving the experiences of the ancients, honoring their memories and perpetuating their legacies (Omoko, 2016). The Agbon - Urhobo people are renowned for their rich cultural heritage and vibrant traditional festivals. These festivals are an essential aspect of Agbon - Urhobo identity, providing a platform for the community to come together, celebrate their history and reaffirm their cultural values.

One of the most significant points in Agbon - Urhobo traditional festivals is their ability to transcend time and space, allowing participants to relive the experiences of their ancestors. Through the retelling of myths and legends, the reenactment of historical events, and performance of traditional rituals, the Agbon - Urhobo people are able to reconnect with their cultural heritage and reaffirm their sense of identity. Through the transmission of cultural knowledge and practices from one generation to the next, Agbon - Urhobo traditional festivals ensure the continued vitality of their traditions. The festivals enable the community to showcase and exhibit their cultural understanding and appreciation.

Most traditional festivals in many cultures, including Agbon - Urhobo, are intricately linked to specific divinities, spirits, or ancestors, and are therefore deeply rooted in religious and spiritual beliefs (Adeoye, 1979). These festivals often serve as a means of honoring, appeasing, or celebrating these spiritual entities, and are typically characterised by a range of rituals, ceremonies and symbolic practices. This paper explores traditional festivals in five of the six town units of Agbon - Urhobo society, namely, Okpara, Kokori, Eku, Ovu and Igun.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Scholars have long debated the definition of culture, but a consensus emerges around three core dimensions: culture as learned traits, culture as adaptive response, and culture as dynamic process. Culture as a complex of learned traits forms the earliest anthropological baseline. Tylor (1871)

defined culture as "a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. This foundational view emphasizes that culture is not innate but acquired through socialization.

Building on this, Akpochafo (2020) refined the definition for contemporary African studies, describing culture as "the complex of unique material, spiritual and intellectual traits that define a community or social class." Both scholars converge on culture as multifaceted: material traits like food and architecture, spiritual traits like beliefs and rituals, and intellectual traits like knowledge and patterns of thought. These tripartite divisions remain useful for analyzing how festivals express all three dimensions simultaneously.

Culture as adaptive response to environment, shifts focus from "what culture is" to "what culture does". Haruna (2002) conceptualized culture as "the outcome of shared response of a populace to their background", while Bello (1991) defined it as "the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment".

Both authors argue that culture emerges from collective problem - solving. Communities develop norms, values, and practices that give "order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic, and religious norms", and distinguishes them from neighbors.

Etuk (002) extends this by noting that culture embodies "what the people think of themselves and organize themselves in order to ensure their survival". Together, these scholars position culture as a survival strategy - a system communities use to adapt to ecological, social, and historical conditions.

Culture as dynamic and regenerative process captures its capacity to change while maintaining continuity. Anyanwu (2019) asserted that culture is "a vehicle for evolution, conservative as well as has the capacity to create and recreate itself". This view reconciles the tension between preservation and innovation. Culture preserves and transmits knowledge across generations, yet adapts to technology, environmental shifts, and intellectual contact. Thus, culture is both conservative and innovative - it maintains identity while allowing new expressions. This dynamic nature explains why African cultures persist despite colonization, globalization, and migration pressures.

If culture is the "whole way of life", traditional festivals are the periodic, intensified performances of that way of life. Literature identifies three dominant functions of African festivals: ritual worship, historical commemoration, and intergenerational transmission.

Festivals as ritual and spiritual performance is the most emphasized function. Omoko (2006) opined that festivals serve as "a platform for people to rejuvenate and reaffirm their loyalty to the ancestor and protect their common values". This aligns with the observation that most traditional festivals derive from ritual moments, centered on the worship of gods, goddesses, and deified beings.

Festivals blend spirituality with community celebration through ceremonies, offerings, and reenactment of mythological events tied to patron deities. As such, festivals are not mere entertainment; they are "vibrant artistic institutions" in traditional Africa that integrate music, dance, drama, storytelling, and visual arts to connect participants to the supernatural realm. They function as bridges between the living and the dead, and between the community and divinities.

Festivals as commemorative events highlight their role in collective memory. Ejekemeuwa (2002) noted that "a festival is generally a joyful

period set aside for celebration. It is an event organized by a particular community to commemorate a remarkable event in their historical life". This commemorative dimension means festivals mark agricultural seasons, historical achievements, religious occasions, or life - cycle transitions. By reenacting primordial events, festivals anchor present identity in ancestral history and promote peace and harmony within the group. The joy and shared activities enhance community cohesion while reminding members of shared origins.

Festivals as vehicles for cultural transmission address how culture survives across generations. Traditional festivals provide structured opportunities for elders to transmit "folk and tribal love" to younger generations through stories, teachings of traditional practices, and demonstration of values. Through participation, younger generations learn their community's history, customs, folktales, costumes, occupations, and religious life. Festivals thus become living expressions of heritage that reinforce identity and continuity.

Beyond internal transmission, they also serve as platforms for cultural display to outsiders, promoting understanding and appreciation of the group's heritage through music, dance, food, and crafts.

The foregoing thoughts converge on two key insights. First, culture in African scholarship is best understood as learned, adaptive, and dynamic - a system that responds to environment while recreating itself. Second, traditional festivals operationalize culture through ritual, commemoration, and pedagogy. They are intricately linked to divinities while simultaneously strengthening social bonds and transmitting knowledge.

However, while these studies explain what culture and festivals are, limited attention has been paid to how the ritual elements - themes, symbols, and performance techniques function specifically within Agbon

- Urhobo festivals. This gap justifies a focused study on the significance and techniques of such festivals within the broader framework of African cultural dynamics.

CULTURAL SETTING :

The Agbon Kingdom is one of the twenty four subunits of the Urhobo ethnic group. Other kingdoms include Eghwu (Ewu - Urhobo), Orogun, Agbarha-Otor, Ughienvwun, Ughelli, Agbarho, Okpe, Okparabe, Arhavbarien, Olomu, Udu, Ewreni, Ogor, Agbarha-Warri, Mosogar, Idjerhe, Oghara, Effurun-Otor (Ephron-Otor), Umiaghwa-Abraka, Oruarivie-Abraka, Uvwie, Uwherun, and Okere-Urhobo. Agbon Kingdom is believed to have existed long before the rise of the Benin Empire in the 1440s, and prior to the Portuguese exploration of the Western Niger Delta in the 1480s. The kingdom covers about 375 square kilometers, bounded by Abraka kingdom to the north, Orogun and Agbarho kingdoms to the east and Aghalope and Orerokpe of Okpe Local Government Area to the West and South (Agbon Home Page, n.d.).

Agbon people speak the Urhobo language as their mother tongue with a little or no dialectical variations. The Nigerian pidgin is also widely used in this area as well as English, the lingua franca of Nigeria. Agbon people are a vibrant ethnic group with a unique cultural identity. They are excellently enterprising. They also have rich traditions, including special festivals, music and dance (Chief L. Jerome, personal communication, August 13, 2025).

AN OVERVIEW OF FESTIVALS IN AGBON-URHOBO KINGDOM:

In Agbon - Urhobo kingdom, as in many other African communities, the custodians of customary laws and traditions play a vital role in determining the dates for traditional festivals. These custodians are typically traditional leaders or elders well versed in the customs,

traditions and history of the community. In most cases, the Ivie (Kings), Ilorogun (Chiefs) and Chief Priests play key roles in deciding when to celebrate festivals.

The above tradition aligns with that of the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria. (Abioye, 2017) noted that festivals are “carefully planned by the traditional institution in the community”. This planning ensures that festival reflects community values and traditions as well as respect heritage. Traditional institution typically oversees date selection, ritual preparations and communal involvement. Abioye further explained that it is the “Oba ” (King) and his chiefs that approve traditional festivals, which entails outpouring of libations, rejoicing, winning and dinning, general fun fare and merry making.

Traditional festivals in Agbon - Urhobo involve offerings to ancestors or deities, seeking blessings, or peace. The festivals are largely characterised by music, dance and festivities, bringing the community members together. Feasting entails the sharing of food and drinks which are symbols of unity and celebration. These festivals are expressions of ancestral pride; they are living museums of ancestral wisdom, reinforcing societal bonds, providing spiritual renewal, and passing down oral traditions. The scheduling of dates for traditional festivals in Agbon - Urhobo land embraces the input of the chief priest, the king, community heads and the council of Chiefs (Chief Mrs. Orherhe, personal communication, August 13, 2025).

In many African societies, including Agbon-Urhobo, festivals are typically celebrated annually. However, the frequency can vary based on the festival's significance. Annual festivals are common for events tied to agricultural cycles, honoring ancestors or marking important cultural events. Less frequent festivals are held biannually, every three to ten years, or even every twenty five years, depending on cultural or spiritual significance. Less frequent festivals allow for build up and preparation (J.

Ukpe, personal communication, August 16, 2025). During these festivals, men are known to take on leadership roles. The women contribute through cooking, decorations, or specific traditional roles. The youths (male and female) engage in performances, preparations or supporting activities. This inclusive participation fosters community bonding, preserves traditions and ensures the Festival success.

Before, during and after a festival, key figures in the community such as the monarch, chief priest and oldest male (okpako orere) perform specific functions. In fact, festivals in Agbon - Urhobo are a big deal, attracting both locals and visitors from far and near. These festivals showcase the rich cultural heritage of the community, featuring traditional music, dance, food and attire. Prior to the commencement of the festivals, key traditional leaders in the community converge at the king's palace to decide on how the festival shall be celebrated. They unanimously agree on a date and make the date known to the public through a town crier. This pre-festival convergence of key individuals ensures tradition is upheld and fosters community awareness (Chief Mrs. Orherhe, personal communication, August 14, 2025).

In Urhobo communities and other African societies, the chief priest consults oracles, ancestors or gods to determine the festival timing. This process aligns the festival date with spiritual guidance as well as honors the cultural and spiritual heritage of the people. The chief priest seeks ancestral blessings or guidance for the festival's success and community wellbeing. They are often seen as intermediaries between the community and the spiritual realm. As part of her responsibility, the oldest woman (okpako eghweya) in Agbon community summons and mobilizes the women to support the leaders to ensure a hitch-free celebration. The youths of the community have the responsibility of keeping the surroundings clean as well as implementing other decisions as may be passed across to them by the leaders (O.I Fortune, personal communication, August 16, 2025).

During the festivals, participants, especially the womenfolk (eghweya) are often seen dancing from one section of the town to another, singing songs with acrobatic displays that reflect primordial events. This participation showcases cultural heritage and highlights the role of women in the overall vibrancy and success of the festivals. Also, during the festivals, participants and spectators connect with cultural narratives. In Agbon communities, festival events occur in public places like streets (usuada), market squares (afieki), cult house (ogwan), shrines (uworhan), and rivers (urhie). These venues make festivals accessible and fully engage the community members. The streets, and market squares are often venues for dances, music and communal gatherings, while cult houses and shrines are for rituals and other spiritual activities. The rivers are for other symbolic acts connected to water. These festivals hold great significance, varying by community or festival. This importance reflects community values as the people are connected to their culture, history and traditions.

In many traditional enclaves, like Agbon - Urhobo, cultural events are pragmatic, addressing needs like health or prosperity. In most cases, events use symbols to convey desired outcomes. Cultural symbols are like secret ingredients of a society's recipe for life. They are visual representations of values, beliefs and traditions that help convey complex ideas through simple imagery. We shall now proceed to examine traditional festivals in the six town units of Agbon - Urhobo society.

OKPARA FESTIVALS

Okpara is the eldest subgroup of Agbon - Urhobo clan, bounded by Kokori/Isiokolo in the East and Ovu inland in the South. The town is watered by Omue stream which also runs across Kokori. It has 196km² space suitable for agriculture and pedestrian use. Its thick Forest has a substantial wide life reserve. Okpara is known to have very entertaining festivals which display a wide array of attires, dancers, drama, etc. The community is known to celebrate a total of five traditional festivals, with

three of them being celebrated every twenty years. These festivals are the Edjenu, the Eni and the Ibi cultural festivals. These three festivals are commemorated as carnivals to connect the descendants of Okpara to their ancestral heritage.

Symbolically, while the Edjenu festival represents "god of the sky", the Eni Festival represents the "Elephant". The Ibi festival stands for the great exploits of past warriors of the community. Each of these festivals is commemorated between the months of January and April every twenty years. During preparation for any of these festivals, Okpara people carve out a sacred enclave called "Efi" or a rendezvous. Here, they plan the festival structure. "Efi" is a traditional sacred area located at the outskirts of Osa street (O.I Fortune, Personal communication, August 16, 2025). The existence of "Efi" as a designated and sacred enclave for festival preparations in Okpara implies cultural significance, community organization and respect for traditions. The sacred place indicates reverence for tradition as the womenfolk are usually prohibited from this area. Importantly, "Efi" represents community bonds through shared cultural practice (Akorherhe & Udi, 2021).

KOKORI FESTIVALS:

By descent, Uhwokori (kokori) is the second son of Agbon, their founding ancestor. This community is bounded by Ekun and Igun in the north, by Ugono, Orhomoru, Erhobaru, Ovara, and Idonuwan villages in Orogun in the East. In the West, Kokori is bounded by Isiokolo and Okpara inland, and by Awirhe in Agbara and Oduvie in Ughelli in the South. The entire Kokori land is flat and situated in the evergreen, tropical forest zone, which is dominated by oil palm trees. A network of streams and creek cuts across different parts of Kokori. Three major streams are identifiable, among which are onwe stream on Orogun road and Erhanaka stream on Kokori - Ofoma road. Kokori is the cradle of the Igbe religion, which began in 1858, and believed to have been founded by a man called Ubiecha of Egbo street in Kokori. (Nabofa, 2003). Kokori has three main

festivals, namely, the Egba, the Orerode, and the Ibi festivals. The Egba festival celebrates the Egba fetish, the Orerode is used to celebrate the ancestors of Kokori people, while the Ibi festival commemorates the gun fires that were used against the invaders who threatened their sovereignty. The Egba and Orerode are held annually, while the Ibi festival is held once in a century (Chief Mrs. Orhehrhe, personal communication, August 15, 2025).

Egba symbolises pride, resilience and the enduring spirit of liberty and freedom among the Kokori people. As a festival depicting war, celebrants use charmed cutlasses and guns. The Egba festival is celebrated annually in February. Through the Egba and Orerode festivals, the Kokori people ignite afresh the memories of their ancestors and pass down traditions to younger generations. Three fetishes are associated with Kokori festivals. They are Egba, Ogidigbo and Otoroho. Egba yearly festival, though regarded as the small festival (Oreotete), it is the most popular. This festival involves the Egba and Ogidigbo fetishes. The big festival (Orerode), celebrates the Otoroho fetish. Oreribi isn't tied to any fetish. The last Oreribi was celebrated in 2011.

On the day of Egba festival, typically in the afternoon, the "igbu" (warriors) perform a dance with their followers along the main street (osure) of Kokori town. The warriors pin bird feathers (ugo) on their hair to represent the number of enemies they killed in wars. The eldest man in Kokori (okaoroh) and his council of chiefs (ehonvwore) play key roles in determining the date for the Egba festival. They meet in the palace and pick a date based on the position of the moon.

Once the festival date is announced, the Egba and Ogidigbo priests begin preparations. They prepare the fetish environment, conducting traditional observances. This often includes rituals and sacred rites. The priests remain in the Egba shrine until the festival is over. Typically, in the evening, the osegba (father) and oniegba (mother) emerge from the Egba

shrine, followed by changes in music sounds, dance movements and sand throwing ritual. The sand throwing ritual is done essentially to prevent strangers from identifying the osegba and oniegba from the priests. Kokori sons and daughters, home and abroad, often take part in this festival which is rooted in the traditions of their ancestors. (Chief Mrs. Orherhe, personal communication, August 15, 2026).

THE ECHEROKO FESTIVAL Of EKU:

Eku is one of the subgroups of Agbon - Urhobo kingdom. Tradition has it that Eku is a half brother to Okpara, Kokori and Orhuakpor. This community is located between Effurun - Abraka road in Ethiope East Local Government Area of Delta State (Onigu, 1982). The people of Eku celebrate the "Echeroko" festival, honoring the "god of war" named Echeroko. This deity is believed to have transformed to an animal called "edjenekpo" (tiger) during wars against Eku's enemies. This festival is part of Eku's cultural heritage, involving traditions honoring this war god. It is celebrated every September to honor the war god Echeroko for its role in past victories against enemies.

The Echeroko festival plays a vital role in safeguarding the cultural heritage and customs of Eku's native people, ensuring these traditions are kept for posterity. Aside from preserving Eku people culture and traditions, the Echeroko festival acts as a unifying platform and fortifies the social connections that bind the people of Eku together. The festival embodies the values that shape the community's overall way of life (Akporthere & Udi, 2021).

Preparations for the Festival typically involve the yearly clearing of pathways leading to the Echeroko shrine. On the eve of the festival, titled men conduct a ritual procession through the town's main streets between 1:00am and 3:00am. During this period, they involve the ancestral spirits of the land. At this time, women must remain indoors. Tradition holds that if a woman accidentally witnesses the titled men performing this ritual,

the gods will cause her to be unable to bear children. This restriction on women is believed to maintain secrecy, prevent desecration and sacrilege and protect the sanctity of the ritual practices. This prohibition does not, however prevent the womenfolk (eghweya) from playing their expected roles before, during and after the festival.

THE OVU UGHERE FESTIVAL

Ovu is a constituent part of Agbon Kingdom. According to a version of Ovu's historical tradition, the community was established by the descendants of Eregbe. Eregbe was a son of Okpara, who himself was the first son of Agbon (Onigu, 1982). Ovu inland is located close to the village of Okrufor - Okpara and near the locality of Oviorie. The Ovu Ughere festival is held annually in February to honor the brave deeds of the community's ancestral warriors. During the festival, renowned warriors take turns to display their heroic feats accomplished in the past year. This is followed by a contest involving the calabash (goured), where there is a competitive struggle for the calabash. The goured is positioned strategically in the "Efi" area, where all local community members can see it from a distance. The renowned warriors armed with cutlasses engage in a competitive battle with each other to try to reach the goured.

Typically, at the end of the contest, the most powerful warrior, who has defended himself against the various machete strikes from his fellow warriors, triumphantly claims the goured. He dances to the applause of onlookers, marking his supremacy among the warriors for that year. Women are not allowed to enter the "Efi" area where the warriors are competing for the goured. (Chief Ojamevraye, personal communication, August 17, 2025). It is believed that this restriction is mandated by the gods.

THE IGUN FESTIVAL

Igun is also one of the subgroups of Agbon - Urhobo society. However, it is believed that the Igun community has no descent connection with Agbon. According to tradition, the Igun community was co-established

by two brothers, namely, Ohwoyovwe and Usu, with the involvement of some Urhobo migrants from Benin. The two brothers are believed to be hunters from Eghwu (Onigu, 1982).

The Igun people worship two deities at their annual festival. They are the "Olokun" also called "Okun Igun" and the "Omote Kpokpo". Olokun is a significant deity associated with the sea, wealth and fertility. Olokun is considered to exercise authority over other water deities. This reflects Olokun's importance in the spiritual realm related to waters and seas. Olokun is known to be a giver of great wealth and prosperity to worshippers. Devotees often seek Olokun's blessings for financial success, abundance and fertility. This deity is worshipped near the sea or using items symbolising sea. The people offer sacrifices like food, animals, or other items to appease Olokun, seeking blessings, wealth, fertility or protection.

The "Omote Kpokpo" deity, also known as "Okao" is believed to have originated from Igun. Despite appearing fearful, it is known to be harmless, friendly and hospitable. They offer prayers and blessings to persons who welcome them into their homes. Igun people revere and celebrate these deities at their annual festival. These festivals are essentially characterised by funfair as well as a showcasing of the rich cultural heritage of the Igun people. The Omote Kpokpo deity is particularly known to bless the people of the community (Chief Mrs. Orherhe, personal communication, August 15, 2025).

CONCLUSION:

This paper has explored traditional festivals in five town units of Agbon - Urhobo kingdom. Cultural festivals, like those in Agbon are tools for reliving the ancestors' legacy, fostering community unity and preserving cultural heritage. Agbon - Urhobo festivals serve as a bridge between the living and the ancestors, reliving their exploits and spiritual connections. They bring the community together, showcasing traditional music, dance,

masquerades, and culinary heritage. These festivals underscore the people's commitment to cultural preservation. It is recommended that efforts should be made to promote and adapt these festivals to modern times, while at the same time respecting traditions to ensure their continuation and relevance in contemporary society. Traditional festivals in Agbon - Urhobo kingdom should be made to attract modern youths by framing them beyond ancestral worship to cultural entertainment and identity. Organizers should integrate digital media, music, fashion, and short films that reinterpret festival symbols and myths in contemporary language.

Youth-led committees can design interactive segments like talent shows, e-gaming tournaments, and eco-tourism tours tied to festival themes. Partnerships with schools and social media influencers can showcase the festival's values of unity, resilience, and creativity rather than only ritual obligations. By blending tradition with modern aesthetics and civic relevance, festivals become spaces for self-expression, heritage pride, and community development, not just ancestral rites.

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