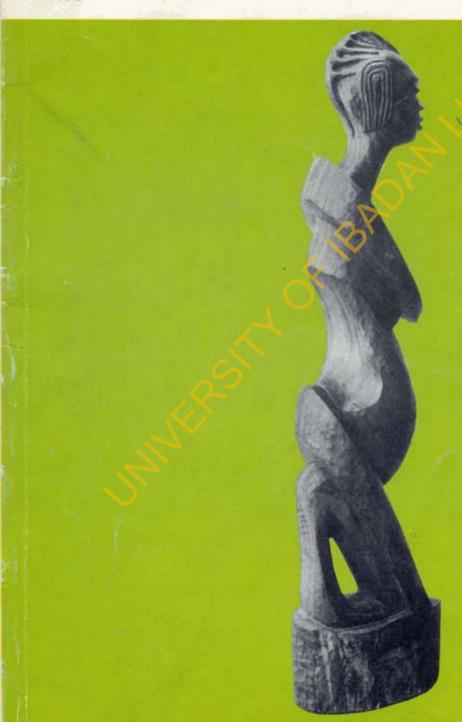
# Nigeria Magazine

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# Festivals in Nigeria: A Bibliography

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This bibliography is coming out at a time when there is general or national awareness for the revival of our cultural heritage. It is hoped that Nigerians and aliens resident in Nigeria, researchers in African Studies, would find this publication a guide to a better knowledge of the cultural heritage and diversity of the peoples of Nigeria.

It is necessary to emphasise, however, that although this is a pioneering effort to record all the known and unknown traditional festivals held annually or in some cases, after a long interval of time, this bibliography is by no means exhaustive.

#### Introduction

Nigeria, one of the largest countries in Africa, is rich in culture and tradition. It has a population of about 56 million people belonging to different ethnic groups. The larger groups are the Hausas, Fulanis, Kanuris, Tivs and Nupes in the North and Yorubas, Igbos, Ibibios and Edos in the South. Each ethnic group has its own language, customs, tradition and religion. It is estimated that there are about 250 different language groups in Nigeria and this implies a large diversity in culture and tradition, language being the main medium for the spread and preservation of culture. By culture here, we mean all the distinctive and shared activities of a people.

There are geographical differences between the north and the south and these differences have had an influence or at least have aided certain tendencies in the traditions and culture of the people of the two geographical zones. It is generally believed that geographical factors and the powers of the traditional rulers of the Yoruba people have aided the advance of Islam from Northern Nigeria into Western Nigeria. Although the first part of this belief may be open to question, there is no doubt that the Yoruba traditional rulers encouraged their people to accept Islam and as a consequence accept it and celebrated festivals associated with this religion.

Festivals are periodic recurring days or seasons of gaiety or merry-making set aside by a community, tribe or clan, for the observance of sacred celebrations, religious solemnities or musical and traditional performance of special significance. It is an occasion of public manifestation of joy or the celebration of a historical occurrence like the conquest of a neighbouring village in way. It can take the form of a religious celebration during which sacrifices are offered to the different gods having power over rain, sunshine, marriage and good harvest.

Ife is the most ancient of all Yoruba towns and is regarded by all Yorubas as the first city from where all other Yorubas migrated to their present abode. In Yoruba culture, Ife is supposed to be the central point from where the rest of Yorubas originated and from where culture and civilisation radiated. Ife alone is known to have about 400 festivals which to this day are celebrated annually.

In most Nigerian festivals, religious activities or worship play a very prominent role. Typical of this can be found among the Yorubas, Ibibios, Nupe and Bida people who interpret life in symbols. Beier notes this in his description of "Ori-Oke festival at Iragbiji". He pointed out that "the mysterious dark rocks that rise suddenly from the flat surrounding countryside, are symbols of eternity." The real object of worship seems in every case to be the Orisha - an anthropomorphic deity very much like Sango, Ogun, Obatala or any of the famous Yoruba gods. The rock is not itself the divine being. Just as the thunder symbolises the strength and power of Sango, and the ocean shows the inexhaustible wealth of Olokun, so the rocks stand for the strength and power of Orisha with whom it is



Ebugu war dancers. It is a victory dance performed after war or a big hunt.

associated. Objects such as mountains, serve as a symbol of worship and this is found in the songs of the worshippers. The Ori-Oke festival is an example of worship not only by the cult members but also the entire town people during which time incantations and prayers are offered in July. It is recorded that this festival takes place during the rains but it is expected that the rain-makers prevent rain from falling during the celebration.

The Ejigbo festival is another example of a religious festival in which the celebrations follow a ritual and the establishment of two "enemy" camps in which both camps, armed with poles, engage in a miniature war composed of attacks interspersed with moments of quiet.

Agbo festival is celebrated annually at Iwopin.

It is believed to have been introduced to Agbowa by a woman from Iwopin (Ijebu waterside) between 1904–1907. Agbo is a goddess represented by a female masquerade.

Igogo festival was imported to Owo from Ife. It lasts for 17 days. The climax of the festival is on the last day when all the chiefs dance around the town to the Igogo music which is played on metal gongs on their way to the Oba's palace.

Osezi festival in Agbor is supposed to be an annual festival but has not been so for a long time. It was revived in 1962 and so was the first in eight years. This is a festival in which the Obi remembers his deceased ancestors and in which there is a demonstration of loyalty on the part of the Agbor people towards their Obi.

New Yam festival is celebrated in almost all the ethnic groups of Nigeria. It takes place usually, about the end of June, and it is celebrated annually. In most areas, to eat new yam before this festival is taboo. A day is usually set aside for this festival by the chief priest of the god of harvest. The day is designated a public holiday by the community. Very early on this day, the high priest kills a goat in the fetish place and pours the blood on the symbol that represents the god of harvest. After this the carcass is cooked and vegetable soup is made of it. Yam is boiled and pounded to make foofoo. Everybody gathers around the market place and the chief priest after incantations and prayers about the past season, prays for a better harvest in the coming season. After this the high priest declares the feast open by eating the pounded yam and the soup first before any other person. After this there is a lot of dancing, drinking and merry-making as the new yam is being eaten. After this festival, the new yam can then be eaten by any member of the community.

# Festival of Pategi Regatta

Regatta is a biennial festival in which the Nupe people come together on the Pategi side of the river for a friendly sports festival. The Nupe people are renowned swimmers and boatmen. Although inaugurated in 1953 as a single event. this festival had been a favourite sport on the Niger since 1935. Competitors include boys, girls, men and women from Pategi and Bida. They come in colourful and well-decorated boats bedecked with flags. In each boat are drummers, dancers, musicians, singers and in some cases, the boats carry mascots. On the sporting day, the competitors assemble in the creeks just off the main river with their boats. As they are called out by the ruling monarch of Pategi, they take their places up stream. When signalled, the competitors paddle furiously up stream to where the judges and spectators are waiting to pick the winners. Collisions are frequent but since the competitors are good swimmers no accident usually occurs. The winners of the competition are given prizes.

# **Argungu Fishing Festival**

Argungu is a small desert town in Sokoto State. Unlike the proper desert, this area has some rivers that do not dry up even in the hot seasons,

thus they are very significant in this dry area. It is in these rivers that the majority of the fish population survive when the other rivers and pools have dried up. The local people are mainly fishermen. This festival takes place during the harmattan season and not only marks the opening of the fishing season but also part of an ancient fertility ritual which from the point of view of the Kebbawa people, is the most important aspect of the occasion. On the evening before this festival, the Homa-traditional chief of the fishermen and the priests of this ancient ritual, go down to the Sokoto river with the Sarkin-Ruwa - the chief of the river and Jirgi - the chief of the ferry-men. They choose one of the pools which is not dry for the ceremony. At the time of the festival, however, the pool must be about 12 feet deep, one hundred and 20 feet wide and about 900 feet long. By this pool, the Homa makes sacrifice of a mixture of honey and balls of rice flour, a red nanny-goat, a couple of black and red hens, onions, pawpaw, water melon, kolanuts and milk. As he throws these into the river, he prays to the gods and to the ancestral spirits of their forefathers to send peace, health, progress and good fortune during the coming year. Very early the following morning, people start trooping to this pool. The males carry two calabashes and a pair of "butterfly" fishing nets. The Homa and his men distribute cotton wool and corn to everyone they meet on their way to the river. On arriving at the river, the chief priest buries a protective charm in the river's edge. By 9 a.m., the site is full of spectators, dancers, singers etc. On the arrival of the Emir, the chief priest performs some more rituals after which he declares the festival open. While the chief priest gets into his beautifully decorated canoe with his drummers, dancers and singers the fishermen undress and move to the bank of the river carrying their nets and calabashes. When they receive a signal from the chief priest, the fishermen leap into the river. The fish population, being disturbed, leap and splash in protest to this invasion of their habitat.

The spectators dance and sing in delight as the fishermen struggle with the giant fish. The priest, still in his canoe, watches with keen interest and weighs the large fish in order to get a record of the biggest catch of the festival. The exhibition of the largest fish, is one of the surest ways of demonstrating the attitude of the gods towards the

Kebbawa people during the coming year. Each fisherman is believed to be a messenger who collects part of the New Year message from the ruling spirits in answer to the prayers and sacrifices made through the Homa. Nowadays, this festival is seasonal and alternates with rice cultivation in the flood plains of the Sokoto river during the wet season. Even then, the importance

of fishing still remains its main objective. The festival now lasts five days instead of one and is one of Nigeria's tourist attractions. Other activities now feature in this festival e.g. wrestling matches, boxing bouts, dancing etc. Worthy prizes are given to the contestants that catch the biggest fish.

Olokun shrine in Urhonighe, Benin, Bendel State. Many festivals are connected with deities in Nigeria and Olokun (Goddess of the river) is one of them.





An all female ritual dance performed during the annual Yemoja festival. Yemoja is a water goddess and mother of Songo.

## Oshun festival

Oshun is an Orisha who is widely worshipped in Yorubaland. She is a deity of the river and was said to be the favourite wife of Sango, the god of thunder. It is believed that Oba Laro, the king of Oshogbo made a pact with Oshun when he made some sacrifice in the river and a mighty fish (Oshun's messenger) appeared and spat some water into his hands. This sacred water was said to have the power of making barren women fertile.

This festival takes place in August and lasts for eight days. It features several activities in which the Ataoja, the chief priests of this deity and the worshippers make various sacrifice to the goddess. On the fifth day of this festival, the Ataoja makes his way to the river to renew his pact with Oshun. Many women also go to this river to evoke the goddess with bells and pray for children and drink out of the holy water. The high priestess, Arugba, then returns to the Oshun shrine and prophesies what would happen during the year. While she is prophesying, the other priests and priestesses of Oshun, prostrate before her because they believe that the Oshun, herself, is speaking through her. The festivity continues till late in the night.

With colonialism, the advent of christianity and new affluence, most of these traditional festivals have lost their significance and meaning and have been restricted or relegated to the rural areas. Most of them have been adulterated to suit modern life. Most of them were almost at the point of extinction but for the sudden awareness



Ivu dancers. Ivu is a ritual annual ancestral dance performed at Ututu, Arochukwu, Imo State, after the planting of yams to propitiate the gods for plentiful harvest.

of the values of African culture and tradition by Africans in the middle of the 20th century. Attempts are now being made by the Nigerian Government to revive some of these traditional festivals.

Some Nigerian writers have incorporated some of these traditional festivals into their work. Wole Soyinka's long poem *Idanre* and his play *Kongi's harvest* are derived from harvest festivals and Soyinka uses this play and poem to show the dependence of the present on the past.

Chinua Achebe's Things fall apart and Arrow of God show their author's insight into some aspects of the Igbo yam festival and suggests the dignity of the past as well as its shortcomings.

#### Scope

It is surprising that despite all the noise about festivals as relates to the Nigerian culture, there is hardly a well documented source to turn to for information on any festival that a scholar may be interested in studying. It is necessary therefore, to emphasise that this is a pioneering effort to record all the known and unknown traditional festivals held in Nigeria. There may be omissions and I would welcome criticisms since I cannot claim that this bibliography is exhaustive. have tried to cover the entire federation as far as documented traditional festivals are concerned. but some States e.g. Rivers, South, Eastern and the Northern States do not have documented literature on many of their traditional festivals. In this work, I have listed only those titles that deal strictly with festivals and other ceremonies like naming ceremonies, burial ceremonies and the like, have been excluded. This bibliography covers traditional festivals associated with harvest, religion, initiation ceremonies, secret societies and cults.

# Arrangement

This bibliography is arranged alphabetically according to the 1967 twelve State structure for convenience. Under each State, listing is alphabetically by author/Title. Subjects or titles relating to Nigeria as a whole are put under

Nigeria-General. In like manner, titles pertaining to the former Northern Region have been put under Northern Nigeria-General.

#### Index

Though arranged geographically according to the 1967 twelve State structure for convenience, the index has been made to accommodate the 1976 nineteen State structure. A "see" reference refers one from the new State to the State it was in before the 1976 split up.

The index is in two alphabetical sequences. The first is the author/Title Index and the second is the State/subject Index.

# Acknowledgement

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