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NEW YAM FESTIVAL CELEBRATION IN CONTEMPORARY IGBO SOCIETY: IMPLICATIONS FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN EKWUSIGO LGA, ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

Igbo new yam festival, known as 'iri ji ọhụrụ' or 'Ịwa ji' (new yam eating or cutting of the new yam) is one of the cultural events practiced in Igbo contemporary society. This festival traditionally marks the end of the planting season and the beginning of harvest of yam and other food crops cultivated by the Igbo people all through the planting period. It is a way of showing gratitude to the gods of the land for a successful planting season. The event is done annually, and it is accompanied by some cultural activities such as masquerading, wrestling, dancing, and food exhibitions. It creates opportunities for local businesses such as trading on yams, fishes, bush meat, local wines, foreign wines, beads, ornamentals, cultural materials, kola nuts, red oil, accommodations and food vendors which promote economic growth and development. The new yam festival also creates opportunities for social and cultural interactions where people from different cultural descents meet for social and cultural entertainments. The festival offers Igbo people who are aware of the activities associated with it the chance of travelling home with their friends and acquaintances to witness the events accompanying the new yam festival. The question is, could new yam festival and its associated activities promote tourism in this modern time in Ekwusigo LGA, Anambra State? In order to answer this question this study delves into new yam festival celebration in contemporary Igbo society: Implication for tourism development in Ekwusigo LGA, Anambra State. The study was thematically carried out through careful examination of the concepts of new yam festival, contemporary Igbo society, tourism, tourism development, implications of new yam festival celebration on tourism development, conclusions and recommendations. The study concludes that when new yam festival is developed, it could enhance tourism development towards economic enhancement in Ekwusigo Local Government of Anambra State.

Keywords: New Yam Festival, Implications, Contemporary Igbo Society, Significance, Tourism Development.

Introduction

Nigeria is one of the West African countries that have rich cultural traditions and festivals they celebrate. Among these celebrations, the new yam festival holds a prominent position in Nigerian society, especially among the Yoruba, Idoma and Igbo people, (Fiyinfoluwa, 2025). Corroborating this, Unya (2021) observes that the Igbo, as one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria has a unifying factor or group identity they all commonly subscribe to and new yam festival celebration is one of the main tenets that are shared by all Igbo-speaking people

irrespective of where they found themselves. The five Igbo speaking states in Nigeria are Anambra, Abia, Abonyi, Enugu and Imo. Igbo people are also found in some other neighbouring states like Cross River, Rivers, Delta and Bayelsa; and this festival is celebrated in those areas as well.

This special festival in Igbo land is celebrated between August and October every year organized by the king (Eze) of the community in collaboration with the council of elders. Celebration of the new yam festival marks the end of the farming season and a new harvest cycle where gods and ancestors are appreciated for a bountiful harvest, centering on the "king of crops" (yam). Onwutalobi (2015) postulates that while early crops such as maize, cocoyam and pumpkins are harvested and eaten without any fanfare, yam is being celebrated to depict its prominent position in the socio-cultural life of the Igbo people. Yam, in this context is referred to as the chief crops. It enjoys a high position among other crops, hence the rituals associated with the eating of the new yam in Igbo society. Okafor (2017) remarks that the festival serves as a solemn ritual to give thanks to deities like 'anị' (earth) and ancestral spirits for abundance and to seek protection for future harvests.

New yam festival popularly known as 'ịwa ji, iri ji, ike ji, ahịajioḳụ, ifejioḳụ, ihinjioḳụ or emume ọnwa asatọ' (depending on dialect), is deeply rooted in tradition that has been passed down for hundreds of years and remains an important occasion for local communities in Igbo land. Though the style and methods may differ from one community to the other, the essential components that make up the festival remain the same. In some communities, the celebration lasts a whole day, while in many places it may last a week or more.

Celebration of the New Yam Festival

The appearance of the new moon in August marks the preparation for the great new yam festival, but the time and mode of preparation varies from community to community, (Igbo Union Finland, 2021). Prior to the event, the yams are harvested. Before the newly harvested yams can be eaten, community leaders perform the rites to declare the yams safe for consumption. In some communities, all remaining yams from previous year must be consumed or discarded on the eve of the festival. At the beginning of the festival, the yams are offered to the gods and ancestors first before distributing them to the villagers. The ritual is performed either by the oldest man in the community or by the king or eminent titleholder. It is a way of appreciating the supreme deity for leading them from the planting season to the time of harvest. After the rituals, the king or the oldest man and other members of council of elders will eat the first yam because it is believed that their position bestows the privilege of being intermediaries between their communities and the gods of the land. Onwutalobi (2015) opines that the variations found among different communities, as well as the rituals and offer of thanksgiving explains the three aspects of the Igbo worldview, that they are pragmatic, religious, and appreciative.

According to Nzewi (2018), the new yam festival encompasses a rich array of cultural activities. Preparatory rituals include the discarding of old yams from the previous season, the harvesting and presentation of the first new yams, the Iwa Ji ceremony, Iwa Oji (the ritual of breaking of kola nut), and sacrificial offerings to the deities are part of the activities that mark the event. These are followed by a diverse programme of celebratory activities: communal feasting on yam dishes, masquerade performances, traditional music and dance,

cultural parades, ceremonial visits and gift exchanges among families, wrestling contests, and award ceremonies (Wikipedia, 2025; Ukpokolo, Okoye and Lawuyi, 2018).

The yam used for the main ritual at the festival is usually roasted and served with palm oil. Other yam-based dishes and different local delicacies are also prepared and shared among community members and guests. The event is symbolic of enjoyment accompanied by vibrant cultural performances such as music, dance, masquerades and theatrical displays. Traditional attires, adornments as well as body and face painting are common during this event. Each of these elements presents a unique and authentic cultural experience that can attract domestic and international visitors alike. The visual spectacle of masquerades, the athleticism of traditional wrestling, and the communal warmth of shared feasting contribute in making the event so colourful and attractive. However, there are some observable adjustments in the way this festival is being celebrated in the contemporary Igbo society which may create memorable and marketable tourism experiences.

New Yam Festival in the Contemporary Igbo Society

Contemporary society simply means modern society or modern times. It is the current society with emerging social, economic and socio- cultural realities. Contemporary society refers to the current historical epoch, distinguished by accelerated technological change, deepening globalization, and far-reaching post-industrial social and cultural transformations (Giddens, 2019). It is also characterized by pressing environmental and social challenges, elevated standards of living in many regions, rising life expectancy, and rapidly evolving social norms and values. In contemporary Igbo society, however, the new yam festival celebration has expanded beyond ritual practices into a socio-cultural event attracting visitors, diaspora populations, and cultural tourists. Within this context, cultural institutions including traditional festivals face the dual pressure of modernization and the need for preservation.

In the contemporary Igbo social milieu, traditional institutions and practices coexist alongside modern systems, resulting in processes of cultural adaptation rather than wholesale cultural loss (Ukpokolo, Okoye and Lawuyi 2018). The new yam festival has evolved considerably over time, integrating modern elements while preserving its foundational ceremonial essence. Contemporary new yam festival celebration now incorporates popular music performances, fashion parades, and cultural storytelling, rendering the festival more engaging and accessible to younger generations (Wikipedia, 2025).

Consequently, the new yam festival is taking a new dimension that is capable of boosting the tourism of the host community. Many communities in Igbo land have taken the opportunity of new yam festival to showcase their cultural heritage and talents. Some persons that are strong manifest their dexterity in wrestling bout which only does not earn them thunderous accolades but spread of worthy naira notes that could improve their economy. Those who have singing and or dancing ability can perform during the festival and get financial appreciation from the audience. It can also be an opportunity for them to gain wider publicity on their talents.

Furthermore, the new yam festival in contemporary Igbo society helps food vendors to make enormous sales. People that can roast yam as one of the interesting local foods in Igbo land

make much sales during the new yam festival. They do not only roast for their family members but also for visitors who accompany their friends for the celebration.

Another interesting feature of the new yam festival in contemporary Igbo society is offalla festival by the kings (Ezes, Igwes) of different communities. In modern times, many Ezes in Igbo land conduct their offalla festival during the new yam festival. The offalla festival as an integral aspect the new yam festival allows dignitaries from different places to visit the community in honour of the traditional ruler of the community, thereby enhancing the tourism potential of the community.

Concept of Tourism Development

Tourism is recognized as one of the fastest-growing sectors of the global economy. It drives economic expansion, generates employment, facilitates cross-cultural exchange, and provides countries with valuable foreign exchange earnings (The United Nations World Tourism Organization, UNWTO, 2018). UNWTO (2018) defines tourism as a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon involving the movement of people to destinations beyond their usual environment, undertaken for personal, leisure, or professional purposes. As a global industry, tourism encompasses interconnected activities such as hospitality, accommodation, transportation\ and cultural sightseeing.

Tourism development refers to the systematic process of planning, promoting, and managing tourism infrastructure and resources so as to attract visitors and generate socio-economic benefits for host communities (UNWTO, 2018). Such development typically involves investment in transportation networks, accommodation facilities, cultural attractions and supportive policy frameworks. Properly managed, tourism promotes inter-cultural understanding, encourages the conservation of cultural heritage, generates employment, stimulates local enterprise, and enhances government revenue.

For developing communities like Ekwusigo LGA of Anambra State, harnessing local cultural assets such as new yam festival for tourism purposes could present a viable pathway to sustainable economic development. In essence, when the new yam festival is well organized as one of the most important festivals in Ekwusigo Local Government Area, it could promote people's movement to the area, utilization of transport facilities, hotel accommodations and patronage of newly harvested crops of the region, that mature with yam. This would enhance the tourism development of Ekwusigo LGA in Anambra State.

The Significance of New Yam Festival

There are many benefits of the new yam festival. It yields multifaceted cultural, social, and economic benefits (Ezeigbo, 2016; Okafor, 2017). The festival is so significant and serves as a unique cultural event that symbolizes gratitude, prosperity and unity. Thus, the main purpose of the new yam festival is to offer thanks to the gods and ancestors for a bountiful harvest and to seek their blessings for future prosperity. According to Unya (2021), yam is the only crop cultivated in Igbo land that has a cult dedicated to it. That is why the new yam festival involves various rituals, invocations and offerings to deities or gods associated with fertility, agriculture and abundance.

Yam is considered a symbol of prosperity in Igbo land. Thus, in the pre-colonial Igbo society, cultivation of yam is the major traditional source of wealth and social status. In order words, a man's wealth was measured based on the size of his barn and the number of yam tubers he possessed. In agreement, Nwafor (2025) states that yam is a symbol of masculine strength, wealth, and social prestige. Ukpokolo, Okoye and Lawuyi (2018) aver that accomplished yam farmers in Igbo land are usually honoured with some titles associated with yam such as 'Eze Ji' (King of yam), 'Di Ji' (Expert yam cultivator) and 'Ọpa Ji Achọ Anị' (A man with surplus yam, looking for available land to cultivate). All these signify the prestigious position yam occupies in the life of the Igbo people.

Furthermore, new yam festival serves to foster a feeling of unity among the participants, young and old alike, and helps to build and maintain a sense of identity. The festival strengthens social ties within communities. The event brings people together thereby fostering a sense of unity and cooperation. It serves as an opportunity for families, neighbours and friends to come together, share meals, exchange gifts and engage in communal activities. According to Okafor (2017), many participants living outside their home communities, see the festival as an important occasion for family reunion, with urban-dwelling Igbo returning to their natal villages to reconnect with kin and community.

It also plays an important role in preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of the Igbo people. Culturally, it serves as a vital mechanism for transmitting indigenous values, knowledge systems, and traditions. Apart from the fact that new yam festival celebration promotes social unity, it helps in value restoration. It reinforces Igbo people's values like respect, gratitude and hard work. New yam festival is deeply rooted in the traditions, customs and beliefs of various communities. Thus, the cultural dances, music, attire and folklore people display during the occasion are being handed down to younger generations, thereby ensuring the continuity of Igbo heritage. The acrobats and dances showcased by the youth during new yam festival attract a lot of admirers. The admirers may come from different neighbouring communities to enjoy the exhibition. Apart from entertainment, this act of watching people's acrobats has some tourism implications.

From an economic standpoint, the festival generates expanded market opportunities for farmers, traders, artisans, and performers, all of whom benefit from the intensified commercial activity that accompanies the celebrations (Nzewi, 2018). Additionally, it provides a platform for youth engagement, the affirmation of local identity, and broad-based community participation. Since the celebration of new yam festival include a variety of entertainments and ceremonies, it attracts people from neighbouring communities, friends and tourists from far and wide.

The new yam festival features a lot of social and cultural activities that can promote tourism. Some people from the host community and other places can attend the new yam festival to be given or receive chieftaincy title from the king (Eze or Igwe) of the host community. This practice has helped many individuals and or politicians to earn title like Eze Abata one of Ozubulu, Ichie Onodu Ugo one of Ekwusigo, Oru Atuagwu one of Amakwa, Ogidiga one of Nza, Omeluora one of Oraifite among other titles. These titles are not awarded in vain. The receivers appreciate the king (Eze) and council of elders with whooping sum of money to support the new yam festival celebration. Some, in appreciation of the received title, build

town hall for the people while others may promise scholarship awards to indigenes of the host community, others gift the host community with amount of money ranging from 50,000,100,000, 1,000,000 among others. Those guests can as well buy yam and other agricultural produce that are displayed during the festivity. All these can help to boost the economic potential of the host community and create opportunity for tourism development.

Implications of New Yam Festival for Tourism Development in Ekwusigo LGA, Anambra State

New yam festival has some implications for tourism development in Ekwusigo local government area of Anambra state. These are as follows:

1. When the new yam festival is well organized by the traditional rulers and the community leaders, it would bring about mass attendance by the people of the host community and the invited members of the neighbouring communities and these attendees would in one way or other patronize the activities associated with the new yam festival towards enhancing tourism development of Ekwusigo LGA, Anambra State.
2. The massive turnout in attendance associated to the new yam festival would basically add to demands for hotel accommodation by the visitors which would enhance the economy of the hotel owners in Ekwusigo LGA. With this, hotel related businesses would thrive in the local government.
3. During the new yam festival celebration, visitors do demand the local foods of the community and this offers the local food vendors the opportunity to make good sales. This high demand for local eateries and its concomitant enjoyment by the patronisers makes the new yam festival a good opportunity for tourism and relaxation.

Conclusion

The Igbo new yam festival represents far more than an agrarian celebration. It is a living repository of cultural identity, spiritual belief, and communal solidarity. In Ekwusigo LGA and across Igbo land, the festival has the potential to serve as a transformative engine for tourism development. By showcasing a rich and distinctive cultural heritage, the festival attracts visitors from diverse backgrounds, thereby stimulating demand for local hospitality, transportation, and artisan goods. Realizing this potential, however, requires coordinated action from government agencies, traditional institutions, and local communities to invest in infrastructure, train hospitality personnel, and market the festival effectively at both national and international levels. Ensuring the cultural integrity of the celebration remains paramount, as it is the authenticity of the new yam festival that constitutes its greatest appeal.

Recommendations

From the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made;

1. Government of Anambra State, through the ministry of culture and tourism should enlighten the traditional rulers of Ekwuaigo LGA on the tourism related benefits of celebrating new yam festival. This when done would help the community to reap full benefits of new yam festival celebration.

2. The traditional rulers of all communities in Ekwusigo LGA should give their new yam festival celebration wide publicity to enable people of all walks of life to join in its celebration towards maximizing the full tourism benefits of the new yam festival.
3. People of different Igbo communities should re-activate social, cultural and economic activities associated to new yam festival celebration to realize its tourism benefits towards tourism development.
4. Stranger elements from other cultural backgrounds should try and find out time for celebration of the new yam festival to enable them enjoy the tourism benefits associated to new yam festivals.
5. Communities in Ekwusigo LGA should incorporate modernization into various activities that mark the new yam festival to continue to make it more attractive to younger generation and wider society. this will make it serve as an instrument of social cohesion among the people as to promote its touristic relevance in contemporary Igbo society.

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