

ZHIBAJE RITUAL FESTIVAL AND THE GBAGYI WORLD VIEW

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Abstract

ZhiBaje practice is one of the essential aspects of the Gbagyi folk life which celebrates the quintessential humanity of the Gbagyi people in central Nigeria. It is one of the religious performances that prove the vitality of the Gbagyis irrespective of the balkanization of the people across several states in Nigeria. This study examines the functionality of ZhiBaje ritual and folklore in the fragmented postcolonial Nigerian state. It appraises the social constructivist values in ZhiBaje practice and how aspects of the ritual practices convey doctrines of sharing, social harmony, love and human dignity; all which are fundamental to nation building. We use performance ethnography and functional theories as a theoretical premise to assert that ZhiBaje practice convey an epistemic bastion upon which humanity's racial prejudices can be suppressed for social integration to take its course. We draw our data from the performance of ZhiBaje ritual by the Gbagyis of Gonin-Gora area of Kaduna State. We used participant observation and key informant interview instrumentality to maintain that the ritual corpus of ZhiBaje is philosophical and contained sundry episteme that can preserve world's humanity. We conclude that harmony amongst Nigeria's diverse populations can only be attained by drawing from aspects of Nigerian nativist beliefs that sanctions the inviolability of human dignity. The study found out that the Gbagyi cosmic world is hierarchical and as a result influences the character of the Gbagyis in central Nigeria.

Keywords: ZhiBaje, Ritual Festival, Folklore, Gbagyi

Introduction

ZhiBaje is one of the festivals celebrated by Gbagyi communities of central Nigeria. It is an important aspect of the Gbagyi folk-life in that it celebrates the spine that holds Gbagyi people together in spite of their geographical fragmentation in present-day central Nigeria. The festival emphasizes single humanity in a diverse multicultural world and promotes sharing irrespective of creed. Nevertheless, the festival is rarely known. The principle underpinning the ritual performance in *ZhiBaje* is rebirth, community sharing and participation. It is anti-capitalist and against individualism. It underscores the common African metaphysics which emphasizes collectivism. This is evident in the indigenous belief on *fako* 'family service', *fwapa* 'collective service' before *anugba* 'personal service' for all Gbagyi. *ZhiBaje* festival, like other festivals in Nigeria, has an intrinsic inclination to social and cultural reconstruction. Nevertheless, *ZhiBaje* has received only a passive amount of critical attention from scholars, ethnographers, cultural institutions and government departments. The festival is largely unknown in many Gbagyi communities due to the growing status of Christianity and Islam among the people. So far, only Zhimiko (2005) has put in effort to document *ZhiBaje* festival. Nevertheless, Zhimiko's (2005) essay mostly explicates the processes of the festival without richly demonstrating the imports of *ZhiBaje* festival in socio-cultural engineering, political participation, sharing and the centrality of the Gbagyi humanity in a diversified world. To this end, the intrinsic cultural, social and developmental export and value of the ritual festival is threatened due to extinctive factors such as none or poor documentation, demonization of the festival by Islamic and Christian clerics, and the apathy of Gbagyi people themselves on this indigenous practices. The aim of this paper is to convey the tropes of *ZhiBaje* ritual festival with a view to express functional ways in which *ZhiBaje* fosters social cohesion and sharing among the Gbagyi peoples of Nigeria. Specifically, the paper will try to understand the nature of Gbagyi worldview and its implication on Gbagyi's cultural practice, examine aspects of *ZhiBaje* ritual festival that foster respect for human dignity, participation and sharing and assess the functional value of *ZhiBaje* ritual festival in understanding Gbagyi nationalism.

Conceptual Clarification: Festival

There are many explications of what constitute a festival and what it is not. Nsofor (1975) defines festivals as "a period set apart by communities or groups of individual, for commemorating important events in the life of community or an individual. The events may be connected with homage to the gods, ancestors or spirits, or they may be concerned with the transition from one season to the

other. This definition posits that festival is an event that is time and space bound. The time of festivals turn out to be the time when individuals, families or communities celebrate and attempt to reinstate any disharmony among them. According to this definition, festivals can be religious or ritualistic in nature. Festivals usually are times to honour gods or ancestral spirits either by supplication or thanksgiving.

Ogunba (1978) on the other hand describes festival as “an integral dynamic part of the culture of an unalienated African, an occasion to which he responds spontaneously to societal and cultural yearning. This definition means that festival is an institution that harmonise almost all the art forms of the community. Festival usually has a set time, which has a story or myth to perform. It is an avenue to showcase and propagate community’s culture. Festival contains much of the folklore genres that are important to the understanding of the cultural life of the people. It is believed to improve, revitalize and regulate the lives of the people in the community especially ritual or religious festivals. One of the main functions of ritual festival is to maintain equilibrium between and among the people, spirits, ancestors, deities and other powers. According to Idegu (1988), ritual festival is an occasion for expressing and reinstating religious values and contact with gods or ancestral spirits. Ukala (2014) notes that ritual festivals renew the bond between the ancestors and their progeny, emphasize cyclical time and keep track of the community’s legacy. Turner (2002:13) opines that:

A [ritual] performance is a cultural activity in which the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are seen in action as they shape and explain [ritualistic] behaviour. It is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures. We will know one another better by entering one another’s performance and learning their grammars and vocabularies.

Turner’s (2002) assertion points to one of the aspects of *ZhiBaje* ritual festival—shared humanity among the people of Gbagyi. Ogunba (1978:1) notes that ritual festivals are primordially conceived by the society with the objective of maintaining a relationship between the spiritual and the living world. Ahithophel (1982:34) agrees by noting that:

Ritual festivals are connected to the worship of gods or goddesses, sacrifices, libation and prayers offered to unseen beings to pacify or

appease them for all the crimes and mistakes that members of the community may possibly have committed against the gods or goddesses.

In addendum to Ahithophel's (1982) claim, ritual festival can also be about thanksgiving for a particular purpose, especially for a bountiful harvest, abundance of rain, fruitfulness, blessings of children, protection from the gods and many more. These sacrifices consequently renew and strengthen the bonds of unity between the living and the deities. This shows that the community depends on the gods and ancestors as being capable of influencing their lives.

Obiechina (1978:46) brings another insight into understanding festival when he avers that it is an "event of coming together periodically to express their sense of communion through those things which not only defined their unique relatedness, but also distinguishes them from all other people". From this description, it can be deduced that festival has unique social unifying tools that bring people together which contain all the intrinsic and extrinsic culture of the people. From the aforementioned definitions, religious rituals performed during festivities can be said to preserve the life of the community thereby enhancing continuity. Intrinsically, festivals also embody social aspects [of] entertainment and relaxation, a channel for re-union, making new friends and adding more contacts. It is also a medium of showing off the rich culture of the people - their identity. Economically, festivals encourage enterprise through the sales of souvenirs, sacrificial items, food and drinks to participants which serves as a source of wealth creation for the local populace and their environs. Nigerian festivals such as Argungu, Igue, Ofala, Leboku and Osun-Oshogbo festivals portray all these traits and continue to be appreciated by all who love traditions.

It is the contention of this paper that these festivals should be upheld as a means of appreciating the Nigerian identity and promoting unity in Nigeria as well as the continuous existence of the communities in which they are practiced. Mbiti's (1970:32) submission finds expression thus:

Through festival the life of the community is renewed. People are entertained and their tension finds outlet. It also brings together the people as a group, thus strengthening their unity and cohesion. Religious and secular values are repeated and renewed through communal festivals. Artistic talents are utilized, drama and oral communication. Where the Festival involves beliefs concerning the unseen world, the link between Human beings and the spirit is renewed.

Mbiti's (1970) assertion supposes that festivals, among other reasons, are functional in celebrating or renewing the fertility of terrestrial or aquatic spaces. It offers a platform within which communities can purge themselves for productivity. This paper is rooted on this premise

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study is fore-grounded on two theories namely: Performance Ethnography and Functional Aesthetics. These theories are chosen because each covers up the gaps inherent in the other. Furthermore, each offers vantages within which this study can achieve its aim. Performance ethnography, according to Conrad (2008:611), "describes a set of interrelated qualitative approaches that bring together systematic methods from performance studies". Denzin (2003) sees it as a field of inquiry that bridges communications studies, drama and theatre. Performance, Bial (2004:) notes, includes cultural activities deemed theatrical or self-consciously constructed performative works of art such as play productions, performance art, or educational drama inclusive of any performative forms—festivals, storytelling, dance, music, street theatre, video, and so on. Conrad (2008:612) affirms that performance ethnography:

provides insights into the nature of social relations by examining performances in real life, such as public gatherings, rituals, festivals, games, carnival or sporting events that are seen as performative. It also investigates social performance or dramatic moments in everyday life, such as moments of conflict, and inquires into everyday interactions, which include culturally conditioned behaviour of the performance of social roles—roles as father, daughter, employee, and so on, as well as roles associated with gender, race, status, age, and so on—and communicative or speech acts that are performative. The notion of performativity, associated with performance studies, is a way of conceiving of an activity or action as similar to a theatrical event in form and/or effect and to describe the potential of language to be performative.

This assertion affirms that performance ethnography can be used to study both the cultures of a people, their communication systems, and arts. This paper sees *ZhiBaje* ritual festival as a form of communication. The use of theatrical elements in the divergent representations places the festival in a position where it can facilitate and bring about cultural assertion and social change.

According to Given (2008), an exploration of performance in qualitative research indicates that performance ethnography has emerged as a collection of interrelated methods that can be employed at any or all stages of the research process—for generating or gathering research material, for interpreting or analyzing material, and for representing research. Performance ethnography as a method for generating research material—for gathering participant responses—may take various forms. The primary methods in ethnography are observation or participant observation, along with interviews, focus groups, and field notes. Performance ethnography involves inquiry into performance in any or all of its cultural or social contexts—in theatrical performances and/or in everyday life performances.

The theory offers an alternative performative way of knowing—a unique and powerful way of accessing knowledge, drawing out responses that are spontaneous, intuitive, tacit, experiential, embodied and affective, rather than simply cognitive. It engages participants in a process of knowledge production—of expressing, interpreting, and re-presenting their ideas. Performative ethnographic inquiry in the context of literary or theatrical creation may also include investigation of real-life performances that occur in the process of creation, but outside of the theatrical performances themselves, in conversations arising from the performance or in preparation for performance—in other words, in participant observation of those conversations and preparations. Conrad (2008:611) notes that “in the analysis or interpretation of research, performance ethnography also has applications that are inherent in the process of performative creation.” Acting out” involves a process that is critical and analytic”.

As performance theorists such as Richard Schechner and Richard Courtney describe, by taking on a role, the “player” exists simultaneously in two worlds: as a character in the experience of the “as if” world and as an actor evaluating the situation from the outside, within the real world (Schechner 1985). The player is both involved in and detached from both realities, alternating from one to the other, observing the self in action, comparing the two worlds to arrive at some new understanding or meaning.

This paper follows this path of inquiry in that it considers *ZhiBaje* festival as a text. It draws from the processes in the ritual enactments to make statements on social and cultural engineering. This echoes Denzin’s (2003:609) belief that“

performance ethnography as praxis is a way of acting on the world in order to change it". This is applicable to *ZhiBaje* ritual festival because its performance creates an open, dialogic space for inquiry and expression through an interpretation of events and their contexts. This is also true considering the fact that performance creates opportunities for communion among participants, researchers, and research audiences. In performance ethnography, participants' performances, both staged and in real life, provide insight into their lived experiences and their cultural worlds (Ogunkoya 2018).

On the other hand, every cultural performance serves certain functions within the precinct of the producer culture. Functional aesthetics offer this paper insight into understanding the functions of *ZhiBaje* in contemporary world. According to Bueno (2009:47), functional aesthetic arts are highly crafted creations that can perform or serve utilitarian purposes. Bueno (2009:47-48) notes that:

Central to performance is the idea that functionality is a crucial aspect of aesthetic appreciation. If we know the proper function of a given object (or event in a case of carnivals), we can appreciate it better and have a more favorable response to it. Consider, for instance, why a car with a flat tire looks so displeasing; the account in terms of functional beauty can readily explain why this is so. The proper function of a car – to allow us to move quickly and efficiently between two locations – cannot be realized with a flat tire. The result, we can say, is not pretty.

In the analysis or interpretation of festivals, functional aesthetics form a basis of appreciating the cultural products on display. This paper deploys this knowledge to assessing the functionality of *ZhiBaje* festival in understanding the realities of the Gbagyi people in Nigeria. The theory is predicated on the argument that every performance within a given cultural context has a functional reason and is complemented by adding social value both to the producer (community) and its shopper or consumer (non-community member). The key principles of these theories hinge on the belief that: every performance has innate functional value and that the social value it institutes in relation to others contributes to the macro-economic value of the owners of art forms. This paper examines the value of *ZhiBaje* vis-à-vis how it can contribute meaningfully to the social and cultural integration in a way that it can usher in development.

Methodology

This paper is rooted in qualitative research methodology. It considered the functional aesthetics in aspects of *ZhiBaje* ritual. The study deployed key informant interview and participant observation as research instruments. *ZhiBaje* Chief Priest and the Oldest Gbagyi man in Gonin Gora were interviewed. Data gotten from the qualitative instrumentation were triangulated and subjected to content analysis. The paper adopted an interpretive inquiry method as tool of analysing data. Interpretive inquiry is a type of qualitative research where data do not necessarily speak for themselves. Rather, findings can be viewed from multiple perspectives. It focuses on understanding (interpreting) “the meanings, purposes, and intentions (interpretations) people or groups give to their own actions and interactions with others” (Smith 2008:459). This suggests that the understanding of a phenomenon is largely dependent on individual or a group rather than universal comprehension. Meaning is therefore determined from each distinct reader’s connotative response than from a universal outlook.

***ZhiBaje* Ritual Festival in Context**

ZhiBaje ritual festival is mostly celebrated in the month of December every year in Gonin Gora, Kaduna- central Nigeria. Although some Gbagyi communities across the middle-belt region celebrates the festival in the months of January and for some others February or March, the ritual is celebrated to usher in the new planting season and to cleanse the community from any potential danger ahead of the coming season. The ritual festival is usually announced by the cry of *Zyikuku*, a bird whose cry signifies that the gods are hungry and requires food (Madami, 2018). With this, the community members prepare to carry out the ritual. The priest who offers the sacrifice usually goes to the nest or spot where *Zyikuku* perches when crying. While there, he would lie-down and speak to the gods believing that they are listening to him and the entire people. Before the actual sacrifice takes place, the hunters usually go for a hunting expedition. During the game, if they catch plenty bush animals it is believed that the gods are with them. One of the key informants, the oldest Gbagyi man in Gonin Gora report that;

I also want to tell you that Friday is the day that was always used for the drinking of *ZhiBaje*, and certain domestic works are not allowed to be done like, sweeping of the house, pounding and other things are to be observed until those that went to perform the sacrifice have returned (*key informant interview with Bagudu Madami, 2018*)..

The priest would then lead selected members of the *ZhiBaje* cult to perform the sacrifice in the forest. At the scene of the sacrifice, the priest bows before the gods, greets them, makes some incantations and then offers sacrifice to the gods. The sacrifice takes place on a specified place among trees and before a stone in the forest. A stone is fixed there and is usually bathed with the blood of animals. After that sacrifice, parts of the ritual meat are shared and eaten among the cult members with sizable part reserved and taken to the *Etsu* (King). After this, the Gbagyi believe that their gods will protect them from their enemies. The ritual meat is presented to the *Etsu* who prays and blesses the people.

One of the key informants notes that the *Gyeita tree* bears witness to every of the prayers made. During such prayers, whatever the community is asking for from the gods is believed to be offered when the *Zhikuku* bird(s) come down to eat from the sacrifices and then fly into the thick forest. This is followed by rapturous celebration which sometimes lasts three to four days which culminates in the drinking of locally brewed beer, *Oje*. Two subjects of the ritual performance is central to Gbagyi folklore. The *Zhikuku* (bird) which announces the time for the ritual and takes the ritual food to the ancestral plan; and the *Gyeiyi* (tree). *Zhikuku* and the *Gyeiyi* iresonate the quintessential connection between the natural and the supernatural in Gbagyi folklore.

One key aspects of the *ZhiBaje* ritual festival that bespeaks the humanity of the Gbagyi is their proclivities to trees as well as the natural habitats. For them, trees are symbolism provided by *Shekwoi* to tie man to the earth while at the same time reaching out to the Supreme Being. Hence, most of the ritual rites take place under a tree and by a stone. One of the trees that bear serious significance to Gbagyi people is the *Gyeyita* (Rimi tree) which exist in the village square in every Gbagyi community as well as the compound of its *Etsu*.



Plate 1: Gyeiyi tree standing at the compound of the King of Gonin Gora (source: Sarki Alheri Precious 2018)

The tree is, in itself, a signpost of the Gbagyi presence. It is believed that the tree cannot be planted neither can it be cut down and that it has the ability to grow by itself swiftly whenever it is brought down.

Gyeiyi is seen as the king tree by the Gbagyi people. Anywhere you see the tree, it means Gbagyi people owned that place or are the first settlers around that place. The Tree was a centre where people use to gather and drink the *ZhiBaje* happily because their gods have answered their prayers.

Going further, one of the attendants of Chief Bagudu Madami, Amuamua notes that *Gyeiyi* tree shares part of the same essence in the performance of *ZhiBaje*. According to him, "the *Gyeiyi* is like a masquerade but it covers itself with leaves.

The leaves can be used to beat out sickness out of children and adults in accordance with the belief of Gbagyi people”.

The tree is a proof of our presence and footprints in Nigeria. If you go to Zaria, just before the entrance of the city gate whether you are coming from the north, south, west or east of the entrance, you will see *Gyeyita* there, everywhere. Attempts have been made in the past to clear the place but the tree keeps resurfacing. People who now occupies that area may be wondering why it is so but it is because we or our footprint cannot be wiped from the surface of our *anyhi* – earth. The same way *ZhiBaje* ritual is done to ward off evil, the leaves from *Gyeyi* is deployed for ritual cleansing and to ward off sickness which affects children and adults (*Interview with Amuamua, attendant to Chief Bagudu Madami 2018*).

Amuamua’s statement reveals a lot about the connection between *ZhiBaje* ritual and *Gyeyi* tree. It is not coincidental that a lot of the drinking of the locally brewed juice and sacrifice is done under the tree and that the pronouncements and blessings of the land and its people during the festival are witnessed by the tree itself. All the activities that take place under the *Gyeyi* tree or by the tree are retained as the people believes that the *Gyeyi* tree has retentive memory. This is the reason it is said to have the ability to spring up without being planted. The tree is believed to exist side-by-side every Gbagyi community and shows the footprint of Gbagyi people through their sojourns on earth. The Chief Priest who performs the *ZhiBaje* ritual notes thus:

The tree is seen as a spirit itself. Hence, it is revered and in some cases worshipped. It is not seen or perceived as a tree but as part of the *anyhi* (the earth) – a source that gives the *Gyeyi* its vitality. It is on the tree *Zhikuku* appears to take its food to the gods and that is why we talk and pray to the tree (*Key informant interview with ZhiBaje Chief Priest, DanladiJatau, 2018*).

From the foregoing, it can be stated that there is a connection between *Zhikuku* and *Gyeyi* – one that has to do with the transportation of earthy wishes and prayers to the ancestral planes. The *Zhikuku* in this context is the bearer of messages. One who conveys messages from the gods to mankind and from mankind to the gods. It is the duty of *Zhikuku* to ensure seamless communication between the world of the living, spirits and plane occupied by the Supreme Being. For order to reign in the world of the living and spirits, *Zhikuku* bears the

burden to commune with forces across the planes. The nucleus of the festival is connected to the human origin of the Gbagyi—ensuring harmony between the human and cosmic world. Order in the two worlds bring about good harvests and ward off evil. The Gbagyis believe that peace is only attainable where there is order in the cosmic world. Bagudu (2019) reveals that the words, ‘Gbagyi’ and ‘ZhiBaje’ bear dense relevance to the ritual process. According to him, the words mean “love one another by giving a helping hand to each other”. To do this means that people must gather together to sacrifice to the gods and afterwards drink local beer (*Oje*). The act of ‘calling together’ to ‘share’ is ritualistic.

During *ZhiBaje* festival everyone drinks from one drum or earthen pot; an act that signifies the *life source* of humanity. For the celebrants as well as guests, it does not matter where or what land one comes from, religion or faith one professes, what matters is the shared humanity and love that holds communities and people together.



Plate 2 & 3: ZhiBaje Participants in Gonin Gora drinking from the same bowl (Credit:Sarki Alheri Precious, 2018)

This practice accounts for why it is difficult for Agbagyi to live in an environment bereft of peace and cooperation. Where necessary, the Gbagyi try or strive to create peace or harmony among the peoples occupying such space. The celebration of *ZhiBaje* festival is a celebration of the moral fibre and temperament

of Gbagyi people within the different intercultural encounters they have had on *anyhi* (earth).

One aspect of Gbagyi folklore which stands out during the ritual is the magical display of selected Gbagyi community members who are mostly youths. The invincibility of the Gbagyi person is tested as the magical 'Knife Dance' is carried out. Here, a youth, or, a group of youth emerges to cut each other's flesh with a sharpened knife or object. This is accompanied with ritual chants. The performer(s) cut his flesh but surprisingly the knife cannot penetrate. He tries the knife on all parts of his body but the object will not pierce through his skin. He is applauded as the chants intensify. He starts from his neck then moves to his ear, tongue, stomach and other parts of his body.



Plate 4: Gbagyi Hunter testing his invincibility with a dagger knife (Source: Sarki Alheri Precious, 2018)

Apart from the knife, he tests the invincibility of Gbagyi hunting and farming communities using both traditional and Western weaponry on his body.

He is cheered by fellow hunters for every successful display. As he performs, a fellow hunter narrates diverse stories about successes and battles won by the Gbagyi people of central Nigeria.

One after the other, the retinue of farmers attempts to cut off parts of the body of the performer-hunter but they fail to spill his blood. This performance is significant because, among the Gbagyi at Gonin Gora, it is believed that one with a pure heart is un-killable; his *ashah* will see him through any attempt targeted at destroying him physically and his human spirit. The King of Gonin Gora, Etsu Doma Yusuf Sarki (of blessed memory) revealed something very significant during a key informant interview.

The human spirit of the Gbagyi person is unbreakable and this manifests outwardly so much so that no human object can penetrate him. However, his heart must be pure or be without sin when fighting for a just cause or battles. The magical hunter display you saw is only an aspect of the real thing. If you observe very well, you will discover that the performance had a witness. The gods were present themselves bearing witness to the state of the heart of the hunter. Did you notice that it was done some distance away from the *Gyeiyi*? The tree bears witness from the roots upon which the hunter stood up to the cosmic world (*Key informant interview with Etsu Gbagyi Doma Yusuf Sarki 2018*).

This statement is revealing. A closer look at the picture shared above shows the very presence of *Gyeiyi* which at first appears to be meaningless to the researcher as well as evades many participants who may not know the import of the tree to the invincibility of the hunter-performer. The existence of the tree suggests one thing and it is that as long as the *Gyeiyi* is rooted deep down to the ground and cannot be destroyed, the life source of the Gbagyi sons and daughters, irrespective of their trades, whose life is pure and free from evil, cannot be destroyed by weapons made by mortals. The significance of this standpoint is that *ZhiBaje* is a kind of regenerative ritual that offers a chance to the community to purge themselves of behaviours and practices that is not Gbagyi; behaviours that threaten their existence and continuity here on earth.

From the conversation with three of the key informants, the researcher discovered that *ZhiBaje* ritual has many other functional values apart from farming. One of the key informants notes;

The sacrifice is not done for farming alone. It is also performed for the protection of the entire community. Therefore, with or without farming, they will still observe the culture, and do not forget that some people still go out to farm elsewhere. I even saw the village Head of Gonin-Gora with his hoe that he used in the farm till date. In fact, I have told my children not to shun farming because it is the key to success for every Gbagyi man (*Key informant interview with Madami, 2018*).

The above statement reveals that *ZhiBaje*, over the years has evolved to serve other sacred functions other than a religious fete celebrated for agricultural purposes. Aspect of the *ZhiBaje* ritual festival is often performed during wedding ceremonies or other ceremonial rites that is performed to keep the Gbagyi universe in harmony. The multiplicity of deities and cults contribute in creating balance in the Gbagyi universe as the activities of the respective cults are checked and regulated within the cosmic order. Thus, it can be said that the structuration of Gbagyi worldview is such that everything is controlled and the gods are revered based on the functions they serve in the traditional society.

Sociologically, *ZhiBaje* ritual festival serves a broad spectrum of functions in Gbagyi land. The diverse performative components of the festival reflect Gbagyi society, preserve its legends, its lore and ethos; explore its problems and criticize its weaknesses. The ritual is a call to humanity to love, share and live together. According to Danladi Jatau,

Many Gbagyi children are known to come home during the celebration of *ZhiBaje*. The ceremony brings them back home away from... to connect to their roots. Some of the Gbagyi children who do not follow the ways of our forefathers because of Islam or Christianity participate in the drinking of the Oje. It is a period in our calendar when our children scattered all over Nigeria have the opportunity to meet themselves and share their experiences (*Key informant interview with the Chief Priest of Gonin Gora, Dalandi Jatau, 2018*).

ZhiBaje ritual festival is one of the most anticipated festivals in Gbagyi land. This is because it engenders togetherness, brotherhood and fosters ethnic cohesion among the Gbagyi people. It is a period of self and community reflection for an average Gbagyiman/woman. Danladi Jatau asserts that,

During *ZhiBaje*, important decision affecting us or the community are taken after due consultation with the *Ashmah*. We take stock of the past

seasons, reflect upon our place amidst our relations with other communities; emerging vices and issues affecting us are discussed. Prayers and blessings are also poured on the land according to the belief of our people (*Key informant interview with the Chief Priest, Danladi Jatau, 2018*).

This implies that *ZhiBaje* ritual functions as a form of a peace-builder or peace building process. The aura of celebration and jubilation that grip the whole town during the festival blurs all religious lines as some of the people who profess Christianity or Islam are soaked together in the excitement of the festival. This infers that people are not alienated from tradition regardless of their religious learning.

Psychologically, *ZhiBaje* festival results in a sense of mental security among members of the community especially when the traditional priests and Etsu bless the land and the people. As a whole, every member of the community goes about his or her duties with peace of mind when the outcome of the ritual is good and especially when the traditional priest does not pronounce any eminent danger like hunger, poor rainfall, diseases or any form of epidemic after the festival.

Politically, the festival brings all the opinion leaders like the chiefs, traditional priest and clan heads of the Gbagyi community together. These are parties that meet to plan the *ZhiBaje* festival celebration, and to decide on the type of rituals to perform during and after the festival. The Gbagyi people vests political power on their king and during the festival, obeisance is paid by chiefs as well as family heads.

Conclusion

It can be argued that the *ZhiBaje* ritual festival embodies, partly, the fullness of Gbagyi belief system, its philosophies and essence. Every aspect of *Shekwoi* has its personality. Thus, within the traditional belief system of the Gbagyi *Shekwoi* is a body or a way of *knowing*. The episteme embedded within the practice of Gbagyi belief system helps the Gbagyi person to understand his place in the world; to understand science and the malleability of this world. Conclusively, the functionality of the *ZhiBaje* on the Gbagyi polity given its stabilizing factor on the people in all facets of human endeavor whether religious, social, political or even psychologically cannot be over-emphasised. It has served as a stabilizing factor and a platform for the maintenance of law and order.

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