

## 'MBOM-UZO': AN AFRICAN IDENTITY IN IGBO COSMOLOGY

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.16461.56809

### Abstract

*When the question of African Identity is applied to persons or societies, it touches on a comprehensive and coherent sense of self. Thus, while including the element of uniqueness that gives rise to self-confidence and a sense of self-worth, the question of identity in Africa must ultimately touch on the issue of commonality. This is true with Africa, her culture and her people. African mode of thought and lifestyle are co-operative and not egoistic, inclusivistic and not exclusivistic. We and not I, is the law of African life. It is relatedness that characterizes the African experience of the other. Relatedness is one of intentionality. The Westernized African is fast following the track of the Western Society that has since lost the sense of relatedness in their bid to classify and distinguish. This Westernized African must be called to order before it is too late. To do this, African culture especially the 'Mbom-Uzo' festival in Igboland which reflects the true, real and holistic African world-view comes into play. This festival therefore should and must be brought to the fore especially the aspect that encourages and enhances communality in Igbo land and indeed Africa. The researcher has adopted the documented, interview and observation methods in the collection of data. This work in the main has adopted the descriptive, phenomenological and sociological approaches in solving the problem already set out. 'Mbom-Uzo' festival in Igboland does not only represent an African Identity amongst the celebrants but has remained till date a veritable part of the African culture which must be cherished and thus preserved. This is the truth, and it must be told.*

Keywords: Quest, Identity, 'Ibo-Uzo', Africa, Festival and Cosmology.

### Introduction

'Mbom-Uzo' (path/road clearing) is a yearly festival among the people. A festival is an event ordinarily celebrated by a community and catering on some characteristics aspect of that community and its religion or culture ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)). A religious festival is a time of special importance marked

by adherents to that Religion. Religious festivals are commonly celebrated on recurring circles in a calendar year or linear calendar. Quarcoopome (1987) defines festivals as annual gathering at which the whole community meets to honour and give thanks to God, the divinities and the ancestors. Festivals are also held to mark the end of one agricultural year and to welcome the beginning of another. During African festivals, Awolalu and Dapamu (1979) observe that people come out in their best, and the festival is characterized by eating, drinking, dancing and general rejoicing. The coming together of the people is re-enacted, and many people for the first time in the year meet on festival occasions. Men and women are brought together in one crowd, and there is usually a sort of social re-union.

### **'Mbom-Uzo' (path/road clearing) festival**

The 'Mbom-Uzo' festival is a yearly festival celebrated by the people that make up the present day Ihitte/Uboma Local Government Area, some parts of Obowo Local Government Area and Nsu people of Ehime Mbano Local Government Area, all in Imo State of Nigeria. The word 'Mbom' (to clear) is derived from the word 'Ibo' (clearing) while the word 'Uzo' means road or path. Put together it means 'Mbom-Uzo' (path or road clearing). Sam (1999) states that the festival is celebrated from the month of September to December each year. Uchendu (1991) presents 'Ibo-Uzo' as an annual festival which means clearing the road... celebrated during the dry season. Ugwu (2004) and Ogbalu (2006) posit that the festival is a cultural activity which is celebrated in Igbo land in a variety of ways. 'Mbom-Uzo' marks the end of the harvesting period. In the traditional Igbo calendar it is celebrated in the seventh (7<sup>th</sup>) month. The Igbo month starts with the planting of the yam - the major food crop of the people around the months of March and April. The harvesting period is around November or December also known as the seventh (7<sup>th</sup>) month in the Igbo calendar. After the harvest, the people would then rest after the 'Mbom-Uzo' festival having gone through a successful farming season. Sam (1999) does not agree less when he states that from the month of September, major roads are kept clean. Women and Youths in preparation for the celebration, collectively/jointly clear pathways of grasses. Any visitor coming into the communities usually observes that everywhere is neat and tidy. The visitor cannot afford not to comment on the environment because of its conspicuous neatness throughout the villages. 'Mbom-Uzo' period is the period of 'mass return' of indigenes from these areas. Indigenes who may not have been home for a long time prefer coming home during this period so as to have the very

rare opportunity of seeing and meeting their brothers and sisters, kith and kin and indeed their loved ones. It is usually a joyous moment, highly celebrated by every male in the family; the rich, the poor, the high and the low. It witnesses the exchange of gifts from in-laws, friends and well-wishers who visit, to express their happiness and survival over the year(s). Children and youths are observed roving about, from one compound to the other singing and dancing, and receiving cash gifts and or eating all manner of delicious meal already prepared.

There is this common food, which is generally in every compound. It is called 'Ugba na Mkpurusu'. 'Ugba' is the sliced oil bean fruit salad, while 'Mkpurusu' is the pounded or grinded melon seed (egusi). The delicacy is spiced with salt and pepper and wrapped with fresh banana leaves, then kept by the side of the fire-place ('Ekwu') to dry for preservation. The preparation for the festival commences with the observation of the moon in September. As soon as the Chief Priest observes the moon, he alerts the village head or the nearest family head who informs the village head and the local town crier is mobilized to inform the people. That evening or night, there is jubilation, the women making noise (signals) towards the long expected news. In some other communities the wooden gung (Ikoro) will be used to inform the people.

Mothers, fathers and members of the various age grades will start holding meetings so as to participate actively. In the main event, different paths and roads leading to different places of the secular or profane, sacred or hallowed, and the general environment are cleared and kept clean. In the words Agwu (1990), "it was a period of general clearing of the roads that could otherwise not have received attention, luckily ushering in the new yam, another major festival in Igbo culture." Odu (2001) adds his voice, "it is celebrated with great enthusiasm and love. It is the most important festival in the town. Any child born on 'Mbom-Uzo' is called 'Uzo-Ukwu', that is the Great Road." Okeke (1991) observes that 'Ibo-Uzo' festival ... is a feast of joy and merrymaking...for fortunes of the year. "It also marks the physical clearing of paths between a town and village as the case may be and her neighbours." The festival which is a thanksgiving to the land is marked by exchange of visits and general merriment. During this period, new yams may be eaten together to show the people's appreciation of the good gestures of the gods in bountiful harvest. In support of this position, Woke (2021), says during 'Mbom-Uzo' festival the entire different age grades will dance as they sing around their market square. They will finally move to the homes of their members who did not participate in the road clearing exercise and who did not bring representatives to work for them. They will go to their houses to collect certain amount of money

generally agreed by them as penalty. If the money was not given, they will confiscate any of the property of their absentee mate, sell the property and recover the sum. 'Mbom-Uzo' festival is always taken seriously by members of the various age grades. Woke goes on to add that 'Mbom-Uzo' is the peoples' own traditional carnival organized by the community through the use of the various age grades, reflecting the aesthetic nature of the land and people of the community and the beauty of Ihitte/Uboma in general.

### **A Religious Identity**

During 'Mbom-Uzo' festival, the traditional African Religion (of the Igbo) is called into relevance. The traditional deities which are major features of the religion come into limelight. Sacrifices are performed to appease the 'ala goddess' (earth mother deity) to ensure a hitch free celebration. Libations are poured to awaken the ancestral spirits, who are believed to be keeping vigil over the wellbeing of their survivors. The libation is poured by each head of the family at different places as well as by the Chief Priest of the various villages and or communities. The importance of such sacrifices, libations, rites and ritual practices cannot be over emphasized in the traditional religious beliefs of the African and the Igbo man. Awolalu and Dapamu (1979) define sacrifice as the act of offering the life of an animal or person, or object, to the divine power or powers. It forms an essential part of every religious ceremony, and it is fundamental to worship. Sacrifice is primarily a means of contacts or communication between the divine and man. It serves as the best way through which man maintains an established relationship between himself and his object of worship. It is also valued as the most effective means employed by man to influence the divinity to be interested in human affairs. The right relationship with the divinity, as well as his favour, will be secured by giving him his dues.

Awolalu and Dapamu see libation as the act of pouring some liquid to the spirits, and the act is accompanied by prayer. Throughout West Africa, libation is taken to be an essential aspect of worship. Anyanwu (2004) posits correctly that sacrifice forms the keystone in traditional religion. It is the most ancient and essential part of every ceremony when worship is paid to the God, the divinities and the ancestors. It is an act of public worship offered in the name of community or part of it. It is an offering to God or the divinities by a priest of a sensible thing through its immolation in acknowledgment of their dominion and man's subjugation. Thus since sacrifice and libation are essential parts of African Religion, it then stands to

reason that 'Mbom-Uzo' festivals remind the Igbo of his origin and indeed take him back to his roots – the traditional African religion, a religion which shapes his being, life and the hereafter. Mbiti (1975) captures it succinctly when he states that religion has dominated the thinking of the African people to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, their social life, their political organization and economic activities. He concludes by saying that religion is closely bound up with the traditional way of life, observing at the same time, that this way of life has shaped religion as well.

Onwuliri (2011) vividly sums it up that African Traditional Religion means an indigenous religion for Africans; an institutionalized patterns of beliefs and worships; a religion handed by the forebears of the present generations of Africa; with its religious beliefs rehearsed in the folklore, expressed through rituals, festival (like 'Mbom-Uzo') and songs; and its power demonstrated in the traditional medicine, magic, occultism and spiritualism; and enshrined in its liturgy and cults giving the African a religious identity, which is a specific type of identity formation. Particularly, it is the sense of group membership to a religion and the importance of this group membership as it pertains to one's self-concept. It refers to religious group membership regardless of religious activity or participation. This religious context can further provide generally a perspective from which to view the world, opportunities to socialize with a spectrum of individuals from different generations, and a set of basic principles to live out (King and Bayotzis, 2004). These foundations shape an individual's identity.

### **The Social Identity**

Social Identity is defined by the way individuals manage their inter-personal roles within social groups (Bornman 2021). Members of social groups share similar values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, rituals and goals; which contribute towards the individual's personal identity (Jenkins 2008; Schwaitz et al 2011). Social group members promote a sense of belonging and a sense of emotional attachment to something greater than self (Phinney 2000). Okeke (2017) agrees that 'Mbom-Uzo' festival is seen as one that tends to build a firm bond between villages and towns through the instrumentality of age grades as a social group which practice it while upholding their harmony. Deriving from this, is the wide variety of social activities that accompany it. Since it witnesses a period during which paths and roads are cleared, a period of dancing; a period of merrymaking; a period when indigenes of the area, residents outside the communities come home to celebrate with their

friends, loved ones, all and sundry, social life, interactions, communication and goodwill messages are given and received. To socialize is in the heart of the traditional African. The 'WE' life. Metuh (1987) captures it as he posits that to the African, the only life worth living is a communal life.

The African believes and radiates the philosophy of "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." He goes further to situate the product of socialization as forming parts of interaction of Beings in African world-view, which witnesses according to Temples (1969) that "nothing moves in the universe of forces without influencing others by its movement.

The world of forces is held like spider's web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network". The goal of such interaction as in 'Mbom-Uzo' festival is obviously to the maintenance of the integration and balance of the Beings in it. This for Metuh encourages harmonious interaction of Beings leading to the mutual strengthening of the Beings involved, and enhances the growth of life. Since one of the basis on which the Africa mode of life rest is the participation of profound communion with the universe, the maintenance of the social aspect of 'Mbom-Uzo' comes into active play. The main objective of an African is to live a life in harmony with humanity and with nature. The African strives therefore to be in harmony with God, deities and his fellow men- the living and the dead. He feels himself in intimate rapport and tries to maintain harmonious relationship with the animals, vegetable and other elements and phenomena in the universe. For him, the first evil is disintegration, for this would spread disaster both for himself and his immediate world. The ideal thing for the African is integration, communion and harmony.

May I therefore summarize this part with the observation of Onyechoa (1997) as he posits that Africa reality structure is characterized by harmony between the human being and nature; a reality that is a totality of free, continuous, inclusive and interdependent identity; an identity of reality, seeing humanity as in harmony with nature, with the task to love, nurture, protect and maintain it. The African mind prefers the concept of togetherness, energy, vitality, goodness, freshness and unaffected beauty. All these realities are captured in the social life being provided to the people by 'Mbom-Uzo' festival.

## **Cultural Identity**

Tylor (1871) defines culture as an umbrella term which encompasses the sound behavior and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities and habits of the individuals in these groups. Thus cultural norm codifies acceptable conducts in society; serving as a guideline for behavior, dress, language and demeanor in a situation which serves as a template for expectations in a social group. As a fallout of the importance of culture to a people, there are a number of international agreements and national laws relating to the protection of culture and cultural heritage. O’Keefe, et al (2016) provide us with the UNESCO and its partner organizations such as Blue Shield International Coordinate, International Protection and local Implementation (see also UNESCO Director General calls for stronger Cooperation for Heritage protection and the Blue Shield International General Assembly, UNESCO, 13 September, 2017). Basically, the Hague Convention for the protection of cultural property in the Event of Armed Conflict and the UNESCO Convention for the protection of culture, Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights deals with cultural heritage in two ways: it gives people the right to participate in cultural life on the one hand and the right to the protection of their contributions to cultural life on the other (UNESCO Legal Instruments: Second protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954 for the protection of cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict 1999).

This protection of culture and cultural goods is increasingly taking up a large area nationally and internationally. Thus going by the earlier definition of Tylor and as referenced above, it becomes very obvious and unassailable the fact that ‘Mbom-Uzo’ robustly qualifies as a culture of the Igbo man and by extension of Africans. The Igbo language is used as a means of communication during the festival. The costume, dressing, dance including the edibles during the festival are aspects of the people’s culture made manifest whole and entire during the celebration. They give the people their identity culturally, defining who the people are, their belief system, their reactions to the environment they have found themselves, and how best to conquer their challenges and the way forward. The importance of all these is captured by Awa (1985) who posits that the importance of culture of our people and its understanding will normally enable a community to take a critical look at itself and see what values, beliefs and attitudes need to be dropped or modified in order that a better social order may be achieved. Ubah (1985) has therefore summed it up “The ceremony and the exercises undertaken are the challenges for learning and recreation. There is no doubt that many a youth during ‘Mgom-Uzo’

takes some time off to reflect on what was going on, to think of alternatives and to arrive at an understanding of the culture of the Igbo adults, and the people generally.” Echeruo (1979) adds his voice “the challenge that we all face today is that of re-establishing our identity.” To re-establish such identity culturally, ‘Mbom-Uzo’ will certainly come into play.

### **An Identity of Godliness**

It is commonly observed among humans to always say that Cleanliness is next to Godliness. When we say this, we are referring to the idea that people have a moral duty to keep themselves and homes clean (collinsdictionary.com). Godliness is the quality of being Godly. Fairchild (2020) says that actual and spiritual purification, ablutions, and washings featured prominently in the Old Testament Jewish ceremonial rituals. For the Hebrew people, who the Igbo claim to have descended from, cleanliness was not only next to Godliness but was absolutely part of it. The standards God established concerning cleanliness for the Israelites touched on every aspect of their lives was extended to the Igbo. Personal hygiene and spiritual purity are intricately linked in African traditional religion as well as the Bible. To offer sacrifices, libation, rituals and the like during ‘Mbom-Uzo’, the medicine men/diviners must firstly purify themselves. To thank the Ultimate Reality at the beginning of the harvest, the people needed to keep themselves and their surroundings clean before approaching Him in thanksgiving. This cleanliness both ritual and actual was fundamental to establishing and preserving holiness in Igbo communities like their counterparts in Israel. Careful attention to personal hygiene is essential in Igbo community particularly as a safeguard against infectious diseases like leprosy. ‘Mbom-Uzo’ offers that opportunity to so be clean. Drawing inference from the Jews, the Igbo are required by the creator through the divinities to observe holiness by moral and spiritual virtues.

A corollary to this Africa belief can be found in the Bible as in Exodus 40:30-31 while Moses placed the wash basin between the Tabernacle and Altar. He filled it with water so that the priests could wash themselves. The expression cleanliness is next to Godliness is used to encourage personal hygiene and neatness, likening cleanliness to spiritual devoutness and goodness. In other words, it is said that it is almost as important to be clean as it is to be virtuous and good even that keeping your home and your body clean is the right thing to do morally, or that doing so brings one closer to God. Here lies the importance of “Mbom-uzo” in identifying the African as a godly being.

### **An identity of indigenous knowledge**

Mbam-uzo provides the Africa an avenue for new knowledge and creativity. Owusu-Ansah and Mji (2013) state that indigenous knowledge or African knowledge is experiential knowledge based on world-view and culture that is basically relational. The spirit of the African worldview includes wholeness, Community and harmony which are deeply embedded in cultural values which Mbom-uzo provides for the Igbo and by extension Africans. An Igbo becomes human only in the midst of others and seeks both individual and collective harmony as the primary task in the process of becoming a true person (Sarpong 2002; Sarpon 1991). Like it's peoples, acquisition of knowledge is collective and community oriented. Central to Traditional African world-view is the strong orientation to collective values and harmony provided by 'Mbom-uzo' and rooted in the collective sense of responsibility – a collective ethic which acknowledges that survival of the group (Igbo) derives from harmony through interdependence and inter connectedness (Mkabela 2005; Sarong 2002; Sarpong 1991).

The African knowledge and its method of acquisition according to Owusu et al has a practical collective and social or interpersonal slant which the festival of 'Mbom-uzo' provides. Mpofu (2002) and Nsamenang (2006) show further that such indigenous conception of intelligence for example, emphasis the practical interpersonal and social domains of functioning and are quite differentiated from cognitive academic intelligence that dominates Western concept of the construct. As a knowledge system, Sarpong and Mkabela argue that it is characteristically oral and passed on from generation to generation in the context of community living and activities through such festival as "Mbom-uzo". Kanya (2014) lends support in the ability of culture to provide indigenous knowledge to Africans when he says that like other human societies across the globe, African indigenous societies have for centuries developed their own sets of experience and explanations relating to the environment they live in (Kimwaga 2010). This according to him is due to the fact that the way learning is perceived and how people actually learn is culturally specific. Different cultures have different ways and experience of social reality and hence learning (Mitike 2008). These culturally and locally specific ways of knowing and knowledge production are often referred to as traditional, community etc. 'Mbom-uzo' provides such knowledge.

### **A celebration of life**

Okafor (1998) states that one aspect of Igbo life which persevered and remained untouched was their belief in, and the need to affirm and celebrate life. The Igbo are active celebrants who view life as one long performance during which they seize every opportunity to give thanks to God for the gift of life. They have evolved their rituals in 'mbom-uzo' festival to celebrate their Communities different deities, ancestors, history and individual achievements which sum up their identity. Communities celebrate the changing season; the coming of the rain marking the start of the farming season and the coming of the dry season to mark the beginning of the harvesting season. During this 'mbo-uzo' festival, different communities stage and invite neighboring towns to attend as guests. 'Mbo-uzo' festival accords such opportunity for the Igbo to celebrate life. Indeed, nothing can stop the Igbo from celebrating life. This celebration is holistic, and the Ihitte/Uboma man as Igbo will employ all the elements of theatre- performers, participants, music, mime, mask, elaborate costumes, make-up and dance at their disposal to affirm and celebrate their oneness manifested in 'mbo-uzo' with the universe.

### **Conclusion**

This work has not left anybody in doubt of an African identity that is alive and well, thriving even gloriously, robustly and flamboyantly through the culture of her indigenous people. Such shades of identity are manifest in the various festivals of the people including the 'Mbom-uzo' festival of Ihitte/uboma- an Igbo speaking people of present day Imo State of Nigeria. This culture is to be protected as a cultural heritage of the people and as advocated by UNESCO. Enjoying the Ray of light from Igbo cosmology, 'mbom-uzo' festival is to the Igbo in particular and Africa in general a mark or shields of identity. A Religious identity; A social identity; A cultural identity; An identity of godliness and a celebration of life for the Igbo and Africans as part of the roots holding African human existence and knowledge. Carnivals are held across the globe; 'Mbom-uzo' depicts and represents an indigenous African Carnival. Is there any tribe which celebrates and upholds her culture? Igbo join such tribe to celebrate her culture. Does any tribe not celebrate her culture? Let such people, tribe and culture drink from the knowledge of "Mbom-uzo". In the world of culture celebration and identification, the Igbo, the African is not lagging behind and will never lack.

## **Recommendations**

1. A Continuous celebration of the African culture as a mark of identity
2. Increased scholarly research and expositions of similar cultural heritages for posterity and documentary purposes.
3. Increased celebrations and cultural carnivals that portray the very positive sides of Africa to counter Africa's denigrators
4. Increased government's support in areas of legislation and funding to preserve African patrimony.
5. African authors and researchers should continue to bring to the fore the all-embracing and encompassing African knowledge through researches such as this.

The time to do all the needful is now.

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