

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF IGUE FESTIVAL TO THE BENIN PEOPLE

BY

**PEACE OSAREME OSARO
ART2000348**

**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
FACULTY OF ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF BENIN
BENIN CITY**

FEBRUARY, 2025

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF IGUE FESTIVAL TO THE BENIN PEOPLE

BY

**PEACE OSAREME OSARO
ART2000348**

**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN
CITY, IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD
OF BACHELOR OF ARTS (B.A) IN HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN CITY,
NIGERIA**

**FEBRUARY, 2025
CERTIFICATION**

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **OSARO PEACE OSAREME** of the Department of History and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, under my supervision.

Mr. Ekhaton-Obogie Osaisonor Godfrey
Project Supervisor

Dr. Frank ikponmwosa
Ag. Head of Department

DATE _____

DATE _____

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to God Almighty for His love, guidance and protection throughout my Undergraduate programme and to my parents.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My profound gratitude goes to God Almighty who has been merciful, providing for me, comforting me, and protecting me. He has also led me to the successful completion of my research project, and for that I am grateful.

My sincere gratitude also goes out to Mr. Ekhaton-Obogie, my project supervisor, who acted as my dependable mentor throughout the study's research and writing. God bless you richly sir. I also want to express my immense gratitude to my lecturers, who has worked hard to improve me as a student and person from the very beginning of my degree program in this university; Prof. Eddy Erhagbe, Prof. E. A. Ifidon, Dr Frank Ikponmwosa, Dr. (Sr.) J. C. Nwaka, Dr Charles Osarumwense, and the Late Dr. Osiki Odion coupled with other outstanding departmental lecturers deserve my gratitude.

I also want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my father, Mr. Osaro Iduwe Friday and my mother, Mrs. Osaro Azuka Rachael, for their love and support all through my stay in the university. To my siblings Osaro Henry, Osaro Sarah, Osaro Augustine and Osaro Favour, God bless you all for your wonderful support all though my days at the university.

Lastly my sincere gratitude goes to my course mates and friends Omoirauwa Justice, Ogbonnaya Blessing and Osagie Favour and others whom I failed to mention for their support and guidance throughout our journey together in the University of Benin, I am eternally grateful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGES
TITLE - - - - -	i
CERTIFICATION - - - - -	ii
DEDICATION - - - - -	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS - - - - -	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS - - - - -	v
 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	
Background to the Study- - - - -	1
Aim and Objectives of the study- - - - -	3
Statement of Problem of the Study- - - - -	4
Scope of the Study- - - - -	4
Significance of the Study- - - - -	5
Methodology- - - - -	6
Literature Review- - - - -	6
Endnotes - - - - -	19

CHAPTER TWO: HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF IGUE FESTIVAL

Introduction-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	21
Evolution of Igue Festival	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	21
Endnotes	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	34

CHAPTER THREE: RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF IGUE FESTIVAL

Introduction-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	36
Preservation of Spiritual and Cultural Identity-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	36
Socio-Cultural Cohesion-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	39
Artistic Expression and Preservation--	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	42
Legacy of Looting and Repatriation-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	43
Modern Relevance and Challenges-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	47
Endnotes	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	50

CHAPTER FOUR: RELEVANCE AND CHALLENGES OF IGUE FESTIVAL IN BENIN SOCIETY

Introduction-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	52
Challenges of Igue Festival	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	59
Endnotes	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	62

CHAPTER FIVE

Summary and Conclusion-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	64
BIBLIOGRAPHY-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	68

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

Cultural norms and values are ingrained in the beliefs of every cultural group or people. Every culture contains a set of norms and values that are deeply embedded and taught as religious practices that allow certain individuals to try to connect. Like all other people, the Benin people have rich heritage which they have re-enact through festivals that are part of their culture and traditions. One such event that has persisted for a long time is the Igue festival celebrated annually by the Benin people. Overtime, this festival have become a phenomena where traditional beliefs are at work.¹

In the Benin, the various ceremonies are traditional religious and cultural practices blended and married in an effort to connect people to the distant ancestral past. The ancestors, despite their distance, are acknowledged as the sustainers of everything. Without a doubt, the religious purposes associated with the Ugie (ceremonies) serve to both inspire and enlighten the people as humanity tries to connect with the divine through its cosmological experiences.² Many religions, and cultures around the world have various festivals, which serve as reminder of things that are very important to the community .³

In an effort to physically communicate with their ancestors and ask for blessings, prosperity, and good health, the Benin people regularly observe the Igie festival festivities.

Instead, the celebration of ancestral worship is fundamental to their way of life and worldview, which will greatly enhance the discussion of ancient African festivals. Festivals generally have beliefs associated with them since they are joyful events held with a definite goal or goals in mind.⁴ The relationship between myths, rituals, and sacred symbols of culture is practically expressed in African festivals and celebrations. Some festivals follow a set calendar of events and take place during particular times.⁵ Festival, rites and rituals are manifestations of the people's profound religiosity, which is passed down through culture as part of the festival celebration process. Since the Oba's health and prosperity are deeply rooted in and based on the numerous Ugie (ceremonies) and rites, the Igie festival is significant to both the Oba and the people of the Benin kingdom.

The central tenet of ancestor veneration, characterize the religious life of the Benin people. In the kingdom of Benin, royal or palace festivals or events are generally referred to as Ugie (ceremonies). According to Benin tradition, the Oba (king) of the kingdom of Benin engage Ugie (celebrations) at the end of each year. Marking the conclusion of the Benin year and the beginning of a new one with renewed hopes for peace and prosperity, this religious and cultural festival are celebrated with great fanfare.⁶

The Igue-Oba ritual is regarded as the most renowned of all the significant royal Ugie rites. It is a single event that gives all Edo people a sense of collective engagement. The entire Benin community participates in Igue-Oba festivities in addition to members of the palace societies.⁷

African traditional festivities would not be the same without music. African traditional celebrations would not be complete without music and dance, as these elements are fundamental to African culture and daily life. The Igie festivities heavily rely on dance, music, and rituals. It was also established to give thanks to the heads every year for saving the lives of the Benin kingdom's citizens and to request favours; it was also the time for customary offerings at a few shrines in the Oba's palace. The unique songs of the Igue Festival are only performed in observance of the occasion and cannot be used at other celebrations or ceremonies. Every significant chief performs a dance during Igue festivities. At the conclusion of a prosperous year, chiefs who serve in the shrines in sacrificial and priestly capacities conduct this age-old dance to wish everyone a good new year.⁸

Aim and Objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to examine the cultural significance of the Igue Festival to the Benin People of benin kingdom, while the objectives are:

1. To examine the origins and evolution of the Igue Festival in the Benin Kingdom
2. To discuss the religious and political significance of the Igue Festival
3. To discuss the socio-political significance of the Igue Festival on the Benin People.
4. To identify the contemporary relevance and challenges of the Igue Festival in modern Benin society

Statement of Problem of the Study

The Origin of Igue has been discussed and described by scholars, but more can be learnt to explain aspects of the festival which are controversial. The Igue festival have been demolished by modern , religious beliefs thereby undermining the religious significance of Igue festival as a ceremony of thanksgiving to the Benin people. Due to the foregoing , the celebration of Igue festival is faced with the challenges of going into extinction in modern Benin society due to the prevalence of misconceptions.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study deals with the historical origins, religious, cultural, socio-political significance of the Igue festival to the Benin people. The study covers Benin kingdom in present day Edo state of Nigeria. It describes the earliest or traditional cultural practices origin of Igue festival to the present day challenges to the performance of Igue in the household of Benin people.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it will show that more can be learnt to explain aspects of the festival which are controversial, despite been subjected to debates by different scholars .With an emphasis on religious importance, cultural preservation, and contemporary relevance, this paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the Igue Festival's cultural value in the Benin Kingdom. This study deepens our comprehension of the festival's significance in modern Benin culture and its wider ramifications for customary cultural practices through its investigation.

Additionally, the study offers a thorough understanding of the Igue Festival's religious and cultural aspects, it shows that Igue festival is a ceremony of thanksgiving to the benin people, The cosmological beliefs of the Benin people, which place a great emphasis on a close relationship with the divine and their ancestors, are the foundation of this celebration. The study provides insight into how the celebration promotes the spiritual identity of the Benin people, assisting them in preserving their feeling of cultural continuity and purpose, by examining its religious significance. This information is essential for maintaining the festival's spiritual centre and guaranteeing that its religious components endure despite changing social dynamics for both religious researchers and cultural practitioners as well as the Benin community. The study concludes by analyzing the festival's applicability in a society that is modernizing and emphasizing its function in maintaining continuity and identity in the face of swift societal change. Like many other traditional festivals, the Igue Festival is subject to modernization and globalizations forces that could undermine its core principles. The study adds to a larger

conversation on maintaining cultural identity in the face of external influences by examining how the festival responds to these difficulties. This investigation can be a useful guide for other communities throughout the world who aim to preserve customs while addressing contemporary social expectations, providing a model for preserving cultural heritage without sacrificing fundamental principles.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach is used in conjunction with these sources to allow for a more thorough examination of the festival's current relevance. This study relies on primary and secondary sources will be used in this study on the cultural significance of the Igue Festival in the Benin Kingdom in order to provide readers a thorough grasp of the festival's social, religious, and historical aspects.

Literature Review

Egharevba's *A Short History of Benin*⁹ is a cornerstone text that offers both a historical and cultural analysis of the Benin Kingdom. In the context of the Igue Festival, Egharevba provides a detailed account of the festival's role in reinforcing the power and authority of the Oba of Benin. He situates the festival within the broader historical framework of Benin's political and spiritual life, emphasizing how it serves to maintain the continuity of the kingdom's traditions and the legitimacy of its rulers. Egharevba describes the Igue as a celebration deeply embedded in the spiritual and political fabric of Benin society. The Igue, therefore, is a moment where the

Oba reaffirms his divine right to rule, invoking the power of the ancestors to safeguard his reign and the well-being of the kingdom. The work is invaluable for understanding how the festival functions as a socio-political institution that binds the community together. Egharevba illustrates the ways in which the festival creates a sense of continuity between the past and the present, reinforcing the cultural identity of the Benin people. By framing the Igue Festival within the larger history of Benin, Egharevba demonstrates how the festival has evolved over time while maintaining its core function as a religious and political event that reinforces the authority of the Oba. In sum, Egharevba's historical narrative is key for comprehending the cultural significance of the Igue Festival as a mechanism of political power and spiritual renewal in the Benin Kingdom. His account highlights the festival's enduring importance in preserving the monarchy's central role in both the governance and religious life of the Benin people

Osatohanmwun Asemota Roberts "*Understanding Essentials of Igue Festival of Benin People in Promoting Traditional Peace*"¹⁰, he comments that A significant cultural and religious occasion in the Benin Kingdom, Edo State, Nigeria, is the (Igue) Festival. Founded in the 15th century by Oba Ewuare the Great, this event has great cultural significance for the Edo people and is a time of gratitude, purification, and blessings. Under the patronage of the current Oba of Benin, it is celebrated every year in December and symbolises the close ties that exist between the community, the monarchy, and the ancestors. The Oba's function as a political and spiritual leader, as well as the Benin monarchy's divine link, are the main themes of the Igue Festival.

Offerings are made to invoke blessings for peace, prosperity, and good fortune in the kingdom, and the Oba conducts cleansing rites throughout the celebration. The event features several rituals, including traditional dances, offerings to the god of good fortune, and a joyous parade around the city. It is common for participants to give "Ewere" leaves, which represent good fortune and communal well-being, sing traditional songs, and dress ceremonially.

The Igue Festival, a colorful celebration of Edo cultural history, builds cultural identity, fosters peace, and fortifies social ties. It has developed into a popular tourist destination that attracts both domestic and foreign tourists, boosting the Edo State's tourism industry. The event continues to be a timeless representation of Edo culture, encapsulated social order and communal ideals despite the demands of modernization and religious shifts. The ancient and culturally rich Igue Festival of the Benin Kingdom has long played a significant role in the social and spiritual life of the Edo people. It was created in the fifteenth century by Oba Ewuare the Great and marks the conclusion of one year and the beginning of another. The celebration is customarily celebrated from late November to early December and represents the Edo people's respect for the Benin monarchs, historical beliefs, and ties to their ancestors.

A rite of regeneration for the people and the monarchy is at the centre of the Igue Festival. As the kingdom's spiritual head, the Oba of Benin conducts purification rites to preserve peace and ask for the kingdom's blessings of fertility, health, and good fortune. During this procedure, the Oba and other royal family members sacrifice animals like goats or leopards. Additionally,

"Ewere" leaves—which stand for protection and good fortune—are used to commemorate the celebration and are given to everyone as a sign of wealth and community cohesion. The celebrations are marked by a few features, such as traditional music, dances, ancestral reverence, and a lavish exhibition of Benin's royal traditions and dress. With dances, traditional drumming, and ceremonies honouring the land's gods, including Ogun (the god of iron) and Olokun (the deity of the sea), chiefs, members of the royal family, and people from other towns add to the joyous ambiance. By showcasing the Edo people's spiritual ties to their ancestors, the event promotes social ideals, solidarity, and cultural heritage preservation.

In addition to its religious purpose, the celebration unites society and politics, bolstering established institutions and the monarchy's power. Being a public event, it draws large crowds of people, including tourists, promoting pride in Edo identity, advancing cultural education, and creating economic benefits through tourism. Despite the effects of colonialism, Christianity, and modernisation, Benin's tradition has persevered, as seen by the Igue Festival. It continues to be a lively expression of Edo identity, encouraging reverence for customs and fostering harmony via cultural observance.

In Orobator, Daniel Ayodele, and Victor Osahon Aiguoarueghian's *Regaining the Lost Heritage: A Critique of the Revival of Igue Festival in Benin, Nigeria*¹¹, they opined that One of the most well-known and culturally significant celebrations in the Benin Kingdom is the Igue Festival, which represents a period of blessings, cleansing, and gratitude for the Edo people.

Although their beginnings are open to several interpretations, they are frequently associated with the 15th-century reign of Oba Ewuare the Great. This celebration, which dates to pre-colonial times, honours Osanobua (God) and marks a successful year for the Benin Kingdom. Traditionally, the Igue Festival spans several days and consists of several ceremonies that highlight many facets of Benin's spiritual and sociopolitical life. Of them, the Ugierhoba honours deceased Obas, and the Otue-Ughieroba entails an anointing rite that represents purity for the Oba. The Igue Ewere, the last ceremony, focusses on dispersing good fortune through "Ewere" leaves, signifying peace and prosperity for the coming year, while the Igue Emobo is intended to fend off evil spirits.

Prior to the British occupation in 1897, the Igue Festival was at its height in history. The festival's importance declined during the colonial era as British influences weakened the Oba's position and upended customs. As many Christians started to see the event as incompatible with their faith, Christianization—especially Pentecostalism—further decreased participation. Although the festival has seen a cultural comeback in recent years, its relevance has changed, striking a balance between traditional reverence and contemporary adaptation. Efforts are being made to restore the festival's full splendour and strengthen its position as a tourist destination and cultural heritage event.

Known as a "festival of the head," the Igue Festival has a strong spiritual, cultural, and historical foundation in the Benin Kingdom. The event has historically represented the

reaffirmation of favours, gratitude for wealth, and protection from bad luck. According to scholars, the celebration started out as a private rite in which Odionwere, the oldest senior, offered sacrifices every year to commemorate his life's journey. Eventually, this custom changed, especially under Oba Ewuare the Great, who made it a formal royal and collective occasion to commemorate the monarchy and the cultural and spiritual unity of Benin. The festival's main stages highlight how all-encompassing it is. The Ague ceremony, which involves fasting and spiritual cleansing, usually kicks off the celebration. Several ceremonial events follow, such as Ugierhoba, which honours the spirits of previous Obas and confirms the Edo people's togetherness, and Otue-Ughieroba, when chiefs and other dignitaries assemble to honour the Oba Emobo, another well-known ceremony, represents the expulsion of evil spirits and ends with the distribution of "Ewere" leaves, which are seen to be lucky charms and signs of peace.

Intricate ceremonies and sacrifices, traditionally involving animals and, during colonial authority, occasionally human sacrifices, were common during the festival's height celebrations. Significant change occurred with the British invasion in 1897 and the ensuing colonial rule, which significantly reduced the festival's grandeur as the British exiled Oba Ovonramwen, stripped the king of many of its privileges, and restricted traditional customs. Following these incidents, the Igue Festival was altered. For example, some ceremonies were shifted from evening to daytime to demythologise the rites, while others that colonial and Christian forces considered "pagan" were discontinued. Despite the impacts of urbanisation, colonial control, and

Christian influence, the celebration has had a resurgence in recent years. The Igue Festival now represents Benin's tenacity and identity in addition to being a beloved cultural occasion. The festival is now accessible to tourists and the public thanks to modern adaptations, garnering international recognition and creating local economic prospects through tourism. The Edo people's commitment to conserving their culture is shown in the revival attempts, which further confirm the Igue Festival's cultural and spiritual significance in modern-day Benin.

In Esiobi Esther's *Utilization of social media for the Promotion of Benin Igue Festival*¹², the Edo people of Benin celebrate the Igue Festival, which is a major cultural event, especially in the Oba of Benin's royal palace. Celebrated every year to usher in a new year, it honours divine protection, purification, and gratitude for wealth. This event includes several ceremonies, all of which represent continuity, unity, and the Edo people's spiritual ties to their ancestors. Although the Edo people have previously observed Thanksgiving, the festival's historical origins can be found in the 15th-century reign of Oba Ewuare the Great. Extensive rituals, such as the Igue Emobo, are done during the celebration to ward off evil spirits and guarantee the kingdom's safety. "Ewere" leaves, which are said to bring luck and blessings for the new year, are distributed as part of Igue Ewere, another important rite. A lively environment that upholds Edo legacy and identity is created by participants who dress traditionally and participate in dances, music, and other cultural expressions. The festival has also been updated for contemporary audiences over time, drawing tourists and boosting local economies. The Igue Festival, which embodies the

ideals and solidarity of the Edo people, continues to be a crucial component of Benin's cultural identity despite the impact of other religions and modernization.

A major part of Benin's cultural and religious life, the Igue Festival is observed with a fusion of contemporary influences and profound historical veneration. The event, which takes place over a few days in December, is a time for purification, gratitude, and requesting God's favour for the upcoming year. It strengthens the Edo people's identity and sense of community continuity by highlighting their ties to their heritage and traditional monarchy. Every event at the festival has a distinct meaning, and taken as a whole, they offer a lasting homage to Benin's cultural legacy. Oba Ewuare the Great is frequently credited for formalizing the event in the 15th century to celebrate his accession to the throne and the prosperity of the country during his reign. Since then, the celebration has developed into a lavish public gathering that includes significant rites like the Igue Ewere, which represents good fortune, peace, and unity, and the Igue Emobo, which is performed by the Oba and chiefs to ward off evil forces. Participants take part in a range of customary acts, such as drumming, dances, and masquerades, which brighten up the streets and foster communal cohesion. A vital cultural event that draws tourists from all over the world, the Igue Festival has seen a resurgence in interest among younger generations because to modern modifications, such as the usage of social media. The festival has been extensively promoted by the Edo State government and local authorities as a means of promoting cultural pride and boosting local economies through tourism. These days, the festival uses social media

sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to promote its historical significance, highlight its events, and interact with people outside of Nigeria. These initiatives guarantee that the Igue Festival will continue to be a dynamic, changing representation of Benin's character, maintaining its significance in a world growing more interconnected by the day.

Omoera Osakue Stevenson *Igue Ceremony as a Theatrical Performance: An Appraisal*¹³, explains that the Benin-speaking people of Edo State, Nigeria, celebrate the Igue Festival, also called the Igue Ceremony, as a lavish religious and cultural occasion every year. It is a way to greet the new year with wishes for harmony and prosperity as well to express gratitude as a group. To honour the ancestors and consider Benin's historical and cultural legacy, the Igue event is organised as a sequence of ceremonial performances that include dance, music, chants, recitals, and masquerades. Nine main ceremonies—Otue-Ugierhoba, Ugie-Erhoba, Iron, Otue-Igueoba, Igue-Inene, Emobo, Iguivbioba, Igue-Edohia, and Igue-Ewere—are essential to the festival's theatricality. The Oba, or king, and the chiefs give exciting presentations during each part. They highlight the relationship between the people and their rulers as well as their common cultural values through symbolic dances, recitations, and other artistic performances. The Igue-Erhoba, in which the present Oba honors previous Obas at their shrine and reaffirms the commitment of the people, is one of the festival's most important events. The Igue-Ewere, a day when young people act out a historical escape from the legendary Oba Ewuare, is another highlight. To foster peace and prosperity, participants symbolically gather "Ebe-Ewere" leaves,

which are linked to good fortune, and bless families with them. This festival, which is said to be essentially theatrical, features a unique African performance style that is not constrained by conventional Western theatre conventions. Several art forms are combined at the Igue Festival to create an enthralling visual and acoustic experience that strengthens cultural identity, historical continuity, and social ties among the Benin people.

The Benin-speaking people of Edo State, Nigeria, celebrate the Igue Festival (also known as the Igue Ceremony), a complex cultural and spiritual event that blends religious gratitude, group affirmation, and cultural exhibition. This event, which lasts for around eleven days, signifies the end of the Benin calendar year and the start of a new one. It is well known for its intricate sequence of ceremonial performances, ceremonies, and highly symbolic reenactments that pay tribute to Benin heritage's spiritual and historical facets.

The festival is organised around nine major events, each with unique theatrical components and significance:

Otue-Ugierhoba: The event starts with chiefs, all dressed traditionally, dancing into the palace with their own dance troupes to honour the Oba (king). This event, which emphasises hierarchy and togetherness via intricate dancing and costumes, is a demonstration of the chiefs' commitment.

Igue-Erhoba: The Oba honours his ancestors by visiting a shrine during this event. Chieftaincy titles may be awarded to worthy people, and chiefs renew their allegiance. Here, the crowd

chants as the chiefs execute the regal "Asaigbaide" dance while brandishing the royal "Eben" sword in a graceful performance.

Iron (Mock Battle): This special festival feature entails a symbolic reenactment of a historical fight, specifically Ogiamien's defiant challenge to the Obaship under Prince Oranmiyan's rule. Despite being private, this fictitious conflict is significant because it mirrors a pivotal moment in Benin history, in which the Oba's triumph represents the return of order. Invoking blessings and protection for the Oba and the country, Otue-Iguaeoba and Iguae-Inene celebrations are replete with dance, music, and incantations. They act as a reminder of the community's allegiance to the king as well as spiritual protection. The community prays to Osanobua, the supreme deity, during the Emobo and Iguivbioba rites in hopes of achieving peace, prosperity, and the welfare of the kingdom. It connects the Benin people to their divine beliefs and displays the festival's deeply spiritual foundations. The purpose of Iguae-Edohia and Iguae-Ewere is to bless and cleanse the community. One of the most culturally significant aspects is Iguae-Ewere, where young people visit homes to bestow blessings and gather "Ebe-Ewere" (leaves of good fortune). This custom dates to Oba Ewuare the Great, who used the leaves as cover during an escape. Because of his admiration for the plant, it has come to be associated with prosperity. During Iguae-Ewere, its plucking and distribution symbolize rebirth and the rejection of negative forces.

Theatrical and Social Significance: The festival's theatricality comes from its ritual enactments, which work as a means of historical preservation and storytelling, in addition to its lavish dance,

music, and costumes. Iron and Igue-Erhoba, for instance, employ stylised movements and symbolic warfare to communicate stories of conflict, victory, and loyalty that are essential to Benin's historical memory. By bringing the community together, reaffirming social norms, and establishing the responsibilities of different social groups, the Igue Festival also fulfils a social purpose. Religious leaders, young people, and chiefs all have designated roles to fulfil, and audience participation in chanting and singing strengthens the sense of group identity.

Cultural and Spiritual Resonance: The Igue Festival represents a link between the ancestral past and the present through its performances. It offers a platform for reaffirming social structures and cultural norms, acknowledging heavenly favour, and expressing respect for ancestors. In addition to being enjoyable, the festival's customs and ceremonies offer a profoundly significant experience that strengthens ties within the community and the Benin people's sense of shared history and purpose.

CHAPTERIZATION

Chapter One: Introduction

- To give an overview of the research
- The background of the study
- The aim and objectives
- The scope of the study

- The significance of the study
- The literature reviews, and the structure of the subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two: Historical Evolution of Igue Festival

- To explore the origins and historical development of the Igue Festival.

Chapter Three: Religious and Political Significance of Igue Festival

- To analyze the festival's influence on the social and cultural fabric of the Benin Kingdom.

Chapter Four: Political Significance of Igue Festival

- To explore the festival's role in the Benin Kingdom's political system and authority will be the primary focus of this chapter.

Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusion

- To summarize the main findings and conclusions derived from the research are succinctly summarized.

ENDNOTES

1. Egharevba Jacob, A Short History of Benin, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1968), p. 163.
2. Benjamin Obeghare Izu, Music and Associated Ceremonies Displayed During Igue (Festival) In the Royal Court of Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, Master dissertation, University of South Africa, 2012, pp. 1-4.
3. Ibid.

4. Osagioduwa Eweka, Cultural Leadership, Festivity and Unity Rendezvousing in Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, Ibadan Journal of Peace and Development, Vol. 3, 2014, 100-101.
5. Asemota Roberts Osatohanmwun, Understanding Essentials of Igue Festival Of Benin People In Promoting Traditional Peace, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture,
6. Umudike School Of General Studies, 2013, 13-18.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Omoruan Daniel and Louis Emmanuel, Histo-Cultural Discourse on the Igue Festival, Pre/Post Benin Invasion and the Reparation Debate, International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, Vol. 3, 2024, 1040-1048.
10. Egharevba Jacob, A Short History of Benin, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1960), pp. 61-66.
11. Osatohanmwun Asemota Roberts, Understanding Essentials of Igue Festival of Benin People in Promoting Traditional Peace, *FSSH Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2024, 13–22.
12. Orobator Daniel Ayodele, and Victor Osahon Aiguobarueghian, Regaining the Lost Heritage: A Critique of the Revival of Igue Festival in Benin, Nigeria, *Icheke Journal of the Faculty of Humanities*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2020, 13–24.
13. Esiobi Esther, Utilization of Social Media for the Promotion of Benin Igue Festival, University of Benin, August 2023.

14. Omoera Osakue Stevenson, Igue Ceremony as a Theatrical Performance: An Appraisal, *Studies of Tribes and Tribals* Vol. 6, No. 2, 2008, 111-115.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF IGUE FESTIVAL

Introduction

The historical evolution of the Igue festival reveals a layered narrative deeply tied to the cultural, political, and spiritual life of the Benin Kingdom. The origins of this festival can be traced to the reign of Oba Esigie in the sixteenth century. Oba Esigie was a renowned warrior-king whose reign was marked by significant political and military achievements, one of which included overcoming his brother, Arhuanan of Udo¹.

Evolution of Igue Festival

Igue festival was first introduced into the Benin royal court during the reign of Oba Ewuare in the fifteenth century. The history of the Igue Ivie festival is interwoven with the broader evolution of Benin's cultural identity.²

Picture with Honourable Benjamin Omuemu and Peace Osaro



Photo taken by the Researcher 04/12/2024

The Igue festival also derives its spiritual essence from its connection to ancestral veneration. Festivals in Benin culture serve as communal and spiritual acts, blending traditional beliefs with rituals that honor the ancestors. The Igue festival is no exception. It is celebrated as a bridge between the living, the ancestors, and the gods.³ During the festival, the Oba and participants engage in elaborate ceremonies to invoke blessings, good health, and prosperity for the kingdom. The evolution of the Igue festival reflects its transformation into a grand cultural

event.⁴ Its initial purpose as a royal commemoration expanded over time to encompass broader societal participation. The festival became an annual event marking the end of the Benin year and the beginning of a new one. It is celebrated with pomp and grandeur, involving music, dance, and theatrical performances. Ewini music, a traditional genre specific to the festival, plays a crucial role in creating an atmosphere of reverence and celebration. The Oba and his chiefs are adorned in coral regalia, their appearances symbolizing the unity of the kingdom and the continuity of its traditions. Furthermore, the historical narrative of the Igue festival is deeply tied to the socio-political structures of the Benin Kingdom. The festival underscores the divine right of the Oba to rule, reinforcing the hierarchical order within the kingdom.⁵

The festival's rituals, music, and dances collectively celebrate the artistic and cultural heritage of the Benin people, ensuring its transmission across generations. The historical evolution of the Igue festival is a testament to its enduring significance in the Benin Kingdom. From its origins as a commemoration of Oba Esigie's military triumph to its establishment as an annual celebration of cultural identity, the festival has become a cornerstone of Benin's traditions.⁶ Its rituals, embodied the kingdom's spiritual and political ethos, while its elaborate ceremonies showcase the artistic and cultural richness of the Edo people. The Igue festival stands as a living monument to the history, values, and resilience of the Benin Kingdom, preserving its legacy for future generations.⁷

The Igue festival also serves as a profound medium for the reinforcement of communal identity and social cohesion in the Benin Kingdom. Beyond its royal and spiritual significance, the festival brings together various societal groups, fostering unity and shared cultural pride. Historically, festivals like Igue were more than celebrations; they were occasions to strengthen the bond between the monarchy and the people.⁸ The rituals, performances, and communal participation are orchestrated to emphasize collective identity, reminding the people of their shared heritage and the sacred responsibility to uphold it. This communal aspect highlights the festival's role as a cultural anchor, preserving Benin's unique traditions amidst changing historical circumstances. One of the critical historical insights into the Igue festival is its role in legitimizing the divine authority of the Oba. The Benin monarchy has always been intertwined with spiritual beliefs, where the Oba is not merely a political leader but a spiritual intermediary between the people and the gods. By performing the rituals of the Igue festival, the Oba reaffirms his divine connection, ensuring his continued legitimacy as the custodian of Benin's cultural and spiritual heritage. The festival's historical evolution also underscores the intersection of art, spirituality, and politics in the Benin Kingdom.⁹ This intersection of art and spirituality demonstrates how the Benin Kingdom used cultural artifacts to reinforce political structures and social norms.¹⁰

Moreover, the Igue festival's evolution illustrates how the Benin Kingdom adapted its traditions to changing times while preserving its core values. For instance, during the colonial

period and subsequent modernization, many African traditions faced threats of erosion. However, the Igue festival persisted as a symbol of resistance and cultural resilience. It became a rallying point for the Benin people, enabling them to assert their identity amidst external influences.¹¹ The festival's ability to endure through centuries of political and social transformations is a testament to its foundational role in the Benin cultural and spiritual landscape. From an anthropological perspective, the Igue festival embodies the principles of ancestral veneration and cosmological balance central to African traditional religions. The rituals performed during the festival reflect the belief in the interconnectedness of the living, the dead, and the divine. By honoring the ancestors and seeking their blessings, the festival serves as a spiritual renewal for the community. This perspective highlights the philosophical depth embedded in the festival, making it not just a cultural event but also a profound expression of Benin's worldview.¹²

Historically, the Igue festival has also been a platform for demonstrating loyalty and allegiance to the monarchy. Chiefs, nobles, and other dignitaries participate in the festival, donning symbolic apparels as symbols of their rank and their fealty to the Oba. This display of loyalty reinforces the hierarchical structure of the Benin Kingdom, where power and privilege are tied to one's proximity to the royal court. The festival thus functions as a ritual of social order, reminding participants of their roles within the kingdom's complex political and cultural system. Furthermore, the musical and performative aspects of the Igue festival are critical to its historical development. Music, particularly Ewini music, and dance are not mere entertainments

but integral components of the festival's spiritual and cultural expression. The rhythms and movements are designed to invoke spiritual presence, energize participants, and communicate sacred messages. The festival's theatricality, with its vibrant costumes and elaborate performances, reflects the Benin people's deep appreciation for drama as a medium of cultural storytelling and spiritual engagement.¹³

The historical trajectory of the Igue festival also illustrates the dynamic interplay between indigenous traditions and external influences. The Igue festival's historical evolution is a story of continuity and change. It reflects the resilience of the Benin Kingdom in preserving its traditions while navigating historical challenges. The festival's rituals, symbols, and performances are not static but have evolved over time to remain relevant to successive generations. This adaptability ensures that the Igue festival continues to serve as a cornerstone of Benin's identity, linking the past with the present and shaping the future of its cultural and spiritual life. Through its historical depth and cultural richness, the Igue festival remains a vibrant celebration of Benin's enduring legacy.¹⁴

The Igue Festival is an integral aspect of the rich cultural tapestry of the Benin Kingdom, deeply rooted in its history and traditions. This festival, celebrated annually, stands as a testament to the Edo people's devotion to their cultural heritage and the spiritual connection they maintain with their ancestors. Historically, the Igue Festival has been traced back to the reigns of the ancient Obas of Benin, who institutionalized the event as a means of strengthening unity,

celebrating prosperity, and reinforcing the authority of the monarchy. It is a vibrant occasion marked by elaborate rituals, traditional displays, and the preservation of customs that define the identity of the Benin people. Central to the Igue Festival is the role of the Oba, who serves as the custodian of the Benin culture and traditions. The festival begins with the Oba performing specific rites, anointing his head as an act of thanksgiving and spiritual renewal. This act symbolizes the commencement of the festival, which then extends to his children, chiefs, and the wider community. This sequence reflects the hierarchical structure of the Benin Kingdom, where the monarchy leads, and the subjects follow. The festival includes an array of symbolic acts, such as the offering of kola nuts, native chalk (orhue), and animals like cocks and other livestock. These offerings are made to thank the ancestors and ensure continued blessings and prosperity. The ewere leaf, a symbol of peace, is also significant during the festival, further emphasizing themes of harmony and unity.¹⁵

The historical significance of Igue is tied to its function as a national festival that cannot be erased or diminished, regardless of societal changes. Its importance is highlighted in the Hall of Departed Kings, where discussions about the festival are indispensable in recounting the legacies of past Obas. By perpetuating this festival, the Edo people reaffirm their identity and connect with their ancestry, ensuring that the cultural values and traditions of the kingdom are not forgotten. This festival embodies the resilience of Edo culture in the face of modernization and external influences. Rituals and ceremonies form a core aspect of the Igue Festival.¹⁶ The

slaughtering of animals, another vital ritual, serves as a medium to honor the spirits and seek their blessings, while certain taboos are observed to maintain the sanctity of the event. For instance, women and men are restricted from specific areas of the palace, reinforcing traditional gender roles and respect for sacred spaces. Community involvement is another cornerstone of the Igue Festival. Preparation for the event is a collective effort, with individuals from different age groups and social classes contributing to its success. Youth, adults, and elderly all have distinct roles, ensuring that the festival embodies the spirit of unity and shared responsibility. During the festival, community members come together to dine, exchange pleasantries, and engage in traditional dances and music. This fosters social cohesion and a sense of belonging among the Edo people. The practice of walking around the community to greet households and receive warm hospitality further underscores the festival's role in promoting love, mutual respect, and solidarity.¹⁷

Traditional practices preserved through the Igue Festival include hereditary chieftaincy, where the senior son of a deceased chief takes over the role, ensuring continuity of leadership and tradition. This reinforces the community's respect for lineage and ancestral connections. The traditional attire worn during the festival, characterized by elaborate and symbolic designs, serves as a visual representation of the culture's vibrancy and pride. Music and dance also play pivotal roles, with drummers, royal musicians, and dancers performing to honor the Oba and the ancestors. These artistic expressions are not merely entertainment but are deeply rooted in the

spiritual and cultural essence of the festival. However, the Igue Festival faces challenges in the modern era. The growing influence of Christianity and misconceptions about traditional practices have led some individuals to distance themselves from the festival, labeling it as fetish or superstitious. This cultural erosion poses a significant threat to the preservation of the festival. To counter this, efforts have been made to involve the younger generation by educating them about the festival's importance and encouraging their participation. Parents play a crucial role in passing down this knowledge, ensuring that the festival remains a living tradition.¹⁸

Documentation has also been emphasized as a means of preserving the Igue Festival. Records, video clips, and other forms of documentation have been created to capture the festival's essence and significance for posterity. These initiatives aim to safeguard the cultural heritage of the Edo people, ensuring that future generations can continue to celebrate and understand the values embedded in the festival. In conclusion, the Igue Festival is not just a celebration but a cultural institution that encapsulates the history, traditions, and values of the Benin Kingdom. It reinforces the authority of the Oba, unites the community, and serves as a bridge between the past and the present. Despite the challenges posed by modernization, the festival remains a vital symbol of Edo identity and resilience, reflecting the people's unwavering commitment to preserving their cultural heritage. Through its rituals, community involvement, and traditional practices, the Igue Festival continues to inspire pride and unity among the Edo people.¹⁹

The Igue Festival is an integral aspect of the rich cultural tapestry of the Benin Kingdom, deeply rooted in its history and traditions. This festival, celebrated annually, stands as a testament to the Edo people's devotion to their cultural heritage and the spiritual connection they maintain with their ancestors. Historically, the Igue Festival has been traced back to the reigns of the ancient Obas of Benin, who institutionalized the event as a means of strengthening unity, celebrating prosperity, and reinforcing the authority of the monarchy. It is a vibrant occasion marked by elaborate rituals, traditional displays, and the preservation of customs that define the identity of the Benin people. Central to the Igue Festival is the role of the Oba, who serves as the custodian of the Benin culture and traditions. The festival begins with the Oba performing specific rites, anointing his head as an act of thanksgiving and spiritual renewal. This act symbolizes the commencement of the festival, which then extends to his children, chiefs, and the wider community.²⁰ This sequence reflects the hierarchical structure of the Benin Kingdom, where the monarchy leads, and the subjects follow. The festival includes an array of symbolic acts, such as the offering of kolanuts, native chalk (ourwe), and animals like cocks and other livestock. These offerings are made to thank the ancestors and ensure continued blessings and prosperity. The ewere leaf, a symbol of peace, is also significant during the festival, further emphasizing themes of harmony and unity. The historical significance of Igue is tied to its function as a national festival that cannot be erased or diminished, regardless of societal changes. Its importance is highlighted in the Hall of Departed Kings, where discussions about the festival are indispensable in recounting the legacies of past Obas. By perpetuating this festival, the Edo

people reaffirm their identity and connect with their ancestry, ensuring that the cultural values and traditions of the kingdom are not forgotten. This festival embodies the resilience of Edo culture in the face of modernization and external influences.²¹

Rituals and ceremonies form a core aspect of the Igue Festival. These royal symbols are not merely ornamental; they hold deep cultural and spiritual meanings. The slaughtering of animals, another vital ritual, serves as a medium to honor the spirits and seek their blessings, while certain taboos are observed to maintain the sanctity of the event. For instance, women and men are restricted from specific areas of the palace, reinforcing traditional gender roles and respect for sacred spaces. Community involvement is another cornerstone of the Igue Festival. Preparation for the event is a collective effort, with individuals from different age groups and social classes contributing to its success. Youth, adults, and elderly all have distinct roles, ensuring that the festival embodies the spirit of unity and shared responsibility. During the festival, community members come together to dine, exchange pleasantries, and engage in traditional dances and music. This fosters social cohesion and a sense of belonging among the Edo people. The practice of walking around the community to greet households and receive warm hospitality further underscores the festival's role in promoting love, mutual respect, and solidarity.²²

Traditional practices preserved through the Igue Festival include hereditary chieftaincy, where the senior son of a deceased chief takes over the role, ensuring continuity of leadership

and tradition. This reinforces the community's respect for lineage and ancestral connections. The traditional attire worn during the festival, characterized by elaborate and symbolic designs, serves as a visual representation of the culture's vibrancy and pride. Music and dance also play pivotal roles, with drummers, royal musicians, and dancers performing to honor the Oba and the ancestors. These artistic expressions are not merely entertainment but are deeply rooted in the spiritual and cultural essence of the festival. However, the Igue Festival faces challenges in the modern era. The growing influence of Christianity and misconceptions about traditional practices have led some individuals to distance themselves from the festival, labeling it as fetish or superstitious. This cultural erosion poses a significant threat to the preservation of the festival. To counter this, efforts have been made to involve the younger generation by educating them about the festival's importance and encouraging their participation. Parents play a crucial role in passing down this knowledge, ensuring that the festival remains a living tradition. From an artistic perspective, the Igue Festival highlights the craftsmanship of Benin artisans. These artifacts transcend mere aesthetics, embodying the spiritual and temporal power vested in the Oba. Music, dance, and dramatic performances further enrich the festival, serving as mediums of cultural storytelling and spiritual expression.

The resilience of the Igue Festival amidst historical challenges, such as colonialism and modernization, underscores its significance as a symbol of cultural continuity. Despite external influences, the festival adapted, integrating new elements while preserving its core values. Its

survival and evolution reflect the Benin Kingdom's determination to uphold its identity and traditions. Some individuals label the festival as fetishistic, distancing themselves from its rituals. Efforts to counteract this cultural erosion include educating the younger generation about its significance and involving them in its activities. Parents and community leaders play pivotal roles in passing down this heritage, ensuring its survival. Documentation has also become an essential tool in preserving the festival's essence. Records, video clips, and other media capture their rituals and significance for posterity. These efforts aim to sustain the cultural heritage of the Edo people, ensuring that future generations can celebrate and understand the values embedded in the Igue Festival.²³

In conclusion, the Igue Festival is more than a celebration; it is a cultural institution that encapsulates the history, traditions, and values of the Benin Kingdom. It reinforces the authority of the Oba, unites the community, and serves as a bridge between the past and the present. Despite the challenges posed by modernization, the festival remains a vital symbol of Edo identity and resilience, reflecting the people's unwavering commitment to preserving their cultural heritage. Through its rituals, community involvement, and traditional practices, the Igue Festival continues to inspire pride and unity among the Edo people, safeguarding the legacy of the Benin Kingdom for future generations.²⁴

ENDNOTES

1. Osarhieme Benson Osadolor, *The Benin Monarchy: The Evolution of Tradition*, (Ibadan: Spectrum Book Limited, 2001), pp. 10-11.
2. Ibid.
3. Jacob Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, (Ibadan: University Press, 1968), pp. 20-25.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Interview with Odudu Emmanuel Osarentin, 63 years old, Chief in Benin city, 4th December, 2024.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

10. R. E. Bradbury, *Benin Studies*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973), pp, 70-75.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Jacob Edewor, *Festivals in Africa: Their Socio-Cultural and Religious Significance*, (Ibadan: Macmillan, 2004), pp. 100-104.
14. Ibid.
15. Aisien Eghosa, *Edo People and their Traditions*, (Lagos: Heritage Publishers, 1999), pp. 89-92.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Interview with Honourable Benjamin Omuemu, 60 years old, Liberian in Benin
Traditional Council of the Oba.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Interview with Mrs Felicia Omairauwa, 75 years old, Igue Festival Attendee, 5th
December 2024.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF IGUE FESTIVAL

Introduction

The socio-cultural impact of the Igue festival of the Benin Kingdom is profound, embedding itself in the identity and heritage of the community. This festival, integral to the spiritual and cultural life of the Benin people, symbolizes a synthesis of religious devotion, artistic expression, and social cohesion.¹

Preservation of Spiritual and Cultural Identity

The Igue festival is deeply rooted in the spiritual traditions of the Benin Kingdom, providing an avenue for annual purification and renewal. Celebrated in the last month of the year,

it involves elaborate rituals that aim to cleanse the community spiritually and reaffirm their connection with ancestors and divinities. These rites, which include fasting, prayers, and offerings on ancestral altars, sustain the people's belief systems and foster a sense of continuity with their past. This spiritual exercise underscores the cultural resilience of the Benin people, helping them maintain their identity amidst external influences. The preservation of spiritual and cultural Identity through the Igue festival is deeply interwoven into the fabric of the Benin Kingdom. This annual celebration is not merely a festive gathering; it is a deliberate act of cultural remembrance and spiritual rejuvenation that connects the people of Benin to their ancestors, divinities, and communal heritage.² At its core, the Igue festival functions as a spiritual anchor, reaffirming the community's worldview and their sacred connection to both the metaphysical and the temporal.

Central to the festival is the concept of spiritual cleansing and renewal. The rituals performed during the Igue festival are designed to purify the kingdom, the ruling Oba, and the individual households within the community. These rituals involve fasting, prayers, and offerings on ancestral altars, which are symbolic acts of gratitude and reverence to the divine forces believed to guide the kingdom. This spiritual exercise not only seeks divine blessings for prosperity and protection but also reinforces the people's belief in their traditional religious practices.³ The rituals act as a reminder of the community's shared spiritual lineage, fostering a collective sense of identity that transcends time and external disruptions. The cultural practices

embodied in the Igue festival are deeply tied to the history and heritage of the Benin Kingdom. The festival's timing, its taboos, and its elaborate ceremonies are preserved in oral traditions and the teachings passed down through generations.⁴ For instance, prohibitions against violence, quarrelling, and certain forms of external interaction during the festival underscore the sacredness of the period. Such customs serve as a cultural compass, guiding the behavior of the people and ensuring that traditional values remain intact. By observing these practices, the people of Benin reaffirm their commitment to the cultural norms that define their community. The festival also plays a critical role in maintaining the sanctity of the Oba's authority and the monarchy's connection to divine power. The rituals performed during the Igue festival emphasize the Oba's role as both a spiritual leader and a custodian of the kingdom's cultural heritage. This connection to divine authority legitimizes the monarchy and reinforces its centrality in the lives of the people. The Oba's active participation in the festival underscores the inseparability of leadership and spirituality in the Benin Kingdom, ensuring that these roles remain intertwined in the collective consciousness of the people.⁵

Picture with Elder Odudu Emmanuel Osarentin and Peace Osaro



Photo taken by the Researcher, 05/12/2025

Moreover, the Igue festival acts as a living archive of Benin's cultural identity. Through its rituals, dances, music, and other artistic expressions, the festival encapsulates the essence of what it means to be Benin. These elements are not static but evolve over time, integrating contemporary influences while retaining their core traditional meanings. This adaptability ensures that the cultural identity embodied in the Igue festival remains vibrant and relevant in the face of changing societal dynamics. As a result, the festival becomes a mechanism for cultural preservation, resisting the forces of cultural erosion brought about by globalization and modernization.⁶

The Igue festival also further serves as a unifying force that strengthens the cultural identity of the Benin people. Communal participation in the festival creates a shared experience that binds individuals to a collective heritage. Whether through the shared act of ritualistic offerings, the communal dances, or the collective observance of taboos, the festival reinforces the idea that the Benin identity is rooted in their shared history, spirituality, and cultural practices. It reminds the people of their unique place in history and their responsibility to preserve their traditions for future generations.⁷

Socio-Cultural Cohesion

The festival also functions as a unifying force within the community. It fosters communal harmony by engaging families and clans in collective rituals and celebrations. Activities such as dances, masquerades, and other performances during the festival highlight the shared heritage and cultural diversity of the kingdom. These ceremonies not only strengthen bonds among members of the community but also serve as a reminder of their shared ancestry and values. The Igue festival plays a central role in fostering socio-cultural cohesion within the Benin Kingdom, serving as a platform for communal unity and collective identity. It is not merely a religious or cultural event but a deeply ingrained social institution that binds the community through shared traditions, rituals, and values. This cohesion is evident in the way the festival brings together individuals from diverse social strata, age groups, and families under a common purpose of celebrating and preserving their heritage.⁸ At its heart, the Igue festival unites families and clans

in collective rituals that emphasize the interconnectedness of all members of the community. Each household actively participates in ceremonies that include offerings, prayers, and blessings for prosperity and harmony. This shared participation reinforces the bonds between family members and extends to the larger kinship networks. It creates a collective sense of responsibility toward upholding the cultural practices that have defined their identity for centuries. These familial and communal interactions during the festival act as a reminder of the shared ancestry and lineage that tie the people of Benin together.⁹

The communal celebrations also foster unity through collective joy and entertainment. The dances, masquerades, and processions that mark the festival are not just artistic expressions but communal activities that involve widespread participation. People from different walks of life—elders, youth, artisans, and even visitors—come together to celebrate the festival's significance. This shared experience transcends social and economic boundaries, creating an atmosphere of inclusivity and solidarity. By participating in these events, individuals affirm their belonging to a larger cultural whole, strengthening social bonds and mutual respect within the community. Additionally, the festival reinforces respect for the Oba and traditional leadership, which is a unifying symbol for the Benin people. The role of the Oba as both a spiritual and temporal leader is highlighted during the Igue festival, as the ceremonies often center on his renewal of power and divine connection. This acknowledgment of the Oba's authority serves to unify the community around a common figure who embodies their collective history and

aspirations.¹⁰ The rituals conducted by the Oba during the festival are seen as acts that benefit the entire community, further cementing the people's loyalty and collective identity under his leadership.

Another critical aspect of socio-cultural cohesion during the Igue festival is its role in resolving conflicts and fostering peace. The festival period is marked by strict taboos against quarrels, violence, and any actions that disrupt communal harmony. These prohibitions are not just spiritual requirements but also practical measures to ensure that the community remains united. By emphasizing peace and mutual respect, the festival creates an environment where grievances are set aside, and relationships are repaired.¹¹ This tradition of reconciliation strengthens social ties and ensures the continuity of harmonious coexistence. Moreover, the Igue festival serves as a bridge between the past and the present, linking generations through shared cultural practices. Elders play a vital role in guiding the younger generation in the rituals and ceremonies, passing down the knowledge and wisdom embedded in these traditions. This intergenerational exchange fosters respect for cultural continuity and ensures that the values and practices of the Benin Kingdom are preserved. Younger participants, through their involvement, gain a deeper appreciation for their heritage and a sense of pride in their identity, which contributes to the long-term cohesion of the community.¹²

Artistic Expression and Preservation

The Igue festival offers a platform for the display of Benin's rich artistic traditions, including bronze casting and ivory carving. These art forms, historically commissioned by the Oba and used in the festival, continue to be a source of pride and identity for the community. By showcasing these art forms, the festival preserves the artistic heritage of the kingdom and inspires future generations to sustain these crafts. The Igue festival serves as a profound medium for artistic expression and cultural preservation within the Benin Kingdom. It is a vibrant celebration that showcases the kingdom's rich artistic heritage, ensuring the continuity of traditional crafts, performances, and creative ingenuity. Through the festival, art becomes both a form of spiritual devotion and a powerful statement of cultural identity, reinforcing the historical and aesthetic legacy of the Benin people.¹³

Central to the festival's artistic expression is the elaborate display of visual art forms such as bronze casting and ivory carving. These traditional crafts have long been associated with the royal court and are integral to the ceremonies of the Igue festival. Intricate sculptures, masks, and adornments crafted by skilled artisans are prominently featured during the event, symbolizing the divine authority of the Oba and the spiritual significance of the rituals. These artworks not only serve ceremonial purposes but also embody the artistic mastery and creativity that have defined the Benin Kingdom for centuries. The continued use and production of these art forms during the festival ensure their preservation and relevance in contemporary times. The Igue festival also

provides a platform for performing arts, including music, dance, and theatrical displays. Traditional drumming, singing, and choreographed dances are essential elements of the celebration, each with specific symbolic meanings tied to the rituals. The rhythmic beats of drums and the melodic chants resonate with the spiritual themes of the festival, creating an immersive experience that connects the participants to their ancestors and deities. These performances are more than mere entertainment; they are living expressions of the kingdom's cultural values and beliefs. By involving the community in these art forms, the festival fosters a sense of pride and continuity, ensuring that these traditions are passed down to future generations.¹⁴

Another dimension of artistic expression during the Igue festival is the use of symbolic attire and regalia. The Oba, chiefs, and other participants don elaborate costumes adorned with fabrics, and other traditional materials that reflect their status and roles in the ceremonies. This attire is not only visually striking but also carries deep cultural and spiritual significance. They are meticulously crafted, often drawing on techniques and designs that have been preserved through centuries. By maintaining these practices, the festival reinforces the importance of traditional aesthetics and craftsmanship in defining the identity of the Benin people.¹⁵

Legacy of Looting and Repatriation

The looting of Benin's artifacts during the British invasion disrupted the socio-cultural fabric of the community. These artifacts, many of which were integral to the Igue festival,

symbolized the spiritual and artistic heritage of the kingdom. Their removal not only desecrated the community's sacred spaces but also displaced significant elements of their cultural identity. The ongoing efforts to repatriate these artifacts highlight the enduring importance of the festival and the broader cultural heritage of Benin. The return of these treasures is seen as a step toward restoring the cultural and spiritual vitality of the community. The legacy of the Igue festival and the broader cultural heritage of the Benin Kingdom is deeply intertwined with the ongoing debates about reparation and the restitution of looted artifacts. The festival is a vivid reminder of the kingdom's historical significance and its rich cultural and artistic traditions, many of which were disrupted by the colonial invasion of 1897.¹⁶ The events of that year not only caused immediate harm to the kingdom's political and spiritual institutions but also set in motion a legacy of cultural displacement that continues to resonate in the present. Efforts toward reparation are not only about returning stolen artifacts but also about addressing the enduring scars of colonialism and restoring the spiritual, cultural, and psychological well-being of the Benin people.¹⁷

The looting of the Benin Kingdom's treasures during the British punitive expedition was more than an act of material theft; it was a cultural desecration. Thousands of artifacts, including the famed Benin bronzes, ivory carvings, and other sacred items integral to the Igue festival and the kingdom's spiritual practices, were forcibly removed from their context and distributed across museums and private collections worldwide. These items held immense spiritual and

cultural significance, serving as physical manifestations of the kingdom's history, artistry, and religious devotion. Their removal disrupted the kingdom's ability to perform key rituals and diminished the symbolic power of its traditional institutions. The ongoing efforts to repatriate these artifacts are rooted in the recognition of their significance to the Benin people. Reparation in this context goes beyond the physical return of artificiality involves the restoration of cultural pride and identity that was undermined by their loss. The return of these treasures would enable the Benin Kingdom to reconnect with its historical and spiritual heritage, reintegrating these objects into their original roles in festivals, rituals, and the community's collective memory. This process is not merely symbolic but deeply restorative, addressing the spiritual void left by their absence and reaffirming the cultural sovereignty of the Benin people.¹⁸

The struggle for reparation has also reignited important discussions about historical justice and the ethical responsibilities of former colonial powers. The artifacts, currently housed in prominent institutions like the British Museum, represent a painful legacy of exploitation and cultural imperialism. Calls for their return are intertwined with broader demands for acknowledgment of the injustices committed during colonial rule and the lasting impacts on African societies. Reparation in this sense is not only about the objects themselves but also about the acknowledgment of historical wrongs and the fostering of cultural understanding and reconciliation. The debate over the repatriation of Benin artifacts has brought to light complex issues of ownership, identity, and politics. Within the Benin Kingdom itself, tensions have arisen

over who should hold custodianship of the returned artifacts—the state government or the traditional palace. This debate underscores the lingering effects of colonial disruptions, which reshaped traditional governance structures and introduced competing claims over cultural heritage. Resolving these tensions requires a careful balance between modern political systems and the historical and spiritual significance of the artifacts to the Oba and the Benin people. The legacy of the Igue festival is central to the arguments for reparation. As a cultural institution, the festival embodies the spiritual and artistic essence of the kingdom, making the return of the looted artifacts an essential step in restoring its full vibrancy.¹⁹ The items looted in 1897 were not mere decorations; they were active participants in the festival’s rituals, symbolizing divine authority, ancestral connections, and the kingdom’s artistic genius. Their return would allow the Igue festival to once again reflect the full depth of Benin’s cultural heritage, revitalizing its role as a living tradition that bridges the past and the present.²⁰

Reparation efforts also offer an opportunity for the Benin Kingdom to reclaim its narrative on the global stage. The artifacts, long displayed in foreign institutions, have often been misrepresented or stripped of their cultural context, reducing them to mere aesthetic objects. Their return provides a chance to correct these distortions and assert the true significance of these items as integral parts of a thriving culture. By reestablishing the connection between the artifacts and their origins, the Benin Kingdom can share its rich history and artistic achievements on its own terms.²¹

The legacy of the Igue festival and the quest for reparation are deeply interconnected, representing both a reminder of historical injustices and a pathway toward cultural restoration. The return of looted artifacts would not only rectify a profound historical wrong but also reinvigorate the spiritual and cultural practices that define the Benin Kingdom. Through these efforts, the legacy of the Igue festival can continue to inspire pride, unity, and resilience, serving as a testament to the enduring strength of the Benin people and their heritage.²²

Modern Relevance and Challenges

In contemporary times, the Igue festival continues to adapt and remain relevant. While its observance faces challenges such as urbanization and modernization, the kingdom's leadership, including Oba Ewuare II, has worked to preserve and promote this heritage. Efforts to establish cultural institutions like the Benin Royal Museum underscore the importance of the festival as a living tradition and a cornerstone of Benin's identity. The modern relevance of the Igue festival is a testament to its adaptability and enduring significance in the Benin Kingdom. While deeply rooted in historical and spiritual traditions, the festival continues to resonate in contemporary times, serving as a vital expression of cultural identity, unity, and resilience. However, the Igue festival also faces numerous challenges that threaten its sustainability and relevance in an era of rapid modernization, globalization, and socio-political change. One of the most significant aspects of the festival's modern relevance lies in its role as a cultural unifier. In a world increasingly shaped by fragmentation and the erosion of traditional values, the Igue festival

remains a cornerstone of communal identity for the Benin people. It serves as a reminder of shared heritage and collective memory, offering a sense of belonging that is especially important in contemporary urban settings where traditional structures are often diluted. The festival provides an opportunity for families, clans, and communities to come together, reaffirming their connections and reinforcing the cultural norms that define their collective existence.²³ The Igue festival has also become a symbol of cultural pride and resistance against the erasure of African traditions. In an era where global influences often overshadow local practices, the festival stands as a celebration of Benin's unique heritage. It demonstrates the ability of traditional customs to coexist with modernity, offering a model for other African communities seeking to preserve their cultural identity in a rapidly changing world. The festival's rituals, performances, and artistic displays highlight the richness of Benin culture, projecting it not only to its people but also to a global audience that increasingly appreciates the value of indigenous traditions.²⁴

Economic relevance is another key aspect of the festival in modern times. The Igue festival attracts tourists, researchers, and cultural enthusiasts, contributing to the local economy and raising the profile of Benin City as a cultural hub. The influx of visitors during the festival period provides opportunities for local artisans, performers, and businesses to showcase their talents and products, generating income and promoting cultural entrepreneurship. This economic dimension reinforces the importance of the festival as a tool for development, blending cultural preservation with practical benefits for the community. Despite its continued relevance, the Igue

festival faces several challenges that threaten its sustainability. Urbanization and modernization have significantly altered the social fabric of the Benin Kingdom, leading to a decline in the observance of traditional practices. Younger generations, influenced by global cultures and lifestyles, often view the festival as an outdated tradition, leading to diminished participation and interest. The erosion of oral traditions, which have historically been the primary means of transmitting knowledge about the festival, further exacerbates this issue, creating a gap between generations.²⁵

Political and economic pressures also pose challenges to the festival's preservation. The prioritization of development agendas and modern infrastructure often comes at the expense of cultural heritage, diverting resources and attention away from traditional practices. Additionally, disputes over the ownership and custodianship of cultural artifacts looted during the British invasion have introduced tension between the traditional authority of the Oba and modern political structures. These conflicts highlight the difficulties of reconciling traditional leadership with contemporary governance, creating an environment where cultural events like the Igue festival can become politicized.²⁶

ENDNOTES

1. Paula Ben-Amos, *The Art of Benin*, (London: British Museum Publications, 1980), pp. 22-24.
2. Ibid.
3. R. E. Bradbury, *Benin Studies*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 155-157.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Philip John Crosskey Dark, *An Introduction to Benin Art and Technology*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 75-77.
7. Joseph Nevadomsky, "The Benin Kingdom: Rituals of Kingship," *African Arts*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 1993, 56-59.
8. Jacob U. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1968), pp. 42-45.

9. Barbara Plankensteiner, *Benin: Kings and Rituals, Court Arts from Nigeria*, (Vienna: Museum für Völkerkunde, 2007), pp. 85-88.
10. Ibid.
11. Interview with Mrs Osayuki Obasohan, 68 years old, Dancer, 05th December 2024
- 12.
13. Kathryn Wysocki Gunsch, *The Benin Plaques: A 16th-Century Imperial Monument*, (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 122-124.
14. Ibid.
15. Alan Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans 1485–1897*, (London: Longmans, 1969), pp. 194-196.
16. Ibid.
17. Annie Coombes, “Museums and the Repatriation Debate,” *Journal of Material Culture* 2, no. 2 (1997): 212-215.
18. Interview with Mrs Imuetinyan Obayuwana, 79 years old, Involved with the Igue Festival, 05th December 2024
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Philip Dark and Herbert Cole, *Benin Art*, (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 56-58.
22. Paula Ben-Amos, “Royal Art of Benin: A Symbolic Analysis,” *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 53, No. 1, 1971, 15-18.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. R. E. Bradbury and P. C. Lloyd, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria*, (London: International African Institute, 1957), pp. 120-122.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

RELEVANCE AND CHALLENGES OF IGUE FESTIVAL IN BENIN SOCIETY

Introduction

The Igue festival holds profound political significance in the Benin Kingdom, primarily as a tool for reinforcing the authority and unity of the state under the leadership of the Oba. The festival underscores the Oba's central role as both the cultural and political leader of the kingdom. By acting as the custodian of the people's traditions and the convener of the festival, the Oba reaffirms his position as the linchpin of the community's governance and cultural heritage. This festival serves as a public demonstration of allegiance by chiefs and citizens, symbolizing the cohesion of the sociopolitical structure around the monarchy. Integral to the political significance of the Igue festival is its capacity to unify the diverse elements of the Benin Kingdom. The festival brings together various groups, including chiefs, nobles, and the general

populace, to participate in a collective celebration of cultural identity and governance.¹ These gatherings such as the Igue festival foster unity and reaffirm the collective spiritual commitment to the kingdom's stability. Chiefs and dignitaries, in their ceremonial regalia, pay homage to the Oba, emphasizing loyalty and reinforcing hierarchical relationships critical to the kingdom's political stability.²

Moreover, the festival functions as an avenue for cultural diplomacy, projecting the Oba's influence beyond the kingdom's immediate boundaries. By attracting tourists and participants from outside the kingdom, the Igue festival enhances the international visibility of Benin's cultural heritage. This diplomatic dimension not only strengthens the Oba's stature but also underscores the kingdom's historical significance as a center of African governance and culture. The integration of traditional rituals and modern adaptations in the Igue festival demonstrates the Oba's adeptness in navigating continuity and change.³ Through the festival, the Oba preserves ancient customs while incorporating contemporary elements that resonate with younger generations and diaspora communities. This dynamic approach ensures the relevance of the festival in modern times, reinforcing the Oba's role as a forward-looking yet tradition-bound leader.⁴

The Igue festival also contributes to the political economy of the kingdom by enhancing social cohesion and providing an opportunity for economic activities. The influx of visitors during the festival bolsters local trade and tourism, further solidifying the festival's role in the

kingdom's sociopolitical fabric. In this sense, the Igue festival is not only a cultural celebration but also a political mechanism for strengthening the Benin Kingdom's unity, stability, and resilience. The Igue festival is an essential cultural and political institution in the Benin Kingdom, serving as a powerful mechanism for reinforcing the authority of the Oba, fostering unity among the people, and showcasing the cultural and political sophistication of the kingdom. The festival is deeply intertwined with the kingdom's governance, demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between cultural traditions and political authority in Benin.⁵ At the heart of the Igue festival is the role of the Oba as the central figure and custodian of the people's cultural heritage. The festival underscores the Oba's supreme authority as both a spiritual leader and a political figure, embodying the kingdom's unity and continuity. The ceremonial aspects of the festival, where chiefs and nobles gather to pay homage to the Oba, highlight his position as the unifying symbol of the Benin Kingdom. These rituals reinforce loyalty and allegiance, ensuring that the political hierarchy remains intact, and that the Oba's authority is respected and revered.⁶

The festival also functions as a stage for reaffirming the sociopolitical structure of the kingdom. Chiefs, nobles, and other dignitaries appear in their traditional regalia, carrying their office staff (eben), and participate in ritualistic dances and other ceremonial activities. This public display of allegiance not only strengthens the Oba's authority but also reaffirms the hierarchical relationships that are central to the governance of the kingdom. By actively participating in these ceremonies, the people acknowledge the Oba's role as the ultimate source

of spiritual and political power, solidifying the cultural and political cohesion of the kingdom. The political significance of the Igue festival extends beyond the symbolic reinforcement of Oba's authority. It also serves as a tool for diplomacy and international engagement. The festival attracts visitors, dignitaries, and tourists from across Nigeria and beyond, enhancing the global recognition of Benin's cultural and political heritage.⁷ This international visibility underscores the historical significance of the Benin Kingdom as a center of African governance, culture, and influence. By showcasing the rich traditions and elaborate ceremonies of the festival, the kingdom strengthens its cultural diplomacy, fostering goodwill and enhancing its reputation on the global stage.⁸

One of the critical aspects of the Igue festival is its role in fostering unity among the people of the Benin Kingdom. The festival brings together people from various social strata, including chiefs, nobles, commoners, and diaspora communities. This collective participation transcends social and geographic boundaries, creating a sense of shared identity and purpose. By engaging in the festival's rituals and celebrations, participants reaffirm their commitment to the kingdom's unity and stability, fostering a spirit of togetherness and mutual respect. The Igue festival also reflects the Oba's ability to adapt ancient traditions to modern realities. While the festival is deeply rooted in historical and cultural practices, it has evolved to incorporate contemporary elements that resonate with younger generations and diaspora communities. This adaptability ensures the festival's relevance in modern times, allowing it to serve as a bridge

between the past and the present. Through these adaptations, the Oba demonstrates his leadership as a forward-thinking custodian of tradition, balancing continuity with innovation.⁹

Economically, the Igue festival is a vital contributor to the kingdom's political economy. The festival period witnesses increased economic activity, with local traders, artisans, and service providers benefiting from the influx of visitors. The vibrant marketplace during the festival exemplifies the interplay between cultural celebrations and economic vitality, underscoring the festival's role in sustaining the kingdom's economic resilience. This economic dimension further strengthens the political significance of the festival, as it highlights the Oba's role in ensuring the kingdom's prosperity. The ceremonial expulsion of evil spirits and the ushering in of peace and prosperity, symbolized by the Ewere leaves, also carry a significant political undertone. This act symbolizes the cleansing of the kingdom and the reaffirmation of the Oba's role as a protector and guide of his people.¹⁰ By overseeing these rituals, the Oba reaffirms his spiritual responsibility to ensure harmony and prosperity within the kingdom, further solidifying his position as a political and spiritual leader. The Igue festival, central to the Benin Kingdom, holds a wealth of political significance that extends far beyond ceremonial activities. It operates as a dynamic platform for affirming the Oba's authority, consolidating sociopolitical structures, and projecting the kingdom's identity both locally and internationally.¹¹

The festival underscores the Oba's unique position as the pivot of governance and spiritual leadership. Its elaborate ceremonies demonstrate the Oba's role as a divinely ordained

ruler, a status reinforced by the rituals and symbols associated with the festival. For instance, the anointing of the Oba's head with sacrificial elements symbolizes purity and divine approval, further cementing his status as a figure of unity and continuity within the political hierarchy. This spiritual dimension elevates the Oba above mere political leadership, casting him as a mediator between the divine and the earthly realms, which reinforces loyalty and allegiance among his subjects. In addition to its spiritual implications, the festival acts as a binding force for the kingdom's administrative structure.¹² The participation of chiefs, nobles, and other officials in ceremonial activities such as the presentation of Ewere leaves and dances in traditional regalia reaffirms the hierarchical structure of governance. During these rituals, chiefs renew their allegiance to the Oba, ensuring the stability and continuity of the sociopolitical system. This aspect of the festival illustrates its role as a periodic reaffirmation of the kingdom's governance principles. The historical narrative embedded in the Igue festival also holds substantial political weight. Rooted in events such as the rise of Oba Ewuare the Great, the festival commemorates historical moments of political consolidation and resilience. For instance, the inclusion of the Igue Iron ceremony, which reenacts the battle for the restoration of the monarchy, symbolizes the kingdom's capacity to overcome internal dissent and external threats. This dramatization of history serves as a reminder of the political unity and strength required to sustain the kingdom.¹³

Moreover, the festival is a medium of cultural diplomacy. Its appeal to foreign visitors and the diaspora community not only showcases the richness of Benin's cultural heritage but also

serves as a statement of the kingdom's historical prominence and political resilience. This international dimension of the Igue festival elevates its significance as a tool for cultural and political engagement on a global scale. The political significance of the festival is also evident in its role as a mechanism for social integration and nation-building. By bringing together diverse groups within the kingdom—chiefs, commoners, and the diaspora—the Igue festival fosters a sense of shared identity and collective purpose.¹⁴ This unifying effect is critical for the political stability of the kingdom, particularly in the face of external influences and internal divisions. The festival demonstrates the adaptability of traditional institutions in the face of modern challenges. Despite colonial disruptions and the influence of Christianity, the Igue festival has retained its relevance. The reforms introduced by Oba Eweka II, such as making rituals more public, illustrate the Oba's strategic leadership in preserving the festival's essence while accommodating contemporary realities. This adaptability underscores the resilience of the political structures of the Benin Kingdom and their capacity to endure through changing times. The Igue festival is a cornerstone of the Benin Kingdom's political framework. It not only reinforces the Oba's authority but also sustains the administrative and social cohesion of the kingdom. Its historical, cultural, and international dimensions further amplify its role as a political institution, ensuring the enduring legacy of the Benin Kingdom. Igue festival holds profound layers of political significance, deeply intertwined with the historical, cultural, and administrative identity of the Benin Kingdom. Its political relevance can be explored through various dimensions rooted in the traditions, ceremonies, and symbolism that define the festival.¹⁵

One of the key aspects of its political significance lies in its role as a state-building mechanism. Historically, the Igue festival was pivotal in reinforcing the central authority of the Oba during the pre-colonial era. The ceremonies showcase the Oba's supremacy, marking him as the nucleus of political and spiritual life in the kingdom. The event provided a platform for chiefs and titled men to publicly reaffirm their loyalty and allegiance to the Oba. This act of homage and allegiance was not merely ceremonial but also a declaration of unity and subordination to the central authority, ensuring that the political hierarchy remained intact and respected. The renewal of allegiance by the chiefs during the festival highlights the intricate relationship between governance and tradition. Chiefs, dressed in elaborate ceremonial regalia, present themselves before the Oba with their traditional swords (eben) as symbols of their authority and their allegiance to the throne. This public reaffirmation consolidates the socio-political structure and ensures the continuity of the kingdom's governance. The involvement of these key political actors also serves to integrate various administrative units under the unifying leadership of the Oba. The festival also reflects the historical evolution of Benin's political identity. Rooted in significant events such as the reign of Oba Ewuare the Great, the festival encapsulates the struggles and triumphs of the kingdom's leadership. For instance, the Igue Iron ceremony, which reenacts historical battles against challenges to the throne, serves as a powerful reminder of the kingdom's resilience and capacity to maintain order and authority despite internal and external threats. This historical dimension ties the festival to the political narrative of the kingdom, making it a tool for fostering pride and identity among the people. Moreover, the spiritual

underpinning of political authority is vividly expressed through the rituals performed during the festival.¹⁶ The anointing of the Oba's head with sacrificial elements symbolizes the sanctity of his leadership and his divine connection to the gods and ancestors. This spiritual endorsement strengthens his legitimacy, portraying him not just as a political leader but also as a divinely chosen mediator between the spiritual and earthly realms. Such practices consolidate his role as a unifying figure whose leadership is anchored in both spiritual and political domains.¹⁷

Challenges of Igue Festival

The Igue festival also served as a political statement of sovereignty, particularly before the British invasion in 1897. During the pre-colonial era, the festival was guarded with strict rules, reflecting the kingdom's determination to protect its cultural sovereignty. For example, historical records indicate that foreign visitors, including British envoys, were often restricted during the festival period to preserve its sanctity. This resistance to external interference emphasized the festival's role in asserting the political autonomy of the Benin Kingdom. Another dimension of the festival's political significance is its capacity for social integration and nation-building. By involving diverse segments of the population—royalty, chiefs, commoners, and even the diaspora—the festival fosters a shared sense of belonging and collective identity. This inclusivity strengthens the kingdom's social fabric, creating a unified community centered around the Oba and the values he represents. The festival becomes a reminder of the kingdom's shared heritage and the central role of the Oba in maintaining peace and harmony.¹⁸ Additionally,

the Igue festival played a role in diplomatic relations and cultural diplomacy. The grandeur and pageantry of the festival attracted attention beyond the kingdom's borders, enhancing its reputation as a sophisticated and well-organized polity. The cultural displays and traditional regalia showcased during the festival projected an image of political stability and cultural richness, drawing admiration from neighboring states and foreign observers. This diplomatic dimension not only strengthened external perceptions of the kingdom but also reinforced internal confidence in its governance and traditions. Post-colonial adaptations of the festival reveal its political resilience. Despite disruptions caused by colonialism and the diminishing powers of the monarchy, the Igue festival has retained its relevance.¹⁹ Oba Eweka II's reforms, which made rituals more public, demonstrated an astute understanding of how to preserve traditional practices while navigating the challenges of a changing sociopolitical landscape. These adaptations underscore the festival's enduring role as a political institution capable of evolving without losing its essence.

The Igue festival transcends its cultural and religious dimensions to serve as a cornerstone of the Benin Kingdom's political identity. It reinforces the authority of the Oba, maintains the sociopolitical hierarchy, and projects the kingdom's historical resilience and cultural sophistication. The festival's capacity to unify the populace, assert sovereignty, and adapt to contemporary challenges ensures its continued significance in the political life of the Benin Kingdom.²⁰

ENDNOTES

1. Akinwumi Ogundiran, *Precolonial Nigeria*, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2005), pp. 310-312.
2. *Ibid.*, 315.

3. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, (London: SCM Press, 1973), pp. 89-90.
4. Ibid., 93.
5. A. F. C. Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans 1485–1897*, (London: Longman, 1969), p. 78.
6. Ibid., 85.
7. Toyin Falola and Ann Genova, *Historical Dictionary of Nigeria*, (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2009), p. 105.
8. Ibid.
9. Chike Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth Century Nigeria*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 44-46.
10. Michael Crowder, *West Africa under Colonial Rule*, (London: Hutchinson, 1968), p. 198.
11. Ekhaguosa Aisien, *Benin City: The Edo State Capital*, (Benin City: Aisien Publishers, 2000), p. 162.
12. Ibid., 164.
13. Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of African Societies to 1870*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 253.
14. Ibid., 256.
15. Peter P. Ekeh, "The Constitution of Civil Society in African History and Politics," *Africa Development Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2004, 1-14.
16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 15-16.
18. Isidore Okpewho, Carole Boyce Davies, and Ali A. Mazrui, *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 112.
19. Akin Alao, "Colonialism and the Transition to Modernity in Africa," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 1993, 369–390.
20. Ibid., 372.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Igue Festival, a cornerstone of the Benin Kingdom's cultural and spiritual life, stands as a profound testament to the enduring legacy of the Edo people. This study has explored the festival's historical evolution, socio-cultural impact, and political significance, revealing its multifaceted role in shaping the identity, unity, and governance of the Benin Kingdom. Through a detailed examination of its origins, rituals, and contemporary relevance, the Igue Festival emerges as a vibrant institution that bridges the past and present, ensuring the continuity of Benin's rich cultural heritage.

The historical evolution of the Igue Festival traces its roots to the reign of Oba Esigie in the 16th century, where it began as a commemoration of royal victory and unity. Over time, the festival evolved into an annual celebration marking the end of the Benin year and the beginning of a new one, characterized by elaborate rituals, music, dance, and theatrical performances. The festival's historical trajectory reflects its adaptability, as it has endured through centuries of political and social transformations, including colonialism and modernization. This resilience underscores the festival's foundational role in the Benin cultural and spiritual landscape, serving as a living monument to the kingdom's history, values, and artistic ingenuity.

The socio-cultural impact of the Igue Festival is profound, embedding itself in the identity and heritage of the Benin people. The festival functions as a spiritual anchor, providing an avenue for annual purification, renewal, and ancestral veneration. Through rituals such as

fasting, prayers, and offerings, the community reaffirms its connection to the divine and its shared spiritual lineage. The festival also fosters communal harmony by engaging families and clans in collective rituals and celebrations, strengthening bonds among members of the community and reinforcing their shared ancestry and values. Artistic expressions, including traditional music, dance, and visual arts, play a central role in the festival, showcasing the kingdom's rich artistic heritage and inspiring future generations to sustain these crafts. The festival's ability to adapt to contemporary influences while preserving its core values ensures its relevance in modern times, serving as a symbol of cultural pride and resistance against the erasure of African traditions.

Politically, the Igue Festival is a powerful mechanism for reinforcing the authority of the Oba and maintaining the socio-political hierarchy of the Benin Kingdom. The festival underscores Oba's central role as both a cultural and political leader, with ceremonies that highlight his divine connection and legitimacy. This public display of loyalty reinforces the hierarchical structure of the kingdom, ensuring the stability and continuity of its governance. The festival also serves as a tool for cultural diplomacy, projecting the Oba's influence beyond the kingdom's immediate boundaries and enhancing the international visibility of Benin's cultural heritage. By attracting tourists and participants from outside the kingdom, the Igue Festival strengthens the Oba's stature and underscores the kingdom's historical significance as a center of African governance and culture.

Despite its enduring significance, the Igue Festival faces challenges in the modern era. Urbanization, modernization, and the influence of global cultures have led to a decline in the observance of traditional practices, particularly among younger generations. The erosion of oral traditions, which have historically been the primary means of transmitting knowledge about the festival, further exacerbates this issue. Additionally, political and economic pressures pose challenges to the festival's preservation, as the prioritization of development agendas often comes at the expense of cultural heritage. However, efforts by the Benin Kingdom's leadership, including Oba Ewuare II, to preserve and promote the festival through cultural institutions and modern adaptations demonstrate a commitment to ensuring its continued relevance. The festival's ability to adapt to contemporary realities while maintaining its core values highlights its resilience and importance as a living tradition.

In conclusion, the Igue Festival is more than a cultural celebration; it is a vital institution that encapsulates the history, traditions, and values of the Benin Kingdom. Through its rituals, community involvement, and artistic expressions, the festival reinforces the authority of the Oba, unites the community, and serves as a bridge between the past and the present. Despite the challenges posed by modernization and external influences, the Igue Festival remains a symbol of Edo identity and resilience, reflecting the people's unwavering commitment to preserving their cultural heritage. As a living tradition, the festival continues to inspire pride and unity among the Edo people, safeguarding the legacy of the Benin Kingdom for future generations. The Igue

Festival stands as a testament to the enduring strength of Benin's cultural and spiritual life, ensuring that its rich heritage remains vibrant and relevant in an ever-changing world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

a) List of Informants

Names	Age	Occupation	Place of Interview	Date of Interview
Honourable Benjamin Omuemu	60	Liberian in Benin Traditional Council	Benin City	04 th December 2024
Mrs Felicia Omairauwa	75	Igue Festival Attendee	Benin City	04 th December 2024
Odudu Emmanuel Osarentin	63	Chief In Benin City	Benin City	05 th December 2024
Mrs Imuetinyan Obayuwana	79	Involved with Igue Ivie Festival	Benin City	05 th December 2024
Mrs Osayuki Obasohan	68	Dancer	Benin City	05 th December 2024

Secondary Sources

Books

A. F. C. Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans 1485–1897*, (London: Longman, 1969).

Aisien E., *Edo People and their Traditions*, (Lagos: Heritage Publishers, 1999).

Akinwumi O., *Precolonial Nigeria*, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2005).

Alan R., *Benin and the Europeans 1485–1897*, (London: Longmans, 1969).

- Barbara P., *Benin: Kings and Rituals, Court Arts from Nigeria*, (Vienna: Museum für Völkerkunde, 2007).
- Bolaji I., *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, (London: SCM Press, 1973).
- Chike O. A., *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth Century Nigeria*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
- Egharevba J., *A Short History of Benin*, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1968).
- Ekhaguosa A., *Benin City: The Edo State Capital*, (Benin City: Aisien Publishers, 2000).
- Elizabeth I., *A History of African Societies to 1870*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- Isidore O., Carole B. D., and Ali A. M., *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
- Jacob E., *Festivals in Africa: Their Socio-Cultural and Religious Significance*, (Ibadan: Macmillan, 2004).
- Jacob E., *A Short History of Benin*, (Ibadan: University Press, 1968).
- Joseph N., "The Benin Kingdom: Rituals of Kingship," *African Arts*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 1993.
- Kathryn W. G., *The Benin Plaques: A 16th-Century Imperial Monument*, (London: Routledge, 2018).
- Michael C., *West Africa under Colonial Rule*, (London: Hutchinson, 1968).
- Osarhieme B. O., *The Benin Monarchy: The Evolution of Tradition*, (Ibadan: Spectrum Book Limited, 2001).
- Paula Be., *The Art of Benin*, (London: British Museum Publications, 1980).
- Philip D. and Herbert C., *Benin Art*, (London: Methuen, 1983).
- Philip J. and Crosskey D., *An Introduction to Benin Art and Technology*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).
- R. E. Bradbury and P. C. Lloyd, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria*, (London: International African Institute, 1957).

R. E. Bradbury, *Benin Studies*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973).

Toyin F. and Ann G., *Historical Dictionary of Nigeria*, (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2009).

Journals

Akin A., "Colonialism and the Transition to Modernity in Africa," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 1993.

Annie C., "Museums and the Repatriation Debate," *Journal of Material Culture*, Vol. 2, no. 2 (1997).

Omoera O. S., Igue Ceremony as a Theatrical Performance: An Appraisal, *Studies of Tribes and Tribals* Vol. 6, No. 2, 2008.

Omoruan D. and Louis E., Histo-Cultural Discourse on the Igue Festival, Pre/Post Benin Invasion and the Reparation Debate, *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, Vol. 3, 2024.

Orobator D. A., and Victor O. A., Regaining the Lost Heritage: A Critique of the Revival of Igue Festival in Benin, Nigeria, *Icheke Journal of the Faculty of Humanities*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2020.

Osagioduwa E., Cultural Leadership, Festivity and Unity Rendezvousing in Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, *Ibadan Journal of Peace and Development*, Vol. 3, 2014.

Osatohanmwun A. R., Understanding Essentials of Igue Festival of Benin People in Promoting Traditional Peace, *FSSH Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2024.

Paula B., "Royal Art of Benin: A Symbolic Analysis," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 53, No. 1, 1971.

Peter P. E., "The Constitution of Civil Society in African History and Politics," *Africa Development Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2004.

Thesis and Dissertation

Asemota R. O., Understanding Essentials of Igue Festival of Benin People in Promoting Traditional Peace, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike School Of General Studies, 2013.

Benjamin O. I., Music and Associated Ceremonies Displayed During Igue (Festival) In the Royal Court of Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, Master dissertation, University of South Africa, 2012.

Esiobi E., Utilization of Social Media for the Promotion of Benin Igue Festival, University of Benin, August 2023.

Online Sources

Omoriegbe I., “The Igue Festival of Beads of Benin Kingdom”, [https://afribary.com/works/the -igue-festival-of-beads-of-benin-kingdom-4030](https://afribary.com/works/the-igue-festival-of-beads-of-benin-kingdom-4030)