

The octogenarian cultural festival (Ito-ogbo at 80) and the COVID-19 pandemic in Obosi, Anambra State



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The octogenarian (Ito-ogbo at 80) festival in Obosi is a festival that is celebrated with a huge fanfare of pumps and pageantries. It is celebrated every three years in March to rejoice with fathers and mothers on the attainment of the age of 80. The worry of the researchers now is how this festival will be handled amid the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in the absence of curative drugs. This article examines the octogenarian cultural festival during the COVID-19 pandemic in Obosi, Anambra State, Nigeria. The article aims at narrating the history of octogenarians in Obosi, discussing the functions of age grades, and discussing its relevance and a discourse on this celebration amid the coronavirus. Historical and phenomenological methods were adopted for analytical purposes. The article found that the longevity of life among Obosi people has been strongly threatened by the delta variant and also that celebrants do not feel safe in sustaining the festival for fear of contracting the delta variant.

Contribution: The Obosi's Ito-ogbo celebration is a good one and it has become a homecoming for all. It has sparked a desire to provide more care to elderly parents, resulting in increased life expectancy. African traditional religion was implicated in this study.

Keywords: Ito-ogbo; octogenarian; festival; coronavirus; Nigeria.

Introduction

'Ito-ogbo festival' (octogenarian celebration or celebration of age at 80) is an age-long festival instituted by our forefathers to thank God for the elderly in society. It is the celebration of age and longevity. The octogenarians are believed to have reached their career aspirations, accomplished their family responsibilities and are debt free. They are seen as people who have nothing more to aspire for but happiness and peace. Obosi people celebrate and honour them. They are automatically exempted from taxations or levies. The people organise a triennial festival called Ito-Ogbo Obosi in honour of those who turned 80 within the three-year gap (Udemba 2020:199). It is a 'traditional mass birthday party' of the age grade that has attained the grand age of 80 years. It is a thanksgiving to the Almighty Creator for keeping our mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and other relatives and friends alive for 80 gruelling years (Nwakobi 2009:12). According to Mr Nzube and Mr Ifeanyi (pers. comm.), the Ito-ogbo festival in Obosi is a unique one with a huge ceremony that calls for the homecoming of people from the world. In the authors' interview with Mr Ejiofor (pers. comm.) and Mr Mmadu (pers. comm.), they said that Ito-ogbo draws people from all parts of the world including Obosi people living abroad, irrespective of the economic conditions. For Mr Ejiofor (pers. comm.), the ceremony is always the most populous and most crowded when compared with Christmas, Easter, Iwa-ji (yam festival), Obiora festival and other ceremonies celebrated in Obosi. It was in appreciation of this fact that Nwakobi (2000:4) described it as a wonderful gift to the whole world. The people of Obosi see this festival as having its origin from biblical times. For instance, the book of Psalm 90:10 lends credence to the celebration of this ceremony in Obosi by saying 3 scores and 10, which means 70. An additional 10 makes it 4 scores which is significant to the people of Obosi. Festivals are a universal phenomenon found in every human race no matter how archaic or barbaric a society is. It is a truism that history knows no tribe or race without one form of the festival or the other in the world.

This study is mainly qualitative, although some oral interviews (13 informants) were conducted to further authenticate textual information (see Appendix 1). As a qualitative study, the authors relied on the documentary method of data collection, which involved the use of library materials such as textbooks, journal articles, periodicals, encyclopedias and Internet materials. Historical

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and phenomenological methods were adopted for analytical purposes. With the historical method, the researchers drew from what has been written concerning the activities of Ito-ogbo ceremony in Obosi. The phenomenological method helped the authors to examine the information collected from the interviewees from Obosi town without any form of bias or prejudice. This article examines the octogenarian cultural festival during the coronavirus pandemic in Obosi, Anambra State, Nigeria. Firstly, the history of octogenarians is narrated in Obosi. Secondly, the function of age grades is discussed. Thirdly, its relevance is analysed. Finally, a sketch of its celebration during the coronavirus pandemic is made.

Conceptual framework

For clarity and a better understanding of the topic under review, it will be pertinent to have the perception of the key terms in the title, namely 'Octogenarian, Festival and Ito-ogbo', before exploring the extensive area of the octogenarian festival in Obosi. This act of clarification of concept is what Ugwu (2009:519) refers to as clearing the definitional fogs in a work. Hornby (1995) defined an octogenarian as a person who is between 80 and 89 years old. But in this context octogenarian refers to people who are 80 years old. Hornby (1995) also saw a festival, like a day or period of the year when people stop work to celebrate a special event, often a religious one. Ejizu (1990:134) described it as 'any special occasion, observance or celebration, which may be religious or secular in nature and generally marked by merrymaking, the performance of music and the like'. Yet another definition was given by Quarcoopomem (1987:87) as an 'annual gathering at which the whole community meets to honour and give thanks to God, divinities and the ancestors'. Ibenwa (2012:343) related that it is a joyful occasion when people gather to express gratitude to their creator and his intermediaries for his love and care. It is a period when well-wishers, friends and family from far and near come together to make new acquaintances. It is seasonal and, in some instances, work-free and a period of rejoicing. People, especially priests, abstain from certain activities to ensure the holiness of the ceremony.

Preparation for Ito-ogbo festival in Obosi

Statistics have shown that humans all over the world celebrate life from birth to death. Therefore, fun and merrymaking have formed an integral part of human life. For example, the Moslems celebrate Id-el-Mauludt, a feast in remembrance of the birth of Mohammed, prophet and the founder of Islam; Id-el-Fitri, a Koranic recommended feast used in marking the end of the Ramadan fast and also a feast of thanksgiving to God for the successful completion of fasting and prayer; Id-el-Kabir, a 3-day feast for sacrifice at the end of the Hajj on the second day of Arafat; and, finally, Lailat at Quadi, the night of glory or power – it is the feast for the night of power in remembrance of the night when Mohammed started receiving the revelation from God (Eneh 2001:97). Christians celebrate Christmas: the birth of our

Lord Jesus Christ; Easter for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Lord's supper of Eucharistic meal, love feast; and Good Friday, the death of Jesus Christ.

Lastly, the adherents of African traditional religion celebrate Iwa-ji festival (breaking of yam), Nta festival (hunting festival) and Iwa-akwa festival (tying of cloth). Furthermore, from this research, it appears that Africans celebrate life very much, especially in countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Congo, South Africa, Cameroon and a few others. No wonder it did not take Modum in Madueme (1978:33) time to observe this in his interaction with the people when he said in his telling remarks that the first thing that strikes the ethnographers about African traditional societies is the sheer numerical importance of ritual festivals and ceremonies. Indeed, he continues, it has been said that the early Europeans who came to Africa were so struck by the number and frequency of such ceremonies that they thought that our people had nothing else to do. Modum (1978:33) concludes by saying that in African traditional societies, it is festivals and ritual ceremonies throughout Africa.

Corroborating this viewpoint, Bishop Crowther, the founding father of the Niger mission in the Eastern part of Nigeria said, 'when we first introduce the gospel to any people we should take advantage of any principles which they admit although the heathens in this part of Africa possesses no written legends, yet wherever we turn our eyes we find them in their animal sacrifices, a text which is the mainspring of Christian faith'. The author admits the fact that this sacrifice spoken about by Bishop Crowther is an integral part of most ceremonies and festivals in this part of the world.

At this juncture, the authors wish to note that Africans are not particular in publicly celebrating important events in their life. So Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004) were right to observe that:

The traditional Africans are not at all unique in publicly celebrating important episodes in their life experience. Other groups in different parts of the world both traditional and modern equally commemorate in their ways a whole variety of prominent events in their histories, [and] most countries of the world, for instance, mark their National Days annually with great fanfare and pomp. Nigeria celebrates her independence day every first October of every year. (p. 99)

For Christians and Muslims throughout the world, the festival of Christmas and Id-el-maulud are occasions for extraordinary celebrations and a joyful re-enactment of important religious facts of the historic birth of Jesus Christ and Holy Prophet Muhammad, respectively. Hence, Ito-ogbo festival is celebrated by Obosi people. The history of 'Ito-ogbo' in Obosi is linked with the activities of various age grades, both past and present. An age grade is formed when people born within a particular time frame (mostly a three-year interval) come together to form a bond with the approval of the Igwe. They thereafter choose a name to be known as. It is noteworthy that all members of an age grade are not necessarily born the same year, but as long as their birthday falls within the three years

TABLE 1: Age-grades in Obosi, Anambra State.

S/No.	Age grade	Dates
1.	Achobefuru	1882–1884
2.	Ochokolu	1885–1887
3.	Olimanna	1888–1890
4.	Ekwueme	1891–1893
5.	Arughalu Achicha/Ozueome	1894–1896
6.	Irude	1897–1899
7.	Odunma	1900–1902
8.	Ojiwelugo	1903–1905
9.	Edomani/Rubisi	1906–1908
10.	Anaga	1909–1911
11.	Ositadinma	1912–1914
12.	Agagboso	1915–1917
13.	Umuoyibo	1918–1920
14.	Umumma	1921–1923
15.	Eziokwubundu	1924–1925
16.	Ifeadigo	1925–1927
17.	Njikoka	1928–1930
18.	Udoka	1931–1933
19.	Asika	1934–1936
20.	Irugo	1937–1939
21.	Igwebuike	1940–1942
22.	Oforika	1943–1945
23.	Ayigadi	1945–1946
24.	Ogadinma	1947–1948
25.	Ofuonu	1949–1950
26.	Oganiru	1951–1952
27.	Ofuobi	1953–1954
28.	Ayibuofu	1955–1956
29.	Achunike	1957–1958
30.	Chiefogo	1959–1960
31.	Akachukwu	1961–1962
32.	Chikwado	1963–1964
33.	Nchekwube	1965–1966

Source: Ibenwa, C.N., 2012, 'Octogenarians and societal development: A case study of Ito-ogbo festival among the Obosi people in Idemili North of Anambra State', in S.N. Onuigbo & N. Ohia (eds.), *Ikenya International Journal of Institute of African Studies* 14(1&2), 342–344.

range, they belong to one age grade. Table 1 shows that there are 33 of them.

List of age grades in Obosi in their chronological order

Having grouped themselves into different age groups as approved by Igwe (His Royal Highness) and members of his cabinet, age grades engage themselves in some useful ventures by embarking on some developmental projects as enumerated by Nwora (2000:13). He said that age grades perform the following functions.

Functions of age grade in Obosi

Age grade is a strong and useful machinery for running the affairs of the town, viz., enforcement of rules and decisions passed by the town. Agbodike (2015:1) stated that generally speaking, the various age grades in Obosi engage in a healthy competition, which triggered off the rapid development of the town. For instance, the members competed among themselves in terms of marriage, title taking, the building of houses and attraction to their villages' useful innovations from the neighbouring towns.

It is a force to be reckoned with in general development programmes initiated by the town such as the provision of infrastructure in institutions of learning, playing a leading role in providing amusement and entertainment to the community by staging different types of traditional dances including the display of various forms of masquerades and attracting useful innovations from the neighbouring towns to their villages.

In recent times, the festival of Ito-ogbo has taken a more colourful dimension unlike in the past years. The festival is being celebrated every three years. One age grade celebrates its own in a particular year. In the next three years, it will be the turn of another age grade that attains the age of 80 years that year and so it continues. For instance, in 2009, the Ifeadigo age grade (*Ifeadigo* in Igbo means light has come) was made up of people born between 1927 and 1929 who celebrated the Ito-ogbo festival. When the festival started drawing near, a series of meetings were being organised both at the family and age grade level. An age grade committee is set up to work with the age grade concerned and the Igwe in council. Money is contributed by the age grade concerned. This is done on a village to village basis. Members of an age grade that live in different villages must contribute money. The money is used to buy a cow which is killed and celebrated. However, in contemporary times, the killing of cow is performed at the family level (Udo and Ifeanyi, pers. comm.). When all the necessary arrangements are made and concluded, the celebrants now wait for the fixed day, when the celebrants shall gather together with their friends and well-wishers in attendance to be honoured by Igwe Obosi and his cabinet members. The festival no doubt affords people ample opportunity to relax and make merry with relatives, friends and well-wishers and to make new acquaintances.

A critical discourse on Ito-ogbo celebration

According to Edekobi (1997:8), the festival of Ito-ogbo in Obosi dates back to 400 AD. The ceremony is usually celebrated for three consecutive days running from Friday to Sunday. Friday is seen as the eve of the festival, as some families organise cocktail parties for people. Saturday is the proper festival when the octogenarians prepare in their native wears and go to the field with their guests to be honoured before the members of the public. The ceremony is performed by the Igwe (the king) with the support of the cabinet members. It is pertinent to note at this juncture that a few centuries back, only men participated in the ceremony. It was seen as an exclusive domain of men but with the turn of events, women became involved (Anyaneto [pers. comm.] and Ifeanyi [pers. comm.]). These men dress in a very primitive manner. They dress in a loin cloth that passed through the waist and through the buttock over to the front side to shield the male private part. This can be said to be reminiscent of the present-day Iwa-akwa (tying of cloth that serves as shorts or knickers). Another loin was passed over

the shoulder right down across the chest to the left side dropping down to the waist.

It must be stressed here that the pattern of dressing described here is no longer fashionable today. People now dress in a more sophisticated manner as a result of western influence. On this day, all roads lead to Obosi, people troop out *en masse* from all nooks and crannies of Obosi and its surroundings and beyond to witness the much cherished Ito-ogbo Obosi festival. When the celebrants (the Ogbueshis) get to the field, they sit down on the chair arranged for them and people come to admire them and exchange pleasantries with them. In short, the atmosphere resounds with shouts of joy and ecstasy on the arrival of the Igwe and his men, the ceremony is declared open with opening prayers and this is followed by the breaking of kola-nuts and speeches from Eze Obosi and other eminent personalities who may wish to do so. Thereafter, the celebrants are crowned with red caps for the men and scarf for the women and certificates of honour are issued to them with the word 'congratulations.' After this ritual, the celebrants are identified and called or greeted with the name *ogbueshi tolu-ogbo* (for men) and *nwanyi nokwudo-eshi* (for women). As the Igwe performs the ceremony, people present there join in cheering them up and pouring encomiums on them. After honouring them with their red caps and red scarfs and the accompanying certificates the ogbueshi now go back to their various homes with their guests to entertain them, while the Igwe and members of his cabinet retire to Igwe's palace for their entertainment. At this point, people start going to the Igwe to pay him homage for the successful hosting of the year's Ito-ogbo festival.

The celebrants entertain their guests in their various homes. Usually, a live music band will be there and there will be eating and drinking. In the end, the ogbueshi could give souvenirs in the form of plastic containers or printed materials such as calendars, pocket diaries, umbrellas and bags, among others, to their guests. The guests also reciprocate by giving some presents to the celebrants in the form of money and other items. Some people in Obosi answer 'Ogbueshi' without attaining the age of 80 years and that explains the reason why the prefix 'tolu-ogbo' was added to the title *ogbueshi* to read *ogbueshi-tolu-ogbo*. Nwabunike, Enwezor and Onwudiegwu (pers. comm.) agreed that this is to distinguish it from those people who perform some traditional rites, thereafter kill the cow and start answering *ogbueshi* as a title without getting to the age of 80 years, which is a prerequisite for one to become *ogbueshi-toluogbo*.

On Sunday, which is the grand finale, in the evening, the *ogbueshis* are accompanied to the Eke market square by well-wishers where they go to receive final blessings from the traditional priest of the shrine. At the market square, the celebrants shoot guns, as they rejoice at coming to the peak of their celebration (Obinkpu, Okoye and Mozie, pers. comm.). The Christians on the same day go to the church to receive final blessings from the priest. According to Ejikeme (pers. comm.), this act brings the ceremony to an end.

Relevance of Ito-ogbo Obosi festival

As a truism, there are some inherent benefits derivable from being *ogbueshi tolu-ogbo*, which are as follows: the *ogbueshi*, by virtue of attaining the age of 80 years, is exempted from communal labour and taxes. These people are admired by the members of the public, who call them 'senior citizens'; even in retirement these people go to churches to offer thanksgiving to God in appreciation of what he has done for them. The government issues certificate of meritorious service to them. This fact was further echoed by Nwakobi (2000:6), when he declared that members of *umuoyibo* age grade are exempted from all communal levies, taxes and labour. At their exalted age, their positions are mainly ceremonial and advisory and as such held in high honour by all and sundry in the community. It was in observance of this fact that Onugha (2000:4) commented 'these people are revered as the community assets'.

Sincerely speaking, Ito-ogbo is a preview of one's funeral, in the sense that it affords the *ogbueshis* the opportunity to witness what their funeral ceremonies will look like when they die. It was in line with this that Ojiaku (1972:2) said that, 'Ito-ogbo is practically a preview of the beneficiaries' funeral; hence, it affords them an idea of how their well-wishers, friends, in-laws, nephews, nieces, etc. would attend their funeral ceremony'. No doubt, this ceremony had sparked a great desire in every Obosi person to see that the elderly ones among them are well taken care of by their children and relatives to ensure that he or she attains the age of 80 years to enable them to celebrate in their family too. Hence, the lives of the *ogbueshis* are being prolonged.

Celebration of Ito-ogbo amid COVID-19

According to history, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) began on 22 November 2019 in the Republic of China. Since its discovery, the virus has been spreading at an alarming rate, resulting in extraordinary numbers of deaths in China, Italy, America, Spain, Germany, France, Russia and Japan to name a few (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control [NCDC] 2020). It affects mostly the elderly. Now it is in over 200 countries of the world. COVID-19 arrived in Nigeria on 27 February 2020 via an Italian who arrived from a country where the virus had already spread. Lagos was the first to detect it. Lagos eventually became the epicentre of the virus, followed by Abuja, the federal capital, Osun, Kano and other cities. It is worrisome that even in the midst of deaths some citizens in Nigeria still doubt the reality of COVID-19. COVID-19 was declared a public health pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020, and since then it has been playing a leading role in how best to prevent and contain the dreaded disease. People should therefore celebrate the Ito-ogbo festival cautiously and ensure that they strictly adhere to all the guidelines and protocols as set out by the WHO and the NCDC. Some COVID-19 safety guidelines and protocols include:

1. Maintain a high level of personal hygiene, wash your hands regularly with running water, use alcohol-based sanitiser to rub your hands on both sides in the absence of water and cover your mouth and nose with a mask. Avoid touching your nose, eyes and mouth. Where the mask is not available, use your handkerchief, and wash it as soon as you come home. Press with a hot iron before reuse.
2. In addition, cover your mouth and nose with your elbow while sneezing, coughing or yawning, or use a tissue if available and dispose it into a dustbin immediately after use.
3. Furthermore, maintain a social and physical distance of at least two metres. This will help to mitigate the spread of the virus.
4. Avoid touching high-contact surfaces such as door handles, stair rails, tables, etc. as you go about (NCDC 2020).

Recommendations

After a critical discourse on Ito-ogbo festival in Obosi, the following suggestions to individuals and the governments emerged.

In this era of COVID-19, Obosi people should cut down costs and the number of invitations, but still ensure that their much cherished traditional ceremony is sustained. The government at all levels should promote and organise a cultural festival at intervals such as that of the Calabar State Cultural Carnival that comes up once every year and the Festival of Black Arts and Culture of 1977 to save our much cherished cultural values.

As is the case with Christian and Islamic ceremonies, the government should adopt the primary, secondary and tertiary education curricula as soon as possible to include the teaching and learning of African traditional religion and culture. Lastly, it should be ensured that traditional festivals are given national recognition just like Christian and Islamic festivals and ceremonies.

Conclusion

From the discussion in this article, it is clear that the Ito-ogbo festival of Obosi is a good one and has become a symbol of homecoming for all and sundry. It has improved the care given to aged parents, making them live longer. But the authors contend that the Ito-ogbo festival coming up in March 2023 should be conducted so that the people involved will not be disadvantaged. However, as there is no curative drug yet, it should be celebrated with utmost caution to avoid the spread of COVID-19. As a result, at the end of the celebration the celebrants, their relatives, friends and well-wishers will go home healthy and safe.

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C.N.I. and F.U. contributed equally to the writing of this article.

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Disclaimer

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Appendix starts on the next page →

APPENDIX 1: Details of interviewees.

S/No.	Name	Occupation	Age	Gender	Town	Date of interview
1.	Anyaneto Man Alone	Businessman	Adult	Male	Obosi	20/12/2019
2.	Ibenwa J. Mmadu	Businessman	Adult	Male	Obosi	22/12/2019
3.	Ejiofor Mike	Businessman	Adult	Male	Obosi	15/07/2020
4.	Enwezor Christian (Mbedebe)	Businessman	Adult	Male	Obosi	26/12/2019
5.	Enwezor Ifeanyi (Akunne) Ugonabu	Civil servant	Adult	Male	Obosi	28/12/20019
6.	Ejikeme Sunday. C	Civil servant	Adult	Male	Obosi	23/09/2020
7.	Ibenwa Ifeanyi (Omeoga)	Business man	Adult	Male	Obosi	14/05/2020
8.	Obinkpu Uche	Businessman	Adult	Male	Obosi	23/12/2019
9.	Ibenwa Nzube	Businessman	Adult	Male	Obosi	18/12/2019
10.	Okoye T.O.	Businessman	Adult	Male	Obosi	26/12/2019
11.	Udo Onwudiegwu (Diokpa Ire)	Civil servant	Adult	Male	Obosi	26/12/2019
12.	Nwabunike Stephen (Ugonabu)	Contractor	Adult	Male	Obosi	20/12/2019
13.	Mozie Godswill Ifeanyi	Civil servant	Adult	Male	Obosi	21/09/2020