

## **HARNESSING AWKA TRADITIONAL FESTIVAL FOR TOURISM PROMOTION**

**Ezenagu Ngozi**

Department of Tourism and Events Management  
Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti

**Olatunji Tabitha**

Department of Tourism and Events Management  
Afe Babalola University Ado-Ekiti

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**ABSTRACT:** *Awka traditional festivals embrace diverse cultural activities which together portrays the glamour of the community indigenous way of life. These festivals are the anvil on which cultural unity is forged as its celebrations acts as a unifying force which binds the people together. Festivals are momentary occasions for merriment seasoned with a purpose attached to different aspects of a community life. It is a period of rest from strenuous daily activities affording the people quality leisure time to consume all the entertaining cultural aesthetics of the event. Of a truth, Awka traditional festival with its associated cultural display has been a platform that sustained cultural uniformity amongst Awka people and its neighbour through ages. This paper in its descriptive nature endeavours to investigate the potential of harnessing the cultural aesthetics of Awka traditional festival (Imoka) for promote tourism.*

**KEYWORDS:** Traditional Festival, Cultural Aesthetics, Tourism, Culture

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Culture as way of life, is a distinctive body of beliefs and traditional institutions which distinguishes a society. It provides resources both material and non-material that constitutes tourism attractions. These tourist resources are interwoven with a community's tradition giving it a glowing present and a promising future. Within a community's tradition lies its beliefs, norms, values and their general ways of life all of which reflect their cultural existence. A manifestation of this is reflected inside many festivals that are part and parcel of the African people. Festivals are an integral part of the cycle of life of a traditional African man or woman. From conception to birth and finally death, there is a strong inclination towards festivals which is a traditional institution. These traditional institutions are common to all human societies. Virtually in all African communities festivities constitute a benchmark for marking various stages tantamount to befitting life. It is one of the ways through which man expresses his awareness of transcendental beings outside himself. Masquerade festivals are pertinent among African tribes especially the south eastern part of Nigeria. They are usually used to display cultural values and aesthetics. The masquerades are very fundamental to traditional African society. In some places, they are believed to be the dead ancestors and messengers of traditional deities from the supernatural world. They are entertaining characters of ancient African communities likened to the comedians and clown of this modern age.

Analytically, festivals are the manifestation of culture in any traditional society. They are entertaining events which offers opportunities for celebrating and learning age long traditions. It makes a people a homogeneous community and provides an avenue by which the people can be identified. They represent an invaluable and priceless heritage by which the image of the people can be reflected. Knowing the place of culture in the life of man, one wonders at the pace by which most of the cherished African cultural values like reverence for traditional institutions to which festival belong is fast diminishing. It is not surprising that despite the value of the African traditional institution (festival) in preserving, promoting and showcasing the glamour of the traditional African life before the coming of the Europeans yet it is not given the publicity commensurate to its worth.

Today, African tradition is held with contempt especially festivities because of its associated root in African traditional religion. In view of the tie between festivities and traditional religion derogatory words such as 'fetish' is used in describing such traditional events. Given the damages inflicted on African festivities calls for cultural revival, reincarnation of traditional art and revolution of our cultural festival.

This desired cultural revival would be successful depending on the value we attach to such cultural activities and its associated objects. Festival are symbolic base on which the unity of community rests. Therefore, throughout the history of human culture certain days or periods of time have been set aside to commemorate and ritually celebrate events and seasons which consolidate community solidarity. Thus, Awka people regard festivities as special periods that are sacred and ritualized. It is a time for man to identify and reunite himself with his gods, community and ancestors.

Hence, understanding the spirit of festivities in Awka, its relevance, its theatrical concert, its condiments and its programming creates a learning atmosphere through cultural display which depicts the history of socio-religious activities of the community. As festivals are events that go beyond dancing and singing, they are emblems of peace and unity. The main thrust of this work is to showcase the cultural aesthetics of Awka traditional festival (Imoka) and how it can be harnessed to promote tourism. The data for writing this work were retrieved using ethnographic research method. Specifically the author employed the use of participant observation and oral interview. All the information elicited via participant observation, interviews and other written works were adequately analyzed qualitatively to identify the cultural aesthetics of Imoka festival and how it can be harnessed for tourism promotion.

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Traditional institutions (festivals) are often the embodiment of knowledge through which these cultures are expressed. It should be recall that, centuries of old traditions of the people of Africa and the diversity of the distinct ethnic groups have created a rich culture that has become a lasting legacy of contemporary Africa (Kuada, 1999). This legacy is its indispensable heritage which gives community its sense of identity and to visitors' access to information, experience and activities emanating from it which can help them (visitor) feel attached to a place. These festivals are communal celebrations involving carefully planned programmes outpourings of respect, rejoicing or high revelry established by customs (Nold, 1998). African life is hedged with customs which invariables makes festival, a manifestation

of these customs an essential part of the African world view. Its importance cannot be over emphasised; in this vein, Nsofor and Maduakor (1979) gave an overview of festivals in Igboland in the following words:

*“Festivals in Igbo society are...periods set apart by communities or groups of individuals for commemorating important events which may be connected with homage to God, gods, ancestors and spirit or they may be connected with the transition from one season to the other...in almost all case, festivals are part of these commemorative events and rituals overtones can be detected in majority of these festivals”*

From Nsofor and Maduakor’s view it is crystal clear that festivities in Igboland entail more than eating and drinking. It also involves moments of sober reflection on man’s spiritual life. In this vein Onyeneke (1987) noted that:

*“Every Igbo community whether at the village group, village or major lineage level occasionally observes festivals. They are public celebration of events considered important and of high value by community. Events that invite public celebrations may be those of life crises of individual birth, puberty, marriages, title taking....death, celebration ,marking the farm cycles of planting and harvesting and the veneration of local deities, personal ‘chi’ (gods as personal spirit) and the community ancestors”*

Looking at Onyeneke opinion nearly all events celebrated in Igbo community has a festive under tone. Thus it is a vivid indication of the numerous natures of Igbo festivals, which filled their life with relaxation an entertainment. This to an outsider is a life of idleness as Modum (1978) observed that:

*“One of the things that first strike the ethnographer about African traditional societies is the sheer numerical importance of ritual festivals and ceremonies. Indeed, it has been said that the earliest Europeans who came to Africa were struck by the number and frequency of such ceremonies that they thought our people had nothing else to do. The truth is that every human society has its peculiar norms which not only characterize it but which determines the life of its members. In traditional African societies this role is played by festivals and ritual ceremonies”*

One would agree with Modum that festival is indeed an indispensable event in African community. It comprises series of cultural events such as ritual, music and dancing, masquerading etc. In view of the ritual importance of festivals Busia in Opoku (1970) writes

*“Ritual surrounds important seasonal community activities as well as the critical periods of an individual’s life. Planting, harvesting and fishing, birth, puberty, marriage- these are occasions for the community or kin group to come together, to join in song and dance*

*or in ritual to give expression to the sense of dependence on the ancestors or on other supernatural powers”*

Equally, Biobaku (1973) from his study of Yoruba community stressed that “No major achievement in the life of an individual, a group or a community is considered possible without the active support of the supernatural. Ritual in such a community becomes a constant factor of life”.

Furthermore, festivities in Awka traditional community go beyond the religious ritual to physical entertainment. In this vein, Ogbalu (1973) observed that “the last days is dominated by display of masquerade, dances and presentation of citizens in the squares...celebration is a form of eating and drinking”. Festive merriment helps in relaxation yet if care is not taken during such moments traditional norms might be broken as a result of excesses. Amakulor (1973) buttressed the ills attached to excessive eating and drinking during festivals in the following words “festivals are marked with such excesses and transgression as drunkenness and exuberant sexual trait or license”. Therefore, apart from eating and drinking, traditional festival as celebrated in Awka encourages relaxation and entertainment through music and dancing. On this Basden (1960) writes “festival is nothing but a f ete with dancing, music, feasting and general manifestation of pleasure and enjoyment with congratulations for the years past and good wishes for the year ahead”. He further stated that music, dance and song to the community are an instrument for creating social emotional and aesthetic solidarity.

Modum in Ogbu (1978) clearly stated that African festivals are characterised by music and dances. He writes “dancing is performed by men and women or in some cases by both sexes depending on the festival and society”. He concluded using Egun-gun, Ekurole, Obatala, Ogun, Oranyan and Ifa festivals of the people of Ede in Old Oyo quoting Beier that the characteristic feature of these festival include:

*“A marked desire to associate by means of dances, musical performances, prayer, incantations and sacrifices with the persons of the god and the spirits of the ancestors and with life of the community. There is a strong belief that in so doing, the community ensures the continuity of its existence through the process of periodical regeneration.”*

Despite, the idleness as a result of the relaxation which accompanies festivities it enhances community life as Mbiti (1970) outlined in the following benefit:

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

Turaki (2001: 149) supported the above in the following words “it serves as a social control mechanism in society by establishing patterns of loyalty and prescribing parameters of acceptable conduct integrating people into the religious system. The frame work of socio-cultural customs and meeting the socio-psychological needs of man”. This implies that festival meets the diverse needs of man in society be it social, religious and cultural.

Analysing the above literature one would agree with me that festival is one of the key factors that has helped in cementing community life in traditional African community especially Awka town. On this note Nwuneli (1987) using the mmonwu festival of Anambra state brought to light the objectives and salient achievement of the festival in the following words “it was an attempt to link those who have often drifted from rural to the urban areas for many years without seeking their root...the mmonwu festival has succeeded in reviving our cultural heritage, boosted tourism and was a great significance to the national pride”.

### **Awka indigenous festivities**

In ancient Awka community every month has a feast attached to it except for the fourth month. This month according to Awka feast calendar is counted as the lost month. Awka people lay so much emphasis on season because it guides and directs their cultural activities. Therefore, Okafor (1992) opined that “Oka year had variable months because of the need to follow the seasons for farming, hence “ngu aro” system arose the “counting of the year” meaning arranging the calendar for the coming year”. Below is a brief rundown of all the feasts observed in Awka in sequential order.

<b>Awka Calendar</b>	<b>Feast</b>	<b>Month</b>
Onwa nvu (nbu)	Egwu Imoka	May
Onwa Ibo	Onwa Ukwu	June
Onwa Ito	Obubu Amanwulu	July
Onwa Ino	Onwa fulu manful/Onwa Evuru m	August
Onwa Ise	Chi	September
Onwa Ishii	Alo	October
Onwa Asaa	Otite	November
Onwa Asato	Mgbuireji/ owuwaji	December
Onwa Teghete	Ede ozo/ Ede Onwa sel Ukwu	January
Onwa Illi	Onwa Egwu-ovbuvbe (ofufe)	February
Diokpala Onwa Illi	Agbala-Imoka	March
Onwa Ogugu aro	Ede-mmou	April

All the feast above were duly observed by Awka people in the past but presently many have faded away due to non-observance of the feast. The festivals that did not fade experienced changes with adaptation such as owuwaji otherwise known as new yam festival. Another is the Otite feast which experienced some changes yet it is known today as Awka end-of-the year celebration but Imoka festival remained the only feast celebrated by all Awka indigene. However, in this work only Imoka festival would be elaborately discussed being the festival that is jointly celebrated by Awka people.

### **Imoka festival**

This is the first feast observed in traditional Awka calendar. It ushers in the beginning of a New Year and planting season. Imoka feast is the most colourful and famous festival collectively celebrated in Awka. It is a medium through which the community pay homage to the Imoka god beseeching him for a prosperous new planting season.

Imoka feast originated from the worship of Imoka deity which is the greatest male god revered in Awka. It is communally worshipped and its origin could be traced down to ancient times during the time when Awka people were continuously menaced by their neighbours. Among their oppressors is a terrifying king Okoli ijeoma of Ndikelionwu who planned to invade Awka. At the hint of this impending invasion, the elders of the Land sent some delegates to Akoto near Idoma, a land known to be inhabited by potent herbal doctors to invite one, who would prepare a charm that would fortify their warriors. The elders returned with a renowned herbal doctor by name Okoyeke who prepared a charm to prevent the invasion of the land peradventure war becomes imminent that the charm would notify them. He cautioned that for the charm to be effective it must be venerated by the community. This lead to the worship of the CHARM-god which the people called Imoka (the Avenger god of Awka people). Also a feast called Egwu-Imoka (The dance of the gods) was initiated to commensurate the worship. The feast was scheduled to hold annually at the beginning of the planting season which is the month of May according to Awka lunar calendar. An altar was built for the god at Amachalla village Awka close to the Nkwo market both the market and the forest close to it were dedicated to the god.

However, after so many years of peaceful living Awka people had a dispute with their neighbour Nwafia over a piece of land. Unknown to them Nwafia people laid siege to attack the people but unfortunately the forest they encamped was that which was dedicated to Imoka god. So the god sent his emissaries the monkeys living in the forest to notify the people. Seeing monkeys roaming the village square were strange so a diviner was immediately consulted who exposed the invasion plan of Nwafia people. The sacred drum Ikolo was mournfully sounded to assemble warriors ready for war. The unsuspected attack launched by Awka people against the Nwafia people brought them victory. Hence, Imoka emissaries monkey were also dedicated making them totem. Thus it became a taboo with severe consequences for Awka people to either kill or eat the meat of monkey till date.

### **Procedure of Imoka festival**

Egwu Imoka (Imoka feast) is celebrated in the fifth (5<sup>th</sup>) week of Awka lunar month (izu onwa nese). It lasts for one native week apart from the first day. The feast commence on Avbo (afor) day. On the evening of Oye market day preceding the feast, the trumpet (Opu-eke) was blown, the abia drum beaten and Ikolo Imoka sounded to marshal in Egwu Imoka. During the ancient times once the Opu-eke sounds all forms of work must stop, if not so it is believed

that Imoka god punished those who defied his sacred week by setting fire on their houses. As people retire to their various homes passing through the path leading to Imoka shrine stops to shower praises on it saying “Okporimili- the dark blue sea”, “Omuta onezue anya- the god that looks after his children”.

However, a week before the general announcement of Imoka feast was made at the Nkwo market square. Immediately the Imoka moon has been sighted, masquerades are sent to inform the natives of Umuokpu village Awka which is the only Awka village outside the community boundary of the on-coming Imoka feast one native week away. Therefore, after the announcement, the music makers retire to the shrine of Imoka eating and drinking and would stay there till the end of the festival.

At the early hours of avbo (afor) day, the Opu-eke were sounded again to fill the air with festive mood. On hearing the sound, young adult boys come out of their various home cleaning the village square by sweeping. While the sound of pounding fills the still air of the dawn. The food for the feast is pounded yam and avbulu (bitter-leaf) soup. The animal used for the would be killed during this early hours of dawn so as to welcome the presence of the gods. The offal including the intestine are thrown beside the shrine for the gods, which would be eaten by the vulture. Their presence in places of sacrifices invariably signifies the gods' acceptance or rejection of the offering. What this implies is that if the vulture comes to eat the offal from the sacrifice especially during feast which was usually thrown beside the shrine of the gods to whom the sacrifice was made, it means that the offering has been accepted but if they did not come or did not eat the offal this means that the sacrifice was rejected. In view of this Okafor (1992) writes “if a sacrifice was made and the animals were killed and the vulture did not appear the officiating priest would beat a gong (a resonant bell shaped metal) and call out uko! Uko! Meaning messenger, messenger and vulture would appear. There was a saying in Awka that “agbafa aja ma shi afuro udene, ife meli be mmou - when there is a sacrifice and no vulture appears something wrong must have happened in the land of the gods”. With the influence of modernity men today eat the offal which was solely meat for the gods.

Henceforth, after eating all marched down to Imoka shrine to pay homage to the god. The chief priest on his part during the early hours of the day enters the shrine brings out the emblem of Imoka god dressed with masquerade attire and place it out the shrine. Then he proceeds to make incantation calling on the god to bless the day.

Adherents go to the shrine to present their gifts of yam, local gin white chalk (nzu) and money. Men use the chalk to draw a symbol of sonship on the ground known as “ima odo”. On receiving the gifts the chief priest- Eze Imoka prays to the god to bless his children. The chief priest during this special occasion dresses in white cloth wearing coral bead on his neck and a war cap (okpu-nwawali). He also dabbed both eyelids with white chalk (nzu). Previously, during the past the chief priest would receive the yam from men and slice off a little of its bottom using it to touch the man's forehead, left and right breast and then pass it over his head before placing the yam in front of the Imoka altar. The male adherent in return pours out his heart desire to Imoka and takes his leave using the white chalk to dab his eyelid. On the other hand women dab their breast and feet white the white chalk (nzu). The above procedures for receiving blessing from Imoka shrine has gone with modernity. Today people only present their gifts and leave the shrine.

The Day's celebration comes to an end after all the offerings had been received, the chief priest- Eze Imoka uses an iron gong (ogene) to shower praises on Imoka god. After this, the shrine apprentice takes up the mobile altar of the god down to the opu-eke square for the dance of the gods. The movable altar is for making sacrifices to the god represented with an iron emblem of Imoka grafted on a long wood rapped round with white cloth and a red piece of cloth tied round the iron emblem of the god. Others at the village square join in the dance of the gods after which the shrine apprentice takes the movable altar back to the shrine still held high in the air and put down only at the shrine. This signifies the end of the day's celebration.

The early hours of this day is meant for the women folk alone marching to the shrine been led by Eze Nwanyi holding the white chalk (nzu) in her hand. Also its a day of masquerades' entertainment as various kinds of masquerade parade this day to honour the women. It is usually in this day that great masquerade like Ijele, Ajo anu, Enyi Nnunu etc comes out. However, the masquerades are meant to converge at the square with the abia drum used to beat out special rhythm of the masquerade dance. But, presently masquerade just parade the streets dancing and running about thrashing one another with sticks. The law of flogging one another with sticks (anachu) requires the one being beaten to retaliate to avoid unnecessary trouble. The major sound heard at the dancing square is the swish of whips. It is a test of endurance of pain. This activity lasts into the night when everybody retires to their abode.

The third day being Eke people moved from village to village eating and drinking while the masquerades run about causing excitement everywhere. All this continues till nightfall after which everybody including the masquerades and dancing groups retire to their homes.

This is a day of relaxation. Elders held various meetings and consultation, settling problems and family affairs. Also masquerade move from house with their followers being entertained with pounded yam and avbulu (bitter leaf) soup. In addition on this day most people and families cook to entertain friends while to most young men it is a forum to welcome age long friends.

However, as known in the past, event of this fourth day is the initiation of young boys into masquerade cult in their father's obu (family hall). Coconut is used for the entertainment and it would be provided for by the mother of the household.

This is the last day of the feast. The same eating and drinking continues till dawn. After lunch people would congregate at the Nkwo market place close to Imoka sacred groove for theatrical display. This could be in form of mock trial, making a case against one another causing lots of laughter to the audience. On this note the festivals end with laughter. Nevertheless, today the festival ends with an orator amusing the people with memorable stories of Awka past hero's.

### **The cultural aesthetics in the Imoka festival**

Imoka festival is a traditional event which thrills its spectators with the following aesthetics:

#### **Mock battle**

In the olden days, the Opu-eke was being danced, this dance took the form of a mock battle called (nro-nta). The essence of this battle was to test one's strength and endurance of pain.

During the battle all would be dressed in battle dresses holding machetes and clave (mgbolo) including the ekpeke (shield) were used for defence. Since it was a mock battle everybody was expected to cut their opponents body slightly and not brutally. In reality no one cuts to kill although blood could flow. This form of battle is basically for the male folk though the female folk could watch. The mock battle had been part of Imoka festival for ages but was banned after Udenabo in Amachalla village Awka was killed in one of those encounters. Henceforth fighting with machetes was replaced with sticks (añachu). Today the mock battle no longer requires battle attire with the ban on machete. Young men dress in simply clothes and flog themselves with sticks until opponent surrenders.

### **Theatrical display**

The theatrical display of Imoka festival is dramatised by the eldest woman in Ifite Awka and the masquerades. On the second day of Imoka feast being Nkwo early in the morning at the sound of the opu-eke, the eldest woman in Ifite Awka would go to the Nkwo market alone carrying her wares in her basket. At the market she would sweep her portion and display her ware as if there was a real market going on. After displaying her ware, she would stand facing the shrine and shower praises on Imoka. Then after half an hour, she repacks her wares in her basket and goes home. This meant that the market had been for the god which signifies that the market never closes.

Also on the final day of the feast masquerade congregate at the Nkwo market square close to Imoka sacred grove for theatrical. They entertain and amuse spectators with different kinds of drama.

### **Dance**

Dance is physical aspect of the festival, in which both the performer and the people are involved. It is a physical participation in the celebration as people dance to the rhythm of the music. Imoka festival is also known as the dance of the gods. It is a feast dominated with dance of various kinds. The eve of the festival when the Opu-eke trumpet sounds all the masquerades converges at the Nkwo market square close to the shrine. There the masquerades display different dance steps in accordance with the rhythm beaten out with the abia drum along with other musical instrument including the opu-eke. After which these masquerades continue with the dance entertainment in a procession to Umuokpo (an Awka village situated outside the boundaries of the community) to announce the date for the feast.

The women folk are left out of the dance of the gods this they do on the early hours of the second day of the feast. In the early hours of this day the women folk alone marching dance to the shrine in a procession led by Eze Nwanyi with a young woman singing praises of Imoka god.

### **Costumes**

Costumes make the festival colourful. The celebration of Imoka is apparent in the array of colours. The Imoka chief priest and Eze Nwanyi (priestess) usually dress in white dabbing their body and eye lids with (nzu) a form of white chalk. Titled men also appear in their traditional attire. Likewise the different dance group also come in their unique attire. While any youth participating in the event must dab their face and body with nzu (white chalk) this proves their sonship as a son of the soil. All the different display of attires by the different

group and their different colours add to the beauty of the festival. The unique impact of these attires is to show different groups with different performance in the festival.

### **Initiation into the masquerade cult**

The initiation rite of passage into the masquerade cult in Awka takes place on the fourth day of Imoka feast. It requires diverse test which the initiate undergoes. The significance is to enable the initiate to keep the secrets of the masquerade society. During one of the tests he would be shown a strand from a spider's cobweb and he would be told to take hold of it and climb it. Definitely this is an impossible task.

As the test continues, he would be given a handful of raw bitter leaves to chew while chewing he would be asked to laugh at the same time. The appearance that this act leaves on the face of the initiate as he munches bitter leaf at the same time laughing is quite comical and it amuses the spectators.

The last test is usually the most tempting of all. He would be asked to identify a masquerade. If he truthfully names the man behind the mask, the spectators would scream as the masquerade slumps down in a mock death unknown to the initiate. The spectators would accuse the boy of killing a masquerade. The shock of the act is meant to send the boy to his early grave. He would stand in the mist of the crowd helpless looking confused. The boy would be ordered to carry up the dead masquerade because he revealed the man behind the mask while he would be trying to lift the giant masquerade the crowd would sing for him, singing with his name that he has killed a masquerade. Hence, seeing that the boy has suffered enough, the masquerade would get up, to the initiate greatest shock and relief. Through this act boy has been taught a lesson never to say that humans carry masquerade instead masquerade are spirits.

At last, the boy would be initiated. This qualifies him to carry his own stick (anachu) and accompany masquerade during their parade.

### **Masquerade display**

Imoka festival in its entirety entails the display of various kinds and ranges of masquerades known in Awka. It is these masquerades who are accorded some sort of spiritual status that actually dance to the rhythm of the dance of the gods. The sense of spirituality attached to the social institution has helped it to maintain its secrecy that masquerades are spirits and not men. The function of the various masquerades on parade during the Imoka feast is purely entertainment. They honour the women folk by displaying the most fearful and powerful masquerades such as Ajo-anu, Ijele, Enyi Nnunu etc on the second of the feast meant for the women. Other masquerades come out in colourful robes accompanied by young men with sticks, traditional dancers and music with masks of different types depicting local tradition and beliefs.

### **Festivities as a source of community life in Awka**

Festivals play a crucial role in the lives of the Africans. To analyse the importance of festival in community life in Awka one needs to take into account the cultural, religious and social factors. Awka traditional festivities are of immense importance to the solidarity of community life in the community. It is one of the greatest medium through which all come together to achieve one purpose unity. These festivities are so much respected by Awka neighbours because during such occasions charms could be used but none is meant to kill.

Unlike her neighbours were people cease such an opportunity to harm or eliminate their enemies. In Awka it is an abomination with death penalty for any to be accused of murder during festivities using poison (nshi). The value of festivities would be examined in all ramifications of Awka life from their religious, social to political life respectively.

On the religious perspective traditional festivities embedded in traditional religion is a means through which the entire community congregates to worship and commune with both gods and man. During the worship, they communally thank the gods for past year and present the new planting season for it to bless. Also through the medium people's faith are strengthened and covenant renewed; while the festival meal constitutes an opportunity for resolving friendship odds between people. However, through festivities political sphere is nurtured. Most political titles in Awka are taken during these festivals. Thus, those coronated are enthroned under the supervision of the gods. With this they are expected to be upright in their decision-making. In essence being crowned in the presence of the entire community makes them to pledge allegiance to the community never to substitute wrong for right once it occurs such a person would be publicly uncrowned. This was the reason why titled men of traditional Awka community indeed are men of honour unlike titled men of today. On the other hand it is also during festivals that community and family affairs are debated and resolved with good judgement. In effect festivals serve as reunion of family members, relatives and loved ones. Also at this time quarrels and misunderstanding are settled.

Furthermore, traditional festivals were supposedly celebrated to preserve and maintain tradition through songs, drumming, dancing and art (Dubnick, 2003). It is through the festivals that cultural bonds are strengthened. During festivities our youth and younger generation learn a lot about the customs of our people. Indeed festivities are a medium of cultural manifestation and norms. The rich cultural heritage of the people is usually being manifested during festivals. Through such display people are exposed to the culture and history of their community. During festivals the youth are taught respect for elders, traditions and the land. Also friendship is renewed during this period with the mass return of people for the festival, Awka people believe that "Ote aka afulu, afuhari ozo"- after a long time of absence we will meet again. More importantly marriages are contracted and consummated during festivities in Awka.

Therefore, in as much as festivities strengthen community life it also consolidates family ties. Weeks before the feast, children are most eager to obey their parents, so not to be denied their new cloths. Likewise parents express their love towards their ward by showering them with gifts.

In addition, festivities as a source of community life promote the health of the people through leisure. The compulsory stop of work during festivities gives the people some moment of rest from farm work and other tedious work for them to refresh before going back to work. Indirectly, it creates opportunity for individual carvers to carve paraphernalia some of which would be needed for the feast especially the "title stool" for title taking and mask for the masquerade. Also it affords skilled women in weaving and pottery making the opportunity to make their wares which would be displayed for their visitors to admire. Hitherto, traditional festivities of Awka have enhanced our community life. Little wonder a youth filled with excitement said "our fathers traditions will not end in my generation, I must pass it on to my children".

### **Traditional festival a via path for tourism promotion**

Traditional Festivals act as a hook to attract tourists. In other words it is a great anchor for attracting tourism. Thus, exploring the role of festival as a via path for tourism promotion in Awka cannot be over emphasised. This can be envisaged by analysing its impact in various areas of life. Notably is its influence in the economic wellbeing of the community. Traditional festival attracts visitors to a destination who spends money within the community, enhancing the local economy and supporting the local economy through restaurants, hotels, and other tourism selected businesses. The high inflow of tourist and day visitors into the community during such occasions contributes immensely to economic empowerment of people through the injection of tourist expenditure into the community. Tourist expenditure is felt in the community from the boarding of taxi to lounging in hotels to visiting tourist sites.

Tourism is an industry that relies heavily on the environment both physical and social. In other words tourism activities cannot do without the environment. It aids the development of the physical environment by attracting the expansion infrastructural facility in the community. Though it does deface the community with pollution and dirt if not adequately managed yet its ability to protect the flora and fauna adds glamour to the community. Thus it is not surprising that traditional festivals provides the stimulus for additional infrastructural development in the local area which will go a long way in promoting tourism

In addition, tourism is instrumental to preserving local culture and tradition of the community. During cultural festivals tourists/visitors have a unique chance to interact with the local community, thereby gaining a deeper experience of the ambience, customs and local cultures. This enhances the resident's pride and promotes the preservation and cultivation of the local culture. Through this medium visitors get acquainted with the local traditions and customs thereby leading to its preservation. In this vein festivals act as a medium through which a destination's image can be improved by offering prime opportunity for tourists/visitors to get to know the local culture and experience the essence of the place.

### **CONCLUSION**

Traditional festivals are cultural entertainment through which a community showcases its diverse cultural endowment to visitors. Awka community is enriched with colourful festivities celebrated to honour the gods, consolidate social ties and maintain culture. Behind each of the festivals celebrated lie a legend/myth of events put together or constitutes the history and traditions of Awka community. The Imoka festival otherwise known as the dance of the gods is a masquerade festival which affords Awka the opportunity to show case its numerous cultural activities. The resilient nature of Imoka festival rooted in the legendry of unity in Awka community has sustained this cultural event not going into extinction as against other traditional festivals whose relevance have been overtaken by modernisation. The cultural aesthetics of this unique festival if properly identified, packaged and marketed would go a long way in promoting tourism in Nigeria.

More importantly Imoka traditional festival has been a platform for enhancing bond in the community through ages. This festival has served as a medium for cultural contact whereby

the younger generations are initiated into various traditional rites and cults so as to preserve the traditions of the land.

Conclusively, the use of traditional festival today as an instrument for consolidating community ties is imperative for tourism development. It involves harnessing cultural aesthetics of the events, reviving and repackaging traditional festivals as tourism events.

### **Recommendation**

The celebration of Imoka festival is a call for communion between men and gods. It marks time and season of mass return of sons, daughters and visitors of Awka community to celebrate and preserve the traditions of the land. A festival of such magnitude with its cultural aesthetics can be harnessed promoting tourism and community ties in the following ways:

1. The community leaders especially the Eze Uzu (Awka traditional ruler) should ensure that the festival is celebrated in a peaceful conducive atmosphere. This is because of the importance of tourist safety to the tourism industry by curtailing or cutting off violence from the festival.
2. Equally, the government can help by reviving and reviewing the festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) which is one of the sure means of advertising and promoting the key concept of traditional festivities.
3. Also the government should incorporate the celebration of traditional festivals in to the development policies of the country. By setting aside a special budget aside to support the planning and celebration of traditional festivals.
4. Instructions of learning should include traditional festivals in its curriculum as a sure way of preserving the traditions, history and culture of Nigeria. This is because traditional festivals serves the purpose of promoting and understanding cultural history in contemporary times and serves as educational needs for students.
5. Cultural related institutions like the various ministries of Arts and Culture and Tourism should identify, package and market Nigeria traditional festivals across the country.

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