

## **5. Social Cohesion through Festivals in Nigeria and the Traditional Performance Space of Biase New Yam Festival of CRS.**

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### **Abstract**

Festivals are common to all human societies, and they vary according to the ecology and the social structure of the people. Nigeria as a country is endowed with lots of cultural activities and festivals, sourced from its multi-cultural communities. These festivals, be it secular, cultural or religious play essential role in any found community. This paper on Social Cohesion through Festivals in Nigeria looks at the Biase New Yam Festival of Cross River State, as a platform for fostering unity, peaceful co-existence and also an opportunity to develop and share culture, showcase values, identity and pride of a people. It analyses the different events that make up the festival, with its contribution to national development. The paper examines the historical trends as manifestations of the people's culture and assesses its traditional performance space. Many festivals remain undocumented and unexplored in many parts of the country as a theatrical performance, making them loose out in the rich repertoire of drama, dance and music. Moreover, understanding the importance of festival in promoting social cohesion can lead to the development of more effective strategies for preserving cultural heritage and promoting communal harmony. Historical and survey research methods was adopted for the study. It also involved participatory observation of festivals, interviews, documentary analysis, and presentation of pictures. By contributing to knowledge, the paper presents vivid account of the New Yam festival as an occasion that gathers visitors not just from the host community, local government areas and Cross River State at large, but also tourists from different states in Nigeria and beyond, while it contributes to the development of culture. The festival is celebrated due to historical legend, as dictated by men for thanksgiving to the gods for a successful planting and bountiful harvest.

**Keywords:** Social Cohesion, Festival, Culture, Traditional Performance Space

**Introduction**

Festivals are common to all human societies, and they vary according to the ecology and the social structure of the people. As mostly said, Africans are well known in the world for their rich cultural heritage as expressed in numerous performances, through festivals, traditional ceremonies and cultural displays. Culture in a simple term is defined as the ways of life of people with a set of distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual, social, economic and political identity. According to Elizabeth Henshaw, culture may be defined as “a realm of consciousness, and mind as the totality of consciousness of the individual, the man” (79). Haralambus and Holborn assert that “culture is the whole way of life found in a particular society”, which can be distinguished from society to society although with a close connection between nations. Culture connects individuals and society to each other in language, norms, beliefs, arts, lifestyles, and ways of living together, value system, traditions and so on. Culture cuts across boundaries due to historical relations between groups like trade, inter-tribal marriages and so on. From Wathiongo, “Culture is a way of life fashioned by a people in their collective endeavor to live and come to terms with their total environment, it is the sum of their art, their science and all their beliefs and rituals” (4).

Nigeria is one of the largest and geographically, socially and culturally most diversified African country. In its diversity the Nigerian culture is reflected in over 250 identified ethnic groups, with three large ethno-linguistic entities which are the Yoruba, the Ibo, and the Hausa Fulani (Ekaette Edem, 81). Ekaette recognised that Nigerian culture is being shaped by the multiple ethnic groups of about 1150 dialectics and over 521 languages. The identity of a nation most times lies in the culture and festival they celebrate. Olakunle Ojo asserts that; “a festival is an event usually and ordinarily staged by a community, which centers on and celebrates some unique events and aspect of the community” (16). Festivals tell the past of the people, assist in easy understanding of the present and a projection into their future as an oral literature. Festivals represent the sociological yearnings of the people, social moral, historical and religious deeds. The entertainment derived from festivals satisfies basic aesthetic qualities that insinuate them to indigenous folks, dance, music and many more as everyone looks forward to the performance.

According to Eric Ayisi; “festival combines economic and religious activities, for they are observed with material things” (68) and Okwori adds that “festivals in most traditional and contemporary societies are often religious, ritualistic and ceremonial” (8). From Nsofor;

Festival is a period set apart by communities  
or group of individuals for commemorating  
important events in the life of community or

an individual. These important events may be connected with homage to the God, gods, ancestors or spirits, or may be concerned with the transition from one season to the other” (6).

The Africans have been kept alive for centuries through indigenous festival performances, which are peculiar to the person that celebrates it. And the life of a community is always renewed during festivals which also serve as a means of reunion between the old and the young, friends and family members. It is celebrated with cultural values, feasting, jubilation, entertainment, exchange of gifts, drinking and merrymaking with beautiful traditional attire and make-up. It associates with dances, musical performances, incantations, prayers and sacrifices to the gods and the spirits of the ancestors. Ekaette Edem asserts that “Cultural life in Nigeria is extremely marked by tradition and traditional forms of events like festivals, ceremonies, exhibitions, performance, music and dance, arts and crafts, carnivals and so on” (83). This paper on Social Cohesion through Festivals in Nigeria looks at the Biase New Yam Festival of Cross River State, as a platform for fostering unity, peaceful co-existence and an opportunity to share culture, showcase values, identity and pride of a people. It seeks to reveal the relevance of festival as a tool for social cohesion and analyze the different events that make up the Biase New yam Festival of Abini Community of Cross River State. It will show the extent to which the festival has shaped the identity and lives of the people in the community, and the rich cultural values found in the festival.

### **A brief about Cross River State**

Cross River State is located in the South-South region of Nigeria and created on May 27, 1967 by General Yakubu Gowon (Official website of Cross River State). The present Cross River State covers the total landmark of 20.156 square kilometers. It shares a common heritage with Akwa Ibom State which borders it to the south, and to the north by Benue State, west by Ebony and Abia States and to the east by The Republic of Cameroon. Located in the Southern Region of Nigeria, Cross River State takes its name from the River Onyono, which flows through its major towns of Akamkpa, Biase, Calabar Municipality, Calabar South, Ikom, Obubra, Odukpani, Ogoja, Ugep, Obanliku, and Akapabuyo. The state's rich cultural heritage and diverse landscape have made it a popular destination for visitors from around the world. According to Chika Udeh, “there are over thirty tribes, each with its unique cultural values, traditions and language” (15). which are the Efik, Ejagham, Ekoi, Bekwarra, Yakuur, Boki, Agbo, Bahumono, Mbube, Mbembe, Ogoja and so on, and the first three being classified as the major tribes in the state. Efik is the largest among the three and found in the southern part of the state. According to the National Bureau of

Statistics in Nigeria, Cross River State has a population of over 3.89 million people as at population check between 2006 and 2016.

The state is mostly surrounded by water. The people are industrious and hard-working and are also endowed with natural resources such as palm oil, cassava, plantain, banana, cocoa, rubber, cocoyam, pineapple and lots more which contribute immensely to boosting the economy of the state. Their major occupations are farming, fishing and hunting, and are related to the Ibibio and Oron tribes of Akwa Ibom State. From my mother, Margaret-Mary Ekpo, who has spent most of her times in the state mentioned that “their major delicacies are *Edikan Ekong*, *Ekpankukwo*, *Ayan Eakpang* and *Efere Afang*. The serene environment gives way for tourism development in the state, like the most yearly-celebrated Calabar Carnival, which takes place every December, and other traditional festivals like the New Yam festival, Calabar Boat Regatta festival, Cultural Dance Festivals and many more. The people are bound together with similar cultural activities in areas of traditional cuisines, rituals, mode of dressing, myths, belief system, music and songs. They speak and understand Efik language generally.

### **The Abini, Biase Adim (New Yam Festival) of Cross River State**

In Cross River State, there are several yearly celebrations and festivals across every section of the state. One of the most celebrated is the Biase New Yam Festival. Due to the fertility of the soil and the good yield every year and every season, the people of Biase and its environs are encouraged in making agriculture their source of livelihood. They are known for their hard work most especially in farming. They specialize in cultivating such crops as yam, cocoyam, cocoa, banana, cashew, castor, citrus, coffee, grape, groundnut, plantain, tea, wheat, and pineapple. Yam in Biase is the most celebrated of all the cash crops produced in the area. Some brave young men breed honey and tap the oil produced by them.

Right from history, as narrated by my parents, Ime Ekpo and Margaret-Mary Ekpo, the people of Akamkpa and Biase Local Government Areas in the southern part of Cross River State keep aside two special days in the months of August and September every year to celebrate the New Yam festival. The same celebration is also performed in several other Local Government Areas of the State aside from Biase. They include Leboku, Obudu, Boki, and Yala. The celebration is almost valued as Christian's Christmas Feast, which is considered as a very important event by the indigenes of the community both within and outside the state and even the regular visiting tourists. The members of the community must not eat the yams harvested in the year until the yam is celebrated and most families make sacrifices of cooked yam to their *erod* (gods) before they sit at that particular spot to eat the yam. This brings about reunion in the community annually and is always a much-awaited festival that boosts tourism development of the state. As narrated by Chief. Cyril

Eyong Enang, there are three villages or communities in Abini, which are Edodono, Emomoro and Afffia. Each of these villages has some huts built for compound meetings and relaxation or in case of sun or rain. These huts are being run and managed by each of the compounds as it is being called by the members of the community. In Edodono, there are three compounds which are: Evangi Thangha, Emorundo and Bonuoke, four in Emomoro which are: Okparuchi, Mirigang, Bogowan and Akotimichi, and four in Afffia which are: Ukporyim, Omortan, Echaokwe and Ugom Ethuk Iwun (the last meaning- original festival compound). See plates 1 to 8 being the compounds the researcher visited.



**Plate 1:** Evangi Thangha in Edodono, in Abini, Biase L.G.A. Ekaette's Personal Collection.



**Plate 2:** Bonuoke in Edodono, Biase L.G.A. Ekaette's Personal Collection.



**Plate 3:** Emorundo in Edodono, Biase L.G.A. Ekaette's Personal Collection.



**Plate 4:** Emorundo in Edodono. Ekaette's Personal Collection.



**Plate 5:** Bonuoke in Edodono. Ekaette's Personal Collection.



**Plate 6:** Akotimichiin Emomoro. Ekaette's Personal Collection.



**Plate 7:** - Mirigangin Emomoro. Ekaette's Personal Collection.





**Plate 8:** Okparuchiin Emomoro and the Village Centre (Square).  
Ekaette's Personal Collection.

For the celebration of the *Abini Adim* (New Yam Festival), a day is chosen according to how convenient it will be by the elders and then announced to the community immediately when the yam is due for harvest. The festival takes place in September. According to Chief Cyril, the date of the celebration is always announced on the fourth market day and by this time; no one is expected to eat of his or her yam which is a taboo in the community not until after the festival. The superior chief will have to harvest and eat the yam first before any member of the community. If caught committing the crime, the culprit will have to pay fine of a He-Goat, Tubers of Yam, Dry Gin, Big Drinks and a Gag of Palm Wine. The festival is always slated for two days with different colourful performances.

On the first day, the maidens from the community will dance *oben ethok iwun* dance (meaning Dance of the New Yam Festival) round the entire community. The first day is mostly for young maidens. Before the festival proper, young maidens are expected to attain rehearsals for a period of time to be allowed to participate in the celebration so as not to “dance left” on that day as it is being said by members of the group. From their explanation, to “dance left” means to dance differently from others. That is to say that one's dance pattern varies in movement from every other member of the group. The rehearsals for the Biase New Yam Festival are led by the most experienced and knowledgeable women, typically senior citizens who have been a part of the festival's traditional dance performances during their youth. These women pass on their knowledge and expertise to the younger generations, by ensuring that the festival's cultural heritage and traditions are preserved for future generations. These women will take the younger maidens on the rudiments of dance as far as the festival is concern, in which they are mainly responsible for that. They are also expected to be members of the maiden dance group till death as coaches.

According to Mrs. Justina Enang Oke, the rehearsal spans through about two weeks before the festival proper. At this time, Maidens from all works of life who live within and outside the community will come together to grace the moment. The venue of the rehearsals also differs, depending on the woman who takes them on the dance routine for

that year. Different older women also volunteer to train the maidens yearly in their compounds. The rehearsal commences in the evening after their return from daily activities, be it school, work, business or farm. They mostly meet at about 6:30 o'clock in the evenings to whatever time they can run for the day.

On the first day of the festival, the maidens move house to house on their traditional attires to perform for other members of the community without drums or any musical instrument. Before the procession, the maidens will first of all meet at their rehearsal venue to get into costumes, makeup and also arrange for their parade at a particular time agreed by them. They will from there move to every Chief's/Elder's house in the community, performing for them, while they will in turn be given gift items like money, drinks, powder or whatever each of them could afford in their houses. At the end of the parade, the maidens will also gather again at the rehearsal venue/compound to dismiss from there.

On the second day of the festival, the hunters also prepare themselves in the forest alongside some masquerades. Preparing these masquerades, some hunters are positioned at different strategic points in the bush to monitor movements in other to check for any non-initiate. These hunters carry their hunting tools on their shoulders, which include *Ojan-abu* (Locally Fabricated Guns) and *Undi* (Sack Bags) and will then march on a single file around the community with the masquerades beginning from 6:30 to 7 o'clock in the morning. They march with two or three village instrumentalists some of who are hunters themselves, hitting the *Oti* (Wooden Gong), *Abhin* (Drum) and also blowing *Uva* (Cow Horn) in a rhythmic form to the movement of the leg. They do this to announce to the community the commencement of the festival. At the end of their rounds, they move to *Anwa Obio* (Village Square) where a live *Uron Igwugwa* (Cock) is tied up at the top of a long bamboo stick. As the filled to the *Anwa Obio* (Village Square), they shoot at the cock one after the other according to their walking position and their arrival. The hunter who shuts down the bamboo from the middle will be announced the best shooter/hunter of the year and will be given the cock as a take home gift for his family. All the hunters at the end of this session will move to a particular compound dismiss for the next session. See Plates 9 to 11 below.



**Plate 9:** The Hunters Rounds in the Community, Approaching the Village Square with Instrument Accompaniment. Ekaette's Personal Collection.





**Plate 10:** The Hunters Displaying their Hunting Skills. Ekaette's Personal Collection.



**Plate 11:** The Hunters Taking Turns to Display their Talents as they match to the Village Square. 2019. Ekaette's Personal Collection.

Ekaette Edem mentioned that “in today's theatre performance, special wrappers with stripped patterns are worn on ceremonial occasions by traditional chiefs and dancers, alongside masquerades of different kinds with elaborate patchwork ... which varies in complexity and style (95). At about 10 o'clock on the same day, some advanced male and the youths of the community will dress on their traditional *Ekor* (Wrapper or Waist Cloth) with varieties of *Ugbute Enun* (Chiefs Cap) mostly red, with *Erani Ukoh* (Eagles Feather) pinned to the cap. They also use red *EyeinUchok* (Neck Bead), white singlet or native sown shirt, white *Endu* or *Ndom* (Powder or Clay), some holding *Oninigha* (Horse Tail) or *Ugwut Enun* (Staff or Hand Stick), while some energetic youths tie *Ekpebock* (Sheep Hair) on their upper hands. These male dancers' dance round the entire community, together with some male children and kids, well dressed as the elderly ones (see Plates 12 below), singing the *Obin Ethok Iwun* (Songs of the New Yam Festival) while displaying *oben ethokiwun* dance (Dance of the New Yam Festival), without drums. As the parade goes on, the number keeps increasing as from the take-off point, since most of the male dancers and children join the parade as they get to their house. The parade ends joyously in one of the compounds as decided by them, dancing, singing, drinking, then shuts of local gun in the air and then departure.



**Plate 12:** The Male Children and Youths on Parade Round the Community. Ekaette's personal collection.

At about 1 o'clock in the afternoon on that same day, the *Enun Ethok Iwun* (Chiefs of the New Yam Festival), also known as the traditional rulers, assembles in one of the compounds for a brief talk before taking a walk to the village square on their traditional wrappers of the same colour. Complimenting traditional wrappers is a neck towel, locally made walking stick, a cap and beads. They move with an aid that walks side by side to protect their boss, carrying locally made guns and machete, while some carry gift items to be presented to the winners at the Village square during the festival. Not missing out in this are their children who also dressed as the elderly ones. This is with the say, catch them young. The title chiefs (*Enun*) move on a single file from *Ugom Ethuk Iwun* which is the original New Yam Festival Compound round to the other compounds in the community and then to the *Anwa Obio* (Village Square) with their aids walking side by side. The first chief who leads the parade carries a bunch of *Iragirat Enun* (Broom of the New Yam Festival), swinging it left and right in the air to clear the path and to also send away evil spirit. According to Chief Enang, the broom protects them from any external force that will hinder the success of the Festival. See Plates 13 to 17 below.



**Plate 13:** The Traditional Chiefs Meeting for the Festival. Ekaette's Personal Collection.



**Plate 14:** The Traditional Chiefs Meeting before the Festival. Ekaette's Personal Collection.



**Plate 15:** Traditional Chiefs taking a walk round the Community with the first man carrying broom, and their aids by the side. Ekaette's Personal Collection.



**Plate 16:** All Traditional Chiefs with Locally made Walking Sticks. Ekaette's Personal Collection.



**Plate 17:** Male Children taking their walk behind their Father's. Ekaette's Personal Collection.

Waiting at the village square are visitors, women and other members of the community who don't like taking part in the festival but play as audience members. On the chief's arrival at the village square, they will one after the other shake an enclosed traditional hut, constructed at the center of the village square using palm fronds. This is carried out to announce their arrival to the gods as tradition demands before taking their seats. The Master of Ceremony, who is also a member of the community as appointed as the community spokes-person, is always on stand-by to welcome and announce the name of the chiefs as they arrive one after the other to take their seat. See Plates 18 to 20.



**Plate 18:** Traditional Chiefs shaking the enclosed Hut on arrival at the Village Square. Ekaette's Personal Collection.



**Plate 19:** Some Traditional Chiefs waiting to be called by the MC. Ekaette's Personal Collection.



**Plate 20:** Seating arrangement of the Chiefs at the Village Square. Ekaette's Personal Collection.

The *Okò-Atakuchi* which is a Traditional Hut is designed for the invisible drummers believed not to be seen till the end of the festival (see Plate 19 below). They are in charge of drumming all through the festival, signifying that the people dance to the rhythm of the gods whom they can hear and feel, but cannot see. These drummers get into the hut at the beginning of the festival but stays in there till dusk so that the people will not see their faces, as they participate actively in the festival. See Plates 21 and 22 below.



**Plate 21:** The invisible Drummers inside the Hut. Ekaette's Personal Collection.

The first set of performers at the festival are three male dancers representing the three communities in the village; The Edono, Emomoro and Afffia communities as they will first of all dance to the hut and shake it one after the other before making their display (see Plates 22 below). At this moment, the rhythm from the sound produced from the hut will automatically change to fit the energetic moves of the warrior dancers. This in turn will immediately announce the arrival of the beautiful maidens.



**Plate 22:** Male Dancers on display. Ekaette's Personal Collection.

After the dancer display by the male dancers, the female dancers too will file in to do their own thing the way they know it best. The younger maidens in a unified pattern and body movement will dance along with them, to show how beautiful, young and succulent they are, displaying all sorts of stylized actions. Since it is a demonstrative dance displays, the maidens make use of mostly their upper body (breast), faces to create eye contacts with ever smiling teeth's, hands and waist. Their leg rings (*Iru*) in rhythmic form produces the same sound as they move to the drums played by the invisible drummers. They also dance in uniform as they move from point to point round the village square to a particular music as was rehearsed earlier before the festival. Only the maidens who took part during the rehearsals can as well perform on the festival day, since they are expected to dance to a particular tune, pattern, movement and form. See Plate 23 and 24 below.





Plate 23: Maidens Dancing to the village square. Ekaette's Personal Collection.



Plate 24: Younger Maidens following behind to the Village Square. Ekaette's Personal Collection.

The New Yam Festival do last for about three (3) to four (4) hours and after which gift items like books, umbrella and cash prizes will be given to the following people by the chiefs representative;

1. The first female to wear the bangle in the community before the festival day.
2. The best danced maiden.
3. Most beautiful maiden.
4. The best performer of the year.
5. The biggest yam harvester of the year, and many more.

The Festival ensemble comprises of the following traditional instruments; *Ntakorok* (Wood Block), *Obodom* (Wooden Slit Drum), *Iborok Ekomo* (Hourglass Drum), *Ekat Ibit* (Side Drum), *Atang-Utang Ibit* (Talking Drum), *Nkong* (Gong) and *Nsak Ubok* (Hand Rattle). There are some entertainers who are well known for their dexterity during the performance of the New Yam Festival, named *Ano Ibrenge* (Charcoal People). They are made up of energetic youths, whose duties are to keep guard of the community until the festival is over and to scare the maidens who did not appear on traditional attire, away from the square, since they believe that the festival is diabolic. These Charcoal People, on the day of the festival prepare themselves in the forest in their grove as early as possible and then parade the entire community. They go bare body, although painted black with *Ibrenge* (Charcoal) and uses *Undi* (Brown Beans Bag) as skirt or tie as wrapper. While on parade, they put fresh palm fronds in their mouth and according to tradition, no man is expected to cross their path. They walk bare foot, with knife and woods stock in their skirts and also go round threatening the villagers (See plate 25 and 26 below). At the end of the entire ceremony, the community members take their visitors and invited guest back home to entertain them with cooked yam before departure from the community. On this day, one is free to stop by any hut to merry with them.





**Plate 25:** The *Ano Ibrenge* (Charcoal People) parading to the Village Square. Ekaette's Personal Collection.



**Plate 26:** The *Ano Ibrenge* (Charcoal People) maintaining order at the Village Square. Ekaette's Personal Collection.

## Conclusion

The Biase New Yam festival is a big occasion that gathers visitors not just from the host community, local government area and Cross River State at large, but also tourists from different states in Nigeria and beyond, while it contributes to the development of culture. It brings about Unity in diversity, which is the coming together of people from different ethnic groups and tribes as at the time of the festival. It is an opportunity that creates links with other parts of the state either by road network, air or through the river. The Biase New Yam festival is celebrated due to historical legend, as dictated by men for thanksgiving to the gods for a successful planting and bountiful harvest. During this time, sacrifices, libation, prayers and thanksgiving are offered to the gods and the deities before the festival to renew and strengthen the bonds of unity between the living and the deities. The festival brings people together as a group and family, and strengthens their unity and cohesion.

In Abini, Biase Local government area, there are many other festivals celebrated in the community apart from the New Yam Festival. Each of which is quite important and last for a considerable time. These festivals are celebrated annually to maintain the relationship between groups and the link between man and the ancestors. These festivals are ritualistic and religious in nature. It is a period where sacrifices are offered to the gods by individual, families, groups and the entire community in form of thanksgiving for the plenty of harvest. The timing for the festival is determined by the cycle of the season or the events.

Generally, cultural festivals aid the promotion of national unity and stability by encouraging mutual coexistence and relationship among the people. It has unique social

and unifying tools that bring people together. It reinforces common values, shared bonds and common taboos for the younger generations to learn from. It also reduces political crisis and misunderstanding between the people, bringing about national stability. A festival encourages sampling of the land's traditional rhythms (Ekaette Edem 95), promotes tourism, traditional handicraft, unity in diversity of the peoples and an occasion for veneration. It brings people together; engender feelings of joy, unity, harmony and peace and also a means to keep in touch with the roots and remind the people of their traditions and customs.

From Obiechina, festival is an event of coming together periodically to express their sense of communion through those things which have given them their feeling of unity, those things which not only defined their unique relatedness, but also distinguishes them from all other people. Therefore, there is need to encourage and promote festivals at the national, state and local levels in the country for generations to come. It encompasses moral, historical, economic and political importance in the society and also serves to meet specific social and cultural needs of the people. This helps to foster a sense of cultural identity and pride among Nigerians, which can lead to stronger connection to their heritage and a greater sense of unity among the people. "Festivals present the uniqueness of one's culture and it is one of the fastest growing forms of tourism in the country. It encourages the discovery of new arts forms, cultural interaction, promotes cultural and creative industries, cultural diversity, strengthen local values and tradition and enrich cultural experiences" (Ekaette Edem 95). The Biase New Yam Festival is one of the very few local festivals that have not been influenced by Christianity.

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