

# Historical Significance of Oka Day Cultural Festival in Ondo State, Nigeria

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## Abstract

This paper examines an important theme of rural festival in postcolonial African societies. The focus is Oka Day Festival in Oka, Ondo State, Nigeria. The Oka Day Festival is a revered cultural event with strong traditional ties. This study explores the various aspects of the Oka Day Festival, including its historical importance, cultural symbolism, socio-economic effects, and current relevance. Based on the historical analysis of oral interviews and the extant literature, this paper concludes that the event acts as a stimulus for communal solidarity and historical progression of the Oka people.

*Keywords: Oka Day Festival, Yoruba Culture, Community Cohesion, Cultural Preservation, Economic Implications, Modernization, Globalization.*

## Introduction

Cultural festivals have a crucial role in societies. It promotes social harmony and safeguards cultural traditions (Rossetti and Quinn, 2021). The term festival is inherently linked to culture and specific locations. Festivals serves to establish a sense of identity for both individuals and their communities. Falassi (1987: 82) provides a definition of a festival as a time of celebration, whether it is considered holy or profane, that is distinguished by unique customs and practices. Festivals honours and upholds communal values, ideas, identity, and continuity. As observed by Getz (2005: 21), festivals are public celebrations with a specific topic. Indeed, festivals are cultural events that exist in all African societies (Onipede, 2017, p. 82).

African festivals have their roots in tradition and history. Festivals offer communities the chance to come together, commemorate their shared identity, and preserve the practices of their ancestors. Oka Land festival is a significant manifestation of traditional festivals. In order to understand the fundamental nature of the Oka Day Festival, it is imperative to get a comprehensive understanding of the historical circumstance surrounding Oka Land festival.

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Oka is a suburban town and currently the administrative headquarters of Akoko South West Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria. It is primarily inhabited by people of Yoruba descent. The composition consists of five distinct sections, namely: Oke Oka (the largest section), Iwaro Oka, Ayegunle Oka, Simerin Oka, and Uba Oka (Obata and Aigbokhan, 2012;). Oka immediate neighbours are Ikun, Oba, Ugbe, Upe, Epinmi and Akungba (Olukoju, 1993). Oka Akoko serves as a prominent hub for agricultural trade, specializing in the cultivation and distribution of cassava, cocoa, palm oil, and kola nuts (Omoriwo, Personal Communication, February 12, 2024). The Oka Day Festival is an esteemed yearly event that is firmly ingrained in the collective consciousness of the people of Oka Land. It features elaborate ceremonies, lively performances, and passionate displays of cultural heritage (Balogun, Personal Communication, February 12, 2024). The festival is deeply rooted in the historical narrative of the Oka people and represents a strong respect for ancestral legacies and spiritual connectivity. At the core of its activities are ancient traditions, such as ritual dances, musical displays, extravagant banquets, and symbolic rituals marking important transitions. This paper examines the significance of this festival as a channel for passing down cultural and indigenous knowledge which helps in the retention of communal memory. The study utilizes historical method of enquiry and ethnographic survey in addition to oral interviews with community stakeholders.

### **Origin of Oka Day Festival**

On assumption of the throne of his ancestors on 16th April 1988, Oba Adebori Adeleye was confronted with economic challenges like many his contemporaries at this time in Yorubaland especially due to the excruciating effects of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). The new King having lived in Lagos for many years saw the need to create a channel for bringing various resources to this less developed town. Thus, the Oka Day event originated within this context. From the king's point of view, the Oka Day celebration serves two purposes, to raise funds for community development and to promote unity under his new leadership.

The first Oka Day event took place in 1990 in Oka's town hall, but it was not officially referred to as 'Oka Day.' The main purpose of this event was clearly stated on the programme cover: 'Oka-Akoko 10 Million fundraiser for Oba's palace.' Prior to the coronation of Oba Adeleye, there was serious dispute between the Olubaka of Ibaka and Asin of Oka-odo over the maintenance of the Olubaka's palace which has been neglected for a long period of time. (Xiao and Ogunode, 2021, p. 795) Hence, Oba Adeleye saw the building of a new palace as equivalent to the revival of Olubaka's status. This building project lasted over many decades, with cash being accumulated gradually throughout the course of the project. The festival officially commenced in 1994 at the instance of His Royal Majesty, Oba Adebori Adeleye, following the efforts of the Oka National Association Clubs (ONAC). The king's proclamation endorsed the date and calendar that had been used by the Agba community, a constituent community within Oka Akoko to celebrate their festival for many years. The New Yam Festival was scheduled to take place on the first Saturday of August, immediately after the conclusion of the masquerade festival on the second-to-last Saturday of July (Afolabi, Personal Communication, February 17, 2024)

In 1999, there was a change in the way people spoke about celebrating Oka festival, instead they focused more on issues that bothers on the progress and development of Oka (Xiao and

Ogunode, 2021, p. 795) The modern version of Oka Day includes a range of events that last for a week, thus leading to huge turnout of tourists and cultural enthusiasts which add tremendous colour and vibrancy to the ceremony usually laced with diverse types of cultural entertainment (Barrister Abubakar, Personal Communication, March 24, 2024) These activities include football matches between different schools and communities within Oka, free medical services, and religious ceremonies held within the precinct of different deities and in churches and mosques (Prince Sakara, Personal Communication, March 24, 2024).

### **Oka Day Festival as a Channel for Social-Cultural Solidarity**

It is paramount to establish in this study that there were other festivals in place before the unanimous agreement by the indigene of the town to come together to celebrate a festival that is internationally accepted like Oka Day Festival. These festivals include: Hunters festival, Masquerades festival, Dancing Festival and Deity festival to mention but a few. These festivals are still celebrated annually like Oka Day but at different times in different communities. One of the benefits of these festivals is that it formed the basis for consideration of a better date and period for an ultimate acceptable Oka Day festival. As observed by Afolabi

The festival's great acceptability may also be attributed to the novelty of a communal gathering that brings together the whole community for the first time. Previously, many communities independently organised their own traditional festivals, mostly showcasing masquerades and shrine ceremonies, and followed their own specific calendars. The event, as envisioned by its first advocates, the Agba community, was designed to symbolize the culmination of the traditional festival cycle. This issue was also considered during its acceptance by the whole town. The Agba traditional calendar reaches its climax in the third week of July, with the New Yam Festival (Ijeunton) taking place fourteen days later (Afolabi, Personal Communication, February 17, 2024).

The Oka Day Festival is a significant festival that is closely connected to the rich cultural heritage of Oka Land. The origin and evolution of the Oka people's cultural identity and legacy preservation may be traced back to their ancient historical tales and ancestral customs. The Oka Day Festival naturally developed and transformed in response to the ever-changing dynamics of society. The festival successfully adjusted to the changing socio-cultural environment by skillfully incorporating modern values and societal conventions, while also maintaining its core traditions and symbols with the inclusion of educational activities like quiz and essay competitions to football competitions, medical outreaches, symposium and different talks that promote diversity and peaceful co-existence as a people. Oka Day festival acts as a lasting anchor of cultural coherence and shared recollection despite the ever-changing passage of time (Omoriwo, Personal Communication, February 12, 2024) An informant observed that:

The Oka Day Festival has evolved from being exclusively observed by indigenous residents of Oka to become a highly anticipated festival attended by prominent individuals including industrial magnates, politicians, the Ondo State Government, and even international visitors. Lately, the festival has attracted global recognition, with European visitors chronicling its activities and television stations devoting coverage to the occasion. Education plays a crucial role in driving this growth. A significant number of persons from the Oka community have sought educational possibilities outside of Nigeria, which has resulted in a strong admiration for their

cultural heritage. As a result, they have invited friends and associates to participate in the festival's celebrations. Moreover, technological improvements have been crucial in enhancing the festival's reach and influence (Alonge, Personal Communication, February 12, 2024).

Thus, the festival demonstrates the durability and flexibility of Oka culture, as it navigated over the course of history. The event blends the past and present of Oka people. Throughout its development, the festival has consistently upheld the cultural traditions of the Oka people thereby preserving ethnic identity and community unity.

It is imperative to know that Oka Day Festival is characterized by a multitude of celebrations and ceremonies that hold great cultural importance. These ceremonies invoke the spirits of ancestors and communicate with gods like Ibisa and Ojominrin.. They embody a deep respect for our forefathers and tradition. (Ajayi, Personal Communication, February 16, 2024). On yearly basis the festival continues to be colourful with new initiatives and the granting of chieftaincy titles such as Bobagunwa, Akogun, Bobatolu, Bobajiroro, Atunluse amongst others. The rites are complex and detailed, frequently showcasing customary dances, rhythmic drumming, and compelling masquerade acts that serve as vivid manifestations of collective identification and cultural pride of the people (Daodu, Personal Communication, February 12, 2024) An informant rightly observed that:

This yearly event has surpassed its initial purpose as a simple celebration of yams and a one-day event. It has transformed into a comprehensive week-long programme that includes a variety of activities. These activities are scheduled from the end of the masquerade festival until the first Saturday of August, which is when the event takes place. This festival serves as a means of raising funds for the development of Oka. It also acknowledges individuals who have made significant contributions to the town's progress. Additionally, it provides scholarships to students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The festival showcases the community's cultural talents and bestows honorary and traditional chieftaincy titles on deserving individuals who have been approved. It includes cultural exhibitions and a ceremonial parade to add to the event's magnificence and entertain distinguished guests. Primarily, it functions as a platform for open discussion and cooperative brainstorming sessions with the goal of visualizing strategies to promote a more prosperous and safe environment for all community members (Ajayi, Personal Communication, February 16, 2024).

These artistic exhibitions not only exhibit the abundant cultural legacy of the Oka community but also function as powerful reminders of the collective voyage and shared encounters that unite individuals bringing developments like increase in number of hotels such as JOMABOT, ROTOWA, REUPHIL hotels and suites. This hotels spring up as a result of complains by attendees who complain of inadequate place to pass the night after the ceremony (Abubakar, Personal Communication, February 19, 2024). The Oka Day Festival also acts as an opportunity to pay tribute to notable personalities from the community. A Nigerian newspaper's weekend magazine depicts the Oka Day celebrations in detail:

It was a beehive of activities as one drove around Oka Akoko town observing preparations of the community in anticipation of their new yam festival just a few hours away. Saloons were busy as women, ladies and girls besieged them making a variety of hairstyles. It was the same way tailoring shops were full as clients impatiently waited to pick their outfits as some of them exchanged words with the tailors who responded while at the same time trying to avoid being pricked by the

needles of their manual sewing machines. The atmosphere was fun-filled, yet busy as last minute shoppers flocked the town's main market which had begun the day before, 'aggressively' displaying tubers of yams strategically in their stalls or tables as if beckoning on prospective buyers. Groups of young girls dressed in costumes with their heads adorned in coral crowns. As the rain beat against roof tops and gave the mud houses new colour hues, occupants didn't consider it a hindrance as members of the community along with guests flocked to the palace of the Oba to get there first so that they could witness who came in what car and attire (*Daily Trust*, 2018).

Although the description contains obvious literary aesthetics, it is clear that the community really values the festival. Furthermore, the celebration is distinguished by community feasting and the exchange of traditional delicacies, which operate as essential elements in promoting a sense of togetherness and collective involvement among festival attendees and the host. Communal dining goes beyond simply providing nourishment, as it is a symbolic expression of shared abundance and common sustenance. By engaging in the act of sharing food, people establish connections based on unity and reciprocal assistance, so confirming their interdependence and collective membership within the community (Omoyeni, Personal Communication, February 19, 2024). According to Bolarinwa Balogun:

The Oka festival doubles as the new yam celebration. It is a moment that almost all the households in the land will pound yam, and welcome visitors, families and friends to eat. At such moments, gifts of different types are shared, to appreciate one another. Equally, different age groups use the opportunity to hold their meetings and celebrate the festival among their members. In the evening of the festival day, there is open air, as well as closed-door musical performances to entertain the residents, visitors and guests, to commemorate the festival (Balogun, Personal Communication, February 12, 2024).

The Oka Day Festival is a lively event that showcases various cultural expressions and brings the community together in celebration. Through rituals, performances, and shared meals, the festival strengthens the links of heritage and solidarity that are integral to the Oka community (Abubakar, Personal Communication, February 19, 2024).

In the same vein, the Oka Day Festival plays a crucial role in developing social connections and facilitating meaningful interactions among the residents of Oka. Consequently promoting a strong feeling of community cohesion (Akerele, Personal Communication, February 19, 2024). During the festival, people from many backgrounds come together to participate in shared experiences of celebration, historical reflection, and communal respect (Osun, 2017, p. 112). These relationships surpass societal divisions. It promotes a deep sense of belonging and inclusiveness that goes beyond social obstacles (Adeniyi, 2016, p. 35). Additionally, the event acts as a priceless avenue for strengthening intergenerational bonds, as respected seniors pass on ancient wisdom and cultural knowledge to younger generations (Balogun, Personal Communication, February 12, 2024). The transmission of ancestral information guarantees the preservation of valued heritage and lasting principles, therefore solidifying the ongoing cultural legacy within the community. By facilitating intergenerational contacts, the festival serves as a holy venue for passing down traditional historical knowledge and nurturing a collective sense of identity. This promotes a shared heritage and communal responsibility among the residents of Oka Land. As observed by Mr. Oluwatosin Alonge:

During this yearly occasion, people gather in a friendly and communal manner, going

beyond their religious beliefs to participate in a shared meal. This exceptional event acts as a cohesive influence, promoting amicable exchanges among acquaintances and relatives. As people gather around the dining table, they have conversations that go beyond their ideological differences. They make use of this opportunity to discuss and resolve any current conflicts. (Alonge, Personal Communication, February 12, 2024)

Similarly, Opeyemi Omoriwo, a regular attendee of the Oka Day festival noted:

The sense of companionship and joy felt during the Oka Festival transcends the limited duration of the event. An interesting tale serves as a clear example of this phenomenon: after finishing my secondary education in Oka in 1997, I had few chances to reconnect with most of my former classmates. Nevertheless, the festival presented a fortuitous opportunity for such reunions. The festival provided a platform for reconciliation in situations where conflicts emerged between my group and another family, particularly when one of their members shared my educational background. The festival fostered conflict resolution by uniting us and providing a platform for grievances to be expressed in the presence of both myself and my counterpart from the opposing family. Furthermore, the event has become a significant platform for eligible unmarried individuals from various family backgrounds and areas within Oka to get to know each other. As a result, many unions have formed as a result of these fortunate meetings, consequently strengthening personal relationships and promoting peaceful coexistence within Oka Land. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that supports the idea that couples met for the first time during the 2002 version of the festival. This serves as a powerful testament to the lasting impact of the sense of community and togetherness fostered by the Oka Festival (Omoriwo, Personal Communication, February 12, 2024).

It is also essential and fundamental to understand that traditional rituals and cultural practices play a crucial role in strengthening the relationships within the community of Oka Land. They serve as a foundational pillar for enhancing social unity and reinforcing the shared identity of the community. The Oka Day Festival, with a long-standing history and rich in ancient customs, represents a tangible manifestation of the collective heritage and lasting cultural tradition that runs through the community (Adebayo, 2019, p. 222). As observed by Oluwatosin Alonge:

An advantageous feature of this festival is the active participation of younger community members in its organisation and preparation. These individuals gain a deep grasp of the community's cultural values through their significant participation and contributions. The younger participants are carefully taught about the historical development of the festival, including significant achievements and the potential negative consequences of deviating from its traditional path. This is done to protect both the cultural heritage and its accuracy and consistency (Alonge, Personal Communication, February 12, 2024).

The festival acts as a means of preserving and continuing the collective memory and historical awareness of the people of Oka Land through the observation and celebration of ancestral customs and traditions (Ajayi, Personal Communication, February 16, 2024). Furthermore, the festival serves as a propitious occasion for the reaffirmation of cultural legacy and the transmission of enduring values that form the foundation of the collective character. Cultural expressions such as storytelling, music, and dance serve as powerful means for sharing cultural knowledge and fostering a shared sense of belonging among community members (Oladele, 2017, p. 88). The sagacious storytellers, traditional

melodies, and indigenous dance forms in Oka Land create a strong connection to cultural roots and foster a deep appreciation for the rich traditions. The Oka Day Festival is a revered event that preserves and honours the enduring traditions of the community and cultivates a strong sense of unity and shared identity. The increasing rate of modernization brings both challenges and opportunities for maintaining cultural identity in Oka Land. Urbanization, globalization, and technological advancement are converging to threaten traditional customs and practices, putting cultural heritage at risk. For instance, Alonge noted that:

The majority of Oka descendants reside in various locations around the globe and that despite the world being interconnected; geographical distance is a constraint in committee planning for the festival as it offers networking chances for participants to promote communal cohesion (Alonge, Personal Communication, February 12, 2024).

Similarly, rapid urban growth is encroaching on traditional landscapes and disrupting long-established communal customs, while global markets are turning cultural artefacts into commodities and diminishing their original importance. Technological breakthroughs are causing a significant change in society norms and values, resulting in the decline of long-standing traditions in favour of modern conveniences and digital innovations.

Modernization brings numerous prospects for the revival and spread of cultural knowledge in Oka Land. Digital platforms and global networks enable the spread of cultural stories and traditional art to a wide and diversified audience (Afolabi, Personal Communication, February 17, 2024). Thus, platforms like social media, online forums, and digital archives provide new ways for Oka's cultural history to be expressed and appreciated through oral traditions, artistic representations and digital preservation. The Oka Day Festival further serves as a unique avenue for promoting collaborative initiatives and community development projects. The festival fosters collaboration among community leaders and stakeholders to address important socio-economic issues by combining their energy and resources. These projects cover a wide range of activities, including poverty reduction, youth empowerment, infrastructure development, and capacity-building efforts. As observed by Alonge, a community leader in Oka:

The idea to build a world-class palace for Oka originated during the yearly gathering of Oka's residents. Today, this innovative project has been achieved, greatly enhancing the community. Collaboration with corporations and NGOs has helped provide necessary social amenities, such as street lights, to improve the community's quality of life. The Oka Day Festival has the ability to stimulate economic development through tourism. Visitors can engage in the cultural richness of the event, which helps boost economic growth and promote entrepreneurship in the town (Alonge, Personal Communication, February 12, 2024).

This above submission is buttressed by Balogun's assertion below:

The celebrations could include guided visits to other tourist attractions in Oka. Identifiable shrines and holy groves devoted to respected deities could be developed as tourist attractions to generate cash for the municipality. Collaborative ventures might be formed with national museums or a local museum could be founded to curate and display Oka's cultural and traditional artefacts. Partnerships could be established with local artisans, such as sculptors and blacksmiths, to create Oka's historical artefacts using native materials. These artisanal objects could be shown and sold during the celebrations to promote native workmanship and bolster local economic growth (Balogun, Personal Communication, February 12, 2024).

As illustrated above, the festival also acts as a central point for creating important relationships and alliances with other stakeholders, therefore enhancing the effectiveness of

community-led projects. Working together with government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and private sector groups allows for possibilities to gather resources, share expertise, and enhance capabilities. By forming strategic partnerships with other stakeholders, the community can have access to expertise, financing, and technical help necessary for carrying out innovative projects and historically relevant social engineering.

## Conclusion

This paper unveils Oka Day Festival as a cohesive cultural event connecting differences and fostering strong relationships that go beyond time and space. The event reinforces the importance of tradition in strengthening the social cohesion of the community by celebrating cultural heritage and communal identity. This study highlights the importance of Oka Day Festival as a social mechanism to sustain shared memories and promote community unity in Oka society. By carefully examining the historical origins, cultural symbols, and social consequences, we uncover the complex web of tradition that unites the community of Oka Land in their collective weakness and strength. Hence, the paper reveals the impact of Oka Day festival on building communal unity, safeguarding cultural heritage, and supporting sustainable community development in Ondo State, Nigeria.

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## Interviews

- Interview with Barrister Isa Abubakar, Secretary Oka Day Planning Committee, on 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2024.
- Interview with Dr. Afolabi Femi , a civil servant and an indigent of Oka, on 17<sup>th</sup> February, 2024.
- Interview with Dr. Bolarinwa Olutayo Balogun, an Academia and indigent of Oka, on 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2024.
- Interview with Dr. Opeyemi Omoriwo, a medical professional and an indigent of Oka, on 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2024.
- Interview with Mr. Alonge Tosin Abayomi , a public servant and an indigent of Oka, on 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2024.
- Interview with Mr. Danjuma Ajayi, a political analyst and Oka Youth Leader, on 16<sup>th</sup> February, 2024.
- Interview with Mr. Daodu Emmanuel a federal civil servant and indigent of Oka, on 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2024.
- Interview with Mr. Ignatius Omoyeni, a federal civil servant and indigent of Oka, on 19<sup>th</sup> February, 2024.
- Interview with Mr. Olumide Akerele, a federal civil servant and indigent of Oka, on 19<sup>th</sup> February, 2024.
- Interview with Mr. Sharafdeen Abubakar, a federal public servant with NDLEA and indigent of Oka, on 19<sup>th</sup> February, 2024.
- Interview with Prince Sunday Theophilus Sakara, a retiree and an indigent of Oka, on 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2024.