

CULTURAL IDENTITY, LANGUAGE, AND GENDER COMPLEMENTARITY IN EHUGBO NEW YAM FESTIVAL

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Abstract

This study examines the interplay of cultural identity, language and the dynamics of gender in Ehugbo New Yam Festival. The specific objectives of the study are to examine the cultural dynamics of New Yam festival in Ehugbo, ascertain the role of language in Ehugbo New Yam festival, and to explore the gender based complementarity in Ehugbo New Yam festival. Data for the study were generated through focused group discussion, oral interview, and participant observations and analyzed in line with Ting-Toomey's (1986) Identity Negotiation Theory. Findings of the study reveal that: new yam festival is a period to magnify God for a bountiful harvest as well as a time to display certain unique cultural identities that reinforce the people's cultural heritages and bonds; Language used in the enactment of various rituals and performances underscore the people's rich linguistic diversity, and the new yam festival in Ehugbo demonstrates a striking balance of roles signifying the vital contributions of both genders. The study concludes that the new yam festival in Ehugbo is not only a veritable avenue for celebration that intertwines cultural identity, language, and gender complementarity but also a period to re-emphasize the preserving of cultural identities and heritages, fostering community's unity and development as well as showcasing the uniqueness of gender complementarity in Ehugbo. The study recommends a documentation and preservation of rituals, historical and cultural significances emanating from the festival and create avenues for educating younger generations about the importance of their cultural identities, language and gender roles.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Language, Gender Complementarity, New Yam Festival, Ehugbo

1. Introduction

Yam is the name commonly associated to several many plant species in the genus dioscorea family which include; dioscorea rotundata (white yam), dioscorea bulbifera (potato yam), dioscorea alata (water yam), dioscorea esculenta (Asiatic yam), dioscorea batatas (Chinese yam), and dioscorea cayenesis (yellow yam). The most commonly cultivated yam in all the communities of Igbo land is the dioscorea rotundata (white yam) with whitish inner flesh and usually big tubers because of its economic value. Yam in Igbo land is not only cultivated because of its economic importance but also because of its symbolic significance nature in the spiritual life of the Igbo people. It is so ritualized that it is often seen as the crop for men while other crops such as cassava and cocoyam connote the female crops. Yam, often referred to as the king of all crops, its harvesting is accompanied by a special festival known as 'iri ji oḥu'. This festival occurs between July and September of every year across various communities in Igbo land, but in Ehugbo, August is the month set aside for this all important festival. The new yam festival in Ehugbo is accompanied with lots of

fun fare, ritualized performances and chants which make the entire community agog with excitement and hope.

The cultivation of yam was the major traditional source of wealth and social status in pre-colonial Ehugbo society, as the size of the barn and the number of yam tubers a man possessed was used to measure his wealth. Most men married many wives to beget children who would help out in farm work. Annually, yams come into the barn at harvest time and while some find their ways in to the market others go back to the farm at planting time. This cyclical process constitutes the major object of the annual ritual act of fecundity, generation, and regeneration. Among the people of Ehugbo, the New Yam Festival is symbolic of enjoyment after the planting season. That explains why invitation to the festival is open to all and sundry, including friends, neighbors, kin relations, acquaintances, in-laws and others.

The carnival mood and graciousness at extending invitations and welcoming every visitor and guests means that there is plenty of food to enjoy as opposed to lack of food to live on. The New Yam Festival in Ehugbo is not only prominent; it dominates and permeates all aspect of their engagements. Apart from the fact that the festival is linked to the agricultural calendar, philosophy and economic structure, it also involves a celebration of existence and paying homage to the ancestors. Agwo, (2025) asserts that the *Ike ji* festival in Ehugbo is a period to sow love, show love and live love as well as reverence God with an open show of gratitude for his protection and kindness in leading them from lean periods to the time of bountiful harvest without deaths resulting from hunger, of the previous year.

The mention of festival, especially *Ike ji*, brings to the mind masculinity and gender segregation. The dynamics of complementarity and power relations between Igbo men and women are visible in two trans-generational institutions – *Umuada* and *Umunna* groups – whose legacies are passed from one generation to another. Moreover, *Ikeji* festival in Ehugbo is not an all-male affair as the roles the women play are in complementarity with those played by the men even though they are unsung. This study therefore, x-rays the dynamics of cultural identity, language roles and gender complementarity in Ehugbo New Yam festival. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

- i. Examine the cultural dynamics of New Yam festival in Ehugbo;
- ii. Ascertain the role of language in Ehugbo New Yam festival; and
- iii. Explore the gender based Complementarity in Ehugbo New Yam festival.

2.1 Related Literature

For Onipede (2017), new yam festival is a cultural celebration that is given special prominence in the life of many agro based societies in Yoruba land, celebrated annually within the months of June and August. The study argues that the new yam festival is a principal tradition in the lives of the Moba people which is significant in uniting the people. Madumele, Egbo, and Okeworo's (2021) underscores the fact that Igbo traditional values should be expanded and incorporated into esteemed and acceptable values. According to them, esteemed values entail women who carved a niche for themselves irrespective of their professions whether formal or informal. They argued that this set of women should be allowed to actively participate in certain Igbo cultural traditions including the ritualization of the new yam festival.

Onwuatuegwu (2024) asserts that the new yam festival holds a profound spiritual significance in cultural heritage in the life of the Igbo people. Onwuatuegwu argued that reconciling ancestral belief system with modern day understanding of events in the society needs the integration of scientific approaches into the festivals of the people, recognizing their historical context of interpretation, challenging obnoxious practices and enhancing moral values. Akankpo (2024) avers that the cultural significance of yam in the Ibibio culture portrays the pattern of new yam celebration in the Ikpe clan and demonstrates the symbolic methods of serving the gods. According to Offor (2024), music of the people portrays their culture and at the same time a means of expressing people's culture and their norms. He argued that music and dance depict the ownership of New Yam festival. African traditional society uses music to commune with the gods, goddesses/spirits of their ancestors, especially during the celebration of the new yam festivals.

Ubong (2025) argues that the Umon people's new yam festival is rooted in their cultural traditions, for them yam is the most celebrated crop and the new yam festival in Ikot Ana serves as a vibrant display of their rich cultural heritage. Adiele (2025) posits that the major identity of the Igbo society are language, fashion and various cultural festivities celebrated round the year, including the new yam festival. She argues that the *iri ji* festival is a cultural drama that is rooted in imitation, ritual, sacrifice and role-playing, which showcases the identity of the Igbo people as a primal consideration by which they are recognized, Adiele's interest is centered on the dramatic genres associated with the *iri ji* in Igbo land, she lists chants, chorus, music, dance and the use of costumes as major elements associated with drama of *iri ji* ọhụ in Igbo land. The study of Tubi, Ojo and Adewumi (2025) contend that new yam festival portends great anthropological, spiritual and philosophical relevance. They argue that the new yam festival of the Okun people showcases the complex nature of consistent operation of cultural practices over the years. They aver that yam production affects the lives of the indigenous people and that the New Yam festival on the other hand helps them to reassert traditional values, despite the damages facing their production as occasioned by foreign influence and local inhibiting factors such as herders' incursion and banditry.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) proposed by Stella Ting-Toomey in 1986. According to the theory, social (or socio-cultural) identities can include ethnic membership identity, social class identity, to family role issues, and personal identities can include any unique attributes that we associate with our individuated self in comparison to those of others. Though the theory has undergone some modifications over the years the latest being the 2005's. The INT posits that human beings in all cultures desire positive identity affirmation in a variety of communication situations. However, what constitutes the proper way to show identity affirmation and consideration varies from one cultural context to the next. The INT emphasizes particular identity domains in influencing individuals' everyday interactions. The 2005 INT version consists of the following ten core assumptions, which explain the antecedent, process, and outcome components of intercultural identity:

- ✓ The core dynamics of people's group membership identities and personal identities are formed via symbolic communication with others.
- ✓ Individuals in all cultures or ethnic groups have the basic motivation needs for identity security, inclusion, predictability, connection, and consistency on both group-based and person-based identity levels.

- ✓ Individuals tend to experience identity emotional security in a culturally familiar environment and experience identity emotional vulnerability in a culturally unfamiliar environment.
- ✓ Individuals tend to feel included when their desired group membership identities are positively endorsed and experience differentiation when their desired group membership identities are stigmatized.
- ✓ Persons tend to experience interaction predictability when communicating with culturally familiar others and interaction unpredictability when communicating with culturally unfamiliar others.
- ✓ Persons tend to desire interpersonal connection via meaningful close relationships and experience identity autonomy when they experience relationship separations.
- ✓ Persons tend to experience identity consistency in repeated cultural routines in a familiar cultural environment and they tend to experience identity change and transformation in a new or unfamiliar cultural environment.
- ✓ Cultural-ethnic, personal, and situational variability dimensions influence the meanings, interpretations, and evaluations of these identity-related themes.
- ✓ Competent identity-negotiation process emphasizes the importance of integrating the necessary intercultural identity-based knowledge, mindfulness, and interaction skills to communicate appropriately, effectively, and adaptively with culturally dissimilar others.
- ✓ Satisfactory identity negotiation outcomes include the feeling of being understood, respected, and affirmatively valued.

In an accelerated multicultural/multiracial identity formation society--race, ethnicity, religion, social class, and culture--will become an increasingly integrative or fragmented focal point for identity construction and re-construction.

3. Methodology

This study adopts the qualitative research approach. Geographically, the study is situated in Ehugbo speech community in Afikpo North Local Government Area, Ebonyi State, Nigeria. This research has the whole of Ehugbo as its scope. The target population of the research is the entire Afikpo (Ehugbo), which is estimated at 156,611 according to the 2006 National Census figure. It is however believed that this figure has drastically increased since the population is rapidly growing. The data for this study were generated through interviews, focus group discussions and participant observations done between August and September, 2025 and subjected to critical discussions using the Identity Negotiation Theory.

4. Data Presentation and Discussion

4.1 Cultural dynamics of New Yam Festival in Ehugbo

Historically, Ehugbo people traced the origin of yam to Enohia Nkalu, a community described as one of the earliest inhabitants in Ehugbo. According to oral tradition, yam was first cultivated, eaten and domesticated by the Nkalu people. Till date, the community holds primacy in matters related to the celebration of New Yam festivals. Unlike other communities in Igbo land where the Kings or the oldest men in the community moderate in the celebration of the festival accompanying the new yam; in Ehugbo, the date and the celebration must be announced by the yam deity priest called Eleri, and then rectified by

nde esaa and *ichie* – the highest decision making organ of the Ehugbo people. No community in Ehugbo celebrates the festival or eats the new yam until the priest performs the rituals associated with the celebration of indigenous specie of yam called *akiri*.

The celebration of the new yam festival by Eleri is an occasion of great significance to the people of Ehugbo. It attracts people from all parts of Ehugbo and beyond. The people regard it as the greatest feast of their land. On the eve of the *Eke* market day, the young maidens (girls) of Enohia Nkalu, aged between seven and twenty years troop to the bush where they spend the night at a deity called *Imo*, practicing songs and dances associated with the celebration. About 11am to 12noon on the fateful day, the girls herald their coming from *Imo* with a melodious song rendered in voices akin to heavenly bodies. The girls dance round a well-mapped out ring in the center of the playground, *Ogo*. They usually render seven different songs. The most interesting aspect is the rendition of a song inviting *Eleri* to come and show why he is called *Eleri*. The climax is the dancing of *Eleri* himself in which he demonstrates in dancing the answers to every question asked him in a song.

At the end of the last dance in the seventh song, he throws into the ring, many pieces of kola nuts which the maidens pick for presentation to their parents and well-wishers. Immediately after throwing in the kola nuts, *Eleri* races quickly to his *Obu* along two rows of able-bodied young men who line up the route to *Obu*. These men will bear him up in case he falls down in the event of his race to *Obu*. Thereafter, the feasting, which consists mainly of pounded yam (*utara ji*) with sumptuous *Ohe sarara* (white soup), and assorted drinks, are served to everyone around.

On the morning of the new yam festival, a meal called *Mgbupe*, made with corn and *ewa* vegetable is prepared and served as breakfast while everyone await the preparation of the main dish (yam). The yam can be prepared as pottage, white yam with oil but preferably its pounded yam with a sumptuous *Ohe Sarara* (white soup) with plenty of moderately sized molded *ahu/egusi* with plenty of fish and meat to go down with the pounded yam. However, while the women are busy preparing the meal the men collects the peels of the yam to offer sacrifices to *njoku ji* – the yam deity; the *njoku ji* must first and foremost accept this sacrifice before anyone can be allowed to eat the yam so prepared.

4.2 The Role of Language in Ehugbo New Yam Festival

Language also play a paramount role in enacting cultural identity among the Ehugbo people, this is noticed in the chants and *oratures* that accompany the festive mood of the season, creating fun and balance. In the early morning of the New Yam festival day, usually on *Nkwo* day, many families troop to their farm to harvest the tubers of yam sufficient for family consumption, gifting to kits and kins and for making sacrifices to *njoku ji*. When the women and some other younger ones who would bear the harvest on the head approach clusters of people, there are usually chants and sayings like:

Ji anyi awafuo - Akiri kpokpo (our yams are coming back - Akiri kpokpo)

Ji gbari wo egbe (they were shut by the yam)

The above are songs rendered to welcome the new yam home. In a case where a farmer experiences lean harvest, there is usually an exclamation of woes with an onomatopoeic reference of *gbem*, *Ji gbari wo egbe*,

on sighting the sizes of the new yams. While on the morning of the New Yam festival between the hours of 4am and 5am, while the women stay behind their doors to chant a prayer-like song, the younger men on the other hand go round the village square with dried palm fagots, maize wastes and other materials oozing beautiful flames with their own proper rendition of the *ikeji* songs.

Ejọ ahọ jee laa ooo - ìya oweyerege
 Ejọ ahọ jee laa ooo - ìya oweyerege
 Ma atata ma eloloo - ìya oweyerege
 Ihe m riri n'ọju m ẹhọ - ìya oweyerege
 M nwua gari n'ọju m ẹhọ - ìya oweyerege
 M ta aki n'ọju m ẹhọ - ìya oweyerege
 Ma atata ma eloloo - ìya oweyerege

This prayer-like chants are usually centered on sending out every bad happenings in the previous year while welcoming the good tidings that are to be brought by the New Year. They plead with the gods for the bringing of these promising good tidings with a request that whatever they eat should bring satisfaction to them. These songs are not in any way gender specific, as both male and female can render them. This is to say that there is usually a linguistic right accorded to everyone with the sole aim of sending into exile a bad year and ushering in a promising New Year, thus:

Ahọ jee laa ooo
 Ahọ jengeje
 Ahọ jelahee
 Jee laa n'ọtutu ẹja
 Jee laa n'enyum

At daybreak, the women who had been by their door side singing, comes out of the house and go to their kitchen side to collect all the dirt heaped within the compound, especially ashes, locate the village squares where the men are and then pour the ashes on the flaming fire while incanting the departure of the bad year (ahọ je laa ooo) and the welcoming of a new year that has a lot of hope for them. The significance of this act is that all the sad events such as bad harvesting season, deaths of family members, bareness, hunger and starvation have been burnt and gone for good, while making way for the new and promising year.

4.3 Gender Complementarity in Ehugbo New Yam Festival

In her study of the economic life of the Ehugbo women between 1900 and 1960, Enwo-Irem (2018) observed that the scheduling of the women's farm work kept them busy all year round, unlike the male counterparts who were basically involved in yam farming; of which the women were not exonerated from participating. Women and their daughters were involved in weeding of their farms, before, during and after the farming session.; planting other women inclined crops like cassava (iwa), ẹdu, ẹkidi, ọna, ahekere, nkasi, different types of cereals, legumes and vegetables, etc. Women were involved in the all year round clearing, cultivation, planting, harvesting, processing and marketing their farm produce and those of their husbands'. They were also in charge of breeding, rearing and sale of their domestic animals like chicken and goats. While they worked in their farms and those of their husbands, they could also be hired to work for pay. Women were responsible for the daily household food supply.

The above is a proof that the Ehugbo women were economically and socially empowered. Some of them were so wealthy that they took highest traditional titles exclusively reserved for men (Olariwee). Taking up this status so empowered them and removed female societal inhibitions from them. These women were so powerful that they could come out even during *izu garigari* - days that women were barred from coming out, some of these women even funded their husbands in taking second wives and titles. The questions begging for answers are; what is the status of these women in contemporary Ehugbo society? Are their identities really subsumed as painted in popular literatures? If not, who then propagated the narratives? If yes, at what point did these women lose their superior identity?

A look into the cultural dynamics of new yam festival in Ehugbo shows that historically and culturally Ehugbo credit a woman called Orienta Imomo, nwa Imomo Otu who sacrificed her child for the people to have yam - the crop that is today so celebrated with fanfare and magnificent ritualization. A legendary account of the origin of *Egbele* also shows that a woman discovered *Egbele* - the deity in charge of initiation of male into adulthood in Ehugbo. Thus, in the historiography of *ikeji* Ehugbo; the supreme sacrifice of women cannot be downplayed, the celebration of *Ikeji* starts with the activities of Women in the farm land “*o kpa eziza*” between the months of February and March, preparing the land for the next planting season as they begin to fetch logs of wood and store in the designated areas of the compound in preparation for *Nku Ikeji* (firewood carried by children to their relatives) and *Ikeji* cooking. Once the men are done with tilling the heaps and planting the yam, it becomes the responsibility of the women to plant other smaller crops like; maize, melon, egg plants, pumpkin and other crops that are used to prepare delicious meals for the New Yam festivities.

The women before the harvest periods engage in an exercise called *Nvosi* to clear the farm in preparation for the harvest. Thus unsung role of women in *ikeji* festival can be divided into three; the pre-*ikeji* roles, the *ikeji* roles and the post *ikeji* roles. The spiritual and most important aspect of the *ikeji* is chiefly championed by women. On *ahọ* market day, two days after the *ikeji*, everyone especially the women whom by virtue of their position have been assigned the role of planting human beings and propagating future generations alongside the men take the oblong molded native chalk (*ogu nzu*) as many numbers as they have relatives to the shrine (*nja*) to commune with their matrilineal ancestors and to announce to them that the *ikeji* was successful while with each *ogu nzu*, hands over each and every one of their relatives to them for protection and blessings. While embarking on this journey which is an avenue for every member of the *ikwu* to know and get acquainted with their maternal lineages it is imperative they avoid touching or being touched by the leaves of coco yams as this is believed to neutralize the potent of the sacrifices that is to be offered to the ancestors. This is the justification of the popular aphorism among the Ehugbo people “*ezighi enyi ezi, o bu ikwu bu ihe a na ezi ezi*”

Aside the above, the *ogu nzu* and other materials used for sacrifices, are of course prepared by the women, notably the aged that have passed the age of menopause. Also, the materials used in preparing the *Njoku ji* and *ibini ukpabi* which is usually situated at the right hand corner of every man’s compound where libations are usually poured to the gods and ancestors are prepared by the women.

From the foregoing, the portrayal of Igbo women in general and Ehugbo women in particular by some scholars as being subservient, inferior, voiceless, and mere appendages to men are otherwise proven wrong by the above role performed by women in Ehugbo. It is therefore correct to say that the Ehugbo women were already empowered before the advent of missionaries and colonial administrators. The position of many scholars who were mainly foreigners stemmed from limited or misunderstanding of the workings of gender complementarity among the Ehugbo women and in fact Igbo women in general. These same women, earlier on represented as powerless, could not have amassed such power, influence, and courage to challenge the colonial authorities as witnessed in 1929 within a short period of time, if they did not already possess such clout.

5. Summary of Findings and Conclusion

The topic of discourse has been subjected to critical discussion and the following findings drawn; new yam festival is a period to not only magnify God for a bountiful harvest experienced by the people but also a time to display certain unique cultural identities that reinforces the people's cultural heritages and bonds, language used in the enactment of various rituals and performances underscore the people's rich linguistic diversity. Again, the new yam festival in Ehugbo demonstrates a striking balance of roles signifying the vital contributions of both gender. This study, therefore, recommends that, while recreating identity, rebuilding cooperate images, redefining and retelling communal stories, women should not be mere facilitators and entertainers at events. Rather, they should be key players who will keep transferring these customs to generations yet to come. People must be guided by the popular saying that, "if you do not say whom you are, others will say who you are not," and to portray you as such.

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