

**RESUSCITATING AJU CULTURAL FESTIVAL FOR TOURISM PROMOTION IN UBURU,
OHAOZARA L.G.A, EBONYI STATE**

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Abstract

Cultural events, such as festivals and social activities, hold the power to draw regional, national, and international attention to communities that have developed their cultural assets for tourism. These events can transform localities into global destinations by leveraging a trinity of attractions encompassing natural, man-made, and cultural components. This study focuses on the cultural assets of the Uburu community and their potential for revitalizing the Aju Cultural Festival to promote tourism. The Uburu community boasts diverse attractions, including Umunaga and Ogwo beaches and the salt lake (Mmahi), which could complement the Aju festival and enrich the tourism experience. Moreover, recent infrastructural progressions, including an improved road network, alongside the establishment of Kings David Federal University of Medical Sciences, serve as additional draws for visitors. Employing ethnographic techniques, this research gathers pertinent insights from the study area. Through a thorough analysis of the collected data, the study proposes strategies to reinvigorate the Aju festival and harness its potential for tourism promotion. In conclusion, this abstract provides a quick look into the exploration of resuscitating the Aju Cultural Festival for tourism advancement in the Uburu community. By tapping into the inherent cultural assets and contemporary developments, the community can potentially create a vibrant cultural tourism experience that appeals to a diverse range of visitors.

Key words: Resuscitating, Aju, cultural festival, Tourism and Promotion

OUTLINE: Introduction, Statement of the problem, Research Questions, Research Objectives Research method, Significance of the study, Background Information, Literature Review, Data presentation and Result, Discussion, Conclusion and Contribution to Knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural festival cum tourism is considered as one of the major reasons people embark on holiday nowadays because tourists will find themselves in an area that is different from their homes and experience things that are typical of that area. Cultural events such as festivals and other social activities attract regional, national, and international appeals to any given community that developed her cultural asset for tourist consumption. Cultural celebrations, including carnival events, religious activities, social gatherings, festival celebrations like wine festivals, gastronomy festivals, sports and social events and other entertainment generations (mainly concerts and theatrical production) are often subsumed in the tourism literature as cultural tourism (McKercher and Du Cross, 2002).

Cultural tourism itself is one of the oldest forms of tourism and motives for travel across countries of the world and has continued to be the major attraction to the tourism industry which cannot be ignored by the tourism community because of its positive influence on the local economy in any given tourism destination. Therefore, *Aju* festival can as well be classified as cultural tourism based on the aforementioned assertion and it stands a better chance of competing with other well-known festival or carnival events in Nigeria such as Carnival Calabar and Abuja Carnival when harnessed for tourism promotion in Uburu community and Ebonyi State at large.

Cultural festivals can transform a local community into an international community because of cultural assets harnessed for tourist consumption which is based on tripartite attractions (natural, manmade,

and cultural attractions). This tripartite attractions are cultural asserts Uburu community is endowed with. *Umunaga* and *Ogwo* beaches, salt lake (*Mmahi*) are a few of the numerous natural attractions that can complement *Aju* festival when harnessed for tourism promotion in the community, current infrastructural development like road network, and newly established Kings David Federal University of Medical Sciences as a manmade attraction will be a step in the right direction towards resuscitating *Aju* cultural festival for tourism promotion in Uburu community.

Statement of the Problem

In contrast to the research in Uburu community and other parts of Nigeria, there is a need for resuscitation of cultural festivals in our various indigenous communities in Igbo land especially in Uburu community. But, there is a challenge of Eurocentric mindset among the people which for decades has adopted more of the Western way of life, festivals, language, clothing, architectures, science, and technologies (Greenwood, 1982), which its resultant effect has led to moral and cultural decay among the indigenous people both at home and in Diaspora.

There is a scarcity of documented materials on resuscitation of *Aju* cultural festival for tourism promotion in Uburu community. In this light, the research aimed at resuscitating *Aju* cultural festival for tourism promotion in Uburu, Ohaozara Local Government Area of Ebonyi State.

Research questions

The questions outlined below were employed by the researcher to obtain vital information in the research areas.

How can *Aju* cultural festival promote tourism development in Uburu Community?

What are the model for resuscitation, preservation, and promotion of *Aju* cultural festival in Uburu community?

Research Objectives

According to Veal (1997), research aims to make known something previously unknown to human beings. The aims of this research are summarized as follows;

General Objective

To examine *Aju* cultural festival with a view to extracting historical data on their activities and as well as their implications for the promotion of cultural tourism in Nigeria: The aim is to determine their contributions to tourism development in Nigeria.

Specific Objective

To examine and document important festivals that could promote tourism development in Uburu community, and

To develop a model for resuscitation, preservation, and promotion of *Aju* cultural festival in Uburu community

Research Method

For over the years, in-depth interview IDI has been one of the finest instruments of data collection in ethnographical research. In-depth interviewing is a qualitative technique that gets to do with carrying out an intensive individual interview with a small number of respondents to explore their perspective on a particular idea, program, or situation. IDI being one of the instruments of data collection in this very research enables the researcher to have direct content (face to face interactions) or firsthand information with the knowledgeable elders in the study area instead of relying entirely on secondary source of data collection.

Secondary source of data collection such as textbooks, maps, Journals newspapers, projects and other archive material was also employed for more clarification in the research area.

Significance of the Research

There is a massive decline in cultural festival in Igbo land, besides *Aju* cultural festival for decades also witnessed mass exodus in it celebration which it resultant effect cannot be denied in Uburu community at present. Resuscitating *Aju* cultural festival in Uburu will bring a lot of sanity and re-right many wrong in the land, before now the festival act as unifying factors among families cum cultural rebirth in the community which attract people from far and near during celebration.

In this light, the significance of this research to Uburu community includes; cultural promotion/rebirth, employment opportunities and entrepreneurship cleverness to the community that will make youths to shun crime and other social voices in the land. Therefore, the notion of resuscitation, preservation and promotion of festival is a crucial concern for the value of cultural tourism development across the world (Godwin, 2005). Finally, the research contributes to the previous studies carried out in the research areas and bridge the gap(s) uncovered by the previous researches.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF UBURU

Figure (1)

Map showing the Ebonyi State

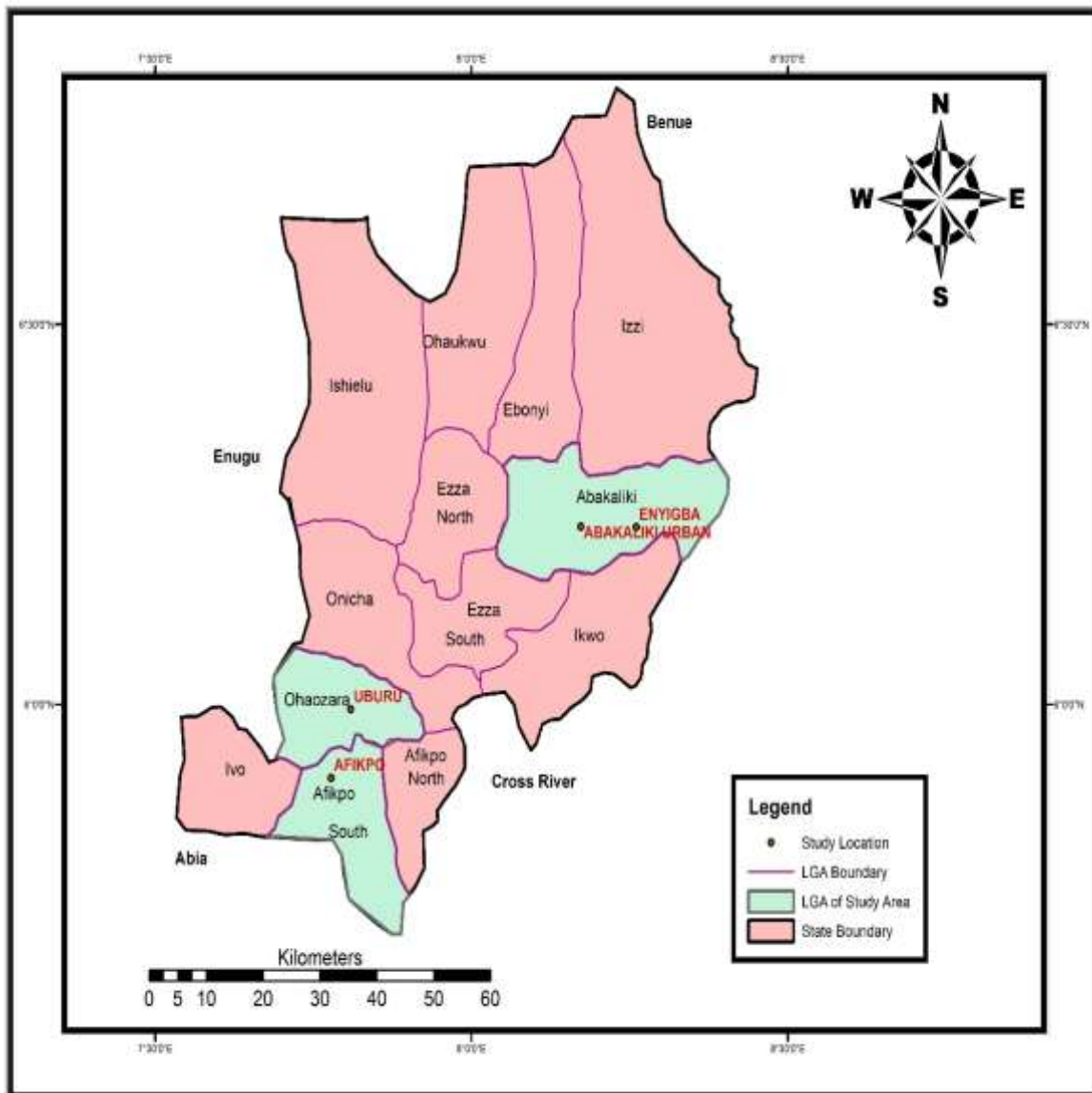
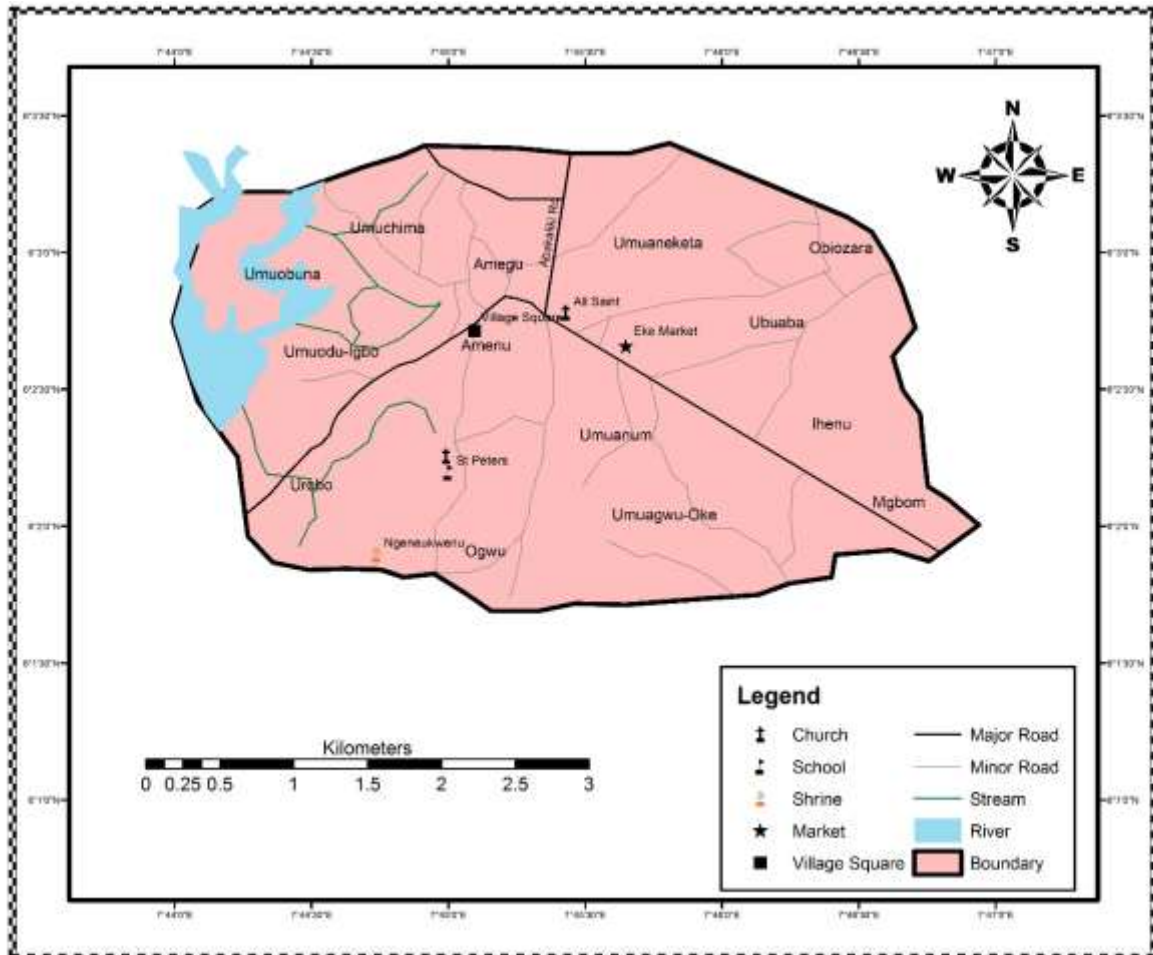


Figure 2)



Map showing Uburu the Study area

Uburu community is made up of 12 villages namely; Amenu, Umuchima, Umuobuna, Umuagwu-Oke, Ihenu, Urobo, Umuodu-igbo, Umuanekeeta, Amagu, Ogwu, Mgbom, Umanum. It is situated in the present Ohaozara local government area in Ebonyi state. Ohaozara is the headquarter of the local government. The community is blessed with numerous cultural, natural and built attractions which make it one of the best destinations for tourism activities in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Festival is a moment of celebration in which people try as much as possible to forget their painful and sorrowful moods cum daily activities. It is a period set aside for reunion among the family members that have been separated for a while due to one reason or the other. Such festivals can be Christmas festival, Esther commemoration; masquerade festival, sports festival, and other cultural or social gatherings that bring people together in the street, marketplace, civic center, tourist routes for a specific period. These cultural attractions such as religious sites, historical properties, galleries, museums, and theatres are also constant elements of tourists' demand. A set of demand-driven issues motivated their development and one of them is socialization needs (Prentice and Andersen, 2003), the development of leisure or recreational activities

(Pine and Gilmore, 1999), and the move towards new consumption experiences (Krojinovic and Gortan, 2017).

According to Andah (1988) in Okonkwo (2013), the unique antiquities or cultural heritages of many nations contribute to the main depository of the people's cultural resources. In African traditional society, these cultural artifacts particularly, the work of arts, served various functions assuring the cohesion of a group or society. On a similar note, Itanyi (2008) includes Folklores, traditional architecture, festivals, monuments, features, and sculptures as some of the aspects of cultural resources of every given society or group.

Okpoko and Okpoko (2002) outlined cultural resources in Nigeria which form aspects of her cultural tourism as both material and nonmaterial attributes acquired within the society and transmitted through generations. Included among them are the diverse belief, festivals, diet, architecture, dance, drama, iron working, wood and stone carving, etc. It is argued that because human beings generally modify the landscapes in which they live and because they attach names, myths, and effective values to feature of the past territory they inhabit, the landscapes of the past culture may also qualify as cultural resources (Okpoko and Okpoko, 2002). In the same vein, Ekechukwu (2006) informs that Nigeria is blessed with cultural resources which according to him include; archaeological sites and other discoveries some of which are very famous across the countries of the world today; historic towns, and cities; screed groves and shrines; cultural festivals, ceremonies of various types and features; museums and monuments of various kinds as well as other leftovers that serve to remind us of our collective common heritages from the past.

Omotoso (2014) noted examples of cultural resources in Nigeria that were well utilized for tourist consumption as follows: Kainji National Park, Borgu and Zurguma National Parks, and Yankari Game reserve. It helps to renew local architectural traditions on the condition that the ancestral heritage and cultural environment are respected for instance; tourism plays a prominent role in the cultural sustainability of the Osun Festival in Osogbo and Argungu Festival in Argungu in Kebbi State. In addition, he noted that tourism attributes to the rebirth of local arts and crafts and that of traditional cultural activities in a protected natural environmental setting. For example, bead and bangles making in Bida, dyeing, pottery, and calabash carvings in the Northern part of Nigeria. In most of the favorable cases, tourism offers a way to revive the social and cultural life of the local communities, thus, reinforcing the resident community, encouraging contacts within the country or nation, and attracting young people with favorable local tourism activities in the host destinations (Omotoso, 2014).

According to Alagon (1988:55) in Okpoko and Ezeadichie (2002:8), Nigeria's cultural heritages which are embedded in the prehistory temporary practice and future exception of the people can be the foundation for tourism and economic development. On the same note, Papatheodorou (1999) asserts that 'tourism resource related to cultural attraction including archaeological and historical sites, festival and events, rich and varied building architecture in the cities and unusually feature such as scenic historic sites play a vital role in the attraction of foreign visitor to a destination. Christ and Compton (2001:5) posits that 'tourism product consist of the principal assets that the country has to offer to tourist combined with every aspect of tourism experience from the time tourist decides to travel until his returns home'.

Thus, festivals should form an internal aspect of tourism and it has been advised that the cultural heritage of the people should form the basis of their tourism development'. In Uburu community festivals hold a lot of potential during *Aju* festival indigenous women prepare numerous local products (local dishes) such as *Ugbagidi* which Uburu people offer as kola nut to visitors (tourists), *Isisa* soup with pounded yam, they also embark on the production of tourist souvenirs such as basket/mat makings, and local salt as a souveirs, etc which tourists can take home as gifts after they visit the community.

This *Aju* festival among the Uburu constitutes a lot of attractions to the people of that area. The festival is interesting; it serves as a unifying factor for all the members of a family and the great-grandchildren who have not seen each other use this period to interact and know each other as a member of the same family. During this festival celebration, the community witness's great foreign visitors and it brings about a foreign exchange to the community, state, and Nigeria economy at large.

Apart from all these, the festival also has an economic impact on the people as it is near compulsory that all the Uburu children far and near must visit home during the festival, so it is economically pertinent to say that it has the capacity of increasing the economic condition of the people because the people visiting

home must spend their money in the village. And some of them will likely visit home with their friends and spend at least five days and more in the community.

AJU FESTIVAL (Preparation and Management)

Aju festival is an important festival celebrated among the old Ohaozara division in the present place Ebonyi state. The communities that celebrate *Aju* festival include Uburu, Okposi, Onisha, and Isu. According to Okoro (pers.com, 2017) *Aju* is usually celebrated at the end of October or the first week of November annually to mark the successful end of the year and to welcome the New Year. *Aju* festival has always been planned and managed within a clan's (*Umunna*) level in Uburu community. Each family's head will buy a goat (*Ewu*) for the event, and other members of the clan will gather at the village square (*Otobo*) or the eldest person home with their farm product yam (*Ji*). Anyone who wishes to buy a goat for his father or uncle is allowed, and it is known in the community as (*Ematu Nnam efa na Onu*) to remember my ancestors with a live goat and anyone who did not kill goat for his father is forbidden from partaking from the meat when is being shared among his kinsman.

Before the month of the celebration, no clan in the community is allowed to harvest yam (*Ji*) in the community. It is taboo to do so, and it may attract ex-communication from the community. During *Aju* festival celebration, people from different communities come to participate and/or to witness the annual ritual. All the sons and daughters of Uburu community residing far and near came home with their friends. Also, there is a penalty when one did not come back during the festival celebration, which makes it practically impossible for anyone not to return home during the celebration.

Besides, there are numerous side attractions to entertain the visitors, and at the same time, the host community during the (*Aju*) festival celebration, for instance, picnic at *Umunaga* and *Umuchima* beaches, selling of local foods, masquerade displays, and *Ada-Ukwu* cultural dance, etc. Uburu community places much value on *Aju* festival because of its uniqueness and contribution to the moral values in the community, more especially the *Ada-Ukwu* cultural dance, which is the association of age-grade among the women of *Amanu* clan in the community.

Ada-Ukwu Cultural Dance

According to Nja-Oba (per.com, 2017) *Ada-Ukwu* cultural dance is a three-day event organized along *Aju* month for the colorful end of the outings and celebrations in the community. People involved in the dancing are women from *Amanu* clan. Women from other clans do not participate or dare dance the song when sung or danced because they believe it is the dance meant for *Ada-Ukwu* (Big Daughters) of *Amanu* clan.

Day one- is the arrival and registration of members.

Day two- is their annual meeting.

Day three- the third day being the final day of the event is the day of their cultural dance and initiation of the new member into the group. *Ada-Ukwu* cultural dance is a display meant for the entertainment of the visitors during the *Aju* Cultural festival. The festival is interesting. It serves as a unifying factor for all *Amanu* daughters. Once a year, all members of *Ada-Ukwu* cultural dance (Age grade) come together in a market square singing and dancing for successful end of the year and welcoming of the new year.

Belief System

Beliefs are the very foundation and a building block of one's life; the development of one's system of beliefs happens almost without one being aware of it. Five main reasons form one belief, namely evidence, tradition, authority, association, revelation. Therefore, belief is the state of mind in which a person thinks something to be the case, with or without there being empirical evidence to prove that something is the case with accurate certainty. In another way, belief can be defined, as a mental representation of an attitude positively oriented towards the likelihood of something being true (www.wikipedia.com, 2017).

According to Nja-Oba (per.com, 2017) *Amanu* clan in Uburu community also believe that during the festival, members of *Ada-Ukwu* cultural dance will showcase themselves for men who are preparing to get married. It is believed that any young female who did not participate in the cultural dance will find it difficult to get married; the reason is that the dance is goddess or spirit that makes young girls attractive to men, failure to participate makes such a person unattractive to men even outside the community. And it is also a

period parents select wives for their children, and tourists who visit during the festival celebration can as well pick wives during the cultural dance display.

Plate (1)



Showing *Ada-Ukwu* Cultural Dance troupe performing during *Aju* festival

Apart from *Ada-Ukwu* cultural dance *Igwebuike* Cultural Dance (another age-grade) from Urobor clan, but this time a combination of male and female, also performs. *Ikpa* Cultural Dance Group which is reserved for only *Onyigbe* titleholders will perform, when the music is being played one who is not a member of *Onyigbe* titleholder is not allowed to dance the music. Masquerade cults such as *Ekwe-Asokwu* masquerade cult, *Omabe* masquerade cults, and *Ada-mma* masquerade cults perform during *Aju* cultural festival or event to entertain tourists in the community. People hardly believe that the *Ada-mma* masquerade is human because of the majestic way it dances and sings to entertain its audience. Also, *Umunaga* and *Umuchima* beach are added advantages for beach tourism in the community.

Plate (2)



Showing *Onyigbe* title holders dancing *Ikpa* cultural dance during *Aju* festival

Plate (3)



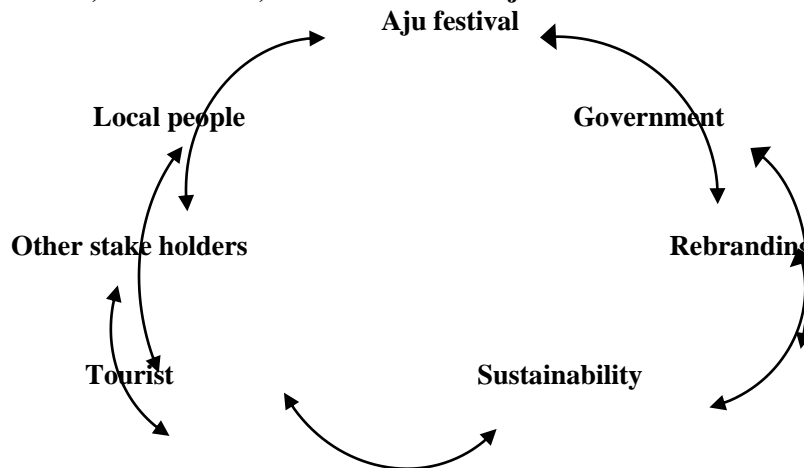
Showing *Ikpa* cultural dance, members performing during *Aju* festival

Discussion

Presently the festival is being rejected in the community in the sense that most people see the festival as fetish and demonic. People with this mindset need total sensitization about the need to preserve the intangible cultural heritage. Also, it will give the local community a sense of belonging and act as the unifying factor as it uses to be in the community before modernization.

Based on the above, *Aju* festival is celebrated because of its moral and cultural values but as time goes on, people started adopting changes which invariably lead to decline of the festival in Uburu. There is a period for a rise, decline, fall, and resuscitation in every heritage destination (product life cycle). The issue at hand now is how *Aju* festival can be resuscitated, preserve, and promoted for tourist consumption in Uburu community and Nigeria at large.

Model for Resuscitation, Preservation, and Promotion of *Aju* Festival



Local Government

Local and state governments coming into the festival will be a step in the right direction as it will resuscitate and project the festival in another dimension in the state. The reason is that *Aju* festival is only the festival being celebrated by the whole communities that make up Ohaozara local government, so government coming in will be a boost to the festival and a new direction and policy will be established which will be a step towards preserving the cultural heritage of the people in the area.

In this case, most of what people think that are deviant can be scrapped out of the festival and the real ones retained. The local organizing committee or local government tourism board will be set up with responsibility to manage and monitor the activities throughout the celebration. Like what is obtainable in

Carnival Calabar in Cross River State which started as Charismas festival within Calabar municipal but turned into the largest cultural fiesta in Africa due to government involvement and intervention. The same thing can be applied in *Aju* festival which will technically open up other tourist attractions for tourism consumption in the community.

Other Stakeholders

Other stakeholders also have a vital role to play as tourism cannot prevail while there is no level playing ground for all the bodies, directly and indirectly, involved in tourism development. The local people, government, developers, nongovernmental organizations should be given a level playing ground as they will help in the resuscitation preservation and promotion of the festival. The stakeholders will help when the need arise that warrant amendment and new initiation that will promote the festival in the local government. Here local people also need to be sensitized when new initiations are incorporated into the festival as it concerns their day-to-day activities and survives as a member of the community. Media houses, like newspapers, magazines television, and radio stations will play a vital role in marketing the festival with the rebrand name or motor.

Rebranding

Rebranding is a marketing strategy that allows a new name, term symbol, designs, or a combination thereof is created for an established brand with intention of developing a new, differentiated identity in the mind of consumers, investors, competitors, and other stakeholders. Often, this involves a radical change to a brand logo, name, legal name, image, marketing strategy, and advertising theme (www.wikipedia.com, 2017). Such change aimed at repositioning the brand company occasionally to distance itself from negative connotations of the previous branding, or to move the brand up market; they may also communicate a new message and a new board of directors that will take charge of the organizational development.

From the researcher's viewpoint, to resuscitate and preserve *Aju* festival for tourism promotion at Uburu community Ohaozara local government, there is a need for a rebranding of the name *Aju* festival, to "Ohaozara Carnival", because people have the wrong impression about *Aju* festival, some tags it different names making it to decline among the indigenous people of Ohaozara, so for this reason, changing of the festival name with a new name, Ohaozara Carnival (it may retain all the attractions it was previously known with) will be a step in the right direction towards preservation and promotion of the festival with a new face of attraction. In rebranding *Aju* festival, the local organizing committee should have a target audience (the youths). For instance, empowerment like skills acquisition, football competition, music competition, costume making, gastronomy competition should be incorporated into the festival celebrations and the best should be rewarded to encourage others.

Tourists (visitors)

During the festival, indigenous people come back with their friends from far and near. Based on this light, making the festival friendly with visitors will boost and stop the misconceptions held against the festival by non-indigenous people, on another note, the festival will open up other attractions that will make tourists comfortable and enjoy their stay in the community. A visit to Umunaga and Umuchima beaches, Ngane Ukwu enu shrine, and Mmahi salt lake will be additional attractions to tourists during the festival celebration in the study area.

Sustainability

What brings the idea of sustainability is the need for preservation and promotion of our cultural heritage. What makes any heritage attraction (festival) rise and fall is a lack of sustainability which is also a lack of incorporation of the future generation into the development plans at the onset of the development. For *Aju* festival to be sustained the resources (heritage) have to be consumed with care in such a way that the future ones shall have their share of the heritage. Even as the festival opens up other attractions, the local government should place laws that will regulate the activities of tourists in the various destinations.

Conclusion

Resuscitating Aju cultural festival for tourism promotion in Uburu community is a step in the right direction. Aju festival is one of the intangible cultural attractions that have the potentials of making the Uburu community a potential destination for tourism activities when harnessed for tourist consumption. This is because heritage like natural, cultural-historical, and manmade attractions are significant objects of any nation as they can reveal the past, inform about the present, and predict the future. The existence or meaningful development of any given society depends on what the present generation will be capable of sustaining to the future generation. With the present infrastructural development in Uburu community, resuscitating Aju festival will bring the study area to the limelight cum tourist destination which will enable preservation and promotion of tourism development in Ebonyi State and Nigeria at large.

Contribution to Knowledge

Uburu community is blessed with numerous attractions ranging from natural, cultural and built attractions. The community and its geographical location is an attraction on its own and developing *Aju* cultural festival will place Uburu community in the world map thereby makes the community destination for tourism activities.

The research will serve as a guide cum tourism master plan to government agencies, private individuals and Nongovernmental organization, students and tourism scholars that has interest in harnessing massive tourism potential in Uburu community and Ebonyi state at large.

Also, model for resuscitation, preservation and promotion of *Aju* cultural festival will contribute to some extent in reshaping misconception hold for decades against the festival in the community. The model will help to bring in investor that can develop beaches scattered all over the community for leisure and relaxation. Also, since tourism is private driven, hotlists can also come in to build and take their share from proceeds generated from tourism and the community will be open up to the world and when it does the youths and women will be the major beneficiaries.

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