



## Building our Cultural World: A Post-COVID-19 Assessment of Okorobo Festival in Ifaki-Ekiti, Ekiti State.

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted traditional cultural events globally, affecting their planning, participation, and cultural values. The study examined a post-COVID assessment of the Okorobo festival and how cultural festivals can be revived again after COVID-19. Data were collected using 70 copies of well-structured questionnaires retrieved out of 100 copies distributed to respondents. The results show that the festival's ratings, compared with the previous ones, are below average due to the low level of patronage and participation, with over 50% of the respondents attesting to the low patronage level compared with previous events. It was also found that bad government policies have limited the growth of the cultural festivals in the state. The results show that 45 respondents, representing 64.3%, agreed that policies were unfavourable about the state's tourism issue. The study also found that the town did not have some basic amenities that could make the festival successful. The study recommended that the patrons get themselves vaccinated and that all measures be taken to curb the spread of the deadly COVID-19 virus. Furthermore, the government should increase their stake in tourism by providing favourable policies and amenities that can help the growth of cultural tourism within the study area and the state at large. It was also recommended that the government and well-meaning indigenes work hand in hand to ensure that the festival is elevated to meet world-class festivals, as this will help increase IGR at local and state levels.

**Keywords:** Okorobo, COVID-19, policies, Ifaki Ekiti

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### Introduction

People without knowledge of their history, origin, culture, and economic status are like trees without roots. It is empirically evident that understanding the past is indispensable to knowing the present and shaping the future of any community. Festival celebrations have been known to preserve our traditions, customs, and norms. Most of our history, culture, and traditions are fading without a trace

with time; therefore, there is a need to get the new generation used to these facts. Local festivals and celebrations are vital in mitigating tensions, bridging divides, and fostering reciprocity and appreciation for diversity. They provide a platform for participants to forge connections and communication, cultivate a shared "sense of belonging," transcend borders and barriers, and combat social exclusion. These events serve as a cohesive fabric for nurturing robust social cohesion. Like many cultural events globally, the festival has likely encountered challenges due to the pandemic. Festivals are an essential aspect of cultural tourism because they bring out all the elements of culture through different means. In recent times, festivals have been seen primarily in Nigeria as a way of bringing together indigenes and non-indigenes of a particular community at least once a year. Omotoba (2015) described festivals as an essential aspect of tourism that receives less attention even though their impact on tourism development cannot be waved aside.

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the global tourism sector. Governments worldwide initiated stringent "lockdowns" starting in March 2020, although the specifics of these measures varied between nations. Nonetheless, there were commonalities in responses, including mandates or encouragement for wearing face masks, implementing "social distancing" protocols, such as maintaining distance between individuals, and employing sanitation practices like hand sanitization and enhanced cleaning routines while minimizing surface contact. Large-scale events like festivals, concerts, and cultural exhibitions, integral to tourism, were prohibited or significantly restricted. Travel, particularly international journeys, became exceedingly challenging as a result. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted various sectors worldwide, including education, agriculture, and the arts. Studies have highlighted efforts to build resilience in education systems post-COVID-19 (Naidu, 2021), the influence of public health containment measures on agricultural activities (Ojediran et al., 2021), and the financial difficulties faced by arts organizations (Charles & Nicoll, 2022). These references offer a foundation for understanding the broader consequences of the pandemic across different fields, which can be extrapolated to the cultural domain and the Okorobo Festival.

Examining the Okorobo Festival in the post-COVID-19 era provides an opportunity to comprehend how cultural events have adapted and developed in response to unprecedented challenges. Drawing insights from various sectors affected by the pandemic, this assessment can offer valuable lessons for the resilience and sustainability of cultural traditions in a changing world. While the study aims to investigate how our cultural heritage can be revitalized with a special focus on the assessment of Okorobo festival of Ifaki Ekiti after COVID-19, the objectives of the study are to critically assess the events in the festival, assess the effects of COVID-19 on the festival in comparison with previous ones, and examine the developmental advantage of Okorobo festival on development in the post-COVID-19 era.

### **The Study Area**

Ifaki is a community that cannot divorce itself from its preterit background. Oral testimonies acknowledge eastward migration from Ile-Ife, the cradle of the Yoruba and their settlements and towns around the present Ifaki Township. Ifaki Ekiti is one of the major towns in Ekiti State. It is located at the center of Ekiti State in Ido/Osi Local Government Area. The kingdom occupies an area of three thousand square kilometres, on an elevation of about five hundred feet above sea level, surrounded by plain land and valley. It is in the tropical area of Nigeria, which is common with the rest of the country. There are two seasons (dry and rainy seasons)

Ifaki Ekiti consists of four major villages, which are now called quarters. These villages came together because of inter- or intra-tribal wars, occasionally troubling small villages and the rest of Yoruba villages and towns. Iwore is a village settled in Iloda near the Eleriku River, and the place is about ten kilometres from the present town of Ifaki. Some inhabitants came from Ado and Ifaki Ekiti because of tribal wars. Their Baale then was Oluwore of Iwore, now one of the High Chiefs constituting the Olufaki-in-Council. Ilero, the second village, came from Esure Ekiti when they were constantly invaded. Then Elesure sought refuge at Oluran and stayed there until he had his first son

at Ifaki Ekiti. When he returned to Esure after the wars had ended, Elesure left his son behind at Ilero quarters at Ifaki. He is now one of the High Chiefs in Ifaki.

Ilogbe people are also a conglomeration of war refugees who ran away from their former towns or villages because of intra or inter-tribal wars. Some people came from Ido, some from Ijelu Ekiti, and some from Orin Ekiti. Ilogbe quarters is headed by Olulogbe, one of the High Chiefs in Ifaki. Another village that merged with Ifaki is Egun. They came from Ikole-Ekiti, while Elegun is one of the High Chiefs in Olufaki council, and Egun is now a quarter in Ifaki Ekiti. Other groups that later settled down at Ifaki Ekiti were Olokun and his family, who claimed to have come from Igbara-Odo, and the Ejemu, who came from Ifisin Ekiti.



### The Study Area

Source: Map Data (2021)

These four villages and some other people had existed in Ifaki Ekiti before the arrival of Olufaki, the royal leader of the community. Oral traditions described Olufaki as the elder brother to Ajero of Ijero Ekiti. However, because of chieftaincy rifts between him and his younger brother, his younger brother was made the Ajero of Ijero Ekiti; he left Ijero angrily with some guards for a greener pasture. When he got to Ifaki, the people saw some signs of royalty in him, such as the crown, the beads, the enslaved people, and many other things.

The Amuju, the queen and the administrator of the whole quarters of Ifaki, then had to respect the royalty and vacated the throne for the Olufaki, and she became the second in command. The unification of these villages under the name ifaki, which literarily means the gift of Eki cloth, brought the four quarters together, but they are still their old names. Many festivals are brought with these villages to their new settlement at ifaki, which they celebrate seasonally or annually, as the case may be. Festivals such as the Apeao Festival, Egungun Festival, and Okorobo festival

### Methods

The study relied on primary data, which was retrieved using the questionnaire. One hundred copies of a well-structured questionnaire were administered to the target population. As a result of the level of fear and restrictions because of COVID-19, only 70 copies of the questionnaire were retrieved. The questionnaire was subjected to coding using MS Excel 2019 and analyzed using SPSS v 23. The result was then presented in tables for further discussion.

## Discussion

### Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 below shows the demographic characteristics of respondents. Most of the respondents are males, and the highest age bracket is between 20 and 59 years, accounting for Nigeria's main active population. 57.2% of the respondents are married and 54.3% are graduates of one higher institution. Since Ekiti State is a civil servant state, over 20% of the respondents were civil servant. Also in the study, even though the respondents claimed to be active as far as the festival is concerned, a larger population of the respondents claimed that they are Christians (58.6%), while only 11.4% claimed to be traditionalists (*igbagbo ko ni ka ma se oro ile baba eni*).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic Information		Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	43	61.4
	Female	27	38.6
Age	<20 Years	7	10.8
	20-39	25	35.7
	40-59	21	30.0
	>59 Years	17	23.5
Marital Status	Single	24	34.3
	Married	40	57.2
	Divorced	1	1.4
	Widowed	5	7.1
Education	No Formal Education	15	21.4
	Primary	5	7.1
	Secondary	12	17.1
	Tertiary	38	54.3
Religion	Christianity	41	58.6
	Islam	19	27.1
	Traditional	8	11.4
	Others	2	2.9
Occupation	Farming	10	14.3
	Crafting	12	17.1
	Civil Servant	14	20.0
	Public Servant	13	18.6
	Others	21	30.0

Source: Fieldwork, 2020

### Major events of the Okorobo Festival

Okorobo festival is a prominent new yam cultural festival celebrated annually from generation to generation. There are two Okorobos which are; *Okorobo Iwore* and *Okorobo Egun* respectively. Although everybody in the town takes part in the festival it originally belonged to the main families in *Iwore* viz *Esiba* and *Oluwore*. *Esiba* brought the idea of showing appreciation to the gods and gratitude to the people by celebrating their farm product pounded yam with pork meat and wine would be prepared in abundance and served to the members of each family and the relatives.

It is generally called *Odun Alawo Gbawo*. Every male child of the family will have his pot of soup and prepare his meat together with his friends from the tubers of yam and the fowls his father might have given him in respect of the Okorobo festival. Okorobo is a festival that involves no rituals or making of sacrifices unto any idol, this is perhaps one of the reasons why people of different shades and creeds participate in the ceremony. It is all about singing and dancing while some physically fit men and women voluntarily flog each other on their legs with the long stems of palm fronds. Strong young men

see it as an exercise and a longstanding conventional way of celebrating the great feast.

Two masquerades were designed and referred to as Aja symbols of unity between men and women of Ifaki, it is believed that behind a successful man, there must be a cooperating and responsible woman, the masquerades are also seals of unity between the two families from which the Okorobo originated the *Oluwoore* and *Esiba*. The Okorobo masquerades stand as an intermediary between the people and the gods, the masquerades take their supplications and appreciation to the gods for them to receive more blessings, favor, and protection in the coming years. *Aja Okorobo* masquerades are made of very long poles of about fifteen feet, yellow palm leaves are cut into two vertically through the palm fronds after the tiny sticks used for making broom have been removed, and the leaves are woven artistically around the poles, the two strong ropes of equal length are tied on to the top of the poles, these ropes are used to control and hold the masquerade in balance.

Okorobo festival has no ritual or any secret behind it that is the reason every indigenous Ifaki at home and in the Diaspora is involved in its celebrations. Okorobo festival lasts for seven days, throughout these seven days both men and women chant praise songs known as "Alamo". They chant the praise of the deity who has relatives and husbands who were their benefactors during past famine most importantly, they chant praise to the fetish gods and goddesses. *Ogberekejo* is another satire or mimic song composed to expose every act of immoralities, indiscipline, and indecent acts committed by any member of the community on and before the festival.

The Ifaki youths sing and dance around the town from three o'clock in the morning till about mid-day. More so, within seven days, men harvest hundreds of heaps of tuber of yams from their farms and distribute them to all their relatives, especially the aged ones who could not farm anymore. There is always the special market day before the main day where the women and children buy condiments needed for the Okorobo festival, the day before the day of celebration, the youths will go to their father's farms to celebrate the festival known as

*Okorobo oko* this is a form of miniature of the real Okorobo at home, they will hunt, tap wine and pound yam right in the farm for the celebration. They will also prepare masquerades, which will be about four feet long.

The significance of this is to create a practicing ground for the future participants; they will also prepare the rod known as "iro" simply the palm tree branch with which they use to flog one another on the day of Okorobo. Throughout the seven days of celebration cutlasses and hoes which are the emblems of farming are forbidding to be used for any manual labor, it is also a bad omen for any person to die during the festival period because it is believed that digging materials are at rest. Within the seven days of events, there would be a series of activities such as games, and cultural dance from every representative of clans and ethnic groups that dwell in the Ifaki community in the king's palace.

On the seventh day Chief *Oluwoore* the Okorobo priest would lead the other chiefs to dance around Ifaki, after that the Okorobo masquerade would leave the grove for *Iwoore* Street, and the people would say their wishes in the form of prayers while the youth would be busy flogging one another with the tree branch called "iro" which they had earlier prepared for the occasion, the significance of the flogging to show the youthful farmers and their level of tolerance to their neighbor. Dancing, singing, flogging, and merriment will go on till the masquerades return to the grove.

About a week to the appointed day, women will chant eulogizing songs in praise of the coming feast and elegies in remembrance of their late comrades who had shared happy occasions with them in the past and were no more. Melodious and sonorous voices could be heard from different individuals coming out of various houses. Any keen observer on the outskirts of the town is bound to notice the large quantity of yams that would be brought home for consumption during the festival. Some generous farmers will share part of their harvest of the day with relations. The official meat for the festival is pork (*Elede*). It is slaughtered in large quantities for the Okorobo feast by families that are interested and could afford it; and distributed to some neighbors. Even the

extremely poor or lonely and indigent ones would have more than enough to eat.

It is often the day most participants overindulge in food, palm wine, ogogoro, beer, and all shades of drinks. Spectators would marvel at the procession of different age grades of females adorning Ankara/lace uniforms of various designs for groups ranging from underage children through to ladies in their thirties. These different age groups would sing, dance, and parade the long route of Okorobo before its arrival. Nevertheless, the arrival of Okorobo heralds the peak of the day's celebration.

It is made up of two long columns decorated with palm fronds and carried on the head supported by two strong ropes. Each column is about 10-12 feet high. It is carried from the Okorobo grove into the town. On sighting the tip of the head, the crowd would greet with a loud "o i re e e!" It means it is advancing and going forth; it will go and come back successfully. This is often the moment all the tourists and other observers have been waiting to see and enjoy the crest of passion that often accompanies the memorable long procession.

The long procession and withdrawal of the Okorobo crew and its retinue i.e., about 2km journey to and fro the stretch of the main street of *Iwore* quarter is the height of enjoyment and indeed the climax of the festival. The tempo of flogging among the youthful folks will increase in front of the procession up till when Okorobo gets to the resting point. By 6:30 and 7:30 p.m., all ceremonies will end after the full-day activity.

The traditional music supplied is of two kinds: one for the physical part of the ceremony which is not accompanied by a drum; while the other is accompanied by the *Kekedu* drum, *Aran*, and Buffalo horns. The concluding part of the week-long celebration is very graceful and cool because old men and women dance to the rich traditional music. The Chief Priest who is also the head of *Iwore* quarters, the *Oluwore* dances in this group. He has a special emblem on him differentiating him from others.

The rate at which COVID-19 affected festivals generally in the state is alarming but the problem attributed to participation is not only because of Coronavirus. Other factors treated

Other groups dance and sing to different high-tempo songs, which suit their youthful physical nature. Their songs usually contain abusive words to deride past or present evil deeds, which the perpetrators might think are not known to the public. As far back as the 1960s and 1970s, Okorobo attracted the interest of elites who were not necessarily Ifaki indigenes whose callings took them outside Ekiti. Okorobo Festival is no doubt one of the festivals that can revive the tourism sector of Ekiti State.

### **The Effects of COVID-19 on the Festival in Comparison with Previous Ones**

COVID-19 has impacted cultural tourism negatively because its main event is a festival that involves a public gathering of participants. As a result of the various lockdowns, the festival was negatively affected. The table below shows the different variables to know the various effects of COVID-19 on the Okorobo Festival, 2020.

The ratings of the festival when compared with the previous one are generally poor (Table 2b). In the table, while 50% of the total respondents classed the ratings as below average, only 7.1% agreed that it is above average. Ishola, et al (2020) noted that live cultural events were affected by the outbreak of the pandemic; one among them was the Gidi cultural festival which is often filled with live entertainment from line-up-of best African and international acts which includes some of the best emerging artists and a diverse range of African food vendors. This also corroborates the findings of Seidi-Fox (2020) who noted that festivals are needed to bridge the cultural world. COVID-19 can thus serve as a barrier to the development of festivals.

Also in the study, it was strongly agreed that the reduction in patrons was a result of COVID-19 (see Table 2c). This is because most regular participants could not participate because of fear of COVID-19 (table 2d). COVID-19 also resulted in the halt of commercial activities in the study area during the Okorobo Festival, 2020.

during the study showed that COVID-19 may not be the only reason why there are fewer patrons for the event. In Table 2f, it was shown that government policies are not in support of festivals with over 60% agreement by the

respondents. Another factor is religion, Christianity and Islam have led most people out of their inherited traditional religion. In the study, it was disagreed that Christianity and

Islam have in any way affected culture. But a few people were also not involved because of fear due to rituals and rites.

Effects Of Covid-19 On Festival		Frequency	Percentage
<b>Are you a first timer</b>	Yes	18	25.7
	No	52	74.3
<b>Ratings of event when compared to previous</b>	Above Average	5	7.1
	Average	20	28.6
	Not Sure	10	14.3
	Below Average	35	50
	Strongly Agree	49	70
	Agree	9	12.9
<b>Covid-19 Reduces Patrons</b>	Undecided	2	2.8
	Disagree	9	12.9
	Strongly	1	1.4
	Disagree		
	Strongly Agree	39	55.7
	Agree	16	22.9
<b>Non-Participation Due To Fear Of Covid-19</b>	Undecided	6	8.6
	Disagree	2	2.8
	Strongly	7	10.0
	Disagree		
	Strongly Agree	40	57.1
	Agree	21	30.0
<b>Covid-19 Has Halted Commercial Activities</b>	Undecided	4	5.8
	Disagree	1	1.4
	Strongly	4	5.7
	Disagree		
	Strongly Agree	24	34.3
	Agree	21	30.0
<b>Government Policies Not In Support Of Festivals</b>	Undecided	3	4.3
	Disagree	6	8.6
	Strongly	16	22.8
	Disagree		
	Strongly Agree	13	18.6
	Agree	18	25.7
<b>Christianity And Islam Has Negatively Affect Our Culture</b>	Undecided	3	4.2
	Disagree	13	18.6
	Strongly	23	32.9
	Disagree		
	Strongly Agree	20	28.6
	Agree	11	15.7
<b>Fear Of Festivals Due To Rituals And Rites</b>	Undecided	14	20.0
	Disagree	11	15.7
	Strongly	14	20.0
	Disagree		

Source: Fieldwork, 2020

### The Developmental Advantage of Okorobo Festival in the Post-Covid-19 Era

The section examined the development advantage of the Okorobo festival. In the study, the respondents agreed that there has been no meaningful development in the community because of the festival. This is largely due to neglect of cultural tourism by the government and indigenes of the locality. Several researches have shown that most of these festivals were used to source funds for developmental projects in villages and towns across the state but most of these funds were not always utilized the way they are supposed to be. This manifested in the results of the study with only 27.3% agreeing

that there has been a developmental project because of the Okorobo festival. According to Omotoba (2015), Infrastructures should be made available for both the host communities and tourists, apart from power supply, portable water, good roads, and other social amenities that can make cultural communities functional. The festivals must be made accessible. Also, other amenities that can aid the positive satisfaction of tourists should be provided. Majorly, accommodation, parking facilities, relaxation centers, etc. should be made available by both the public and private sectors.

<b>Developmental advantage of okorobo festival on development in post-covid era</b>		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Are you a resident</b>	Yes	55	78.6
	No	15	21.4
<b>Contribution to the success of the festival</b>	Financially	12	17.1
	Materially	8	11.4
	Spiritually	24	34.3
	Patronizing	24	34.3
	Others	2	2.9
<b>Development as a result of the festival</b>	Yes	17	24.3
	No	53	75.7
<b>Precautions are taken to reduce the spread of covid-19</b>	Use of facemasks	34	48.6
	Washing of hands	13	18.6
	Use of sanitizer	8	11.4
	Social/physical distancing	10	14.3
	Others	5	7.1
<b>Level of satisfaction on infrastructure for Okorobo</b>			
<b>Road networks leading to the host community</b>	Very dissatisfied	14	20.0
	Dissatisfied	11	15.7
	Undecided	2	2.9
	Satisfied	19	27.1
	Very satisfied	24	34.3
<b>Communication networks</b>	Very dissatisfied	7	10.0
	Dissatisfied	5	7.1
	Undecided	3	4.3
	Satisfied	25	35.7
	Very satisfied	30	42.9
<b>Security</b>	Very dissatisfied	5	7.1
	Dissatisfied	11	15.6
	Undecided	3	4.3
	Satisfied	27	38.6
	Very satisfied	22	31.4
<b>Toilet facilities</b>	Very dissatisfied	15	21.4
	Dissatisfied	24	34.3
	Undecided	10	14.3
<b>Public transport</b>	Satisfied	15	21.4
	Very satisfied	6	8.6
	Very dissatisfied	9	12.8



	Dissatisfied	11	15.7
	Undecided	3	4.3
	Satisfied	27	38.6
	Very satisfied	20	28.6
	Very dissatisfied	15	21.4
<b>Potable water</b>	Dissatisfied	28	40.0
	Undecided	9	12.9
	Satisfied	11	15.7
	Very satisfied	7	10.0
	Very dissatisfied	6	8.6
<b>Accommodation</b>	Dissatisfied	8	11.4
	Undecided	6	8.6
	Satisfied	28	40.0
	Very satisfied	22	31.4
	Very dissatisfied	13	18.6
<b>Eateries and restaurants</b>	Dissatisfied	6	8.6
	Undecided	5	7.1
	Satisfied	27	38.6
	Very satisfied	19	27.1

Source: Fieldwork, 2020

The level of satisfaction with the facilities present in Ifaki Ekiti for the success of the festival was also assessed. Out of the facilities in Table 3 above, only two were not satisfactory, which are toilet facilities and potable water. These two are very important to the well-being of patrons and the respondents were not satisfied as shown in table 3 above. Facilities are very compulsory entities for the development of cultural tourism anywhere in the world. Although, the respondents were satisfied with roads within the communities, what of roads of surrounding communities?

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusively, this research has largely shown the various activities embedded in the great Okorobo festival and shown the various reasons for the problems confronted during the Okorobo Festival 2020. COVID-19 largely has limited the development of cultural festivals due

to the several restrictions and fear of contracting the virus among the populace. Neglect on the part of the government and unavailability of facilities have also been a limiting factor to the growth of cultural festivals in the study area. it is thus recommended that: COVID-19 vaccines should be purchased so that everybody can be a beneficiary of the vaccine, this will allow for free movement and will increase patronage levels without fear of contraction; the government should be proactive and should work out policies that can help revive cultural tourism not just in the study area but in Nigeria at large especially as the number of cases of COVID-19 is dwindling; cultural festivals within the state should be taken into limelight by advertising using different form of media especially social media; facilities that will help the image of the host community should be put in place as this will also increase the level of patronage within the study area.

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