

Ikenge Festival of Amai Kingdom: Aspects And Rituals

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Abstract

This study examines the Ikenge festival of the Amai Kingdom. Amai is a Ukwuani community in the present-day Ukwuani Local Government Area of Delta State. This study is derived from the centrality of the festival in the social, religio-cultural and political history of the people. The general objective, therefore, is to examine the various aspects and rituals associated with the festival. It also delves into how the political history of the people, their quest for survival in the face of existential threats, and their gallantry and exploits have shaped the celebration of aspects of the festival. Adopting historical methods of description and analysis, the research utilises an ethnographic approach, integrating participant observation of the festival with interviews, documentary evidence, and multimedia recordings (audio and photography of scenes and events). The study aims to establish that the various aspects and rituals of the festival have shaped people's lives and existence.

Keywords: Amai, Festivals, Religious and Cultural History, religious Rituals

introduction

Festivals are central to the social and religio-cultural history of every society. As a source of oral history in songs, chants, and dance, festivals have survived across ages and civilisations and are currently visible in the tourism and hospitality industries worldwide. Festivals provide a connection between the past and the present, as their celebrations re-enact memories of the past. A festival tells much about a people's history, including their origins, migration, settlement, and later historical developments and incidents.

A festival is conceived as an artistic normative practice and observance of any given society, depicting the historical and cultural heritage at a particular time or period under characteristic conjugality. This is given that most African festivals are dedicated to the veneration of the supreme God, intermediary spirits, and ancestral beings for either a glorious past or an anticipated future (Anigala, 2005, pp. 24-26).

As a result, people's festivals have religio-cultural implications. However, this is not to deny the social effects of all festivals in facilitating intra-group and inter-group relations, promoting internal cohesion and external cordiality (Obamwonyi & Onyekuru, 2024, p. 3). There are notable characteristics of festivals. First, all festivals have historical, social, religious and cultural significance. Second, festivals are ritualised. Lastly, there is seasonality in festival celebrations, predicated on the specificity of location and time frame (Okocha, Faloseyi, Elele and Onobe, 2024:19).

Further, according to Okafor (cited in Udensi et al., 2020:205), a festival is a periodic gathering of people to celebrate an event. It includes forms of entertainment and performances which are often held at a particular time of the year. A festival could be seen as a chain of activities, celebrations, ceremonies, food, drinks, and rituals that mark the continuity of culture in a given environment. It also celebrates the deeds of the forebears who served and sacrificed their time and resources as pathfinders of the people. It is the convergence of memory (the past) and ideas (the future) that is sacred and indispensable to the preservation of the people's cultural heritage. Such is the Ikenge festival to the Amai people.

Ikenge festival is One of the festivals celebrated among the Ukwuani group in Nigeria's Delta State. The festival is of Igbo provenance, celebrated by the Igbo group east and west of the Niger River

(Chukwudera, 2021, pp. 1-2). The celebration of the festival is a submission and veneration of the invisible and divine entities, namely the supreme God (Chukwu Abiama / Chineke/ Oliseweuwa), the mediatory angels or spirits (Ndi Nmor), and the ancestral spirits (Ndi Ikei) reckoned to control and regulate the affairs of the living. The identification and rendering of these supreme entities are etymologically Igbo, with a manifest effect on valiance, heroism, and valour in life endeavours. Hence, Izuegbu (2003:38) captures Ikenge, also pronounced Ikenga, as central in Igbo cosmology with its emblems representing the God of good luck and individuals' right arm of achievement."

The Ikenge festival in Amai falls within the late January to early February window, marking the end of the traditional farming calendar and the beginning of a new farming year. Therefore, the festival is used to celebrate the outgoing year, thanking the various gods for the fertility of the soil, the fertility of their women's wombs, victory in wars, and success in other endeavours. It also celebrates Amai's continued capacity to defend itself and sustain its existence, especially against the forces of Obiaruku, Umuebu, Eziokpor and Ezionum, collectively known as the Akashiede Alliance. It presents an opportunity to offer sacrifices for a better New Year. The Ikenge celebration can be likened to the modern New Year celebration.

It is also a time for families to have a well-deserved rest and enjoy their harvests, having been occupied with farming since the beginning of the planting season. Also, extended families come together, from far and wide, to bond. This period also witnesses an increase in marriage ceremonies, funerals, and chieftaincy installations immediately after the festival. Social clubs and cooperative societies also hold their end-of-year parties during this period. Deliberately, people have begun planning their social events to coincide with the Ikenge season. The dry season, which characterises the period, also motivates people to hold their social events during that season.

However, despite the changes, most aspects of the festival celebration, including the rituals, remain resilient. Against this background, this study examines the Ikenge festival of Amai with a view to establishing the factors of change and continuity in its celebration.

There is increasing interest among scholars in humanistic fields in the study of festivals, leading to the term 'festivalisation'. The various festivals celebrated by the Ukwuani group, including the Ikenge festival, have received limited academic attention and commentary on social media and in the analytical community. Scholars such as Esimike of Fine and Applied Arts, Osanebi of Music, Eziechine of English, Obamwonyi, Onyekuru, Ossai-Uloku, and Anyawu of the Theatre Arts have, in their respective studies, x-rayed the various aspects of the Ikenge festival in Ukwuani land. However, the studies' limited understanding of the festival is limited to aesthetic, visual, symbolic, emblematic, and entertainment significance. The near absence of Ikenge of Amai from studies of its ritual significance and historical perspective, reflecting its role in the origin and later development of the people, has created conflicting positions on the changes and continuity that have embraced the festival in recent times. The research questions are: What traditions exist regarding the origin, migration, and socio-cultural system of the Amai people? What are the meaning, symbols and associated rituals of the Ikenge festival among the people? What factors led to significant changes and continuity in the Ikenge people's culture over time? In what ways has the festival impacted the Amai people and community? These questions are fundamental to understanding the historical development of the Ikenge festival in the Amai Kingdom.

Ikenga in the Organisational System of Amai

Ikenga occupies a central position within Amai's organisational system, serving as a key expression of the community's social and religious-cultural heritage, observances, and practices. Over time, these traditions have shown some adaptability in response to changing social conditions and

worldviews. Consequently, the celebration of the Ikenge festival among the Amai people demonstrates both continuity and transformation in its forms, meanings, and functions.

Origin of the Ikenge Festival

The Ikenge festival, as noted by Gugum (1986), is considered to be as old as the Ukwuani people themselves. Each settlement group within the region maintains its account regarding the origin of the Ikenge deity. Among the Utagba-Uno community, whose celebration of the festival is regarded as the most prominent in Ukwuani, the festival honours and commemorates heroes who defended the land and ensured the safety of the people, thereby ensuring the continued existence of their settlement (Obaniwonyi & Onyekuru, 2024).

One tradition recounts the story of Nge, a warrior who defeated a malevolent spirit known as Akidi. The presence of Akidi had subjected the community to torment, causing the deaths of many natives and forcing the people to live in constant fear, avoiding their farms and areas where the spirit was active. Nge volunteered to confront Akidi, ultimately demystifying, killing and beheading the 'spirit', and returning its head to the settlement. This heroic act sparked communal celebration, and the phrase "*Ike Nge siniwagbu Akidi*", meaning "the strength of Nge caused the killing of Akidi", became a song of victory. The strength of Nge, or *Ike Nge*, was subsequently deified, and the celebration came to be observed both individually and collectively among the people (Oral interview with Queen-Obi Asi Monye).

In Amai, the Ikenge deity is closely associated with the narrative of the Nze deity's origination from Aboh, mediated by Nze (Gugum, 1986, p. 11; Aniodigwe, 2008:22–24). According to tradition, the Obi of Aboh, Esume, entrusted Nze with the symbols of the Nze deity (a royal cult deity) and of Ikenge, a god associated with luck, achievement, success, and strength. The symbol of Ikenge comprised a bow and an iron arrow. Both symbols were installed at Amai-Nge, with the Okpala-Uku serving as their custodian priest, responsible for overseeing their veneration and associated rituals (Gugum, 1986:11–12).

The central role of Nge in introducing the Ikenge deity in Amai raises questions about the Utagba-Uno tradition's reference to Nge. It is plausible that the heroic acts attributed to the Utagba-Uno Nge were understood within a religious context in which the Ikenge deity, already present in the belief system, empowered the warrior to overcome threats to the settlement. This connection suggests that the origins of Ikenge are best traced to Igbo communities east of the Niger, where the cosmology provides well-defined terminologies and conceptual frameworks for the deity and its associated festival.

The diffusion of Ikenge into Ukwuani communities occurred through the migration and adaptation of Igbo groups who moved westward across the Niger River. Their initial settlements in the riverine areas of Asaba, Ebu, and Aboh served as the first points of cultural contact. Within these settlements, Igbo religious and cultural practices, including the veneration of Ikenge, were introduced, adapted, and incorporated into local belief systems. From these points, the festival and associated rituals were further disseminated, gradually becoming embedded in the cultural and spiritual life of the wider Ukwuani communities.

Various Aspects and Rituals Associated with the Ikenge Festival

The Ikenge festival in Amai is marked by a series of distinct rituals, each serving to define and legitimise it within the community. One of the most important of these is the ritual associated with the fixing of the festival date, called Ika Nmor, which takes place at Isu Nze in Amai-Nge and is

presided over by the Okpala-Uku of the section. The process of determining a suitable date involves consultations and contributions from notable members and leaders across the community.

Ika Mmor: This is the commencement ceremony where the Ikenge festival for the year is declared open, and the timetable is announced. It involves the Okpala Uku leading the community to the Nze shrine to commune with the ancestors and seek their permission to hold the Ikenge festival for that year. If the ancestors' responses are positive, the Okpala Uku and his chiefs perform further rituals and declare the Ikenge festival open. The Okpala-Uku initiates the process on an Afor day with an **Ikpo-Uku**. This convening brings together the Okpala-Ukus and other ruling representatives from the other four communities. This preparatory engagement continues for two consecutive days (Eke), culminating on the designated day when all participants assemble at Ishu Nze, the location that also houses the Ikenge deity. Before the meeting, a man considered ritually pure performs a ritual washing of the Ikenge emblem with palm wine. This act is intended to prevent violence and misfortune during the festival period. The meeting is formally chaired by the Okpala-Uku of Amai-Nge, who alone enters the Nze temple to present kola nuts to all attendees. Only indigenes, who are freeborn members of the community, are permitted to partake. At the same time, individuals of outcast, slave (Ndi Oshu), or foreign status are prohibited from participating in this ritual, reflecting their exclusion from sacred communal rites.

Initially, the Okpala-Uku proposes a provisional date approximately five months in advance. This date is then reconsidered through deliberation with the Okpala-Ukus and Inotu of Amai-Nge, after which the final date is declared, typically after **Oge Ise** (a period of twenty-five days). The announcement of the official festival date signals the commencement of **Igba Ogene**, a period of music, dance, and fanfares that continues for the twenty-five days leading up to the festival itself (Gugum, 1986:13–15).

Igba Ogene Ogene Dance Procession)The **Igba Ogene** is performed at night as part of the preparatory activities leading to the Ikenge festival. During this period, the names of individuals who have committed crimes or engaged in abominable acts are incorporated into songs and chants, serving both as social admonition and communal memory. Concurrently, dance groups form and rehearsals begin in anticipation of the festival. Prior to the commencement of the celebrations, hunters remain in the bush to neutralise any potential dangers. This precautionary practice is intended to maintain peace during the festival, particularly given that the Ikenge festival is traditionally associated with displays of violence and martial prowess. This practice is observed across all Ukwuani clans.

In an interview with Chief Oduwe Orji Napoleon, he gave a detailed description of the Igba Ogene procession. According to him,

...Igba Ogene is the practice of dancing round the community by women and children to signify the success of the Ika Mmor event. After the Ika Mmor, the women perform Igba Ogene. The Ika Mmor comes with the lifting of the embargo on the use of vulgar words in the community. The women's dancing, singing, and clapping have significant social significance. The women see themselves as vessels of honour, and the preservation of the community's moral values rests with them to protect. Through the Ogene, social discipline is instilled. The names of women and men who, in their various ways, have committed acts of sacrilege in the community, like adultery, stealing, fornication, witchcraft, etc., are composed into songs. These culprits are called out in the Ogene songs and processions. These culprits are jeered at and vilified if sighted. It is believed that naming and shaming the culprit will deter them from such acts in the future and deter others.

The importance of the Igba Ogene lies in its dramatic, aesthetic, sacred, secular, and moral significance. Through various renditions of songs, history is recorded, documented and preserved in oral forms.

Mmanwu (Masquerade): Central to Amai cultural identity, masquerades function as physical manifestations of deities or ancestral heroes. These phenomena exhibit significant morphological diversity, with variations dictated by regional traditions, ritualistic intent, and aesthetic patterns. Fundamental to this practice is the mask, a transformative apparatus that facilitates the impersonation of supernatural entities by obscuring the wearer's human identity. Within the broader context of traditional African societies, these ceremonial disguises are classified by their anatomical application into head, face, and body masks. These masquerades, such as the Ochu and Ukwata, are also emblematic of the land's deities.

Ibu Ukwata: The **Ibu Ukwata dance** constitutes a prominent feature of the festival in several clans, including Amai, Obiaruku, Umuebu, and Umukwata. Historically, the Ukwata dance was not performed alongside the Ikenge festival in other Ukwuani clans, such as Umutu, but this changed in recent years, and the two now coincide. In preparation for the festival, the Otu-Onuogbo age group, responsible for the military and defence functions within the clans, undertakes hunting expeditions to procure game (*Ichu Okpali*) for the performance of the Ukwata dance and to provide meat (*Nni*) for the Ikenge festival. The leader of the age group summons all members to determine the date for hunting, and there is no strict limit to the number of animals that may be taken.

Although the types of animals or birds used for the Ukwata dance may vary across different Ukwuani communities, the dance itself follows similar patterns and techniques. It is noteworthy, however, that in some clans, the Ibu Ukwata remains distinct from the Ikenge festival. Such communities include Abbi, Akoku, Emu, Ezionum, Ogume, Utagba-Ugbe, Onicha-Ukwani, and Utagba-Uno, where Ukwata continues to be celebrated independently of Ikenge.

In Amai, on the fifteenth day (Afor) following the fixing of the Ikenge festival date, the **Otu-Onuogbo** age group undertakes the clearing of the **Uno-Ukwata** (Ukwata grove). The following day (Nkwo), members of the age group move into the camp in Uno-Ukwata, where they remain for 8 days. Participation in this camping is considered essential, and any member who fails to join is subject to a fine. During the camping period, the Ukwata is renovated with fresh palm fronds, and the members rehearse the dance to determine who will perform the Ukwata for that year. No member is allowed to return home during this period. Despite the separation from their families and friends, the camp is described as an enjoyable and engaging experience.

Thomas Ajedo explains that, "In the camp, we do everything in common. Our food is prepared by the younger members of the age group under the supervision of the **Oga** (designated supervisor), and everyone eats as much as they can. At some point, the Otu-Olo age group inspects the renovated Ukwata and the game that has been killed. This inspection is purely formal, a practice that has existed from time immemorial. Upon their arrival, a special dish is prepared for them." The culmination of the camping period is marked by a ritual known as "**Ogene amu o guniofia**", which will be discussed later in this chapter. During the camping period, male youths also engage in communal activities, such as tidying the streets, as part of preparations for the Ikenge festival.

Women play an equally important role in festival preparation. They intensify efforts to store corn in anticipation of visitors, particularly because, about five days before the festival, the chiefs (Inotus) impose a ban on harvesting cassava. This is done to ensure the women and maidens are fully focused

on the festival and available to play their critical roles in the entire process. The ban remains in effect until nine days after the festival. In addition, women clean and decorate the walls of their homes, enhancing the community's aesthetic appeal. Middle-aged women also adorn their bodies with **indigo designs**, adding to the festival's visual richness.

The festival is further enlivened by performances of various dances, including **Adele, Jeni, Egwuokeloma, Egwu-Ugbana, and Amalabuyor**, which are perfected by youths in preparation for the celebrations. From the day the **Okpala-Uku** fixes the festival date, different groups begin performing specially composed songs that expose individuals who have committed offenses within the society, thus combining ritual, social regulation, and communal entertainment in the Ikenge festival.

On the eighth day of camping in the **Uno-Ukwata** (Ukwata grove), which falls on an Afor day and three days before the Ikenge festival, the **final rehearsal of the Ukwata dance** is performed by the members of the **Otu-Onuogbo** age group. On the same day, the **Otu-Ite** age group is responsible for affixing the skinned animals to the Ukwata. The Ukwata is a ceremonial object constructed from wood and palm fronds, with either a skinned animal or a bird attached. Named after a brave hunter in Ukwuani, the Ukwata is distinct from a mask or masquerade; the dancer carries it on his head during the performance. According to Amai tradition, the Otu-Ite age group prepares the Ukwata for the dance, while the **Okpala-Ukwata** (leader of the Ukwata dance) officiates the rehearsal. At the conclusion of this exercise, the best dancer is selected to perform the Ukwata during the festival.

In the evening, all participants decamp from the Uno-Ukwata and return to town around eight o'clock. Their arrival is signaled by three gunshots, alerting the community that the Otu-Onuegbe has returned from the grove. The group is led by a native trumpeter, the **Oka-Opi**, who sings praises of the age group, accompanied by a chorus of selected members chanting, "*Anu a guniofia o*", meaning "there are no more animals in the bush." This ritual serves both as a symbolic announcement and as a confirmation that preparations for the dance are complete.

The twenty-fourth day after the festival date, known as "**Mmo Ndo Obia**" (the day of the strangers), is considered particularly significant in Amai. In Ebedei and Obiaruku, this day corresponds to the sixteenth and eighth day, respectively. It is designated for the expected arrival of sons and daughters of the town who had not yet returned for the festival. In the early part of the night, the **Otu-Onuogbo** stages a public rehearsal of the Ukwata dance, during which the community learns the identity of the dancer who will perform the Ukwata. By about eight o'clock, residents gather in front of Efino's house along Obiaruku Road, Amai, eagerly awaiting the announcement of the selected performer, heightening anticipation and communal excitement associated with the festival.

After the participants have settled into their designated positions, each carrying carved bamboo sticks and, in some cases, leather fans, the songsters begin with a ceremonial song. This opening performance signals the formal start of the ritual activities, setting the mood for the dances and communal celebrations that follow. The combination of instruments, fans, and vocal performance conveys both the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of the festival, while promoting collective participation and the transmission of traditional narratives through music and movement. They usually start with a song:

*Caller: Okpala Ukwata O ge je bu o,
Response: Iyoyo ooo, O ge je bu o etc.*

*Translation:
Ukwata priest has come to perform*

Iyoyo ooo has come to perform

Following this, the rehearsal begins, starting with those who had performed the Ukwata dance in previous years. Their participation serves as a model for the new performers, guiding them through the movements and sequences. During this rehearsal, the group performs a traditional song:

*Ozagu yam owumo o,
Oh ho oh ho oh ho oh ho oh ho;
Ewa di ime o,
Oh ho oh ho oh ho oh ho oh ho.*

Translation:

*Ozagu, come forth and prepare me
Oh ho oh ho oh ho oh ho oh ho;
I am ready and longing for it,
Oh ho oh ho oh ho oh ho oh ho.*

The song accompanies the dancers' movements, establishing rhythm and synchrony while engaging both performers and observers. Finally, when the individual chosen to perform the Ukwata dance for the year takes the floor, he performs it two to three times to the previously rehearsed tunes. The singers then accompany him with the following traditional song:

*Okweliyonwamo,
Oh ho ho (repeated twice);
Nnalikweli fu yobu o,
Oh ho ho,
Nnalikweli fu yobu,
Oh ho ho, and so on.*

Translation:

*We/he has agreed to serve the deity
Oh ho ho (repeated twice);
Our fathers have given consent, so we have agreed to serve the deity,
Oh ho ho,
Our fathers have given consent, so we have agreed to serve the deity,
Oh ho ho, and so on.*

That is to say, "My son, the Ukwata dance has rested on you, and when your mother and your Father agree, you will dance the Ukwata!" With this declaration, the entire community becomes aware of who will perform the Ukwata dance for the year. Following this announcement, various groups form, keeping the town lively with songs, drumming, and other forms of entertainment throughout the night and into the following morning. The atmosphere during this period has often been compared to that of Christmas or New Year's Eve, with an air of excitement and communal celebration.

The following day, the twenty-fifth day after the festival date had been fixed, falls on an **Eke** day and marks the official beginning of the celebration. The festival spans two days. In the early hours of that Eke day, the **Otu-Olo** age group fires a series of cannons, sometimes numbering one hundred or more, signaling to the entire community that the Ikenge festival has commenced. Around four o'clock, the Ukwata dance begins, accompanied by rhythmic songs and movements. Before ten o'clock, families prepare a special meal called "Evai", which consists of yam cooked with oil soup, big fish, and meat that have been specifically preserved for the occasion.

The Ukwata dancer is adorned in distinctive ways, wearing coral beads on the wrists and around the neck, while his body is adorned with indigo patterns. The dance is performed at various strategic points within the community, particularly in front of specific shrines, emphasising both its ritual and performative significance. Once the dancing concludes, the **Otu-Onuogbo** age group retires to the house of the **Okpala-Ukwata**, where the Ukwata is kept safely until the following year, preserving the continuity of the festival and its associated rituals.

The offering of **Ewai**, a mashed boiled yam mixed with palm oil, to Ikenge concludes the activities of the first day (**Eko**) of the festival. In every household, the symbols of Ikenge worship are carefully arranged. These symbols typically include all farming and hunting implements such as cutlasses, axes, hoes, guns, bows, arrows, and other working tools. In some instances, wooden images are also placed as symbols of Ikenge.

The head of the household, acting as the lay-priest of Ikenge, performs the Ewai offering to acknowledge the deity's assistance throughout the past year. While making the offering, the "*di ogo nmo*" (lay priest) invokes the God to continue providing guidance and support for the household's endeavours. After a portion of the meal is offered to Ikenge, the remainder is shared among household members and their neighbours. In appreciation, neighbours may offer gifts or money as tokens of gratitude for the Ewai they have shared.

Okwa Nwose Uchebenu, while rendering a detailed analysis of the Ibu Ukwata aspect of the Ikenge Amai, vividly captured it thus:

...in our community, Amai, the Ukwata plays a pivotal role in the Ikenge festival, which marks the end of a farming season or year and the beginning of a new one, often celebrated in February. The festival features vibrant displays of dance, art, and craftsmanship, highlighting the unique cultural identity of the Amai community, particularly, and the Ndokwa people in general. Ukwata celebration is the event that happens on the Eke market day preceding the Olie day. In other words, the Ukwata dance is an aspect of the Ikenge festival performed on the eve of the Olie celebration. The UKwata symbol or deity is a round stool covered with leaves and other traditional materials with an animal fastened to the top. This unique object possesses both cultural and spiritual significance. Nine days to the Ukwata day, the community delegates the youths to perform communal work of clearing the Ukwata shrine. Afterward, the shrine is cordoned off with omu leaves (palm fronds), and the Ukwata priest moves into the shrine. The priest or Okpala Ukwata is the custodian and keeper of the Ukwata shrine. He serves the Ukwata deity on behalf of the community and serves as an intermediary between the ancestors and the living. Typically, on the Afor day before the Eke Ukwata, the Okpala Ukwata invites eligible young men to the Ukwata shrine in the bush to audition for the Ukwata dancer of the year. Bearing a dummy Ukwata deity, the men perform the various traditional Ukwata dances and simulations.

In the end, the Okpala Ukwata, assisted by Ukwata dancers from previous years, selects two candidates as the most preferred to

perform the Ukwata dance. They are then presented to the deity in order of preference. Once chosen, spiritual cleansing, preparation and fortification commence on the 'chosen one'. By the next day, Nkwo, there is a dress rehearsal of the Ukwata dance in the community arena. There, the performance, billed for the next day, is critiqued, corrected and perfected. On the Eke day, which is the Ukwata day, the Okpala Ukwata leads the pack from the Ukwata shrine to the arena, bearing the Ukwata deity. Once in the arena, the chosen one steps forward and is presented with the deity. He carries it, and the drums begin to play while he dances to the entertainment of the crowd. The Ukwata dance is a vigorous and energetic performance.

Another notable feature of the Ikenge festival is the procession of newly circumcised girls. These young women dress elaborately and are led by a native dance band, either **Igele**, **Oponda**, **Otu-Egode**, or **Otu-Abane**, to the town square following the Ukwata dance. This element of the festival was prominent up to the early 1960s, but it has since declined, possibly due to the influence of Western civilisation.

Inwu Olie: The day after Ibu Ukwata is known as **Olie**, or “*Inwu Olie*”. This is dedicated to showcasing the skills of the valiant men of the community. This day features the **Ukolo** and **Ochwu** dances, in which only brave, skilled men participate. The Ukolo dance is both fierce and compelling; the dancers are armed with cutlasses and guns, demonstrating their prowess and courage. To protect themselves from potential injury, the men wear amulets, known as **Egbono** and **Egba**, on their arms and waists, which are believed to provide spiritual and physical protection during the performance.

The **Inwu Olie**, also known as **Ima Olie**, was distinguished by the ritual of **Isin Okuma** (the climbing of Okuma), which involved a very large and elongated drum used to display valor. Only warriors who had slain wild animals or human adversaries that posed a threat to the stability of Amai land were permitted to participate in Okuma. The ritual begins with the beating of the drum, during which a staged warrior performs in synchrony with the rhythm while simultaneously demonstrating his experience with the slain victim, illustrating how the killing was carried out, whether by strangulation or gunshot. Following this demonstration, the warrior climbs the Okuma, while the other warriors fire their guns into the air. The warrior's courage and skill were further confirmed by his ability to stand firmly atop the Okuma without falling, as the drum was believed to possess a mystical Power capable of dislodging even the most confident warriors (*Ishiekwene Ndubuisi interview cited*).

The **Ima Olie** rituals also included the ceremonial processions of the **Inotus**, the chiefly class from the various communities. As principal celebrants of the festival, the Inotus began the day by greeting the dawn of **Olie** with **Igba Egbe Ani** (the firing of cannons) as early as 5:30–6:00 a.m. By noon, the Inotus conducted their processions, which brought to completion the key activities of the festival (*Oral interview: Ishiekwene Ndubuisi, Amai, 2025*). This Inwu Olie celebration marks the culmination of all the activities. It provides an occasion to celebrate and display *who is who* in the Kingdom. Young and old, in various groups, parade the entire community event arena, displaying their strength or source of strength. They adorn themselves with beads, war gear, charms, and amulets, having used the previous night to fortify themselves. They also carry weapons such as bows and arrows, dane guns, and machetes. Drums are rolled out, and war beats, songs and chats are rendered. Special meals of yam, oil, and fish are prepared to celebrate Olie day.

Igba Egbe Ani: This is the firing of the cannon gun in the early hours of the Olie day. The Otu Olile age grade announces to the entire community the commencement of Olie via the firing of the cannon gun. The booming of the gun is a clear message that all other activities lined up for that day can now commence because the gods have given consent. The Otu Olile age grade, which oversees all the palm trees in the entire Amai community, carries out this task.

Inotu Parade: On the designated Olie day, in the morning, the Inotu Society or Chief of all the five clans that make up the community stages their Inotu parade. The Inotu is a chieftaincy title that admits one into an exclusive, elite society within the community. The title comes at a huge cost and is given to men who have distinguished themselves in their legitimate enterprises. Adorned in the best of their chieftaincy regalia, the Inotu group files out in uniform and parades from one end of the arena to the other. In the lines closely behind them are their children, wives and relatives. These family members call out the chieftaincy title of their brother, father or husband while singing their praises. Their acts of gallantry and valour are also announced. Other distinguishing achievements are not left out. Gunshots are fired to celebrate the Inotus.

Egwu Ukele: Egwu Ukele is a high-tempo, energetic genre of traditional war music rooted in the early survival history of the Ukwuani people. Originating as a celebratory medium to welcome victorious warriors, its functional role expanded to include pre-battle mobilisation and the invocation of divine protection from ancestors. In Amai, Egwu Ukele is held in esteem, not sung arbitrarily and is imbued with high significance. Beyond the battlefield, the music serves a critical funerary function, honoring the legacy of deceased warriors while simultaneously galvanising the living toward communal service. (Osanebi, 2020).

Egwu Ukele is believed to have a supernatural and motivational effect that awakens the warrior's bravery and spurs them to charge forward against threats. During the Ikenge festival, Ukele serves as an oral archive, narrating the community's resilience and heroic triumphs. Evolutionarily, the genre transitioned from a primarily instrumental form—where vocalisation was restricted to ensure tactical alertness—to a more lyrically elaborate tradition. Today, this vocal freedom allows for the extensive panegyric honoring of historical figures and ancestral spirits.

According to Osanebi (2020), "Ukulele ensemble consists of a group of traditional instruments (three drums, a timeline, a gong, a shaker and a traditional horn), songs, and dance. The musical instruments are made of local materials, including logs of wood, millet stalks, flat and thick metal, copper wire, and rope. It requires consistent practice of the Ukele to achieve mastery, and only those who have shown a high degree of mastery are allowed to play the Egwu Ukele during festivals or associated ceremonies. The Ukele rendition has proven to be a veritable tool for the preservation of the oral traditions of the Amai people. Embedded in these songs, chants, and drumming are the history of the wars fought and the deeds of specific warriors. These oral histories are handed down to the younger generation for further preservation. Vansina (1985: 27), while writing on oral tradition, notes that verbal messages are either spoken, sung, or called out on musical instruments. This statement affirms music as a tool for communication and cultural preservation. Omotoso (2009: 175) substantiates that Ukelemusic is a cultural tool that can be used to transmit knowledge, cultural values, emotions, feelings, and morals. During the Ikenge Festival, Ukele is used as a historical device to celebrate the Amai people's history. Through drumming, singing and war-like simulated dancing, Ukele musicians and warriors re-enact war scenes depicting how they fought and conquered foes, ensuring the continued existence of Amai as a people despite being flanked by bellicose neighbours.

Inyi Okwuma: Inyi Okwuma, also called the climbing of the Okwuma altar, is held on Olie day. In the Ishikaguma Quarters, it is on that Olie day that they observe the ceremony known as InyiOkwuma. The Okwuma is a drum-like altar designed for only warriors who have distinguished themselves in warfare to climb. The Okwuma is the exclusive preserve of members of the Igbu Society, whose membership is limited to those who have 'neutralised' an enemy in a war. During that Inyi Okuma ceremony, the community gathers at the arena, with Igbu Society members emerging in single file and brandishing the weapons they used to achieve Igbu status. After this general parade, the individual process requires an Igbu member to come to the middle of the arena. He is to approach the Okwuma altar while being controlled by the sound of the talking drum, which gives commands thus:

Who are you?

Where did you encounter the enemy?

How did you encounter the enemy?

How did you triumph, and with which weapon?

The Igbu title holder responds to these questions in a simulated or dramatised fashion. As he makes his way towards the altar, he begins to demonstrate, announces his name, and points towards the forest where he had the encounter. He further dramatises how he combated the enemy, using the weapon he deployed during the encounter, and finally shows how he neutralised the threat. He shows whether it was by gun or spear, bow and arrow, physical contact like strangling, a hit to the head or a machete blow. He caps the performance with a successful climb and mounting of the Okwuma altar, and he stays stable atop. At this point, cheers and gunshots fill the air in celebration of his deed. It should be noted that only a true Igbu can successfully mount the Okwuma. Impersonation has an instant consequence of the victim not being able to maintain a balance on the Okwuma, falling off and getting afflicted with a disease by the gods.

Awuwa: This is the final rite of the Ikenge festival. It involves cleansing the land of any unclean acts that may have occurred during the Ikenge festival. Vulgarly, fornication and other forms of indecency are some of these acts that were specifically mentioned during the Awuwa cleansing exercise. After the cleansing, the use of vulgar words and all forms of obscene display become banned once more until the next Ikenge festival. The exercise is held in the cemetery and involves rituals aimed at pacifying all the spirits and gods of the land.

Significance of Ikenge Festival

The Ikenge Festival holds considerable importance for the social cohesion, stability, and agricultural productivity of Amai, as well as, by extension, other Ukwuani communities. The festival functions as a temporal marker within the organisational system of the people, particularly in relation to the farming calendar.

Celebrated in January or February, the festival marks both the end of the previous farming season and the start of a new One. Awareness of the festival encouraged the completion of ongoing farming activities, including the harvest of key crops such as yams, which are essential to initiating the upcoming agricultural cycle (Gugum, 1986:16 & 35).

The onset of the new farming season was preceded by the ritual of land purification, a necessary practice carried out before clearing the fields. The Ani goddess was venerated to ensure a bountiful season, following the Akwula, a peace-offering ritual that concluded the Ikenge festival. The veneration involved a prominent priest offering ebulibu, a mixture of yam flour and red oil. Additionally, a fowl or goat was sacrificed to the Ani deity as a supplication for peace and agricultural abundance. Engaging in farm clearing before the completion of this ritual was considered taboo and strictly forbidden (Interview cited; Ishiekwene Ndubuisi interview cited).

The Ikenge Festival, therefore, is not only a cultural and religious celebration but also a critical component of the community's agricultural and social systems, linking ritual observance to practical and symbolic aspects of sustenance and continuity.

The Ikenge Festival serves as a unifying force among the people of Amai and other Ukwuani communities. During the festival period, sons and daughters who live away from home return, filling the town with both familiar and unfamiliar faces. For those who have not had the opportunity to meet members of their extended families, the festival provides a crucial occasion to do so. While some return home at other times of the year, the majority prefer to reunite during the Ikenge Festival, making it a central period for family reunions and social bonding. Visitors from outside the community also converge to share in the celebrations, enhancing the festival's social significance.

The festival additionally plays a role in courtship and marriage arrangements. Many parents bring their daughters home during the festival to present them to potential suitors, while young men who wish to marry also return to select life partners. In an oral interview, Enudi E. notes that the festival provides access to "a thousand and one mature girls" for consideration of marriage. However, as Adigida C. observes, the success of marriages arranged during the festival often depends on fortune, as young women may misrepresent themselves during the celebrations. Despite these limitations, Amai remains one of the towns where festival marriages are still culturally valued.

Ikenge Festival is also a period of communal merriment, drawing the attention of both residents and returnees. It provides a suitable occasion for the conferment of chieftaincy titles, with many individuals assuming titles such as Onotu during the festival.

The festival also accommodates the observance of significant ancestral rites, including second burials, which are central to Ukwuani ancestral cults. Aligning second burials with the festival ensures large attendance due to the influx of people. For notable hunters or warriors, these ceremonies include the Otu-Nta age group constructing a mock coffin, known as "Igudu," while women of the family entertain the crowd. One ritual, called "Ika Akpu," involves the Igudu seemingly guiding its bearers to locations within and around the town where the deceased had hidden human heads during his lifetime. Various women's groups perform dances around the town to express the wealth and status of the deceased, and abundant eating and drinking, characteristic of the festival, further mark the occasion. The Ikenge Festival is both a cultural and social institution that fosters unity, facilitates social interactions, supports matrimonial arrangements, and provides an occasion for the performance of traditional rituals and celebrations of community identity.

Sacred Places:

In the Amai community, certain places, shrines and altars are regarded as sacred and holy. They are centres of worship and abodes of the ancestors. These places play critical roles in the history of the people and are particularly significant during the Ikenge festival.

Isu Nze: This is the abode of the great Nze Shrine, the guardian and protector of the Amai people and community. The sacred nature of the shrine makes it impossible for non-Amai indigenes to appear before the Nze. Also, those classified into the caste system are not permitted to enter the shrine. Utterances and conduct are seriously guarded and regulated in Isu Nze. The inner sanctum of the Nze is exclusive to the Nze priest and a select few. According to the Amai oral tradition, the Nze is the God of protection, located in the Nge quarters, and represents the community's moral values, sincerity, dignity, and integrity. Purification is required at the gate before being allowed onto the Nze premises.

Isu Asua: Found in the two Amai clans of Umuosele and Ishikaguma, the Isu Asua shrine is the shrine of the Amai goddess of protection. The shrine is regarded as a very sacred ground. It is at the

Isu Asua that critical decisions concerning the corporate existence and survival of the community are taken. Decisions to go to war and the subsequent war strategies are plotted in Isu Asua. As the Ukwata dance in the community arena draws to a close, the Ukwata dancer leads the community to the Isu Asua shrine, where the final Ukwata dance is performed. This dance symbolises the Ukwata deity's payment of obeisance and subservience to the Asua deity.

Uno Ukwata: The Ukwata shrine is another sacred ground. Women are not allowed on the Ukwata shrine's premises. This is the dwelling place of the Ukwata deity and is managed by the Ukwata priest called Okpala Ukwata.

Conclusion

The Ikenge Festival remains one of the most important cultural and religious institutions among the Ukwuani people, especially in Amai. Its origins, traced to heroic figures such as Nge and Nduezi, demonstrate the connection between individual courage and communal identity, where acts of bravery and protection were later sanctified through the worship of Ikenge, the God of strength, luck, achievement, and success. These foundational stories show that the festival is more than a celebration; it functions as a living repository of collective memory, linking past heroism to contemporary social and religious life. The movement of Ikenge from Igbo communities east of the Niger River into Ukwuani land illustrates historical processes of migration, cultural adaptation, and religious integration, revealing the interactions between neighboring societies that contributed to the development of Ukwuani religious and cultural practices.

The rituals of the Ikenge Festival cover a wide range of social, religious, and agricultural functions. The annual fixing of the festival date at Ishu Nze by the Okpala-Uku, the washing of the Ikenge emblem, the Igba Ogene period, hunting exercises, preparation and performance of the Ukwata dance, and offerings such as Ewai and Aruwa provide both spiritual and practical organisation for the community. Rituals regulate social behaviour, promote agricultural productivity, maintain spiritual protection, and sustain communal identity. The festival also serves as a temporal marker in the agricultural calendar, signaling the end of the previous farming season and the beginning of a new one. Practices such as land purification, offerings to the Ani goddess, and the prohibition of farm clearing before completion of the rituals illustrate the link between spiritual belief and livelihood.

Socially, the Ikenge Festival strengthens social cohesion. The return of sons and daughters from outside the community fills the town with family members and visitors, creating opportunities for reunions, courtship, and marriage arrangements. Traditional practices, including performances of the Ukwata dance, cultural dances, and ceremonial processions, provide entertainment while maintaining moral and social order. The festival also serves as a venue for conferring chieftaincy titles, launching community development initiatives, and promoting collective participation in civic life. Through these activities, the festival sustains communal bonds and fosters a sense of belonging.

Religious observances form the central aspect of the festival. Offerings to Ikenge, veneration of ancestors, and the performance of Inwu Olie/Ima Olie rituals, including the climbing of the Okuma drum, emphasise the spiritual dimensions of the celebration. These activities acknowledge past achievements, seek guidance for the year ahead, and pay homage to warriors and hunters who contributed to community safety. While Christianity and Western culture have altered certain practices, such as the circumcision procession and fishing rituals at the Isi-Akpu River, the main religious and cultural aspects of the festival continue to be performed. Contemporary additions, including live music, staged dances, and visits by politicians, illustrate the festival's capacity to adapt while maintaining its traditional purpose and communal focus.

The transmission of cultural knowledge during the festival is evident in the instruction of youth in traditional dances, the preparation and performance of the Ukwata, and the involvement of community members in various rituals. These practices pass skills, stories, and values from one generation to the next, ensuring continuity of cultural identity. Although some disciplinary and social functions have diminished due to modern legal and religious influences, the festival still provides occasions for moral guidance, social interaction, and the celebration of collective achievements.

The Ikenge Festival combines history, religion, social organisation, and cultural expression. It connects past and present, linking heroic narratives to contemporary communal life, integrating ritual observances with agricultural cycles, and sustaining communal identity through shared celebration and social participation. Despite external influences and changing social contexts, the core elements of the festival, including the Ukwata dance, offerings to Ikenge, hunting exercises, Igba Ogene, and processions of the Inotus, continue to command respect and participation. The festival endures as a vital institution for Amai and other Ukwuani communities, promoting unity, continuity, and the collective affirmation of cultural and spiritual values.

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