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Amidst Western Influence: A Study of the Post-Colonial Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival  
(Oke Aku)

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## Abstract

The Ezza New Yam Festival (Oke Aku) is a significant cultural heritage and event that projects the identity and values of the people in the area. The event marks the end of planting yam, and the beginning of harvest and new year in Ezza indigenous calendar. With the increasing influence of Western culture however, the festival's traditional practices and significance are faced with various challenges. Using the Cultural Imperialism Theory and Cultural Hybridization, the study examined the impact of Westernization on the festival's cultural heritage and its enduring relevance in the post-colonial Ezza. Using the theories, qualitative approach and content analysis, the study explores the perceptions of the people regarding the festival's significance, the changes that have occurred as a result of Western influence, and the ways in which the Ezza are adapting to these changes while maintaining its cultural identity. The findings of the study reveal that the resilience of the Ezza people's cultural heritage and the essence of preserving traditional practices in the face of globalization. This study contributes to the understanding of the complex dynamics between cultural tradition and modernity, highlighting the need for cultural preservation and promotion in the face of Western influence.

Keywords: Western influence, Post-Colonial, Ezza Ezekuna, and New Yam Festival

## Introduction

The Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival (Oke Aku) is a significant cultural event in Nigeria, marking the end of yam planting, and beginning of the harvest season and New Year. As a result of the increasing influence of Western culture, the festival's traditional practices and significance are faced with challenges. The festival is deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the Ezza. Ezza is a part of Northeastern Igbo in the Southeastern Nigeria. The unmitigated distortions suffered by the festival's traditional practices and significance made it vulnerable to destruction. The fact that the festival is as well, a symbol of identity, peace, unity and cooperation, and a cultural heritage was considered immaterial to the Western Culture.

In the post-colonial Ezza, the festival has undergone certain changes resulting from Westernization, Christianity, and modernisation. Despite these changes, the festival remains strongly and essentially attached to the Ezza culture, attracting people from far and near, including tourists. The impact of Western influence on the <sup>1</sup> Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival is explored in the study, pointing at the extent to which the traditional practices and essence of the festival have been affected. By so doing, the dynamics of the culture and modernity would be laid bare and it will establish the need for preservation and promotion of cultural heritage of the Ezza.

## Theoretical Framework

Cultural Imperialism Theory and Cultural Hybridization are adopted in analyzing the study, *Amidst Western Influence: A Study of the Post-Colonial Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival (Oke Aku)*. According to Herbert Schiller, Cultural Imperialism Theory suggests that Western cultures exert a dominant influence over other cultures, leading to suppression of

other cultures and traditions (Zhang, 2016). Anchoring the research on this model indicates imposition of Western cultural values, norms, and practices on non-Western societies, such as Ezza in the Southeastern Nigeria. At first, it opens for cultural assimilations which results in replacement of certain local cultures with the Western cultures. This fundamentally, presents a new background and cultural form, enabling blending of the Western and the local cultures.

This framework is used to analyse the extent to which Western cultural values, norms, and practices have influenced the Post-colonial Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival. It would further, investigate how cultural homonisation is exerted on the seeming weak culture (Oke Aku) of the Ezza. Through the process of cultural assimilation, a local culture as that of the Ezza cultural heritage is combated for displacement, suppression, and replacement. At a long run, the theory helped to uncover the fact that the processes to suppress and replace the culture of New Yam Festival in Ezza opened the area to cultural hybridization. It is on the basis of this, that the Cultural Hybridization becomes relevant in the lens of analyzing the study. This framework upholds the process of blending different cultural practices, values, and traditions to create a new cultural form in a given place (Tuncer, 2023). In this regard, the Western culture, and local culture of Ezza developed blending attributes that created a new cultural form in the sphere of Ezza New Yam Festival.

#### Statement of Problem

The Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival is a cultural and traditional heritage of the Ezza in the Northeastern Igbo, Nigeria. With the arrival of Europeans of different groups of traders, British officials, and Christian missionaries, and their consequent colonization of Nigeria, Western influence on the indigenous cultural heritage became increasingly conspicuous in various parts of the country, including Ezzaland. Be that as it may, the festival took its share of the challenges posed by the Western influence. Its traditional practices and significance were being eroded, and there arose the risk of losing the cultural heritage. This became patent through altering the festival's cultural identity, leading to a loss of traditional values and practices up to the post-colonial era. It is however, the take of this

study to investigate the impact of Western influence on the Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival, exploring the nature, changes, continuity, and the means of sustaining the cultural heritage in the realm of modernity.

### Research Methodology

In conducting this research, historical sources, consisting of primary and secondary sources were explored. The primary source material utilized is oral evidence. The secondary source materials utilized include books, and journal articles. Really, there are very few scholarly works and local commentaries on the Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival. The study depended mostly on the oral evidence drawn from a number of elders, and critical stakeholders from Ezza and Ebonyi State, at large.

During the research, some interviews were phone-recorded while in some, notes were taken down. Some of the interviewees were left to exhaust themselves on each question asked; before they were asked certain questions structured in such a way to expatiate more on any part of the topics which was either left out or scantily discussed. On the part of secondary sources, such as the books, and journal articles the researchers derived ideas from related and relevant works on the area and topic of study to improve the quality of the work. Generally, this study relied on thematic approach and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. By skillfully employing the Cultural Imperialism Theory and Cultural Hybridization, the study explored and analyzed *Amidst Western Influence: A Study of the Post-Colonial Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival (Oke Aku)*, unfolding the nature of the festival, changes and continuity over times, alongside the means of sustaining the cultural heritage in Ezza.

### The Nature of Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival (Oke Aku)

Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival is as old as the days of Ezekuna and his family members. The festival is meant to monumentalize yam as the leading crop and symbol of agriculture in Ezzaland. Agriculture however, was the main sector of the local economy that employed almost the entire people of Ezzaland, and provided them with means of survival. Recognizing the role of yam, among other crops, the people chose to capture yam

as a symbol for celebrating all crops that sustained people in the area. The Ezza are people that believe in the power of God and His agents in all about their culture and civilization (Chukwuma, 2003). So, they believe in the power of nature or God in success or bountiful harvest in agriculture, especially in growing of yam. To that effect, the progenitor of Ezza, Ezekuna designed the period as when to appreciate God for productivity and richness of crops, and good health and protection for farmers (the Ezza). During the period, the people demonstrated thanksgiving to the agents of God (gods and goddesses), such as god of yam (Nja Ji), and god of hunting and war (Obasi). These agents of God were fed with cooked and grated yam with a mixture oil only. Apart from the oil, no other ingredient is traditionally and religiously allowed to be added to the food for the said-agents (Ongele & Anyigor, 2025).

The annual festival usually occurs within the month of July. This month is captured by the Ezza Calender as the month of the Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival (Onwa Oke Aku). It is during the month that the council of elders (Ochi Mkpuru) gathers at the home of Ezekuna (Okpoku Ezekuna) and fixes the date of the festival, using the Ezza Calendar. One thing certain is that the concerned people fix it, one week (four days) to the Eke Market day for preparation (Eke Azuta or Eke awha du ebo). At the mid-night, nature passes and ushers the people to the New Year with a loud voice. This is when people echoed in prayer; let a bad year go in vain (ejo awha gbaru eka la), while drumming or beating gongs. The Orie Market day following the Eke ahwa du ebo becomes the main day for the celebration. Before day-break to give Ezza the main day, the oldest elder of each home in Ezza cuts unripe palm head, a chick, and four fruits of pepper and mount them at the yam compost (Ishi neswhe) at the beginning of a farm and entrance of the compound. For the Ezza, the manner, the living celebrate the festival, so the dead celebrate it. To that effect, the items mounted at the yam compost (Ishi neswhe) are meant to be used by the dead that died childless for the celebration. Those that had a child or children before death are believed to have their spirits celebrating with the living during the event (Njoku & Nworie, 2010). At the yam compost, peels from yam only, are traditionally allowed to be disposed there.

Before the main day for the celebration, people tidied up their homes and village square as a part of the preparation. The Orié Market day after the Eke Market day for preparation (Eke azuta) is the actual day for the celebration of the festival (Oke Aku). It commences with pleasantries and compliments, such as Anyi Aboo, meaning we have survived, Response: Awhaa laburu awha oma, meaning this year shall be good for us. Contextually, the compliments depict the fact that the festival marks the end of planting year, and the beginning of harvest and a new year. It further conveys the people's prayer for favours and fruitfulness of the year (C. Ugota, personal communication, 24th, 2025). In this regard, the Ezza started with prayers and appreciations to God for His care and protection in their various homes.

Before morning, the women folks would have finished preparing pepper-oil (uza ukpara). The pepper-oil is usually hosted for the celebration in a covenant plate (ukpara). Other significant items include cola-nut, alligator pepper, bitter cola, cocoa-nut, groundnut, palm kernel, and yam. On presentation of these items, the oldest male elder among the family members led prayer session as others responded, isee (Amen) at different stages of the prayers. At this point, one of the kinsmen that have traditional and customary knowledge of sharing items starts sharing of the items with the cola-nuts. By the custom, the cola-nut or a lobe of cola-nut that is used for the prayer belongs to the leader of the prayer session. An additional lobe or part is usually attached to it. The attached part of the cola-nut is usually and customarily used to appreciate the person that shares the items (C. Ugota, personal communication, 24th, 2025).

In sharing the assorted presents for the celebration, the yam and palm kernel were shared on bare ground while others were shared on the covenant plate that must be placed on the ground as people made their choice accordingly. Where the covenant plate is perceived to be inadequate for the sharing, additional tray could be of support. As the sharing is completely done, members of the gathering or assembly are to choose accordingly. During this celebration, visitors are welcomed and given some parts of the items shared. This demonstration and procession are observed in all families of kinsmen. This implies that the

assembly of elders, youths, and children moves from one compound to another, observing the celebration of the festival.

During this period equally, people visited their relatives with gifts of prepared food, cola-nut, old yam tuber, pepper-oil, cocoa-nut, banana, plantain, among others. It marks a time for renewal of family bond, friendship, and relationship for peaceful co-existence in Ezzaland (Njoku & Nworie, 2010). Many people of Ezza dissent and non-residents of Ezzaland returned to their ancestral homes in Ezza. The Ezza in diasporas send delegations to represent them in the celebration at the ancestral home of Ezza (Okpoku Ezekuna). Among the people that gathered for the celebration at the ancestral home include the Ezza from Ezza North and South, those from other local governments of Ebonyi State, those from other states of Nigeria, alongside oversea delegations. In this regard, all communities of Ezza are represented. As communities bring the presents for the celebration, individuals or groups supported the programme voluntarily.

One week (four days) later, the grand-finale of the festival is observed to mark the completion of the annual festival. As the event ends ceremoniously, new yam tubers begin to appear in markets in Ezza. The first Eke Market day in the unacquired calendar year is known as Eke Okpobe ochita (the day farmers bring their new yam tubers to market without the intention to sell them). They bring and display them as wares, but cannot sell them to any customer. It marks opening of markets in Ezza for distribution of new yam tubers (H. Nwanga, personal communication, 24th, 2025). At this point, increasing harvest of new crops is witnessed among the Ezza.

#### Changes and Continuity in the Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival

The fact is that the people and their cultural heritage, new yam festival faced challenges, emanating from Western influence. This influence and Christianity could not wholly obliterate the cultural heritage, Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival as attempts to harvest yam or introduce it (yam) to Ezza markets before the festival were always visited by mysterious eventuality. At first, those who were converted to Christianity abandoned the cultural heritage completely, alleging that it was idolatrous. Bearing in mind that mysterious

forces unleash disaster on defaulters of the tradition, the Christians waited uninvolved until it was observed before going to either harvest their yam or introducing it to Ezza markets (Odey, 1986).

To accommodate the people in all religions, and meet up with the pace and need of modernity, the period under discussion witnessed the festival undergoing some changes. Some of the changes are conspicuous in the areas of offering sacrifices to gods and goddesses during the festival. Inasmuch as the people are mainly known as traditional worshippers and Christians, modification of some of the rituals of the festival remained unavoidable (Odey, 1986). Some Christians, especially members of the orthodox churches of Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Methodist among the people resorted to observing the festival in their churches by bringing those similar items to Church, and organizing mass or prayer session in honour of the event. The traditional worshippers on the other hand, celebrated theirs, observing the usual rituals holistically.

The return of civilian rule to the government of Nigeria in 1999 availed more opportunities for mobilization of people to make the event more colourful. Some of the politicians in Ezza and other parts of the state supported the programme to attract the people's supports to their political ambitions. Others saw it as their cultural and customary obligation that must be strictly observed. So, involvement of political office holders, and wealthy people of Ezza Ezekuna in the event, alongside efforts of some church priests to facilitate blending of the Western and local cultures promoted the modernisation of the event (R. Ujebe, personal communication, 24th, 2025). Currently, politicians, businessmen and women, teachers, farmers, and priests of different religions with their adherents are deeply involved. The event developed to become all-people's affair. Both non-Christians and Christians celebrate the event together in their homes and churches. Cultural dances and music, and masquerades are as well involved in the celebrations in either churches or homes (Ongele, 2024). The fact is that churches insist that such cultural dances and masquerades should not be attached to shrines, but could be blessed in churches as parts of the symbols of culture, and identity in Ezza.

Fundamentally, certain practices of the cultural heritage could not be neutralized. Examples include, no one could dismiss the fact that it is an annual event, the Council of Elders (Ndi Ochi Mkpuru) maintains the right of fixing the date the festival, using the Ezza calendar, it must be observed during Onwa Oke Aku (July in the modern calendar), the festival must be held on Ori Market Day which precedes Eke Azuta. The event lasts for one indigenous week (four days), and ends with a grand finale. The people of Ezza and or their representatives reconvene at Okpoku Ezekuna (home of Ezekuna). While the elders gather and pray with cola-nut at Nchonu (Sacred Altar of Ezekuna). Young people and politicians organize and close the ceremony ceremoniously at the Ezza civic centre. The first Eke market day after the event endures as the new yam introduction day (C. Ugota, personal communication, 24th, 2025). The introduced yam to the market is not meant to be sold or bought. It is however, important to note that most of the rituals of the event as identified above are strictly conducted or led by the Council of Elders. Many from far and near, including tourists observed the ceremonies at different stages in happiness. All these are observed in response to the essence of the dynamics of tradition and modernity in efforts to preserve and promote the cultural heritage.

#### Sustaining the Cultural Heritage (Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival)

To sustain and promote the Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival in the post-colonial era and amidst the influence of Christianity and modernity, various measures are required. It is obvious that the festival is a significant cultural heritage in the area, projecting the richness of Ezza culture, and upholding its image, identity and values. A period that is meant for celebrating harvest, survival, achievements, peace, unity, and thanksgiving is indeed, worthy enough to be preserved through community involvement. Local farmers, community leaders, such as traditional rulers, leaders of town development unions, women leaders, youth leaders and their respective groups should be encouraged to participate actively to ensure preservation and promotion of the festival's values (U. Utobo, personal communication, 20th, 2025). Engagement of these groups in the communities of Ezza would equally support passing down this cultural heritage and values from generations to

generations.

Ezza should engage in cultural documentation. This exercise would enable effective collection of various festivals in Ezzaland. Their respective significance and relationship with one another toward sustainable socio-cultural growth and development would be unveiled. The new yam festival for example, is one of the festivals in Ezza. Its development to emerge as all-important event in Ezza underscores its essence. Of course, its history, traditions, and cultural significance should be traced, and documented to strengthen preservation and promotion of its heritage (C. Mgbada, personal communication, 19th, 2025). This document will avail researchers, foreigners, Christians, among others the opportunity to comprehend the real nature, practices, and significance of the festival, thereby dispelling wrong notions of people about the cultural heritage.

The festival should be designed to develop sustainable economic models that can accommodate and favour entrepreneurs of various categories in the area. No doubt, yam is identified in the event as a symbol to monumentalize crops. The essence of the festival should be broadened to shape economic models that would be potentially supportive to the growth and development of all the sectors of economy in the area (C. Mgbada, personal communication, 19th, 2025). In this regard, entrepreneurs, such as farmers, artisans, and traders could be empowered to contribute more significantly toward economic development. This could be achieved through engagement of extension services for local farmers, subsidisation of farm inputs, introduction of new and rich breeds of crops and animals, provision of storage facilities in Ezza, and establishment of hybrid skill acquisition centre at Okpoku Ezekuna.

Development of eco-tourism initiatives in the area to demonstrate the festival's cultural significance, local cuisine, and natural attractions would support to raise the festival to become economic-oriented (Honey, 2009). In this regard, it would develop more employment opportunities and increase revenue generation through cultural exchange. Shaping the festival to develop eco-tourism attributes would attract more tourists to Ezzaland. To strengthen this, the cultural heritage, consisting of traditional music, dance,

and art should be developed and strongly incorporated in the rituals of the festival. This would however, promote harnessing of the festival for economic growth and development. The people should be adequately educated on all about the event through, among other things conducting of enlightenment campaigns, seminars, workshops, and introduction of heritage studies in schools (Bello & Garba, 2022) in Ezzaland, and Nigeria at large. It is through these means that visitors, and people of the area would be helped to acquire knowledge of the festival's history, and cultural values. This approach is important because many were already misinformed about the godliness and purity of the cultural heritage. Even as some, especially Christians, and visitors that are re-informed about the cultural, social, economic and political importance of the festival are beginning to embrace it enthusiastically, many are still skeptical about the essence of the programme. The people of Ezza should seek partnerships and collaborations with government, Non-governmental Organisations, companies, international organizations, groups, and individuals to facilitate access to resources, expertise, and funds for supporting growth and development and sustainability of the festival. These key factors would energize the people to introduce new ideas in the rituals and practices of the festival, thereby making it both creative and innovative in all fronts. Indeed, creativity and innovativeness in conducting the events and its rituals will broaden the scope of its promising potentials and participation of people in the area. On the part of government for instance, the ministry of culture and tourism should facilitate enactment favourable policies to cultural growth and development. The designed policies should be enforced efficiently to attract government investment in the rich cultural heritage. Wherein the people of Ezza open and lobby for such collaborations, the cultural heritage would be potentially sustainable.

## Conclusion

Ezza Ezekuna New Yam Festival is one of the cultural heritages of Ezza in the Northeastern Igbo, Southeastern Nigeria that suffered distortions from Westernization, Christianity, and modernity. Of course, the festival is a vital part of Ezza culture, symbolizing hardwork, tradition, identity, and thanksgiving. Despite the distortions, the

festival continues to thrive defiantly, adapting to changing times while preserving and retaining its core values. Its character of unleashing mysterious destruction on defaulters sustained it, and its adaptability is promoted more strongly by the civilian rule since 1999. The politicians are baited to its promotion as a means of attracting peoples supports to their political ambitions. In this process, other critical stakeholders, such as businessmen and women, religious and community leaders queued, supporting the annual festival. Measures to preserve and sustain the festival are necessary, and are not limited to documentation of Ezza culture, partnerships and collaborations, community engagement, and education and awareness campaigns.

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