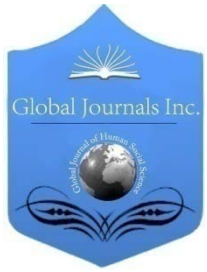
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Orality and Religion: The Ethno-Linguistic and Ritual Content of Ekajuk New Yam Festival

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Abstract- Orality is primordial, transcends all races and permeates all facets of life from birth to maturity and death. Each of these stages of human life and endeavor is prone to composition and delivery of Oral material as well as linguistic manipulation either in celebration of life or in adoration and thankfulness to a deity who superintends over human affairs. Language, in the form of ordinary verbal utterances, signs or gestures, has often lent itself to diverse uses at different levels of interaction or communication in the articulation of messages either in social parlance or in sacrificial and ritual circumstances. The complexity of Oral communication becomes evident when language is viewed in every day social interaction-sociolinguistics- then in stylized forms-ethno-poetics, and in ritual enactments-incantations. This can perhaps explain why Orality or language operates at different levels of complexity. Ekajuk new yam festival provides opportunities in social as well as ritual circumstances for the use of language in both ordinary and stylized forms.

Keywords: festival, orality, ritual, socio-linguistics, cultural integration, communication and ekajuk community.

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Keywords: festival, orality, ritual, socio-linguistics, cultural integration, communication and ekajuk community.

I. Introduction

The mention of Orality and its attendant contextually, which is the centre-piece of Oral Literature calls to mind several connotations and denotations among scholars who are unfamiliar with the discipline of Oral Literature some of which include primitivism or lower mental and cognitive ability, yet Walter Ong (1982) has put forward a rather complex argument about the place of or ature in today's technologically advanced environment. Many Literary and Communication Scholars, among them Isidore Ok pewho (1992), Dell Hymes (1996), Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs (1990), Barre Toelkin (2003), Dennis Tedlock (1993) Jerome Rothenberg (1985), Jan Blommaert (2006) and Ivan Brady (2008) following from this, have equally examined the complexity of oral communication in today's global technologies and have variously seen language not simply as "stable, closed and internally homogenous units", but instead as "repertories or socio-linguistic systems and ways of speaking" peculiar to a people and serving as identity codes for such communities (Blommaert 2006). In the sphere of written African Literature, the concern with Language as a mode of communication of African experience and knowledge systems has been of utmost concern to literary artists and critics for a long time now and has also formed the basis for discourses in International Conferences in several years past. It is still a subject of discourse today as scholars continue to argue about the authenticity or otherwise of literary creations written in foreign languages and said to be articulating African experiences and backgrounds. Adrian Roscoe's and Achebe's positions reflect the polarities of the argument. While Roscoe (1971) asserts

> How can an African, writing in English convey his authentic voice and spirit? Will his immersion in the English language [not] simply mean a further dose of the culture bleaching…? (p.9).

To this Achebe (1975) proffers a response that ….

> the African writer should aim to use the language in a way that brings out his messages best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of
>
> International exchange will be lost. (P.6)

Ngugi Wa' Thiongo's (1984) position seems to be a summation when he posits that:

> The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their cultural and social environment, indeed in relation to their entire universe. Hence language has always been at the heart of the two contending social forces in Africa of the 20th century (p.4)

If the use of a foreign language becomes difficult for the configuration of the African experience of literary creativity and African traditional languages inadequate for international intelligibility, what then is the way forward? Biodun Jeyifo quoting Ngugi after the publication of *Decolonizing the Mind* asserts that

- The revolutionary Kenyan writer, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, announced that from the date of the publication of that book, he was no longer going to write in English; "henceforth, Ngugi declared, "it will be Gikuyu and Swahili all the way". In taking this momentous step, Ngugi argued that [what] he

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called, "European African Literatures" in English, French, Portuguese, were mere offshoots of modern African Literature and not the authentic, valid stuff, which, in Ngugi's opinion, could only be Literatures written in indigenous Literary Languages of Africa."

Ngugi did keep to his words, and, for a while, produced works in Gikuyu and Swahili although the International readership is considerably reduced yet the impact of the works within the region and the environment from which they emanated was more profound and raised the consciousness of the people much more than his works written in English. Surely, this raises the question as to who the African writer's audience really is; Africans or the International community, but this is a major debate beyond the purview of this paper. This is the dilemma of the African writer. From this perspective, the question that we must ask and answer is; what is language? If language can also simply be conceived of as any sign or symbol which appropriately conveys meaning or carries a message that is intelligibly interpreted to enhance communication barring all other ideological and cultural implications, then the aphorism "actions speak louder than words" becomes applicable to the African situation. Further questions that can arise are, why can't the African writer look back and pay more attention to festival enactments and our oral literatures as the best mode of expressing our unique identity? If our desire is to communicate our identity then we must resort to a medium that best articulates and portrays our message most appropriately to the outside world and not depend primarily on writing for the dissemination of information about Africa and African Culture. We cannot shy away from what is uniquely and authentically African and pander to so called modernity or technological advancements which tend to obliterate our cultural values inherent in our festivals. After all Langston Hughes (1926) provided a glowing example in his postulation on African American writing in his *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* . If our bell does not sound loud enough, let us ring it harder. Let us be the lizard that fell from a height and till today keeps nodding "his" head in praise and recognition of himself and his achievement and has surely been noticed by all of us. Let us communicate through our festivals and oral literatures. In a consideration of oral literature and festivals as oral communication, one acknowledges that thought, i.e. ideas and concepts and information exist in the mind and imagination of the speaker who encodes it in a message to a receiver in words and/or symbols. The message is then decoded by the receiver who translates the words or symbols into a concept or information that is understandable by him and others who operate within the same linguistic code. Communication really is simply the flow of or exchange of information among people or groups of people at a given point in time and with the same linguistic tools. In this scenario, the advantage that oral or verbal communication and gesture possesses over written communication is that oral communication is supplemented or complemented by visual aids and other non-verbal elements which aid and vivify the conveyance of meaning. Body language or gestures in oral situations plays a significant role and certainly has a greater and better impact on the listener and therefore results in immediate feedback. THIS IS THE APPEAL OF FESTIVALS as they contain spectacle which enhances vivification of experience as well as other visual accoutrements which aid the conveyance of meaning and elimination of misrepresentation and misinterpretation often associated with African cultural norms and practices. Orality, therefore, allows the oral communicator to express himself more vividly such that even when scholars have argued that not all of oral literature is produced orally and that horn and drum poetry is complex, realized through the medium of the horn and the drum and not uttered verbally, this writer's reaction has always been that the horn is manipulated through the mouth, and the drum with hands to produce sounds which are only meaningful when they approximate to verbal correlates which are linguistically meaningful in a given linguistic context. After all, language is an arbitrary allocation of meaning to sound uttered through the mouth or produced with the horn or the drum. For this reason, African festivals become a better and more forceful language for the impartation of African culture and knowledge systems to the outside world and those who care to study African ways or modes of communication. Festivals provide the canvass for contextual enactment of performances which can be seen as extended forms of theatrical enactments that offer wider opportunities for a rounded analysis or assessment of cultural identity as depicted in the linguistic structures employed during festivals and other such performances. Festivals, therefore, serve as the best avenues, not only for an in-depth view of a community's cultural norms and values but also an insight into how language operates and affects cultural behaviours or vice versa evident in an ethno-poetic, ethno-linguistic and ethnographic analysis of festival contents. J.L. Dohne (1969) therefore observes that

The highest object of language study is to obtain an insight into the characters and thought modes of mankind.

In this context Ekajuk New Yam Festival or any other festival can be seen as a valid expression of the creative imagination as well as a complex assessment of a people's relationship to their environment. Ekajuk New Yam Festival, therefore, enhances an acquaintance with several verbal forms which aid the presentation of a graphic picture of Ekajuk society's ideological and cosmic viewpoint. The New Yam Festival also provides opportunities for the artistic use of language and so

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serves as a manifestation of the ecological environment while portraying the people's conceptual framework of their values and beliefs which are expressed in their language. In Ekajuk New Yam Festival, for instance, the predominant linguistic form seems to be the proverb which offers ample opportunity for an ethno-linguistic analysis that will help to bring out the extent to which language encompasses culture and life experiences of the community. The proverb becomes a veritable linguistic tool for encoding experience and its usefulness as a means for the study of language potentiality or influence on culture is invaluable. Festivals generally and Ekajuk new yam in particular allow for a colourful manipulation of linguistic resources of a community to reflect culture and allow for a wide range of information and ideas to be expressed and digested. They broaden the scope of verbal utterances while vivifying them with gesture and any other forms of embellishment. Language, world view and religion have remained the major means by which cultural experiences are best expressed and these are easily expressed in festivals. The African is known to be very deeply religious and so to the average Ekajuk or Bakor man, cultural practices as are manifest in festivals like the New Yam become the basis for interaction and expression of individuality ad communal integration. Among the Ekajuk, the New Yam Festival and its inherent religious, cultural and linguistic content, serves as a means of reconciliation of individuals, groups and the entire community to their universe and the external world. During this celebration, no one denies anybody food, not even an arch enemy, if he/she is willing to eat the food. The proverb, as a linguistic unit, therefore occupies a distinct place in discourse as a time-tested, complex and pregnant means of encoding ideas and concepts in the community. The proverb "Ntol Kpim ebol bol" literarily means "the new yam has no rotten one; but it is also a figurative way of saying "there is no fright during a new yam festival as no one is expected to harm anybody during this period of rejoicing and plentiful food. Proverbs, along with riddles and witticisms therefore portray artistic skills of orators and other performers in their apt employment for vivification and externalization of Ekajuk cultural norms and ethics.

II. Origin and Relevance of Festivals

The origin of festivals is primordial and transcends human races. Festivals, as we all know, have served humanity from ancient times, as events or ceremonies organized by communities at yearly or other convenient intervals in celebration of unique aspects of their cultural lives usually reflecting the local or even national history and traditions of the inhabitants of the said communities. Festivals serve specific purposes in the communal run of life for example in commemoration and thanksgiving to a deity; celebration of victory in battle or an endowment of say fertile agricultural land which enhances good harvest of particular crops that are then celebrated. Festivals therefore provide a sense of shared identity and authenticate unique aspects of a people's cultural lives. They offer a sense of belonging for social interaction among communities within common geographical locations. They also celebrate unique aspects of life ranging from social entertainment to ritual or religious rites and beliefs. They therefore provide avenues for the enactment of the totality of a community's consciousness of their environment, their origins, habitat, entertainment and cosmic beliefs. Briefly, festivals articulate and celebrate the knowledge systems of a people while projecting identity. Also worthy of note is that festivals provide avenues for interaction between a community and the outside world through attraction of tourists who visit particular communities during festive seasons to participate and learn about other cultures as messages are better comprehended in action during festivals.

Ethno-linguistics as a discipline is concerned with the study of the interrelationship between languages and the cultural behaviour of the people who speak those languages. It is therefore an examination of language as an aspect of culture as well as the influence of language on the cultural behaviour of a people and vice versa. Festivals are therefore, the best avenues to witness this interplay of language and culture. Without any attempt to delve into the intricate development of the discipline of ethno-linguistics, it is, however, pertinent to observe that the disciplines of Oral Literature, ethnography, ethno-linguistics, ethno-poetics, folklore and even psychology are all collaborative disciplines sharing common grounds and dove-tailing in their study of man, his environment and his behaviour culturally, psychically, linguistically and socially. All these fields contribute to the attempt to understand human behaviour in relation to environmental influences and human cognitive capacity. It therefore, seems to this writer, that festivals provide avenues for a composite view of human behaviour from the various perspectives from which these several disciplines have and are still contributing to an understanding of man and his environment. I have, however, chosen to restrict my investigation to the ethno-linguistic and ritual content of Ekajuk New Yam Festival in this bid to discover how language authenticates and validates cultural behaviour and identity in this community. Since through language a community or cultural entity is linked to its social relationships and language as well enhances participation in a variety of social activities that reinforce identity, status and kinship, language can be said to locate a people within their ecological environment as they derive images from this landscape to build up an ideology that best expresses their ethical values and cosmic viewpoint. From this perspective, festivals can be seen to provide ample opportunity for stylistic variations to language used within a cultural context that

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in turn aids the validation of culture. An ethno-linguistic analysis of Ekajuk new yam festival will, therefore, aid an understanding of how language can be manipulated at different levels to project social identities. A socio-linguistic analysis of language can also explicate the relationship between performance context and the attainment of values and aesthetic standards within a given community. We can then extend the analysis of language beyond the ethno-linguistic to the ethno-poetic realm to enhance the portrayal of the artistic and creative uses of language in festival and/or other ceremonial occasions.

In his explication of the discipline of ethno-poetics, Jerome Rothenberg (1993), one of the founding fathers and coiner of the term ethno-poetics in 1968 avers that it is an intense enquiry into the dialectics of poetic development which can be traced to over two hundred years in the different fields of philosophy, anthropology, folklore, psychology and the literary arts but which has shifted grounds from Western or literate traditions to the less developed or "low technology cultures", and to oral and non literate forms of verbal expression. Rothenberg posits that as an aspect of linguistic manipulation, ethno-poetics

> Is clearly linked with impulses…to explore new and alternative forms of poetry and to subvert normative views of traditional values and the claims of "civilization" to hegemony over other forms of culture.

The poetic use of language during festivals like the Ekajuk New Yam Festival and many other festivals that dot the entire gamut of African and Nigerian life offers us this invaluable opportunity to perceive the intricate, creative and complex displays in performance contexts of drama and other cultural activities. Festivals, one observes, offer traditional communities or what Walter Ong (1982) describes as "Primary Oral Cultures", which languages may be in danger of extinction due to lack of documentation and the barrage of modern day technological advancements; the opportunity to put their languages to creative or imaginative use thus helping to stabilize and sustain them. This is desirable particularly when analysis of oral literature and other festival performances tend to focus primarily on "text and function", rather than "contextual explication of function" which should be our major concern in analysis of performances.

Furthermore, apart from serving as a reflection of the historical, cultural, linguistic or religious antecedents of a community, communal festivals can become handy as assertions of political or power structures of communities in relation to the larger national or international communities. Ekajuk New Yam Festival can serve as a means of repositioning Ekajuk language within the ambit of modern global languages in the present milieu of contemporary globalization which Dell Hymes (1998) recognizes when he posits that this kind of linguistic recognition serves as

> Politics of recognition which starts from a restoration of disempowered people as bearers and producers of valuable culture, over which the themselves have control: recognizing one's language, [and] one's specific ways of speaking.

To buttress the capacity of language and linguistic structures in the empowerment of communities in power play politics, Webster and Kroskrity (2013) argue for a refocusing of language documentation to enhance

> tacit forms of power which tries to reposition and restore power and importance to those speakers of language groups who, through consistent marginalization, have tended to be obliterated in terms of the global power play characteristic of the modern literacy dominated world.

Festivals not only bring out the linguistic potentials of a community to lime light, but also reinvigorate societal and communal identity and integration into the modern world of globalization. They become popular holiday fiestas that provide better understanding of other cultures outside our immediate cultures in a more relaxed and entertaining atmosphere.

III. Ekajuk People and the New Yam Festival

For an in-depth study of the Ekajuk people see Majuk (1995) and Ganyi (2009). However, as a brief note on the people, the Ekajuk have been described by "The seed company (2014)", a religious bible translation group of the Lutheran church working around Ogoja and Yala Local Government Areas, as predominantly;

> Subsistence farmers growing yams, groundnuts, cassava, and green leaves; 70 percent nominal Christians (with) a distinct love for music [and] September 15th as the New Yam Festival day.

Specifically Ekajuk people are described by the church people as "having a close connection with the land which their survival in modern Nigeria demands. Yet for their awe and wonder of creation, people feel disconnected and separated from their creator." This description is typical of Western misconception of the African world view and knowledge systems. Contrary to the Church member's observation, Ekajuk people are deeply religious as is evident from the fact that no aspect of their lives is ever carried out or celebrated without rituals or other offerings to a deity or Supreme Being and overseer of their lives and environment. Perhaps Agriculture which is the mainstay of the people deserves mention here as no agricultural activity transpires without appropriate sacrifices ranging from bush clearing to planting and harvesting. All of these are preceded by proper appeasement of their traditional gods who act as intermediaries to "Eshowo", the Supreme God and creator of all things. On the other hand, Ekajuk people equally display a high degree of

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apathy towards Christianity which they see as alien to their culture and which explains the above view of them as being "separated from their Creator." This apathy manifests in the Ekajuk people's attitude towards Christian festivals which is nonchalant while conversely, the new yam festival, funerals and masquerade festivals are highly valued and attract elaborate preparations. The New Yam Festival has gradually assumed centre place in Ekajuk communal life as an avenue for show casing all aspects of Ekajuk culture and religion and the Calendrical reckoning of years. As a festival, the new yam was first collectively celebrated on the 15th of September, 1963. Initially, the new yam was celebrated by individuals whenever their farm produce, particularly yams, were ripe for harvest. The date for the celebration was therefore personal to the individual and his family members and close associates. However, in 1963 the then Clan Head of Ekajuk and member of the Eastern Nigeria House of Assembly, Ntul-Atul Philip Elgam Nakuku, in consultation with all the Clan heads of the other seven Bakor Clans agreed on a specific date, September 15th for a collective celebration of new yam. This became an outstanding festival in all Bakor Clans and since then, has remained the rallying point for all Bakor sons and daughters. The entire Bakor community of which Ekajuk is part thereafter saw the New Yam festival as an avenue for integration and celebration of the fruits of their labour throughout the year. Yam is the king of all crops and the mystical link that connects them to the soil and hence to the unknown force that makes yam and other crops to grow and feed them. They see in yam the mystery of re-incarnation and rejuvenation which is part and parcel of the people's belief in ancestral worship. This, as well, explains their attachment to dirges and funerals as rites of passage to the ethereal world and assurance of re-incarnation. Just as yam re-incarnates every year after death so also do Bakor people hope for and strongly believe in re-incarnation. Yam becomes that symbol of the mystery of re-incarnation. The new yam festival thus becomes a composite of all facets of Ekajuk life within which ceremony creative literature, religious and other cultural activities take place alongside entertainment. Women decorate themselves with new hairstyles and new dance steps are learnt to be enacted on the festival day. Elaborate preparations are made while money is saved towards the festival which money becomes handy for new dresses, purchase of animals and entertainment facilities and purchase of assorted drinks.

IV. The Aesthetic and Ethno-Linguistic Content of the Festival

Aesthetics can be said to be the science that deals with the nature of art, beauty and taste, the creation and appreciation of beauty in artistic productions. Beauty thus becomes an essential ingredient of artistic creations and aesthetic experience, so art aims at absolute beauty without which no art exists. All artistic creations, therefore, aim at the achievement of stylistic excellence in which the artistic objects and/or performances satisfy certain rules or aesthetic standards prescribed by the society within which the objects are created and consumed. Ekajuk new yam festival flourishes as the purveyor of the ethno-linguistic and ritual content of Ekajuk cultural lives and offers us the avenue for analysis of the artistic and aesthetic use of language which authenticates culture and maintains the unique identity of the people. The festival is celebrated on the 15th day of September every year and brings together sons and daughters of Ekajuk extraction and their friends from all works of life and the Diaspora. Since song and dance usher in the festival proper, the month of September is eulogized in a typical new yam festival song which runs thus:

Nyang eshumwubu
Nyang eyebe atang
Ngo nfung nah elku
Ekajuk li ntol kpeh

Translated as

The ninth month (of the year)
The month of happiness
On the 15th day
Ekajuk complete new yam celebrations.

The song is not just a eulogy of the month of September, but also of the new yam itself which arrival marks the end of the period of fasting that ushers in the festival. The song also presages the fact that other sacrifices precede the 15th day which is the culmination of all activities relating to the new yam festival. Minor celebrations include beauty contests, dramatic displays, wrestling and masquerade displays. Songs provide the best poetic structures for a linguistics analysis of society and the Ekajuk new yam festival is replete with songs which portray the environment and worldview of the people. Bassey Inyang, a journalist with the Cross River State Ministry of Information and Social Development sums up the 2013 new yam festival thus

- Given the significance of the new yam festival to the Bakor (Ejagham) people that straddle across Ogoja and Ikom Local Government Areas of Cross River State, to the Quas of Calabar Municipality and other Southern parts of the state, the fanfare which the celebration attracts is usually unprecedented. Middle of September every year, the Bakor ethnic group (of which Ekajuk is one) holds its new yam [festival] to appreciate God for a successful yam harvest for the last farming season. The 2013 edition of the celebration which held last Saturday commenced with majority of the people trooping to their various worship places for thanksgiving for

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their "first yam of the year" harvest. Those who subscribe to traditional religion trooped to their various shrines in the localities, clans and villages that make up the Bakor nation to offer sacrifices and perform other rituals as a form of thanksgiving to the god of harvest of the land. At midday, the elders of the community release "atam" masquerade to display… it was a celebration galore with Rev.

Fr. Eworo who made it to the event from his base in the United States of America (U.S.A). A unique aspect of the festival is that it closes ranks between all categories of people, rich and poor, Christian and atheist, visitor's and indigenes and even perceived enemies are forbidden to deny their antagonists food. Inyang again observes that

- Ordinarily, for the born again Christians, the mingling of a man of God with "unbelievers," in a traditional festival such as the celebration of new yam would be considered satanic and a taboo that should be condemned (but) Eworo, popularly regarded as the "spiritual father" of the Bakor people wined, danced and celebrated the Bakor new yam festival with his people some of whom are arch practitioners of African traditional religion, practiced by their forebears; thus taking to the recorded biblical practice where Jesus Christ dined and wined with sinners such as Matthew the tax collector…

I have quoted copiously from Inyang's record to illustrate what transpires during the festival and so do not need further elaboration as my interest lies instead in the linguistic manipulation and ritual content of the celebration. An in-depth analysis of the celebration shows that the festival translates to a dramatic performance within which language is creatively employed to portray the cultural background of Ekajuk people. Language reflects the ecology, the ethical values and the historical antecedents of the people as are reflected in the ritual content of the festival. Language generally and the different forms of its inflection becomes the means for an understanding of performance context, and folk or traditional narratives that rely on a deep understanding of linguistic structures to emphasize meaning as an effect of performance aesthetics.

Let us therefore commence this exploration with ululations in praise of the new yams and which ululations are employed to welcome women as they arrive home with yam tubers at various points in the evenings on the eve or any day prior to the festival day. Usually people are free to harvest and eat yams once the traditional ritual of feeding the god of harvest is performed. This ritual is performed before planting and again before harvest commences. Children, the major performers on this occasion and any other interested youth, chant, running after the women with the yam tubers

Elu ntol ntol ameh koobah

Sho ka mombeh

Mombeh li kpuul

Translated as

The new yam, **HE** has been brought

To pound for a little rat

The little rat will eat all (of it)

The chant is an archaic poetic rendition of Ekajuk language, short, cryptic and reminiscent of a wide range of Ekajuk linguistic manipulation. The chant speaks volumes of Ekajuk cultural norms and values encapsulated in it. The first sentence, "elu ntol ntol ameh koobah" is a personification of yam. The phrase "ameh koobah" is not used for inanimate objects but for human beings mostly. When used for an object, as in this case, it bestows that object with dignity and the object assumes the power of a human being and is automatically honoured. Thus, during the festival yam is honoured. The new yam is seen as a visitor who has stayed away for a long time and is only now visiting again and would soon go back home. Also "ameh koobah" which means "he/she has been brought denotes an important personality and is consequently employed by women to usher in a new born baby at birth. When the mother and child are being escorted into the homestead from the traditional birth attendants shade, women chant "ameh koobae", which here signifies something precious, something significant. The birth of a human being is as mysterious and as significant as the coming of the new yam hence language here transcends the ordinary everyday use of words. Bringing any other object would simply be expressed as

"yeb koba" meaning "He/she has brought it".

"ameh kooba" is therefore poetic connotes something precious and valuable.

Implicit in this honour bestowed on yam is adoration of the forces behind the transformation of the yam. The mystery behind the transformation of yam from old (planted) to new yam (harvested) is expressed in the adage.

"elu ji li nkpabe nyi shinghe akpabe"

Translated "The new yam is the greatest of mermaids"

This is in reference to the colour of the new yam which is different from the old brownish grey of old yams. The new yam is yellowish brown and signifies the ancestral spirits of the land to whom rituals are offered using red chalk or cam wood and yellow, the traditional colours of the gods of the land. It also captures the awe that accompanies the mystery of incarnation.

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The arrival of the new yam is also subject to praises encapsulated in descriptive epithets rendered by elders who inspect the tubers as they are brought home. Such epithets are poetic and pregnant with meaning. They include among others:

Abaa anneh jiki

He has come to save people

Or abaa njale wuul

He has come to kill hunger

Or agali ayenghe yenghe

Atokor

fere li jo wonor abor

Meaning: too much eating makes one heavy

No eating makes you shiver/weak.

These expressions are heard from elders in many compounds and are perceived to be in praise of new yam which is addressed as a warrior come to free people from hunger and which chants are all rendered in archaic forms of Ekajuk language that add colour and enhance depth of expression. This is where the second part of the dramatic chant becomes relevant.

Sho ka mombeh, mombeh li kpuul

"To pound for a little rat (who) will eat all of it".

The expression diminishes the power and importance of man who is as small and as helpless as a little rat. Man is helpless before hunger but yam is the warrior who defeats hunger. The phrase magnifies the power of yam, its rejuvenative power, its creative and sustaining power as against the diminutive personality of man before hunger. Yam thus becomes a deity to be worshipped by man for its inexplicable essence. Other epithets by which yam is described include:

Ntul ekulugbe	king of the farmstead
Ashap mbame	hard to cultivate
Anob nkpake	joyful to harvest

Again these short, cryptic and archaic phrases equate yam with childbirth or the reproductive process. Farm chores are as hard and sometimes as painful as labour but the final product pleases the mind as much as a baby brings joy to the parents. Yam and man thus symbolize inexplicable nature resplendent in its rejuvenative essence.

The 15th and 16th September are marked by much eating and drinking but the 15th is also marked by singing, dancing and masquerade displays prominent among which is the "atam", a royal masquerade which performs several functions of entertainment, adjudication and ritual cleansing. Among a plethora of festival songs usually intoned during the dancing by women and youths are such songs as

Warebae nshoor

Warebae nshoor

Nnobor anyi wor bake limi kaare nshoor

Nnobor anyi wor bake limi kaare nneeh

Translated as

We have come papa
We have come mama
What good will you offer us papa
What good will you offer us mama

Or

Efung bi lilah
Efung elgere
Koon nshol ba kaarr go elgere
Koon nshol ba kaarr go elgere
elgerae elgere, Elgerae elgere

Translated as

The day of today
The day of joy
Bring things to us in happiness
Bring food to us in happiness/joy
Happiness! Happiness! Happiness! Happiness.

V. The Ritual Content of the Festival

Ritual, whether traditional or Christian, thrives more on chants and incantations as well as dialogue, all of which are creative forms of language use. They portray the oratorical or artistic skills of artists as performers. In this context, every Ekajuk citizen learns from his ancestral lineage,the prayers of supplication to his family's ancestors. Every family head therefore presents his family to the ancestors on such occasions of festival celebrations like the new yam. This, however, is strongly threatened by the advent of Christianity. Most people now go to the Christian churches to make their offerings. This not with standing, every Ekajuk citizen is strongly bound by ancestral rules governing interaction within the community and is guided by the adjudication of elders within the land. Agricultural activities are, therefore, very strongly subject to ritual performances which are carried out by elders and priests designated for such purposes. No one, Christian, atheist, or traditional religionist disobeys elders in the performance of these duties that make for cohesion and peaceful existence in society. Elders, it is believed are vested with authority by the gods and ancestors to perform these duties. No one is permitted to plant or to harvest yam until the spirit of yam represented by a deity "Nnim" is fed and appeased. To start planting or before new yam is eaten people often ask

Bob kunu elu go nnim-a ?

Meaning – Have the elders or priest placed a yam in the shrine?

Then and only then are people permitted to plant or harvest yams. Anything to the contrary would

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amount to desecration of the earth which is a serious crime requiring heavy cleansing rites or ostracism. The ceremony of placing a yam in the shrine is done by the chief priest of the community in the presence of elders who represent the various units of the Community. No one perceived to be wicked or unclean is allowed entry into the shrines of the Community. The chief priest or any elder chosen to offer prayers of supplication throws up mashed yam and in the process calls on the ancestral spirits of all the wards to come, eat and bless the planting or harvesting as the case may be. Worthy of note is the fact that these supplicators are always accomplished orators or artists, and in most cases singers. In case of the new yam festival the prayers solicit for blessings and peace on the land during the period of the celebrations. Language used here is often elevated and artistic or proverbial. Chants and incantations highlight past ancestral achievements in the land and serve as invitations to the ancestors to come and witness the celebrations. They usually commence with a litany of ancestors namely Egre Akobi, Moshe Egba, Ebak Eri, Morgan Aleshe, Ayop Ekre, Montul Kpimbang etc.

Wukin ero bareh

Meaning – Listen to our supplication.

Alternatively, the supplicatory prayer runs as a short litany of names which is artistically presented with apt descriptions or acknowledgements of what each ancestor stood for or achieved in the Community during his life time e.g.

- Egre Akobi – Mfam Enya
- Moshe Egba – Ntul bim
- Morgan Aleshe – eboblum ebtah
- Ebak Eri – alum go nyor

Translated as

- Egre Akobi – your world
- Moshe egba – our hunt leader
- Morgan Aleshe – the warrior's right hand
- Ebak Eri – speech from your mouth

These are well known ancestors who were great hunters, yam farmers, medicine men, warriors and spokesmen for the community who are all invited to come and listen and participate in the festival. They are then invited to a meal in a language outside the normal run of Ekajuk language e.g.

Egre Akobi	elu ali
Moshe Egba	elu ali, nyam aka
Morgan Aleshe	Enanghe edi
Ebak Eri	Amam awor
Ayop Ekre	Mbaang gbuul

Translated as

Egre akobi	yam you eat
Moshe Egba	yam you eat, meat you provide
Morgan Alesh	cool atmosphere (wedesire)
Ebak Eri	Wine you drink (for our sake)
Ayop Ekre.	No hindrance, a clear road.

This invocatory chant amounts to an inversion of the normal linguistic process as it translates to commands and expectations from the ancestors yet it is reminiscent of Old Ekajuk language employed during the period of inter tribal warfare when people hardly had time for long and elaborate speeches. The short interjectory forms, realized poetically, represent archaic forms of Ekajuk language known as "Nnam ngbor" or "The inner language." Today, these forms are obsolete and only come handy in festival or ritual situations. What obtains today are lengthy expressions which sound banal and unpleasant. The old forms which are usually rendered by an accomplished artist or orator are poetic and aesthetically very pleasant to listen to. Today, Ekajuk people are noted for bravery and stubbornness as P. Amoury Talbot (1912) described them. Also, today the Bakor generally and Ekajuk in particular parade an array of war dances including Ebrimbi, Alashi, Ayita, Agrinya as well as traditional war deities like "Atimbi" and "Afufu" which are recognized and feasted during the new yam festival period.

"Elu ali" is an archaic and inverted form of "li elu" which is the ordinary everyday expression meaning "eat yam" but "elu ali" is more poetic and connotative and incantatory. The same applies to "nyiam aka" instead of "ka nyiam" meaning "provide meat", for the festival and "amam awor" instead of "wor amam" meaning "drink wine". What the artist achieves with "elu ali", "amam awor", nyam aka" is avoidance of direct commands to the ancestors to eat yam or drink wine or provide meat which would be preposterous and confrontational. Language becomes more cryptic and mild, more in the form of a plea than a command.

In addition, the poetry of the prayer rests on the succinct imagery created through the successive mention of all that is desired during the period of the festival namely

Trouble free celebration, fat yam tubers, riches and happiness. which is complemented by appropriate mention of an ancestor to provide the needed commodity. A typical supplicatory prayer by a priest performer would run like

ebrikpabi, ntong shing mbaang	chorus: eh he
eblu tub, ebim kpor	eh he
Anebkal jel abon	eh he etc
Afang yel go mfam	
ntol jol ashol ashol	
enanghe ndi beem	

Translated as

Almighty God, trouble will pass by
Yams (will) grow fat; hunts (will) yield
Women (will) give birth (to children)

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Riches (will) enter the Community
The new yam festival (will) be filled with laughter and joy.
Peace and calm (will) reign.

At this point language becomes incantatory and poetic as well as dialogic particularly as the audience is expected to respond in approbation of the chanter's invocations which are expressive of their collective wishes. This is the voice of the community.

Celebrations like these do not permit elaborate or long speeches in ordinary language. The short pregnant utterances create effect as the chorus responds with "eheheh," "eheheh," "eheheh" after each utterance. The culmination of the festival celebrations is the final cleansing of the Community by atam masquerade late in the evening of the 15th of September. Specifically Atam performs the cleansing ceremony prior to and at the end of the festival. The masquerader does this either by running or walking briskly at dusk through the entire Community, placing his club on every roof top and chanting incantations silently in thanksgiving to the gods of the land for a successful new yam festival. All these are irrespective of whatever Christian Church ceremonies or prayers that precede or end the festival. For the role of atam masquerade in Bakor Community see Ganyi (2013). This aspect of the celebration is often missed by visitors who may have left to their various destinations or gone to sleep and sometimes the cleansing is performed at night.

VI. Conclusion

Festivals, we all know, bring people of the same or different cultures together to interact using language as the basis for this interaction. For this reason, festivals can offer opportunities for us to focus attention on the poetics of language use that will portray the artful qualities of linguistic manipulation in the traditional contexts of the festivals. In festivals we can view and analyze contextual and situational variables that affect or even enhance language use particularly when it relates to choices of linguistic systems or narrative traditions that aim to articulate cultural values of a particular Community. As Dell Hymes (1996) succinctly observes

> Narratives answer to two elementary
> functions of language … Presentational
> as well as propositional, deleting
> presentational aspects from the record
> means the loss of the narrative
> (behavioural and cultural) aspects of the texts.

Perhaps an ethno-poetics approach to festival contents as carriers of the performance aesthetics and creative use of language in contextual situations will yield better results in our attempts to diagnose how language carries the thought modes and ideological bent of the Communities that use a particular language. After all Kenneth Sherwood argues that ethno-poetics

> enriches our understanding of traditional poetries in formal, philosophical and spiritual terms (and) alters received ideas about the Western Canon and literary form thereby enlarging the domain of poetry.

Ekajuk new yam festival provides this opportunity for an intensive and in-depth analysis of language use in all facets of Ekajuk life and which will enhance the celebration, not only of Ekajuk culture and values but also the bond of unity that binds the Ekajuk people to their immediate Bakor brothers and the larger Ejagham nation through language and culture. The new yam festival and the atam masquerade are to the Ekajuk people and their Bakor brothers what "Mgbe" is to the Ejagham nation or "Ekpe" to other cultures, who have adulterated "Mgbe" to "mkpe" or "Ekpe" as the case may be. It is a re-enactment of the bond of unity existing among the people and a reminder of their culture, ethics and knowledge systems celebrated on the same day by all the clans that constitute the Bakor union namely; Nkim, Nkum and Ekajuk in Ogoja and Nnam, Abaniyom, Nde, Ntaa and Nselle in Ikom Local Government Areas of Cross River State respectively.

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