The scale **Journal Website:** https://thescalejournal.com.ng/
An Interdisciplinary Journal of
The ACADEMIC STAFF UNION OF POLYTECHNICS - ZONE D
ISSN: 2992-3727 Published 30th November, 2025

CULTURE, POLITICS, AND CONTESTATION OF AUTHORITY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE IRI JI MBAISE CULTURAL FESTIVAL

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ABSTRACT
The Iri Ji Mbaise festival, celebrated annually in Imo State, Nigeria, stands as one of the most elaborate expressions of Igbo cultural identity and heritage. Traditionally designed as a ritualized celebration of yam harvest and communal solidarity, the festival has in recent years become a contested arena where questions of cultural authority, political influence, and social mobilization intersect. This paper critically examines the tensions between Ezeji title holders, custodians of yam culture, and Ezuruezu, the apex socio-cultural organization in Mbaise, over control, and modalities of hosting the festival. Drawing on ethnographic observations, oral testimonies, and documentary sources, the analysis reveals how self-centered motives, leadership rivalries, and underlying political intrigues have encroached upon what is ostensibly a communal rite of unity. By situating these conflicts within broader debates on the politicization of culture, the paper highlights the shifting boundaries between tradition and modernity, heritage and power, ritual and social wrongdoing. Ultimately, the study argues that the struggles surrounding Iri Ji Mbaise are symptomatic of wider tensions in contemporary African cultural practices, where festivals function not only as sites of identity affirmation but also as battlegrounds for legitimacy, influence and control. In so doing, the paper contributes to the growing body of scholarship on African cultural festivals as spaces of negotiation, contestation, and redefinition in the face of changing socio-political realities.
Keywords: Igbo identity, cultural festivals, Iri Ji Mbaise, politicization of culture, authority.

INTRODUCTION
In the contemporary Nigerian cultural setting, several cultural heritages stand tall across the realm. One can eloquently point out the prominence of the Argungu Fishing Festival in the North (Kebbi State), the Osun-Osogbo Festival in Osun State, west of the Niger, and a myriad of other festivals in different corners of the country. In the stature of these aforementioned cultural heritages is the celebration of Iri Ji (New Yam Festival) in Igboland. It is safe to say that the Iri Ji festival, as celebrated by the Mbaise nation, remarkably stands out as a landmark expression of Igbo cultural heritage.

The New Yam Festival in Mbaise has firmly become imprinted as a way of life for the people of the area. The festival, which gained prominence as far back as the early 1940s, is rooted in the mythology of "Ahiajoku," the god of yam and harvest. It celebrates the success of the yearly crop planting and bountiful harvest, and also serves as the event marking the first harvest of the year. In Igboland, yam is considered chief among all crops and is deeply revered. To that extent, its celebration, rooted in the "Ahiajoku" heritage, forms an important part of African traditional religion.

Ndi Ezeji, the traditional custodians of the Iri Ji culture, consist of men who have distinguished themselves in yam farming and possess massive barns. From observable practices, many yam farmers in Mbaise hardly eat new yam before the Iri Ji festival, which centrally takes place on August 15 every year. The festival has indeed become part of the make-up and definition of the Mbaise nation and, in the words of

Duke and Osim (2020), the festival, like others, has sufficiently recreated and enlivened the community socially, culturally, economically, and spiritually.

However, the recreation and social cohesion afforded by the Iri Ji festival have, for decades, endured the onslaught of modernity. In recent times, the realities of commodification of the festival and self-centeredness have aligned with political encroachments to suffocate the true spirit of the celebration (see Miller, 1993).

The crux of the matter stems from these factors. Succinctly put, the Iri Ji festival has been enmeshed in a tussle for power and control. The turning point came with the hijack of the festival by Ndi Eze Mbaise, who reduced it to a show of political clout in 2018, when chieftaincy politics took the stage. The cultural heritage continued in that straitjacket until Ezuruezu waded into the simmering cultural tension between Ndi Ezeji and the Mbaise Traditional Rulers' Council (Ndi Eze). They insisted that the authority to centrally organize the Iri Ji ceremony must rest solely with Ndi Ezeji and Ezuruezu Mbaise (The Nigerian Voice, 2018). Having wrestled power from Ndi Eze Mbaise, Ezuruezu became monopolistic and positioned itself to exclusively manage the affairs and conduct of the festival. Thus, Ndi Ezeji became subtly edged out and sidelined in the management of a cultural heritage in which they are supposed to be the front-liners.

CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF KEY WORDS

IGBO IDENTITY

The culture and ways of life of a people epitomize their identity. It is as true as in a variedly divided world; people are primarily identified by their culture, which embodies their language, food, music, dressing, social institutions, and other forms of physical expression. The Igbos of southeast Nigeria, as well as those who reside in other parts of the country and the diaspora, possess unique and distinctive factors that can be culturally defined. These constitute the universal emblem of Igbo identity and heritage.

The Igbo language, though facing challenges of endangerment due to globalization and acculturation, remains central to the continuity of Igbo identity, as it transmits values, worldviews, and philosophies of life (Echeruo, 1998; Nwachukwu-Agbada, 2010). Traditional cuisine, ranging from dishes like *"Ofe Onugbu"* (bitterleaf soup) and *"Abacha"* (African salad), reflects not only nutritional practices but also the social and symbolic life of the people (Okafor, 2014). Attires such as the *"Isi Agu"*, worn with pride during ceremonies, communicate dignity, social belonging, and cultural consciousness. Equally, the different rhythms of traditional music and masquerade performances, such as *"Mmanwu"*, embody the spiritual and aesthetic heritage of the Igbos, reinforcing communal solidarity and ancestral reverence (Onwuejeogwu, 1981; Nwoga, 1984).

Altogether, these expressions paint a holistic picture of who the Igbos are; their culture and their identity. Thus, Igbo identity is not static but dynamic, rooted in tradition, while negotiating space within modernity. It remains a vital index of belonging, resilience, and cultural continuity for a people deeply aware of their history and heritage

CULTURAL FESTIVAL

If culture is the totality of inherited ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge that constitutes the shared bases of social action (Collins Concise English Dictionary, 1998), then these elements find their highest expression when celebrated through festivals. In other words, a cultural festival is the periodic celebration of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge of a people. Such festivals serve not only as entertainment or recreation but also as instruments of identity preservation, social cohesion, and intergenerational knowledge transmission (Okonkwo, 2010; Nze, 2017).

ISSN: 2992-3727 Published 30th November, 2025

Examples abound in the *Odenigbo, Oruru-Ukwu Enyiogugu colloquium and Ahiajoku* Lecture Series; all flourishing intellectual festivals rooted in Igbo philosophy and cultural renewal. These events transcend mere academic gatherings; they are symbolic spaces for the revival and revalidation of Igbo epistemology, thought systems, and linguistic heritage (Nwosu, 2012). Similarly, the *"Iri Ji"* or New Yam Festival stands as one of the most visible cultural heritages of the Igbo people. It is annually celebrated across Igbo communities to mark gratitude to *"Chukwu Okike"* (God) for bountiful harvests and to reaffirm social unity and moral order (Onwuejeogwu, 1981; Okafor, 2014).

Therefore, cultural festivals in Igboland and beyond are not mere traditional rituals; they embody the philosophy of life, communal continuity, and resistance to cultural erosion. They were instituted to preserve and promote indigenous languages, cultural values, unity, and progress among the Igbo and, by extension, the Nigerian nation (The Nation, 2025).

IRI JI MBAISE

The New Yam Festival, known as *"Iri Ji Ohuru"* in local Igbo parlance, is an age-long cultural heritage of the Igbo people. In Igbo cosmology, yam enjoys a pride of place and suffices as the most revered element in its agrarian tradition. The New Yam Festival celebrates not only the harvest and the successful end of the farming cycle but also thanksgiving to *"Chukwu Okike"* (God) and the ancestors for life, fertility, and abundance (Onwuejeogwu, 1981; Uchendu, 1965).

In the Mbaise nation, made up of five clans; *Agbaja, Uvuru, Ezinihitte, Ahiara*, and *Ekwerazu*, the *Iri Ji* tradition has become a notable symbol of unity and collective identity. Centrally celebrated on the 15th of August each year, the *Iri Ji Mbaise* cultural heritage is now deeply entrenched in the socio-cultural calendar of the people as both an emblem of pride and a defining attribute of the Mbaise nation (Ekechi, 2013). The festival transcends the ritual of yam tasting; it embodies renewal, kinship solidarity, and communal thanksgiving.

Uniquely, the "*Iri Ji Mbaise*" festival reverberates in every household and ignites a massive homecoming experience second only to the Christmas and New Year celebrations. Beyond its ritualistic essence, it provides a platform for cultural diplomacy, social negotiation, and the reassertion of Igbo traditional values in a rapidly changing world (Okafor, 2014; Nze, 2017). Thus, *Iri Ji Mbaise* combines the sacred celebration of yam's fertility symbolism with a dynamic avenue for collective representation, cultural continuity, and social expression.

POLITICISATION OF CULTURE

In recent history, modernization has given effect to the dilution of the purity of most cultural heritages to accommodate evolving social and political structures. Culture, once perceived as an autonomous system of values and traditions, is increasingly drawn into the arena of political negotiation, identity construction, and economic competition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Nzegwu, 2014). The history of the *Argungu* Fishing Festival, for example, illustrates this transformation. Originally initiated in 1934 to commemorate the end of long-standing hostilities between the Sokoto Caliphate and the Kingdom of Kebbi, the festival has over time transcended its original purpose. What began as a local fishing competition among the riverine communities has evolved into a large-scale civic event that attracts national and international participants (Aremu, 2001).

Through deliberate expansion, the *Argungu* festival has become not only a symbol of unity and identity but also a platform for political networking, tourism diplomacy, and economic advancement. It provides state and non-state actors' opportunities to project power, consolidate legitimacy, and promote regional cooperation (Nwaezeigwe, 2015). This politicization of culture is not peculiar to northern Nigeria alone;

it reflects a broader national and global trend where cultural festivals are mobilized as instruments of soft power and nation branding (Falola, 2021).

Thus, while festivals like *Argungu, Osun-Osogbo*, and *Iri Ji Mbaise* retain their traditional roots, they increasingly serve political, diplomatic, and developmental purposes. The fusion of culture and politics, though productive in fostering visibility and cohesion, equally risks commodifying heritage and eroding its original sacred essence, a paradox central to contemporary cultural discourse (Okeke, 2017).

AUTHORITY

According to Ogunna et al. (2003), authority refers to a "relationship between persons or offices in which one has the right to give commands to another, who sees it as a duty to obey." In the context of cultural authority, this right derives not merely from legal mandate but from the legitimacy that tradition, customs, and collective recognition confer (Weber, 1947). Within indigenous societies such as Mbaise, authority is both symbolic and functional, anchored in ancestral sanction and community consensus.

The question, therefore, arises: between *Ndi Ezeji* (the titled yam owners) and *Ezuruezu Mbaise* (the apex socio-cultural organization), who should command obedience and wield traditional authority regarding the control and direction of the *Iri Ji Mbaise* festival? In practice, both entities bear complementary strands of authority. While *Ndi Ezeji* derive their legitimacy from agrarian ritual custodianship, *Ezuruezu Mbaise* exercises representational authority rooted in collective social organization. When harmoniously aligned, these dual structures of authority sustain cultural order and authenticity. However, when contestation arises, it exposes the dynamic nature of traditional governance, where legitimacy is continually negotiated between sacred tradition and evolving socio-political structures.

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

To fully understand the dynamics of control and contestations in the *Iri Ji Mbaise* festival, a theoretical approach to the study will be attempted from three cardinal points of view: interpretive anthropology, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and phenomenology.

In his work "The Interpretation of Cultures", Geertz (1973) described culture as "an ordered system of meaning and of symbols, in terms of which social interaction takes place; the framework of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values through which individuals define their world, express their feelings, and make their judgments." In other words, if culture is an embodiment of the meanings expressed in symbolic forms, it becomes pertinent to search for the meaning hidden behind symbolic behavior (Bazancir, 2023). This is the hallmark of Geertz's idea of interpretive anthropology, which offers a deeper opportunity to understand any culture.

When a cultural festival like *Iri Ji Mbaise* is seen as a text that can be read, interpreted, and understood within its symbolic context, meaning can be communicated, which in turn reproduces cultural cohesion. As a rich cultural text that holds the Igbo social values, and collective identity, the *Iri Ji* festival can thus be understood as more than a mere seasonal agricultural event.

Highlighting the second point of view, Norman Fairclough (1992), the authority behind Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), in his work "Discourse and Social Change", advanced CDA as a method to determine how social power, inequality, and dominance are asserted and reproduced through discourse in socio-cultural and political contexts. To unveil the asymmetrical use of power, exploitation, manipulation, and structural inequalities, CDA examines the intersection of language and social structure (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Among other principles, CDA maintains that the relationship among discourse, social structures, and culture is dialectical: discourse is historical and cannot be produced out of context, since it defines or exposes the nature of social power relations (Wodak, 1996; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). In this case, it can be argued that the discursive history of the *Iri Ji Mbaise* heritage has not been adequately

engaged by contending social agents to delineate the cultural and social field. Therefore, by applying the CDA framework, it is expected that power, influence, and authority can be operated more effectively through the production of consent via discourse, especially when grounded in the historical interpretation of language (Golbasi, 2017).

In the field of phenomenological sociology, the works of Alfred Schutz (1967), and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) stand prominent. As a theoretical framework, phenomenology examines the construction of social reality through everyday intersubjective interactions and experiences (Javed & Zafar, 2025). Schutz argued that individuals can better understand their lived experiences through the phenomenological principle, by interpreting and illustrating them rather than passively perceiving an objective reality (Ratner, 1973). Berger and Luckmann (2018) built on Schutz's premises by emphasizing that individuals and social groups create shared concepts and reciprocal social roles through interaction with one another.

Considering the research issue at hand, this framework takes the study beyond abstract boundaries to focus on how agents; *Ndi Ezeji, Ezuruezu*, and the indigenes of Mbaise, experience, perceive, and make sense of the festival.

IRI JI MBAISE FESTIVAL: CONTROL DYNAMICS AND CONTESTATION

A people are normally identified by their culture; their distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual, social, economic, and political identity (Eden, 2024). These variables of identity and distinction reflect the way of life of the people: their culture. Culture is dynamic, changing with the shifting socio-political and economic landscape. Therefore, friction tends to arise in a social structure where rigid principles regarding ritual practices and ceremonial makeup are tightly held in the face of changing social dynamics.

To understand the point of contestation in the *Iri Ji Mbaise* festival, one needs to probe the control dynamics of the heritage. The *Iri Ji* ceremony owes its foundation to the *Ahiajoku* tradition, which portrays the sacredness of yam, its cultivation, and its celebration. The centrality of yam (often described in Igbo sources as the "king of crops") and the ritual prestige associated with yam production and barns are well documented in studies of Igbo agrarian culture (Korieh, 2007). *Ndi Ezeji* have always been the priests and custodians of this tradition, and hitherto were the overall superintendents of the *Iri Ji Mbaise festival*. The New Yam / *Iri Ji* festival more broadly has been studied as a sacred seasonal ceremony across many Igbo communities and framed as both a religious and cultural performance (Okafor, 1992; Onwuatuegwu, 2024). However, their grip on the festival began to weaken with the intervention of the church and the spiritual dilution that accompanied campaigns against every form of idol worship (Manus, 2007). Politics further eroded their prestige, as seen in the 2018 edition marred by a chieftaincy installation controversy that heightened political visibility and contestation at the festival (Waka About Africa, 2018). Most significantly, the growing influence of *Ezuruezu Mbaise*, and its gradual usurpation of managerial control, has challenged *Ndi Ezeji's* custodial authority. *Ezuruezu* justifies its intervention by claiming that, as the apex socio-cultural organization in Mbaise, control of cultural heritage is its exclusive preserve. Recent reports of renewed disputes and accusations around festival management corroborate continuing tensions between *Ndi Ezeji* and *Ezuruezu* (Silver News, 2025).

While this trend persists, the *Ezeji Mbaise* institution remains unwilling to part with its sacred custodial mandate. To them, they are not guests but the very soul of the festival. Their authority, they argue, is an ancestral duty, not political charity (Silver News, 2025).

The contestation between the two groups is essentially a struggle over meaning, legitimacy, and authority. *Ndi Ezeji* interpret the *Iri Ji* festival as a sacred ritual text in which yam, the "king of crops", symbolizes ancestral continuity and ritual prestige. Notable work on Igbo yam cults and related deities (e.g., *Ahia/Njoku Ji*) shows how yam rituals are embedded in wider cosmological systems that require

ceremonial offerings before new yams are eaten; a ritual logic that undergirds custodial claims (Nwosu, 2013; Uchendu, 1965). Their act of breaking and tasting the first yam is understood as a cultural performance of authority, which validates their leadership in symbolic legitimacy. *Ezuruezu*, by contrast, reinterprets the same festival through the lens of modern socio-cultural identity. For them, it is less about ritual custodianship and more about projecting Mbaise unity, political visibility, and cultural diplomacy in a globalized context. Thus, one party anchors legitimacy in ritual purity, while the other locates it in collective representation (Adiele, 2025; Onwuatuegwu, 2024).

Language and discourse further sharpen this divide. *Ndi Ezeji* assert their role as "custodians of the yam" and guardians of ancestral mandates, reinforcing authenticity and tradition. *Ezuruezu*, meanwhile, frame the festival as an inclusive civic event, emphasizing unity, modernization, and political networking. Each camp, therefore, uses discourse strategically to legitimize itself while delegitimizing the other in line with the critical discourse studies of cultural politics (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

At the experiential level, contestation arises because the same cultural event embodies different lived meanings. For *Ndi Ezeji*, the *Iri Ji* festival is inseparable from ritual duty, ancestral honor, and agrarian prestige. For *Ezuruezu Mbaise*, however, the lived meaning is political and civic: it provides a platform for external projection of Mbaise identity, elite networking, and representation. Yet, for ordinary people, the festival is experienced more pragmatically, as a moment of belonging, collective pride, and celebration. The people do not align fully with either side but tend to balance ritual purity with modernity, creating a space of accommodation between the two camps (Adiele, 2025; Onwuatuegwu, 2024).

DEMARCATING BOUNDARIES OF AUTHORITY BETWEEN EZURUEZU AND NDI EZEJI

The contest between *Ndi Ezeji* and *Ezuruezu Mbaise* over the control of the *Iri Ji* festival reflects a deeper struggle between ritual purity and socio-political modernity. Demarcating boundaries of authority therefore requires a fair evaluation of both claims, without undermining the essence of the cultural heritage or the realities of contemporary society. This evaluation will be carried out via three guiding sub-themes: the merits of *Ndi Ezeji's* traditional custodianship, *Ezuruezu's* modernist approach and its merits, and a synthesis of traditional and modern perspectives.

Merits of Ndi Ezeji's Traditional Custodianship

The foundation of the *Iri Ji Mbaise* festival rests on ritual legitimacy. *Ndi Ezeji*, as yam priests and custodians of the *Ahiajoku* tradition, embody the spiritual purity and ancestral continuity of the celebration (Manus, 2007). Their authority derives not from political structures or civic associations, but from cultural cosmology; the belief that yam is the "king of crops," and that those who cultivate and present it in abundance acquire ritual prestige and ancestral honor (Onwurah, 1990). Thus, their role in breaking and tasting the first yam is not symbolic in the ordinary sense, but sacramental, validating the continuity of communal life, agricultural fertility, and ancestral blessings (Ukpabi Unya, 2021).

Maintaining the cultural purity of the festival requires acknowledging that without the custodial function of *Ndi Ezeji*, the *Iri Ji* loses its ritual authenticity and risks becoming a mere performance. Their authority is rooted in tradition, and by virtue of that authority, they represent the spiritual soul of the festival. Any attempt to dislodge or diminish their role amounts to severing the festival from its ancestral roots (Onwuatuegwu, 1990).

Ezuruezu's Modernist Approach and Its Merits

Ezuruezu Mbaise, as the apex socio-cultural organization, approaches the festival not simply as a sacred ritual but as a platform for unity, visibility, and socio-political advancement. Its leaders argue that in a globalized world, cultural events must be transformed into spectacles capable of attracting political

dignitaries, investors, and development partners (Ndubisi, 2022). By centralizing organization and projecting the festival as a unifying badge of identity for all Mbaise clans, *Ezuruezu* seeks to reposition the *Iri Ji* as both a civic celebration and a diplomatic tool (Onwuatuegwu, 1990).

This modernist approach has merit because it extends the relevance of the festival beyond the village square to the national and even international stage. By rebranding the *Iri Ji* as a public cultural festival, *Ezuruezu* provides opportunities for elite networking, political bargaining, and developmental mobilization (Onwuatuegwu, 1990; Ukpabi Unya, 2021). In this sense, *Ezuruezu* does not seek to erase tradition but to reinterpret it within the contemporary needs of the Mbaise people. Their intervention, though contested, reflects the pressing demand to align heritage with socioeconomic growth and political representation.

Toward a Synthesis of Traditional and Modern Perspectives

While the claims of *Ndi Ezeji* and *Ezuruezu* appear conflicting, they need not be mutually exclusive. A synthesis of perspectives offers the most sustainable way forward. On one hand, the festival must retain its ritual core, which is the spiritual custodianship of *Ndi Ezeji*. This guarantees cultural authenticity, preserves ancestral integrity, and affirms Mbaise identity in its purest form (Manus, 2007). On the other hand, *Ezuruezu's* modernist agenda, if pursued with sensitivity to tradition, can elevate the festival into a vehicle for socioeconomic development and political visibility (see Ndubisi, 2022).

Demarcating boundaries of authority thus requires a dual recognition: *Ndi Ezeji* must remain the ritual superintendents of the *Iri Ji Mbaise* festival, ensuring that it retains its cultural soul, while *Ezuruezu* should coordinate its broader civic, diplomatic, and developmental aspects (Ukpabi Unya, 2021). In this balanced model, ritual purity and cultural continuity are safeguarded, while modern representation and collective advancement are also achieved. The result is not a festival stripped of meaning, nor a ritual locked away from progress, but a heritage that speaks to both ancestors and posterity (Onwuatuegwu, 1990; Onwuatuegwu, 2024).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The culture of *Iri Ji Mbaise* has come of age and significance, and truly deserves a pride of place both in the UNESCO cultural calendar and within the global tourism industry. To elevate the *Iri Ji Mbaise* heritage to the summit of internationally recognized festivals requires not only the preservation of its cultural purity but also an intentional pursuit of both national and international visibility.

In this context, the two poles of authority, traditional and modern, identified in the study's analytical framework deserve equitable accommodation. Such inclusivity ensures that shared authority yields shared prosperity. It is shared authority in the sense that *Ndi Ezeji*, as one of the analogous poles, serve as sacristans of the sacred symbols of the festival, vested with the authority to oversee the ritual of the *"Iwaji"* (cutting of yam) ceremony. Conversely, *Ezuruezu Mbaise* should exercise authority in areas of organization, cultural diplomacy, and the broadening of the festival's socioeconomic and political horizons.

This synergy between tradition and modernity not only sustains the integrity of the festival but also projects *Iri Ji Mbaise* as a living cultural system; dynamic, inclusive, and globally relevant. Such collaboration remains the pathway toward transforming the festival into a universal emblem of Igbo cultural identity and pride. To achieve this balance, the following recommendations are advanced:

Institutional Recognition of Complementary Authority

The dual significance of the festival must be acknowledged by recognizing *Ndi Ezeji* as the legitimate ritual custodians while affirming *Ezuruezu* as the civic and socio-political coordinators. This

complementary recognition demarcates authority in a way as to eliminate conflict and strengthen collective identity.

Codification through a Cultural Charter

A cultural charter should be developed, jointly authored by *Ndi Ezeji* and *Ezuruezu*, to codify their respective roles. Such codification would serve as a constitutional arrangement/guide for festival management, with the advantage of reducing future ambiguities. Similar charters in other African cultural contexts have proven effective in sustaining heritage while negotiating modernity, as Ndubisi, (2022) emphasizes.

Creation of a Collaborative Festival Committee

A standing committee should be constituted, comprising representatives of *Ndi Ezeji*, *Ezuruezu*, town unions, youth groups, the diaspora community and any other important stakeholders. While *Ndi Ezeji* would oversee ritual subcommittees, *Ezuruezu* would coordinate civic and publicity subcommittees, ensuring that the dual targets of the festival are pursued in harmony.

Safeguarding Ritual Purity

The integrity of the ritual, particularly the breaking and tasting of the first yam, must remain the exclusive preserve of *Ndi Ezeji*. Onwuatuegwu's (2024) treatise shows that any encroachment into this role risks desacralizing the festival and severing its continuity with Igbo cosmology and ancestral heritage.

Strategic Modernization of the Festival

Ezuruezu's efforts to project the festival to wider socio-political audiences should be encouraged, but carried out with sensitivity to cultural roots. By balancing ritual with spectacle, *Ezuruezu* can transform the *Iri Ji* into both a sacred tradition and a platform for political visibility, tourism, and development diplomacy, as enunciated above.

Documentation and Archiving of the Festival

A structured process of documentation, involving oral history, video archiving, and academic publications, should be institutionalized. This not only preserves the historical memory of the festival but also provides transparency for demarcating roles and responsibilities across generations of Mbaise kin.

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