

Otna Uknu Runderle (Age Grade Wrestling) Festival: A Review in the Context of its Tourism Potentials.

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Abstract

At age 60, a male adult of *Runderle*, in a very colorful ceremony, performs his last wrestling outing. This impressive ceremony symbolizes the end of a very important phase and the beginning of yet another significant, but last phase, of a man's life, which is *Ohna Runderle* (the red cap chiefs and the highest organ of the community government). At age 40, a male youth of *Runderle* ceases to wrestle at the community arena. After 40 years of age, his eyes and that of his family and relatives are set on 60 years and the *Otna Uknu* festival. To every male of *Runderle* and their relatives, friends and well-wishers, the years preceding age 60, are very critical. It is viewed by the community as bad omen for anyone who did not live to celebrate this very important phase and culture of *Runderle*. To be admitted into *Ohna Runderle*, it is one of the requirements, if not the most important requirement to be fulfilled. In addition to being denied a seat in *Ohna Runderle*, a male who could not fulfill this important cultural obligation, is denied some rights that are exclusive to him by reason of his age. He is looked down on in the community, and also loses his voice in community matters. This unpleasant treatment is not meted on the man alone, but extends to his family and other relatives. The study reveals that in order to avoid this collective shame, the families and relatives of prospective celebrants, ensures that their man performs the ceremony without hitches. And in the end the glory does not go to the celebrant alone, but to his family and relatives. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine the *Otna Uknu* festival of *Runderle* in the context of its tourism potentials and the development of the *Ikwerre* of *Runderle*. It adopts the historical methodology using primary and secondary sources to gather data. It concludes that the principle of collective

ownership of *otna uknu* communal obligation has promoted group solidarity and the development of Rundele community.

Introduction

Otna Uknu Rundele is a symbolic ceremonial wrestling festival of Rundele community of Ikwerreland in Rivers State, for male adult of the community whose age set attained 60years of age. In Rundele tradition, a man ceases to wrestle at the community arena or anywhere else on attaining 40years of age (Eze Gideon Omodu, 2021). At 60years, he is received into the community leadership cadre and can be heard in community matters. But before that he and his age grade must perform the customary *Otna Uknu*. A man whose age grade and himself have not fulfill the customary obligation of performing *Otna Uknu* after attaining 60years, will not be initiated as Ohna Rundele, and the age and the man, depending on who has failed to discharge the obligation. An age grade desiring to perform the ceremony would have to inform the community of their readiness to prosecute the ceremony. But any age grade not ready on account of lack of the wherewithal or other circumstances beyond their control, would have to wait until they are able to host the festival. Attempt by the former paramount ruler of the community to impose on a man who had not performed his *Otna uknu* Rundele as Ohna Rundele was resisted by his family with an action in court. Because of the importance attached to this symbolic customary age grade wrestling ceremony and the consequences for not performing it, its fulfillment has become a matter of serious concern to the families, friends and foes of those who have or about to attain the age of *Otna Uknu* Rundele. As a result, all hands are usually on deck to ensure that relatives successfully discharge this obligation without hitches. The study reveals that the spirit of collectivism being demonstrated at this cultural event has further aided Rundele in her overall community development efforts.

The aim of the paper, therefore, is to review the significance of *Otna Uknu* Rundele as a tool for socio-cultural development. And to achieve this objective, the paper is divided into three sections. The first discusses conceptual clarifications and theoretical framework, the second part discusses findings and discussion, the third part is the conclusion.

Conceptual Clarifications and Definition

In this part of the paper a few concepts will be clarified and defined for the purposes of enhancing the understanding of their application in the paper. The concepts are: Age grade System, culture and tourism.

The Age Grade System

Age grade as a social organization in traditional societies is an arrangement in which male members of same age or same age sets of some year interval from the same community are

initiated into as members (Iroh, 2014, p.80). In most communities very rigorous processes are prescribed for a prospective candidate of an age grade, and predominantly for the male members of the community (Iroh, 2014, p.79).

In most African societies in pre-colonial period, initiation into age grade was not an option. This was due to the fact that responsibilities in most African societies were tied to the age grade system, as was in most Ikwerre communities. It is expected that anyone who aspires to serve the community in any capacity, must be a member of the age grade saddled with the responsibility to discharge that task.

The age grade system has been described as a veritable tool in mobilizing community development efforts. It played significant role in mobilizing development efforts in Africa during the pre-colonial period. In most communities self-help development programs are organized around the age grade system (UN, 1956).

They acted as watch dogs in their communities and disciplined erring members whose acts are inconsistent with the ideals of the group, and as well, acted as agents of social control in their communities (Iroh, 2014, pp. 76-78).

Culture

There is hardly an acceptable definition of the concept, culture. However, there seem to be consensus among scholars that it is a people's way of life. For Raph Linton, it must be learned, shared and transmitted from generation to generation (cited in Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, P.3). For Clyde Kluckhohn, culture is a creation by members of a particular society for living (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p. 3). Raymond Williams (1976), a leading theorist of culture, claims that culture is one of the complicated words in the English language. Irrespective of its usage, culture contrasts with nature. They are human creation; things that come about outside nature's intervention. Again, it is believed to determine the way members of society "think and feel", "defines their actions and defines their outlook on life".

For a society or community to operate "effectively and efficiently", order is a necessity. And there are principles of conduct, which must be shared and learned by members of that society or community that ensures this orderliness. Culture, therefore, play the role of guiding members of the society to avoid instability, and without which human society would be an illusion (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p.3).

Emile Durkheim describes shared moral beliefs and values of a society as collective conscience or culture. He believes that collective conscience has a strong influence on

members of the society, especially in pre-industrial societies, which are characterized by mechanical solidarity. But as societies evolve, division of labour takes place given room for interdependence, which he called organic solidarity. In this circumstance, collective conscience or a shared culture, though still necessary, it is no longer as strong as it was under mechanical solidarity (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p.887).

A shared culture or collective conscience, according to Durkheim, is necessary if a society must make progress, because it acts as check on the behaviour of members of the society. In his view, this shared culture does not change but it is transmitted from generation to generation. And to avoid unpleasant consequences or punishment, members of the society must conform to the society's culture. Although credited for paving the way for the development of a social theory of culture, he has seriously been criticized for his view that social structure determines human culture, rather than human creativity (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p.888).

Talcott Parsons describes culture as a functional prerequisite—a basic need for any society to survive, and without which society is impossible. Culture enables members of the society to understand themselves and to work together for the good of themselves and the society as a whole. He believes culture is transmitted through the process of socialization, and can “change if not repeated and reinforced in peoples' behaviours” (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p.888). Parson has been criticized for applying his theory to all social systems. In the opinion of his critics, his theory can only apply in homogenous and not in heterogeneous societies where people share different cultures yet have not disintegrated (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p.889).

Karl Marx like other functionalists believes there is nothing innate or natural about culture. For him culture has a social origin; a product of human creativity. In his view, culture is an ideology of the ruling class. A part of the society's superstructure, shaped by its base or infrastructure. That is, the ruling class that owns the means of production uses their economic power to shape the culture or conscience of the society. In other words, “the material production” shapes or “produces the mental production of the society” (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p.890). To the neo-marxists, there is no straightforward relationship between class and culture. They believe culture possesses considerable autonomy from economic influences. But for Raymond Williams, economic factors can influence culture, but cannot determine it. According to him, cultures are created by members of the society responding to their economic circumstances. It changes as society evolves and history unfolds (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p.897).

Tourism

Tourism as a concept is difficult to define. Among the litany of definitions, scholars are yet to come to a consensus on a definition for the term. However, the one rendered by the UN World Tourism Organization seems to approximate the definition of tourism as:

...the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside of their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited (UNWTO).

The definition offered by the UN World tourism Organization is beyond the common perception that sees the term as one that is only concern about holiday activity (Gilbert, 2017, p.129). Tourism today has become the mainstay of most countries' economy contributing significantly to their GDP. It has direct effects on nations' social, cultural, educational and economic sectors¹⁸. Nigeria has huge tourism potentials. She is rich in cultural diversity, panorama and festivals. This is perhaps the reason tourism was given a priority attention, when the National Tourism Policy was launched in 1990 by the Federal Government. The main focus of the policy is the generation of income, creation of jobs, promotion of rural businesses and national integration. In 2010, the Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC) and Tourism ministry developed the National Action Plan with a view to develop the tourism sector of Nigerian economy and make the country the "Ultimate Tourism Destination in Africa" (Gilbert, 2017, p.130).

Theoretical Framework

In the view of Thomas Hobbes, the 17th Century Social Philosopher, humans are continually in pursuit of power and profit, and primarily motivated by self-interest, which have the potential for generating war and strife in society. This led him to ask the question: How can some semblance of social order in society be created and maintained? (cited in Turner, 1974). Sociological theory, therefore, is an attempt to explain social processes. Why and how is society possible?

The concern of history and historians, have since shifted to the need to draw useful lessons from past events from mere narrative, causation, description, and in some cases just knowing the events, through the application of theory in historical research (Adesina, 2012, pp. 11-12). However, some scholars of history have criticized the application of theories in historical research on the ground that such development would "expose the discipline too much to the imperialism of the social sciences" (Adesina, 2012, p.11). For them, facts about the past should speak for themselves. Indeed, facts about past events cannot speak for

themselves, or anybody for that matter (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p.1032). No doubt, it is facts about the past breathed upon by professional historians that becomes history. And that is the essence of historical reconstruction (Enyindah, 2019, pp.26-27). To Adesina, "history and theory are complementary" (2012, p.13), and its relevance in historical discourse cannot be overemphasized. The point, for emphasis, is that the historian can hardly draw useful lessons from past social processes or events without the application of relevant theory to explain the why and how of these processes or events.

Indeed, there are many theories to consider in explaining present or past social events. However, the data and its relevance determine the appropriate theory or theories to adopt in any historical research. It is against the foregoing that the paper adopts the functionalist perspective. As a theory of society, functionalism has its origin first in the works of Comte, Spencer and Durkheim, followed by the works of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries anthropologists, like A.R.Radcliff-Brown and Bronislow Malinowski (Turner, 1974; Ekpenyong, 2003, p.39). It was the first theory in the 19th Century to be utilized by social thinkers of the time to probe and address the problem of social order, which answer was found in the biological sciences (Turner, 1974, p.15).

The functionalist perspective, variously described as the consensus, integration, or functional model, has the following assumptions:

That every society is relatively persistent stable structure of elements and well integrated, and each element has a function to contribute to its existence as a system based on a consensus of values among its members (Ekpenyong, 2003, p.40); that society consists of independent parts, and tends toward social equilibrium, the various parts are understood in terms of their contributions to the maintenance of the entire social system (Ekpenyong, 2003, pp.40-41; Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p.1032), and see conflict in society as tentative strains between the elements that make up that society (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, pp.10-11). *Otna Uknu* Rundele has contributed significantly by promoting group solidarity in Rundele, which is a prerequisite for community development, without which Rundele would not have made progress as a community. It has infused in the people the principle of collective ownership of fulfilling the obligation of performing *Otna Uknu* ceremony imposed on all male adults of 60years of age. *Otna Uknu* Rundele has contributed to the community and the state in the promotion of cultural tourism by attracting tourists from within and outside the country to Rundele every year the festival is hosted.

By mid 1960s, the relevance of functionalism as an explanatory theory of society had suffered serious decline to barrage of scathing criticisms against it (Ritzer, 2000, p.117). However, the continuing relevance of the theory has been sustained through the works of Robert K. Merton, a structural functionalist (Ritzer, 2000, p.108). Merton criticized early structural functionalists' bias for functions of one social system or institution for another. This defect was rectified with his idea of dysfunction. To him, structures or institutions that contribute to the maintenance of a system can also have unpleasant consequences for them (Ritzer, 2000, pp. 109-110). He also developed the idea of non-functions of structures or institutions. For him, there are consequences that are not useful to the system, not minding their usefulness in the past. He criticized the indispensability of all structures to the workings of the social system. He contends that some parts of the social system that are redundant and not serving any useful purpose can actually be expended. By this means change in the society will be inevitable (Ritzer, 2000, p.110).

Otna Uknu Rundele Festival

Otna Uknu is a wrestling festival by male adult members of Rundele community, who have attained 60 years of age (Eze Gideon Omodu, 2021). For an age grade to get to this stage to perform *Otnu Uknu* at 60years of age, it ought to have graduated or passed through other younger levels of age grades in Rundele community age grade institution. *Otna Uknu* festival is one of the highest and most significant annual event that has assumed the status of a carnival and a ritual in the life of Rundele community. It is so significant that every member of the community, do not only look forward to it, but actually makes preparations years ahead, especially families that have male adults hoping to graduate into the age grade.

In traditional African societies, such as the Ikwerre, the age grade system determines ones role in the community (Nduka, 1993). At 40 years of age, according to Eze Omodu, an adult Rundele man stops competitive wrestling. At this age as he graduates from youthful age grades, he begins to get ready to assume more responsible roles in the community. And one key role to play as an adult male child of Rundele community is to be a member of Ohna Rundele, the highest and the most revered institution in the community. The Ohna council sits as the representatives of the living and dead members of the community. That is why in Ikwerreland the council is expected to be constituted by adults without blemish, men who love truth in their inward parts and live it.

A major requirement for one to be admitted into Ohna Rundele is the fulfillment or performance of the Age Grade wrestling, *Otna Uknu* Rundele. In the words of Eze Omodu, *Otna Uknu* "is a prerequisite for one to be an Ohna Rundele". He noted that any imposition

of one who had not performed age grade wrestling, *Otna Uknu*, would be resisted by the community, especially the family to be represented in Ohna Council. He went further to inform that in 1998, His Royal Highness Eze S .I. Alete, the former paramount ruler of Rundele, wanted to impose one Egbo Wejei (76) as Ohna Rundele to represent Ogbolo family of Mgbuolua without satisfying the requirement of performing the age grade ritual. But the Ogbolo family resisted it by instituting an action in the court. But he died in 1998 before the matter was determined. The festival announces an end to a participating adult's public social indulgences, such as wrestling, especially if he is admitted into Ohna Rundele.

In the past, when means of recording births were not available, especially in this part of Africa, other methods of dating were used to determine age. For instance, oral traditionalists use the reigns of kings, use famous battles, plagues or famine, to date events they narrate (Barkindo, 1990, pp.167-168). In the words of E.J. Alagoa: "Everybody of oral traditions contains within it some system of telling which events happened before which" (Alagoa, 1974-2014, pp.46-48). The Ikwerre of Rundele used farming circle, remarkable events in the community or outside, such as *Wonju/Wonji* (1918 influenza outbreak), World War 1 and 2 to determine by these and other methods, the age of those who got initiated into this age grade in time past (Omodu, 2021).

Although *Otna Uknu* is a mandatory annual ceremonial adult age grade wrestling festival to be performed by those that attained 60years of age in preparation to a higher community responsibility, it is the responsibility of members of the age grade to inform Rundele community of their readiness to host the festival. Eze Omodu claimed that in most cases in the past factors of poverty and crises were responsible for members' failure to perform *Otna Uknu*. But whenever it becomes convenient to them and are ready to perform the ceremony, they are required to make customary presentation of drinks to the village and inform them of their readiness to execute the ceremony. The five villages of Rundele: Mgbuolua, Mgbuelia, Omofo, Egamini and Agba, now have different days they celebrate their *Otna Uknu*. The informant revealed that it was not so before now. He noted that before the 18th Century, when Mgbuolua and Mgbuelia were still at Omofo, their ancestral home before their relocation to the present place and until 1976, the two villages shared one common wrestling ground. Eze Omodu informed that the two villages moved out of their ancestral home which was later given to Omofo because of the environmental problem of flooding. At their new location, they established a new wrestling arena, *Odovisi* Rundele at Mgbuelia. The two villages celebrated *Otna Uknu* festival together and same day. While the other three villages of Omofo, Egamini and Agba had theirs on different days with the entire Rundele in attendance on each occasion.

On the day set aside for the event, members of the age grade from Mgbuolua would arrive Mgbuelia, the first village to host, and would be received with family members, guests, well-wishers and others from Rundele community and beyond, who had come to witness the festival, by Mgbuelia. At this point, the drummer (*Ogbudu*) would begin to usher in the members from Mgbuolua by their wrestling names and in the order of their age, and recalling their past exploits when they were youths, beginning from the youngest to the oldest, into *Odovisi* Rundele wrestling arena. After Mgbuolua members have been ushered in, the drummers (*Ogbudu*) would then usher into the arena members from Mgbuelia, also by their wrestling names and according to their age, from the youngest to the oldest. The informant noted that the drummers (*Ogbudu*) knew the wrestling names of Rundele people and those of their neighbours, like Odegu, Rumuekpe, and Emohua. After members of the age grade from the two villages with their guests have been ushered into the arena, then the festival would commence.

The rule of engagement is strictly that no wrestler should throw down his opponent in the symbolic wrestling encounter because of their age. The members celebrating the festival are dressed in traditional towel and *Ovelive* leaves round their waist and other wrestling costumes (make-up) which mark them out from the crowd of spectators. Immediately after the ceremony has come to a close at *Odovisi*, Mgbuelia, everyone would move over to Mgbuolua village to repeat the ceremony, including all the members of the age grade from Mgbuelia and their guests, well-wishers and community members. Again, the drummers (*Ogbudu*) would usher the members from the two villages by their wrestling names and in the order of their age into Mgbuolua arena for the wrestling celebration, as was done earlier at Mgbuelia village.

By 1976, Mgbuolua and Mgbuelia parted ways in their hosting of *Otna Uknu* Rundele because of the problem of mutual mistrust between the two villages. It should be noted that with outbreak of the Nigerian civil war in 1967, the members of *Otna Uknu* Rundele were no longer able to perform the ceremony annually until 1974 with the end of the war in 1970. In 1974, *Otna Uknu* as usual resumed with Mgbuolua and Mgbuelia hosting. Immediately after the first round of the celebration at Mgbuelia, there was a heavy rainfall which drenched everyone in attendance and made it difficult for the second leg of the ceremony to move over to Mgbuolua village. In 1976, the next celebration of *Otna Uknu* Rundele after the civil war was also marred by a heavy down pour which truncated the Mgbuolua village arm of the celebration. As the two villages met to find out what was responsible for the inexplicable developments that surrounded the ceremony at different times, it was revealed that Alete Omoni (Alete Womoni), an influential man from Mgbuelia, who did not want Mgbuolua to share in the glory of *Otna Uknu* Rundele, was

responsible for the disruptions they experienced on the two occasions. That was the cause of the split between the two villages that had from inception done this ceremony together. It is very important to note that when the oldest person is being ushered in he is usually honoured by the entire group going out to receive him. The champion wrestler (*Diotna*), who may not necessarily be the oldest in the group, also enjoys the honour of being received by the entire group as he is ushered into the arena. A champion of the age group is one who had made exploits in their youth. The champion wrestler (*Diotna*), irrespective of his age has a place of honour among his age mates. Where the champion is no more living, the person to be ushered into the arena would be the son of the patron of the age grade where he is a member of the age grade. Otherwise it would go to any member from his family or kindred, who must be a member of the age grade, while the second in command of the age grade must not come from same family with the patron of the age grade.

Until the 1970s, the only entertainment required to be provided the public by the celebrants was a 60 litres iron pot filled with palm wine. The pot was kept at the arena and anyone who desired went for a cup full of palm wine. But today, because of the touch of modernity guests and the entire public are given lavish entertainment for the honour done them.

Otna Uknu Rundele in Socio-Cultural Development Context

The significance of *Otna Uknu* in the socio-cultural development of the community and the country as a whole, form the thrust of the discussion in this section. The *Otna Uknu* culture of Ikwerre Rundele has not only brought huge attention of the world to the community and the people of Rundele but has promoted cultural tourism, and as well as promoted group solidarity, a panacea for community development.

The cultural heritage is one that has brought peace and progress to Rundele community. In fact, it is always the desire of the people of Rundele to have their male relatives live to perform this last communal obligation before joining their ancestors. It is for this reason that relatives of members of this age grade are known to have gone extra mile to ensure nothing stood in the way of their relative performing this ritual. Eze Gideon Omodo said even those who ordinarily should have stayed away from participating on the ground of ill-health were facilitated to participate through the efforts of relatives and friends. It is reported that some passed on a day or two after the ceremony. And on such occasion, the deceased is believed to made it (Died well). He gave account of a man who was brought from his hospital bed to perform his *Otna Uknu*. That the sick man could barely walk round the arena even with the prop of his children and relatives, how much less to follow his mates to run round the arena, as the Ikwerre custom and traditions demands. He died few

days after the ceremony and his family and other relatives rejoiced and gave thanks to God for averting the shame that would have come upon their family and relatives.

Again, to further highlight the importance of the ceremony in the context of group solidarity in the community, an informant gave account of the assistance he gave to *Uknu Ndnuknurnu* Age Grade that enables the group to perform *Otna Uknu*, when it was their turn to do so. He noted that at the end of the Nigeria civil war only four members of the group were alive. And out of the number, only one had the means to prosecute the festival, the rest were “dragging their feet” because of poverty. He claimed he provided all the customary ‘things’ needed for the ceremony.

Otna Uknu heritage of Rundele has the potential to bring people together for development purposes within Rundele community. Otherwise, how would one explain the inability of one to prosecute a cultural festival as a collective disability and shame or embarrassment to family and relatives. And in order to avert this, all hand must be on deck to be counted. *Otna Uknu* festival of Rundele has the potential to contribute to the growth of cultural tourism in Nigeria. It is one annual cultural event that attracts people from around the world to Rundele to participate in the ceremony. Rundele people residing outside Nigeria look forward to coming home when it is time for them to perform this communal obligation. During this festival, the community usually witnesses increased commercial and other economic activities.

Conclusion

Before Thomas Hobbes and other social theorists in the West in the 17th century began to be bothered about the problem of order in the society, African people had earlier gone ahead to culturally design ways of tackling the problem of order in their society. And the evidence of this is the institutionalization of *Otna Uknu* Rundele by the Ikwerre people of Rundele community. *Otna Uknu* Rundele festival has promoted group solidarity in Rundele community demonstrated in their collective ownership of *Otna Uknu* communal obligation, a necessary ingredient for community development. Although, some improvements have been recorded in this time honoured cultural heritage, especially in the entertainment, yet a lot of upgrade is still needed to enable it attract more cultural tourists to the community.

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