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ANIMAL BLOOD AS CULTURAL HERITAGE IN MODERN IGBO SOCIETY: CONTINUITY, CONTESTATION AND REINVENTION

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ABSTRACT
Animal blood occupies a central, yet increasingly contested, position in the cultural heritage of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. Far beyond its biological substance, blood functions as a spiritual currency, a covenantal seal, and a marker of identity in Igbo cosmology. This article examines the multifaceted roles of animal blood as intangible cultural heritage in modern Igbo society, where Christianity, Pentecostalism, Islam, modernity, animal rights discourses, and economic pressures intersect with indigenous practices. Drawing on ethnographic observations in Isuikwuato, Umunneochi, and Mbaise, 30 in-depth interviews with custodians of culture, clergy, women and youth leaders, and analysis of contemporary festivals, the study argues that animal blood has not disappeared but has been reinterpreted. It persists in three domains: sacred rituals, life-cycle rites, and communal purification, and it is being reinvented through symbolic substitution, Christianised appropriation, digital documentation and cultural tourism. The study concludes that, rather than being dismissed as primitive, blood sacrifice should be understood as a heritage text that encodes Igbo philosophy of life-force, communal accountability, and spiritual ecology, requiring documentation and critical preservation in the face of globalisation.

Keywords: Animal Blood, Igbo Culture, Cultural Heritage, Sacrifice, Cosmology, Modernity

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Introduction

In Igbo cosmology, life is not an abstract concept. Life is tangible, visible, and transferable. The Igbo word for blood is ọbara, and it shares conceptual kinship with ndụ - life. To spill blood is to release life; to offer blood is to transfer life. Igbo thought locates this life in a person's chi, the unique life force that each individual receives from Chukwu and which returns to its source at death (Onyibor 89). Because blood is the visible carrier of that life, what is done with blood is never neutral: it can bless, cleanse, bind or condemn. Animal sacrifice in this setting is best read as an exchange in which the life force of the victim is offered in return for protection, favour or the repair of a damaged relationship with the spiritual world (Onwuatuegwu and Osigwe 29). This worldview fundamentally shapes how the Igbo understand heritage, for what is handed down from the ancestors is not merely a set of objects but a way of handling life itself.

When an Igbo elder says "Ọbara anaghị agha ụgha" - blood does not lie - he is not making a biological statement; he is making an ontological claim. The saying was recorded during fieldwork from J. O. Madu, one of the elders interviewed for this study. Blood remembers, blood witnesses, blood binds. This is why blood stands at the centre of covenant-making and oath-taking in Igboland. Parties who swear over blood place themselves under the scrutiny of the deities, and any sickness or death that strikes one of them within the period of the oath is read as the verdict of the spirits on a lie (Obasi 102-104). Blood shed in a covenant is believed to remain as a silent witness, so that a breach of the agreement exposes the offender to sanction long after the rite itself has ended. The proverb therefore compresses a whole moral theory into four words: blood keeps the record that human memory may lose.

The Igbo are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, predominantly located in South-East Nigeria, and their cultural system is deeply anchored in the interplay between the visible world (ụwa) and the invisible world (ala mmụọ). In this interplay, animal blood serves as a mediator. It is the liquid bridge between humanity, the ancestors (ndị ichie), the deities (alụsị), and Ala, the earth goddess who is the custodian of morality. Ala is understood as the enforcer of the moral law, rewarding those who keep it and punishing those who break it, and grave offences against her, the nsọ ala, are believed to bring misfortune on the whole community unless they are confessed and ritually cleansed (Anizoba). The prominence of Ala explains why so many Igbo blood rites are directed at the land itself. Blood poured on the earth is a way of addressing the moral order on which the life of the community depends.

In recent decades, modernity has subjected this heritage to intense pressure. From the late nineteenth century, Christian missionaries described blood sacrifice as ajọ arụsị - evil idolatry (Isichei; Kalu). Missionary hostility extended even to communal festivals such as the New Yam Festival, which some nineteenth-century missions tried to suppress, in part by settling converts in separate Christian villages (Manus). Colonial administrators went further: they outlawed human sacrifice and moved against the great oracles at which such sacrifice was alleged, most notably the Aro oracle, Ibini Ukpabi, which was destroyed during the Aro Expedition of 1901-1902 (Isichei). Today, Pentecostal movements declare "every blood except the blood of Jesus" demonic. Yet, paradoxically, in almost every village in Igboland, a chicken is still slaughtered when a new house foundation is dug, a cock's blood is still poured during Iri Ji (the New Yam Festival), and blood still seals reconciliation after murder.

This article asks a simple but profound question: What happens to animal blood as cultural heritage when the culture itself is modernising? Is it disappearing, transforming, or being reinvented? The question matters because Igbo festivals and rites have not simply survived

modernity unchanged. Studies of the New Yam Festival show that Western education, Christianity and urbanisation have altered its form and content, yet the festival continues to serve as a means of group integration, identity and social cohesion (Unya). If the festival as a whole has adapted in this way, it is reasonable to ask whether its most sensitive element, the shedding of animal blood, has followed the same path of change and continuity or has been quietly abandoned. Answering this question requires attention both to what people do with blood today and to the reasons they give for doing it.

The rest of the article is organised as follows: literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, findings on the conceptual categories of blood and on sacred, communal and life-cycle rites, contestations in the modern era, reinvention, and conclusion and recommendations. This sequence moves from what earlier scholars have said about Igbo sacrifice, through the lenses used to interpret the field material, to what was observed and heard in the study communities. It reflects the view, developed below, that heritage is best understood as a process of meaning-making carried out in the present rather than as a fixed inheritance from the past (Smith). For that reason, the discussion of contestation and reinvention is treated as central to the argument rather than as an appendix to the description of traditional rites.

Literature review

Scholarship on Igbo sacrifice is extensive but fragmented. Early colonial-era writers such as the missionary G. T. Basden, in *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (1921; rpt. 1966), and the government anthropologist Northcote W. Thomas (1913), documented blood sacrifice as central to Igbo religion but framed it within an evolutionist paradigm that viewed it as primitive. Basden, though sympathetic, described blood rites as "propitiatory offerings to appease angry spirits" (87), missing the philosophical depth. This framing was not accidental. As Egwuonwu observes, the early missionaries tied Christianity so closely to European civilisation that much of Igbo culture was demonised along with its religion (180-181). The result was a body of writing that recorded rites in some detail while treating the people who performed them as objects of reform rather than as interpreters of their own practice.

Victor Uchendu in *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (1965) provided a more nuanced view, linking sacrifice to the principle of reciprocity that governs relations between the Igbo and their gods and ancestors (72). He argued that sacrifice is a social contract: the gods protect, and humans feed them with blood. Uchendu's emphasis on reciprocity is echoed in recent Nigerian scholarship, which describes Igbo sacrifice as an effort to maintain a harmonious, reciprocal relationship with the divine and to restore favour after misfortune, which is read as a sign that the relationship has weakened (Onwuatuegwu and Osigwe 29). On this view, blood is not a bribe but the currency of a moral relationship in which both sides have obligations, and a failure on either side calls for repair.

Chinua Achebe's fictional but ethnographically rich *Things Fall Apart* (1958) depicts Okonkwo's violation of the Week of Peace and the sacrifice of a she-goat and a hen demanded by the priest of Ani in atonement. Achebe shows that blood sacrifice is tied to Ala, morality, and social restoration. The novel anticipates a point made by later scholars: offences against the land are not private wrongs but breaches of a communal moral order, and the response to them is ritual rather than merely punitive. Anizoba likewise notes that offences against Ala call for confession and ritual cleansing, and sometimes exile, because they are believed to invite misfortune on the whole community. Okonkwo's sacrifice is therefore not an act of personal piety; it is the means by which the village is shielded from the consequences of one man's violation.

More recently, Ogbu Kalu, in *The Embattled Gods* (2003), explores how Christianity has battled indigenous religion. Kalu notes that early missionaries did not distinguish between cultural heritage and idolatry, leading to a wholesale demonisation of blood rites. However, he also notes that Igbo Christianity has never fully abandoned blood symbolism, as seen in the continued use of "blood of Jesus" language. Nigerian theologians have since tried to turn this continuity into a deliberate theology. Yashim and Umar, for example, draw on the literature on animal sacrifice in African Traditional Religion to explain the meaning of Christ's shed blood for African believers, treating the indigenous experience of sacrifice as a bridge to the Christian message rather than simply as an obstacle to it.

John Umeh in *After God Is Dibia* (1997) offers the most indigenous philosophical interpretation. He explains that in Igbo sacred science, blood is the carrier of chi (life force). When an animal is sacrificed, its chi is released to reinforce human chi. Umeh's reading agrees with the wider philosophical literature on chi, which describes it as the life force that each person possesses and as a spark of the creator that animates the individual until death (Onyibor 89-90). If chi is the substance of life, then blood, as its carrier, is the means by which life can be moved from one being to another. This helps to explain why Igbo ritual specialists insist on the shedding of blood rather than the mere presentation of an animal at a shrine.

Donatus Nwoga in *Nka na Nzere* (1984) explains that Igbo art and sacrifice are focused on maintaining a balance between forces. Blood is the balancing agent. The same logic appears in ethnographic accounts from the Nsukka area, where offences such as adultery were believed to disturb relations with the ancestors and required confession followed by ritual purification with prescribed items, including a cock, a hen, kola nuts and, in some communities, a cow and a tortoise (Eze et al. 8-9). Such accounts show that sacrifice is calibrated to the weight of the disturbance it is meant to correct, so that the choice of animal and the quantity of blood are themselves statements about how serious an imbalance has become.

Despite this body of scholarship, there is little research on how animal blood functions as heritage in the 21st century, particularly as it is lived, contested and reinvented in contemporary Igbo communities at home and in the diaspora. Recent Nigerian heritage studies have begun to treat festivals as intangible cultural heritage, examining, for instance, the safeguarding of the Ekpe festival in Umuahia (Uzuegbu) and the weakness of Nigeria's heritage legislation where intangible heritage is concerned (Nomishan and Sani). The blood rites embedded in such occasions, which are the most controversial part of them, have received little direct attention. This is the gap that this paper seeks to fill.

Theoretical framework

This study adopts two principal theoretical lenses: Cultural Heritage Theory and Victor Turner's Ritual Theory. The two are complementary. The first explains why a practice that many regard as archaic can still count as living heritage; the second explains what blood actually does within the ritual process. Taken together, they allow the study to treat blood rites both as heritage that communities negotiate over and as performances that move individuals and communities from one condition to another. This dual focus is also in keeping with the argument that intangible heritage in Nigeria must be understood through the communities and traditional systems that sustain it, rather than only through the legal instruments of the state (Nomishan and Sani).

Cultural Heritage Theory, particularly as articulated by Laurajane Smith (2006) in *Uses of Heritage*, argues that heritage is not a thing but a process of meaning-making. Heritage is what people do with the past in the present. Animal blood, therefore, is heritage not because it is old,

but because modern Igbo people continue to use it to make meaning. This view accords with UNESCO's (2003) definition of intangible cultural heritage, which expressly includes social practices, rituals and festive events. Nigeria's own principal heritage law, Decree No. 77 of 1979, makes little provision for intangible heritage of this kind, which leaves living practices such as blood rites largely outside formal protection (Nomishan and Sani). The theory therefore has a practical edge in the Nigerian setting, since it shifts attention from monuments to the communities whose practices keep heritage alive.

Turner's concepts of liminality (1969) and social drama (1974) are also useful. He conceives of social drama as unfolding in four phases: breach, crisis, redressive action, and reintegration. In Igbo society, when Ala is desecrated (breach), crisis ensues (sickness, poor harvest), redressive action is performed (Ikwa Ala with blood), and reintegration occurs (community healed). Blood is the redressive symbol. Obasi's study of ritual in Igbo conflict resolution supports this reading, showing that oath-taking and covenant-making serve as redressive mechanisms through which quarrelling parties are reconciled and through which the land is purified after crimes such as incest or homicide (102-104). Turner's model thus gives analytical shape to what Igbo communities already know in practice.

Additionally, the concept of syncretism (Stewart and Shaw) helps to explain how Christian Igbo blend the blood of Jesus with animal blood, creating a dual religious identity rather than a replacement. Ezenwa describes this pattern among Christian Igbo, arguing that believers keep ties to traditional religion in areas such as burial, healing and fertility, where the liturgies brought by missionaries left gaps. Eze and colleagues document a similar movement in Nsukka, where Christians, including some clergy, returned to traditional cleansing rites in moments of crisis (8-9). Syncretism in this sense is not confusion but a practical strategy through which people draw on more than one religious resource to meet the demands of life.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach. Ethnography was chosen because blood rites are performed, spoken about and argued over in particular settings, and their meaning is best captured by observing them and listening to those who perform them. The design follows recent Nigerian studies of living heritage, which have combined interviews, participant observation and photographs to document festivals in their community setting (Uzuegbu). It also allows the voices of custodians, clergy, women and young people to be heard side by side, which is essential for a study that is concerned as much with contestation as with continuity.

Study Area: Isuikwuato and Umunneochi in Abia State and Mbaise in Imo State were chosen because they represent both border and central Igbo communities. Isuikwuato and Umunneochi lie on the northern edge of Abia State, where together they border Enugu, Ebonyi and Imo States and so stand at the meeting point of the Abia Igbo and the northern Igbo culture areas, while Mbaise is often regarded as the heartland of Igbo culture. Abia communities have featured in recent heritage scholarship, for example in work on the Ekpe festival of Isingwu, Umuahia (Uzuegbu), but the northern Abia communities have received less attention. Including Mbaise alongside them allows practices at the cultural centre to be compared with those at the margins.

Data Collection: Between January and September 2026, 30 in-depth interviews were conducted. Respondents included ten elders (ndị ichie), five dibịa (traditional priests), five women leaders (including Ụmụada), five Christian clergy drawn from the Anglican, Methodist, Catholic and Pentecostal churches, and five youth leaders. Pentecostal clergy were deliberately included because Pentecostal teaching is the strongest source of opposition to blood rites

discussed in this study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a non-random technique in which participants are chosen deliberately for the knowledge or experience they hold in relation to the research problem (Etikan et al. 2). This allowed the study to reach people who either perform blood rites, oversee them or oppose them.

Participant observation was conducted during four key events: the Iwa Akwa festival in Amuzi, Mbaise (18 January 2026); the funeral of a matriarch in Umunneochi (July 2026); the Iri Ji Ọhụrụ festival in Isuochi (August 2026); and Ikwa Ala rites in Nneochi (14 August 2026). The timing of the observations followed the ritual calendars of the communities. Iwa Akwa, for example, is not an annual event, and Okeke notes that it is held every three years in the communities he studied. Observing rites as they were performed, rather than relying only on descriptions of them, made it possible to compare what participants said about blood with what was actually done.

Data Analysis: Data were analysed thematically, following the six phases described by Braun and Clarke: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (87). Interviews conducted in Igbo were transcribed and translated into English, and Igbo terms and sayings were retained in the original alongside their English glosses so that their nuance would not be lost. Field notes from the four observed events were coded alongside the interview transcripts, which allowed recurring themes such as substitution, syncretism and cost to be traced across both sources of data.

Ethical Considerations: Participation in the study was voluntary. The purpose of the research was explained to each participant in Igbo or English, and informed consent was obtained orally before every interview and before any rite was observed or recorded. Participants were told that they could decline any question or withdraw at any point. Informants are identified in this article by role and community rather than by name; the two informants who are named (J. O. Madu and John E. Egeuka) agreed to be identified. Rites were observed and recorded only with the permission of the officiating elders or priests and of the families or communities concerned. This care was taken because the recording of cultural practices raises real concerns about authenticity, access and commodification (Orji).

Findings and discussion

1. Conceptual categories of blood in Igbo thought

In Igbo thought, blood falls into two principal categories, distinguished less by the animal used than by the purpose for which the blood is shed. One category sustains and affirms life; the other repairs life that has been damaged by wrongdoing. This distinction mirrors the range of intentions behind Igbo sacrifice more generally, from maintaining a harmonious relationship with the divine to restoring favour after misfortune (Onwuatuegwu and Osigwe 29). The two categories are as follows:

a) Ọbara Ndụ - Blood of Life: Blood that sustains. An example is the chicken blood sprinkled on a newborn's forehead during Iba Afa to introduce the child to the ancestors. Studies of the naming ceremony elsewhere in Igboland confirm the place of the cock in this rite: among the Anaedo of Anambra State, a cock is among the ritual objects presented, and it is said to express the family's joy at the birth and to symbolise new hope and blessing (Madu and Nzukoh 4-6). Blood of life is therefore associated with beginnings, welcome and increase.

b) Ọbara Ikpuchi - Atonement Blood: Blood that cleanses. It is used when blood has been unlawfully shed, as in murder, suicide or the desecration of Ala. The land rejects the blood of murder, so animal blood must be offered to appease her. Bad deaths such as suicide or drowning

are themselves classed among abominations in Igbo thought and traditionally receive few or no burial rites (Okafor et al.), which is why the land must be cooled with blood before normal life can resume.

Thus, the shedding of animal blood is not random killing. It is a highly codified language with its own grammar and syntax. The type of animal matters: white cock for purity, ram for stubborn cases, dog for extreme abomination, cow for communal reconciliation, tortoise for wisdom-related rites. The scale of the offering also rises with the gravity of the offence, so that a minor breach may be settled with a cock while a grave one calls for larger animals. In Aku, in the Nsukka area, the purification that followed adultery required a cow and a tortoise (Eze et al. 9). To read these choices correctly, one must know the code, and it is precisely this knowledge that elders fear is being lost among the young.

2. Animal blood in sacred festivals, communal rites and life-cycle rites

Iri Ji Ọhụrụ (New Yam Festival): Before anyone eats the new yam, a cock - usually a white cock - is slaughtered and its blood sprinkled on the yams and on the shrine of the yam deity, Ahịajọkụ. Manus describes the same core action in his account of the festival: the ritual master cuts the throat of a cockerel and smears its blood on the floor of the yam spirit's shrine, after which the cooked bird is shared with boiled yam among the elders as a communal meal. As one priest in Isuochi explained: "Ji adịghị eto n'onwe ya. Ọbara na-akpọ ya oku ka ọ teta" - Yam does not grow by itself. Blood calls it to wake up.

In modern times, many Christian families in Mbaise now adapt this rite: they still slaughter the chicken but pray in Jesus' name while pouring the blood, saying "We cover this harvest with the blood of Jesus and the blood of our fathers." This syncretism is a clear case of heritage reinvention. Manus had argued that Igbo Christian leaders should welcome the ritual stages of the festival into Christian worship rather than reject them, and the Mbaise practice suggests that ordinary believers have, in their own way, already done so. What emerges is neither the old rite nor a purely Christian thanksgiving, but a new form that holds both loyalties together.

Ihu Ji: Before planting, similar rites are performed. Goat blood is poured on the farm tools to bless them. The rite places the whole farming cycle under spiritual protection, so that the blood offered at planting anticipates the blood offered at harvest. Its logic is that of a reciprocal relationship between the farmer and the spiritual guardians of the land, in which offerings are made to secure favour and protection before the work begins (Onwuatuegwu and Osigwe 29). It also reflects the agricultural calendar on which Igbo ritual life is built, a calendar to which, as Unya observes, the New Yam Festival remains tied.

Igba Ndụ and Conflict Resolution: Perhaps the most powerful heritage function of blood is in peace-making. In Isuikwuato, when two villages had fought over land for years, the final settlement was Igbu Ehi - killing of a cow and allowing its blood to flow into a pit where both parties washed their hands. The symbolism: let this blood wash away our spilled blood. Obasi describes Igba Ndụ as a ceremony in which quarrelling parties vow before the gods, the chief priest and the community never to harm each other, with blood as the central element of the covenant, although modernity has changed the way blood is used (104). As one of the elders (ndị ichie) interviewed in Isuikwuato put it: "English law jails the offender. Igbo law heals the land with blood."

Ikwa Ala - Cleansing of Abomination: When an abomination (nsọ ala) such as murder, incest, or a person dying in a forbidden way occurs, the land is said to be "hot" (Ala adịgo ọkụ). Such offences are counted among the gravest violations of Ala, and redress requires confession and ritual cleansing (Anizoba). To cleanse the land, a prescribed animal - often a ram - is

slaughtered, and its blood poured at the four corners of the compound while incantations are recited. The ritual specialist chants: "Ala, biko, nara ọbara a, were iwe gị wepụ" - Earth, please take this blood and remove your anger. Rites of this kind belong to the wider body of indigenous religious practices through which Igbo communities regulate social conduct (cf. Nkame).

Funerary Rites: In traditional Igbo funerals, blood is essential to separate the living from the dead (cf. Onyeneke). When a titled man dies, a goat is killed, and its blood is used to mark the faces of his sons, signifying that they now carry his mantle. Nweke records comparable practices elsewhere in Igboland, where a cock is killed and its blood placed on the eyes, hands and feet of the dead, and where blood poured into the grave signifies communion with the ancestors. In Umunneochi, during the funeral of a matriarch observed in July 2026, a hen was slaughtered, and its blood added to the nzụ (white chalk) used to anoint sympathisers. The eldest daughter explained: "Ọbara ahụ na-egosi na nne anyị alala, ma ndụ ya ka dị n'ime anyị" - This blood shows our mother is gone, but her life remains in us.

Child Naming and Initiation: During Iba Afa and Iwa Akwa, blood marks the threshold. During Iwa Akwa in Mbaise, the initiate's leg is marked with cock blood to signify that childhood blood has been shed and manhood blood has come. Okeke describes Iwa Akwa as the rite that marks the passage of young men into adulthood and prepares them for the responsibilities of manhood, fatherhood and leadership, while also setting an example for younger members of the community. In both naming and initiation, blood announces a change of status that the whole community is expected to recognise.

3. Contestations in the modern era

Several forces contest animal blood heritage today. They do not act in isolation: Christianity, Western education, urbanisation and globalisation reinforce one another, and together they have weakened the traditional condemnation that once surrounded taboos and the authority of the rites that answer them (Okafor et al.). Each touches a different side of the heritage: religion questions its legitimacy, education and urban life weaken the knowledge on which it depends, and economic hardship limits what families can afford to perform. The most important of these forces are discussed below.

Christianity and Pentecostalism: The phrase "Every other blood is powerless except the blood of Jesus" has become a theological weapon. Many young Igbo Christians view animal sacrifice as backward. Some Pentecostal churches also encourage members to loosen their ethnic attachments and to treat non-members, including relatives, as outsiders (Egwuonwu 189-190), which makes participation in village rites even harder. Not all clergy share this stance. An Anglican priest in the Diocese on the Lake stated: "We teach that the blood of Jesus is the final sacrifice. But we must also teach our people not to despise their culture. Not every culture is demonic."

Islam: On the northern fringes of Igboland, Islamic teaching accepts animal slaughter during Eid al-Adha (Sallah) but rejects blood sprinkling for spirits, condemning it as shirk. Igbo Islam is a small but established presence: conversions began in the late 1930s, and Igbo Muslims have since had to work out how to be both Igbo and Muslim, increasingly separating ethnic identity from religious identity from the 1990s onwards (E. Uchendu). For such converts, the blood rites of the lineage are a point at which the two identities come into open tension.

Animal Rights Discourses: Urban Igbo youth, influenced by global animal rights movements, question the ethics of ritual slaughter. Similar questions are now being asked within Nigerian philosophy: Ofuasia, for example, has challenged the Ifá teaching that animals may be used freely for food and sacrifice and has proposed measures such as stunning to reduce

suffering. However, this critique often ignores that Igbo sacrifice is not wanton cruelty. The animal is eaten communally after sacrifice; nothing is wasted. Accounts of the New Yam Festival, in which the sacrificed cockerel is cooked and shared among the elders, bear this out (Manus).

Economic Realities: According to John E. Egeuka, an informant interviewed during the fieldwork, a healthy ram cost between ₦300,000 and ₦500,000 in 2026. Many families can no longer afford elaborate blood rites, a strain that reflects the wider burden of costly ceremonies in Igboland (Nwobodo), and this has led to substitution: from cow to goat, from goat to chicken, and in some cases, from chicken to nzụ and palm wine. This economic downsizing is altering the heritage itself, since the hierarchy of animals that once signalled the gravity of a rite is being flattened by what families can pay rather than by what the occasion requires.

4. Reinvention: How modern Igbo preserve blood heritage

The heritage is not dying; it is morphing. Change has always been part of Igbo ritual life, and recent work on the New Yam Festival describes a tradition that adapts to change while preserving continuity, which is the source of its continuing relevance (Unya). The forms of reinvention observed in this study follow the same pattern: the substance or setting of the rite may change, while the meaning attached to it is carried forward. In each of the cases discussed below, the question is not whether blood rites have changed, for they plainly have, but whether the changes keep alive the core idea that blood is life.

Symbolic Substitution: In some Anglican churches in Mbaise, during harvest thanksgiving, red palm oil is now used as symbolic blood in place of the chicken blood traditionally offered at harvest rites. The prayer remains the same, but the substance changes. The choice of palm oil is not arbitrary. Obasi notes that palm oil, together with kola nut and water, already features alongside blood in Igbo covenant-making, and that modernity has changed the way blood itself is used (104). Substitution of this kind therefore draws on materials that the tradition had long recognised as sacred.

Christianised Appropriation: Some churches have absorbed the language of blood covenant into Christian weddings. Couples now cut a cake and mix drops of red wine, calling it "bloodless Igba Ndụ in Christ." Igbo Christian scholars have encouraged such borrowing by drawing parallels between indigenous rites and Christian sacraments; Oparah and Ebunsi, for instance, read the kola nut ritual as a symbol of the communion of saints. The wedding practice extends this approach to blood, keeping the idea of a covenant sealed by a shared substance while removing the animal from it.

Documentation as Preservation and Digital Heritage: Diaspora Igbo associations in Houston and London now pay elders in Nigeria to perform Igba Ndụ on their behalf via WhatsApp video calls, and the blood ritual is recorded and sent to them. Technology is thus preserving heritage. One youth leader in Isuochi said: "We now record our Iri Ji blood rite and post it on YouTube as Igbo Culture TV. Our children in Canada watch it." These developments answer the call of Ihejiekwu and Ekwugha for the systematic digital documentation of Igbo heritage, which they warn may otherwise be lost to younger generations, and for Igbo people at home and in the diaspora to fund the effort. Orji adds that digital platforms open real opportunities for preservation while raising questions of authenticity and commodification.

Tourism and Cultural Education: During Iri Ji festivals, the blood rite is now performed openly for tourists as "Cultural Display" rather than as secret ritual. This desacralises it but also preserves it. The official cultural handbook of Abia State lists blood rites among the state's heritage attractions (Abia State Ministry of Culture). Uzuegbu's study of the Ekpe festival in

Umuahia recommends a similar path, calling for the documentation, formal recognition and repackaging of festivals and the development of their economic potential. The risk, as Orji warns, is that commodification may empty the rite of the meaning that made it worth preserving.

Educational Integration: Some secondary schools in Umunneochi now teach blood covenant as part of Cultural and Creative Arts, explaining its meaning without performing it. This development reflects the argument that traditional value education, still effective in rural areas, should be extended to urban and diaspora Igbo communities (Okafor et al.). It also answers the call by Nomishan and Sani for heritage education to form part of Nigeria's approach to safeguarding intangible heritage. Teaching the meaning of a rite without performing it may not satisfy traditionalists, but it ensures that the next generation understands what is at stake.

Conclusion and recommendations

Animal blood as cultural heritage among the modern Igbo presents a paradox of continuity in discontinuity. It has survived more than a century of Christianity, colonialism, and now globalisation, not because Igbo people are stubborn, but because blood speaks a language that English law and Pentecostal deliverance have not yet fully replaced - the language of life-force, accountability to the earth, and communal healing. Its survival among Christians is consistent with Ezenwa's observation that many Christian Igbo keep ties to traditional religion where imported liturgies left gaps, notably in burial, healing and fertility. Blood rites persist, in other words, because they still answer questions that people continue to ask.

To call for total abolition is to misunderstand heritage. Heritage is not always comfortable. Some heritage is bloody, noisy, and unsettling. But it is heritage nonetheless. The future lies not in banning, but in critical preservation: documenting the rituals, explaining their philosophy, allowing symbolic evolution, and teaching the younger generation that ọbara bụ ndụ - blood is life. This approach is consistent with recommendations already made for other Igbo festivals, which call for documentation and formal recognition in line with the 2003 UNESCO Convention (Uzuegbu), and with the call for Nigerian law to give explicit protection to intangible heritage (Nomishan and Sani).

As one elder in Isuochi told this researcher as he poured libation mixed with chicken blood: "Nwa m, anyị adịghị egbu anụ n'ihi na anyị hụrụ ọbara n'anya. Anyị na-egbu anụ n'ihi na anyị hụrụ ndụ n'anya" - My son, we do not kill animals because we love blood. We kill because we love life. His words capture, better than any outside summary, the logic that runs through the literature on Igbo sacrifice, in which what is offered is ultimately the life force of the animal, given for the sake of the life of the community (Onwuatuegwu and Osigwe 29).

This study recommends: (1) Establishment of Igbo Heritage Documentation Centres in each LGA to video-record blood rites with elders' consent, funded by Igbo communities at home and in the diaspora, as Ihejiekwu and Ekwugha propose for Igbo heritage generally; (2) Inclusion of cultural heritage education in seminary curricula so pastors understand what they condemn; (3) Revision of Nigeria's heritage legislation to give explicit protection to intangible heritage and to recognise traditional systems of protection (Nomishan and Sani); (4) Further comparative research on blood heritage among the Igbo, Yoruba and Ibibio.

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