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Kuchicheb Festival and the Kuteb People of Southern Taraba State, Nigeria up to 2007

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Abstract:

The Kuchicheb festival has a long history which dates back to the origin of Kuteb people. It is an annual celebration carried out by the Kuteb people of southern Taraba State, Nigeria. The Kuchicheb festival was suspended in 2007 by the Taraba State Government because of the violence that erupted among the Jukun and the Kuteb. Worthy of note is that there are other festivals in Kuteb land but the Kuchicheb is significant to the Kuteb because the festival brings together all the various clans. This paper examines the historical origin and practice of the Kuchicheb festival and concludes that the Kuchicheb festival is a very important festival among the Kuteb people considering the socio-economic and political contributions that are derived from the Kuchicheb festival as well as the central role it plays in the history of the Kuteb people. This work used the literary-historical method to investigate Kuchicheb festival and the Kuteb People of Southern Taraba State, Nigeria. It has also interviewed various groups of people such as, Kuteb elders, civil servants, and the masses where necessary in order that the concept may be clearly understood. This research therefore recommends the lifting of the ban on the festival because of its socio-economy values and its role in the preservation of the history of the people.

Keywords: *Kuchicheb, Kuteb, Taraba State*

1. Introduction

It can be said that culture is the “way of life” that is passed on from one generation to the other. The human awareness that the society is guided by a distinctive set of belief, feelings and strategies for living gives that the members of the society a sense of common identity as “a people”.ⁱ Culture is an important part of human lives, as it helps in building unity in the society.

The culture of people in a society is varies among different ethnic groups. These are manifested in their general behaviour, social value, fashion, arts, dance, songs and musical instruments. Accordingly, there are diversities of cultural festivals/practice which are mostly performed to mark the harvest and initiation into manhood or womanhood, installation of ruler, marriage, burial ceremony and general entertainment.

Geographically, Takum, Ussa and Yangtu are at the southern Taraba State, Nigeria. It has rains for about six to seven months in a year with two short breaks in April and August. The April break allows for late farm clearing and repairs of roofs taken off by the first spate of rains in early March while the August break permits for mid-year harvest.ⁱⁱ March was selected as an intermission between the harvesting of the previous year farm produce and the preparation for the new farming season. Geographically, Ussa is situated about eight kilometers from Takum.

Taraba as a State have many major cultural festivals, following: Nwunyo Fishing festival in Ibi Local Government Area, Purma of Chambain Donga Local Government Area, and Puje of the Wapanin Wukari Local Government Area; we also have the Sharo of the Fulani in Jalingo, Ardo-Kola, Lau, and Bali Local Government Areas Kuchicheb festival of the Kuteb in Takum and Ussa Local Government Areas Kati of Mambillain Sardauna Local Government Area and Mantau and NseNse festival of the Mumuye people in Pantisawa and Zing Local Government Areas.ⁱⁱⁱ Apart from the Kuchicheb Festival which was banned by the Government, these cultural practices and festivals are practiced and they work in putting the goals and objectives of the adherents together as a people. The work focuses on the Kuchicheb festival of the Kuteb of Southern Taraba State, Nigeria.

2. Origin of Kuchicheb Festival

“Kuteb” is generally regarded as the father of the Kuteb people of southern Taraba State which had twelve children that now constitute the twelve clans of the Kuteb.^{iv} Before the demise of “Kuteb” the founder of the Kuteb tribe, who instructed all his twelve children occupying the twelve hills in Kuteb land to make it a tradition to always meet for the purpose of unity. After handing the mantle of leadership to Likam who is been considered as the eldest son of Kuteb, Kuteb instructed the rest of the twelve clans to consider Likam as their leader and they must come together to support. Every year they were to assemble at Mbarikam (one of the hills) to perform religious and social activities to demonstrate the spirit of togetherness.^v

From the above, it can be stated that “Kuchicheb” is the harvest of thanksgiving festival for the Kuteb people of southern Taraba State and also a cultural and religious festival which was usually celebrated with pomp and pageantry. It is an annual festival of thanksgiving to Rimam (god) for his abundant blessing, bumper harvest and supplications to him for more rains and harvest in the forthcoming year. This festival is usually carried out March 25th of every year. It is also considered to be a festival for healing, protection and preparation for the next farming season.^{vi}

It has been said that the Kuchicheb festival had existed from time immemorial. It was said to have originated as far back when the man “Kuteb” started worshipping idols before the coming of Christianity into the land. As to the date to when the first Kuchicheb festival was celebrated, oral tradition argued to be around the 17th century.^{vii} However, from the history of Kuteb the founder of the Kuteb tribe, his death and instruction on unity and togetherness passed on to his children, started when the Kuchicheb festival came into existence as there was no evidence of Kuchicheb festival outside Kuteb land either on their migration or among their neighbours.

To support the earlier reasons as to why the Kuchicheb festival is important to the Kuteb people is to have a pure society and to attract the great creator’s blessings into every home. At a particular time of the year such as before the first rains, fires in homes are extinguished and the ashes swept away to await the “fire of purification” from the ancestral home-the Ussa hills.^{viii}

Politically, the head of the Kuteb people was regarded as the Ukwe (paramount ruler). This was a position made to ensure that there were checks on the activities of the Kwe (clan chief), there was the office of the Kukwen who was the traditional chief priest. Kwe is found in every Kuteb hill. These hills represent the twelve clans of the Kuteb; each clan is expected to have its Kukwen. Every year during the festival, it was the duty of all the twelve Kukwens to go to Ussa hill to take fire.^{ix}

On March 25th of every year, which was regarded as the Kuchicheb day, all the Kuteb folks at home and those outside tramped out in their thousands into the ancient city of Takum to obey the command of their progenitor, Kuteb to set aside a day every year which they must come together to worship and praise god. Kuchicheb festival therefore became a cultural cum-religious festival ordained by the forefathers of Kuteb people as obligatory rite.^x

3. Organization and Celebration of Kuchicheb

Kuchicheb is an annual new year cum harvest thanksgiving festival which comes up in March 25th of every year when the rains are just about setting in. Takum is a very fertile area and the main occupation of the people is agriculture and hunting. The religion of the people before the advent of the Christianity into the area has much to do with soil fertility and related concern.^{xi} This shows that the festival had a direct link to the major occupation of the Kuteb people.

A week before the celebration of Kuchicheb festival, all the areas in Kuteb land will be kept clean. There will be no fighting among the people. No sexual contact among the people and the Ukwe (paramount ruler) would send some ritually matured Kuteb elders to go and stay in the mountain (Ussa hill) for one week in order to seek permission from Kuteb legendary father for the celebration.^{xii}

Before entering the “sacred week”, people were enjoined to purify their hearts by settling their differences so as not to harbor any grudges against another. They were to show hospitality to visitors and relatives who came from far and near with little or no provocation. Children must not be harassed or maltreated. Lastly, sexual relationships were forbidden during the sacred week.^{xiii} As any person who violates the “sacred week” either by sheer oversight or default, must undergo rituals of purification before he/she could be considered cleaned.

Something of paramount importance is the presence of masquerades in the Kuchicheb festival. The masquerades are believed to represent the gods for different purpose or traditional aspects.^{xiv} It is believed that the masquerades helped to preserve good health and strength for the next farming year.^{xv} During the “sacred week”, the masquerades observed two taboos. The first was that they must abstain from sexual gratification. Secondly, under no circumstance should women know who was wearing the mask. A breach of the taboos was an invitation to instant death at the stage through severe nasal bleeding due to a mysterious shrinking of the mask.^{xvi} The masquerades procession was preceded by a signature tune to warn off women and children from their paths.^{xvii}

Everyday, before the masquerades and the people commence dancing, the head of the household would come out with a clay bowl of water. Using palm leaves to dip in the water then he would sprinkle the field thrice and repeat the phrase:

“Uwogjimshwurshwurshwur”

“Uwogjimshwurshwurshwur”

“Uwogjimshwurshwurshwur”

Meaning

“It’s all peaceful, peaceful, peaceful”

“It’s all peaceful, peaceful, peaceful”

“It’s all peaceful, peaceful, peaceful”

Another important personality who must not escape notice is the Kukwen (chief priest). They are the traditional leaders that bring fires from the hills.^{xviii}, ^{xix} They are considered as the spiritual leaders (priest) of the Kuteb. There are twelve Kukwens in Kutebland. At an appointed time in the year, all the Akwens (priests) of the twelve clans that made up the ethnic group would assemble under the paramount priest (Kukwen) to discuss and fix the period for the “sacred week”- Kuchicheb. Information about their decision was relayed to the elders of each clan who will in turn pass the same to heads of families well ahead of time to allow women thresh out corn for brew.^{xx} The entire activities mentioned above were regarded as a preparation for the “holy week”.

On the day of the festival; the twelve Kukwens representing the twelve clans would move in procession leading the Ukwe (paramount ruler) to Ussa hill. Twelve goats and fowls were slaughtered and burnt to the gods, after which the fire would be taken and handed over to the Ukwe. He then leads the procession down the Ussa hill where thousands of the Kuteb folks await to receive their share of blessing through the Kukwens.^{xxi} The practice can be compared to happened in the days of Moses and the people of Israel on their way

out from the land of Egypt in the Bible (read the book of Exodus 19). The Ukwe and other elders of the Kuteb people go to mount Ussa each year to perform the traditional rites before the commencement of the festival by the Kuteb.

After dancing and merriment with the people, the Ukwe would take the fire and mounts on a horse and keeps acknowledging cheers from his subjects while he is leading them from the Ussa hills to Takum. The procession led by the Ukwe was filled with glamour and was quite imperial. The Kukwens sprinkle water which was being regarded as “holy water” on the Ukwe from time to time as he is making a glorious and triumphant entry to the ancient city of their forefathers, just the way the catholic practice during consecration (the sprinkling of water).

Kuchicheb cultural festival is regarded as old as the tribe Kuteb itself. The festival was purely a religious custom among the Kuteb ethnic group and celebrated on the 25th March of every year from time immemorial. The above could be true because the Kuchicheb festival is rounded up with a pilgrimage to a place called Iyaussa, a place believed to be the spot where their founding parents resided after their decent from Rikwen Ussa- Mount Ussa. The spot is survived by a large flint stone – the Iyaussa. The purpose of this pilgrimage was to take the “holy fire”. There was the sacred knocking of another piece of stone against Iyaussa Mountain to ignite fire using fine shrubs. The fire was then shared among the twelve elders representing the various clans of the Kuteb people. This fire was carried by each elder, in some cases through a distance of over sixty to seventy kilometers to their foothills where they reside. If after prayers, none of these representatives of the ancestors showed up; the elders would consult the diviner (Ndetichaenpwen) to find out what was amiss.

On the date of the festival, however, a signal for the celebration will be given by the blowing of an elephant tusk and cow horn. This can be seen in the practice of the Jews religion in Israel. After this, then all fires in Kuteb clans would be extinguished and the Kuteb elders from all the Kuteb clans would go and meet the priest on the mountain. Some sanctification rituals would be performed and these representatives will receive their own share of the fire. While this was going on, the other members would wait at Iya- Ussa near Takum in order to welcome them with the mysterious fire. ^{xxii}Geographically, the Ussa hill is situated about eight kilometers from Takum. ^{xxiii}

After the arrival of the chief priest and elders, one or two priest would be asked to go and see whether the conditions were conducive in Takum for the distribution of the fire. ^{xxiv} With the arrival of the new fire from Iyaussa, all previous fire in the village were put out. The sacred fire from Iyaussa becomes the source of the fire for the New Year. ^{xxv}

The procession back from Ussa hill is recorded amidst dances (Sae) such as, Sea Ike, Sae Kwop, Sae Rika, Sae Iwen, Sae Utarong/Kutaron, Sae Kufa, Sae Ipwein, Sae Pippi, Sae Rifayain, Sae Kumburu. ^{xxvi} All the above mentioned dances are to show appreciation for the gift of the fire and all groups engage in their various dances.

The festival depicted Kuteb mode of pre-colonial dressing, respect for law and order as commanded by the ancestors and passed on by elders, Kukwen and the Ukwe. It was a show of farming and hunting tools: a marks of Kuteb industry, show of hospitality through lavish provision of food and drinks to Kuteb people and guests, the love for education through the strong participation of the younger once in the festival to receive words of wisdom from the Ukwe, etc. This festival attracted participants and spectators from near and far. ^{xxvii}

Assorted food accompanied by lots of meat from domestic and games, dressed in generous palm oil were served. As a rule, every food cooked during the festival was literally soaked in red oil. The food was topped with corn beer. The beer was served in such a quantity that by the end no one will seems to have any appetite for more. That notwithstanding, each day comes with fresh brew till the seventh day period is over. ^{xxviii}

Highlights of the festival included a guided tour at Itse Ussa area, an ancient city of Ussa, a speech by His Royal Highness Ukwe Takum, traditional dances, exhibition of local craft, economic resources, social and community developments, display of arts, antiquities etc. and thrilling the masses with sightseeing. ^{xxix}

After a successful celebration, it is often terminated by heavy downpour, even if hitherto there had been threats of drought. This served as a form of reassurance that there was nothing to be afraid of, ^{xxx} as the year would come with multiple blessing especially for the women.

4. Conclusion

Even though it was understood that On March 25, 2007, violence erupted between the Jukun and Kuteb communities of Taraba State, which reportedly resulted in the deaths of seven persons, destruction of property, and displacement of the Kuteb community. The government deployed mobile policemen to the area to prevent further violence. On December 28, of that same year, the violence reignited when the Kuteb protested the Jukun trying to hold a cultural festival known as Puje. The Kuteb were previously prohibited by the government from holding their own cultural festival, Kuchicheb, earlier in the year. The clash reportedly resulted in millions of naira worth of damage, thousands of residents fleeing for safety, and seven deaths.

The history of the Kuteb will not be complete without the mention of the Kuchicheb festival. For so long now, the festival was not celebrated due to the ban made by the Taraba State Government, since 2007 till date. The continuous ban on the Kuchicheb festival celebration has placed encumbrance on the present generation from getting the benefit of the festival. The generation yet unborn will be deterred from knowing the importance of culture.

To support the above reasons as to why the Kuchicheb festival is important to the Kuteb people is to have a modest society and to attract the great creator’s blessings into every home. At a particular time of the year such as before the first rains, fires in homes are extinguished and the ashes swept away to await the “fire of purification” from the ancestral home—the Ussa hills.

The Kuchicheb festival no doubt has promoted political development of the people. The festival broadened the aims and objectives of the community based unions of the Kuteb people. Prominent among such unions is the KutebYatsa of Nigeria (KYN).

Socially, the festival has helped to serve as a great medium of bringing together Kuteb sons and daughters around the world. During such festival, Kuteb sons and daughters would come together to discuss developmental issues aimed at their progress and the country at large. By the submission of the study, Taraba State Government will help the preservation of the Kuteb history by lifting the ban on the festival celebration.

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