

## **The Sociological and Cultural Significance of the Argungu International Fishing and Cultural Festival in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

*This study analyzed the sociological and cultural significance of the Argungu International Fishing and Cultural Festival in Nigeria. Data were collected from 252 respondents in Kebbi State. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, percentages and means. The study showed that majority of the respondents (44.84%) agreed the festival seasons they witnessed so far have been a great source of relief from tensions. Furthermore, many people (69.44%) have settled permanently in Argungu as a result of fishing, water and regularity of festival while only a few (30.56%) settled in Argungu for others reason. Kebbawa people (40.87%) endorsed the continuity of the festival. Furthermore, 32.94% of the respondents comprising of Sokoto people and people from other parts of Nigeria would want the festival to continue. The Kebbawa people ranked the festival events with higher preference for water events (72.62%).*

**Keywords:** fishing festival, sociological perspective, cultural perspective, significance, Nigeria

### **1. Introduction**

Argungu Fishing Festival is probably one of the most eloquent efforts by an African people to relive and maintain a significant feature of its socio-cultural heritage. The annual festival at Argungu indeed signifies a Nigerian's people unique efforts at reasserting its basic values and beliefs, hence its relative distinctiveness vis-à-vis the other peoples around it (Yusuf, 1982). This cultural revival among the Kebbawa of Kebbi State is particularly laudable at a time when most African nations have been trying to relive their past by probing and adjusting the Blackman's heritage through such joint activities as the second World Festival Arts and Culture (FESTAC), which was held in Nigeria in early 1977. No doubt, revivalist assertions of this nature are apparently the only ways by which today's African nations can rid themselves of their colonial subservience, and subsequently bring to themselves the much needed respect and distinctiveness among other nations. Internally, it has equally become a primary factor in local level development and inter-ethnic mixture.

The festival is probably the oldest known institution of its kind among most of the riverine people of Nigeria. In the modern context, it has become the most widely attended annual festival in Nigeria and perhaps in Africa as a whole (Yusuf, 1982). The festival was never attended by very large crowds. But in the recent years, a little people have become a thousand, and the Federal Republic of Nigeria benefits as much from this festival as the people and town of Argungu and Kebbi State.

Argungu Fishing and Cultural Festival is an annual event that takes place in Argungu town, Kebbi State of Nigeria. About 30,000 fishermen, and villagers, participate in a week-long traditional fishing competition, which includes other cultural events (Dantata, 2007). Argungu is small town by the Sokoto River. Traditionally, fishing and agriculture are the main economic activities of the area. The festival evolved over the years, from 1934 when the Sultan of Sokoto visited Argungu, after many years of hostilities between the two neighbours and a fishing festival was organized in honour of the visiting monarch. Since then, the fishing festival has continued as an annual event, with additional cultural and sporting activities, attracting about 500,000 spectators from all over Nigeria, and all over the world. It also attracts local and international media coverage, including the CNN and BBC (Dantata, 2007).

There is a saying that Africa is the festival continent. Throughout the year in towns and villages across the continent, colorful and vibrant religious, harvest, fertility, and cultural festivals are held. Bare-hand fishing competition among thousands of fishermen, equipped with a hand net and large gourd, is the main event of the cultural extravaganza at Argungu in Kebbi State in Northwestern Nigeria. The competitors splash into the stream, scouring the water for huge freshwater fish. The Argungu fishing festival (*Fashin Ruwa*) is a celebration of life. It is a tool of conserving natural resources, maintaining and promoting traditional life. It is the precursor of today's fishery management measure. The local people believe they have been fishermen *for all time*. The effective conservation of natural resources is closely linked to the use of the local knowledge and hence the life of the community. It is also part of an ancient fertility ritual which, from the point of view of the local Kebbawa people, is the most important aspect of the occasion. The festival takes place usually in February after all agricultural work is finished. It marks the end of the growing season, and it opens the fishing season with a bang (Shyllon, 2007).

According to Yusuf (1982), the festival season brings forth the most in Kebbawa cultural manifestations. During the occasion, the basic traditions of the Kebbawa and the neighbouring communities receive wide publicity and global exhibition. The festival legitimates the community's power structure as amongst the fishing folks, and this system of power embraces largely male members, thus making the achievement of power an essentially community decision. Other aspects of the culture of the people of Argungu, notably dress priorities, diet preferences, dance, praise-songs and music, pastimes like wrestling and boxing, and even courting behavior are invariably revealed during the Festival season (Yusuf, 1982).

However, Yusuf (1982) submitted that intensive intermixture with other people has greatly influenced the basic configuration of Kebbawa cultural patterns. The speech behavior and dress models of the Kebbawa have been increasingly modified by influences from Sokoto, Gobir, Katsina and beyond. The Publicity Sub-Committee, Argungu Fishing Festival (1995) reported that cultural night, which is one of the major events of the Fishing Festival, is a night of cultural promotion during which artists from various states of the Federation as well as the neighbouring countries display the rich cultural heritage of their people, and that this event is hardly missed by many. The night features events such as dancing, singing, drama presentations, acrobatic display and so on.

Summarily speaking, the Argungu Fishing Festival has over the years provided Nigerians and the International community with a chance of appreciating and sharing the unique cultural experiences of the Kebbawa. Indeed, it is not only a means of preserving cultural bonds, but also that of promoting culture and integrity of the Blackman (Yusuf, 1982).

Socially, the Festival season at Argungu has also become a period of great excitement, pageantry and general license. Such cultural sidelines specifically serve to enliven the atmosphere and bring forth the best and most relaxed moods in everybody. Apart from symbolizing the general feelings and patterning of the Kebbawa community, the Argungu Festival guarantees a considerable amount of psychological satisfaction and peace of mind to many.

According to Yusuf (1982) the Festival has generally enriched several citizens from Argungu who benefited from the award of contracts connected with staging the Festival. More than 4,000 persons have secured jobs on a seasonal or permanent basis with the Fishing Festival Committee. Most of these employees are engaged as labourers or officials for specific entries to the Festival. The prizes won by individual participants to the Festival have proved to be of enormous economic value and are invested usually in marital, religious or occupational obligations. In short, the various activities connected with the Festival have served to raise the average standard of living in Argungu town and its environs (Publicity Sub-Committee, Argungu Fishing Festival, 1995).

According to BellaNaija.com (2011), during the 2011 Argungu Fishing and Cultural Festival, it was reiterated that the country has the potentials of thriving in the area of attracting foreign tourists. Argungu is an important international event that is capable of attracting foreign tourists to Nigeria, and that is why a brewery company like Maltina has been officially sponsoring the competition for years now. This, according to the company, is being done to encourage Nigerians to believe in and be proud of their culture, tradition and heritage which are very rich. The fact that Maltina has been sponsoring the event for years is why in each edition Maltina gives out both cash and material reward to winners. At the 2010 edition Maltina gave exciting prizes to the winners of the competition; the overall winner of the competition got N1 million and a tricycle; the first runner won N300,000 and a motorcycle while the second runner got N200, 000 and a generator. This is Maltina's unique way of sharing happiness following the re-launch of Maltina in February 2011. Apart from being the official drink of the festival, Maltina also activated a road show to drum up support for the festival and create awareness about its impact on tourism and social cohesion in the country. In addition, "sharing pavilion" was created where consumers came and shared their happy moments and experienced the brands new proposition. Those who were not fishermen were able to win exciting prizes after the fishing competition through competitive dancing competition. The winners thanked Maltina for providing them the opportunity of winning the prizes. The overall winner of the 2011 grand fishing competition said that apart from buying more nets to extend his fishing business, he intends to use part of the money to buy a pumping machine to use in his irrigation farm that he does on a part time basis. He also applauded the Emir for his resolve to ensure that the festival continues to hold.

Given the growing value of this festival culturally and socially, the festival needs to be empirically analysed in terms of its relevance to the society. Specifically, it has become necessary to examine the role of the festival in the sociological behaviour and socio-cultural patterns of the people of Argungu region and beyond. This paper is therefore aimed at analysing the sociological and cultural significance of the Argungu International Fishing and Cultural Festival in Nigeria.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 The Study Area**

Kebbi State is a state in north-western Nigeria with its capital at Birnin Kebbi. The state was formed from part of Sokoto State in 1991. Kebbi State is bordered by Sokoto State, Niger State, Dosso Region in the Republic of Niger and the nation of Benin. It has a total area of 36,800 km<sup>2</sup> (Nigerian National News, 2012).

Kebbi State was created on 27th August, 1991, out of the then Sokoto State, following the creation of nine additional states and the readjustment of geographical boundaries of the then twenty-one States by the Federal Military Government. Its headquarters is Birnin Kebbi, an ancient town dating back to the 14th Century. Located between latitude 10°8'N and 13°15'N and longitude 3°30'E and 6°02'E, the state is bounded by Sokoto State to the north and east, Niger State to the south, and Benin Republic to the west. It has a total land area of 36,129 square kilometer

Kebbi State was created out of the former Sokoto State on 17 August 1991. The State has a total population of 3,238,628 people (NPC, 2007). The state has Sudan and Sahel-savannah. The southern part is generally rocky with the Niger River traversing the state from Benin to Ngaski LGA. The northern part of the state is sandy with the Rima River passing through Argungu to Bagudo LGA where it empties into the Niger. Agriculture is the main occupation of the people especially in rural areas, Crops produced are mainly grains; animal rearing and fishing are also common. Islam is the dominant religion of the people. There are 225 political wards, 3000 settlements and 1036 hard to reach settlements in the 21 Local Government Areas in the State.

Located in North Western Nigeria, Kebbi State occupies 36,800 square kilometres. Kebbi State shares boundaries with Sokoto State on the North-Eastern axis, Zamfara State on the Eastern part, Niger state on the Southern part and Republic of Niger on the Western part. Kebbi state has an agriculturally viable environment since it is endowed with high soil fertility, vast farm lands and economically viable rivers sheltered by fine tropical climate. Owing to these factors, agriculture has remained the major source of revenue and indeed the backbone of the economy of the state. Major food crops in the area are millet, guinea – corn, maize, cassava, potatoes, rice, beans, onions and vegetables, while cash crops including wheat, soya beans, ginger, sugarcane, groundnuts and tobacco are also produced in the state. Similarly, fruits such as mango, cashew, guava and pawpaw are produced under horticulture.

Kebbi State has Kebbi Agricultural Development Authority which is responsible for the implementation of its agricultural policies. Kebbi state is endowed with economically viable rivers such as the Niger and the Rima for the development of fisheries activities. Fishing has always been one of the key occupations of the inhabitants of the state. Also environmental factors as well as the largest concentration of cattle and other animals have made the state a basic raw materials source for diary-products industries. The mineral resources in the state include limestone, salt, clay and gypsum.

One of the occupational festivals is the Argungu Fishing and cultural festival. The Argungu festival was first celebrated as a big event in 1934, when it was staged to mark the visit of the Sultan of Sokoto, Mallam Hassan Dan Muazu to Argungu. Hitherto, it was an irregular get-together of local fishermen residing in the vicinity of the fishing site of Argungu. Today, it is celebrated with a lot of pomp attracting people from both inside and outside the country.

The town of Argungu which has been hosting the annual fishing and cultural festival is located North-East of Birnin-Kebbi Town at a distance of about 58 kilometres along the bank of River Rima or Gulbin Kebbi. Argungu is the Headquarters of both Argungu Emirate and Argungu Local Government Area. The population of Argungu Local Government area was estimated to be 195,484 (NPC, 2007).

Argungu is an undulating highly drained region blessed with numerous rivers, streams, lakes, ponds and pools. The most important rivers are the River Rima and the Gulbin Kebbi. The region has a very good flood-plain of an average of five kilometers wide. From the foregoing, it is not surprising that Argungu has become an area where intensive fishing and rice cultivation takes place. Consequently, there is a high population concentration in the Argungu region.

Argungu Local Government Area comes entirely within the Sudan/Sahel Savannah, climatic and vegetational zone. It experiences three dominant seasons. The wet season (*damuna*) extends from June to September. Starting from August, the numerous streams, lakes and ponds, notably the Gulbin Kebbi overflow their banks. The cool season (*dari*) extends from October to January and is usually characterized by a relatively long spell of dryness and dust (Harmattan) from the Sahara. The hot season (*bazara*) starts from February and lasts until May. This period is marked by intensive heat with temperature of over 90° C.

The vegetation is generally the Sudan type characterized by open woodlands, short, tender grasslands and stunted scrubs. The trees are deciduous, and in recent times, the impact of man and soil erosion is greatly felt. The vegetation becomes sparser along the marshes where dense populations are encountered.

The long dry season has a relatively negative impact on both vegetation and human activities. However, the short rainy season and subsequent over flowing of banks significantly encourage rice cultivation and fishing industry. Paddy rice is harvested mainly during the dry, cold period; communal fishing rituals and festivals commence shortly after. Millet, corn, cassava, beans, groundnuts and maize are also grown during the short, wet season. Some pastoral activities are carried out along the banks of the river.

In general, Argungu people or the Kebbawa are noted for rice cultivation and fishing industry. Most Kebbawa are fishermen and about 75% of the districts within Argungu Emirate engage in fishing industry. Up to 1950's some three quarters of the population combine fishing with rice cultivation. The rice culture of the marshes provides the necessary nourishment for the fish within the lakes, ponds and streams. Agriculture apart, the Kebbawa has also been famous for salt and tin mining, mostly surface mining.

## 2.2 Sampling Technique

The Argungu Fishing Festival comprises of participants, spectators/observers and officials. From each of these three groups respondents were randomly sampled in Kebbi State. In all, a total sample size of 252 respondents was obtained for the study using a probability cluster sampling technique.

## 2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected on the 252 respondents selected for the study using a structured questionnaire. The respondents cut across participants at the festivals, spectators/observers and officials. Secondary data were collected from past project (Asogwa, 2002).

## 2.4 Analytical Technique

Data collected for the study were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, percentages and means.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Usefulness of the Festival

The result in Table 1 shows that majority of the respondents (44.84%) agreed the festival seasons they witnessed so far have been a great source of relief from tensions. This is because the season of the festival gives them great relief from monotonous year-round activities thereby serving to dissipate tensions (even if temporarily) as a result of a direct communion with the gala of music, dances, acrobatics and jubilant faces. Yusuf (1982) observed that the natives themselves, particularly in the past, unanimously partook of the unrestricted license for ceremonial eating and drinking, music and dance, processions and pageants which dominate every Festival season.

### 3.2 Awareness for the Festival

The result in Table 2 shows that most of the respondents (57.94%) attended the festival from within the vicinity of Argungu region (42.06%). This suggests that the awareness for the festival is higher within the precinct of Argungu region than beyond. This probably accounts for the relatively higher influx of local people to the festival (Asogwa, 2002).

### 3.3 Excitement for the Festival

Table 3 shows that many people (69.44%) have settled permanently in Argungu as a result of fishing, water and regularity of festival while only a few (30.56%) settled in Argungu for others reason. This indicates that people are highly excited by the festival to the extent that they would decide to settle permanently in Argungu. This probably explains the high population concentration in Argungu. The high level of excitement for the festival may be attributed to the fact that the Argungu fishing festival guarantees a considerable amount of psychological satisfaction and peace of mind to many (Yusuf, 1982).

### 3.4 Eagerness for the Festival to continue

The result in Table 4 shows that 40.87% of the respondents comprising of the Kebbawa people would want the festival to continue. Furthermore, 32.94% of the respondents comprising of Sokoto people and people from other parts of Nigeria would want the festival to continue. The Kebbawa people may have endorsed the continuity of the festival because, to them, it is a means of culture preservation, self-identification and sense of independence. The Kebbawa feel quite rightly that the festival has served to set them apart from most of their neighbours. For others, the festival should continue because, the festival seasons have been a great relief from monotonous year-round activities, thus helping to dissipate tension, even if temporarily, as result of a direct communion with the gala of music, dances, acrobatics and jubilant faces (Yusuf, 1982).

### 3.5 Relative ranking of the Festival events

The result in Table 5 shows that the Kebbawa people ranked the festival events with higher preference for water events. Boat race ranked 19.84%, Wild-duck catching ranked 19.84%, Grand Fishing ranked 17.86% and Swimming Competition ranked 15.08%. This clearly suggests that the Argungu people still place a great premium on water events. This presumably strengthens their belief in the potency of both *Fashen Ruwa* and *Gyaran Ruwa* (Yusuf, 1982).

### 3.6 Employment Opportunities at the Festival

The result in Table 6 shows that across the Festival years, the people secured jobs as casual labourers, regular labourers, ushers and guards. However, the result indicates that ushers and guards constitute the highest proportion of employees at the Festival across the Festival periods. For example, in 1980 47.6% ushers and guards were employed and 47.4% ushers and guards were employed in 1999; the least being 42.1% in 1981. This is due to need to have sufficient ushers and guards to cater for the teeming population of guests and tourists that troop to the Festival at every season of the Festival. Furthermore, the dire need to ensure adequate security of life and property during the ceremony may have informed the employment of large number of ushers and guards.

#### 4. Conclusion

The study showed that the festival gives the people great relief from monotonous year-round activities thereby serving to dissipate tensions. Furthermore, people are highly excited by the festival to the extent that they would decide to settle permanently in Argungu.

The Kebbawa people endorsed the continuity of the festival because, to them, it is a means of culture preservation, self-identification and sense of independence. For others, the festival should continue because, the festival seasons have been a great relief from monotonous year-round activities, thus helping to dissipate tension, even if temporarily.

The study also showed that the Kebbawa people ranked the festival events with higher preference for water events, suggesting that the Argungu people still place a great premium on water events. This presumably strengthens their belief in the potency of both *Fashen Ruwa* and *Gyaran Ruwa*. The Festival apart from providing employment opportunities to some inhabitants has helped in exposing both the human and natural resources of the area as well as their cultural riches.

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**Table 1: Distribution of Respondents on the basis of usefulness of the Festival**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Relevant	64	25.40
Relief of tensions	113	44.84
Exciting	75	29.76
<b>Total</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 2: Distribution of Respondents on the basis of Awareness for the Festival**

	Frequency	Percentage
Attendance from within a twenty-kilometer radius of Argungu town	146	57.94
Attendance from beyond a twenty-kilometer radius of Argungu town	106	42.06
<b>Total</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 3: Distribution of Respondents on the basis of reasons for settling in Argungu town**

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
Fishing, water and regularity of festival	175	69.44
Other reasons	77	30.56
<b>Total</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 4: Distribution of Respondents on the basis of Eagerness for the Festival to continue**

	Frequency	Percentage
Kebbawa (Argungu)	103	40.87
Kebbi People/other parts of Nigeria	83	32.94
Others	66	26.19
<b>Total</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 5: Distribution of Respondents on the basis of Relative ranking of the Festival events**

Events	Frequency	Percentage
Boat-race	50	19.84
Wild-duck catching	50	19.84
Grand fishing	45	17.86
Swimming competition	38	15.08
Music	25	9.92
Dance	25	9.92
Other cultural events	19	7.54
<b>Total</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 6: Distribution of Employees at the Festival**

Year	Casual labourers		Regular labourers		Ushers/Guards		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>1980</b>	30	28.6	25	23.8	50	47.6	105	100
<b>1981</b>	25	26.3	30	31.6	40	42.1	95	100
<b>1982</b>	22	21.6	35	34.3	45	44.1	102	100
<b>1983</b>	25	22.7	38	34.6	47	42.7	110	100
<b>1987</b>	20	18.2	40	36.4	50	45.4	110	100
<b>1989</b>	25	20	45	36	55	44	125	100
<b>1991</b>	27	20.6	46	35.1	58	44.3	131	100
<b>1995</b>	30	21.4	50	35.7	60	42.9	140	100
<b>1997</b>	28	21.4	47	35.9	56	42.7	131	100
<b>1999</b>	20	21	30	31.6	45	47.4	95	100

Adapted from Asogwa, 2002