



A Critical Analysis of Cultural Tourism, Drama and Theatre in Ikwerre Traditional Wrestling Festivals in Rivers State

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Received: 10.06.2026 | Accepted: 21.07.2026 | Published: 26.07.2026

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.21591513](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21591513)

Abstract

Original Research Article

This work interrogates the use of drama and theatre as cultural tourism in the traditional wrestling festival in Ikwerre ethnic nationality of Rivers State. It is obvious to state that traditional wrestling is an integral component of Ikwerre culture and tradition that fosters peace, unity, and socio-cultural entertainment amongst the people. Unfortunately, the traditional wrestling performance is gradually declining due to a lack of interest among some people in the community. The problem has somewhat reduced the practice and visibility of the traditional wrestling festival as a major source of cultural tourism in the Ikwerre ethnic nationality, hence, this study. In achieving the aim and objectives of the work, the researcher employs the cultural and performance theories as instruments or pivot of analysis. The work sourced data from primary and secondary collections. The primary data include but are not limited to the researcher's personal experience, while the secondary data were sourced from textbooks, scholarly journal articles and internet materials, among others. It is the modest recommendation of this work that the people of Ikwerre ethnic nationality and the lovers of traditional wrestling festival be encouraged to promote traditional wrestling as festival cultural tourism; thus, enhancing global visibility of the culture and tradition.

Keywords: Drama, theatre, cultural tourism, traditional wrestling and festival.

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Introduction

Culture is an identity that differentiates a particular group of people from another. It therefore becomes a vital element in the identity and preservation of any society thus serves as a source of beliefs, values, customs and even as an artistic expression of the worldview of the people. "Culture is the cumulative experience of a people in transforming the environment to suit their wellbeing. The experience involves the

development of skills and methods that enable the substance of a particular environment." (Krama & Ohia, p. 22). This could be expressed in dance, rituals, festivals and traditional wrestling performances. Relating to issues of cultural influence in wrestling festival, Ohia contends that "traditional wrestling festival is one of the oldest theatrical and cultural sporting exercises that helps to provide entertainment resort to the people" (Obuh cited in Ohia, p. 178).



One of the traditional festivals that provides entertainment and social cohesion to the people of Ikwerre ethnic nationality is the traditional

wrestling festival popularly called Ota or Egelege wrestling festival.



Culled from Ogbodo Isiokpo (in Ikwerre ethnic nationality) traditional wrestling festival, 2026.

This festival remains a major vibrant cultural practice that re-enacts the cultural and traditional activities of the people and thus provide symbolic meaning and relaxation to the people. In reality, traditional wrestling in Ikwerre ethnic nationality is not only a physical contest of agility and tactics but a cultural festival embedded with elements of drama and theatre. It is posited that “traditional wrestling is more than a physical contest; it is a cultural ceremony that reinforces moral values, kinship, and belonging. Across civilizations, wrestling has symbolised respect, discipline, and the triumph of honour over aggression” (www.google.com). It is noted that:

Traditional wrestling can be Victor Turner’s (1982, p. 78) words be regarded as social drama... that experiential matrix from which the many genres beginning with cultural performances... ritual, judicial procedure, and

eventually oral and literary narratives are generated. African traditional wrestling used to be a challenge contest in which a wrestler from one community from the opposite camp... (p. 178).

This is because the wrestling festival features elements such as music, dance, costume, storytelling, makeup and thus, presented in a performance arena for the audience delight. The use of dramatic wrestling festival highlights the importance of the festival as a total theatre experience where the various components of the theatre is presented in a single performance. Notwithstanding, the expression and presentation of the people’s cultural ambience and activities in the wrestling festival, its elements of cultural tourism are ready baits that attract the tourist attention to participate in the festival.



Tourists participating in traditional wrestling festival, 2026

Culled from Ogbodo Isiokpo (in Ikwerre ethnic nationality) traditional wrestling festival, 2026

The interest in watching and assimilating cultural activities of the Ikwerre people of Rivers State by other neighbours for the purposes of entertainment, information and education constitute in this work the concept of cultural tourism. It is on the above assertion that the work seeks to critically evaluate and examine the use of theatre and drama in the Ikwerre traditional wrestling festival. Details of the relevance of the traditional wrestling festival with focus on its dramatic and theatrical drive will be explicated sufficiently in the course of this work.

Theoretical Framework: A Review

The analysis of this work anchors on two basic theoretical frameworks such as cultural theory and performance theory as roadmap for critical evaluation and analysis of the topic under examination.

Cultural Theory: This theory is needed in the work because of its importance on understanding how cultural activities and practices structure and thus reflect the socio-cultural identity of the people. This theory reveals the concept of culture

as the totality of the people's ways of life as it encompasses the beliefs, everyday practices, artistic expressions and social institutions, amongst other adequacies. "Cultural theory consists of theories about culture; how it works, what it means, how our understanding of it has changed over time, and how it relates to processes which are commonly thought to take place apart from culture." (www.researchgate.net). The use of cultural theory in this work is appropriate, hence, it deals with the cultural and traditional life styles of the people (in this case, the traditional wrestling festival) of Ikwerre ethnic nationality. According to Lizardo "cultural theory is also one of the few strands of modern theorising that boasts having a "straight line" of succession from the programmatic concerns that preoccupied the sociological classics" (www.academia.edu). It is no gainsaying the fact that cultural festival such as traditional wrestling creates and enhances avenue for communal participation and identity confirmation, thereby strengthening the socio-cultural base of the Ikwerre people.

Performance Theory: The crux of the work

under interrogation is anchored on performance and performative aspects of human activities, thus, the use of performance theory as pivot of critical analysis. In the views of Richard Schechner, one of the proponents of performance theory maintains that performance encompasses “restored behaviour” implicating that actions are repeated, rehearsed and most times, culturally embedded. “Richard Schechner is one of the theatre exponents who propounded performance

theory to cater for dramatic/theatrical endeavours and everyday activities.” (Ohia, 2025. p. 177). Relating this to the traditional Ikwerre wrestling festival, the dramatic and theatrical activities or actions of the drummers, wrestlers and performers can be closely seen as rehearsed cultural and traditional expressions or practices that passes from one generation to another.



Photo taken from Ogbodo Isiokpo (in Ikwerre ethnic nationality) traditional wrestling festival, 2026.

Cultural Tourism, Drama and Theatre in Ikwerre Traditional Wrestling Festival: A Focus

It is important to mention that Ikwerre traditional wrestling festival is in its very nature a cultural tourism. Cultural tourism is a kind of tourism that involves the movement of people from one place to another to experience and assimilate the people’s culture, tradition, religion, history and art amongst other lifestyles. It affords the tourist the opportunity to visit historical site and monuments and thus learn about the culture, customs and lifestyle of the people. Therefore, Ikwerre traditional wrestling festival is by no mean devoid of touristic potentials that attract

possible tourists from near and far to participate in the festival. The cultural performance embedded in the wrestling activities are ready materials that attract the tourists. The festival demonstrates the dramatic activities in typical African societies. Most often, it is encapsulated from storytelling tradition, myth and ritual elements inherent in African culture in general and Nigerian society in particular. According to available information, traditional festival is “rooted in ancient customs and passed down through generations as these festivals often honour deities, commemorate historical events, or mark significant life transitions” (www.google.com).

African traditional theatre is believed to have originated from the different festivals, rituals, story sessions and the other socio-cultural, religious and artistic activities and ceremonies that have existed in Africa from time immemorial and are based on African traditional beliefs and practices (Ohiri, 2010, p. 22).

This work is set to evaluate the recognition of traditional wrestling festival not commonly as physical competition but as a traditional and cultural performance hub that in cooperate ritual, aesthetic, identity and entertainment potentials of the people. The argument in this paper is the presentation of Ikwerre traditional wrestling festival as cultural tourism that parades the potentials of bringing tourist to assimilate the cultural vibrancy, communal and artistic values of the people. This is because, the performance is rich in dramatic and theatrical ambiances that showcase or rather presents graphical orientation, philosophy, values and other cultural ribaldries of the people of Ikwerre ethnic nationality in a single wrestling performance. It is claimed that “drama is a mode of fictional storytelling that is meant to be performed for an audience. It involves dialogue and action to portray a story” (www.google.com). Abrams & Harpham define drama as “the form of composition designed for performance in the theatre, in which actors take the roles of the characters, perform the indicated actions, and utter the dialogue” (2005, p. 84). It on the above assertion that it becomes imperative to posit that traditional wrestling is dramatic and theatrically oriented due largely to its presentation of dramatic elements such as plot, character, music, spectacle and other artistic elements. These elements, put together, create the atmosphere of drama and theatre during the festival; especially to the tourists.

Dramatic and theatrical experiences

showcased in the presentation and utilization of elements of theatre in the practice and presentation of traditional theatre; such as the stage, costume and makeup, storytelling, characters (performers) amongst other variables are highlighted in the festival. Therefore, the paper strongly posits that traditional wrestling festival is rich in the presentation of dramatic and theatrical contents that lure the would-be tourists to appreciate the cultural indices and values encased in the wrestling festival.

The Ikwerre Ethnic Nationality in Rivers State of Nigeria: Geographical Location

Like other indigenous ethnic groups in Rivers State, the Ikwerre ethnic nationality is located in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The ethnic group occupy the major north-central and eastern parts of Rivers State. The Ikwerre ethnic group has four (4) Local Government Areas such as: Port Harcourt City, Obio-Akpor, Emohua and Ikwerre L.G.As. The Ikwerre ethnic nationality shares boundaries with the Ogonis, Etche, Kalabaris and Ekpeye ethnic groups in Rivers State. They also share boundary with the Imo State. However, it is not out of place to state that the Ikwerre people are blessed and located within the tropical rainforest region that is associated with rich vegetation, lowland terrain, rivers and other lucrative ecosystem.

Occupation of the Ikwerre Ethnic Group: It is of mention to state clearly that the people of Ikwerre ethnic group have various occupational engagements that reflect their environment and historical background. These include the followings:

- i. Farming Activities:** Basically, the people of Ikwerre ethnic group are farmers whose livelihood depend on cultivation of soil and allied practices. Farming activities have been a major source of livelihood; especially to the rural dwellers who farm in their fertile lands.
- ii. Fishing Activities:** Those living close to the creeks engage in fishing activities as a source of income and livelihood. These activities or occupational engagements are always done in subsistence quantities to maintain livelihood.

iii. Administrators: Many Ikwerre people are civil servants and public office holders such as Politicians, Lawyers and Administrators in the socio-political structure of society.

iv. Trading: Evidence abound that some members of Ikwerre ethnic group are traders of different commodities. Modernity and civilization have placed them to interact with close neighbours in the areas of buying and selling of goods and services. In summary, the Ikwerre people of Rivers State are industrious people who are occupationally engaged in varieties of human activities to make a living.

The Religio-Cultural Worldview of the People

The people of Ikwerre ethnic group belong to diverse religious beliefs such as: Traditional religion, Christianity, Islam and others. They are free to choose and worship any religion of their interest to attain supernatural desire. The Ikwerre religio-cultural worldview is a supernatural ecosystem that blends with traditional beliefs, Christianity, Islam and other religious interests that shape identity, values and cultural expressions.

The Language of the People of Ikwerre Ethnic Nationality

The dominant language of the people is the Ikwerre or (*Iwhuruoha*) language that is commonly spoken and understood in the four (4) Local Government Areas that make up the Ikwerre ethnic nationality. However, the people speak English language amongst other means of verbal communications.

The Use of Elements of Drama and Theatre in Traditional Wrestling Festival: An Interrogation

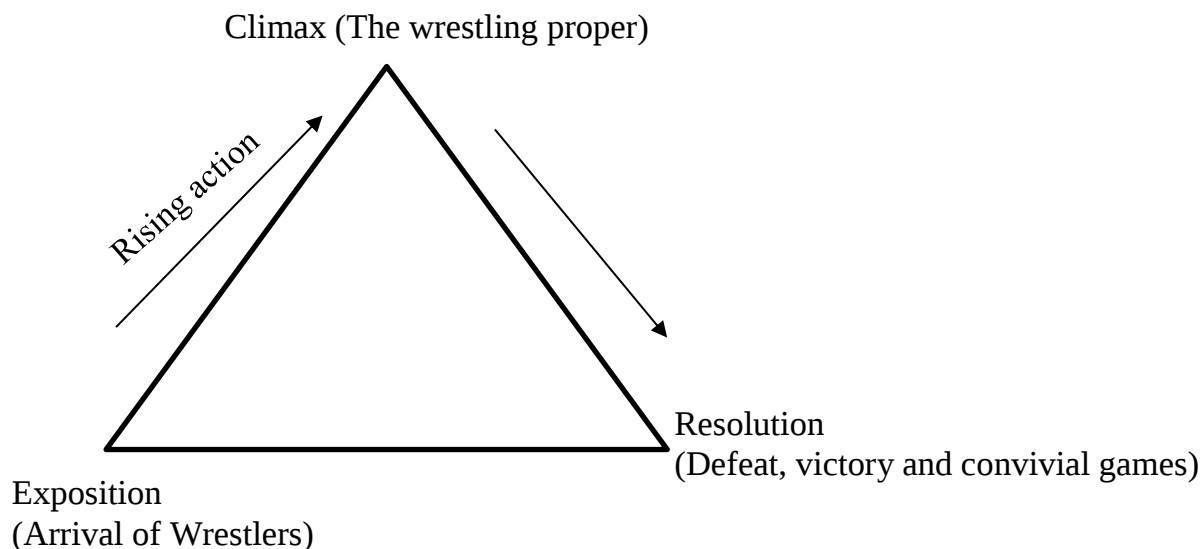
1. Costume and Makeup: In the traditional wrestling festival, wrestlers appear in various costumes such as: beads, animal skins, masks and body paints amongst others. These artistic ornaments help to tell a story about the festival.

2. Song, Dance and Choreograph: Dance and drumming are elements used to announce the entrance and movements of the wrestlers to and around the arena. This helps to create dramatic spectacles.

3. Audience Participation: In traditional wrestling festival, the audience are critical factors that make up the performance. This is because they are the final costumers of theatrical performance.

4. Character and Characterization in the Festival: In the Ikwerre traditional wrestling festival, performers take and perform the character traits of some natural and supernatural elements such as heroes, spirit beings, champions and others. Most often, some take the role of protagonist while other perform the roles of antagonist thereby enhancing the pace of the plot.

5. Plot Structure of the Festival: Every dramatic/theatrical performance must have structural presentation of action and story. The traditional wrestling festival follows the dramatic plot structure that starts from the exposition, through the climax to the resolution. This is graphically presented in the diagram below



Contribution of Traditional Festivals in Cultural Tourism

The importance of traditional festivals in cultural tourism cannot be overstated. This is because the concept of cultural tourism is based on the indices and ribaldries of traditional festivals. Therefore, traditional festivals provide the platforms for the exhibition and presentation of the people's cultural heritage and artefacts to tourist. In this direction, the interest of tourist in participating in traditional festivals is to assimilate the cultural potentials of the people. This may include but not limited to their environment, behaviour, religion, artefacts, values and norms amongst others. Haralambos and Holborn: assert that:

The tourist moves from place to place. However, their movements are a little more purposeful. They know where they want to go. But they are not like the pilgrim. They do not travel to meet some ultimate goals. They simply go to places to gain new

experiences, to see somewhere different or do something they have not done before (2008. p. 698).

The above information explains the reason why people (tourists) move from place to place. No doubt, their targets may be for leisure, trade or entertainment. Notwithstanding which ever reasons, the tourists are the consumers of traditional festivals. It is on this connection that it asserts thus "African traditional theatre is ambivalent as it expresses the traditional historic thought encased in the totality of the culture evolved in attempt to meet with challenges of the environment" (Krama, 2013, p. 3).

In African context, ritual constitutes drama. No matter the nature of rituals, its practice and presentation is indeed dramatic. Most cultural festivals are transformations of rituals. This is evident in Brockett as quoted in Krama thus:

Primitive rituals contain germs of drama because music, song, dance, masks and costumes were almost always used. A suitable site had to be provided for the performance of such rites and when the

whole tribe did not partake in the performances, a clear division was normally made between the actual

performers and the gathered community... (2006, p. 7).



Drummers performing during the Ogbodo Isiokpo (in Ikwerre ethnic nationality) traditional wrestling festival, 2026

The above statement connotes that drama is evident in every traditional festival. To further illustrate this point, traditional festivals have dance, music, costume and other elements of drama. Festivals or traditional African theatre anchors its essence and importance on celebrating the culture of the people.

It is a truism to assert that the traditional festivities continue to be a major draw for potential tourists, despite the way the environment and culture are presented to them. To be specific, it is important to state that the traditional festivals include the indigenous cultural ceremonies and activities that showcase the cultural heritage and beliefs of a given people to the tourist. Example includes but not limited to: masquerade performances, rites of passages, new yam and fishing festivals among others. The presentation of these festivals lure members of the public from far and near to partake in the

event. These traditional festivals are centre of attraction; hence, its tourist potentials. Supporting the above assertion, Ohiri maintains that:

African traditional theatre is a theatre that exists in African based on African culture. It is rooted in African mythology, philosophy and cosmology. It is the people's identity and reflects the

“Africanness”
of the people.
Based on these
facts, it has
been explained
as, the sum
total of all the
theatrical
activities
evolved and
nurtured on the
African soil
and in keeping
with the
African
tradition...
(2010, p. 16).

"African theatre transmits African culture as a distinct creation, specific to a particular people which adds to the beauty of variety of cultures." African theatre fully appropriates the distinctiveness of the African experience while also transmitting both material and non-material culture vividly for a charming experience (Krama, 2012, p. 75). The work highlights the significance of traditional festivals or African traditional theatre in cultural tourism based on the aforementioned considerations. This suggests that traditional festivals provide a setting that makes it possible for tourists to take part in cultural rituals. The goal of a tourist is to observe the cultural celebrations and events that are prevalent or rooted in a particular setting or population. Revealing the nature and characteristics of traditional festival, Ogunba and Abiola (1978) posit that:

An indigenous
cultural
institution, a
form of art
nurtured on
the African
soil over the
centuries and
which has
therefore
developed
distinctive
features and

whose
techniques are
sometimes
totally
different from
the borrowed
form now
practiced by
many of our
contemporary
artists (p. 4).

A festival in African tradition is a religious communion. The stereotype image of a festival in African tradition is a ceremony in which everybody participates in and which admits of no mere spectators. African traditional theatre is an expression of the people, institutions and experience of the communal society.

Conclusion

No doubt, the work has interrogated in details the concept of cultural tourism, drama, and theatre in Ikwerre traditional wrestling festival in Rivers State. Wrestling is not only a sporting exercise but also a source of relaxation, entertainment, social mobilization, and unity in the Ikwerre ethnic nationality in Rivers State of Nigeria. In this study, the researcher examined the intersection of cultural tourism, drama, and theatrical content that is found in the presentation of traditional wrestling festivals. Drama and theatre as it were, play a vital role in traditional wrestling festivals, as it draws the interest of potential tourists to the ceremony. In the course of this interrogation, the researcher presents the traditional wrestling festival as a total theatre that embodies the use of song, dance, ritual, and movement in a single performance. Also, the work identified elements of drama and theatre in Ikwerre traditional wrestling festival such as: character, plot, spectacle, music, and language, among others. It is also noted that the Ikwerre traditional wrestling festival is rich in touristic potentials that are capable of seeking the attention of both local and foreign tourists to participate in the festival and thus enhances the

cultural visibility and socio-economic values of the people.

Recommendations

Having critically evaluated and analysed the concepts of cultural tourism, drama, and theatre in Ikwerre traditional wrestling festivals, the work puts forward the following recommendations.

- ❖ It is the kind recommendation of this study that members of the Ikwerre ethnic nationality should be encouraged to develop an interest in promoting and preserving their indigenous wrestling festival to sustain its existence and thus create more global visibility.
- ❖ Tourists and other wrestling enthusiasts should be encouraged to watch, participate, and assimilate the cultural values, norms, and practices encased in the traditional wrestling festival in the Ikwerre ethnic nationality as a way of encouraging and promoting cultural tourism in the Rivers State of Nigeria in general and the Ikwerre nation in particular.
- ❖ The paper recommends that government and other well-spirited individuals should regularly promote and sponsor traditional wrestling festival as a means of not only entertaining the people but also as an avenue for socio-economic cohesion and rejuvenation. In light of the above, the paper strongly advises that recreational centres and other allied infrastructure should be provided to enhance smooth operations and convenience during the festival context.
- ❖ As a way of seeking decorum, peace, and unity, the paper recommends that security should be provided to the tourists and wrestlers during the wrestling festival to curb social violence and its attendant criminalities.
- ❖ The paper in its wisdom recommends that the use of dramatic elements should be sufficiently deployed and presented in

the wrestling festival to sustain the interest and desire of participants. In this case, the hallmark of the performance should be tailored towards enhancing the entertainment and theatrical values of the ceremony.

- ❖ In submission, the paper encourages the use and promotion of cultural activities such as ritual, dance, song, and mask, amongst other elements that could launch the culture and tradition of the people to a more global reach.

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