Festival as Peace Infrastructure: The Odi-Onin Festival and the Politics of Community Cohesion Among the Emeyal Clan of Bayelsa State, Nigeria

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Abstract
Cultural festivals in Africa have been studied chiefly through tourism, economic development and artistic display, with little sustained attention to their use as deliberate instruments of grassroots peacebuilding. This article examines the Odi-Onin Festival, instituted by the youth leadership of the Emeyal clan in Ogbia Local Government Area, Bayelsa State, Nigeria, as a case of an indigenous festival mobilised to heal fractures produced by unequal access to oil-derived benefits among the clan's twelve communities. Drawing on oral interviews with organisers, traditional custodians and community members, together with participant observation, it reads the festival's masquerade, drumming and dance, intergroup competition and communal feasting through Structural Functionalism, Symbolic Interactionism and Communitarianism. It finds that the festival operates as a ritual space of shared meaning, a mechanism of social integration and a moral appeal to communal obligation, and that its recurrence has improved inter-village relations since a reluctant, poorly attended first clan-wide edition. Financial dependency, political interference and youth disengagement threaten its future, and the article closes with recommendations for safeguarding such festivals in the oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta.

Keywords: *Cultural Festivals; Peacebuilding; Community Cohesion; Odi-Onin Festival; Niger Delta*

Introduction

Cultural festivals have drawn renewed scholarly attention as places where fractured communities rehearse a shared identity. Emmy Prince Rutagand argues that they "play a vital role in building social cohesion by creating inclusive spaces that allow intercultural dialogue and the breaking down of stereotypes," spaces that in turn "foster a shared sense of belonging and cultural understanding" (12). Giulia Alonzo and Giulia Rossetti shift the emphasis from display to the emotional and relational goods that festivals generate, describing them as instruments of "cultural welfare" (26). Both accounts are general; the question pursued here is what such a festival can do when the quarrel to be healed concerns money. The question is sharpest in resource-contested societies, where extractive economies distribute benefit unevenly and the unevenness hardens into resentment. Nigeria's Niger Delta is the paradigmatic case, and the Emeyal clan of Ogbia Local Government Area poses the question in its sharpest form, since the dispute its festival addresses turns on which villages the oil companies pay.The Odi-Onin Festival, whose name translates as "Festival of Togetherness," dates only to 2020, when the then Youth President of the Emeyal Clan first organised it as the "Oban Emeyal Unity Festival." It was a deliberate youth intervention against chronic disunity among the clan's twelve communities: Amorokeni, Kolo I, Kolo II, Kolo III, Emeyal I, Emeyal II, Imiringi, Elebele, Otuasega, Ibelebiri, Yiba-Ama (Oruma) and Etegwe II. The source of that disunity is material. Imiringi, Elebele, Otuasega and Oruma sit within oil-producing territory and receive scholarships, grants, community bonuses and infrastructure from operating companies that the other communities do not, and oral testimony gathered for this study describes the resulting "deep grievance" as strong enough that shared lineage has at times been overshadowed. The first edition drew only wards sympathetic to the initiative and rotated modestly from ward to ward. Under a later Youth President, Milford Adu, the festival was reconceived in 2024 and renamed "Eyal Odi-Onin," with villages invited "not to compete for dominance, but to celebrate shared ancestry, culture, and identity through collective participation in music, dance, masquerade displays, storytelling, and sporting events." That inaugural clan-wide edition was only modestly successful, and several villages took part reluctantly. The second edition, in 2025, is described in oral testimony as a "breakthrough moment," with all twelve communities contributing masquerades, dance troupes and local cuisine. This trajectory makes the festival a compact case for the claim that cultural festivals function as peacebuilding infrastructure. It is neither an ancestral ritual who's peace-making must be inferred from myth nor a symbolic event detached from material stakes; its organisers name peacebuilding as their goal, and each edition can be read as an index of success or failure. The study accordingly aims to examine the role of cultural festivals in promoting peace and community cohesion by describing the festival's performance elements, examining how it facilitates interaction across the twelve communities, analysing its promotion of shared values, assessing its perceived impact and identifying the challenges bearing on its future. The data come from oral interviews with youth leaders, community organisers and cultural custodians, and from participant observation. The article adds an empirically grounded case to a thin literature on festivals and peacebuilding in Africa, and it documents an indigenous festival that has received no sustained scholarly attention, thereby safeguarding oral knowledge that might otherwise go unrecorded. It also offers practical insight to community leaders, policymakers and cultural practitioners in Ogbia Local Government Area and in comparable oil-producing communities elsewhere in the Niger Delta. Scholarship on African festivals has concentrated on their economic and tourism value, their artistic display and, more recently, identity and heritage. Studies of the Argungu Fishing Festival have stressed its ecological and economic dimensions (Shyllon; Asogwa et al.), and work on the Osun-Osogbo Festival has foregrounded

heritage tourism and sacred-site conservation (Umejei; Woosnam et al.). Where peacebuilding appears in this work it is incidental, and it attaches to long-established festivals with substantial archives. What is missing is empirical attention to smaller, recent festivals created by community actors as peacebuilding interventions. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no existing scholarship examines how the Odi-Onin Festival mitigates the tensions produced by unequal oil benefits among the Emeyal communities or how its performances operate as mechanisms of reconciliation. This article addresses that gap by analysing the elements and processes through which peace is enacted in a festival whose declared reason for being was peace, rather than reading peace into it from outside.

Theoretical Frameworks

The study rests on Structural Functionalism, Symbolic Interactionism and Communitarianism, which explain the festival at different levels. Structural Functionalism, associated with Émile Durkheim's *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), conceives society as an integrated system whose institutions and norms sustain order. Central to it is the social fact, an external and constraining force such as law, tradition or moral code that shapes individual conduct while binding members to a shared collective conscience. Ritual is, for Durkheim, the chief means by which the collective conscience is renewed, since it reaffirms shared belief and social roles. The functionalist distinction between manifest functions, the intended and visible outcomes of an institution, and latent functions, its unintended stabilising effects, suits the present case: the festival's celebration of heritage, promotion of youth participation and public performance of identity coexist with a latent work of conflict mediation and inter-village reconciliation. Symbolic Interactionism, developed by George Herbert Mead (1934) and systematised by Herbert Blumer (1969), moves from structure to interaction and treats social order as something participants produce continuously through the meanings they attach to objects and events. Festivals become arenas in which communal values are interpreted, negotiated and performed. A masquerade's ritualised entrance or a meal shared across formerly divided villages communicates a norm and produces it at once, resolving tension symbolically rather than through confrontation. Communitarianism, advanced by Amitai Etzioni, supplies the moral register: well-being depends on shared obligation and communal values as well as on law and institutions. Communitarianism privileges the interests of the group over unbounded self-interest and holds that institutions work best when they reinforce mutual responsibility and civic solidarity. By requiring all twelve villages to join in shared ritual, the festival reasserts communal obligation over the narrow, resource-based self-interest that produced the grievance. Each framework corrects the others. Structural Functionalism alone would present the festival as more harmonious than its reluctant early participation allows; Symbolic Interactionism alone would lose sight of the oil-derived inequality that occasioned it; Communitarianism alone would assume a consensus that the festival's uneven early history belies. Together they describe an institution, a performance and a moral appeal at once.

Literature Review

Culture and Festival

Any inquiry into festivals must first reckon with the definitional complexity of culture. Vladimer Lado Gamsakhurdia frames culture as "an entirety of relational processes of sense-making of experiences that are self-centred, intentional and future-oriented," yet "always rooted in historically constructed sociocultural systems" (480). Albert Wisdom is more concrete, and his

claim that "culture can be said to be the binding force that holds people together as a society" (165) anticipates this study's interest in cohesion, where Gamsakhurdia's definition leaves the social function implicit.

Festivals inherit the plurality of the concept. Alessandro Falassi describes a festival as "a social phenomenon, encountered in virtually all human cultures" (1), and Waldemar Cudny traces festivals to the culture and religion of early tribal societies, whose forms shifted with wider social change (12). Happy Sharer adds that festivals have historically bridged "the past and the present" (32). What these definitions share is a periodic occasion on which a community rehearses and reaffirms its collective identity, which is what the Odi-Onin Festival was designed to do across a divided clan.

Festivals in Nigerian and Niger Delta Contexts

Nigeria's more than 250 ethnic groups sustain festivals that serve as instruments of identity preservation and intergenerational transfer as well as entertainment. Odoja Asogwa and George Odoh observe that a festival can serve as "a compendium of . . . cultural history and a storehouse of . . . knowledge and worldview" (21), an archival function that recurs across the Igbo New Yam Festival, and the Yoruba Olojo Festival alike. Masquerade, music and dance recur across such traditions; the same authors find that masquerades "transcend mere entertainment to serve as didactic instruments of moral instruction" (61), which anticipates the moral guidance Emeyal elders supply at Odi-Onin (section 5.3). The tradition is also old and widely shared; Laura Leddy Turner notes that masquerade "likely originated on the West African Coast" and travelled with the transatlantic experience to Caribbean and southeastern United States carnival traditions (51). Odi-Onin's masquerades therefore belong to a long lineage, though what distinguishes them here is the purpose to which they are put.

Festivals, Cohesion and Peacebuilding

Scholars link festival participation directly to cohesion, trust and belonging. Greg Richards notes that festivals "create opportunities for social interaction and community engagement" (78). Serene Chok and colleagues examine the same role in multicultural societies, a concern close to the internally differentiated structure of the Emeyal clan. Where these accounts stay general, others name mechanisms. Thomas Edevbie, writing on Ijo oral tradition, treats festival space as a liminal arena in which ordinary distinctions relax (115), and J. Van der Merwe observes that "communal meals during festivals serve as critical social occasions where kinship and community ties are both enacted and reaffirmed" (4). Chioma Onuorah adds that inclusive celebration can "help reduce prejudices, heal divisions, and provide opportunities for collaborative community development" (1). Feasting has a theoretical vocabulary of its own. Marcel Mauss's account of gift exchange, which he calls "the total social fact that binds communities, marking relationships, and sustaining social order" (9), gives a reading of the reciprocal gifts that accompany such meals. Mauss treats the exchange as binding, and at Odi-Onin the shared meal and the gift exchange work together.

The peacebuilding literature is more cautious. Sabrina Sadeghi argues that festivals can foster "more positive intercultural relations" through "dialogue, shared experience, and creative engagement that transcend prior divisions" (15), and Johan Galtung's account of conflict transformation supplies a vocabulary for redirecting antagonistic energy into cooperation. John Paul Lederach warns that durable peace attends to "personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions" at once (34) and demands "a sustained investment in relationships, institutions, and structures over decades, not merely years" (81), so that no single festival edition can count as a

completed achievement. Thania Paffenholz cautions against uncritical "civil society enthusiasm," since "not all civil society actors are peace-promoting; some are peace-wreckers, spoilers, or even warmongers" (410-12). A festival is therefore not automatically peace-generative; it must be structured towards that end. The point bears on how cohesion itself is understood. The term is used loosely across the festival literature, and in the Emeyal case it has to be built at two levels: interpersonally, among individual clan members across village lines, and structurally, between oil-benefiting and non-benefiting communities whose relationship is mediated by external corporate and governmental actors. Cohesion here is a multidimensional achievement, comprising trust, reciprocity, belonging and cross-cutting ties, that must be renewed continually, and a festival edition can contribute to it without completing it.

Empirical Precedents

Studies of specific Nigerian festivals supply methodological precedents. Kyle Woosnam and colleagues, using an Emotional Solidarity Scale at the Osun-Osogbo Festival, found visitors more emotionally attached to the festival environment than local residents, and recommended stronger resident involvement in planning. The Odi-Onin Festival differs on exactly this point, since planning and mobilisation rest with the clan's own youth wing, so the risk it faces is less outsider capture of the programme than dependence on outside money. Benjamin Asogwa and colleagues found that the Argungu Festival "fosters local pride, strengthens community bonds, and boosts microeconomic activities." Neither examines a festival founded to resolve intra-clan, resource-derived conflict, and that is the gap addressed here.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section draws on semi-structured oral interviews with youth leaders, community organisers, traditional custodians and participants, and on the researcher's participant observation across two editions of the festival. The method privileges lived experience and insider perspective over externally imposed measurement, in keeping with the festival's own reliance on orally transmitted history. Secondary sources situate the Emeyal experience within the regional and continental literature reviewed above. Quotations from interviewees are identified by name and marked as oral interviews; they are the study's primary evidence for the festival's history, its organisation and the meanings participants attach to it.

Setting: The Emeyal Clan and Its Twelve Communities

The Emeyal clan is one of four constituent clans of Ogbia Kingdom, with Abureni, Anyama and Oloibiri, in Ogbia Local Government Area. Gary Campbell records that "the discovery of crude oil in Oloibiri in 1956 marked the beginning of commercial petroleum extraction in Nigeria" (43), and the consequences of that discovery still shape relations among the clans. The Ogbia are ethnically Ijaw, with documented kinship and linguistic ties to neighbouring Ijaw groups, including the Okoroma of Nembe, the Odual of Abua/Odual and the Ogbogolo of Ahoada-West. The Emeyal clan comprises twelve communities under a single senior ruler, the Obenobhan, with each community headed by its own Obenema. Oral testimony locates the founding grievance in the geography of oil: Imiringi, Elebele, Otuasega and Oruma receive scholarships, grants, bonuses and power supply from operating companies, and the remaining communities, lacking oil-bearing territory, do not. The festival was created to address that structural condition, not a generalised cultural drift.

Historical Development of the Festival

The festival's history since 2020 falls into three phases traceable through the interviews. In the first, under Comrade Okala, then Youth President, the event ran as the "Oban Emeyal Unity Festival." Participation was voluntary and partial: only supportive wards took part, the celebration rotated between wards, and programming was limited to sport, such as rally races, canoe races and tug-of-war, with youth as sole organisers and participants. The second phase began when Milford Adu, a later Youth President, observed "growing bitterness and factional disputes among the twelve villages," rooted in land issues, leadership rivalries and generational misunderstanding, and redesigned the event in 2024 as "Eyal Odi-Onin," the Festival of Togetherness. With the blessing of the then Obenobhan, His Royal Majesty the late King George Lawson, the inaugural edition exposed the depth of disunity: several villages participated reluctantly, others withheld full engagement out of suspicion, and turnout fell short of expectations. The youth leadership answered with village-to-village dialogue and reconciliatory outreach that appealed to kinship and to the need for a unified clan voice. The third phase is the 2025 edition, in which all twelve communities took part with visible enthusiasm, each contributing masquerades, troupes, dramatic performances and local cuisine. Melfold Adu observed in interview that this edition affirmed "the symbolic message . . . that Emeyal remains one family despite its many villages." The clan remembers it as a breakthrough. The movement from ward-restricted participation, through a reluctant clan-wide first edition, to full attendance is the empirical core of the claim that the festival is an evolving, self-correcting instrument of peacebuilding rather than a static cultural inheritance.

Stakeholder Structure

The festival rests on a layered structure of stakeholders. The Emeyal Youth Wing is the principal driving force, responsible, according to Melfold Adu, for "conceptual planning, programme design, inter-community mobilisation, logistics, and conflict mediation" (oral interview); that last duty makes the wing a peacebuilder as well as an organiser. Traditional authority supplies legitimacy: The Obenobhan gives institutional approval, and the Obhan Council and chiefs act as custodians of tradition, with Nelson Daniel Ademe noting that their involvement "reassures elders and sceptical groups that the festival aligns with Emeyal customs and values" (oral interview). Each community's Obenema mobilises residents so that participation extends beyond youth. Elders supply storytelling and moral guidance; in Okala Precious's words, "elders' contributions provide moral guidance and historical depth that anchor the festival in cultural continuity" (oral interview). Economic stakeholders benefit too: traders, food vendors, artisans and transport operators derive livelihood from the crowds, and Mason Egbo observes that "market stalls, food sales, craft displays, and temporary commercial activities create short-term income opportunities and stimulate micro-economic circulation" (oral interview). The income is modest, but it gives non-benefiting villages a material stake in the festival's success, which the oil payments never did. Families and the wider community are both participants and beneficiaries, sustaining attendance and continuity through communal feasting, children's games and family-oriented amusement.

Performance Elements of the Odi-Onin Festival

The programme integrates performance elements that reinforce one another (Figs. 1 to 6). Masquerade is the most striking: several masquerades appear in organised procession, some enacting ancestral spirits and hunters and others playing comic and satirical roles, moving through choreographed sequences that include interaction with elders and the receiving of offerings. Drumming, singing and musical ensembles supply the sonic architecture, with traditional Ogbia

percussive cycles accompanying masquerade entrances and dance, and vocal narration marking transitions between segments. Dance troupes of youths, elders and specialised dancers dramatise lineage narratives and mark rites of passage while giving inter-village rivalry a structured, non-hostile arena. Youth performance and sport channel energy into constructive expression. Football tournaments, skits, talent showcases and group dances draw large crowds, and inter-village matches serve at once as occasions for reconciliation and for spirited, non-destructive rivalry. Women's performance and communal singing, with intergroup competitions in drumming, dance, drama and storytelling, extend the same competitive-but-cooperative logic. Rutagand observes that such participatory spaces "preserve cultural heritage and promote a sense of community among diverse populations" (15); at Odi-Onin, elders or appointed committees judge the competitions and reward cultural fluency, synchronisation and adherence to tradition rather than mere technical display. Communal meals, prepared from local staples such as fresh fish, cassava and riverine delicacies, symbolise hospitality and reciprocity and perform nutritional, ritual and pedagogical functions at once; they give elders an informal occasion to transmit history and moral instruction, and the accompanying gift exchange reinforces networks of reciprocal obligation across the twelve communities. The photographs carry part of the argument. The Chief Priest's ceremonial entry (Fig. 1) is the visible form of the traditional sanction that Ademe says reassures sceptical elders, and it places the festival inside Emeyal custom before any masquerade appears. The drumming ensemble and dance troupe (Figs. 3 and 4) show the units of competition, each troupe representing one community, so that rivalry is displayed as difference of style within a shared repertoire. The audience image (Fig. 6) records the condition on which the whole argument depends: residents of oil-benefiting and non-benefiting villages standing in a single crowd.

Fig. 1. The Chief Priest's ceremonial entry, signifying traditional authority's sanction of the event.

Fig. 2. Masquerade display, enacting ancestral identity before the assembled Emeyal communities.

Fig. 3. A traditional Ogbia drumming ensemble accompanying masquerade and dance.

Fig. 4. A cultural dance troupe representing one of the clan's twelve communities.

Fig. 5. Ceremonial costume worn during youth performance.

Fig. 6. Audience participation: community members from across the twelve villages in the shared festival ground (see section 6.1).

Source for Figs. 1 to 6: Field photography, Odi-Onin Festival, 2025.

Discussions

Social Interaction, Shared Values and Belonging

The festival ground is a shared physical and symbolic space, a neutral territory where elders, youths, women's associations and diaspora members converge outside village-based social organisation. Edevbie describes such space as liminal, a place where "hierarchical and group distinctions are relaxed, allowing social energy to circulate freely among participants" (115). The formulation fits the Odi-Onin ground closely, since it lets residents of oil-benefiting and non-benefiting villages share one crowd (Fig. 6).

Structured competitions, whether drumming contests, dance face-offs or storytelling exhibitions, require coordination, rehearsal and collective execution, and so convert latent rivalry into cooperative rivalry organised around shared performance rather than resource competition. Feasting and gift exchange add informal, low-stakes occasions for cross-village contact in which

reconciliation proceeds through relaxed sociality rather than formal negotiation alone, an effect consistent with Van der Merwe's claim about communal meals.

The festival also reinforces shared values. Masquerade parades, dance, storytelling and historical reenactment foreground symbols that all twelve communities recognise, and so remind participants of common ancestry rather than of the distinctions that occasioned the festival. Elders' storytelling embeds these values affectively in a setting that, unlike ordinary life, stages the value of unity across village lines, and the participation of diaspora members and returning kin extends belonging across space as well as time. The effect is cumulative: each edition adds to a store of shared experience on which the next can draw, and a village that has performed alongside its neighbours in one year enters the next as a participant in a common event rather than as a guarded visitor.

Impact on Peacebuilding and Community Cohesion

The festival was founded as a direct response to prolonged resource-based conflict, and it functions as a strategic social institution rather than a celebration alone. It redirects antagonistic energy into cooperative expression, in the manner Sabrina Sadeghi describes when she credits festivals with fostering "more positive intercultural relations" (15). Sadeghi writes of intercultural relations, however, and the Emeyal quarrel is intra-clan; the Odi-Onin case suggests that the same mechanism can operate within a single kin group divided by money. Annual recurrence matters: unlike a single agreement or a short dialogue intervention, the yearly cycle ritualises reconciliation, which accords with Onuorah's view that inclusive festivals "help reduce prejudices, heal divisions, and provide opportunities for collaborative community development" (1). The contrast between the reluctant first clan-wide edition and the fully attended second gives the study its clearest evidence of a cumulative, trust-building effect. Repetition itself appears to do much of the cohesive work, which fits Lederach's insistence on sustained investment over decades (81); it also means that two editions cannot establish durability. The evidence is nonetheless suggestive in a particular way. The youth leadership did not treat the reluctant 2024 edition as a failure; it answered with dialogue and outreach, and the 2025 turnout followed that campaign. The festival's effect therefore seems to depend on the organising work around it as much as on the programme itself, which qualifies any reading of the festival as a self-executing ritual. Paffenholz's warning that civil society actors are not automatically peace-promoting applies with the same force: what distinguishes Odi-Onin is that its organisers built reconciliation into its design and pursued it between editions. A further limit follows from the structure of the grievance. Cohesion has a horizontal dimension, the trust and reciprocity among clan members across village lines, and a vertical one, the fairness of the arrangements that govern the relationship between communities and the institutions above them. The evidence gathered here bears almost wholly on the first. The festival brings the twelve communities into one performance, but the payments from operating companies that divided them are settled elsewhere, between individual communities and the companies, and no interview suggests that the festival alters that arrangement. Its achievement is therefore to make the division less corrosive, not to remove its cause, and the reading of the case as peace infrastructure should be held to that more modest claim.

Challenges and Opportunities

Several structural constraints threaten sustainability. Dependence on external funding, elite sponsorship and government support exposes the festival to donor priorities; as Mohammad Sadeghi observes, "external funding pressures often introduce commercial imperatives that may overshadow traditional and social objectives, potentially shifting the festival from a platform for

community cohesion to a commodified spectacle" (23). Political interference is a second: in a region marked by elite rivalry the festival is open to partisan cooptation that would erode its standing as the clan's own event. Youth disengagement is a third, with urban migration, formal education and global entertainment supplying the pressures. Logistical and coordination difficulties, and the gradual erosion of cultural forms under globalised entertainment, complete the festival's structural vulnerabilities. Against these constraints the study identifies several opportunities. Formal integration into local government frameworks on conflict resolution and community development could stabilise funding and shield the festival from episodic interference. Youth ambassador programmes, digital storytelling and multimedia documentation could address generational disengagement and extend the festival's reach beyond Emeyal territory. Collaboration with universities and peacebuilding organisations could supply evaluation capacity, and training in festival management and conflict sensitivity would reduce dependence on external actors. Professional capacity-building for organisers would let local stakeholders lead the festival with greater autonomy and resilience, reducing reliance on outsiders whose priorities may not match communal peacebuilding goals. Finally, the festival's economic and tourism potential should be approached with calibration: revenue is best treated as a secondary benefit and not as the organising logic, since it can supply material support for continuity without displacing the founding purpose. That balance is one the organisers would need to maintain deliberately, and Mohammad Sadeghi's warning about commodified spectacle indicates what is lost if they do not.

Reading the Findings against the Theoretical Framework

The three frameworks explain more together than any one does alone. The manifest programme of masquerade, dance, sport and feasting corresponds to the Structural Functionalist register, while the latent function of conflict mediation is what oral sources describe when they call the second edition a "breakthrough moment" in inter-village relations rather than a well-attended party. Meaning, however, is not simply imposed by structure. As Symbolic Interactionism insists, participants negotiate it each year through choices about which masquerade to field, which dance to stage and how enthusiastically to take part, and the shift from reluctant to enthusiastic participation between the two clan-wide editions is itself a collectively performed statement of renewed commitment. The Communitarian register supplies the normative undertone: organisers and elders frame participation as an obligation owed to the clan, which helps explain why continued outreach and dialogue, and not repetition of the programme alone, were needed to move communities from reluctance to enthusiasm. The peacebuilding effect arises from the interaction of structural function, symbolic performance and moral obligation, and the study's trajectory from fractured beginnings towards clan-wide embrace is intelligible only when all three are held in view.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The evidence from oral interview and participant observation supports the conclusion that the Odi-Onin Festival is a strategic social institution and not merely a celebration. Its masquerade, dance, oral narration, competition and feasting engage the whole clan and suspend, at least temporarily, the divisions rooted in unequal oil benefits, creating conditions favourable to reconciliation and the rebuilding of trust. Its movement from a partially attended, ward-restricted celebration to a fully embraced clan-wide institution supports the theoretical claim, advanced through the combined framework, that festivals can be deliberate, self-correcting instruments of peacebuilding rather than static cultural inheritance. The word temporarily carries weight, however: a festival can

suspend a grievance without altering the distribution that produced it, and whether Odi-Onin can outlast a fresh dispute over oil benefits is a question that two clan-wide editions cannot answer.

The recommendations below also pull against one another. Formal recognition by local government would stabilise funding, yet section 6.3 identified political interference as a standing threat, and the integration that protects the festival from neglect could expose it to the partisan cooptation described above. Organisers will need to secure institutional support without ceding the festival's ownership by the clan, since ownership is what made the 2025 edition legible to the twelve communities as their own event. Its continued effectiveness is not guaranteed. Financial dependency, political interference, youth disengagement and commercialisation are genuine threats to its long-term sustainability as a peacebuilding institution, and the study accordingly offers five recommendations. Organisers and cultural custodians should formally document and safeguard the core performance elements, including masquerade traditions, dance forms and oral narratives, to secure their continuity and authenticity. They should expand participatory activities and inclusive planning meetings across the twelve communities, and build in youth involvement, mentorship and intergenerational dialogue so that shared values are sustained across age groups and generational disengagement is forestalled. Local government authorities and community leaders should formally recognise the festival as a cultural peacebuilding institution and integrate it into community development and conflict-resolution strategies in Ogbia Local Government Area. Sustainable funding models, transparent governance structures, youth-centred initiatives and strategic partnerships with cultural and peacebuilding organisations should be developed to meet the structural challenges identified above and to secure the festival's long-term contribution to peace and cohesion. The study documents an event with no prior sustained academic attention and preserves knowledge transmitted mainly through oral tradition. Longitudinal study of later editions should test whether the gains of 2025 endure, and comparison with other recently instituted, resource-conflict-responsive festivals in the Niger Delta would show whether the mechanisms identified here generalise beyond the Emeyal clan.

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