

# Igue 1965: Celebration Of The Head

By Dave Sugarman (10) 64–66

Art Matthews (10) 64–66 and I shared several unique incidents and experiences together, but one stands out as special.



Members of a chief's family accompany him to the festival.

Photo: Dave Sugarman

During the Benin Igue festival, one of Art's students from Otwa, invited us to join his family for the festival. They were a royal family, and so engaged a priest to conduct their 'celebration of the head'. About 20 family members, young and old, and Art and I gathered in a 10'x15' room lighted only by a tinned milk can kerosene lamp. The hour long ceremony began with the oldest female beginning to lead the group in chanting the family name.

Obongwanye.....Obongwanye.....Obongwanye.

Throughout the evening, the chant continued. Sometimes slow, sometimes faster, occasionally softly, and then swelling and loud. Amidst the chanting, the priest began to offer blessings and provide offerings and sacrifices to family members and especially the 'heads' in attendance. As I remember so vividly, his first ceremonial was to approach each

member of the circle, and place a spot of chalk on the forehead and chant his cant as he progressed.

I was about halfway around the circle, and when he came to me he hesitated slightly and passed to the person on my right. This happened to be the student who had invited us. There was a quick exchange of words, the priest retraced his steps, and with a large smile administered my very own chalk and blessing. From that point on, I was part of the family celebration, chanting Obongwanye.....Obongwanye....., and received my anointment of coconut milk and a drop of the blood of the guinea fowl sacrifice, like the others. We then shared broken kola, coconut, and a shot of kia kia (palm wine gin), congratulated each other and left into the city streets teeming with others moving from celebration to celebration. We joined a large family group of 50 or more, but it was a raucous, loud affair, nothing like the intimate celebration of family we had just left. The next morning, children running from house to house blessed us with a bit of leaf stuck to our foreheads as we 'dashed them small', and then ran on. We also joined other Benin PCVs at the Oba of Benin's public ceremony, which in part honored him as the 'head' of all of Benin.



One of the many chiefs approaching the Oba's compound.

Photo: Andy Philpot

The culmination of the small family group ceremony was also performed that next morning. We returned to the home and were offered pounded yam and stew made from the guinea fowl of the previous evening. It wasn't till after we left and I had taken two large helpings that I realized that all of the family members who had celebrated together were to partake of the blessing meal. This wasn't the first or last time that ignorance of culture and custom resulted in my seeming insensitivity.

On further reflection, I have a strong feeling for what we experienced. It was a celebration in

some ways similar to the family Thanksgivings my family has always practiced. It also had many of the elements that the Jews incorporate in their Passover celebration. In the past few years a friend and his family included me and my family in their family traditional Passover commemoration, and it was very reminiscent of the experience on that night long ago in that faraway place of Nigeria.

The celebration of family, the inclusion of outsiders, the symbolic foods, and the feeling of closeness were universal.

I will never forget Obongwanye.....Obongwanye.....Obongwanye. •