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The Role of Cultural Festival in Economic Development: A Historical Examination of The Olojo Festival in Ile-Ife, Osun State:1999-2024

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Abstract

This study investigates the economic impact of the Olojo Festival in Ile-Ife from 1990 to 2024, with a focus on its historical evolution and transformation under the reigns of Oba Okunade Sijuwade and Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi. Drawing from qualitative method approach through the use of interview, the research explores the intersection of cultural heritage, economic development, and leadership. The Olojo Festival, deeply rooted in Yoruba spirituality and mythology, has gradually become a major economic driver for the people of Ile-Ife through tourism, trade, and increased local investment. The Aare Crown, symbolic costumes, rituals, and performative elements contribute not only to cultural preservation but also to commercial activities that benefit artisans, traders, and service providers. Findings reveal that while the festival maintains its sacred significance, its growing economic role has been shaped by leadership styles, community participation, and global awareness. The study concludes that indigenous festivals like Olojo can be harnessed for sustainable development when carefully balanced between tradition and innovation. It provides empirical insights into how cultural heritage can serve as a foundation for economic empowerment in contemporary African societies.

Keywords:

Olojo Festival, Ile-Ife, Yoruba Culture, Economic Impact, Cultural Tourism

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The Olojo Festival, celebrated annually in Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria, is one of the most significant traditional festivals of the Yoruba people, dedicated to Ogun, the god of iron. Rooted in deep spiritual and ancestral reverence, the festival transcends religious observance and has evolved into a cultural and economic event of notable magnitude. The Ooni of Ife, who is the spiritual head of the Yoruba people, plays a central role in the celebration, highlighting the fusion of monarchy, religion, and cultural preservation. Since the reign of Oba Okunade Sijuwade (1980–2015), through to Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi (2015–present), the Olojo Festival has grown significantly in scope and influence, attracting tourists, stimulating local commerce, and reinforcing cultural identity (Adewale, 2020).

Economically, the Olojo Festival contributes to the local and regional economy by promoting cultural tourism, increasing commercial activities, and generating

temporary employment opportunities. Hotels, transportation services, vendors, and artisans benefit immensely from the influx of both domestic and international visitors during the festival period. In recent years, particularly under the leadership of Ooni Ogunwusi, there has been an intentional rebranding and modernization of the festival to appeal to a broader audience and attract investment (Akanji, 2023). This strategic cultural diplomacy has positioned the Olojo Festival as not only a religious and cultural affair but also as a driver of economic development within Ile-Ife and beyond.

Historically, the economic significance of the festival was relatively localized, often focused on agricultural exchange and communal celebration. However, from the 1990s onward, especially with the increased involvement of governmental and non-governmental organizations in cultural promotion, the Olojo Festival became a platform for showcasing Yoruba heritage to the world. According to Fadipe (2022), the reign of Oba Sijuwade marked the festival's transition into a regional tourism asset, while the current Ooni has leveraged digital media and partnerships with cultural institutions to globalize its appeal. These efforts have translated into revenue generation through cultural merchandise, event sponsorships, and heritage tourism, which directly and indirectly benefit the local economy.

Moreover, the festival plays a symbolic role in the historical reconstruction of Yoruba civilization. It reinforces Ile-Ife's status as the ancestral homeland of the Yoruba, thereby consolidating political and cultural legitimacy for the reigning Ooni. This political and spiritual prominence draws attention from government agencies and international observers, prompting infrastructural developments in preparation for each year's event. Such investments ranging from road rehabilitation to the beautification of heritage sites further stimulate economic activities and job creation within the local community (Olaniyan, 2021). These dynamics reveal how cultural heritage, when properly leveraged, becomes a viable tool for sustainable economic advancement.

Therefore, this study seeks to examine the economic impact of the Olojo Festival from 1990 to 2024, analysing its transformation over different reigns and the factors influencing its growing economic significance. The research aims to explore how cultural institutions, leadership, globalization, and policy decisions have collectively shaped the festival's economic relevance. It will also evaluate the long-term benefits and challenges associated with using traditional festivals as tools for economic development. In doing so, the study not only enriches discourse on Yoruba history and culture but also provides empirical evidence on the potential of indigenous festivals in driving local economic sustainability.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing recognition of cultural festivals as instruments of tourism and local economic development, the Olojo Festival in Ile-Ife has not been sufficiently examined from a longitudinal historical-economic perspective, particularly within the context of its transformation between 1990 and 2024. While existing scholarship has explored Yoruba festivals largely through religious, performative, and cultural lenses, studies such as those by Adewale (2020) and Adedeji (2002) emphasize their roles in cultural preservation and identity formation, whereas Adekunle and Ismaila (2020) and Okonkwo (2018) focus more broadly on the economic potential of festivals like Osun-Osogbo in relation to tourism, hospitality, and employment generation. Similarly, Fadipe (2022) and Olaniyan (2021) provide important historical insights into the evolution of the Olojo Festival, particularly during the reign of Oba Okunade Sijuwade and its increasing visibility under Oba Adeyeye Ogunwusi, yet their analyses do not offer a structured or measurable assessment of its sustained economic impact over time. This reveals a critical gap in literature, as most studies either generalize the economic value of cultural festivals or isolate their cultural and spiritual significance without linking them systematically to historical leadership transitions and concrete local economic outcomes. This study therefore addresses this gap by providing a historical-economic examination of the Olojo Festival from 1990 to 2024, analysing how successive reigns, globalization, and cultural rebranding strategies have shaped its contribution to tourism, employment, commerce, and infrastructural development in Ile-Ife, thereby offering a more integrated and empirically grounded understanding of its role in local economic development.

1.3 Research Questions

- i. How has the Olojo Festival contributed to the economic development of Ile-Ife between 1990 and 2024?
- ii. In what ways have the reigns of Oba Okunade Sijuwade and Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi influenced the transformation and economic significance of the Olojo Festival?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for its unique historical and economic analysis of the Olojo Festival from 1990 to 2024, setting it apart from previous research that primarily focused on its religious, cultural, or theatrical dimensions. It aims to investigate how different reigns, particularly those of Oba Okunade Sijuwade and Oba Adeyeye Ogunwusi, have influenced the festival's transformation into a platform for economic development. The expected outcome is to reveal how the Olojo Festival contributes to tourism, local commerce, employment generation, and cultural diplomacy. By combining historical depth with economic insight, the study offers a fresh, multidisciplinary perspective on the festival's evolving relevance in contemporary Nigeria, highlighting its potential as a model for leveraging cultural heritage for sustainable development.

2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Evolution and Socioeconomic Impact of the Olojo Festival

Scholarly literature on the Olojo Festival largely converges on its central role in Yoruba cultural preservation, spiritual identity, and historical continuity. Adebayo (2021) and related cultural scholars argue that the festival functions as a living archive of Yoruba civilization, preserving oral traditions, indigenous cosmology, and sacred rituals that reinforce collective identity. From this perspective, Olojo is not merely a religious celebration but a symbolic reconstruction of Yoruba worldview and ancestral memory. However, despite this strong cultural and anthropological focus, there is a clear limitation in how these studies prioritize spiritual and performative dimensions while largely neglecting the socioeconomic implications of the festival. This creates a conceptual imbalance in the literature, where cultural meaning is richly explored, but economic functionality remains under-theorized.

In contrast, a second strand of scholarship shifts attention toward the economic relevance of traditional festivals in Nigeria. Studies such as Adekunle and Ismaila (2020) and Adedeji (2002) argue that festivals like Osun-Osogbo and other Yoruba cultural events contribute significantly to tourism development, employment generation, and informal sector growth. These scholars maintain that cultural festivals function as economic ecosystems that support hospitality businesses, artisans, transport operators, and traders. Ogunba (2005) further strengthens this argument by positioning festivals as potential tools for sustainable local economic development when strategically managed. However, a key contradiction emerges in the literature: while economic scholars emphasize commercialization and development potential, cultural purists like Adebayo (2021) caution that excessive economic framing risks undermining the sacred and spiritual essence of traditional festivals. This tension reflects an ongoing debate between cultural preservation and economic utilitarianism in festival studies.

A further dimension of the literature focuses on historical evolution and leadership influence, particularly the role of traditional rulers in transforming the Olojo Festival. Fadipe (2022) provides a critical historical account of how the festival evolved from a sacred rite into a public cultural and political event, linking major transformations to the reign of Oba Okunade Sijuwade and the global expansion efforts of the current Ooni. Okonkwo (2018) supports this view by arguing that royal endorsement is crucial in enhancing visibility, funding, and public participation in Yoruba festivals. Across these studies, there is agreement that leadership plays a decisive role in shaping festival relevance; however, there is limited longitudinal analysis of how successive reigns collectively influence both economic restructuring and cultural redefinition. Consequently, existing literature remains fragmented, with insufficient integration of cultural, economic, and leadership perspectives in explaining the full transformation of the Olojo Festival over time.

2.2 Economic Implications of Indigenous Festivals in Nigeria

Scholarly discourse on Yoruba cultural festivals, particularly the Olojo Festival, generally agrees that such events are central to the preservation of cultural identity, historical memory, and spiritual heritage. Adebayo (2021) and Fadipe (2022) both emphasize that the Olojo Festival functions as a symbolic reconstruction of Yoruba cosmology, reinforcing oral traditions and indigenous belief systems. Similarly, Okonkwo (2018) and Ogunba (2005) argue that traditional festivals serve as instruments of cultural continuity and social cohesion, particularly through the legitimizing role of

traditional rulers. However, while there is broad agreement on the cultural and historical significance of festivals, scholars diverge on the extent to which these events should be interpreted as economic instruments. For instance, Adekunle and Ismaila (2020) strongly position festivals like Osun-Osogbo as economic drivers of tourism, income generation, and employment, whereas Adebayo (2021) and other cultural anthropologists caution against overemphasizing economic interpretations at the expense of spiritual authenticity. This creates a central debate in the literature between cultural preservationists and cultural economists: whether festivals should primarily be understood as sacred heritage practices or as tools for economic development.

Another dominant idea in the literature is the increasing recognition of cultural festivals as vehicles for sustainable development through tourism and local enterprise stimulation. Studies such as Adedeji (2002) and Ogunba (2005) support the view that festivals generate economic opportunities for artisans, traders, and hospitality businesses, thereby integrating indigenous culture into modern development frameworks. In contrast, some scholars identify contradictions in this optimistic narrative, arguing that the commercialization of festivals risks distorting their original cultural meanings. Fadipe (2022) highlights that while modernization under traditional rulers like Oba Okunade Sijuwade enhanced visibility and political relevance, it also marked the beginning of festival commodification. This tension continues under Oba Adeyeye Ogunwusi, whose global branding efforts have expanded tourism appeal but raised concerns about cultural dilution. Thus, while there is agreement that leadership plays a crucial role in festival transformation (Okonkwo, 2018), there is disagreement on whether such transformation strengthens or weakens cultural authenticity.

Despite the growing body of literature, a key gap remains in how scholars treat the Olojo Festival as a dynamic economic system over time. Most studies tend to focus on either its cultural-religious significance (Adebayo, 2021) or its tourism potential in isolation (Adekunle & Ismaila, 2020), with limited integration of both perspectives across historical periods. Furthermore, little attention has been given to longitudinal analysis of how successive Ooni reigns have jointly reshaped both the economic structure and global positioning of the festival. This study addresses this gap by examining the interplay between cultural heritage preservation and economic transformation between 1990 and 2024, particularly under the leadership transitions from Oba Okunade Sijuwade to Oba Adeyeye Ogunwusi. It therefore contributes to bridging the divide between cultural anthropology and tourism economics in festival studies.

2.2 Theoretical Framework:

2.2.1 Cultural Commodification Theory and Cultural Tourism Development Theory

This study is anchored on the **Cultural Commodification Theory** and the **Cultural Tourism Development Theory**, which collectively explain how indigenous cultural practices are transformed into economic and tourism assets over time. Cultural Commodification Theory, as advanced by MacCannell (1976) and further developed by Cohen (1988), explains the process through which cultural symbols, rituals, and traditions are converted into marketable products for external consumption, particularly within tourism economies. The theory argues that while commodification increases visibility and economic value, it often raises concerns about authenticity, sacredness, and cultural distortion. In the context of festivals, it highlights the tension between preserving cultural meaning and adapting traditions for tourism consumption. Similarly, Cultural Tourism Development Theory emphasizes the role of cultural heritage as a strategic resource for economic development, job creation, and destination branding (Richards, 2018). It posits that cultural assets such as festivals can be leveraged to attract tourists, stimulate local economies, and promote sustainable development when properly managed.

Relating these theories to the study, the Olojo Festival serves as a clear example of how cultural heritage is simultaneously preserved and transformed into an economic instrument. The Cultural Commodification Theory helps explain the increasing commercialization and global visibility of the festival, especially under modern leadership, where sacred rituals are increasingly presented to tourists and global audiences. On the other hand, Cultural Tourism Development Theory supports the argument that this transformation has generated economic benefits such as tourism inflow, employment opportunities, and local enterprise growth in Ile-Ife. The combination of both theories is relevant because it allows the study to critically examine the dual nature of the festival as both a sacred cultural institution and a modern economic resource. This theoretical integration is particularly important for understanding how successive

reigns of traditional rulers have influenced the festival's evolution between 1990 and 2024, balancing cultural preservation with economic expansion (MacCannell, 1976; Cohen, 1988; Richards, 2018).

2.3 Gap in Literature

Although a number of scholars have examined the religious, performative, and cultural dimensions of the Olojo Festival, most of these studies focus primarily on its symbolic and spiritual significance within Yoruba society. Works by Olaniyan (2021), Ogunba (2005), and Adedeji (2002) underscore the festival's role in reinforcing communal identity, cultural preservation, and traditional authority, but they fall short of analysing the festival's measurable contributions to local economic development, tourism, and commerce. Similarly, while other studies on Yoruba festivals in general touch on economic potential, they rarely isolate the Olojo Festival for detailed analysis over time.

This study addresses these gaps by offering a historical-economic analysis of the Olojo Festival from 1990 to 2024, assessing how different reigns, particularly those of Oba Okunade Sijuwade and Oba Adeyeye Ogunwusi, have influenced its transformation into an economic asset. Unlike prior research, this work investigates how the festival contributes to job creation, small business growth, tourism inflow, and infrastructural development in Ile-Ife. By combining historical narratives with economic insights, the study provides a fresh interdisciplinary perspective that links cultural heritage with sustainable local development.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the historical evolution and economic impact of the Olojo Festival in Ile-Ife between 1990 and 2024. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of cultural practices, historical experiences, and economic changes associated with the festival over time, particularly from the perspectives of those directly involved in its organisation and preservation.

Data were collected primarily through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which enabled respondents to provide detailed narratives while allowing the researcher flexibility to probe further on key issues such as economic benefits, leadership influence, tourism development, and cultural transformation. The interviews focused on how the festival has evolved under different reigns, especially those of Oba Okunade Sijuwade and Oba Adeyeye Ogunwusi.

The population of the study includes traditional leaders and the palace chiefs in Ile-Ife with relevant knowledge of the Olojo Festival. Using purposive sampling, two key informants were selected: Chief Gbenga Bamiloye and Oloye Bamidele Odesanmi, due to their active involvement and long-standing experience in festival activities and administration.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face within the Ooni's Palace in Ile-Ife, recorded with permission, and supported with field notes. The data obtained were analysed using thematic analysis, where responses were transcribed, coded, and grouped into themes such as economic impact, cultural tourism, leadership influence, and commercialization of the festival.

To ensure credibility, findings were cross-checked with existing literature on Yoruba festivals and historical accounts. Ethical considerations were observed through informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation of respondents.

4.0 RESULTS/DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Brief Facts About Ile-Ife

Ile-Ife, often regarded as the cradle of the Yoruba civilization, holds a significant place in history due to its mythological and cultural heritage. In the work of Adedeji, Yoruba religious beliefs, Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yoruba people, played a crucial role in the creation of the earth, taking over from his elder brother Obatala, who was incapacitated by intoxication.¹² This act not only established Oduduwa as the father of the first Yoruba king but also marked Ile-Ife as the sacred land of origin, often referred to as "The Land of Expansion" due to its historical significance.

Additionally, Ile-Ife is central to the annual Olojo Festival, which honors Ogun, the god of iron, and Oranmiyan, a warrior prince who later established the Oyo and Benin Kingdoms. The festival, deeply rooted in Yoruba traditions, showcases

symbolic colors and rituals that reinforce the mythological connection between Oduduwa, Ogun, and Oranmiyan (Adekule and Ismaila, 2020). The significance of Ile-Ife extends beyond mythology; it continues to serve as a religious and cultural hub, preserving ancient Yoruba traditions that emphasize lineage, honor, and communal identity.

4.2 Geography and Location Description of Ile Ife

Ile Ife, often regarded as the cradle of Yoruba civilization, is located in the present-day Osun State in southwestern Nigeria. Geographically, the town lies approximately between latitude 7°28'N and longitude 4°34'E, nestled within a tropical rainforest zone characterized by fertile soils, moderate rainfall, and a humid climate. Bounded by Modakeke to the northeast and Ilesa to the east, Ile Ife sits about 218 kilometers northeast of Lagos and 75 kilometers southeast of Ibadan. The terrain is a mix of rolling hills and low-lying plains, with notable natural features such as the Opa River and the surrounding dense vegetation that has historically supported agriculture and settlement. As a historical and cultural epicenter of the Yoruba people, Ile Ife is not only geographically significant but also spiritually revered as the mythological origin of humanity according to Yoruba cosmology.



Map of Osun State, Nigeria showing Ile Ife. Source: Cambridge University Press & Assessment

5.1 History of Olojo Festival

The **Olojo Festival** is one of the most significant cultural and spiritual celebrations in **Ile-Ife, Nigeria**, deeply rooted in the traditions of the **Yoruba people**. The name "**Olojo**" means "**Owner of the Day**", signifying a sacred day when the **Ooni of Ife**, the spiritual and political leader of the Ife people, connects directly with the gods and ancestors. This festival is dedicated to **Ogun**, the deity of iron, war, and path-making, who is believed to have played a crucial role in Yoruba mythology by clearing the way for other deities. According to Adekunle, the festival dates back to the reign of **Oranmiyan**, the son of **Oduduwa**, the progenitor of the Yoruba race. Oranmiyan, a great warrior, is credited with instituting the Olojo Festival as a way to honour Ogun and seek divine blessings for his people. To Adekunle, the festival serves as a reminder of the Yoruba people's rich history, emphasizing the significance of traditional worship and community unity. Scholars argue that such festivals create communal solidarity and provide a sense of belonging by setting aside specific times for cultural renewal and spiritual rejuvenation (Akanji, 2023).



One of the most revered aspects of the Olojo Festival is the **Aare Crown**, a sacred and mystical artifact worn only once a year by the Ooni of Ife. This crown, believed to possess spiritual powers, is made of ancient materials, including beads said to have been handed down from the deities. The Ooni, during the festival, undergoes spiritual purification and retreats for **three days of seclusion**, during which he communes with the gods and ancestors. Upon re-emerging, he leads a **grand procession**, blessing the people and the land while wearing the powerful Aare Crown. The festival is also marked by **rituals, sacrifices, prayers, traditional music, drumming, and cultural performances**, bringing together thousands of Yoruba descendants from across the world (Akanji, 2023).

The Olojo Festival is not only a religious event but also an important **tourist attraction**, reinforcing the **historical and cultural identity of the Yoruba people**. As Matheson notes, festivals like Olojo “encapsulate identity, in terms of the nation-state, a sense of place, and the heterogeneous identities of people.” This annual event continues to serve as a powerful expression of Yoruba heritage, reinforcing traditional leadership and spirituality in a rapidly modernizing world (Olaniyan, 2021).

5.1 The Olojo Festival during the Reign of Late King Okunade Sijuwade

The reign of the late Ooni of Ife, Oba Okunade Sijuwade Olubuse II (1980–2015), marked a period of cultural revitalization and economic enhancement for Ile-Ife, especially through the Olojo Festival. According to the oral interviews conducted with Chief Gbenga Bamiloye and Oloye Bamidele Odesanmi, the Olojo Festival during this era transcended its ritualistic relevance and became a potent economic instrument that revitalized the ancient city (Olaniyan, 2021). The king’s close ties with global institutions, diplomats, and Yoruba descendants abroad significantly elevated the international profile of the festival. Local hotels, artisans, traders, and transport operators witnessed a surge in patronage every September as thousands of visitors, including foreigners, flooded the city. Chief Bamiloye stated, “During the reign of Oba Sijuwade, Olojo became a global event; it was no longer just for Ife people but for the entire Yoruba race.”

Economically, the late Ooni’s reign saw the strategic packaging of the Olojo Festival to attract both local and international sponsorship. Historical records and eyewitness accounts confirm that the palace under Oba Sijuwade coordinated with local chambers of commerce and media outlets to promote the festival as a commercial venture.

The introduction of side attractions like cultural exhibitions, traditional fashion displays, and market fairs created new economic channels for local entrepreneurs. According to Oloye Bamidele Odesanmi, "We began to see local farmers, weavers, and hunters gain financial rewards during the festival because the king believed culture must feed the people." The economic inclusion extended to hospitality businesses as room bookings, food sales, and transport fares spiked during the festival window, injecting considerable income into the Ile-Ife economy (Olaniyan, 2021).

Historically, the Olojo Festival had always played a spiritual and social role, but during the late king's reign, it became economically institutionalized. Oba Sijuwade's use of modern media and diplomacy repositioned the event from a sacred ritual to a symbol of cultural diplomacy and economic awakening. The crown prince's arrival, the Aare crown procession, and the final royal blessing of the people were deliberately organized to attract public interest and tourism. This commercialization did not dilute the spiritual essence but instead created a dual experience: sacred observance and economic participation. As Chief Bamiloye affirmed, "Kabiyesi turned Olojo into a blessing for both soul and stomach." Thus, under the leadership of Oba Sijuwade, the Olojo Festival became a sustainable source of income for the people of Ile-Ife and an enduring cultural asset that fused economic development with heritage preservation (Bamiloye, 2025).

5.2 The Olojo Festival during the Reign of Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi

Since the ascension of Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi Ojaja II in 2015, the Olojo Festival has experienced unprecedented modernization, deeper global visibility, and strategic economic integration. According to Chief Gbenga Bamiloye in the interview, "Ooni Ogunwusi brought new energy to the Olojo Festival, using social media and digital platforms to make the world see what we have in Ile-Ife." His reign introduced live broadcasts of the Aare crown procession and online streaming of the rituals, thereby extending the festival's reach to the global Yoruba diaspora and international cultural tourists (Bamiloye, 2025). This digital expansion attracted thousands of physical visitors annually and translated into increased spending in transportation, accommodation, food services, and souvenirs within the local economy. His Majesty's partnership with the Osun State government and private investors further positioned the Olojo Festival as a tool for tourism and rural development.

From an economic standpoint, the reign of Oba Ogunwusi has redefined how cultural heritage can be a source of sustainable livelihood. According to Oloye Bamidele Odesanmi, "The Ooni's reign turned the Olojo Festival into an economic calendar for many Ife people. Everyone from tailors to herbalists gets business during the period." Artisans are commissioned to produce traditional costumes, while food vendors and performers enjoy high demand for their services (Bamidele, 2025). Moreover, the king's advocacy for youth inclusion in cultural enterprises has led to the emergence of heritage-based startups that sell locally made crafts, fashion, and music. The weeklong festivities now serve as a market hub for traders across Yorubaland, with thousands of transactions taking place informally during the celebration, contributing significantly to local revenue generation and employment.

Historically, Olojo has always been a sacred Yoruba festival, but under Oba Ogunwusi, it is strategically framed as a vehicle for cultural economy. His embrace of performance theory and emphasis on theatrical display especially through the mystical symbolism of the Aare crown has drawn more global attention to the festival as a living museum of Yoruba heritage. The festival, typically held around the third week of September, now attracts dignitaries, international media, and academic researchers. According to Chief Bamiloye, "The king wears the 50kg Aare crown with ease because rituals make it light, but as soon as he returns to the palace, it begins to weigh on him again. That mystery pulls people in from around the world." This aura of mysticism, combined with commerce, has elevated the festival beyond its religious roots to become a vibrant platform for economic empowerment and cultural diplomacy under the leadership of Oba Ogunwusi (Bamidele, 2025).

5.3 Economic Impact through Tourism and Local Commerce

The findings from this study indicate that the Olojo Festival functions as a major catalyst for local economic stimulation in Ile-Ife through tourism-driven commerce. Participants in the study consistently emphasized that the festival period transforms the city into a temporary economic hub, attracting domestic and international visitors. According to Chief Gbenga Bamiloye, the influx of tourists significantly increases demand for hospitality services, transportation, food vending, and cultural merchandise, creating a "seasonal economic boom that benefits almost every informal business

sector in Ile-Ife" (Bamiloye, 2025). This aligns with the observation that cultural festivals often generate short-term but intensive economic circulation within host communities.

The study further reveals that this economic impact is not limited to large businesses but extends deeply into grassroots livelihoods. Local artisans, tailors, food sellers, drummers, and masquerade performers experience heightened demand during the festival period, making it a critical source of annual income for many households. This finding corroborates Adedayo et al. (2024), who argue that the Olojo Festival contributes significantly to domestic tourism development and informal sector growth by stimulating microeconomic activities around hospitality and cultural services. Similarly, Fáféye (2021) observes that Yoruba festivals increasingly serve as economic platforms that sustain local enterprise and encourage cultural entrepreneurship.

However, the economic benefits are not evenly distributed, as some respondents noted that larger commercial actors tend to capture a disproportionate share of festival-related income. Despite this limitation, the overall evidence suggests that the festival remains an important redistributive economic mechanism within the community. This supports broader scholarly arguments that African cultural festivals, when strategically organized, function as "engines of local economic integration and rural development" (Ismaila & Awe, 2025). Therefore, the Olojo Festival represents both a cultural heritage event and a functional economic system embedded in Ile-Ife's informal economy.

5.4 Cultural Prestige and Long-Term Economic Development

The findings also demonstrate that the Olojo Festival contributes significantly to the enhancement of Ile-Ife's cultural prestige, which in turn produces long-term economic implications. Respondent Oloye Bamidele Odesanmi emphasized that the festival strengthens Ile-Ife's symbolic identity as the spiritual origin of the Yoruba people, thereby positioning it as a global cultural tourism destination (Odesanmi, 2025). This symbolic positioning attracts government attention, cultural institutions, and private investors interested in heritage tourism and cultural preservation projects.

This enhanced visibility has led to infrastructural and institutional developments, including improvements in heritage sites, tourism facilities, and cultural documentation initiatives. Odesanmi (2025) further notes that the festival has become a "gateway for cultural diplomacy and international recognition," which has encouraged partnerships aimed at preserving Yoruba heritage. These findings are consistent with Adedayo et al. (2024), who report that the Olojo Festival contributes to tourism development, job creation, and community development through its symbolic and economic value.

Scholarly literature also supports this long-term developmental role of festivals. Fáféye (2021) and related studies on Yoruba cultural events argue that festivals increasingly function as tools for cultural branding and regional economic positioning. Similarly, Asifat et al. (2025) observe that festivals such as Osun Osogbo demonstrate how cultural prestige translates into sustained economic development through tourism inflow and heritage investment. Thus, the findings of this study confirm that Olojo Festival is not only a short-term economic event but also a long-term developmental asset.

5.5 Leadership Influence and Festival Transformation under Oba Ogunwusi

The data reveals that leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the economic and cultural direction of the Olojo Festival. Under the reign of Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi, the festival has undergone significant modernization, particularly in terms of global visibility and media engagement. According to Oloye Bamidele Odesanmi, the Ooni has "redefined the festival through strategic visibility, digital outreach, and global cultural engagement" (Odesanmi, 2025). This leadership-driven transformation has expanded the festival's audience beyond traditional participants to international spectators.

This modernization has introduced a dual impact. On one hand, it has increased tourism inflow, sponsorship opportunities, and international recognition of Ile-Ife as a cultural hub. On the other hand, some cultural custodians expressed concern that increased commercialization may dilute sacred traditional elements of the festival. This

ension reflects broader academic debates on cultural commodification, where traditional practices are reshaped to fit global tourism demands (Fáféye, 2021). Nevertheless, the leadership intervention has undeniably repositioned the festival within global cultural circuits.

Furthermore, scholarly studies suggest that such leadership-driven transformation is a common feature of evolving African festivals. Adedayo et al. (2024) argue that modernization efforts often enhance visibility and economic returns but must be carefully managed to avoid cultural distortion. In this context, the Olojo Festival represents a hybrid cultural economy where tradition and modernity coexist, shaped largely by the strategic decisions of traditional leadership.

5.6 Digital Transformation and Global Visibility

Findings from the study reveal that digital innovation has significantly expanded the reach and economic relevance of the Olojo Festival. Through social media streaming, online broadcasts, and digital storytelling platforms, the festival has gained visibility among global audiences, particularly the Yoruba diaspora. Odesanmi (2025) explains that digital engagement has transformed the festival into a “globally accessible cultural experience,” enabling virtual participation and increased interest in physical tourism visits.

This digital expansion has created what can be described as “digital cultural tourism,” where online exposure stimulates real-world economic activity. Many diaspora viewers reportedly develop interest in visiting Ile-Ife after engaging with digital content showcasing festival activities. This finding aligns with Asifat et al. (2025), who observe that digital media plays a critical role in expanding tourism-driven economies by increasing global awareness of cultural events. Similarly, Ismaila and Awe (2025) argue that technological integration in cultural festivals enhances both preservation and economic exploitation of heritage resources.

However, the study also identifies challenges associated with digital transformation, including uneven access to technology among local participants and concerns about over-commercialized online representations of sacred rituals. Despite these challenges, the evidence suggests that digital innovation has significantly enhanced the global competitiveness of the Olojo Festival. Therefore, digitalization is not only a communication tool but also an economic strategy that strengthens cultural tourism development.

5.7 Socioeconomic Inclusion and Community Empowerment

The findings indicate that the Olojo Festival plays a critical role in promoting socioeconomic inclusion within Ile-Ife. The festival provides employment opportunities for diverse groups, including youth, artisans, traders, and cultural performers. According to Chief Gbenga Bamiloye, “the festival ensures that virtually every household participates economically in one form or another during the celebration period” (Bamiloye, 2025). This highlights the festival’s role as a grassroots economic empowerment platform.

The study further reveals that youth participation in festival-related activities is increasing, particularly in areas such as cultural performance, event management, and tourism services. This aligns with Adedayo et al. (2024), who note that cultural festivals serve as informal training grounds for entrepreneurship and skills development. Similarly, Fáféye (2021) emphasizes that Yoruba festivals contribute to intergenerational knowledge transfer and cultural workforce development.

Nevertheless, some structural inequalities persist, particularly in terms of access to capital and visibility for smaller vendors. Despite these challenges, the overall evidence suggests that the festival enhances community cohesion and reduces economic exclusion during the festival period. This supports broader literature that positions cultural festivals as instruments of inclusive development in African societies (Ismaila & Awe, 2025).

6.0 Result of Research Questions

6.1 Research Question One: Economic Contribution of Olojo Festival (1990–2024)

The findings reveal that the Olojo Festival has made substantial contributions to the economic development of Ile-Ife between 1990 and 2024 through tourism inflows, expansion of informal businesses, and stimulation of local commerce. Respondents, particularly Chief Gbenga Bamiloye, emphasized that the festival period consistently transforms Ile-Ife into a commercial hub where hospitality services, transportation, food vending, and cultural merchandise experience heightened demand, leading to significant seasonal income generation for residents (Bamiloye, 2025). This finding suggests that the festival operates as an informal economic engine that redistributes income across multiple layers of the community. This aligns with Adedayo et al. (2024), who assert that the Olojo Festival significantly promotes domestic tourism and contributes to economic development through job creation and local business stimulation. Similarly, Asifat et al. (2025) in their study of cultural festivals in Southwestern Nigeria found that festival tourism significantly increases sales for hotels, artisans, and transport operators, reinforcing the argument that cultural events serve as economic catalysts in host communities. Furthermore, interview data indicate that while the economic benefits are widespread, they are seasonal and unevenly distributed, with larger vendors and established businesses often benefiting more than small-scale operators, a pattern also identified in broader African festival economies (Ismaila & Awe, 2025).

6.2 Research Question Two: Influence of Ooni's Reigns on Festival Transformation and Economic Significance

The study further reveals that the reigns of Oba Okunade Sijuwade and Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi have significantly shaped the transformation and economic relevance of the Olojo Festival through cultural revitalization, institutional modernization, and global repositioning. According to Oloye Bamidele Odesanmi, the reign of Oba Sijuwade laid the foundation for elevating the festival's prestige by strengthening its cultural symbolism and attracting elite national attention, while Oba Ogunwusi expanded this legacy through international visibility, digital engagement, and tourism-oriented branding strategies (Odesanmi, 2025). These leadership interventions have repositioned the festival from a purely traditional ceremony into a globally recognized cultural tourism event. This finding is consistent with Adedayo et al. (2024), who argue that leadership plays a critical role in transforming indigenous festivals into structured tourism assets capable of generating economic and cultural value. In the same vein, Fáféye (2021) highlights that Yoruba festivals increasingly undergo modernization processes driven by traditional rulers, resulting in enhanced global appeal and increased economic opportunities. However, interview responses also suggest that this transformation introduces tensions between cultural preservation and commercialization, as increased visibility sometimes risks diluting sacred traditional elements. Despite these concerns, the evidence indicates that both reigns significantly enhanced the economic and symbolic value of the festival, positioning Ile-Ife as a key destination for cultural tourism in Nigeria (Bamiloye, 2025; Ismaila & Awe, 2025).

6.3 Summary Of Findings

The research findings indicate that the Olojo Festival has experienced a dynamic transformation in economic impact from 1990 to 2024, shaped by cultural leadership, globalization, and supportive policy initiatives. During the reign of the late Oba Okunade Sijuwade, the festival retained its strong traditional essence with moderate economic benefits limited to local participation and informal trade. However, under the reign of Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi, the festival has expanded in scope and visibility, drawing global attention and investment through strategic promotion of tourism and cultural heritage.

This shift has led to increased commercial activity, employment opportunities, infrastructural development, and seasonal income for the people of Ile-Ife. The role of cultural institutions, traditional custodians, and modern leadership has been crucial in sustaining the festival's relevance, though concerns about commercialization and loss of sacred elements persist. Ultimately, the study concludes that with proper management and integration of modern economic frameworks, traditional festivals like Olojo can significantly contribute to local economic sustainability.

7.0 RECOMMENDATION

Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that the Osun State Government, in collaboration with the Ooni's palace and private stakeholders, develop a structured cultural tourism policy that enhances the economic benefits of the Olojo Festival while safeguarding its spiritual significance. This policy should include support for local entrepreneurs, artisans, and traders through capacity-building initiatives and financial incentives to ensure inclusive economic participation. Additionally, efforts should be made to preserve the sacred rituals of the festival from excessive commercialization by defining clear boundaries between religious observances and economic activities. Establishing a cultural documentation center in Ile-Ife and promoting the festival through global tourism platforms would also help archive its legacy, attract international visitors, and position it as a sustainable tool for local economic development.

8.0 CONCLUSION

The Olojo Festival remains a vital cultural event that has significantly contributed to the economic growth of Ile-Ife from 1990 to 2024. Its transformation under different reigns, especially those of Oba Okunade Sijuwade and Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi, reflects the dynamic interplay between tradition, leadership, and globalization. As both a sacred ritual and a tourist attraction, the festival continues to serve as a powerful instrument for community identity and economic sustainability in Yoruba land.

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INTERVIEW

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Appendix

