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# **CATHOLIC PRIEST, UNITING THE TIV THROUGH KYEGH SHA SHWA CULTURAL FESTIVAL**

**By**

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Like a wild fire, Kyegh Sha Shwa (KSS) is spreading. It is a festival initiated by a priest of Makurdi Catholic Diocese Rev. Fr. Solomon Ukeyima. The priest is today known as the Convener and Tor KSS, in view of the idea, which is being considered brilliant. From the first day, in 2015, when it was celebrated in Daudu, Guma Local Government Area (LGA) of Benue State, the feast continues to "have increasing number of people indicating interest to attend." It is a gathering of the Tiv, wherein they consume the customary foods and beverages, make merry and promote other forms of their culture. It is like tourism of a sort. The 5th and the 2019 edition of the feast tagged KSS Gboko 2019, according to Nat Apir, one of the opinion leaders in the land was a huge success. More numbers, at home and abroad, as well as foreigners, were in attendance.

Earlier, during the unveiling in Lagos, scores of Tiv people living abroad flew in to be part of the events. The unveiling, which preceded the main event in Gboko, came only after the Tiv in Abuja requested the Convener and Tor KSS Revd. Fr. Solomon Ukeyima to give them KSS treat. "The core aim of KSS is to come together, reason together to grow together," Fr. Ukeyima told Daily Trust. Since the last time Tiv Day was celebrated in 2014, but religious gatherings, no other

platform has pulled together the people, as does KSS festival. Many have attributed this to a near absence of a common ground for socio-cultural interaction.

### **Why Kyegh Sha Shwa (KSS)**

Kyegh Sha Shwa (KSS) is a famous soup among the Tiv. Literally, it is chicken in sesame soup and suitable for consumption with pounded yam. When prepared by the best of Tiv cook, a visitor, even if consuming it for the first time, would naturally seek to know the woman that prepares it. This would usually come with a token of appreciation for the meal. "Kyegh Sha Shwa is a special delicacy of Tiv people of north central Nigeria. For me and like minds, it is more than a meal; we have elevated it into a festival where we are trying to revive the Tiv culture of unity. It is our attempt at reconciliation to come together, to reason together, and identify ways of bettering the lot of our people," Fr. Ukeyima explained.

Sesame is an export commodity. It is one of the high pricing grains in the Nigeria agricultural market. The Tiv had been famous producers of the commodity. However, with the passing of time, its production took a nosedive, to the extent, that it is now only cultivated at the commercial scale in Guma, Gwer West and Gwer East, with local areas like Katsina-Ala, Kwande, Logo and Vandeikya, as against its hitherto cultivation throughout the Tiv speaking areas of Benue State. And Fr. Ukeyima feels that the festival will further promote the cultivation of the annual crop. "For a Tiv man Kyegh Sha Shwa is a special meal; it is not offered to everyone. For you to be treated to it means you are a special visitor. And bennisseed was going extinct. "So, when I thought about the divisions in the land and lack of avenues for cultural

interaction, and this important commodity and the delicacy, we named the festival Kyegh Sha Shwa," the Convener and Tor KSS noted, adding that the idea came while serving as the Priest in charge of St. Francis Mission Daudu.

"There (Daudu), the people cultivate yams and sasame in large quantities, and you know the two go together. That was why I chose KSS," he summed.

According to Iorliam Shija, a cultural enthusiast, "pounded yam with Kyegh Sha Shwa is irresistible. It is both delicious and satisfying." Thousands of young Tiv and the middle age, including traditional rulers, turned up at the KSS Festival Gboko 2019.

### **What happens at the feast**

Entrepreneurs are taking advantage of the festival to promote their brands. It is also a huge market for those selling cultural wares. Like a sporting event, KSS provides opportunity as a ground for reuniting with old timw friends and making new ones. It is no doubt a tourist ground that is a beehive of activities, reminiscent of the yester years of a Tiv setting. Apart from the year of inception, successive editions of the festival witness a guest speech. In 2017, the Bishop of Catholic Diocese of Gboko His Lordship Williams Avenya was the guest speaker with the erudite David Ker, Professor of English, delivering a guest speech at the 2018 edition.

The sitting arrangement is in groups, normally, after the guest speaker must have delivered his message. During meals, the Tiv seat in a circular manner, as they eat from a common dish. "It's fun here," Aondoaver Ahule, according to one attendee. He said he had seen

some of his friends he's not seen "for years" at the festival. Ahule added: "Although this is my first, with the experience, I don't think I would like to miss future editions." Thousands of people, not just the Tiv, on 27th December, 2019, turned up in Gboko, for the festival, with fun.

Oscar Terhemen Aorabee, Managing Counsel at Elohim Chambers and Convener Benue Valley Initiative, addressed the people on the topic: There is strength in unity. He observed that divisions have taken over Tiv land, warning that unless there is a rethink, situations will continue to worsen. He identified love, peace, unity, commerce, and education as among the necessary ingredients that will reposition the people for effective participation in global affairs. Basically, KSS is a social gathering where cultural elements and ways of the people are on display. Young people take advantage of the day to exhibit their sense of Tiv culture through attires and display of other elements of the Tiv culture.

Uka uka, the practice of eating pounded yam with meat in the absence of soup seems to be a particular norm at the event. Young people compete for who wins, in consuming a significant part of pounded yam with the smallest meat possible, in the absence of soup. This year, a cultural night preceded KSS main event. It was termed KSS cultural night and was held at the JS Tarka Stadium Gboko. "Acts were entertained from Tiv artistes including Rapizo, Everest; there was also Swange, Ngighngigh and Aloja tunes. It was an interesting night," Ukan Kurugh, a humanitarian and one of the festival attendees, said of the KSS cultural night.

Thousands of the Tiv attend the annual event, where the uka-uka (the art of eating pounded yam with meat only, without dipping a mound of the food in a soup) competition is staged. There is also the folktale competition and food conservation completion, among other side attractions at the main event.

### **What The People Are Saying**

Alex Ter Adum, former Justice Commissioner and General Manager Benue Investment and Property Commission (BIPC) commenting on KSS, said the festival "has been introduced by this generation and its acceptance is of wide application and appeal amongst our people to qualify as our contemporary culture. "All the festivals we know and celebrate in half measure today were introduced by a particular generation of our forefathers. Even the popular Swange was only introduced in the 30s and 40s. It was not part of our culture previously, yet it has been embraced by us from generation to generation. I am sure when it was first muted as a form of dance and music, many in that generation must have scorned it off.

"Today, however, it (Swange) is a major cultural identity of the Tiv man globally. "Years after we are gone, the next generation of Tiv people will celebrate KSS as a culture of their forefathers; that's how culture evolves. Society is dynamic." "KSS holds a special place in my heart, as I learn every year about the Tiv cultural heritage," Kate Hembafan Iordye told Daily Trust. She described the 2019 edition of KSS as "overwhelmingly good and it shows how much the Tiv people look forward to KSS every year. "This year's KSS, like every other KSS, is targeted at uniting the Tiv people, who have been divided along various lines." She commended the Revd. Fr. Ukeyima for

coming out with the initiative aimed at uniting the Tiv people. "It's fun here," Aondoaver Ahule, one of the attendees at the KSS Gboko 2019, told Daily Trust. He said he had seen some of his friends he's not seen "for years" at the festival. Ahule added: "Although this is my first, with the experience, I don't think I would like to miss future editions."

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In 2016, the Oracle of Tiv nation Wantaregh Paul Unongo, at the KSS festival in Daudu, encouraged Fr. Ukeyima to be steadfast and keep up with his efforts to unite the nation. He endorsed the festival, calling for its sustenance as an instrument for cultural revival. Thousands of people, not just the Tiv, on 27th December, 2019, turned up in Gboko, for the festival, with fun.

### **KSS is an apolitical gathering**

"KSS is incurably apolitical, and by the Grace of God, it will remain so. It is simply a gathering of the Tiv, irrespective of their political affiliations. "At KSS, you find people eat from the same plate showing unity and reconciliation. Politics has remained the greatest weapon that tears our people apart, and that is what we are trying to heal," Fr. Ukeyima told Daily Trust. Although politicians are welcome to attend, the Convener said KSS has no partisan undertones.

## **Funding**

KSS is funded by people of goodwill. Since the reverend gentleman initiated the festival, his friends began donating to its success. Now, cultural enthusiasts, not limited to the Tiv, have been donating to the successful hosting of KSS. "No one is tasked as a pr-condition to attend the festival. Even though we encourage attendees to appear in cultural attires, that in no one way mean anyone is restricted to attend because they don't have or cannot afford them," Fr. Ukeyima said. Although the festival has souvenirs, none is a condition precedent to attendance. According to the Convener, "people of goodwill" send in their donations: Others do so by cash donations, prayers, yams, local breed of chicken, sesame while others give what they feel is necessary for the event to be a success.

The unveiling of the festival also provides the organisers an opportunity to raise money for the event. Now, the organisers are encouraging those attending the festival to prepare to take care of friends. This is apparently due to the large number of people that turn out, compounding the challenge of the organisers in serving those in attendance. At the moment, KSS is the toast of the young; men and ladies alike, and the middle aged. Would it also be seized by politicians? The Convener and Tor KSS answered in the negative. For now, it remains a social gathering, with opportunities to interact, make friends, merry, and discover new things.

Solomon Mfa Ukeyima, who has been displaced thrice by armed herdsmen is a humanitarian priest of the Catholic order. Born to Pa Dennis and Mama Nyiepine Ukeyima of Kwande Local Government Area (LGA) of Benue State of Nigeria, in 1976, Fr. Ukeyima was

ordained to be a priest in the Lord's vineyard in 2004 by His Lordship Most Rev Athanasius Usuh, then Bishop of Makurdi Catholic Diocese. He received early education at NKST Primary School, High Level, Makurdi, (1982) and St. Joseph's Primary School, Nyiman, Makurdi, 1988.

Ukeyima was inspired early in life to be a shepherd of the flock. He therefore enrolled at St. James' Minor Seminary, Aliade (now in Yandev) in 1989. By 1994, he proceeded to Catholic Diocese of Makurdi/Preparatory Seminary, Okpoga, Okpokwu LGA. His journey to the priesthood had already begun, earning a B. A. Hons in Philosophy from St. Thomas Aquinas' Major Seminary, Makurdi in 1998. After his pastoral year at St. Gabriel's Parish, Nyamor, Gboko in 1999, Ukeyima proceeded to St. Augustine's Major Seminary, Jos, Plateau state, for his M.A. Theology, graduating in 2003.

Following years of integral formation in line with "Optatam Totius," Ukeyima was ordained in the Order of Deaconate at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Cathedral, Makurdi by His Lordship, Most Revd. Dr. Athanasius Atule Usuh in 2003 and posted to St. John's Parish Gboko (now St. John De Baptist Cathedral), for pastoral assignment under the tutelage of Very Revd. Fr Stephen Beba (2003 -2004). With total submission to the will of God, Fr. Ukeyima views life as a window through which we see others and not a mirror through which we see ourselves. Since ordination, he has worked variously as Assistant Parish Priest, St. Michael's Parish Jato Aka (2004-2008), Assistant Cathedral Administrator, Our Lady of Perpetual Help Cathedral, Makurdi (2008 - 2010), Assistant Parish Priest, Sacred Heart's Parish Udei (2010-2011), Parish Priest (Pioneer), St. Francis Catholic



Mission (2012 - 2017), Parish Priest, St. Augustine's Parish, Demekpe and is the current Dean, Ikpayongo Deanery.

Fr. Ukeyima has been Youth Chaplain, Adikpo Deanery, Makurdi Deanery, Makurdi Diocese; YCSN Chaplain, Makurdi Diocese; C.W.O Chaplain, Udei Deanery; Holy Family Society Chaplain, Udei Deanery; Member, Priests Council, Makurdi Diocese; Secretary, Udei Deanery and MOD Chaplain, Udei Deanery and is the Chair of Board, Sesugh u Maria Pilgrimage Ayati.

The Kwande born has founded the "Ungoov Mba-Dedoo", an association of very old Christian women that he caters for, both materially and spiritually; the "Mater Dei" Widows, an association of widows under the umbrella of Mary the Mother of God who herself suffered widowhood, training them periodically on self-reliant schemes. He is also the Convener-in-Chief of the Annual Kyegh Sha Shwa (KSS) Cultural Festival.