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A Festival of Ribaldry: *A Brief History of “Ine Ubulu”*

By Idenze Ezeme

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A FESTIVAL OF RIBALDRY

A Festival of Ribaldry: A Brief History of “Ine Ubulu”

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The Ụbụlụ-Ukwu Ine festival is an important event among the people. It takes place on a Wednesday every September, the people say, on the “ninth moon.” There are three major festivals in the kingdom: the Ine, the Iwu, and the Iwa-ji (New Yam).

As he said, Dịokpa Nkwor Oseji, a highly respected elder, stated that the Ine festival has existed since the creation of the Ubulu Kingdom. It was consequently passed down through generations, starting from the first set of descendants through to the present one, and it is an indispensable part of the culture and traditions of Ubulu-Uku. The major significance of this festival is to purify these warriors who have fought in many battles and spilled blood, or their descendants, in a special ritual called Ịkpu-Agana.

The Ine festival tends to eliminate evil spirits that are associated with blood and violence. According to them, such spirits are to be exorcised for the community to be kept in peace and healthy.

The most exciting moments of this Ine festival are the frenetic dances. The dance is led by the war chiefs and warriors who have undergone the cleansing ritual, although many people in the community also join in. Dancing is fast and powerful; during feasts, a special form of greeting- one peculiar shake called ina-aka, a kind of royal handshake exchanged.

As it were, there was a saying, “Elim ọgede je Ekwensụ” which translates into “May I not eat plantain to exorcise the devil.” This came from the notion that the eating of plantains makes one too tired to keep up the energetic dance. Another expression, “Adiwe anọ ofu

etiti ekili Ine”, in translation is “You can’t just stand still and watch the Ine dance.”.

Freedom of Speech During the Festival

One of the peculiar things about the Ine festival is that participants are afforded the opportunity to talk freely about problems in the community. They can sing songs called Igba abu which denigrate bad behaviors or immoral acts without being reprimanded. These songs help to expose ills in a lively and daring manner, even if they involve big men.

These songs are used by the community to help amend behavior with the view of ensuring that people follow the general moral values of the kingdom during the Ine festival.

The Ine festival is sometimes called “Ekwensu” meaning “devil.” This name has often been misconstrued. Historian Esther Nwogwonuwe Wright explains this, saying that the festivals earned this title from its very nature, which allows people to speak their minds and sometimes shockingly express ills committed.

That is to say, evil acts are committed due to the influence of the devil called Ekwensu. A festival would be held to cleanse the community of this evil. While this might be misconstrued that Ine is in honor of the devil, it is actually the converse; a means to combat evil and immorality.

Music occupies a great deal during the Ine festival. The types of songs usually applied during Ine are quite different from those used in other festivals such as Ukpukpe and Iwu. The music used during this occasion is unique and only those who understand the culture well will be truly in a position to know and feel it.

Following the wars between the Ogbe and Alumu, new songs were composed for the festival. Some of the songs sing the loyalty to certain groups. One example of one of the songs composed by the Alumu people says:

Ogbe dīni oye – Who are the Ogbe people loyal to?

This was one way the Alumu said they were only for God and this song was sung against Obi Ofulue I whom they believed took sides with the Ogbe during a conflict.

It is not certain when the Ine festival started, but it is supposed to be ancient at least as early as the nascent period of the Ubulu-Uku Kingdom. Over time, it grew into a really exciting event, incorporating other traditions, especially those concerning its history of wars and peace.

Chief Ofulue, Isagba of Ubulu-Uku, was a prominent person in the Ine festival. A photo with his group during one Ine festival in the 1970s shows how significant this event is in the history of the kingdom.

The Misunderstanding of Ekwensu

Ekwensu in traditional Igbo thinking would not precisely translate as 'devil'. Initially, the term was translated as the Igbo god of war. When the Bible was translated into Igbo however, one of the words used to translate Satan or devil became Ekwensu.

Actually, in fact, the Igbo language as traditionally spoken has no word for Satan or devil; and the association of Ekwensu with the devil represents something of a modernist misunderstanding induced through Christianity.

Ine is a very big festival within the culture of the people of Ubulu-Uku. It is well characterized by lively dancing and music, with a chance to talk freely about issues happening in one's community. The main aim of the festival is to cleanse the town of evil and bring peace and harmony to the people.

Although one may perceive some diabolical activities while celebrating Ine, it is quite the opposite of that belief; evil and ill behavior are fought through the festival. Even though the trend has faded away, the festival is a strong tradition that ensures the values

and unity of the community continue to thrive within Ubulu-Uku.

1. Wright, E. N. (1998). The Story of Ubulu Kingdom. Heritage Publishers.
2. Oral Interview with Chief Ofulue, Isagba of Ubulu-Uku, conducted in July 1975.
3. Oral Narratives from Ubulu-Uku Elders, collected during the Ine Festival in 2022.
4. Oseji, N. (1973). "The Origins of Ine and Iwu Festivals in Ubulu Kingdom." Ubulu Oral History Project.
5. Nwogwonuwe, E. W. (2005). Igbo Festivals and Traditions: A Comprehensive Guide. Delta Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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