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Aji Ekere Festival of Ebonyi State: *A Cultural Bridge Between Tradition and Modernity*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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AJI EKERE FESTIVAL OF EBONYI STATE

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The Aji Ekere Festival is one of the oldest and most important festivals celebrated by people in Ebonyi State, especially among the Izzi, Ezza, Ikwo, and other communities. The festival has deep roots in their farming life and traditional beliefs. It means many things, such as Thanksgiving, a cleansing of the spirit, bringing people together, and helping them remember themselves.



A masquerade during the Aji ekere festival

Even though there are slight differences between how each clan does

it, what joins all of them together is the same: it is the festival that they use to thank their gods and eat the new yams officially.

“Aji Ekere” means something like “accepting to eat yam” in their local language. In Igbo culture and the Ebonyi people’s side, yam is king in the farm. Before anyone can harvest or eat the new yam, they must first thank the ancestors and the gods. That is how the Aji Ekere Festival started— to honour the spirits and thank them for the harvest, which is good.

It is not just an ordinary festival. It is a serious spiritual and community event.

The festival commences between late August and early September when the yam is mature. But it is elders, traditional priests, and community leaders who select the final date based on their traditional customs and observations of the environment.

Sometimes, villages can choose different days, so people can also attend other people’s festivals.

Lots of work will start before the festival happens: 1. People will clear the farm and select the finest yams to use for the festival. 2. People will sweep and repair their houses, as well as the ancestral shrine. 3. Tailors will sew new clothes, and women will buy good wrappers and beads. Food preparation will be added; people will be preparing pounded yam, ogbono soup, and goat meat. 4. Masquerade dancers will rehearse, and drummers will practice to make everything lively.

Ancestral Offerings Before anyone eats the yam, elders and traditional priests will first of all give an offering —they will roast the yam, break kola nut, pour palm wine, and sometimes kill a fowl or a goat in the shrine. It is their way of thanking the gods and asking for more blessings.

Breaking of the New Yam The community king (such as Igwe, Eze, or Okpoto) or the oldest elder will eat the first yam publicly. He will be

the one to open the yam season officially. He will cut the yam, dip it in red oil, and pray for prosperity and protection for everybody.

Masquerade Performances Different colourful masquerades will come out. Some will dance, some will run up and down, some will even scare small people. They believe that a masquerade is a spirit from ancestors who came visiting.

Traditional Dances and Music Women, young boys and girls will dance traditional dances like Atilogwu, Ikpirikpe, and others. Drummers will beat good talking drums, flautists and singers will make the people lively.

Feasting and Merrymaking Every family will prepare good food. Pounded yam, soups, meat, and drinks will be enough. They will share food with visitors and neighbours. It is a way of showing how united they are.

Chieftaincy and Title Taking During the festival, some people will take a chieftaincy title or special awards. The Title will show that the person has become a well-known man or woman in society and is ready to carry more responsibility.

Wrestling Matches and Competitions Igba Mgba (a wrestling event) is very popular at the festival. Young men will wrestle to show strength and skills. The winners might carry a goat, a yam, or even cash prizes.

1. **Spiritual Renewal:** It helps reconnect the living with their ancestors and gods, making everyone's spirit pure. 2. **Agricultural Celebration:** It shows how grateful they are for what farming brings. 3. **Social Cohesion:** The festival brings people together, settles fights and unites families. 4. **Preservation of Heritage:** Dances, masquerades, and old customs will help keep the Ebonyi people's culture strong.

Nowadays, because of Christianity and modern lifestyle, some things have changed: Some places no longer perform animal sacrifices; instead, they use prayer or symbolic offerings. Church services



sometimes follow a traditional festival to pray for the harvest. Politicians sometimes sponsor festivals as a way to connect with people. – Youths have started adding talent shows, beauty pageants and exhibitions to the festival activities.

But no matter the little changes, the main heart of Aji Ekere is still strong in the minds of the people of Ebonyi.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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An enthusiast in tech with deep passion for studying and showcasing the vibrant cultural heritage of southern Nigeria . Combining my skill with my obsession towards African history and traditions to create contributions that impacts the digital space.



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