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By Chukwunwike Ossai

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EGWU IMO-OKA

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Awka, located in the heart of Igboland, in Anambra State, Nigeria, is situated. This town has a rich history and many traditions. One big Celebration that is still observed today is the Imo-Oka Festival, also known as Egwu Imo-Oka. This festival is not just a celebration; it's a reflection that shows the old roots, beliefs, and strength of the Awka people.

The story of Imo-Oka began with a girl from Awka named Nomeh. She was very sick, despite the fact that they called a native doctor from Umuezeukwu to treat her, she still died. The Awka people believed that her spirit is not at rest because she didn't get married or give birth to a child before she died. After her death, the death of younger children began in the town, and people believed that it was the Nomeh spirit that was angry.

Then they called strong native doctors from a place called "Idomaland" (that could be Igala people, Awka addresses as "Akpotos"). This native doctor created a powerful medicine called Akwalì Ọmụmụ ụmụ Ọka (i.e., a charm for the procreation of Awka people). This charm was buried where Nomeh was buried. The charm began to have a serious power, and people started worshipping it as a god. That is how the god Imo-Oka was birthed.

The Awka people didn't allow the native doctors to return to their land, as they feared they might go and help other towns with the same charm. So, they gave them land on the Awka border for them to stay, and that is how Okpuno town started. Okpuno paid Awka a tribute

every year before the arrival of white men(colonial masters).

The Decline of Okanube and the Rise of Imo-Oka Before the existence of Imo-Oka, Awka people always worshipped another god called Okanube. It is a hunting god who taught them how to work with iron and make medicines. The name Okanube means “a person who is senior with a spear.” It was the sky god that taught the first Awka people (Ifiteana) how to make an iron spear and add native medicine to hunt animals, especially elephants.

The elephant tusk, which they called Okike, is his sacred item. Every family has one in their shrine, and every fifth month of the year, they offer a sacrifice to it, in order for hunting to go smoothly.

But as people started hunting elephants too much, the animal started disappearing. The last elephant that they killed was in 1910. As elephants were reduced, people saw no reason to worship Okanube. His shrine was reduced to only one spear that was stuck to the ground. But the memory of Okanube was still there; even the town’s name, “Oka” (which the British changed to “Awka”), is derived from Umu Okanube, the children of Okanube.

As Okanube left the people’s mind, Imo-Oka was lifted. She then took over as the town’s main god. But unlike Okanube, which was a hunting god, Imo-Oka is a god of protection, children, and unity. That was a need for the people at that time.

The Imo-Oka Festival: A Vibrant Celebration The Egwu Imo-Oka Festival is the largest traditional celebration still held in Awka. It is the event which opens Awka’s traditional year. The celebration is filled with music, dance, sacrifice, prayers, and community enjoyment. That was the time when the people of Awka remembered where they came from and asked Imo-Oka to bless them with health, children, and peace.

Veneration of Imo-Oka: Everything started in the shrine of Imo-Oka. Priests and elders would offer a sacrifice and pray to beg the god for

blessings. They pray for protection, help in giving birth, and to keep the community safe from harm.

The Nro Ota Mock Battle. One major event is nro ota, which is a mock fight in which the young Awka boys are involved. It is to remember an old war they fought against people known as Uvume. In that war, Awka won and carried the sacred trumpet (Opu Eke), which belongs to Uvume, and they gave it to Imo-Oka. This mock fight showed that Imo-Oka is strong and is proud of their past warrior.

Dances and performances: Plenty of traditional music, dance, and masquerades are always part of the festival. Drummers and flautists would play beautiful rhythms, while masquerades representing ancestors danced and entertained the people. This is not just for fun; it's a way to connect with the spirit world and show respect to those who have passed away.

Communal feasting and social bonding' The festival is also a time when people cook food, eat together, share drinks, and catch up with friends and family. The market would be filled up as people go to buy food, clothes, and festival items. The whole town loved the carnival ground.

Symbolism and Significance Everything they do in this festival has a deep meaning. The whole celebration shows how Awka people can turn bad things to better. Nومه's death, which was a tragedy, turned into a blessing that brought Imo-Oka, who protects them.

The mock fight they always do shows that Awka people know how to fight and win. The Imo-Oka shrine shows that they still hold their tradition even as the world changes. Despite many old practices fading, this festival remains strong.

Awka's Historical Context: A Legacy of Expansion Awka people come from three main family groups: Uruei, Amaenyiana, and Okpo. They are settled near the Ogugwu stream. As they grew, they fought and pushed many neighbouring villages out.

: Umuezeukwu war(caused by the death of Nomeh): Uveme war (remembered during a mock battle): Inyi war (over hunting the land): Abo-Enugwu, Amantogwu, Nwolu, Uruana/Nluana, and Norgu

The festival reminds people of all these victories and how Awka became a strong town.

The Festival in Modern Times Today, the Imo-Oka Festival is still very important. Both people who live in Awka and those abroad come back home for the celebration. Despite Christianity having changed some things, the core rituals remain.

The festival has even become a tourist attraction. People now come from far to witness the culture. Local groups also try to teach younger generations about the meaning of the festival to keep the tradition alive. The Imo-Oka Festival is not just a celebration; it is a full story of Awka: pain, strength, unity, and pride. From Nomeh's death, to Awka's Victories, and Imo-Oka blessings, this festival is the spirit that binds the people together.

As the world changes, the Awka people still hold tight to what makes them who they are. This festival shows that even when things change, culture can still stand strong. It is a true picture of how Awka survived, grew, and still takes pride in its roots.

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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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