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Ekwesu Festival of Onicha Ukwuani: *Strength, Spirit, and the Soul of Ukwuani Clan*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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The Ekwesu Festival is one of the colorful and important cultural events that showcase the rich traditions of the people in Ukwuani, Onicha Ukwuani, located in Ndokwa West Local Government Area, Delta State, Nigeria. It is a festival that takes place every year, and it is deeply rooted in the culture of the Ukwuani clan. A group within the larger Igbo community. The festival showcases how strong, united, and proud the community is through rituals, music, dance, and numerous group activities. Ekwesu is the way people used to express who they are, how they survived invasions, and how strong they are to this day.

Ukwuani people that stays in the western side of Niger Delta have story about where they came from – a lecturer in Delta State University, Paul O. Opone, said they are mainly from Igbo origin. Onicha Ukwuani is one of the main communities in the Ndokwa area, and it is familiar to them in their culture – they have music, dance, and festivals that reflect their farming and social lifestyle. Ekwesu Festival is one of the biggest events, especially in the Ike-Onicha side of town. The festival is a strong example of how Ukwuani people resisted external invasion, especially from the defunct Benin Empire.

They do link the festival with a New Yam Festival that many Igbo communities do to thank God for the yam harvest. But Ekwesu is different because it focuses more on strength, brotherhood, and ritual, which is not too common with other festivals. They call it the festival of “brawn” because activities like mock battles with canes and wrestling are involved. These things are not just there for fun – they

have meaning. It is a way of testing who is strong, who is brave, and who is ready to stand firm for his people. It helps bring everyone together and shows the power within the community.

The Ekwesu Festival usually takes place at the end of the year, around October, similar to the ones held in 2019 and 2022. It is a festival that lasts for several days, and people from Onicha Ukwuani and nearby villages come to watch and participate. The name “Ekwesu” is linked to a deity of the broader Igbo culture – it is a symbol of bravery used to trick the enemy during troubled times or war. The mock battle is not a violent flogging – it comes with rules. Young boys will use a cane to mock-fight, showing how brave they are and how they can endure.

But it’s not only the muscle they celebrate – music, dance, and food are also available. Ukwuani highlife music will be played everywhere, featuring guitar, drums, and flute. People will dance well, especially with steps that great musicians like Chief Ochiligwe Ubulu introduced. Yam food is available – they ate yam in different styles, accompanied by palm wine, to thank God for the harvest and to share love.

The Ekwesu festival is not an occasion they do just for the sake of doing it. They normally plan it well with the help of traditional leaders, such as the Okpala-Uku and Ndi Ichie. They will first make announcements, hold meetings, and ensure that everything is in order according to tradition.

1. Whipping Contests: This is the main thing. Young men will do a whipping contest, organized by age group. They will use a slightly bent cane, and everything will be under control. The aim is to show that someone is strong and brave. People will be watching, shouting, and music will be playing, making everything sweet.

2. Wrestling Matches: Wrestling is common in many Igbo and Ukwuani areas. During Ekwesu, boys will enter the ring to show their power and tactics. It will show that someone can defend their people. It’s fun, it is a sport, and a way to build a bond.

3 Cultural Performances: Music and dance are crucial to this festival. Groups will perform Ukwuani traditional dances that tell the story of the people. Artists like General Franco, Lee Ezute, and Charles Iwegbue have helped popularize this style. The whole place is active.

4. Communal Feasting and Socializing: Family and friends will gather, eat together, and catch up with each other. Yam is the king of food here – roasted, boiled, pounded, any style. Palm wine will flow, and people will laugh, share gossip, and enjoy.

5. Ritual Offerings and Prayers: Like other Igbo festivals, Ekwesu has a spiritual side. They do pray and offer sacrifices to ancestors and gods, such as Obodo, whom they used to worship in Onicha Ukwuani. To show gratitude and ask for blessings for everyone.

Ekwesu has a big meaning – cultural, social, and even economic. Culturally, it helps preserve the Ukwuani way of life. It ensures that a child growing up will know what his people stand for. All the fighting and whipping is not just for show – it teaches us to be strong, humble, and united with our people.

Socially, the festival will help bring everyone together – people who live abroad will return, visitors will come, and they will all bond over their shared culture. Boys who participate in flogging and wrestling will gain respect – it is the little boys who become men in the eyes of the community.

Economically, the festival will bring money, just like the New Yam Festival in places like Onicha Igboeze, Ebonyi. Visitors will buy food, drinks, souvenirs, and transport people to earn money. Researchers and culture lovers will still document the things happening, and that will promote Ukwuani culture worldwide.

Ekwesu has faced some problems over time. City life, people who migrate to towns, and Western influence affected how it was done. Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) still spoils many cultural activities, and it stopped Ekwesu for a while. But the Onicha Ukwuani people

brought it back strong.

Now, Ekwesu has made some updates to keep up with modern times. You can watch the festival on YouTube, like on NdéUkwuani TV. Social media will also help promote it. Young people will join more now, and even those who are not at home can still connect. Leaders have also spoken about making peace during the festival, as was done in the Ikenga Festival in Obiaruku. They will use security to make sure everybody is safe.

The Ekwesu Festival in Onicha Ukwuani is a major celebration that embodies the rich culture of Ukwuani. From mock battles and wrestling to music, dance, and food, it shows that the people are strong, proud, and united. It's a treasure that keeps tradition alive and still welcomes new people, too. As they combine old and new ways, the festival will still shine and show the world that Ukwuani culture endures.

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- NdéUkwuani TV (YouTube Channel). Various uploads of Ekwesu Festival.
- Oral Interviews with Elders of Onicha Ukwuani, Ndokwa West, Delta State.
- Igbo Festivals and Cultural Practices Archives – Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Field notes from the 2019 and 2022 Ekwesu Festivals – Community Cultural Documentation Project, Ndokwa Heritage Group.
- Ezute, Charles Iwegbue & Ubulu, Ochiligwe. Traditional Highlife Musicians' Recordings (Various).

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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