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Ezeagu Atilogwu: *The Rhythmic Soul of Igbo Identity and Global Cultural Impact*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Atilogwu Dancing Display.

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Ezeagu Enugu stands firm as one of the strongholds of Igbo culture, known for the festivals it hosts and the powerful traditional dances it performs. Among all, Ezeagu Atilogwu's dance stands out the most. It has spread beyond Ezeagu land and reached every corner of Nigeria, as well as abroad. This story will tell you how the Atilogwu dance started, how it grew, and why it remains strong today as a symbol of Igbo pride, strength, and creativity.

Ezeagu culture is deeply rooted in seasonal festivals, which mark the farming season and community events. Festivals like Ogugo-Chi, Akanu, Oku Owa-Ito, Ibono Okochi, Ibono Udu-Mii, Mgba Ndi-Omu, Mgba Une n'Une, Owhuwhu-Ji, and Mgba Ogwu are important for showing tradition. All these festivals come with different dances, but Atilogwu is the best. The dance is full of moves, energy and rhythm, which makes people proud of their roots.

In Igbo land, dance is a serious matter. They have dances like Atilogwu, Abigbo, Egwu Amala, Egwu Ogene, Nkwa Umuagbogho, and Egedege. But Atilogwu stand out because of the mixed body movement, music, and everybody from the community is involved. In Ezeagu, Atilogwu is not just a dance – it's a way of connecting generations.



Atilogwu Dancers, Photo: Umuigbo

Atilogwu means “Is it medicine that is inside?” in Igbo. It is a dance that they gather from different local dances. Some people said it is a blend of Anam, Ogwulogwu, Anaku, Ochanja, and Adunjanja. Others mention Mgbaga, Ogwulogwu, Otiokpokpo, Ochufulu, and Egwu-Igba. This mixture brings about a dance that is full of legwork, somersaults, and a strong rhythm, which is interesting to watch.

The version that we know of today started around 1947 in Lagos. It was the Ezeagu people living in Lagos who formed the Ezeagu Improvement Union, which took the matter seriously. Clement Onwumelu, who worked at the Nigerian Railways, bought instruments in Atilogwu dance after a youth group from Aguobu Iwollo, which had learned it from Ebenebe, Awka, in 1942, showed what they could do. Afterwards, the dance began to spread in Ezeagu land.

To make it more solid, they called two professionals – Ofodile Amaka from Ugwuike, Iwollo, and Simon Ndu, whom they referred to as Major – to come to Lagos and train the group. Leonard Aliozo Nkedife,

a senior officer in the Post and Telegraph, led the team well. They even made a rule that all Ezeagu male children must learn it until they were 14, so that the culture would not die.

The Atilogwu first showed in public around July 1948 during a condolence visit in Lagos. Later, they performed at the National Igbo Day event at Dr. Nnamdi Stadium in Yaba. People applauded the performance. The dance helped a boy, Godwin Ofor, obtain a scholarship to study Pharmacy at the University of Ibadan. One flautist, Ogueji Ebuo, got a job with the African Development Corporation. This shows that the dance is not just entertaining but has opened doors for young people.

In the 1950s, Ezeagu Atilogwu had become a big name in Lagos. People began to call them “Famous Ezeagu Atilogwu.” Big men like Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Dr. K.O. Mbadiwe, Hon. Festus Okotie-Eboh, and Mazi Mbonu Ojike began to support them. The way the dance moves the body, accompanied by flute, drum, xylophone, and gong, is mind-blowing. That is why they used to put their pictures on postcards and send them as Christmas cards.

They started performing at TV shows, Igbo Day celebrations, and arts festivals. In 1955, Dr. Mbadiwe organised a gala performance. In 1956, Queen Elizabeth II saw them live in Lagos. Then in 1962, they went to represent Nigeria at the 8th World Youth and Students Festival of Arts and Culture in Helsinki, Finland. They won the dance competition there and toured 21 countries!



Igbo Atilogwu performance, Enugu, 17 March 1990. Photo by Tim Graham.

The group continues to shine internationally. In 1961, they performed in Cotonou, Dahomey (now Benin). In 1964, they entered the United States to perform at Lincoln University and Howard University. It was around the same time that Nigerian Airways started its flights to New York. Dr. Mbadiwe called it “Operation Fantastic.” The tour made them famous as “Ezeagu International Atilogwu.”

However, trouble arose when the Nigerian Civil War began in 1967. Many Igbo, including members of the group, ran to the East. Some were still performing in countries like Gabon to gather support for Biafra. Even with the war, the spirit of Atilogwu refuses to die. New groups came up from Enugu and Kano.

In Kano, it was called “Rawa Ibo.” They performed well on Igbo Day and the Northern Festival of Arts. But the war scattered the movement. In Enugu, one man, Sylvanus Anidu, started training new boys. The Okpuyo Atilogwu group won a prize in the 1963 Eastern

Nigeria Festival of Arts and dropped an album in 1977.

Today, Atilogwu is still strong. Groups like the Ezeagu International Atilogwu Dance Group, led by Innocent Ozoeze, and the Ezeagu Famous Atilogwu, led by Sylvester Nzekwe, continued the tradition. The Ikenga Cultural Troupe (led by Fidelis Ojielo) also performed in Enugu. They all show the same flips, beat, and energy that make Atilogwu special.

They have performed at big festivals like FESTAC'77. Albums like Ezeagu Atilogwu Dance – Igbadike (1976) and Okpuyo Atilogwu Dance (1977) are still played to date. This made sure that even new generations could still hear and learn the rhythm.

Atilogwu is not an ordinary dance. It is a spirit, talent, and unity of the Igbo people. From its origins in the village to its international level, Atilogwu has become a significant part of Nigerian culture. As new groups emerge and add their touch, the Atilogwu will still shine, reminding people that Igbo culture endures.

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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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