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By Idenze Ezeme

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The Ịwu Festival begins on an “Afọ” market day with the cultural activities that precede the holy week of the festival. The sacred week ends when a cannon shot from the palace breaks the silence.

As the saying goes: “Ịwu bia na Afọ, naa na-nkwọ” meaning Ịwu begins on Afọ and ends on Nkwọ. The Holy Week of Ịwu was a critical period for the Ubulu traditionalists; it is akin to the Holy Week of other religions. It was a period of silence and peace, in deep reflection. It is a week in which one communes with “Chi-Ukwu” for guidance and atonement, even as Ezemu, the founder of Ubulu-Uku, did when he ascended the throne for the first time. Some time ago, we reviewed how such a holy week, upon its observance for the very first time by Ezemu, heralded the maiden Ịwu festival in the Ubulu kingdom.

Holy Week starts from “Afọ” day, just past midnight ending “Ụka-Olie” the Sunday of Olie Market Day, and flows up to the evening of the following “Nkwọ” day. Hence, the saying goes in the language of the famous Ubulu, “Ịwu bia n’afọ náa nẹ Nkwọ “. Some years are adjusted by an intervening day so that such a week is what would be referred to as “Uje-Ukwu” a big ceremony.

During that time, there were things that were just taboo to do. Here are five things anathema during Ịwu Holy Week:

Ịwu is a peace festival, and if a death occurs during this period, it is treated seriously. There are suspicions that such a person died



because of some offense to the gods, and for this reason, the age of the person is immaterial. Even on one's death during this period, one cannot be buried. It is an abomination to die or be buried during the period of Ịwu.

One of the worst curses one can pronounce on another is “Ị sho n'Ịwu” – a wish that someone commit suicide during Ịwu. If one dies within the Holy Week, an investigation is then conducted and sacrifices offered to the gods before any burial rite commences. Such a death is seen to signal an offense against the gods. Quite simply, it is considered better to die at any other time than during Ịwu.

There is sacred silence during Ịwu. Such a practice of absolute quiet may be the most peculiar to this festival. And when the Ịwu yam is being cooked and Chief Priests are deep in prayers for the good of the land and atonement of misdeeds, then silence is held to be imperative. Great sounds, such as singing, playing music, hooting, and even the noise made on breaking firewood, are forbidden.

Whereas the Ine Festival is purely characterized by noisy celebrations. However, there are tendencies of violation in Ịwu; the breaking of wood into pieces is allowed within the compounds of traditional Chiefs or families with royal schedules, *ndi-enwene*.

Having been through various types of wars internally and externally, Ubulu detests any form of war, either verbal or physical, during the Ịwu Holy Week. Any quarrel or battle has to be suspended, only to resume or to be settled after the event. In its over 800-year history, no Ịwu festival has ever been called off by the people of Ubulu because of war.

But normally, a king's death can only reduce the scale of such a festival-from a large “Uje-Ukwu” ceremony to a smaller “Uje-Nta” or an “Ịwu-Ufoi” -a ceremony that did not involve a Chief Priest. This is because after the enthronement of a new king, the erstwhile priest conducts his last Ịwu festival and retires, since no Chief Priest can serve during the reigns of two kings. Do not quarrel, fight, or curse



during Iwu, thus pray for the kingdom of Ubulu.

Among the more autocratic King Ubulu, the executioners are called "idoloma," yet even though a misdeed has been committed which requires that form of punishment, no executions may be carried out on Holy Thursday and Friday. On those most holy days, blood must not be seen to flow nor a blow be struck.

Moreover, public mourning during Iwu and the wear of black clothes which is a sign of mourning, is not allowed. The Holy Week must be bereft of sorrow and enmity.

Other things are suspended during the Iwu Holy Week, while some of the traditional rites and practices take precedence. Anything that disturbs these is considered a serious offense. Some ritual purifications and prayers to "Chi-Ukwu" should cleanse the community; disturbing it desecrates the sacred order.

The Iwu Holy Week is a time of deep reverence, reflection, and peace. Death, noise, war, execution, and disruption of sacred rites are strictly forbidden to maintain the sanctity of the festival. This time is dedicated to honoring the gods, seeking wisdom, and ensuring harmony in the Ubulu community.

1. Ezemu Tradition and Ubulu History – Oral tradition from Ubulu-Uku elders and historical accounts of the first Iwu festival, passed down through generations.
2. Oḍinala: The Indigenous Religion of the Igbo People – A comprehensive guide on Igbo traditions and festivals, which provides an understanding of the importance of communal worship and sacred times in Igbo culture.
3. Ubulu Cultural Practices and Festivals – Documented accounts of Ubulu traditional rites and rituals, available in local archives and through research conducted by cultural anthropologists.



4. Traditional Igbo Calendar and Festivities – A review of the lunar-based Igbo calendar, emphasizing the significance of market days (Afo, Nkwọ, Olie) and how they align with major festivals.

5. Igbo Cosmology and Religious Observances – Scholarly work on the belief systems of the Igbo, with particular attention to the role of Chief Priests and their duties during times of communal observance.

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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