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Igba Ota-Omu Festival: *Ohafia's Age-Grade System and the Celebration of Communal Legacy*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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IGBA OTA-OMU FESTIVAL

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The age-grade system in Ohafia has existed since the community started. It helps organise society and gives people responsibilities that benefit everybody. From infants, they would join the age grade with people close to their age. This kind of grouping builds friendship and a sense of duty to the community.

As they grew, some people left Ohafia to find greener pastures or pursue education. However, to keep their bond strong, each age grade had a name (that they called Izara Afa) and a big community project to do, like building a school or hall. All the members contributed money and supported each other for weddings, burials, and other life events. Nobody was alone in good or bad times, and it helped keep the community strong.

Before colonial times, some of their age-grade members would defend Ohafia or help fight in areas like Arochukwu. People knew them because they did not get scared when it came to fighting. But today, instead of fighting, they would do community work and leave a good legacy behind.

The Ota-Omu Ceremony: A Celebration of Survival and Legacy. The biggest event for any age grade is the Ota-Omu ceremony. It occurs every three years in December, and it means that the group has finished its active service to the community. It was a way of thanking God that they survived life challenges, sickness, poverty, and problems. Like Akajiaku (2022) said, it is important we “give people their flowers while they are still alive.”

Before the main Ota-Omu ceremony, they would perform a smaller ceremony in October called Isu Ahu Otomu. In this one, the women in that age grade would prepare a traditional soup, ahu. They would wear fine clothes to the community square to share them.

After October, they will begin preparations for the main ceremony. On Ota-Omu day, everybody will wear the same clothes: a plain George wrapper with a white shirt or blouse. An umbrella will cover them from the sun. Family and friends will walk with them to the square. They will sing, dance, and walk through many villages, just to show that they are still part of the whole Ohafia.

When they returned to the square, they presented the project they had built, such as a school or hall, and the community gave them a certificate. After that, they were not active again in community work but became respected elders from whom the community sought advice.

The next day would be full of enjoyment. They would decorate the celebrant's compound very well with canopies. The celebrant would sit in the best chair as people came with their greetings. Visitors would drop gifts and money (they would write it down), and the celebrant would give them a gift, too, like soap or bigger things if the celebrant had money. There would be lots of Food and drink until night.

Economic and Social Impacts of the Ota-Omu Ceremony. Ota-Omu is not only a cultural event, but it also boosts businesses very well. People travel back from everywhere, so hotels are occupied, transportation is expensive, and people rush to build their houses. All these activities help young people find jobs. The ceremony does push the community forward economically.

Socially, it helps hold the people together. If you do not attend your age-grade ceremony, people might begin to avoid you. So, it makes people who travel remember home. The ceremony also makes the elders more respected, as they have served and now become the

custodians of tradition.

Challenges and Resilience. Even though the ceremony is interesting, its cost has made it difficult, especially as the Nigerian economy isn't stable. To do both Isu Ahu Otomu and Ota-Omu cost a lot. But the people of Ohafia, especially in Elu, were still doing it. They would manage little money and still keep the culture strong.

Ohafia age-grade system and Ota-Omu ceremony are not just a culture. It is a way of life that shows unity, strength, and progress. From small to old people, everybody was involved. The ceremony celebrated life and hard work, and it brought people together, no matter where they were. Even with economic problems, the people of the Ohafia still push their culture forward, honouring their elders and building a good future every three years. It is this kind of togetherness, service, and celebration that made them unique.

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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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