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Igba Uche Festival of Ohafia: *Honouring Tradition, Celebrating Service, and Unlocking Tourism Potential*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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IGBA UCHE FESTIVAL OF OHAFIA

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The Igba Uche Cultural Festival is an Important traditional festival that Ohafia people in Abia State always perform. This festival has been around since the time of our ancestors, demonstrating strong respect for the age-graded system, hard work, and community unity. The festival is a way to honor people who have served the community well and are elderly, and it's an opportunity for the community to come together and celebrate its achievements.

An interview that was conducted explains how the Igba Uche Festival started. This was because in the days of the old, Ohafia people were serious warriors, who went to war and did slave raiding for their partners, that are Arochukwu slave merchants. The person speaking about the information said that this festival has been in existence for a long time before our forefathers, and they used it as a tool to prepare warriors to defend the community.

The warriors all came from a specific age range. As they go to war and grow old, the community celebrates their retirement and hands over the baton to the younger ones. The age range system helped separate the seniors from the juniors, regardless of gender. Before the 20th century, the Ohafia people grouped boys and girls born within the same three-year age range, known as an "uke". Every three years, they create a new age range.

The Igba Uche Festival is the way they celebrate the oldest age range retiring. The main activity is that they would tie a palm frond to the

shield, which signifies that the person has ended their duty in battle. Some places call it Otomu, Igbotu Omu, Omumu_Uche or Izuuche. To tie a palm frond for a shield means that Ohafia men have stopped fighting on behalf of the group. Traditionally, before someone is recognized as a senior citizen, they must retire from active community service.

This ceremony honors elders who have made significant contributions to the community and now deserve the title of senior citizen. The festival happens every four to five years, depending on when the next age range retires. It is a three-day event: the first day is for preparation, and the second and third days are the main celebration. It usually happens between December 26 and December 31.

The reason we don't experience a lot of war like before is that the Festival now happens after the age range finishes one Important project development, such as a road, school, or borehole. The retirement age is usually 60 years and above. They do it during the Christmas period, when many people return to the village.

Because the celebration lasts three days, on the first day, the age groups would parade through the community. Women would wear lace wrappers and blouses with head ties. Men would wear George wrappers with a T-shirt or traditional Ishi agu, along with a walking stick. The parade is enjoyable and colourful.

They dance to the sounds of drums, gongs, flutes, and songs. The second day is to hand over the project built to the community. The project can be a school, a borehole, a road, or anything that benefits the people. The third day is the final celebration, full of serious dancing, masquerade displays, songs, and entertainment.

The families in the age group build a marquee (they call it 'efe' in Ohafia) that they decorate with George materials. Inside the efe, they serve drinks, kola nut, food and other gifts to visitors. Visitors would still donate money, which would be recorded in a visitor's book, and later share an account with the community.

They decorate the place like a living room, sometimes with a big picture of the celebrant at the front of the tent. Each age range leader leads the dance with their people. From the market, they march down until they reach the new project building.

This festival is very important because it helped the community develop infrastructure when the government was unable to. Igba Uche is a once-in-a-lifetime celebration for people who participate. The event was managed by a committee headed by the Eze council, and representatives from all the villages attended to join in the planning.

Importance and Tourism Potentials of 'Igba Uche' Cultural Festival in Ohafia

Research shows that the Festival brings honor to the elders for their service to the community, and they give thanks to God for protection, blessings, and long life. Apart from the celebration, the Festival brings development to the community because it boosts the local economy.

Local sellers who sell traditional craft, food and Souvenirs make plenty of money. Transporters and hotel businesses also benefit as visitors come in from different places. The money that they make would circulate in the community and uplift the standards of living.

Religiously. The festival is tied to warriors who survive during slave raids and fight dangerous animals. The Igba Uche title is given to people who have achieved greatness in their lifetime. It also gives people the opportunity to pray Chi, as Eze in council prays with kolanut and dry gin for the new age range and Festival guests.

There is always Entertainment: masquerades, cultural dancers, music, and jokes. Preparation for the dance begins two months before the event so that everyone can learn the steps and the song well. The main idea behind the Festival is to bring people together and honor those who deserve it. It brings joy and happiness, as people from different backgrounds meet and exchange ideas.

Socially and culturally, the Igba Uche Festival promotes a good life and right living, reminding people about Ohafia traditions, norms, and culture, which can be easily forgotten due to Western influence. Local dishes like Otto (water yam porridge), Ofe Okazi (Okazi soup), Okazi agworoagwo, Ofe Achara, Akpuruakpu Egusi, Abacha, and pounded yam are served.

During the celebration, guests from home and abroad attend, and prominent Ohafia sons and daughters always support the Festival. The event helped strengthen the community bond and encouraged more development. Each age range is involved in a commission project, such as boreholes, schools, health centers, and halls.

The festival gives Ohafia a good reputation and also preserves their culture. Students and researchers come to study Ohafia culture through the Festival. It also shows the multiplier effect in the local economy, resulting in more jobs, better infrastructure, and more business opportunities.

Contributions of 'Igba Uche' Cultural Festival to Tourism Development in Ohafia

Festivals are important for tourism development both locally and internationally. The Igba Uche Festival plays a significant role in the growth of tourism in Ohafia. It always showcases their beliefs, Values and behavior to visitors. The local economy they boosted through the sale of food, drinks, crafts, performances, and other activities during the Festival.

The Festival always attracts Visitors from different parts of the country, who come to witness the rich Culture of the people. It always gives people a chance to study and enjoy the cultural life of Ohafia. Visitors are free to mingle with locals, build relationships, and enjoy entertainment.

For tourism to succeed, a destination area must have certain key features, such as uniqueness, accessibility, and interesting attractions.

Igba Uche Festival has all these qualities because Ohafia people know how to package and brand their festival well.

According to Dychkovskyy and Ivanov (2020), festivals can help build a destination's image, promote rebranding, and establish a good reputation. The planning of the Festival always involves every village that sends representatives, and they oversee cultural displays to ensure that everything goes smoothly.

Before the main day, they always publicize the Festival through radio jingles, handbills and billboards. They even send letters to government bodies, such as the Abia State Tourism Board. Although some roads are still in poor condition, most roads are accessible to tourists.

Security is handled by local vigilantes and government security forces, such as police and the army, to ensure that everybody is safe. Hotels, guesthouses, and restaurants are around the Festival area to cater to tourists. A good mobile network is available to help tourists communicate easily.

Essential facilities like water, health centers, markets, and good roads are available, making the Festival area always conducive for visitors. The government and prominent Ohafia people always support the provision of these amenities.

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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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