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Igwa Nshi Eke: *A Thrilling Celebration of Igbo Culture and Resilience*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
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**Igwa Nshi festival enlivens Eke,
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Igwa Nshi Eke: A Thrilling Celebration of Igbo Culture and Resilience

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In the lively villages of Eke, a vibrant community in Udi Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria, and a central role of the Waawa people—pulsing with the deep beat of drums and the spirited dance of masquerades under the July sun. This is the Igwa Nshi Eke Festival, a captivating cultural event that transforms Eke into a stage of tradition, unity, and historical pride. Picture thousands gathering at Amankwo Square, the air filled with the sound of traditional chants and the aroma of local snacks like okpa wawa and jìgbo, as the community celebrates its heritage—held annually in mid-July, this festival is a thrilling showcase of Igbo culture. It's a time when Eke shines, drawing locals, diaspora, and cultural enthusiasts to witness a celebration that honours past victories and fosters community spirit.

01

A Tradition Born from Triumph and Tradition

The Igwa Nshi Eke Festival, also known as Egwu Abia, has its roots in the rich history of the Eke people, a community made up of five villages in Udi LGA. Oral traditions suggest it began centuries ago as a celebration of victory over neighbouring towns like Ebe, Egede, Afa, and others, who waged internecine warfare against Eke, possibly over ancestral lands. The festival's name, "Igwa Nshi," may translate to "drum of Nshi" or "dance of strength," reflecting the use of drumming as a ritual to summon protective spirits, a practice tied to a native

doctor's intervention that helped Eke reclaim its settlement. Celebrated annually in mid-July—often around July 15, as seen in 2022—it aligns with the harvest season, a time of reflection and renewal.

Historically, the festival involved spiritual rites, including sacrifices to mutate elephants against enemies, a practice abandoned with the advent of Christianity, which now dominates Eke with nearly 90% Catholic adherence. The community adapted Igwa Nshi into a cultural carnival, retaining the drumming and dancing while shedding traditional rituals. This evolution highlights Eke's resilience, turning a wartime strategy into a unifying cultural event that brings scattered indigenes home.

02

Preparing for the Cultural Carnival

Preparation begins in early July. Families gather resources for the festivities, with women cooking local snacks like okpa wawa (bambara nut pudding) and jigbo (African salad), while men tune drums of all sizes—abia, ekwe, and others—for the grand performance. The community sets the date, often declared by Imama village upon sighting the new moon, with Nshi Umuaka (children's day) a week before the main event for seniors.

The days before build excitement with rehearsals and community clean-ups, welcoming indigenes returning from Enugu, other cities of Nigeria and abroad. By mid-July, Eke is alive—streets decorated, homes open, and hearts ready for an eight-day celebration that blends ancient pride with modern joy.

03

Eight Days of Drums, Dance, and Unity

The Igwa Nshi Festival spans eight days, peaking around July 10th-25th. It begins with Nshi Umuaka, a children's event, followed a week later by the main celebration at Amankwo Square. The festivities start with the beating of drums, a tradition that once summoned protective spirits, now a cultural spectacle. Men dominate the drumming, their energy captivating the crowd, while women and girls dance skillfully, showcasing their elegance in gorgeous dresses and jewelry, often seeking eligible bachelors amidst the festivities.

Over 5,000 spectators gather as masquerades and dancers perform, their movements synchronized to the drumbeats. The elderly, like an 80-year-old woman dancing in a wheelchair in 2023, add a touching layer of continuity. Guests enjoy local snacks, and the event fosters reunions, with indigenes sharing stories of Eke's past. It ends with a final display, the community reflecting on its heritage, often extending into evening celebrations.

04

A Festival with Purpose and Challenges

Igwa Nshi is Eke's cultural lifeline. The drumming and dances connect the living to their victorious ancestors, reinforcing Igbo values of resilience and community. It unites the five villages, pulling indigenes home and attracting tourists who marvel at its thrilling displays. The festival also boosts local pride, with leaders like Osita Okechukwu, DG of Voice of Nigeria, praising its role as a unifying factor in 2019.

Economically, it spurs tourism, filling markets, though it faces challenges. The 2020 cancellation due to COVID-19 and past security concerns highlight vulnerabilities, with calls for vigilance against external threats. Some Christian factions question its spiritual past, but Eke's people see it as a cultural celebration, not a ritual, adapting to maintain its spirit with enhanced security.

05

Eke: A Town of History and Heart

Eke, part of Udi LGA, is a historic Igbo community near Enugu, known for its cultural depth and resilience after wartime displacement. With five villages and a legacy of overcoming adversity, the Igwa Nshi Festival amplifies this heritage, drawing visitors to its vibrant streets.

Tourists love the festival's energy—drums, dances, and local cuisine—pairing well with nearby Enugu's attractions. For Eke, it's a chance to shine, a thrilling reminder of its roots.

06

A Festival That Endures

As the drums fade and the dances end, Igwa Nshi leaves Eke glowing. It's a victory hymn, a reunion, and a cultural triumph all in one. In a changing world, this festival holds firm—a testament to Igbo resilience. This July, the rites will resume, the drums will beat, and Eke will welcome all. If you're in Enugu State, follow the sound—you'll find a celebration that's pure magic.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odiike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explores ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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