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Ito Ogbo Festival of Obosi: *Honoring Longevity, Heritage, and Intergenerational Unity in Igbo Culture*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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The Ito Ogbo Festival is a colourful and important event that resonates big with the Obosi people who reside in Idemili North Local Government Area, Anambra State. They do it every three years to celebrate people that had reached 80 years and above, and to bring everybody together in unity. The festival doesn't just celebrate old age, it also shows that Obosi people value their culture, long life, and togetherness. The festival has been running for over 500 years and has now evolved into a major celebration that brings the Obosi people, both at home and abroad, together in joy and pride.

Obosi is a town with a large population; according to the 2006 census, it had around 140,000 residents. The town has a rich culture, and many of its residents have succeeded in various aspects of life. Obosi is at the heart of Anambra, and it's a cultural centre in Igbo land. They have many festivals, including Olisa, Idemili, Obiora/Iwaji (also known as the New Yam Festival), and the largest of all, Ito Ogbo.

The festival began over 500 years ago and is part of the Igbo age-grade system. For the Obosi age grade, they help identify who will celebrate people between the ages of 80 and 82 during the festival year. The celebration is like a big birthday party for the elders, and they do have titles like Ogbueshi (for men) and Ogbueshi (for women) to show that they have reached a respected age.

Instead of mourning or crying over death, Ito Ogbo celebrates long life. In a country like Nigeria, where life is not easy, reaching 80 years

is a significant blessing. Obosi people believed that a long life is a sign that God has blessed you. And then they used the festival to thank God and appreciate what the elders have done in the community. It also prepares them to cross to the next life with happiness instead of sadness.

Every three years, Obosi turns to Carnival Town, where they hold the Ito Ogbo Festival. This celebration usually takes place in Afo Adike Square or Obosi Village Square. The planning is handled by different committees that ensure tradition is followed. In recent years, they have also added health and safety rules, such as COVID-19 protocols, for 2021.

The festival has plenty of events that lead to the main celebration:

1. Pre-festival activities: Before the main day, Obosi hits so hot with activities like a football match, a beauty contest, a seminar, and a masquerade show. All these do help build excitement, especially for the youth.
2. Main Ceremony: This is the main highlight of the day. People that had gotten to 80 would wear beautiful traditional clothes, They usually come from one specific age group, like Oforka Age Grade in 2024. They usually wear the same type of dress to show unity and respect. The Igwe of Obosi, Chidubem Iweka, would give them the title and a red cap to confirm that they are respected elders. They would also collect certificates that show they have officially become senior citizens.
3. Cultural performances. Music, Dance, and Masquerades are plenty, Traditional high-life bands play very interesting music, and dance groups perform serious steps. A gun salute also follows to hail the elders.
4. Communal feasting and speeches: People will eat together, including family, friends, guests, leaders, and the Igwe. They would give speeches to talk about unity, peace, and the importance of

culture. In 2021, even officials from the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture came to represent Minister Laim Mohamed to show their support.

5. Exemption from communal duties: After the festival, the elders who were celebrated wouldn't pay the community levy again or do hard work like before. It is the community that will say, 'Thank you for your contribution. '

The festival is not about religion, so whether you're a Christian, Muslim, or traditionalist, you can participate. Unity is the most important thing.

Ito ogbo has plenty of meaning in culture, social life, and even the economy:

1. Cultural Preservation: It shows that Obosi people know very well how to value their culture and their work to keep them alive. Even as they modernised it a little, they never changed what made it special. The world has taken notice, and Obosi has tried to get UNESCO to recognise it as cultural heritage.

2. Celebration of longevity: For a country where people struggle with sickness, insecurity, and hardship, to live to 80 years is a very big deal. Ito Ogbo celebrates these blessings and gives respect to elders who have experience and wisdom. Igwe Iweka even quoted a proverb, which says, "A child close to an elder will learn better things."

3. Social cohesion and unity: The festival brings peace. Even if people have family problems or political quarrel, Ito Ogbo would unite them. People from abroad do return to celebrate and reconnect with their roots.

4. Economic and Tourism Potential: Ito Ogbo brings visitors, both Nigerians and foreigners. As they arrive, they buy food, crafts, souvenirs, and more. The town does benefit from the money and exposure. In 2021, the federal government even promised to help

raise the festival to a national and global level.

5. Empowerment of Elders: The way Obosi treated their elders with respect and even removed levy from them after 80 shows that they value old age. One ex-governorship candidate, Chijioke Ndubisi, said that Nigeria needs a policy to care for elders like this.

Even if Ito Ogbo is still strong, they face challenges from things like modern lifestyle, people migrating, and Western influence. But Obosi people change little things to make young people enjoy them too, like beauty contests and football games. Social media and YouTube have helped broadcast to people who were unable to attend in person.

COVID-19 presented another challenge, but Obosi still hosted the 2021 edition with all safety measures in place. The festival continued despite everything.

But the town still has other issues. In 2023, they said cult problems in youth who are not attending school had increased, but they also helped inspire the young people to choose culture and learning over violence. The elders could use this festival to talk to the youths and guide them.

2021 FESTIVAL: They celebrated 131 Elders. People from the Federal Ministry of Culture attended. They sold program booklets with old photos and information. It happened in Obosi Stadium.

2024 FESTIVAL: Oforka, Age Grade, were honoured. Governor Soludo and the Big Names attended. They discussed better security and how the festival could improve its infrastructure. Five other towns in Anambra copied Obosi's style of elder celebration.

Even other Igbo communities started their version of Ito Ogbo. If UNESCO accepted it, the whole world would know Obosi as the cultural capital.

Ito Ogbo Festival in Oboese is a big celebration of old age, unity and

culture. It honours elders with dance, music, and tradition. It brings communities together, connects people abroad with their roots, and also boosts tourism. Even with modern challenges, the festival continued to grow strong. As Igwe Iweka said in 2024, “Ito Ogbo Obosi is a gift to Nigeria and UNESCO”. It shows that this festival is something that everybody in the world could admire and learn from.

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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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