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Nwaotam Festival Opobo: *A Spectacular Celebration of Igbo Culture*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**A colourful display of attire by
Opobo natives at the Nwaotam
Festival 2024. - Opobo TV**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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Nwaotam Akirika-Uku Ndoki 2021, Photographed by Ndoki Nmanma Nu Media

Picture the coastal waters of Opobo Town, Rivers State, Nigeria, shimmering under the New Year's sun as the air fills with the rhythmic splash of boats, the vibrant chants of masquerades, and the festive hum of a community united. This is the Nwaotam Festival, an annual cultural extravaganza that transforms Opobo into a dazzling hub of tradition, history, and maritime pride. Picture colorful regattas racing across the Opobo River, masquerades dancing through the streets, and families feasting on yam dishes—held every December 31 to January 1, this festival is a vibrant celebration of the Ubani (Ibani) people's heritage, blending ancestral rites with a modern carnival spirit. It's a time when Opobo shines, drawing locals, diaspora, and tourists into a rich tapestry of Igbo and coastal culture.



The Ejiesile Movement of Nigeria performing energetic dances as part of the Nwaotam Festival celebrations — Opobo TV.

01

A Tradition Born from Migration and Resilience

The Nwaotam Festival traces its origins to the Ndoki, an Igbo subgroup with deep ties to present-day Abia and Rivers States. Historical accounts suggest it began among the Ndoki, influenced by the ancient deity Otam, a spiritual figure central to their rituals. The festival migrated to Opobo in the 19th century with Ozurumba Mbanaso, later known as King Jaja of Opobo, who founded the kingdom in 1870 as his personal estate after fleeing a civil war in Bonny. Born a slave from Amaigbo, Imo State, Jaja rose to lead the Opubo Anna Pepple Chieftaincy House, establishing Opobo as a palm oil trading powerhouse. The Nwaotam, meaning “Descendants of Otam deity” or “Children of Otam” in local dialect, evolved into a thanksgiving for the yam harvest and a renewal rite, reflecting the Ibani’s maritime and agrarian roots.



Nwaotam—Mkpajekiri, Ubani Natives at the Palace of Jaja of Opobo.

Celebrated annually from December 31 to January 1, shifting to January 2 if December 25 falls on a Sunday, Nwaotam aligns with the New Year, blending indigenous traditions with the Christian holiday season. This fusion highlights Opobo's adaptability, maintaining its cultural essence while embracing a broader festive spirit, a practice also seen in Bonny, Andoni, and other Ubani-influenced areas.

02

Preparing for the Maritime Spectacle

Preparation kicks off in early December. Families gather yams, the festival's staple, and women cook hearty dishes—pounded yam, pepper soup, and palm wine—while men ready boats for the regatta, a highlight of the event. Masquerades are crafted in secret, using raffia,

feathers, and painted masks to honor ancestral spirits, a nod to the Ottam cult's legacy. The community, guided by the King and chiefs, sets the date, ensuring it honours tradition and the New Year calendar.

The days before build excitement with preliminary dances and boat preparations, and the town welcomes indigenes returning from Port Harcourt, Abuja, Lagos, or abroad. By December 31, Opobo is alive—streets decorated, boats polished, and hearts ready for a two-day celebration blending ancient rites with modern joy.

03

Two Days of Regatta, Dance, and Unity

The Nwaotam Festival unfolds over December 31 and January 1, starting with a morning ceremony where the King, currently HRM. Dandeson Douglas Jaja V, offers prayers and the first yam to ancestors and God, a ritual of gratitude for the harvest. The yam, roasted and shared, marks the eating season's start, fostering communal bonds.



A colourful display, with drummers and dancers entertaining spectators along the Opobo.

The streets then erupt with the boat regatta, a thrilling race across the Opobo River, where enthusiastic men row for first place, cheered by crowds on shore. Masquerades parade through the town, their dances a mix of grace and energy, delighting children who chase them and adults who toss coins in appreciation. Cultural performances—traditional dances and storytelling—fill the day, showcasing Opobo’s artistic spirit. Food stalls serve yam dishes and palm wine, extending the festivities into the night with music and laughter, a vibrant crossover into the New Year.

04

A Festival with Purpose and Challenges

Nwaotam is Opobo’s cultural lifeline. The regatta and masquerades connect the living to their maritime and ancestral past, reinforcing Ibani values of gratitude and community. It unites the kingdom, pulling indigenes home and attracting tourists who marvel at its

unique displays. The festival also boosts local pride, with leaders like the King promoting cultural preservation amidst modern influences.



A display of culture and spirituality. Connect Opobo.

Economically, it spurs tourism, filling markets and hotels, though it faces challenges. The Christmas overlap raises questions from some Christian factions about its spiritual elements, but Opobo's people see it as a cultural celebration, not idolatry. Security ensures safety, addressing rare incidents, ensuring the festival's growth as a regional highlight.

Opobo: A Kingdom of History and Harmony

Opobo, 40 kilometers east of Port Harcourt, is a historic island kingdom founded by an Igbo man, King Jaja in 1870, named after King Opubo Pepple. Known for its palm oil trade and maritime heritage, it's a cultural hub with ties to Bonny and Andoni. The Nwaotam Festival amplifies this legacy, drawing visitors to its vibrant waters and streets.



The Mkpa Nwaotam society on diaplay, captivating the audience with its symbolic performance. Opobo TV.

Tourists love the festival's energy, regattas, food, and masquerade displays, pairing well with nearby Bonny's LNG sites. For Opobo, it's a chance to shine, a spectacular reminder of its roots.

A Festival That Endures

As the boats dock and the masquerades retreat, Nwaotam leaves Opobo glowing. It's a thanksgiving, a reunion, and a cultural triumph all in one. In a changing world, this festival holds firm, a testament to Igbo and Ibani resilience. Next December 31, the rites will resume, the races will flow, and Opobo will welcome all. If you're in Rivers State, follow the water, you'll find a celebration that's pure magic.

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- Medium. (2024, August 2). Opobo Nwaotam Festival: A vibrant festival in Opobo, Rivers State, Nigeria.
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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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