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Ohafia: *The Warrior Spirit and Cultural Legacy of Southeastern Igbo*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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OHAFIA

Ohafia: The Warrior Spirit and Cultural Legacy of Southeastern Igbo

By Chukwunwike Ossai · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com

Ohafia is a proud community in Abia State, Nigeria, that people in Igboland are familiar with due to its warrior history, strong traditions, and cultural contributions. The place is located in a hilly area in southeastern Nigeria, and it is popular for a war dance called “Ikpirikpi Ogu”, strong stories, and warrior pride. It is through oral stories, colonial records, and modern studies that people know the full story of Ohafia—one story of courage, unity, and adaptation. This article will discuss their history, politics, war lifestyle, economy, culture, and how Ohafia has now walked into modern times.

Ohafia story began from the migration of Igbo people, based on what is said in their oral history. They came from a place close to Nri or Arochukwu, led by one warrior called Oha or Akanu. They entered the hilly land and later settled in Ohafia, building small villages that eventually joined together as one big clan.

Even though archaeologists had limited evidence, stories showed that the Ohafia people combined well with groups like the Aro, Ibibio, and Cross River people. In the 1600s, they had already established a strong military society and were linked to the Aro Confederacy in both war and business. The Cross River closed to them, aiding trade and giving them an advantage in war.

Ohafia still had roles during the slave trade time—warriors from Ohafia helped the Aro people capture people for slavery. Even if this part of history isn’t interesting, it shows that Ohafia had a serious influence during that time. British records and research still talk

about how strong Ohafia warriors are.

Village heads and a council of elders rule Ohafia. The place has 25 villages, each with its own Eze Ogo (village head). The full community was under Udumeze, the top traditional ruler.

Socially, Ohafia had age-grade groups, secret societies, and warrior groups. One large group is the Ikpirikpi age-grade, composed of brave men who have demonstrated strength or served the community. They provide law enforcement, protection, and event planning services.

The Ohafia secret society, like the Ekpe, borrowed from the Cross River side, helping to keep the law and tradition. Even though it was mostly men inside this group, women still had power. Groups like Ikporo Ohafia do represent women in trade and social matters.

When British people arrived, they tried to change traditional ways by appointing warrant chiefs. But the Ohafia warriors totally disagreed—they still maintained their power. Now, traditional rulers do work with the government system.



Ohafia masquerades

Ohafia isn't complete without mentioning war. The people are real warriors who have respect. They even call themselves "Ohafia Igbo Ogu" (Ohafia that knows war). One outstanding thing was head-hunting—to cut off the heads of their enemies after battle as a sign of victory. It is not repeated, but the story remains in the culture.

The Ikpirikpi Ogu war dance is the biggest show of Ohafia warriors' pride. The dance is full of movement, flips, music, and a war act that shows courage. It happens during a festival, a burial, or any big celebration. The dance still teaches people about the story of Ohafia.

Ohafia warriors helped the Aro Confederacy in the past, especially in controlling war and trade. The warriors knew about bushes very well; they used a knife, a spear, and later a gun. It is not just a physical fight—Dibia (native doctor) also prays and prepares them spiritually.

Even young boys are trained from a young age how to fight and defend their people. War in Ohafia is not just physical—it has spirit

and community connection.



The Ohafia war dance "Iri Agha". An adult male carrying a headhunter's trophy (Oyaya) on his head." G.I. Jones, 1932-1939.

Before and even now, the Ohafia people survive mostly through farming, trading, and handicrafts. They grew yam, cassava, cocoyam, palm fruit, and other crops. The god of yam, they call Ifejioku, is still important, especially during Onwa Asaa (New Yam Festival).

Because they are closer to Cross River and have an Aro link, Ohafia does well in trading. They sell a variety of farm goods, including baskets, clothes, pots, and other items. During the slave trade, warriors also helped protect traders and even joined raids for business.

Handwork, such as weaving, blacksmithing, and woodwork, is also strong in Ohafia. They sold plenty of palm oil and kernel at that time. Even now, some parts of this market are still thriving.

Today, people in Ohafia have entered various fields, including business, teaching, and government work. Markets like Eke Ohafia are still busy, even though they are not as big as the ones at Onitsha. People who traveled to the UK, the US, and other places send money home—it helps community projects and culture.

Ohafia culture is a loaded package—dance, music, stories, and traditional life, all tied to the war spirit. People from there had really helped to mould Igbo culture.

The Ikpirikpi Ogu is the highest celebration of warrior spirit. Age-grade and warrior families do dancing at the big event. The dance comes with drums, flutes, and ogene (an iron gong). The thing is, stories act with their body—it shows how war happened and also honors old-time warriors. The dance has made its way to Nigerian festivals and even abroad.

Music like Igba (drum music) and Ukom (flute music by women) still rocks parties and events. Masquerades like Okonkwo and Egbele combine spirit, culture, and fun for people.

Ohafia people are good at storytelling. They have epic poems, songs, and proverbs that teach and entertain. Songs like Igu Afa do talk about brave warriors. Scholars like Philip Nsugbe wrote about this tradition in their book *Ohaffia: A Matrilineal Igbo People* (1974).

Modern Ohafia people have written books and have joined the academic world. They discuss identity, culture, and how to blend tradition with modern life. Groups like Ohafia Heritage Foundation collected stories, recorded them, and then placed them online.

Unlike most Igbo people, who typically follow their father's side only, Ohafia also has a matrilineal system—we call it "Ikun". People respect both the mother's and the father's sides. In Ohafia, a mother's family can give you land, a name, or a title. This culture shows that they know how to blend ideas from neighbors, like those in the Cross River area.



Photo: Ohafia, 1930s. G. I. Jones.

Ohafia in the Colonial and Postcolonial Eras

When the British people entered Igbo land, they clashed with Ohafia warriors during the Aro Expedition at (1901–1902). Even if Ohafia fought hard, they later fell under colonial rule. The British then placed warrant chiefs, and this caused problems.

Women from Ohafia refused to keep calm. They also participated in the 1929 Aba Women's Riot. Christianity then entered through Anglican and Presbyterian missionaries, but it did not replace the native beliefs. Schools came up to raise educated people who later joined the Nigerian independence movement.

During the Biafra War (1967–1970), Ohafia suffered again. They fought plenty of times, and businesses stopped. After the war, the people joined hands with those abroad once to rebuild their homes and restore their culture and life.

Ohafia Today: Challenges and Opportunities

Now we have entered the 21st century, Ohafia remains strong culturally, but challenges are still many. Youth ran to Aba, Lagos, and other cities. Traditional ways faded because of urban life, Pentecostal churches, and the Western mindset.

But there is still hope. People from Ohafia who are based abroad send money and support local growth. Groups like Ohafia Development Union built schools, clinics, and supported their culture. Festivals like Echera (new yam) pull people back home and keep tradition alive.

The story of Ohafia remains on the internet through things like Igbopedia, and research that is still going on. If tourism is packaged well, places like Udumeze Palace and the war dance arena could become tourist sites.

Ohafia is an example of Igbo strength, featuring warrior spirit, unity, and cultural power. From war-town to culture-town, Ohafia had passed down many things, but still stood strong. The war dance and matrilineal culture make them unique in Igbo land.

As they face modern challenges, Ohafia still shines by using their culture and people abroad. As one proverb said, “The power of a Warrior is not only in his sword but in his heart.” And truly, Ohafia heart is the people, story, and tradition—It is their biggest power.

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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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