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Okorobia:

The Role and Relevance of Young Men in Igbo Society from Tradition to Modern Times

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**Small boys masquerade in Ovim Village, Isu Ikwa Ato [Isuikwuato].”
- G. I. Jones, 1930s**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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Men of Emii showcasing music and dance display at the Okazi Emii Festival 2024 – Ou Travel and Tour.

The word “Okorobia” is a strong cultural word in Igbo land that carries a lengthy meaning. In Igbo society, especially among those living in riverine areas, such as Aboh, Onitsha, Ogba, and others. Means “a matured young man who’s not married or not become a full adult” in the eyes of society.

“Oko” means man or male, someone who has strength and energy. “Robia” comes from a single word that could mean “someone who’s coming up” or “someone who’s still growing.” Its combination with

“Oko” means “A man growing up has passed the level of a child, but still not a full man yet.

Therefore, “Okorobia” means a mature young man who is not yet married. The female side of this word is “Nwa Ada” or “Agbogho”; some dialects say “mgbotor,” meaning young girl or maiden.

In different Igbo places, the way “Okorobia” is said may change slightly, but the meaning remains the same. Some places will call it “Okoro”.

1. It shows someone is now responsible. Okorobia is a stage in the life of every young man to learn their responsibility, strength and how to contribute to society. From 15- 30 years, they start helping out at home, farm, fishing, trading and even learning handwork.



Photo with no context, likely Igbo men from Onicha (Onitsha), photographed by Henry Crosse in the late 19th century. MAA Cambridge.

2. Gender Matters As Igbo society look at men and women differently,

Okorobia has his roles: i. He must show strength, courage and respect
ii. He could join others to protect the village or help in festivals
iii. He will prepare to marry and take care of the family.

Women have their own role too- like market, marriage and family care- but all of them have respect in their own way.

3. Respect and Recognition If anyone calls you “Okorobia” it means you’ve not only left childhood, but people are also expecting you to act responsible. Elders will address you with respect, and you are also supposed to be involved in village matters.

What Okorobia Does. i. Farm work: For upland Igbos, they plant yams in river areas. Is fishing and trading. ii. Business: Okorobia sells in the market, joins the boat trade, or follows people to learn a trade. iii. Apprentice: Today, most Okorobias now learns mechanics, tailoring or computer work.

Small boys masquerade in Ovim Village, Isu Ikwa Ato [Isuikwuato].” – G. I. Jones, 1930s
2. Community Work i Age Group: Okorobia is included in the age group that does road work, settles little problems or plans festivals. ii. Cultural Events: Wrestling Masquerade, New Yam Festival, Boat Race- they play a big role. iii. Security: They help protect the community against attackers.

3. Spiritual Role. They mustn’t necessarily hold Ofo (traditional staff of justice), but they learn from elders and they help in ritual or festival matters. Especially in the Riverine area. Okorobia helps worship river gods or take part in water-related rituals.

1. For Greetings. If you see a young man, you have to greet: “Okorobia, how you doing”? In the fishing area: “Okorobia, are you fishing today?”?.

2. For Proverbs “Okorobia was never at home when the goat decides to eat leaf”- The Young man is supposed to act sharp. “Okorobia is the strength of the community” Young men are important for progress.



An Igbo man photographed by British government anthropologist Northcote Thomas in the 1910s, the markings on his face are known as ichi which is worn by men and young boys as part of initiation into the the Nze na Ozo society, a society originally consisting of priests. The marks were also referred to as ogba ubi, farm furrows.

3. In Different Areas i. In Anoma side (Delta): it is used but sometimes young men are called “Okoro “. ii. In Ogba and Aboh, Okorobia is common, especially in greeting and trade conversation. iii. In Onitsha, the Boat worked when Okonkwo was in the market. iv. In Owerri, Ngwa: They linked Okorobia with farming.

No matter the area, the meaning remains “Young man growing up, must develop into full manhood.

1. Education and city life. Most Okorobia now go to school and also learn to work in the city. Even abroad (UK, US, Canada), there is still that Igbo pride boasting about being an Okorobia.

2. Culture Still Exists. Even in church and modern life, as well as in villages and festivals, the word is still used. In diaspora, some young men are proud to call themselves Okorobia.

3. Challenges Problems are many: lack of money, lack of jobs, and expensive marriage. Oil problems in river areas stopped fishing and farming. So, Okorobia is now looking for a side hustle.

4. Ofo and Okorobia. Even if the elders hold an Ofo, young men begin to learn its meaning. They assist elders during rituals, and swear with Ofo to display their innocence.

Okorobia is not just a word. It has to do with stages of life and respect. In Igbo land, whether upland or riverine, Okorobia means hope, work and community strength. From Aboh to Onitsha, they represent the future. Even with problems in modern life, the Okorobia spirit remains strong. They are the engine that drives Igbo society forward.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chukwunwike Ossai

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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