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Owerre-Olubor: *Cultural Heritage and the Ogbanigbe Festival*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Owerre Olubor indigenes with white chalk(nzu) rubbed on their body during Ogbanigbe festival

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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OWERRE-OLUBOR

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Owerre Olubor, Ogbanigbe festival

In the heart of Anioma, the Owerre-Olubor community of Delta State is a repository of rich traditions that have withstood the test of time. Located in the Ika North East Local Government Area near Agbor, the community celebrates the Ogbanigbe Festival (Ime-Egwu), a cultural celebration representing their heritage, communal identity, and spiritual beliefs. This festival represents an occasion for eating, drinking, and connecting to the community's foundations and agricultural cycles.

Historical Foundations of Owerre-Olubor

The history of Owerre-Olubor begins with the foundations of its patriarch. According to oral traditions preserved through generations, the father of Owerre was Olubor, from whom the community got its name. Owerre gave birth to five children who have become the progenitors of the villages that make up the community of present-day Owerre-Olubor.

Oral traditions describe three of Owerre's children as "legitimate children" (Onofo, Agboma, and Etiti), while the other two—Ese and Ikpulu—complete the ancestral lineage. All five descendants are acknowledged as fundamental to the community's structure.

These five ancestral figures gave rise to the five villages that collectively form Owerre-Olubor:

- Umuikpuru
- Umuagboma
- Etiti
- Umuonofo
- Umuese (also known as Umude-ese)

"Umu—" in the village names means "children of" or "descendants of" in Igbo language derivatives, pointing to the lineage connection of the founding fathers in Owerre Olubor. They all continue to influence the community's social structure, political organization, and ceremonies.

Evolution and Origin of the Ogbanigbe Festival

The Ogbanigbe Festival, alternatively called Ime-Egwu, is a fascinating example of cultural adaptation. The festival started as a remembrance of the special funeral dance that followed the remains

of Diagbor, who was the father of Owerre, after his death at Ejeme, where he was receiving treatment. This funeral process, which carried his corpse back to Owerre-Olubor for burial, included special rituals and ceremonial moves that would form the foundation of the Ogbanigbe Festival.

Oral tradition describes the time as “thousands of years.” However, it’s likely a figurative expression showing many generations. The funeral rites and dance moves associated with Diagbor’s burial underwent an important transformation. Via continuity processes and cultural change, what started as burial rituals gradually evolved to become a broader cultural celebration. The dance and rites once used specially to accompany Diagbor’s remains evolved into the more comprehensive celebration now known as Ime-Egwu.

The timing and significance of the festival shifted to coincide with agricultural cycles, specifically the maturation of new yams. This change reportedly took effect after the inception of “ogwudes,” a term that likely refers to a historical period, a specific ritual innovation, or perhaps a cultural authority that influenced the community’s ceremonial practices.

This transformation from funeral remembrance to harvest celebration shows the dynamic nature of cultural traditions, which often evolve to meet changing community needs while maintaining connections to historical foundations. The festival’s adaptation to align with agricultural life reflects the central importance of farming in the community’s subsistence and cultural life.

02

Agricultural Significance and Spiritual Dimensions

Oral tradition characterized Ogbanigbe as a “jubilant dance and

celebration”, remembering the community’s survival through “the second part of the ordeal of farming season” for hundreds of years. This shows that the festival marks an important transition point in the agricultural calendar, likely the successful navigation of challenging growing periods and the celebration of harvest.

The connection to agricultural cycles places it among a wider pattern of harvest festivals that are common throughout Nigeria and much of Africa. As noted by the religious scholar John Mbiti in his 1975 work “The Prayer of Africa,” harvesting is typically linked with festivals during which prayers are tendered and ritual incantations are performed by traditional religious authorities, including priests, diviners, elders, and family heads.

The role of the “Edofi” shrine in the celebration of Ogbanigbe emphasizes the spiritual dimensions of the festival. During Ogbanigbe, the five villages of Owerre-Olubor assemble to offer thanksgiving at the shrine. Oral history of Owerre Olubor indicates that the Edofi was brought from the Ukwuani area of Kwale. The shrine’s external origin suggests historical migration patterns, cultural diffusion, or alliance-building that influenced the community’s spiritual practices. The continuity of this shrine’s role during the Ogbanigbe festival highlights the persistence of traditional spiritual practices even as the festival’s wider context has evolved.

03

Festival Organization and Community Structure

The celebration of the Ogbanigbe festival follows well-organised ceremonial processes that reinforce and reflect the community’s social organization. During the Ogbanigbe festival, each of the five villages gathers at the Chief’s palace before visiting the chief, who holds the title of “Olubor,” associated with the first son in the ancestral lineage.

Importantly, the Olubor title and other chieftaincy and kingship positions operate on a rotational basis within the community. This system of rotational leadership serves multiple important social functions:

- It shares responsibility and prestige among various lineages and villages
- It prevents the concentration of authority and power within a single family line
- It ignites communal bonds via shared ceremonial authority
- It acknowledges the equal standing of the various ancestral villages within the community structure

Such rotational systems are common in many Igbo traditional Nigerian communities as a model for ensuring equitable governance, maintaining social cohesion across generations and preventing conflicts between lineages.

04

Musical Traditions and Ceremonial Expression

Music and dance form integral parts of the Ogbanigbe Festival. Different drums are used for the traditional dances during the celebration. In many Nigerian festivals, different drums may be associated with:

- Specific ancestral deities
- Particular age grades and social groups within the community
- Different stages or rituals within the festival
- Special dance moves form with varied ceremonial importance

Drumming in the Ogbanigbe festival in general connects to its origins, in the burial process for Diagbor and its contemporary function as a jubilant harvest celebration. The transformation of these musical

traditions from funeral to harvest celebration shows the broader evolution of the festival itself.

05

Contemporary Relevance and Cultural Preservation

The continued celebration of the Ogbanigbe festival in contemporary times shows the strength of traditional cultural practices even in an era of rapid urbanization and religious changes. As with many traditional festivals, Ogbanigbe likely serves multiple functions in the community today:

- Connection to ancestral heritage
- Providing occasions for togetherness and conflict resolution
- Marking agricultural cycles and celebrating bountiful harvests
- Creating avenues for the transmission of cultural knowledge to younger generations

In Nigeria, where many traditional practices face challenges from religious conversion to urbanization, the continuity of festivals like Ogbanigbe represents a form of cultural preservation and resilience by maintaining these ceremonial practices.

SOURCES

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