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The Afia Olu Festival of Nnewi: *A Vibrant Celebration of Igbo Harvest and Heritage*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Festivities from the third day of the 2023 Afia Olu Festival in Umudim Nnewi, highlighting communal unity and cultural pride. Photo by Ou Travel and Tour.

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Afia Olu Festival Nnewi 2024, Photo by Ou Travel and Tour.

A thriving economic hub in Anambra State, Nigeria, renowned for having the highest concentration of billionaires per square mile in the country. Every August, its streets come alive in a vibrant display of colour, music, and rich traditions. This is Nnewi, a commercial powerhouse, and every year, it hosts the Afia Olu Festival—also known as Afia-Olù—a joyous celebration of the new yam harvest that’s been a cornerstone of Igbo culture for over a century. Picture the Igwe, the king, slicing the first yam, masquerades dancing to the beat of drums, and families sharing laughter over plates of pounded yam and bitter leaf soup. Spanning four native days, this festival isn’t just a feast—it’s a heartfelt thanksgiving, a cultural showcase, and a homecoming that pulls Nnewi’s sons and daughters from across the globe back to their roots.

01

A Tradition That Honours the Land

The Afia Olu Festival, often called the Nnewi New Yam Festival, dates back to around 1918, though some oral histories suggest its roots stretch even further. It began in Akaboukwu village, near the towns of Ojoto and Ichi, before spreading to Nnewi’s four quarters—Uruagu, Nnewichi, Umudim, and Otoló. Back then, each quarter celebrated separately, but over time, they united to make it a shared event, a symbol of strength and togetherness. The festival honours Ufiojioku (Ifejioku), the deity of land fertility, and offers thanks to God and ancestors for a bountiful harvest. Yams, the Igbo’s staple crop, aren’t just food here—they’re a symbol of wealth, abundance, and survival.

Held over four native days—Eke, Orie, Afor, and Nkwo—the festival kicks off in August, often the first week, with preparations starting months ahead. It’s a time when no one in Nnewi eats new yam until the Igwe, currently H.R.H. Igwe Kenneth Orizu III, declares it fit during the festival. Before the event, old yams are eaten up or tossed

out, and the “Onuakuku” ritual—dropping hoes and machetes—marks the end of the farming season. It’s a sacred pause, a moment to reflect on the land’s gifts and pray for the year ahead.



An impressive masquerade performance during the 2022 Afia Olu Festival, showcasing the vibrant traditions of Nnewi. Nairaland Forum.

02

Preparing for the Celebration

The lead-up to Afia Olu is a flurry of activity. Farmers bring in the first yams, their golden tubers a point of pride. Women sweep village squares and gather ingredients—yams, bitter leaf, fish—for the feasts. Young girls learn traditional dances, dyeing their bodies with patterns and dressing in bright wrappers. Young men, called the “Oto Kolo,” join masquerade cults, preparing to perform as spirits of the past. They craft costumes in secret—raffia skirts, feathered masks, and carved faces painted in bold colours.

The Igwe’s palace hums with plans. Elders choose the best yams for the ceremonial cutting, while drummers tune their

instruments—ekwe, ubom, uyo, and the sharp ogene gong. The four quarters of Nnewi—Otoló, Uruagu, Umudim, and Nnewichi—each add their own touch, from wrestling matches to maiden dances. By the time Eke day arrives, the city's ready—roads packed with diaspora returning from Berlin, London, or New York, all eager to join the celebration.

03

Four Days of Festivity and Ritual

The Afia Olu Festival unfolds over four native days, each with its own rhythm. On Eke, the first day, the Igwe leads the “Iwaji” ceremony—scaling the first yam—at a central spot, now often Agbo-Edo due to urban changes. He offers the yam to God and ancestors, a thanksgiving for the harvest. Elders from each quarter present fowls in order of seniority—Otoló first, then Uruagu, Umudim, and Nnewichi. The chief priest of Edo, a deity of protection, parades the fowls before they're taken to the farm and sacrificed to Ufiojioku, ensuring the land's fertility for the next season.

Orie day brings cultural displays—girls dance in swirling wrappers, their movements graceful and proud. Afor day is the crowd favorite, an evening of masquerade drama. The Igwe invites the Ijele masquerade from Umueri, known as the king of masquerades in Anambra. Ijele is a family of four—Nne Ijele (the mother), Ijele Onuku (the father), the police, and the palm wine tapper. Nne Ijele steps out first, a beautiful figure with an ox tail and enamel plate, dancing to soft flute music. Ijele Onuku follows in chieftaincy regalia, his big face a sight to behold. Six Ijele police keep the crowd back as the royal drums—igba eze—play the Akunechenyi, the dance of kings. Seven cannon shots signal Ijele's majestic performance, a highlight that leaves everyone in awe.



A snapshot capturing the colorful “Ajofia Nnewi Masquerade”, cultural dances and ceremonial rites performed during the 2024 Afiaolu Festival in Nnewi. Photo credits: Pinterest.

Nkwo, the final day, wraps up with prayers and feasting. The Igwe, chief priest, and elders offer sacrifices to Edo for the safety of Nnewi’s children, home and abroad. Women cook pounded yam and bitter leaf soup, served at the palace to entertain guests. Each quarter’s masquerades—like Orinuli from Otolo or Ebu-Ebu from Nnewichi—perform one last time, rounding out the festival with a burst of energy.

04

Four Days of Festivity and Ritual

Afia Olu is more than a harvest party—it’s Nnewi’s cultural heartbeat. It keeps Igbo traditions alive, from the sacred yam rituals to the masquerade dances that channel ancestral spirits. It’s a time of unity, bridging the four quarters and pulling the diaspora back home. The festival also blends old and new—while rooted in pre-Christian beliefs, it’s embraced by Nnewi’s Christian majority, with events like a special

service at St. Mary's Anglican Cathedral in Uruagu kicking things off in 2017.

It's a boost for the city too. Tourists flock to see the masquerades and taste yam dishes, filling hotels and markets. Companies like Globacom have sponsored it, adding modern touches like concerts—think the 2011 Glo Rock N Rule show with stars like Eedris Abdulkareem. Leaders like Senator Ifeanyi Ubah and Governor Willie Obiano have attended, using it to connect with the people. But some worry it's losing its spark—urban growth has taken over traditional venues like Nkwo Triangle, and local participation has dipped, with calls for rebranding to keep it vibrant.

05

Nnewi: The Industrial Heart with a Cultural Soul

Nnewi, Anambra's second-largest city, sits 22 kilometers southeast of Onitsha, east of the Niger River. It's a commercial giant, home to billionaires like Cletus Ibeto and Innocent Chukwuma, and the largest motor spare parts market in West Africa. Split into Nnewi North and South, its core—Otolo, Uruagu, Umudim, and Nnewichi—holds tight to tradition despite the city's growth. Afia Olu taps into that history, a reminder of Nnewi's farming roots in a place now known for industry.

Visitors love the festival's energy—the music, the food, the chance to see Igbo culture up close. Pair it with Nnewi's markets or a trip to nearby Onitsha, and it's a cultural getaway that's hard to beat. For Nnewi, it's a moment to shine, showing the world that its heart still beats with tradition.

A Legacy That Endures

As the last masquerade dances off and the prayers fade, Afia Olu leaves Nnewi glowing. It's a thanksgiving, a reunion, and a cultural stand all in one. In a city racing toward modernity, this festival holds the line—a four-day love letter to Igbo heritage. Next August, the yams will ripen again, the drums will sound, and Nnewi will celebrate. If you're ever in Anambra, follow the music—you'll find a harvest party that's pure magic.

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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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