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The Aji Festival of Isobo Otaka: *A Celebration of Womanhood and Igbo Heritage in Cross River*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Women adorned with Nzu (chalk), symbolizing the spirituality of the festival, wearing various greenery leaves as they chant, dance, and clean the market in preparation for the Aji Festival in Isobo. Photo credit: Ekureku Hub.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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Girls posing at the Isobo, Aji Festival. Photograph by Hive.

Think of a quiet village tucked away in the lush greenery of Cross River State, Nigeria, where June arrives with a burst of colour, music, and the warm chatter of a close-knit community. This is Isobo Otaka, one of three Igbo-speaking villages in Obubra Local Government Area, and every year, it comes alive with the Aji Festival, a vibrant celebration of womanhood, heritage, and unity. Picture young women stepping out in their finest wrappers, drums pounding a lively beat, and the air thick with the scent of rice and yam dishes. Held in June, unlike the April celebrations of their Biko Biko and Ezomezo neighbors, this festival is a joyful rite of passage that ties the Isobo people to their Igbo roots and their Cross River home.

01

A Tradition Steeped in History

The Aji Festival has deep roots in the traditions of the Isobo people, an Igbo subgroup who've carved out a unique identity in Cross River. Long ago, it was a "fattening room" ceremony—a time when young girls, reaching womanhood, were secluded for months to prepare for marriage and adult life. Back then, they'd undergo circumcision, a practice now abandoned, and spend three to five months in isolation. Elders taught them songs, dances, and the skills of homemaking, feeding them rich foods to plump them up as a sign of beauty and health. At the end, the Aji Festival marked their grand debut to the village—a dazzling showcase of their transformation.

Today, the festival has evolved. The old customs of circumcision and seclusion are gone, but the spirit of celebrating womanhood remains strong. It's a time to honour the strength and grace of Isobo women, blending Igbo traditions with the rhythms of Cross River life. The Isobo—spread across Otaka, Biko Biko, and Ezomezo and share this festival as a cultural thread, though each village picks its own month. For Otaka, June is the magic time, a season when the rains have settled and the harvest is near.

02

Preparing for the Celebration

The buildup to Aji in Isobo Otaka is a village affair. Weeks before June, families start planning. Women clean the markets for rice and yams, the staples of the feast, while men tune their drums and ogene gongs, those metal instruments that ring out with a sharp, happy sound. Young girls, the stars of the show, practice their dances, their laughter echoing through the village as they learn steps passed down from their grandmothers.

Elders play a big role too. They meet to set the date, often guided by the lunar calendar and the farming cycle. Costumes come together—bright wrappers, beads, and headscarves that shimmer in the sun. It's a busy, happy time, with everyone pitching in. Even the kids get excited, running around and sneaking peeks at the preparations. By the time June arrives, Otaka is ready to shine.

03

The Festival Unfolds

When the big day comes, Isobo Otaka turns into a stage of joy. It starts with the drums, deep and steadily joined by the ogene's bright notes. The young women step out, dressed in their best, their faces glowing with pride. They dance in a line, swaying and spinning to songs that tell stories of love, family, and the land. The crowd claps along, cheering as the girls show off their moves.

Masquerades join the fun too, tall figures in raffia and feathers, their masks painted with bold colors. They're not just for looks; they represent ancestors, bringing blessings and a bit of mystery. People toss coins or small gifts at their feet, a tradition of thanks. The

dancing goes on for hours, with everyone, men, women, kids joining in at some point. It's a party where no one's left out.

Food is a huge part of Aji. Tables groan under plates of pounded yam, spicy soups, and rice dishes flavoured with fish from the nearby rivers. Palm wine flows, loosening tongues and sparking laughter. As the sun dips low, the festival winds down with storytelling, elders sharing tales of Isobo's past, keeping the history alive for the next generation.



A beautiful lady showcased as Miss Aji Festival 2021, representing the essence of our great Aji. Credits: Mr & Mrs Aji Festival | Facebook.

04

A Bridge of Culture and Identity

The Aji Festival is more than a good time, it's a lifeline for Isobo Otaka. Living in Cross River, surrounded by Mbembe and Yakurr neighbours, the Isobo hold tight to their Igbo roots. The festival ties

them to their language, music, and customs, even as they blend with the wider state's traditions. It's a chance to say, "We're Igbo, we're Cross River, and we're proud."

For the women, it's a moment to shine. Though the fattening rooms are gone, Aji still celebrates their journeys past and present into womanhood. It's a mix of old and new, keeping the spirit of the rite alive in a modern world. And it's not just for Otaka, friends from Biko Biko, Ezomezo, and beyond come too, making it a reunion of the Isobo family.

05

Isobo Otaka: A Hidden Gem

Isobo Otaka sits in Obubra, a rural corner of Cross River near Ebonyi State. It's a farming village, with rice and yams growing in the fertile soil. The Isobo people, about 15,000 strong across their three communities are known for their warmth and charm. Otaka, the smallest of the trio, has a quiet beauty, with dirt paths winding through mud houses and greenery all around.

The festival puts Otaka on the map. Visitors, some from Calabar, others from farther afield come to see the dances and taste the food. It's a boost for the village, with vendors selling crafts and snacks. For a place often overlooked, Aji is a chance to share its story with the world.

06

A Legacy That Lives On

As the last drumbeat fades and the crowd heads home, the Aji Festival leaves Isobo Otaka glowing. It's a celebration of women, a nod to

ancestors, and a promise to keep going. In a fast-changing Nigeria, this festival stands firm, a piece of Igbo heart wrapped in Cross River soul. Come this June, the gongs will ring again, the dancers will step out, and Otaka will show the world what it's made of. If you're ever in Cross River, follow the music, you'll find a welcome like no other.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odike

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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