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The Chicago Igbo Fest: *A Transnational Celebration of Identity, Culture, and Community*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Young girls at igbo fest chicago 2012

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In Chicago, every year, they do Igbo Fest, and it shows how strong, rich, and proud the Igbo people who are based abroad still hold on to their culture. Austin C. Okigbo wrote about it very well in his article “Ahịajịọkụ in Chicago” In “The World of Music” (2015). The festival is a way that the Igbo people who are based abroad changed and adapted the New Yam Festival (Ahịajịọkụ) so it can work in the way they live in North America. Not that they just carried the one in their house to come here—they changed it to fit in the way they survived and grew in diaspora.

This article is about how the festival happened, what it means, and how it helps the Igbo people in America to hold onto who they are, especially in the 2012 festival that Okigbo focused on.



IGBO FEST CHICAGO WITH THE BEAUTY WITH INSPIRATION- MISS NIGERIA AMERICA NATION 2019

Historical and Cultural Context of Igbo Migration

Igbo people, one of the big ethnic groups in Nigeria, have migrated to different places a long time ago, mostly because of a better life and money. Okigbo said that since the 1950s, different researchers have shown that the economic problems have pushed many Igbos out of their villages to cities like Lagos, Accra, New York, London, and even Chicago. As they now scatter, they form groups like hometown unions. These unions act like mini-banks to help people do business or build back home.

Aside from money matters, the union helps the Igbo people to keep their identity. Okigbo discussed “Igboness”—that even if every Igbo person has their roots in Naija, once they get to abroad, all of them would join together as one Igbo people. Many of them who are based in America go to school very well, are successful, and use their unity to make life better. Census data even shows that Nigerians, especially

the Igbo and Yoruba, are some of the most educated people in the U.S.

The New Yam Festival: A Symbol of Struggle and Wealth

The Ahiajioku or New Yam Festival shows how the Igbo people value hard work, harvest, and wealth. Yam is a strong symbol—it means manhood, money, and effort. The name “ahiajioku” came from the words ahia (sweat/effort), ji (to hold), and oku (wealth), which means that to have money, one needs to work hard.

Back in Igboland, the festival is a time to thank the land goddess (Ala), perform rituals for the men who are the heads of the house, and throw parties. They use yams for Thanksgiving, hold wrestling matches, masquerade shows, and dance performances. In America, even though they don't plant yams, the meaning still remains—it has become the symbol of education, business, and success.



Igbo masquerade at the Chicago Igbo-Fest 2012. Photo by Okigbo, A. C.

The Chicago Igbo Fest: Structure and Symbolism

In Chicago, the Igbo Fest has been divided into three main parts: Ama Ndi Igbo (cultural talk), Warren Park festivities, and an interdenominational Sunday church service. Each part does a special job of keeping culture alive and bringing the community together.

Ama Ndi Igbo: Intellectual and Cultural Discourse

Ama Ndi Igbo is a forum they use to discuss serious matters about Igbo tradition, philosophy, development, and how to carry culture to the next generation. They normally discuss how the Igbo people would help build Igboland, their role in Nigeria and abroad, and how young people would know their roots. It helps educate the young ones they gave birth to in America by telling them about where they came from.

Warren Park Festivities: Ritual and Performance

The main celebration takes place in Warren Park. Elders cut the yam as a symbol of blessing and give thanks to God, the community, and Nigeria. Women cook different foods from all Igbo areas. After that, performances begin.

Okigbo said that three types of performances happen there:

1. Masculinity and Hard Work: In the village, they do wrestling to show the strength of a man. However, since many young people in Chicago don't know about traditional wrestling, they have replaced it with a war dance. In 2012, they performed the Ohafia war dance from Abia State. The dance shows strength, courage, and achievement—now it does not just mean fight, but success in schools or businesses. The men who danced wore warrior clothes, chanting history and poems, and playing drums and machete rhythm.
2. Fertility and Wealth: Young women dance to show beauty, pride, and community wealth. In 2012, Umu Igbo Alliance was a young women's group that danced in different Igbo areas, with highlife music by Oriental Brothers. One song, "Nwa ada di mma" (fine girl), praises the beauty of women and the type of money a man is supposed

to have to marry her. Spectators spray money on them, they wear beads and nsibidi symbols, all showing celebration of wealth and beauty.

3. Masquerade Performances: Masquerades are a symbol of ancestors. In 2012, the Enugu people performed a masquerade dance. The big mask (okwomma) was decorated with symbols of African history and global connection. One mask even looked like a modern African woman. They performed in the evening to close the event and remind everybody that hard work and blessings go in a cycle.

Sunday Interdenominational Worship: Spiritual Reflection

The whole celebration ends with the Sunday service. Here, they usually pray for the Igbo people and Nigeria as a whole. They also use it to talk about how the traditional cultures of Christianity and Igbo work together. People worry that if you celebrate Ahịajịọkụ, you don't serve God, but this service explains that it is not so. It shows that you can keep your culture and still be a Christian.

Music and Performance: Bridging Tradition and Modernity

Music is a serious part of the festival. The Ohafia war dance, with its poetic chant and simple drum beat, connects the past with today. Women dance with highlife music, blending old dance with new styles they learnt from their Parents. Highlife music shows that the Igbo people know how well to combine tradition with global music. Masquerade also tells stories of African people who have connections with other cultures, so the festival is like a stage in global history.

This kind of performance shows how people from Naija who hold culture but still live in America balance their old and new lives together. They adapt culture to fit their current lives, and this is the meaning of transnational identity.

Broader Implications: Race, Diaspora, and Identity

Igbo Fest in Chicago is a big thing for how people understand race and diaspora. Okigbo says that the way Igbo people form their own unique identity abroad is different from that of other black communities. Instead, let them join the general “Black” identity; they do show their own proud culture, success, and values.

The festival is also a time to reflect—it’s a time to see how far the people have gone, settle beef, and connect with American society. Since many of them are successful and educated, the festival shows their struggle and achievement, the same theme that Ahịajịọkụ carries.

Igbo Fest in Chicago is not just a party—it’s a serious cultural and identity show. The way they remixed the New Yam Festival shows that the Igbo people in diaspora know how well to keep tradition and still grow abroad. Okigbo shows that this festival builds a strong community, a bridge between home and abroad, old and new life. It’s a place where they translate culture and build togetherness. The message of Ahịajịọkụ—struggle, success, and unity—still rings loud in all Igbo people, no matter where they are.

Reference Okigbo, A. C. (2015). Ahịajịọkụ in Chicago: Music and the Negotiation of Transnational Igbo Identity. *The World of Music* (new series), Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 99–121.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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