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The Ekpe Festival of Umuahia: *A Vibrant Celebration of Igbo Culture and Ancestral Legacy*

By Chuka Odike

Ozikoro.com · Cultural Heritage · 6 min read

FEATURE
IMAGE

Ekpe Festival Umuahia, Photo by Ou Travel and Tour.

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THE EKPE FESTIVAL OF UMUAHIA

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2023 Ekpe festival of Ehume in Umuopara, Umuahia South LGA of Abia State. PhotoGrid by Tour Gecko.

Picture a bustling city in southeastern Nigeria, where the streets of Umuahia, the capital of Abia State, come alive with the sound of drums, the swirl of colourful costumes, and the infectious energy of a people honouring their past. This is the Ekpe Festival, an annual spectacle that transforms Umuahia into a vibrant tapestry of tradition, dance, and spiritual reverence. Held every January, this masquerade festival is a cornerstone of Igbo heritage, drawing locals and visitors alike into a celebration that echoes through centuries. As the masquerades leap and twirl under the sun, the air fills with the rhythm of cultural pride, and for a moment, the boundary between the living and the ancestors blurs into a joyous reunion.

01

Roots of the Ekpe Festival

The Ekpe Festival traces its origins deep into the pre-colonial history of the Igbo people, particularly those in Umuahia and its surrounding clans like Ohuhu, Ibeku, and Umuopara. Long before the British arrived with their maps and missions, the Ekpe masquerade was a sacred tradition, a ritual to welcome the new year and pay homage to the spirits of the departed. The word “Ekpe” itself is tied to the Igbo term for a leopard, symbolizing strength, agility, and mystique qualities embodied by the masquerades that dominate the festival. For the people of Umuahia, it’s a time to reconnect with their roots, to celebrate the resilience of a culture that has weathered storms of change.

This festival isn’t just a performance; it’s a living narrative of Igbo cosmology. The Ekpe masquerades are believed to be vessels for ancestral spirits, returning to bless the community, enforce moral order, and guide the living. In Umuahia, the tradition is especially tied to the Ohuhu clan, where oral histories claim the first Ekpe festival emerged in the village of Ogbodiukwu Umuopara. Over time, it spread across the city’s clans, each adding its unique flair while preserving the core essence of unity and reverence.

02

Preparing for the Dance of Spirits

The Ekpe Festival doesn't burst into life unannounced. Weeks before January, the air in Umuahia hums with anticipation. In the villages and quarters, young men often initiates of the Ekpe society gather in secret to craft the masquerades. These aren't mere costumes but works of art: towering figures adorned with raffia, feathers, and vibrant fabrics like the iconic George wrapper, a richly patterned cloth tied around the waist. The masks, some with horns or jagged teeth, are carved from wood and painted in bold hues of red, black, and white, each design a nod to ancestral stories or clan identity.

Elders oversee the spiritual preparations, conducting rites to summon the spirits into the masquerades. A goat, chosen for its symbolic purity, is central to these rituals its blood an offering to awaken the Ekpe figures, its meat shared in a communal feast that binds the people together. Unlike some Igbo traditions that bar women from masquerade rites, the Ekpe Festival in Umuahia is inclusive. Men and women, young and old, wear their finest cultural attire, ishiagu shirts for men, wrappers and beads for women ready to witness the spectacle.

03

The Festival Unfolds

When January arrives, Umuahia becomes a stage. The festival kicks off in village squares, markets, and open fields, with each clan showcasing its Ekpe performers. The sound of the "ogba," a traditional drum ensemble, sets the pace, its deep beats calling the masquerades forth. Out they come graceful yet fierce, their raffia

skirts swaying as they dance to songs that have been sung for generations. The crowd erupts in cheers, children darting between legs to catch a glimpse, while elders nod approvingly at the skill of the performers.

The Ekpe dancers don't just move; they tell stories with their bodies. A leap might mimic a leopard's pounce, a twirl might honour a fallen warrior. Spectators show their appreciation by tossing money at the dancer's feet a tradition that blends gratitude with celebration. The festival weaves through the city, from the historic Nkwoegwu market to the bustling Umuahia Gate, each stop a chance for the Ekpe to bless the land and its people.

The climax arrives with a breathtaking ritual: the beheading of a goat. In a small shrine of palm leaves at the village center, the lead Ekpe often a young man chosen for his strength and purity raises a cutlass high. With one swift strike, the goat falls, and the crowd roars in triumph. This act isn't mere theatrics; it's a sacred moment, symbolizing renewal and the community's victory over the old year's challenges. As the blood stains the earth, the celebration peaks music swells, dancers whirl, and Umuahia revels in its shared heritage.



Ekpe ndi Umulenso, Ekeuga – Ohuhu Clan, Culture and Heritage, Umuahia.

04

A Bridge Between Worlds

The Ekpe Festival is more than a party; it's a spiritual dialogue. The masquerades, shrouded in mystery, are seen as emissaries of the ancestors, tasked with maintaining harmony. In some tales, they reprimand the wayward or reward the virtuous, their presence a reminder of the moral codes that bind the Igbo. The secrecy of their creation hidden from women and non-initiates adds to their aura, with legends warning of misfortune for those who peek behind the veil.

Yet, the festival also reflects Umuahia's modernity. In a city where Christianity now dominates, the Ekpe tradition endures, blending seamlessly with contemporary life. As one local elder put it, "The church is for Sunday, but Ekpe is for our soul." This adaptability has

kept the festival alive, attracting tourists who marvel at its raw energy and scholars who study its layered meanings.

05

Umuahia's Cultural Heartbeat

Umuahia, nestled between Port Harcourt and Enugu, is no stranger to history. Once the second capital of the short-lived Biafran Republic during Nigeria's civil war, it's a city of resilience and pride. The Ekpe Festival amplifies this spirit, turning a quiet agricultural hub into a cultural beacon. Beyond the masquerades, it's a social affair young men and women flirt amid the festivities, marriages are sparked, and the diaspora returns to reconnect with home.

The festival also boosts local life. Markets swell with vendors selling yams, palm wine, and souvenirs, while the influx of visitors drawn by Umuahia's war museum and Akwete weaving fame spurs the economy. For a city often overshadowed by its commercial sibling, Aba, the Ekpe Festival is a chance to shine.

06

A Tradition That Endures

As the final drums fade and the masquerades retreat, the Ekpe Festival leaves Umuahia buzzing with memories and promises. It's a testament to the Igbo people's ability to hold fast to their identity, even as the world shifts around them. For those who witness it, the festival is a sensory feast a blur of colour, sound, and spirit that lingers long after January ends.

In Umuahia, the Ekpe Festival isn't just an event; it's a heartbeat, a story told in dance and drum, a legacy that leaps from the past into

the future. And as the new year unfolds, the people of Umuahia know: the ancestors will return, the masquerades will rise, and the celebration will live on.

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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 explore 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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