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The Ezumezu Festival of Igbere: *A Triennial Celebration of Unity and Igbo Heritage*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Ezumezu Igbere Festival

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THE EZUMEZU FESTIVAL OF IGBERE

The Ezumezu Festival of Igbere: A Triennial Celebration of Unity and Igbo Heritage

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Imagine a small town nestled in the rolling hills of Abia State, Nigeria, where every three years the streets burst into life with music, dance, and the chatter of a community coming together. This is Igbere, a proud Igbo clan in Bende Local Government Area, and its heartbeat is the Ezumezu Festival a grand reunion that celebrates tradition, unity, and the timeless age-grade system. Picture the scene: colorful banners flutter in the breeze, drums echo through the villages, and people of all ages gather to honor their past while building a future. Held every third December, this festival is more than an event—it's a living story of Igbere's soul.

01

A Tradition Born in Time

The Ezumezu Festival began in 1958 as the “Igbere Anniversary,” a modest gathering to mark the passage of years. Over decades, it grew into something bigger—a triennial spectacle that showcases the rich culture of Igbere's 13 autonomous villages: Agbo, Eziam, Amaukwu, Amakpo, Amankalu, Ibinanta, Amaofufe, Ibinaukwu, Umunsi, Okafia, Ohumola, Amaoji, and Amaiyi. At its core is the age-grade system, a tradition as old as the clan itself. In Igbere, people are grouped by age, and these groups take turns serving the community—building schools, bridges, and clinics, or keeping the peace.

Every three years, Ezumezu marks two big moments. First, it's a

retirement party for the oldest age grade, a group that's spent 39 years (13 cycles of three) working for Igbere. This ceremony, called "Igbotonma," is a heartfelt goodbye, filled with pride and gratitude. Second, it welcomes a new age grade, young and eager, into the fold. It's a cycle of renewal, a way to keep the clan strong and united. Today, the festival also raises funds for projects, blending old customs with modern needs.

02

Getting Ready for the Big Day

Months before December, Igbere hums with excitement. Families clean their homes, women stock up on yams and spices, and men gather in secret to prepare masquerades—those magical figures that bring the festival to life. These aren't just costumes; they're symbols of the ancestors, made from raffia, feathers, and bright cloth. The air fills with the scent of roasted yam and the sound of hammers shaping wood for civic projects.

Traditional rulers, the Ndi Eze, meet to plan the event, while age grades polish their dance steps and songs. A ban on burials and weddings from December 24 to 31 ensures everyone focuses on Ezumezu. It's a time when the whole clan—plus friends from near and far—comes together. Even the diaspora, scattered across Nigeria and beyond, plan their return to Igbere Secondary School field, the festival's main stage.

03

The Festival Lights Up Igbere

When the day arrives—usually December 26—Igbere explodes with energy. The festival kicks off with a roar of drums, the "ogene" and

“ekwe,” calling everyone to gather. Masquerades leap into the crowd, their raffia skirts swirling as they dance to ancient tunes. Kids squeal with delight, chasing the performers, while elders nod and smile, remembering their own days in the spotlight.

The “Igbotonma” ceremony is the heart of the day. The retiring age grade, often men and women in their 60s or 70s, steps forward in colorful attire—ishiagu shirts and wrappers. Leaders like Senator Orji Uzor Kalu, a son of Igbere, might join to honor them, praising their years of service. Then, the new age grade is named and welcomed with cheers, their young faces glowing with pride. It’s a moment that ties generations together.

The fun doesn’t stop there. Across the 13 villages, you’ll find wrestling matches, beauty contests, and dance-offs. Women serve up plates of pounded yam and egusi soup, while palm wine flows freely. Tourists—sometimes from as far as China—snap photos of the hilly landscape and join the party, amazed by the warm hospitality. At night, bonfires light up the sky, and stories of Igbere’s past fill the air.



Rep. Benjamin Kalu Reels Out Achievements As He Participates In Triennial Ezumezu Igbere Festival – ABN TV

04

More Than Just a Party

Ezumezu is a cultural powerhouse. It's a chance to show off Igbere's traditions—think folklore, poetry, and the unique Igbo dialect spoken here. But it's also practical. Age grades have built everything from health centers to roads, cutting unemployment and boosting education. As Rep. Benjamin Kalu once said at the 2021 festival, these projects make life better for everyone.

Spiritually, it's deep too. The masquerades aren't just for show—they're links to the ancestors, keeping the community in line with old values. Even in a mostly Christian town, Ezumezu thrives, proving Igbere can honor its past while embracing the present. Leaders like Senator Kalu and local kings stress peace and unity,

making sure the festival strengthens the clan's bonds.

05

Igberere: A Place of Pride

Igberere sits in Abia State's Bende area, about 66 miles from Aba and 26 miles from Umuahia. Its hills and cool weather make it a perfect backdrop for Ezumezu. The clan's history stretches back centuries, tied to neighbors like Alayi and Ohafia, with a shared Igbo spirit. Today, it's a mix of rural charm and growing ambition, with leaders pushing for progress while holding tight to tradition.

The festival also puts Igberere on the map. Tourists love the food, the dances, and the chance to see a real Igbo celebration. It's a boost for local vendors selling crafts and snacks, and a call to the world: come see what Igberere's all about.



Ezumezu Igbere Festival – ODINMA EBIRI Age Grade, – ABN TV

06

A Legacy That Keeps Growing

As the drums fade and the crowds head home, Ezumezu leaves a mark. It's a promise kept—a vow to remember the old ways and build something new. For three days, Igbere shines, its people united in joy and purpose. And in three years, they'll do it all again, proving that some traditions never fade.

So, if you ever get the chance, head to Igbere in December. Taste the yam, dance with the masquerades, and feel the heartbeat of a community that knows how to celebrate life. Ezumezu isn't just a festival—it's Igbere's gift to the world.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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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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