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The Ikeji Festival of Arochukwu: *A Timeless Celebration of Igbo Culture and Harvest*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**Eze Aro, H.E. Dr. Eberechukwu
Kanu Oji at Ikeji Aro Festival, 2024.
Photo credits, Arochukwu
Mouthpiece.**

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Aro men dancing at Ikeji Aro Festival, 2024. Photo credits, Arochukwu Mouthpiece.

A renowned town in Abia State, Nigeria and Igboland in general, suddenly bursting into life with the sound of drums, the swirl of masquerades, and the scent of roasted yams wafting through the air. This is Arochukwu, the ancient heart of the Aro people, and every September, it hosts the Ikeji Festival, a dazzling celebration of the new yam harvest and Igbo heritage. Picture a scene where thousands gather at Amaikpe Square, voices rising in song, as colourful dancers and towering masquerades parade through the streets. Held over several days, with its grand finale called Eke Ekpe, this festival is a joyful blast of tradition that pulls sons and daughters of Arochukwu home from across the globe.

01

A Tradition Older Than Time

The Ikeji Festival is one of the oldest celebrations in Igboland, stretching back more than a thousand years—some say to 912 AD. “Ikeji” means “strength of the yam” or “tying of the yam” in Igbo, a nod to the crop that’s been the lifeblood of the Aro people forever. Back in the day, it was a simple harvest ritual, a way to thank Chukwu Abiama, the Igbo Supreme God in and the ancestors for a bountiful year. Arochukwu, perched on hilly land near the Cross River, was a powerhouse in pre-colonial times, famous for its Long Juju (Ibini Ukpabi) oracle and trade networks. The festival grew with the town’s influence, spreading to over 350 Aro settlements worldwide.

Today, it’s a cultural juggernaut. The Eze Aro, the traditional king, currently His Eminence Dr. Eberechukwu Kanu Oji. sets the date each year, guided by the lunar calendar. What started as a humble feast has become a three-week explosion of music, dance, and unity, peaking with the Eke Ekpe finale in late September or early October. It’s a time when the Aro renew their covenant with their roots and celebrate their unbreakable spirit.

Preparing for the Party

Weeks before September, Arochukwu buzzes with energy. Farmers haul in the first yams, plump and golden, from the fields. Women sweep village squares and fire up hearths for cooking, think pounded yam, spicy soups, and palm wine galore. Men slip into sacred groves to craft masquerades, wild figures draped in raffia, feathers, and bright cloth, their masks carved with fierce faces. These aren't just costumes; they're spirits of the past, brought to life with prayers and offerings.



Aro Elders Libate and bless new yam at Ikeji Aro Festival, 2024. Photo credits, Arochukwu Mouthpiece.

The 19 villages of Arochukwu, like Obinkita, Ibom, and Atani, each add their own flavour. Elders plan wrestling matches, dances, and plays, while kids run around, wide-eyed with excitement. The Eze

Aro's palace hums as he prepares to bless the new yam, a sacred act that kicks off the eating season. By the time the festival starts, the town's ready-decked out in colour, pulsing with anticipation.

03

Days of Joy and Spectacle

The Ikeji Festival rolls out in stages, building up to a grand finish. It starts with quieter days, Nkwo Ibom-Isii, where Ibom village hosts wrestling and maiden dances, or Afor Okpo, when the festivities spread out. But the real magic happens at Eke Ekpe, the climax. On this day—say, September 21, like in 2023, Amaikpe Square fills with thousands. The Eze Aro steps out, regal leopard wears (Ìsi Agu) in white robes, beaded crown and the Aro emblem, greeted by chiefs and a sea of cheering faces.



Ladies of Aro display cultural dances and stanzas at Ikeji Aro Festival, 2024. Photo credits, Arochukwu Mouthpiece.

Masquerades steal the show, some ten feet tall, leaping and twirling to the beat of ogene gongs and ekwe drums. Each village sends its best dancers and performers, competing for cheers and bragging rights. Obinkita won hearts in 2017 with their stunning display, a memory still fresh for many. People dress up, men in flowing jumpers, women in wrappers and beads, while kids dart through the crowd, tossing coins to the dancers. Food stalls pop up, offering roasted yam and fish, and the air rings with laughter and song.

04

More Than a Festival

Ikeji is a cultural lifeline. It's a chance to see Arochukwu's traditions, masquerades, music, and prayers come alive. The Aro believe the spirits join them, guiding and blessing the community. It's also a

homecoming, sons and daughters from Lagos, London, or New York flood back, suitcases in tow, to reconnect with family and roots. Leaders like Governor Alex Otti have joined in, praising the festival's role in uniting people.



Eze Aro, H.E. Eberechukwu Kanu Oji with H.E. Alex Otti at the Ikeji Aro Festival – Tribune Online.

It's practical too. The event boosts tourism, hotels fill up, vendors thrive, and outsiders get a taste of Igbo life. In 2018, MTN and Nigerian Breweries jumped on board as sponsors, turning Ikeji into a branded spectacle streamed online for the world to see. The theme "Culture for Development" sums it up, it's about pride, progress, and keeping the old ways strong.

05

Arochukwu: The Ancient Kingdom

Arochukwu sits in Abia State's northeast, a hilly spot near the Cross River, about 70 miles from Umuahia. It's the ancestral home of the Aro, a people once feared and respected for their oracle and trade savvy. The town's 19 villages form a tight-knit kingdom, with a history tied to the slave trade and resistance against British rule until 1902. Today, it's quieter, farming and small businesses keep it going, but Ikeji puts it back in the spotlight.



Colourful display of women at the Ikeji Aro Festival – Arochukwu Mouthpiece.

Tourists love the vibe. The Long Juju shrine, the river views, and the festival's energy make it a draw. For the Aro, it's a chance to show off their past and dream of a future where Arochukwu thrives again.

A Promise Kept

When the last masquerade retreats and the drums fall silent, the Ikeji Festival leaves Arochukwu humming. It's a thanksgiving, a reunion, and a shout of pride all rolled into one. In a world racing forward, this festival holds the line, a living link to the ancestors and a gift to the next generation. Next September, the yams will ripen again, the gongs will ring, and Arochukwu will dance. If you're ever in Abia State, follow the beat, you'll find a celebration that's pure Igbo magic.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odi

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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