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The Iri Ji Festival of Mbaise: *A Joyous Celebration of Igbo Harvest and Unity*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Traditional dancers performing at the Iri Ji Mbaise Festival, showcasing the rich cultural heritage of the Mbaise people. Photo Credit: Nairaland Forum.

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Community elders conducting the ceremonial cutting of the new yam, a central ritual in the Iri Ji Mbaise Festival.
Photo Credit: Steemit - The Iri-Ji Mbaise Festival.

A warm August day in Imo State, Nigeria, where the air hums with excitement and the scent of roasted yam drifts through the crowd. This is Mbaise, a bustling region in the heart of Igboland, and every year on August 15, it explodes with the Iri Ji Festival, a vibrant celebration of the new yam harvest. Imagine thousands gathered at a stadium or village square, drums pounding, masquerades twirling, and families sharing laughter over plates of yam and palm oil. This isn't just a party, it's a sacred tradition that ties Mbaise's people to their land, their ancestors, and each other, a five-hour spectacle of culture that's been alive for centuries.

01

A Tradition That Feeds the Soul

The Iri Ji Festival, meaning “new yam eating” in Igbo started long ago, handed down through stories no one alive can pinpoint to a single day. Mbaise, made up of three local government areas, Aboh Mbaise, Ahiazu Mbaise, and Ezinihitte Mbaise, has turned it into a grand event. Back in the day, it was a simple thanksgiving, a nod to Chukwu Abiama, the Supreme God, and Ahiajoku, the yam deity, for a good harvest. Yams aren't just food here—they're life, a symbol of wealth and hard work. Old tales say Ngwa folks split from Mbaise travelers at the Imo River, roasting yams while others hurried on, earning them the nickname “Ohuhu,” or “roasters.”



masquerade performance enthralling spectators during the Iri Ji Mbaise Festival. Photo Credit: Linda Ikeji's Blog.

Now, it's a full-blown festival, fixed on August 15 to match the Catholic Feast of the Assumption—a blend of old beliefs and new faith. It's a day no true Mbaise son or daughter eats new yam before, saving that first bite for the celebration. From its humble roots, Iri Ji has grown into a unifying force, pulling Mbaise's 91 communities together to honour their past and pray for the future.

02

Preparing for the Big Day

The buildup starts weeks ahead. Farmers haul in the season's first yams—big, golden tubers that show off their skill. Women sweep compounds clean and stock up on peppers, oil, and chickens for the feast. Men craft masquerades in secret—tall figures of raffia and feathers, their masks painted with bold grins. Elders, the Ezeji—yam custodians—pick the best tubers for the ritual cutting, a job that's

both honor and duty.

Villages buzz with rehearsals—dance groups fine-tune their steps, drummers test their beats. The host rotates yearly among Aboh, Ahiazu, and Ezinihitte, with places like Chioma Ajunwa Stadium in Afor-Oru or Aboh Mbaise Secondary School turning into festival grounds. By August 15, Mbaise's ready—roads packed with sons and daughters from Lagos, New York, or London, all home to join the fun.

03

A Day of Feasting and Festivity

Come festival day, Mbaise wakes early. By 10 a.m., the crowd's thick—thousands strong, dressed in white jumpers, colorful wrappers, and beads. The drums kick off, deep and steady, joined by the ogene's sharp ring. The Ezeji lead the way, cutting the first yam with prayers to God and the ancestors, then roasting it over an open fire. That first slice, dipped in peppery palm oil, marks the season's start—everyone waits for their turn to dig in.

Masquerades burst out next—wild and towering, they dance through the throng, chasing kids who giggle and scatter. Each village struts its stuff—Obinkita might bring wrestlers, Ahiara a maiden dance. Politicians and big names, like Governor Hope Uzodimma or Emeka Ihedioha, often show up, adding glamour and a bit of politicking. Food stalls dish out yam pepper soup, roasted yam with sauce, and plenty of palm wine. By 3 p.m., the party's winding down, but the joy lingers—stories swapped, bonds tightened.

04

A Celebration with Purpose

Iri Ji is Mbaise's heartbeat. It's a harvest thanksgiving, sure, but it's also a cultural anchor. The masquerades and dances keep old Igbo ways alive, even as Christianity shapes the prayers. It's a homecoming too—diaspora folks reconnect, and locals show off their roots. Leaders use it to rally support, like Uzodimma did in 2023, promising roads and progress. Sponsors like Eagle Schnapps or MTN chip in, turning it into a tourism draw that puts Mbaise on the map.

It's practical too. Yams mean survival here, and the festival celebrates the farmers who feed the nation. With over 611,000 people packed into 404 square kilometers, Mbaise's one of West Africa's densest spots—hard work is a must, and Iri Ji honors that grit.

05

Mbaise: The Seat of Sages

Mbaise sits in Imo State's southeast, a hilly patch between Owerri and Umuahia, split into three councils since British rule carved it out in 1941. It's a land of farmers, scholars, and fighters—once part of the Aro trade network, now a hub of culture and resilience. The festival ties into that legacy, a shout of pride from a people who've weathered colonial wars, civil strife, and modern hustle.



A vibrant masquerade performance enthralling spectators during the Iri Ji Mbaise Festival. Photo Credit: Linda Ikeji's Blog.

Visitors love it—the food, the energy, the chance to see Igbo life raw and real. Pair it with nearby Owerri's markets or Oguta Lake, and you've got a trip worth taking. For Mbaise, it's their moment to shine, a day when the world sees what "Seat of Sages" really means.

06

A Legacy That Grows

When the drums quiet and the crowd thins, Iri Ji leaves Mbaise warm and full. It's a thank-you to the land, a hug for the community, and a promise to keep going. In a fast-moving world, this festival stands firm—a slice of Igbo soul that won't fade. Next August 15, the yams will ripen again, the gongs will sound, and Mbaise will celebrate. If you're ever in Imo State, join in—you'll taste the harvest and feel the unity in every bite.

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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 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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