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The Ojiji Izhi Nnode, Festival of Izzi: *A Sacred Celebration of Yam and Unity in Ebonyi State*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Ojiji Izhi (Izzi) Festival - PhotoGrid by Izhi Nnode Youth Forum.

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THE OJJI IZHI NNODO, FESTIVAL OF IZZI

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Ojiji Izhi Nnodo (new Yam Festival In Izhi (Izzi) Of Ebonyi State – Culture Forum Izhi.

Imagine a land where the earth yields its bounty in golden tubers, where the air thrums with the beat of ancestral drums, and where a community gathers under the wide sky to honour their past and embrace their future. This is Izzi (Ìzhì), a vibrant clan in Ebonyi State, Nigeria, and every August or September, its people come together for the Ojiji Festival, a dazzling celebration of the new yam harvest, steeped in tradition and pulsing with the spirit of unity. As the masquerades dance and the voices rise in song, the festival unfolds like a living tapestry, weaving together the threads of Igbo heritage, gratitude, and communal pride.

01

Origins and Meaning

The Ojiji Festival, known locally as “Ojiji Izhi Nnodo,” is the Izzi-Igbo people’s version of the New Yam Festival, a tradition shared across Igbo communities but uniquely flavoured by the customs of this Ebonyi clan. Held annually at the end of the rainy season, it marks the harvest of yams, the king of crops in Igbo culture and the beginning of a new cycle of abundance. For the Izzi (Ìzhì), whose ancestral home lies in Amegu within Abakaliki Local Government Area, the festival is more than a harvest rite; it’s a spiritual homecoming, a time to thank the gods and ancestors for their blessings and to renew the bonds that hold the clan together.

The word “Ojiji” carries a sense of reverence, tied to the ritual unveiling of the new yam, a crop so vital that it’s said to embody life itself. In Izzi lore, the festival dates back centuries, predating colonial intrusions, when the clan’s forebears established a covenant with the land and its spirits. Early European observers, like the British officer C.W. Patridge in 1903, marveled at the sophistication of Izzi culture, noting its structured governance and deep-rooted customs qualities that shine through in the Ojiji celebration.

02

The Build-Up to the Feast

The Ojji Festival doesn't spring forth overnight. In the weeks leading up to late August or early September, Izzi (Ìzhì) villages buzz with preparation. Farmers, having tended their yam mounds through the rainy months, begin the harvest with care, selecting the finest tubers for the festival. Elders and titled men, guardians of tradition, consult the Izzi (Ìzhì) calendar fixed at Anmegu, the clan's spiritual center to declare the festival's date. This announcement ripples through Izzi's 25 communities, from Iboko to Ndieze, igniting a flurry of activity.

Women sweep compounds and prepare hearths for the feast, while men craft masquerades in secluded groves. These masquerades, adorned with raffia, feathers, and bright fabrics, are more than costumes, they're embodiments of the ancestors, brought to life with offerings and incantations. At Anmegu's sacred shrine, Ophoke Anmegu, the high priest, Ishi Uke Omelali (Omenala), performs sacrifices to maintain cosmic balance, spilling the blood of goats and chickens to honour the earth deity and ensure the festival's sanctity.

03

The Festival in Full Bloom

When the day arrives, Izzi (Ìzhì) transforms into a kaleidoscope of sound and colour. The festival often spans several days, culminating in a grand finale at the Izhi Nnodo Cultural Center in Anmegu. It begins with the "Iri Ji," the ceremonial eating of the new yam. The oldest men, known as Uke, roast the first yams over open fires, offering prayers to Ala, the earth goddess, and the ancestors. The yam is then shared, a sacred act symbolizing gratitude and renewal before the community joins in a feast of pounded yam, vegetable soups, and palm

wine.

Then come the masquerades. With the thunder of drums like the “ogene” and “ekwe,” they burst onto the scene, their movements a blend of grace and power. Some tower over the crowd, their raffia skirts swaying, while others leap and spin, mimicking the agility of the leopard “Ekpe style” a totem of strength in Izzi (Izhi) culture. The Omaba Ekpe and Ogbodu masquerades, with their complicated masks and vibrant hues, lead the parade, drawing cheers from onlookers who toss coins and shout praises.

The streets of Izzi (Izhi) fill with life women in wrappers and headscarves, men in flowing jumpers and caps, children darting through the throng. Cultural dances like the “Nkwa Nwite” ripple through the crowd, their rhythms echoing the heartbeat of the clan. At night, the celebration spills into an all-night carnival, with bonfires lighting the way for storytelling, laughter, and the crowning of “Nwomarimma” and “Mkparawa”—the festival’s beauty king and queen.



Grand finale ojji Izzi (Izhi) Nnodo Ekumenyi New yam festival – Adamazi TV.

04

A Tapestry of Spirit and Society

The Ojji Festival is a bridge between worlds. The masquerades, shrouded in mystique, are seen as ancestral emissaries, enforcing harmony and blessing the land. In Izzi's social structure, where the eldest son of each family becomes an Uke, the festival reinforces roles and resolves disputes, from land ownership to communal labor. It's a time when the clan's unity shines brightest, as friends, in-laws, and even neighboring clans join the festivities, invited in the ecumenical spirit of Ojji.

Yet, it's also a mirror of Izzi's resilience. Despite colonial disruptions and modern pressures, the festival endures, adapting to a Christian-majority landscape while holding fast to its roots. As Hon. Uchenna Stephen Igwe, a local leader, remarked during the 2024 celebration, it's a call to "be steadfast in unity" and support the community's growth—a sentiment echoed by leaders like Governor Francis Nwifuru, who often attend to bolster its prominence.

05

Izzi's Place in Ebonyi

Izzi (Ịzhị), spanning Abakaliki, Ebonyi, and Izzi Local Government Areas, is a powerhouse in Ebonyi State, known for its agricultural might—yams, cassava, rice, and its mineral wealth, like lead and zinc. The clan's market at Iboko, a historic trading hub, pulses with commerce, while its cultural influence ripples across the state. The Ojji Festival amplifies this identity, drawing tourists to Ebonyi, the "Salt of the Nation," and showcasing Izzi's role as a cultural anchor in the southeast.

A Legacy That Lives On

As the masquerades retreat and the fires die down, the Ojiji Festival leaves Izzi (Ịzhi) bathed in a glow of pride and possibility. It's a celebration of survival of a people who've nurtured their traditions through time, who've turned the humble yam into a symbol of life and legacy. For those who witness it, the festival is a sensory journey a chance to taste the new yam, hear the drums, and feel the spirit of Izzi (Ịzhi) rising from the earth.

In a world of rapid change, the Ojiji Festival stands firm, a testament to the Izzi people's unwavering bond with their ancestors and each other. And as the seasons turn, they know: the yams will grow again, the drums will sound, and the festival will return to light up Ebonyi once more.

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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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