



Ozi Ikòrò

AFRICAN HISTORY · CULTURE · INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

CULTURAL HERITAGE

The Okpensi Festival as a Pillar of Ancestral Worship and Cultural Identity in Igbo-Ukwu

By Chukwunwike Ossai

Ozikoro.com · Cultural Heritage · 6 min read

FEATURE
IMAGE

Mmanwu Masqurade perfomance during Okpensi festival at Unubi

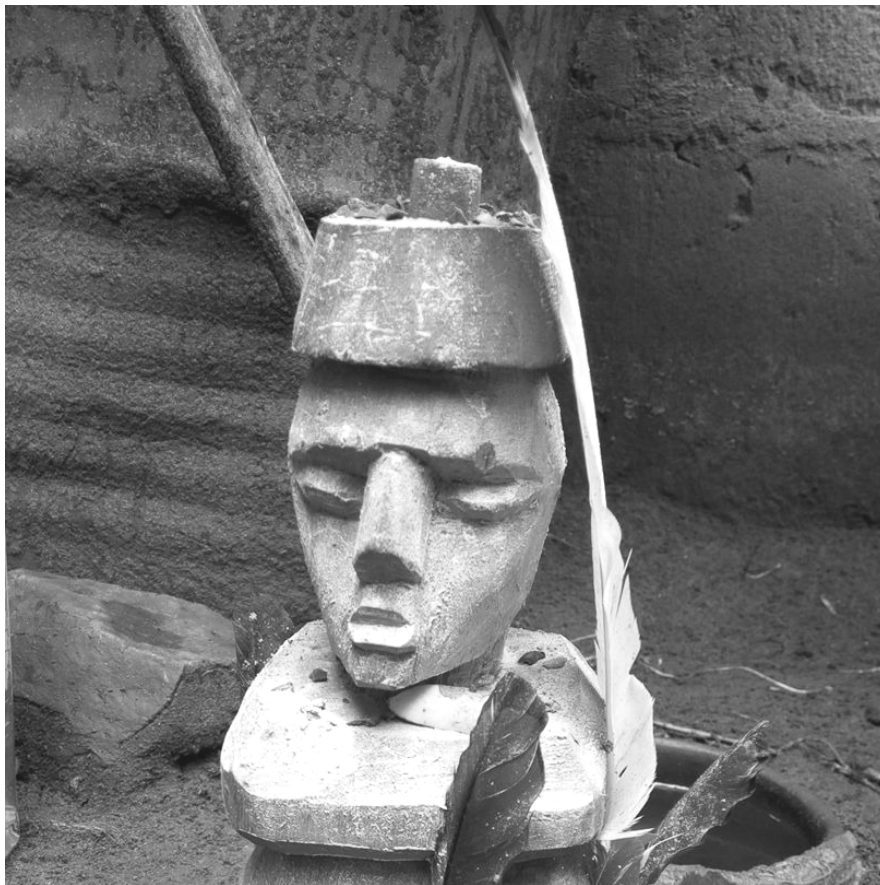
Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

Ozi Ikòrò

THE OKPENSI FESTIVAL AS A PILLAR OF ANCESTRAL WORSHIP AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN

The Okpensi Festival as a Pillar of Ancestral Worship and Cultural Identity in Igbo-Ukwu

By Chukwunwike Ossai · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com



Okpensi, a symbolic entity that represents an ancestor



The Okpenssi Festival, which happens at Igbo-Ukwu, a town in Anambra State, Nigeria, is a good spiritual festival that means a lot to Igbo culture. This festival is one of the ways used to honour the ancestors (people who are dead, called Ndi Ichie), and it shows how the Igbo people value family, peace in the community, and respect for people who are gone. The festival is a part of their tradition that combines farming and spiritual things. It has plenty of rituals, everybody joins hands, and people share things. All these things make them stronger as one people and also help keep their culture alive.

Origins and Cultural Context of the Okpenssi Festival The Okpenssi Festival is a traditional Igbo celebration that is held at Igbo-Ukwu, a town that's popular because of the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes that archaeologists have found — their bronzes date back to the 9th century and show that the people have been well-known for a very long time. This festival is part of the ways that the Igbo people remember and respect their ancestors; they believe that they still protect, guide, and bless the living. In Igbo belief, ancestors (Ndi Ichie) are like a bridge between this life and the spirit world, and this kind of festival is a way to keep everything balanced.

The name “Okpenssi” comes from the Igbo language, but because of the many dialects, it could mean different things in different places. This festival isn't like the New Yam Festival (Iwa-Ji), because it focuses on killing animals (like fowl and goat) and on how married daughters would reconnect with their fathers' house. The festival is based on the Igbo lunar calendar, which counts time in four days (izu) and longer periods like the 39 days (Izu Nwe). This shows that Igbo people know how to keep time and arrange their traditions well.

Igbo-Ukwu, in Aguata LGA, is a place that carries culture in its head—it has chiefs, artists, and deep spiritual people. Okpenssi Festival shows that the town still holds strong Igbo traditions. Even though the festival is Igbo-Ukwu's own, other Igbo communities like Enugu or other places that do Odo and Ikoro festivals have a similar spirit, as they all honour the ancestors, too.



Okpensì Festival in Unubi

Rituals and Activities of the Okpensì Festival

Preparatory Cleansing: Before the festival started, the whole community began cleaning everywhere—houses, roads, and the village square. This cleaning meant that they should prepare the ground for their ancestors to come. In the minds of the Igbo, clean places are holy places. It is the same kind of thing that they did in other festivals like the New Yam Festival or Ofala.

Offerings from Married Daughters: One strong thing in Okpensì is that married daughters carry fowl and kola nuts to give to their father. The father collects the gifts to sacrifice for their ancestors. This shows that in Igbo land, even when a woman is married, she is still important in her father's house. Kola nut is a strong symbol for respect and peace, and fowl is a sacrifice for the ancestors.

Sacrificial Rituals: They normally kill cocks and goats. After they kill the cock, they will pluck the feathers and spread it at the road that leads outside the compound. This one could mean that they normally direct ancestors to come and eat an offering or that they spread



blessings. Goat that are killed are big sacrifices that show how serious the thing is.

Feasting and Communal Sharing: Plenty of food is made available, like yam dishes, egusi or ogbono soup, and the meat from the sacrifice. People eat together as one. Before they eat, they give the ancestors a small portion. This shows that the dead still eat with the living. It is also a way to thank the ancestors.



Achukwu Masquerade performance

Ancestral Visitation by Achikwu: When night comes, they believe that the ancestors will come in the form of a masquerade, normally called Achikwu. They will walk around the village with dance and song. People will be quiet on the road because they believe that spirits are walking. This part is very deep and spiritual, and shows that the ancestors are still around.

Distribution of Gifts and Departure: The next morning, the father of the house would share meat and yams and give them to the daughters, grandchildren, and in-laws who came to visit. This shows love, peace, and how family is supposed to be united. Yam in Igbo land means that someone does well.



Post-Festival Intervals and Visits: After the festival, people rest and reflect for four days (Izu), during which they visit their in-laws and other families. Then, another 39 days (Izu Nwe) follow. This period could have smaller traditional events or preparations for other festivals. This shows how the Igbo people plan their lives around tradition.

Ancestral Veneration and Spiritual Continuity: This festival shows that the Igbo people still believe that their ancestors live with them. As they offer sacrifices, they try to make peace and collect blessings from those who are gone. The Achikwu part confirms that the spirit of the dead still works in the community.

Strengthening Family and Community Ties: The festival brings daughters, fathers, children, and in-laws together. As everybody shares food and meat, it strengthens the family bond. Visitors, too, eat and join, building peace among the villages.

Cultural Preservation: As the world changes, festivals like Okpens help the Igbo people remember who they are. From cleaning to masquerading, it is a tradition that is passed on to the younger ones. Everyone has roles—old people, young people, and women. So, the culture will not die.

Agricultural and Economic Symbolism: Even if Okpens isn't a farming festival like New Yam, the use of yam and goat still shows that it is connected with land and farming. Sharing meat and yams shows that the community are united and everybody would benefit.

Spiritual Purification and Renewal: Cleaning the house and being quiet during the Achikwu visitation show that the festival cleanses bad spirits and brings a better future. The way they took space those days (Izu and Izu Nwe) shows they are serious about planning and spiritual things.

Christianity has made some people think that ancestral sacrifice is a bad thing. Some leaders try to explain that this is culture, not idol



worship. Another problem is that people move to the city, and young people don't know the traditions anymore. To help, they could use social media like YouTube (as Nnobi people do) to show their festival.

If they add this festival to the Anambra tourism program, it could attract tourists. Igbo-Ukwu already has the bronze museum and nearby places like Awka and Nnobi. If they work with cultural groups like the Anambra State Association Europe, the festival could become big outside Nigeria.

Comparison with Other Igbo Festivals Okpensi has similar things to other Igbo festivals, but it still has its unique way. For example:

1. Ashaolu Festival (Nnobi): This one has cleaning and offerings like Okpensi, but it focuses more on yam harvest and does not have an Achikwu masquerade. 2. Ofala Festival (Onitsha): This one is for the king (Obi) celebration; they have masquerades and food too, but it focuses more on the king's matters. 3. Odo Festival (Enugu): This one has spirits that return in masquerade form like Achikwu, but it normally happens every two years, and it is at the whole town, not just family-focused like Okpensi.

Okpensi Festival in Igbo-Ukwu is a serious way for the Igbo people to show their belief in and respect for their ancestors, love for family, and unity in the community. Through cleaning, sacrifice, feasting, and the Achikwu masquerade, the people connect with the spirit world and with each other. The role that married daughters play shows that families cannot break up after marriage. The timing of the festival shows that they know how to plan well.

- Uchendu, V.C. (1965). *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Isichei, Elizabeth. (1976). *A History of the Igbo People*. Macmillan Press.
- Nwoye, G. (2011). "Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview: An Insider's Perspective." *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 3(9), 304–317.



- Igboukwu.org. (n.d.). Cultural Heritage of Igbo-Ukwu.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chukwunwike Ossai

An enthusiast in tech with deep passion for studying and showcasing the vibrant cultural heritage of southern Nigeria . Combining my skill with my obsession towards African history and traditions to create contributions that impacts the digital space.



Ozi Ikòrò

History worth reading.

African history · culture · indigenous knowledge
