



Ozi Ikòrò

AFRICAN HISTORY · CULTURE · INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

CULTURAL HERITAGE

The War Dance Festival (ILA OSO) In Uzuakoli

By Idenze Ezeme

Ozikoro.com · Cultural Heritage · 4 min read

FEATURE
IMAGE

A group of young people from different age grades at the December 2011 ILA OSO FESTIVAL.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

Ozi Ikòrò

THE WAR DANCE FESTIVAL (ILA OSO) IN UZUAKOLI

The War Dance Festival (ILA OSO) In Uzuakoli

By Idenze Ezeme · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com

The ILA OSO festival is a significant cultural event of the Uzuakoli people, located in present-day Abia State, Nigeria. With a history spanning over two centuries, this vibrant festival is deeply rooted in the traditions and historical heritage of the Uzuakoli community. The ILA OSO festival is celebrated biennially, alternating with the IZA MBARA AMA masquerade dance, ensuring that each event receives its due reverence and grandeur.

Historical Background

The origins of the ILA OSO festival date back over 200 years. Oral history suggests that it was established to commemorate the military victories and bravery of the ancestors of the Uzuakoli people. The festival serves as a reminder of past struggles, strategic battles, and the resilience of the community's warriors. Over generations, it has evolved into an important tradition that connects present-day Uzuakoli people with their history and cultural identity.

Uzuakoli itself is a historically significant town known for its traditional institutions, including the famous Methodist College and an established leprosy settlement that played a major role in medical history. Its cultural wealth is showcased through events like the ILA OSO festival, which continues to attract not only locals but also visitors eager to witness the grandeur of Igbo heritage.

Festival Celebrations and Attire

The ILA OSO festival typically takes place in December, a time when many natives return to their homeland to celebrate and reconnect

with their roots. The festival day is marked by an elaborate display of traditional regalia and customs.

- Men's Attire and Weapons: Men dress in war-like outfits, embodying the spirit of their warrior ancestors. They carry traditional weapons such as: Otta (clubs)
- Egbe ntu (muskets)
- Mma Oge (swords)
- Aku and Akpaka (war accessories)



A man fully dressed with his Akwa George and Nzu carrying Egbe Ntu. Photo by Gifty-e

- Women's Attire and Dance: Women wear elegant traditional outfits, including akwa george (a beautifully woven cloth) and traditional beads. They adorn themselves with nzu (white chalk) and uri (indigenous body art). Women participate by carrying the mkpoola, a dance accessory that enhances their rhythmic movements during performances.



The Women dressed in their Akwa George and Traditional Beads. Photo by Gifty-e

The War Dance and Age-Grade Processions

The ILA OSO is not just a festival of dance; it is a reenactment of war and victory. However, it is distinct from the IKPIRIKPE, which is the actual war dance performed exclusively by men. The festival prominently features age-old war artifacts and spoils of war captured by past warriors.

Participants are grouped into their respective age grades, a traditional Igbo practice of social organization. Each age grade takes turns dancing through the village, singing war songs, and celebrating the victories of their ancestors. This procession strengthens community bonds and fosters intergenerational storytelling, ensuring that history is passed down to younger generations.

Cultural Significance of the ILA OSO Festival

The ILA OSO festival plays a crucial role in preserving Uzuakoli's cultural heritage. Its significance includes:

- **Preservation of History:** The festival acts as a living archive of Uzuakoli's martial past, allowing younger generations to learn about their ancestors' battles and victories.
- **Community Bonding:** By bringing together natives from all walks of life, the festival fosters a strong sense of unity and belonging.
- **Cultural Expression:** The colorful attire, traditional music, dance, and war relics provide a platform for celebrating and preserving indigenous customs.
- **Tourism and Recognition:** In recent years, the festival has gained recognition beyond Uzuakoli, drawing cultural enthusiasts, historians, and visitors who wish to witness the rich traditions firsthand.

Modern Relevance and Continuity

Despite the pressures of modernization, the ILA OSO festival continues to thrive. Community elders, cultural custodians, and local organizations play a significant role in ensuring that the festival retains its authenticity. Social media and digital platforms have also contributed to the wider awareness of the festival, helping to document and share its vibrant customs with a global audience.

In 2023, the festival attracted a large crowd, with various village groups showcasing unique performances. As cultural appreciation grows, there is hope that future generations will continue to uphold this remarkable tradition.



Ila Oso Uzuakoli 2023 began with Eluoma village launching the month-long festival of songs and dances across the five villages. Today, Amankwo continues the celebration with a vibrant display in the village squares. At Ndagbo village square, the performances were truly unforgettable. Photo by Uzuakoli.

01

Ila Oso Uzuakoli 2017

Ila Oso Uzuakoli 2017. Video by Nwokedi Nworisara

- Gifty-e. (n.d.). The War Dance Festival (ILA OSO) in Uzuakoli.
- Uzuakoli Cultural Heritage. (2023, December). The War Dance Festival (ILA OSO) in Uzuakoli.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idenze Ezeme

Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



Ozi Ikòrò

History worth reading.

African history · culture · indigenous knowledge
