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By Chukwunwike Ossai

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UKWATA ABBI

Ukwata Abbi: A Celebration of Culture, Unity, and Heritage in Anioma

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Ukwata Abbi is a big festival that the Abbi people of Delta State, Nigeria, celebrate every year. It is enjoyed not only by the Abbi people but also by other neighbouring communities. It is one of the valued cultural ceremonies that spell out their history, unity, and various lifestyles. It happens mostly in February when the farming season is over; it is a season where everybody comes together to celebrate, making peace and enjoying.

How it started: The popular Ukwata festival of Ukwuani people originated from the Umukwata Kingdom of Ukwuani. Some elders explained that it originated from a man by the name of Amacha, who is an indigene of Echalla-Ukwu in Igbo near the River Niger. Amacha, alongside his brother Ukwata, were hunting when they arrived at Aboh. But there was a dispute between them and the people of Aboh, so Amacha, Ukwata, and their friends Effi and Amai moved to Ukwuani. Amacha settled in “Kanyibilinebeni” (which means “let us stay here”), and it later turned to Abbi Echalla. Ukwata, his brother, later formed the Umukwata clan, making both families connected to date.

It was said that Ukwata, the founder of Umukwata, started the Ukwata Festival to celebrate Ukwata’s resilience with peace and plenty of food. As time went by, it grew into a big feast that reminded them of their forefathers holding their culture tight. The name “Ukwata” came from Amacha’s brother, making him part of the celebration.

Ukwata is not a minor play as it contains various meanings. It is when the farming season is over in February, and people are resting as they await the next planting season. It is a time to reflect, reconcile and start a new beginning. Making peace is everyone's responsibility, and it is a big chance for the Abbi people to feel like one family. Once the date is fixed, which is done by the Okpala-Uku (Abbi king) or the Uko-Okpala, nobody fights, quarrels, collects debts, or even organises a noisy burial. But things like marriage, naming ceremonies, and parties are allowed. Making the world filled with happiness. Abbi boys and girls who live far away, including strangers, do partake in the celebration.

How it's been done: The festival normally takes days, but two days are outstanding: The Nkwo Nde Ebiai and Ukwata Dance Day. Before commencement, people harvest yams, store them in their yam barns, and wait for the conclusion of the festival before touching them again, which marks the end of the farming season.

How the date is being fixed: This is a very serious aspect. The Okpala-Uku or Oyiwa(like a Priest) in Okpala palace will go to the shrine to ask the gods when it is to be celebrated. It is a spiritual act that shows that Ukwata is not just a party but something involving the ancestors and the gods.

The Nkwo Nde Ebiai: This is like a warm-up day, where people prepare and put on nice dresses. The town is lovely as everyone awaits the main event.

Ukwata Dance Day: This is the main day of the event; people known as " Ukwata carriers" will come out from the shrine with the "Ukwata," which is the main object of the dance. The dance is being done in the three quarters of Abbi-Elovie, Okwelle, and Umia. While the music is on, people will be singing, and the dancers will appear in attractive dresses. If there is anyone between the quarters, they will dance together, but if there's a problem, it might be handled separately by each quarter. The dance also has a spiritual attachment, as it is being done as a sign of respect to the gods and chases evil spirits.

Its advantage to the people is that Ukwata Abbi is a big social play that brings people together. It is a time when the Abbi indigenes in Lagos, Abuja, or even abroad come back home. Friends, family, and even strangers are always present. So it turns out to be one big reunion. People from other places, including different tribes, partake in the ceremony, bringing Cultural diversity.

Money-wise, the festival brings good business. Considering the crowd, market purchases increase, including food, drinks, and services being rendered. The “Ukwata Abbi mega concert” has been added for some years, and it pulls out sponsors and tourists who deal with extra spending in town. The peace that exists during the festival makes everything go smoothly, bringing happiness to marketers.

How is it celebrated today, and what are the problems associated with it

Ukwata Abbi is now a little bit modernised; it can be seen through Facebook in the form of the “Ukwata Abbi carnival,” which has gained popularity online. Artists like Queen Ozaka have dedicated a song to it, mixing both old and new lyrics, enticing the youth as well.

However, it is faced with certain challenges; sometimes, fights between advanced men from Echalla (2017) try to condemn it, though they reconcile later. Then, modernity and city disputes make most youths forget the culture. Yet, Abbi people are determined leaders, youths, and culture lovers who fight to keep it alive and fresh.

Ukwata Abbi is a strong sign of who the Abbi people really are; it carries their history, ways, and hope from Amacha and Ukwata history to date. It ties them together with enjoyment and peace. Even as time evolves, the festival still stands tall, showing the power of culture over people and making them proud. It is not only practiced in Abbi but has now become a culture in Ndokwa and its surroundings. It is a mind-blowing celebration.

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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.



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