

**THE NEW YAM FESTIVAL OF NDIIGBO  
(eastern part of Nigeria)**

The new yam festival of Ndi-Igbo (the eastern part of Nigeria) West Africa occurs at the beginning of the harvest period of the Eastern scarp land which occurs on early April. It marks off the border between the Harvest period and the next planting season of the year.

It is a ceremony that is being done by the people (traditional rural people and often times the urban citizens too). It's a very great occasion celebrated by the people in appreciating the gods of their land for granting them a good planting season with a bountiful harvest and also seeking for more of his abundance in the next planting season. It involves mainly the eating of yam (the King of the arable staple food of the easterners) with palm oil prepared together with condiments such as salt, pepper and other flavourings. The yam may be roasted or probably cooked depending on the choice of the eater.

During this occasion, libations are poured on the earth such as gins, rums, spirits and other sacred victuals in appreciation of this season. Prayers are often said by the chief priest to the gods of the land such as Agwu, Nri and Odo e.t.c. the Iri-ji festival is a commemorative festival that brings together all the citizens of the village whether home and abroad together. This occasion is often celebrated in the village square where a lot of events connected to the ceremony are performed such as the beating of the drums, dancing, eating and drinking and equally extension of greetings or regards to extended friends and well wishers.

Food (yam and its sauce) is brought generally is a tray and kept virtually for all to take. It is eaten generally to everyone's satisfaction. Sometimes the yam maybe pounded or prepared in any other way. After the celebration in the village square, the individuals go home to continue the celebration in their houses. It takes two-three days for the commemoration depending on the type of community and its leaders. During this season, everyone is excited as there are lots to eat and drink as a result of the new harvest season. Masquerades are also seen during this festival as one of the excitatory sightseeing. Different kinds of masquerades are seen dancing around such as izaga ndi igbo, apia, e.t.c.

The New yam festival is really a long expected ceremony in the culture of the Easterners of the West Africans as it marks the end of a hard labour and strenuous season of planting and the beginning of an enjoyable season.

â€œOrurueshi (new yam festival) simply means the revival and refreshing of the body, to keep body and soul together after the long period of cultivation and famine. It is an annual event celebrated traditionally and culturally,â€ Ogbodo disclosed. He noted that Ikem-Asokwa is one of the foremost communities in Igboland that celebrates new yam festival early enough in July, along with their brethren in Ikem-Nando, Aguleri and Umuleri communities in Anambra State. Ogbodo said that â€œsince yam is regarded as the king of all food crops and is highly respected by our tradition and culture, during this ceremony, a farmer has to purify himself before he can taste or eat the new yam, lest, the spirit of his yam will protest and next yearâ€™s yield will not be substantial. The new yam festival portrayed the Igbo society as predominantly agrarian with more than half of its population engaged in farming and has brought a lot of development to Igbo land as it encourages agriculture which has in turn boosted the economy of many Igbo communities. The festival has also been a tool for uniting the Igbo ethnic group as they come together for the celebration, including their sons and daughters overseas. However, in many Igbo communities, Iwa Iji or new yam festival lasts for few days while in some communities, it may last for a week or more. On the first day of the new yam festival, the yams are publicly roasted and first offered to â€œOhajokuâ€, the Igbo god of yam/earth before the villagers commence eating. The New Yam Festival, Iwaji is done in honor of Ahiajoku (Ajoku, Njoku, Ajokwuji). The word, Iwaji/Iriji means eating yam. The new yam signifies the fruitful end to a work year and the beginning of a new one.â€ If a new yam came into a community from a different one, a cleansing ritual would ensue. Early harvested yam contains traces of poison and so the waiting period gives the yam time to mature. It is why at the beginning of the festival, the Igwe or the Chief priest takes the first bite of the new yam. This ritual is called drinking poison.â€ After praying over it, the householder is to cut off small parts of the yams at the ends. This symbolizes the sacrifice of Ahiajoku. The yams are cooked with palm oil and chicken which symbolizes the body and blood of Ahiajoku.