

SPECIAL EVENT

New Yam Festival (ihi Onīpīpē)

The festival is celebrated every year on the 30th of August and stands to beguile the cultural heritage of the Yala people who are situated in the northern part of Cross River State and shares boundaries with the neighbouring Ebonyi and Benue State respectively.

To the Yala people of Cross river state, celebrating the new yam is thanksgiving to God for good yields and a successful farming season and not idol worshipping. Some call it ihi Onīpīp, or ihi obule, depending on the dialect. The celebration is a cultural- based occasion, binding individual Yala communities together as essentially farmers and dependants on yam. ihi Onīpīp, or ihi obule is a cultural feast with deep significance. In some communities, it is always marked with spectacle and pageantry. The day is symbolic of family reunion and the enjoyment of a bountiful harvest after a tedious season of cultivation. The new yam festival is as old as tradition in Yala but can trace its origin to Wogada (Ebo) Kingdom, the land of brave warriors. This festival has its unique purpose and aim. It is the formal presentation of a newly cultivated tuber of yam to God Almighty, the ancestors of the land and also thanking God for protection, and also for sustaining the life of the farmers, the indigenes of the

land and the farm product (the yam) through a successful season in agriculture. Yams are the first crop to be harvested and are the most important crop of the Yalas. Traditionally, the role of eating the first yam is performed by the oldest man in the community or the king (Ogabor). Roasted yams, coupled with red oily sauce may be used in a New Yam Festival ceremony but mostly pounded yam is best suitable. This is because it is an ancient way of eating a tuber of yam among the Yala people. Prior to the celebration or what may be referred to as the D-day a traditional offering must be offer, any new yam harvested must not be eaten until the Sacrifice is done, an offering is made on behalf of the people as they pray for renewed life as they eat the new yam. In the olden days chief priest also offers the yams to gods, deities and ancestors. It is believed that their position bestows the privilege of being intermediaries between their communities and the gods of the land. The rituals are meant to express the gratitude of the community to the gods for making the harvest possible, and they are widely followed in some communities despite the influence of Christianity in the area. A variety of festivities mark the eating of new yam celebration, some of them include but not limited to Royal Dance and Masquerade Parade. The colourful festival is a spectacle of exhibited joy, thanks, and community display. One can ask, why is it that despite the fact that Yala people plant and harvest varieties of crops, why are they given so much priority in celebrating only yam?

Providing an answer to this, Barrister Alphonsus Ogar Eba, said that the yam is given such priority because it is regarded as the main crop of the farmland. “Yam is the king of the farm land that is why it is being celebrated. Have you seen us celebrating cocoyam or maize, no, yam is the king of all crops in the farm”. A shortage of yam supply is a case of genuine distress. For no substitute gives the same sense of satisfaction. This preference for yam and the time and labour necessary for its production are some reasons why yam is a very important Yala food. The important significance of the special day is to preserve old cultures and traditions that have to do with the ancient practices and to offer the new generation an insight into such practices, so that the culture lives on with the next generation. The festival is rich with culture-traditions, local menus, acrobatic masquerades, brilliant parades, fun, dance and ethnic music. The new yam festival is not limited to the different villages and ethnic groups but can be celebrated in faraway countries even in Europe or America.