YAM FESTIVAL in GHANA and NIGERIA

Held in August or September. Also known as "Homowo" or "To Hoot at Hunger" (Ghana) and "Iriji" (Nigeria)

(Thanks to my friends, Isaac Cann, from Ghana, and Thaddeus (Teddy) Ezeji from Nigeria, who shared memories and photographic ideas)

The Yam Festival in Ghana, a country in western Africa, is also called the "Homowo" or "To Hoot at Hunger" Festival: the people hope for a good harvest so no famine will hit the people in the coming year. In Nigeria, also in western Africa, "Iriji" means "New Yams", and the people also hope for a plentiful harvest. Problems can be too much or too little rain, and animals, especially goats, which eat the yams. In Nigeria, the festival is celebrated mainly by the Igbo peoples, and various communities celebrate Iriji in different ways. But, all have a parade, songs, dancing and drumming. Because a good yam harvest is important for survival, the people give thanks to the spirits of the earth and sky.

Teddy Ezeji explained that his name means "King of Yams" (Eze=king, and Ji=yam). His great grandfather was awarded the name for life, because he consistently had the best yam harvest in his district (the Mbano district in Imo state, in the SE of Nigeria). He was also a landowner and the local native doctor.

This festival is held once a year, usually in August or September, just as the rainy season is coming to an end, and crops are ripe and ready to harvest. There is plenty of maize (corn) as well as other vegetables, such as okra, beans, cassava, and yams. Yams are usually the first fruits of the harvest, the staple food of many peoples of western Africa. The yam is a large tuberous root related to the sweet potato, but not exactly the same. American sweet potatoes are usually orange, but African yams can be white, yellow, or orange inside (but they still taste sweet) and come in many shapes and sizes: some can be up to a few feet long.

Yams are very versatile and can be cooked in many ways: roasted, boiled, added to soups and stews, fried, mashed, or dried and pounded into flour. The traditional dish is called fufu. This is boiled, mashed yams, with a little butter or palm oil, often still eaten in the traditional way---with the hands.

At the Yam Feast, the local people serve yams with fish, chicken or lamb; or with vegetables, such as oil bean, pumpkin, corn, or African greens; or in a soup. Isaac remembers palm nut soup, and Teddy coco yam soup. One of Isaac’s favorites was yam porridge (pounded cooked yam reconstituted into a thick soup) topped with cooked goat. Dessert might be mangoes, guavas, pineapple or oranges. Drinks include fruit juices, palm wine and beer.

In Ghana:
This “To Hoot at Hunger” Festival takes place in many rural communities. Women dig up the yams and carry them home in baskets on their heads. Everyone is proud of the harvest and wants to be the family with the largest crop. Villagers gather together as the women and young girls prepare the feast, with the yams as prized food. They choose a young boy to carry the best yams to the festival dinner, and another boy follows him beating a drum. Other young people from the village march to the beat of the drum and the sound of a woodwind instrument, and sometimes musket fire. Chiefs, under umbrellas and wearing robes made from the famous, brightly colored, Ghanaian Kente Cloth (which spread, as a symbol of African design, to other
African countries) follow the yams, and the young people dance. Other activities include singing, wearing animal masks, and displaying fetishes.

In Nigeria:
On the first morning of the celebration, families make an altar in honor of their ancestors, the earth god Ala, and the yam god, Ihejioku. Village men go out to the farms to dig up the new yams, and give thanks in the village square. Yams must be carefully dug up as they bruise easily. In their homes the men make an offering to the ancestors of new yams, some white chalk, and a chicken. The chicken is for slaughter, and the chalk symbolizes purity and well-being. Some of these traditions are changing now, as Christianity becomes stronger in the region. A feast with family, friends and neighbors follows.

On the second day, the villagers gather to watch young men in wrestling contests. In the morning the wrestlers eat roasted yams, which they believe will give them strength, and village elders are chosen as judges. Drums welcome the wrestlers, divided into two teams, into the village square. When a wrestler wins a round, drummers beat their drums again, and young women come into the circle and dance. Eating, drinking, and talking also continue the whole day into the evening. It can be a noisy celebration with gongs, musket fire, calabashes, and flutes as well as the drums.

Drums:
Drums are a very important instrument throughout Africa, played on both happy and sad occasions, and are always played sometime during a harvest festival. Some drums are made from a calabash, a large bottle-shaped gourd. It is cut horizontally to make a large bowl and placed upside down. The surface is decorated with etched designs, and played with bundles of thin, flexible sticks.

Other drums, called *udu*, are bottle-shaped clay pots with an opening in the top and a hole in the side. They play the drum by covering the side hole with the palm of one hand while hitting the top hole with the other hand. By covering and hitting the drum's openings in different ways, they can make many different sounds. Nowadays, many school kids made their own udu and learn how to play them (even at a school I know in St Louis). Other drums are cylindrical or rectangular and covered with animal skin and decorated with plant fibers, wooden beads, and cowrie shells.
Nature worship and animalism:
Millions of Igbos and other West African peoples today are Christian or Muslim, but many still also pray to the ancient gods. As in old pagan religions, they believe that all objects in nature, such as trees, fields, mountains, are given life by the spirits who live inside them. The people believe that if they honor the spirits they will be rewarded with a good harvest. For the yam harvest they need to honor the yam spirits, the earth goddess that nourishes the crops, and the water god that brings rains. Many villages have a special Rainmaker, usually a very powerful "magical" person (who needs to be placated with lots of money!)

Masks:
Masks originated from this nature worship and animalism. Many people believe that masked men embody the spirit of the harvest gods, so through the masqueraders the gods can interact with the community. The masks tell stories and are closely linked to the culture. The masks are often very large and detailed, using a variety of materials. Some are carved from wood, while others are made from bark, animal skins, plant fibers, and woven cloth. The masked ritual dances are always accompanied by drumming.

Recipe for Yam Muffins (very easy)

INGREDIENTS:
1 cup cooked yams, mashed
1 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup sugar
2 teaspoons baking powder
2 eggs
4 tablespoons, sweet butter, melted
3/4 cup milk
1 teaspoon cinnamon

METHOD:
1. Preheat oven to 350, and grease muffin tins, or arrange paper muffin cups on a baking sheet.
2. In a large mixing bowl, combine all ingredients and mix well
3. Pour the batter into the muffin tins or paper cups until 2/3 full and bake for 20-25 minutes. Makes 24 muffins

For more Information:
(about Kente Cloth) [http://www.marshall.edu/akanart/cloth_kente.html](http://www.marshall.edu/akanart/cloth_kente.html)
(about Yams) [http://ipgri-pa.grinfo.net](http://ipgri-pa.grinfo.net)
(Harvest Festivals in Africa) [http://www.harvestfestivals.net/africanfestivals.htm](http://www.harvestfestivals.net/africanfestivals.htm)