

Igbo Beliefs and Religious Thought

The Igbo believe in a benevolent creator or Chukwu (also known as Chineke) (i.e. Almighty God), that each individual is born with a spiritual assistant or guardian principle, Chi, unique to each individual, and that the individual's fate and destiny are determined by their *chi*. Thus the Igbo say that siblings may come of the same mother but no two people have the same Chi.

In addition to Igbo belief in a supreme deity, the Igbo traditional belief system also included other "lower-deities" and providences related to different aspects of Igbo cosmology. This was in consonance with African traditional belief systems including those of Ancient Egypt and Ancient Ethiopia (Kush) and it was on these belief systems that earlier civilizations such as the Greeks based their own belief systems. Early Western chroniclers such as Homer and Herodotus noted that the Ethiopians were the favorites of the gods and that Greek gods went to Kush to partake in their annual religious rites. The Ala spirit is the goddess or providence spirit of the Earth who is also the guardian spirit of living descendants and moral rectitude.

The Igbo also believe in principal spirits of the sun (Anyanwu), the sky (Igwekaala) and thunder and lightning (Amadioha). There are numerous other deities related to rivers and streams, forests and sacred woods, agriculture, the days of the calendar which is structured around major and minor market days, the professions, and so on. Another principal Igbo deity is Njoku or Ajoku, guardian deity of the yam which in previous times was the major staple crop of the Igbo. In parts of Igbo land there are annual rituals in honor of the yam deity known as Ifejioku, and in other parts children who were dedicated to the service of the deity were named Njoku. As adults such children were expected to become prosperous yam farmers which made them into nobility.

Among the Igbo each major deity has a priest in every town that honors it, and the priest is assisted by a group of acolytes and devotees.

The Igbo world is divided into several interconnected realms, principal among them being the realm of the living, the realm of the dead or of the ancestors, and the realm of the unborn. Individuals who led an honorable life and received a proper burial proceed to the ancestral realm to take their place among the ancestors or Ndichie. From there they keep a watchful eye on the clan and visit their loved ones among the living with blessings such as fertility, good health, longevity and prosperity. In gratitude the living offer sacrifices to them at the family hearth, and seek their counsel.

Children are considered the greatest blessing of all and this is reflected in popular names such as Nwakaego; a child is worth more than money or Akuakanwa; no wealth is worthier than a child, or Nwabuugwu; a child is the greatest honor. In many parts of Igboland, women who successfully deliver ten children are rewarded with special celebrations and rites that honor their hips. Infertility is considered a particularly harsh misfortune. The Igbo believe that it is children who perpetuate the race, and in order to do so children are expected to continue Igbo tradition and ways.

The Igbo are known historically for their republicanism and the absence of monarchical or central political structures among them as a group. Igbo contempt for monarchies is conspicuously embedded in the popular saying and common name, Igboamaeze; the Igbo recognize no kings. This is so because the Igbo believe that there is a king in every man, in other words that each person is a king unto themselves and master of their own affairs. Each Igbo community or clan is organized around age groups, social organizations, the revered and accomplished and family heads with a special place for the priest. Deference is paid to the eldest man in the clan, but each grown man has a say in the affairs of the community. Issues that affect the clan are publicly tabled and discussed and the opinion of each grown man is taken into consideration in order to reach consensus. Affairs that particularly affect women are discussed in women groups and accordingly decided and settled. In every community, the daughters of the clan or Umuada (also known as Umumboto) occupy a particularly powerful place and could return from their different places of marriage to exercise the breaking vote in matters of grave consequence to the community. Individuals are accorded special rights in their maternal clan and may return to their mother's home town when threatened or banished from their own home towns.

Highly accomplished men and women are admitted into orders for people of title such as Ndi Ozo or Ndi Nze. Such individuals receive certain insignia to show their stature. Membership in these orders is highly exclusive, and to qualify an individual needs more than mere material accomplishment or gallantry. They need to be highly regarded and well-spoken of in the community, and most importantly, they must be a person of the greatest integrity, truthfulness, and sanity. The slightest impeachment of character is enough to disqualify an individual from becoming a person of title and once admitted into the order, a person of title is forbidden to lie, cheat, climb a tree, covet or divest a neighbor of their belongings, or commit an abomination or crime.