

IGBO-AFRICAN GODS AND GODDESSES

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Abstract

Pantheon is a concept that is associated with religious worldviews that are considered polytheistic, usually to capture their gods and goddesses. Focusing on the Igbo world, this work makes a collection of selected deities in Igbo worldview. While arraying these deities, it maintains that the idea of Supreme Being is very strong in Igbo traditional religion. Thus, while there is a multiplicity of lesser gods, there has always been only one Supreme Being who is the source of all that there is, including the deities themselves. If we look at this issue from the perspective that these deities are only deans or messengers of the Supreme Being then there would be no conflict of supremacy. And in fact the supremacy of the Supreme Being points to the fact that Igbo traditional religion is a religion of structure, inextricably bound up with the total structure of Igbo traditional life. It is within this structure that the Igbo person's existence, welfare and destiny are totally caught up. The hermeneutic approach is employed for the purpose of this study.

Keywords: Igbo, African, Pantheon, Hermeneutic, Deities.

Introduction

In the Igbo-African cosmology, there is only one God- *Chukwu Okike* or *Chineke*, who is high and is expected to be reached through intermediaries. These intermediaries are called divinities and share aspects of the divine status. While some African scholars believe that they were created by God, some others believe that they emanated from the Supreme Being. Thus, Mbiti (1975) observes:

It is sometimes also believed that between God and human beings, there are other beings that populate the universe. These are the spirits. There are many types of spirits. God is their creator first as he is the creator of all human beings. The spirits have a status between God and man, and are not identical with either and some of them may be used to do certain things. (p. 65).

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Arinze (1970), speaking from the Igbo perspective, avows that:

God is the Supreme Spirit, the creator of everything. No one equals him in power. He knows everything. He is altogether a good and merciful God and does harm to no one. He sends rain and especially children, and it is from him that each individual derives his personal 'chi'. But this supreme spirit has made many inferior spirits who are nearer to man and through whom man normally offers his worship to Him. (p. 10).

Contrary to Arinze and Mbiti's perspective, some African scholars like Quarcoopome (1987) believe that they emanate from God; as such, it is incorrect to say that they were created by him, but more correct to speak of them as offsprings of the Supreme Being. The position of these scholars is based on the fact that one never hears about the story of the creation of divinities in African traditional theology. This explains why the *Abosom* of Ghana, *Orisa-nla* of the Yoruba, *Olokun* of the Edo are referred to as sons of the Supreme Being. However, while the second perspective brings a new light into our understanding of primordial divinities, it does not adequately account for divinities that are historical or personified natural forces.

This notwithstanding, these divinities are responsible to God for whatever act they perform in their relationship with human beings. Their function is to ensure that God is not bordered with petty problems from the earth; they are not an end in themselves but a means to an end, and everything they do is dependent upon God's approval; this does not in any way change the fact that they are a powerful set of spiritual beings. They are functionaries in the theocratic governance of God, sometimes referred to as his messengers and at other times as his sons. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) beautifully refer to them as the executive heads of various divine departments in the Supreme Being's monarchical government. Each divinity has a name, usually describing its function: as we have *Ala* among the Igbo meaning earth, and speaks

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of earth-goddess, or *Olokun* in Yoruba, *Okun* meaning ocean,
generally meaning the god of the sea.

The difference between these divinities and the Supreme Being is very obvious. They are inferior spirits, while God is a superior spirit. They vary in number from place to place, however, with more among the Yoruba where one can get as many as 1700 divinities. This notwithstanding, this work focuses on Igbo divinities. In an age when African religious traditions are under attack, and are relegated to the background of mere obscurantism, this work makes an attempt to take our minds back to who we were, what we did, how we survived and related with the supernatural forces in the African universe, especially before the West broke into the structure of our religious-cultural identity.

Divinities among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria

There are numerous deities among the Igbo of Western Nigeria. However, a good number of these deities have only local adherents, with their popularity restricted to particular cultural and geographical parameters in Igboland. In fact, virtually every village in traditional Igbo societies has a deity that is revered by the particular people, and a chief priest who mediates between the people and the particular deity. While these are referred to as deities, this work is precisely interested in deities that have a trans-cultural recognition in Igboland. By this, I mean, the major deities in the Igbo world whose powers resonates in Igboland. These deities are: Anyawu, Amadioha, Ahiajoku, Ala, Ibini Ukpabi, Ekwensu, Agwu and Mmuo Mmiri.

1. Anyawu- The Eye of the Light

The word *anyawu* is a combination of two Igbo words: The first word is *anya* which means “eye” and *anwu* which means “the light”. Put together, it means “the eye of the light”. However, going beyond the literal meaning, *Anyawu* means the sun. And in Igbo traditional religion, it refers to the god of the Sun or the Sun god, who is referred to as the eye of the light. Going beyond the literal understanding of the eye for sight, the theology of *Anyawu* has implications for the human enlightenment, our vision and our

foresight. Metaphorically, this sight represents itself as **insight**, which is the capacity to gain an accurate and deep intuitive understanding of a person or thing, and **foresight**, the ability to predict what will happen or be needed in the future. In short, insight is the ability to see things as they really are, and foresight is the ability to see things as they will be. If this be the case, *Anyawu* was a deity that had the power to inspire insight and foresight in people.

Talking about the veneration of *Anyawu* among the Nri, Anuobi (2006) avers that:

In standard Nri scarification, the artist would carve the first line to run from the center of the forehead down to the center of the chin. They would then carve a second line to run across the face, from the right cheek to the left. The second line met the first at the center of the nose, making it a perfect cross. The second cross was drawn with one line running from the left side of the forehead down to the right side of the chin and another line running down the opposite direction. This sequence and pattern was repeated until the pattern looked like the rays of the sun. Altogether, it took sixteen straight lines, eight crosses, for a full face scarification that mirrored the rays of the sun. It was their way of honoring the sun that they worshiped. But it was more than that. It was the face and service and another way of losing one's facial personality. (pp. 203-204).

A cursory glance at history reveals that speaking of a deity in terms of an eye is not exclusive to the Igbo; the Egyptian Ra is depicted as a Falcon headed man who has a sun disk on his head. *Anyawu* deity is the Igbo way of paying homage to the sun, which is revered all over the world for the light and heat it provides to make our planet earth habitable. In the *Anyawu* deity, the Igbo expresses the central place that the sun occupies in Igbo daily life. For instance, the Igbo method of keeping time is based on it, as for the majority of human history. Most of our modern calendar, are based on solar movements, and lot of our major holidays originally started as solar equinox or solstice celebrations. Even Western astrology focuses on a person's sun signs.

Anyawu is the son of *Chineke* or *Chukwu*, and sacrifices that are made to *Chukwu* are made through *Anyawu*, because of the special and close association of the sun with the Supreme Being. The significance of this deity among the Igbo is seen in the artistic expression of the *Anyawu* deity even on the walls of buildings in Igbo traditional families.



Figure 1: An ancient Igbo wall with the Anyawu symbol

The depiction of *Anyawu* deity goes beyond the parameters of arts. *Anyawu* deity has also been given an anthropological face by scholars, and one of the depictions of anyawu deity in human form by Ben Enwonwu can be seen below.



Figure 2: Anyawu depicted in a Human Form

The sun is so important to the Igbo that the Igboland was referred to as Land of the Rising Sun. This is evident even in the Biafra flag:



Figure 3: The Biafra Flag with the Image of the Sun

The sun for the Igbo symbolizes both physical and spiritual awakening; sleep cycles follows that of the sun. The Igbo wakes up around the time the sun rises, and goes to sleep soon after the sunset. As people whose basic source of income was based on agriculture, the movement of the sun was very important to them as seeds germinate better when exposed to moisture and sunlight. *Anyawu* was also the symbol of perfection which every Igbo must seek. Darkness is often used to symbolize something that is hidden or unknown, while light in this sense represents something that has been revealed.

2. *Amadioha*: The God of Thunder and Lightning

Amadioha also known as *Igwe* (sky) is the son of *Chineke*, and sometimes referred to as the husband of *Ala*. In some parts of Igboland, it is referred to as *Amadiora* or *Kamalu*. The colour of this deity is red, its symbol is a white ram and its day for worship is the *Afo* market day. This explains why during sacrifices to *Amadioha*, a white ram is always preferable. It is a god of justice, in that it carries out vengeance for the weak; it is the god of love, peace, unity and the messianic hope of those who are in great need; and also, the god of enterprise that brings personal wealth.



Figure 4: The Ram- a symbol of Amadioha

Amadioha stands for the collective will of the people. This is derived from its etymology which means ‘man of the people’. Its associate is the *Anyawu*, the god of the sun, and the sun, astrologically, is its governing planet. This explains why, while *Anyawu* is popular in the northern part of Igboland, *Amadioha* is well revered in the southern part of Igboland, however, *Amadioha* remains a very popular deity in the entire Igboland. It is similar to the god *Shango* in the Yoruba religion, who is also considered as the god of thunder and lightning, and also *Sokogba* (Nupe) *Ogiuwu* (Edo); *Eto*, *Itiri*, *Egba* (Urhobo).

Amadioha is considered the “Owner of the Sky.” Whenever lightning kills a person or strikes an object, the event is often considered a sign or message from *Amadioha*. Lightening was believed to have its track and so the Igbo would always avoid those tracks. It is also referred to as the husband of *Ala*. Just as a husband fertilizes his wife so does *Amadioha* fertilize his wife *Ala* through

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rainfall. *Dibia*, or priests, are, therefore, asked to determine what wrong has been committed by the victim or the owner of the object. Not minding the violent image that thunder and lightning carry, *Amadioha* is presumed to be a gentle deity who gets violent only when provoked.



Figure 5: An Image of Amadioha

Amadioha is an agent of *Chukwu* against undetected crimes and who brings divine blessings to people. Through his intercession, *Chukwu* nourishes the green vegetation of the earth, sees to the health of the living, lightens up the world and gathers evidences as well as bears witness for good deeds and against evil deeds. It can pull down or up trees that have evil hidden in them, and such events is usually understood as an exposure by *Amadioha*. It can also destroy farmlands where people have buried charms to harm their enemies or kill their opponents. It ensures that the natural order as set by *Chukwu* is not upset. Its principle is simple, ‘eye goes for an eye and a tooth goes for a tooth’. Whatever one sows, one will reap” (Kanu 2013). *Amadioha* is, therefore, referred to as the deity that manifests the wrath of *Chukwu*.

Apollos (2002) avers that in the shrine of *Amadioha*, there is usually a long bamboo pole normally suspended horizontally in the air by two strong big forked sticks, one on each side. Some charms and medicinal grass are tied to the suspended pole, smeared by blood of a fowl, and pasted with feathers. It is believed that any evil doer can never pass under it and go free without being struck to death or afflicted with an incurable disease. Big trees and thick bush normally surround the *Amadioha* shrine, with antiquated objects like broken pots, boxes, bottles, mirrors, iron pots and cups found inside the grove. Other special instruments found in the shrine include: *Ogu* (hoe), *mpi okpu* (animal horn), *opi ele* (antelope horn), *igbugbo* (metal gong) and *nma* (knife). Animals dedicated to *Amadioha* include: *ebulu Amadioha* (ram of *Amadioha*), *aturu Amadioha* (sheep of *Amadioha*), *ehi Amadioha* (cow of *Amadioha*). These are regarded as the daughters and property of *Amadioha*. Nobody dares harm or kill them to avoid the wrath of *Amadioha*.

3. *Ahiajoku*: The God of Agriculture

The Nri hegemony and its influence on Igbo history cannot be over emphasized. It is in this regard that Madubuko (1994) observes that the story of the Igbo people, no matter how briefly considered, would be incomplete if one omits the Eri-Nri contribution. Afigbo (1981) shows Eri clan as originating from the regions of Anambra River, at Aguleri; from there, they fanned eastward and established various communities. According to Uzukwu (1988), Eri is the father of all Nri and tradition has it that he came from *Chukwu*. During a severe famine, to provide food, he prayed to *Chukwu* who demanded that he should sacrifice his first son *Ahiajoku* and Ada, his daughter to him so as to save the other children from starvation. After they were killed, their flesh was cut into pieces and buried in several different mounds. A few days after the sacrifice and burial of his son and daughter, yam and palm tree began to grow out of the places where the flesh of his son were buried, while vegetables and cocoyam grew out of the places where he buried Ada's flesh. If yam germinated from where *Ahiajoku*, Eri's first son was buried, it means that yam is the symbol of *Ahiajoku*, and since it was given to man to sustain life, it is regarded as life itself. Since then, the spirit of *Ahiajoku* became the God of Yam.

There is also another narrative that refers to *Ahiajoku* as a goddess and not a god. In precolonial times the *Uhianjoku* was regarded as the goddess of farm productivity exemplified in the yam and cocoyam as the major farm crops. *Uhianjoku* was worshipped as a deity (a Goddess) and homage was paid to this deity by the elders in appreciation for the role ascribed to her by the ancestors in sustaining farm productivity. *Uhianjoku*, according to this perspective, has presently been modernized as *Ahiajoku*, an acronym for bounty intellectual harvest of the Igbo East of the Niger. *Ahiajoku* is now celebrated by all Igbos to honour the crop yam which is the mainstay of arable farming activity in Igboland as well as the King of farm crops. While this perspective provides an alternative opinion, the first narrative that relates *Ahiajoku* with Eri, the king of Nri is a preferred position.

The myth of *Ahiajoku* is reenacted during the New Yam Festival each year. Each householder places four or eight new yams on the ground near a shrine. After saying some prayers, he cuts small portions off each end of the yams to symbolize the sacrifice of *Ahiajoku*. The yams are then cooked with palm oil, water, and chicken to make a dish that symbolizes the body and blood of *Ahiajoku*. The Igbo people consider the yam to be so sacred that at one time, anyone caught stealing it would be put to death.

The philosophy behind worshipping “Ahia-ji Oku” is hidden in the very words that have formed the name of the deity. “Ahia” indicates exertion, industry, to strive after, hence to trade; “ji”, to lay hold of and “Oku” riches. Thus, the full meaning is: “Industry or trade brings wealth”. This to a great extent explains the hard work and industry of the Igbo, for it is industry brings wealth. In those days, yam largely constituted wealth. A man is evaluated by the size of his yam barn (Oba Ji), large household and ability to earn a good living and help others in society. According to Onwutalobi (2015), the rite of new yam is to re-enact a bounty harvest and wealth for the celebrants. The importance is further captured in seeing the new yam festival as a tradition, and one of which culminates the end of a yam

farming cycle and the beginning of another. This explains why every farmer offers sacrifice to Ahiajoku deity for a bountiful harvest.

4. *Ala*: Earth Goddess

Ala is the most important deity in Igbo public and private cults. She is the sole daughter of *Chukwu* and is believed to have made the ground and the vegetable kingdom. Onwu (2002) describes *Ala* thus:

Of all the divinities *Ala*-the Earth goddess is generally worshipped in Igbo land as the arch-divinity and seen as the goddess of fertility and guardian of Igbo morality, a power which controls - divinities and a force which brings fortune and economic prosperity. (p. 2).

The earth goddess has the function of exposing those who secretly commit evil and the evils they commit. It is in this regard that the Igbo say:

- a. *Ani tukwa gi* – may the earth expose you.
- b. *Ani bokwa gi ji n'aja* – which literally means “may the earth put yam and sand on your head”. This means, “may the earth goddess render you miserable and expose your shame”.
- c. *Ani jukwa gi* (may the earth reject your corpse).

In Igbo land, the earth is holy, and from it God produces all living things, including human beings. It is also through this earth that human beings rejoin their maker – *Chineke*. When a man therefore, commits a crime, he is said to have “*Meruo Ala*” (defiled the earth). If such a person dies without having “*Mejuo Ala*” (pacified the earth), the earth goddess whose function it is to expose people’s atrocities will reject the corpse of such a person. When the person is buried, the earth goddess throws up the corpse out of the belly of the earth. In this case, the bereaved are left with the option of cremation. The implication being that the soul of the person is destroyed and will never reincarnate. For such a soul, the Igbo would say: *enu erughi ya aka, ani erughi ya aka*, meaning that he has no share in the sky or earth. They end up as wicked spirits.

While *Chukwu* is in charge of creation, *Ala* is in charge of conserving that which is created. While *Chukwu* is the giver of the moral law, *Ala* is the enforcer of the law. *Ala* is also the “womb” that holds and nurtures and renews when necessary. This explains why she is always depicted in diagrams as though she is pregnant:



Figure 6: Ala, the Womb that holds and nurtures

The **Igbo**, an agrarian people, regard her as the “mother” of all crops. Before planting and harvest, they hold days of ritual ceremonies to appease *Ala* so that she will facilitate the growth of healthy crops or to thank her for making possible the abundant harvest soon to begin. In a year of drought or other agricultural misfortunes, the people undertake ritual processes meant to examine how they may have angered *Ala* and caused her to withhold her blessings. After they look for wrongdoing on the part of humans, they seek scientific explanations for crop failures. When religious and natural explanations conflict, mythical narratives are used to overcome contradictions.

5. *Ibini Ukpabi*: Long Juju of Arochukwu

Ibini Ukpabi is the divinity of Arochukwu; it was known in the Eastern Delta as *Tsuku ab yama*, which translates to “God resides there.” According to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), it has the power “to identify sorcerers, witches, poisoners. People also believe that she can make barren women fertile, and give success in trade, fertility of crops and victory in war” (p. 94). There are two narratives about how it got the name ‘Long Juju’. First, it was said that the name came into existence when a British explorer walked the long tunnel and got tired then exclaimed, “*This juju is long; it is a long juju*“. However, the second narrative is linked to the colonial masters, who called it the “Long Juju” because of the distance and length of days it took supplicants to visit it for consultations as well as the extent and coverage of its influence in the then Eastern Nigeria and beyond.

Ibini Ukpabi transformed Arochukwu to a place where major issues and conflicts were adjudicated. And the shrine of this great deity was the venue, the supreme court, and its judgment was final, with no further appeal. No other shrine or deity entertained the adjudication of a case already settled by *Ibini Ukpabi*. And persons or communities never challenged her judgment; to do that was to risk being invaded by either Ohafia or Abam warriors who protected the integrity and supremacy of the Arochukwu deity with their military might. The height of its powers was during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, when it was the most powerful deity in Igboland. Its power also made the Aros supreme and advantaged as they served as middlemen in the trading between the whitemen and the Igbo in hinterland. The Aro could travel to virtually every part of Igboland to buy the goods (including slaves) which they sold to the European merchants. The *Ibini Ukpabi* oracle formed the basis for the attachment of the surfix ‘Chukwu’ to the name of Aro thereby converting it to Arochukwu (God’s Aro). Because of their association with *Ibini Ukpabi*, they were known by many Igbo communities as Umuchukwu, (the children of God). In fact, the Efik and Ibibio people knew the Aro people as *Mbot Abassi* (the people of the Great Spirit).

Uguru (2015) avers that the reputation of *Ibini Ukpabi* was based on its ability to deliver swift judgments. Once a person entered the shrine, if found guilty, the person never returned. The relations would only see blood flowing out from the shrine and then would know the person was guilty and had been killed by the deity. However, some scholars have argued that it was all a ruse as the priests would never kill; it was all animal blood which was poured out, while the person was taken through a door to a secret location to be sold as slave. The offenders, after walking into the tunnel, were stripped naked at a place known as the ‘**Hill of Rags**’ and clandestinely sold into slavery instead of being killed. If this perspective is true, the question also arises as to the source or sources of the human skulls that were found in different positions in the shrine. Where they fabricated or where there people who were really killed at the shrine?

Power of Sunflower (2015) has attempted to give a description of the shrine of *Ibini Ukpabi*:

The approach to the Long Ju-Ju is through dense bush, which gradually becomes thicker and thicker until one arrives at the entrance of a deep oval-shaped pit, seventy feet deep, sixty yards long, and fifty yards wide. One then climbs down the precipitous sides of the rock into a narrow gorge and into running water, up which one wades, passing under two fences, until one finally comes to a place where the water comes out of the solid rock in two big streams, which unite below a small island, on which are two altars, one made of many trade guns, stuck muzzle downwards into the ground and topped with skulls, the other being of wood and supporting more skulls, bones, feathers, blood, eggs, and other votive offerings to the Ju-Ju, including the head of the last victim. (The Power of Sunflower, p.1).

It writes further:

Over the rock, where is the source of the water, is a roof of human skulls with a curtain, the top part of which is composed of clothes and the lower part of native matting, screening the rock and hanging just short of the water's edge. The lower portions of the rock composing the other side of this crater are draped with mats only. On the left of the entrance, centrally situated, and opposite the island, has been hewn out of the rock a flat-topped ledge for sacrificial purposes. The water, about twelve inches deep, is full of tame grey-coloured fish, about two feet in length, with long suckers and glaring yellow eyes, which have a most bizarre appearance as they glide noiselessly through the clear water in the dim light of this charnel-house of fetish lore, which is roofed with densely intertwined creepers. These fish are regarded as sacred. On the left of the exit lies another pile of human skulls and other relics of Ju-Ju rites, and on the left the last sacrifice—a white goat, trussed up in the branches of a palm tree and starving to death. (The Power of Sunflower, p.1).

Describing further, it writes:

The conducting of a visitor to the Ju-Ju is usually a somewhat lengthy process, and when he arrives in its proximity he is led by a circuitous route and finally marched in backwards. It would seem to be a fair estimate to put the number of pilgrims down at about five hundred annually, all of whom pay dearly for the advice or decree which is vouchsafed to them. Probably the number of human sacrifices does not reach a total of fifty per annum, while about 200 people are sold into slavery, and the remainder are allowed to go away free. (The Power of Sunflower, p.1).

How did the Aro Oracle come into existence? Arochukwu tradition has it that the oracle originally belonged to the ancient Ibibio dwellers of the present day Arochukwu, who under the Ibibio kingdom referred to the oracle as *Ibritam (ibit itam)*, meaning, the giant drum. The oracle was developed and served by the Idiong

secret society about 300 AD. When Aro conquered the Ibibio in the 1634 in the Ibibio/Igbo war, they took over the oracle but retained its priests, with Loesin as the chief priest who was to initiate Aro indigenes into the cult as priests. Subsequently Aro took over the priesthood and full control of the oracle and renamed it *Ibit Ukpabi*, meaning the drum of *Ukpabi*. *Ukpabi* was the Aro word for the Creator God, thus the oracle meant the Drum of the Creator God, obvious implying that it spoke for God. During the military expedition to Arochukwu in 1901 and 1902, the oracle was destroyed. And when Christianity came, the oracle's name was adapted by the Igbo Catechism in reference to God Almighty, namely *Chukwu-abiam*.

6. *Ekwensu*: The God of Warriors

Along with *Ala* and *Amadioha*, *Ekwensu* represents the testing force or power of *Chukwu* and constitute the greatest gods among the ancient Igbo. Missionaries have wrongly identified *Ekwensu* with the Christian concept of devil. According to Metuh (1991), *Ekwensu* is, in fact, the spirit of violence and patron of warriors like Esu of Yoruba and Kratas of Greece; *Ekwensu* is not the Christian devil, it is rather the Son of *Chukwu* and possessed people who are quick to anger. It was a force of chaos and change and ruled over the wicked spirits and the chaotic forces of nature. Death was its perpetual companion.

It was the god of bargains, very crafty at trade and negotiations. At moments of difficult mercantile negotiations, *Ekwensu* is invoked. Isichie (1969), records that among the Igbo of Asaba, there was a festival called *Ekwensu* festival, and it constituted their major annual feast, during which they displayed their military prowess. This deity was invoked during times of war or conflict, however, was banished during peacetime to avoid his influences in the community, for it can incite bloodshed among the people. Usually, warriors set up shrines to *Ekwensu* to help war efforts and destroyed them after victory have been won. This deity was feared as much as *Chukwu*.



Figure 7: Image of Ekwensu Deity

To be possessed by *Ekwensu* can bring about a person committing evil acts which are contrary to what *Chukwu* allows or against the humanity of human beings. Whenever an unfathomable act of evil is committed by someone considered incapable of such a crime, possession by *Ekwensu* is a common explanation. Without excusing the person's conduct, this attribution of the origins of such criminal depravity to a superhuman power allows the Igbo to acknowledge that there are some levels of inhumanity humans cannot reach on their own. This explains why the missionaries immediately saw in *Ekwensu*, Lucifer, the Father of lies and evil. Mogo (2016) wrote a poem titled *Ekwensu* in which he decried the damage done to *Ekwensu*'s identity and integrity:

Ekwensu

Violence to the language
is violence to the soul
is violence to a people

is violence to their history
is violence to their future
is violence to their identity
is tangible violence

Like *Ekwensu*
the trickster in our cosmology, simplified
into a white God's black devil
so chi became a white God
and *Chukwu* became a white God
and *ekwensu* became evil

this is what they do to us, simplify us
fit our glory into a story
where they are the hero
flatten our hair, our noses, our tongue
whip us into conformity
then blame us for the mess they left
and the mess we have made
of the mess that they left

Sorry *Ekwensu*
for how they destroyed your reputation
how they maligned your character
how, because they did not understand you
they decided to spread vicious lies about you
you go on being you
who cares what they say?

7. Agwu: The god of Divination and Healing:

Agwu also known as *Agwusi* is a trickstar god like *Ekwensu*, the *Esu* of Yoruba and *Ananse* of Akan people. It is a basic concept in Igbo traditional religion that helps the Igbo to explain the phenomenon of good and evil, health and sickness, wealth and poverty, fortune and misfortune (Aguwa 1995), and belongs to the category of deities from *Chukwu Okike* (the creator God) like *Anyanwu*, *Amadioha* and *Ala*.

Observing how *Agwu* manifests himself to people, Okeke (2017) observes that:

Agwu comes to people in different ways. Sometimes, it comes through liquidation in one's business, or one falling from a tree or any other dimension. It is believed that a person who is so possessed can be holding a key in his hand and be searching for it in his room. *Agwu* is believed to be a spirit of giddiness, rascality, confusion and forgetfulness, among others. It brings worries to an individual, in other words, it causes a person an emotional trauma and generally psychological disorder. (p. 1).

Arinze (2008) writes further on the negative manifestations of *Ahwu* deity in the lives of people:

Agwu (who) is the special spirit of *ndi dibia*, the spirit of giddiness, rascality, discomposure, confusion and forgetfulness (*mmuo nkpassa uche*). It is believed that a person possessed by *Agwu* can be holding a key in his hand and yet be searching for it frantically in his room. Talking during sleep or when alone is also believed to be symptom of his presence. *Agwu* scatters the brain; hence he is also called *Mmuo eli eli*, *eke eke*, *Mmuo ntunye nku*, or *Akaose* (spirit of confusion). He can also send the possessed man many worries, a chain of misfortunes, deterioration of crops, financial breakdown, etc. (p. 123).

When a person is sick, poor or in misfortune, *Agwu* is blamed, however, when a person is healthy, wealthy and gifted with creative talents, *Agwu's* benevolence is praised. This implies that *Agwu* not only brings evil and misfortune, it can also come with blessings. However, Aguwa (1993) avers that unlike a mere spirit force, *Agwu* exercises intellectual and volitive faculties. Being a trickstar, it is difficult to identify whether it is male or female; *Agwu* can manifest in both forms or can play both roles at will, at once or at anytime. It is the chief messenger of the Almighty God and is the spirit-force that inspires people with exceptional talents.

Nwankwo (1987) recollects and records his conversation with *Agwu* – when *Agwu* was asked about himself, he replied:

I am the spark of Divine Essence charged with the responsibility of providing man with tools of existence ... I hold the key to those secrets of creation which man is expected to know and reveal such secrets as are necessary for the advancement of mankind ... in the study of science, philosophy, religion, occultism, mysticism, I am the first port of call. Intelligence, wisdom, knowledge and power is bestowed on those who have received the blessings of the agent of the Almighty God. These privileges are nevertheless without a price and it is that you shall be clean before God at all times of your life. (p. 69).

One only needs so little a demonstration as to close his eyes, stand barefooted on the earth, open wide his arms and solemnly echo: *Agwu gosi m ike gi!* (*Agwu* show me your power) to experience the awe of *Agwu's* divine aura.

Agwu was respected and feared in ancient Igbo society because of its capability to sow confusion even in the clearest mind. It can as well transform a dull mind with very clear thought. The *dibia* avoids the wrath of *Agwu*, since clarity of mind is necessary for the success of their everyday mission, thus, *Agwu* is referred to as the god of medicine men. Ogbalu (1981) avers that:

Agwu is the god of medicine and divination. He is worshipped by every person during a person's *Iru Agwu* ceremony particularly males, if they are to behave well and have common sense. To him is assigned the responsibility of men who act as if they have no common sense. (p. 54).

Establishing the relationship between *Agwu* and medicine men, Arinze (1970) further explains:

Agwu is the common patron of all diviners. Hence each *dibia* offers prayers to *Agwu* every morning soon after rising. The *dibia* strikes the tortoise shell rhythmically and speaks in a technical language, praising *Agwu* whom he believes will not delay in enriching him. (p. 123).

To the diviner, *Agwu* is, therefore, a patron. In fact, it is believed that those who become *ndi dibia* and diviners are possessed by *Agwu* deity, who supervises them as they carry out their specific functions. The misrepresentation of *Agwu* or not following its disciplinary measures has consequences for the *dibia* or diviner. However, when a healer does not charge his clients too much money; when he prepares medicines according to its directives; listens and carries out appropriate instructions; avoids certain prohibitions, such as not using one's healing power unduly against others or taking other people's wife or husband; not going to sleep with a woman during her menstrual period; avoiding certain places like funerals of people of questionable character; not being stingy, but showing compassion. Such a person will *Agwu* bless beyond measure

8. *Nmuo Mmiri* or *Nne Mmiri*: The Water goddess

In African ontology, spirits inhabit mountains, trees, the ground, the sky, the water- rivers, seas, oceans, canals, etc. The spirit that inhabits the water are popularly called mammy water, *Mami Wata* or *Mami Wota* in pidgin English and occupy a prominent place in the pantheon of Africa gods and goddesses. The Igbo equivalent of Mammy Water is *Nmuo Mmiri*. She is a female deity with variant names, and the sustainer of sea life, the bringer of hope, provider of help and protection, the bringer of gifts and exotic things. Indeed, she is said to hold the key to the gate that leads to the world of solutions. Whenever the Igbo pray he does not forget to add *ka uzo anyi buru uzo mmiri*, which means, "may our journey follow the path of the stream". It is she who guides people to exotic lands, and chooses to permit human beings to travel and reach their destinations on top of the sea.

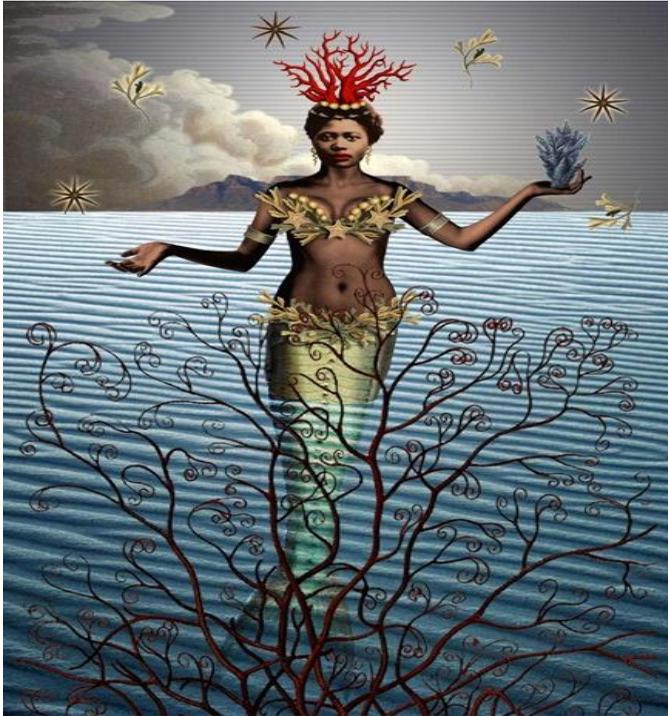


Figure 8: Nne Mmiri

In Igbo cosmology, Jell-Bahlsen (2014) avers that *Nne Mmiri* is an ancient and important deity, which underscores awe for female fecundity, sacredness of life and water. This deity is supremely beautiful, colorful, sparkling, elusive and benevolent, however, equally dangerous as she can cause turmoil among a people, diseases and even bring about death. Unlike Ala deity, she usually has multiple spouses and can grant children to human beings. Those who are her devotees find in her a source of fertility, children, food, health, wealth, etc. The *Nne Mmiri* represents the female dimension of the Igbo universe and a role model of female achievement. Her icon among the Igbo is the python, crocodile and tortoise.

Conclusion

Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) categorized divinities into three: the primordial divinities who dwell in the heavens and were with the Supreme Being during the creation of the universe, like *Orisha nla* (Arch-divinity), which Idowu (1962 & 1973) avers was given the responsibility of creating the human body. There is the category of deified ancestors who were human beings that lived extraordinary or mysterious lives and were made divinities after their death, like Sango who was a former powerful king of Oyo. There are also personified forces and phenomena which speak of spirits that have their abode on mountains, hills, rivers, seas, oceans, trees, roads, markets, caves, brooks, lakes, forests, etc. Their abode also determines the place where they are worshipped, and also the residence of the priest of the deity. While Awolalu and Dopamu were developing these categorizations of deities, they developed a structure that better served the Yoruba deities than that of the Igbo. This is not to say that there are no Igbo deities that can fall into any of these categories. For instance, the primordial deities, conveniently accommodates the major Igbo deities. Of course, the personified forces and phenomena also classified Igbo deities as many of them are known by their habitats, showing how ecological factors can influence religion believe and practices.

However, as regards deified ancestors, this categorization is not very popular among the Igbo. There are certainly times when deities are generated through the murder of persons, but these deities are not named after the persons whose spirits were conjured to bring the deity into being; these are man-made for the people's survival and well being. Bringing Awolalu and Dopamu's categorization structure into the Igbo world of deities reveals that there might be the need for further categorization. And further categorizations must include:

1. National deities, meaning deities that are worshiped only in a particular area like the Ebumiri of Umunumu in Mbano, Ofọ Itu in the Mbaise, Idemili in Uga, Aguata, Haba in

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Agulu, Nnagwurugwu of Isu in Arọchukwu, and Ọha Mmiri
of Oguta, among others.

2. There are also Trans-National deities, which include deities that are worshipped within and outside national boundaries like the *Ibini Ukpabi*, *Amadioha*, *Ala*, *Ahajioku*, etc.
3. There might also be the need to make a distinction between male and female deities, and the implications of such a dual categorization for the Igbo world.

These categorizations notwithstanding, the belief in deities remain a very important component of Igbo traditional religion. This must not be understood as polytheism as has been misconstrued by both western and African scholars. For instance, Onwu (2002) asserted that:

No matter what other writers say, polytheism (which means belief in or worship of many gods) is practiced among the traditional Igbo. But it does not imply that all the local deities are of equal importance and power to the people. Although a lot of local variation exist in names, categories and details of belief in and worship of these divinities, a number of them are believed to be major divinities and are widely acknowledged. (p. 2).

The idea of Supreme Being is very strong in Igbo traditional religion. While there are a multiplicity of lesser gods, there has always been only one Supreme Being who is the source of all that there is, including the deities themselves. If we look at this issue from the perspective that these deities are only deans or messengers of the Supreme Being then there would be no conflict of supremacy. And in fact the supremacy of the Supreme Being points to the fact that Igbo traditional religion is a religion of structure, inextricably bound up with the total structure of Igbo traditional life. It is within this structure that the Igbo person's existence, welfare and destiny are totally caught up. It is in his believe that the more he or she can control nature and the force, the more he or she is able to enjoy

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protection, longevity, progress, success and peace with God, the
divinities and the ancestors.

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