

## *Review*

# **Igbo cultural and religious worldview: An insider's perspective**

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Although it can easily be contended that there is no dearth of ethnographic reports and writings on the Igbo people of Nigeria, yet it can equally be argued that most of such reports, particularly those arising from the works of Christian missionaries and British colonial ethnographers had largely been concerned with giving a general picture of the mores, customs and traditions of the Igbo. The core of such writings often present the Igbo as primitive people given to some unchanging cultural traits/habits, rather than as agentic people, known for their well articulated cultural and religious worldview. In particular, most of the previous anthropological reports on the Igbo arose at those regrettable days of colonial denigrations in which the perspectives of indigenous African peoples were treated with much disdain, with the people themselves being approached as mere informants to be spoken-for rather than to be listened to regarding their views on the nature of life in the human world. Using the technique of documentary analysis and in-depth library research methodology, the present paper intends to correct some of the shortfalls embedding most of the previous anthropological reports on the Igbo. In particular, the paper plans to educate the reader on some ideals and ethos of the Igbo of Nigeria. In making this contribution it is not assumed that the reader knows much about the culture of the Igbo. Hence it is expected that at the end of the presentation, a lot should have become clearer regarding Igbo culture and religious worldview as well as the rituals and procedures of the key transitional ceremonies of Igbo religion.

**Key words:** Igbo, Nigeria, socio-cultural, worldview, transitional ceremonies.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Even though one can safely argue that there is no dearth of ethnographic reports and writings on the great Igbo people of South-Eastern Nigeria, yet it can equally be contended that most of such reports or writings on the Igbo, particularly those of them emerging from Christian missionaries and British colonial ethnographers had mainly been targeted at painting a general picture of the unchanging customs and traditions of the Igbo people of Nigeria. The essence of such writings appeared intended only to present the Igbo as traditional community people given to expression of their inherited ancestral mores and practices. They were rarely studied or presented as agentic people, known for their well articulated cultural and religious worldview. Yet it is these aspects of the Igbo that make them unique among the other ethnic

groups in the West African sub-region. In particular, and most regrettably, it is to be noted that a lot of the previous anthropological reports on the Igbo were accomplished during the hey-days of negative colonial practices when the perspectives of all African peoples were treated in great disdain, with the local people themselves typically approached as mere informants to be spoken-for rather than as full-fledged human subjects to be listened to with respect, regarding their views on the nature of life in the human world.

Using the technique of documentary analysis and an in-depth library research methodology, the present paper was designed to contribute data that would help to serve as a corrective to some of the excesses and dated and limited information about the Igbo, still propagated in

some of the previous anthropological reports. In particular, the paper is intended to educate or re-educate the reader on some ideals and ethos of the Igbo. In making this contribution, it is not assumed that the reader knows much about the culture of the Igbo. Hence it is the major expectation of the present researcher that at the end of this report, a lot should have been made clearer regarding the content and complexities of Igbo culture and religious worldview as well as the rituals and procedures of the key transitional ceremonies of Igbo religion.

### IGBO AS LANGUAGE AND PEOPLE

Now, in the context of this paper, the term Igbo is used as a double signifier. On the one hand, it refers to one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. On the other hand, it is used to designate the language of this group, the Igbo people of Nigeria. The Igbo belong to the Sudanic linguistic group of the Kwa division (Uchendu, 1965; Onwuejeogwu, 1981). Igbo language is characterized by its tonality, the monosyllabic root-words and an absence of inflexional endings. In terms of location, the Igbo occupy the bulk of the South-eastern parts of Nigeria. It is usually said that while the other two major ethnic groups in Nigeria (the Hausa and the Yoruba) also inhabit other countries in Africa, the Igbo are found as an indigenous population in no other country in the world than their present Nigerian setting. Igbo elders have maintained that the Igbo are indigenous to their present location in Nigeria and had not migrated from elsewhere to their present location.

The Igbo have a common border with the Igala and the Idoma on the Northern part of Nigeria, the Ijaw and Ogoni on the South, the Yako and Ibibio on the Eastern boundary and the Bini and Warri on the West. The principal rivers are Niger, Imo, Anambra, and the Ulasi River. The Niger divides the Igbo into two uneven areas. The bulk of the population lives east of the Niger, with heavy concentration at Okigwe, Orlu, Owerri, Onitsha, and Awka. The other part of the Igbo group lives west of the Niger.

Igboland has a tropical climate. The average annual temperature is about 80°F, with an annual range of between 5 and 10°. There are two marked seasons of the year among the Igbo. These include the dry season and the rainy season. The former starts in October and ends in April. The latter commences in April and ends in October with a break in August (Ekwunife, 1990).

### ECOLOGICAL FEATURES OF IGBO CULTURE AREA

The Igbo cultural area is characterized by a variety of ecological features. This has encouraged scholars to

divide the Igbo territory into some key ecological areas such as the riverrine, delta, the central, and the North-eastern belts. Scholars like Onwuejeogu (1972) and Uchendu (1965) present six instead of four divisions as follows, the Southern half of the scarplands of South-eastern Nigeria, the Southern half of the lower Niger basin, the mid west lowlands, the Niger delta, the Palm Belt of South-eastern Nigeria, and the Cross River basin. Some authors like Afigbo (1972) and Isichei (1977), prefer to use five divisions – Northern or Onitsha Igbo, Southern or Owerri Igbo, Western Igbo, Eastern or Cross River Igbo and North-Eastern Igbo.

Despite this effort at description of the Igbo territory into sub-divisions, scholars like Dike (1956: 44) agree that:

“Throughout the nineteenth century and before it, the great majority of the Igbo claimed Nri town in Awka district as their ancestral home, and it has been suggested that around Nri town is to be found the heart of the Igbo nationality”.

The priests of Nri, according to him enjoy the privilege of walking untouched or unharmed through any portion of the Igbo territory. Their semi-sacred character indicated by a short staff of office afford them passport and protection everywhere they go among the Igbo. Similarly, according to Talbot (1932), the theocratic sway of *Eze* (King of) Nri was almost universally accepted and the itinerant priests ministered to the religious needs of the whole community. Inter-marriages, attendance at inter-clan festivals, blood-covenants between neighbouring political units, and the many communal-market groups in the tribal interior, were effective instruments of cultural unity among the Igbo. According to Forde and Jones (1950:7) who described the Igbo habitation style:

“The typical Igbo settlement pattern consists of loose clusters of homesteads irregularly scattered along cleared paths radiating from a central meeting place of the village and/or village group, which contains the shrines and groves of the local earth deity or other chief spirit and also serves as the market”.

### IGBO POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Politically and socially, the traditional Igbo society has no centralized form of government. Political groupings are based upon the agnate group or *Umunna* (Ekwunife, 1990). The agnate (*Umunna*) group system is based on the patrilineal or matrilineal organization of the village. The agnate (*Umunna*) is organized on three levels. At the primary level is the family, centred on the *Obi* of the *pater-familias* or in his absence, the *Okpala* (the eldest son) takes over. This process gives rise to the need for the *Abam n'obi* ceremony. That ritual ceremony of the

take-over of the home-head by the eldest son of the family has been researched on by the present author and will be presented in subsequent publications.

At the higher level is the *Ebo* (village) lineage group with the most senior *Okpala* of the village group as the leader. Finally at the highest level is the 'town' – the aggregate of all *Ebo* or village lineages. Among the Igbo, leadership of the community falls on age grade.

Age grade associations are important in Igbo social organization and among many Igbo village and town groups and they are highly developed and in each case constitute a part of the administrative machinery. Age grade associations are composed of age companies, which are formed triennially among boys beginning from the ages of thirteen and fifteen years. Members of a particular age company elect their leader and choose a name by which to be known by other citizens of the village and town. About two or three age companies are then merged together to form an age grade association. But as the boys grow to manhood, their companies are periodically upgraded through successive age grades until they reach the ranks of the elders, which is the highest age grade.

Among some Igbo communities, the transition from one age grade to another takes place at intervals of six years while in others it could be less. In general there are normally about five age grades in each community. The younger age grades engage in manual labour such as the cleaning of pathways and village squares. The older age grades are responsible for the construction of markets and bridges, as well as the legislative and executive aspect and defence of the village or community (Oguagha, 1989).

While the agnate group (*Umunna*) system encourages equality, communalism and egalitarianism at all levels, the title associations promote individualism with the prestige, power and authority attached to solid personal and material achievement. Among the Igbo, there are *Ozo* title groups, which are open to any freeborn citizen who is capable of paying the requisite fees and possess an upright character. This means that among the Igbo, probity of character is a basic requirement for admission into the *ozo* title society and in this way the title is a mark of respectability. The *insigna* of the titleholders include ankle cords tied on feet (*owu ozo*), an iron staff (*alo*), and a cow or horsetail (*nza*). *Ozo* titleholders are in addition expected to take praise names. Among such names are: *Akunna* (father's wealth), *Akunne* (mother's wealth), and *Akukalia* (abundance of wealth).

The Igbo *Ozo* titles are graded in an ascending order of prestige, privilege, and ritual status, and have to be taken in that order after the necessary ritual ceremonies and payments. The names for the different grades vary from community to community. Generally, however, they are split into two groups: the lower rank category, which is less expensive and conferred some social status, and the

higher ranks which are more expensive and socially significant (Oguagha, 1989).

Among the Anambra Igbo including those from Nri and Ihiala towns, titleholders within the higher ranks are called such praise names as *Ogbuefi* (Cow killer) and *Ogbuanyinya* (Horse killer), *Ide* (the pillar, holding the house) and *Nze* or Chief (a significant elder).

These facts are necessary for an understanding of the meaning and significance of ritual agents and privileges conferred on a high ranking elder at the moment of his death, in one of the research reports to subsequently follow the present paper. Although the Igbo are fundamentally an agricultural community, few undertake smiting, carving, pottery and cicatrisation as full time occupation. Presently, however, a good majority of Igbo sons and daughters are involved in business merchandise and white-collar jobs all over Nigeria and beyond.

## IGBO WORLDVIEW: A DEFINITION

A worldview has been referred to as how people perceive and explain their world, or the ways things are or change in their environment. According to Kalu (1978) and Kraft (1979) a worldview can be understood in terms of a unified picture of the cosmos explained by a system of concepts, which order the natural and social rhythms, and the place of individuals and communities in them. In other words, a world-view reflects people's basic assumptions about, and perceptions of the universe, which give orientation and value to their lives. A people's worldview stands for their source of explanations for the ways things are in the world, including their theories of illness, death, and misfortunes, and how human afflictions and problems can be resolved. Indeed as Animalu (1990) sees it, a worldview or cosmological framework refers to a people's way of organizing their activities which explain the how and why of daily existence. According to Animalu, worldviews are products of experiences so pregnant with drama that such experiences give rise to symbols or totems of some sort. The symbols give rise to thought or creative intelligence (*ako-na-uche*) and creative intelligence gives rise, in turn, to the customs and codes of the society, which are so internalized, from childhood onwards, that they go unquestioned as a way of life.

A cultural group such as the Igbo is able from their worldview, to explain reality, life and the human environment, and predict space-time events, and finally exert control over them. In this way, the force of Igbo Religion as of any other religion or ideological system rests with the cosmology, which undergirds it. In the case of the traditional Igbo, all forms of individual and group religious practices occur within the broad outline of their worldview (Ejizu, 1987). Particular belief systems, such

as the basis for the ritual naming of a child, the *Okuku Onye-Uwa* ceremony, and death and burial rites and other traditional values and practices emanate from and are validated by it. It is not only religion, but also most other aspects of Igbo traditional socio-cultural life that come under the influence of Igbo worldview (Animalu, 1990).

## IGBO IDEA OF THE UNIVERSE

The Igbo people have a religious conception of the universe. They see their world as made up to two planes: the physical and the spiritual. Igbo worldview, however, abhors the tendency to a digital categorization of things. They believe that there is a dual-traffic and interaction between the inhabitants of the two worlds (Metuh, 1981; Manus, 1993; and Isizoh, 1999). In this way, the understanding among the Igbo is that spiritual beings and cosmic forces are highly intermingled. The activities of spiritual beings and forces often directly impinge on the affairs of humans in the human world. This fundamental religious outlook on life continues to adjust itself each time, to the changing circumstances of the life experiences of the people.

The diagrammatic representation of Igbo Cosmology shown in Figure 1 adapted from Animalu (1990) would explain the Igbo outlook in a more detailed form.

In Igbo religious worldview, the human world is three-dimensional – the sky; the earth, intricately woven with water; and the spirit/ancestral world. Each of the three dimensions operates as a viable reality or a place of habitation; with all three interconnected or contiguous and continuous in a non-hierarchical manner. This means that in such a worldview, although the Supreme Being is believed to live in the sky and major divinities such as Lightning, Thunder, Sun, and Moon are near Him, there is nothing to suggest that the ancestors who live in the ancestral world are inferior (Kalu and Kalu 1993). Supporting the earlier observation, Ejizu (1987: 132) asserts that:

“Analytically, a structure of Igbo perception of the universe in terms of space presents a picture of three-tiered arrangement in consonance with popular intuition. There is the sky above, Igwe, then, the earth, Ala, and finally, we have the under-world, Ime-Ala. Each of these layers is thought to be densely inhabited”.

Perceiving the world in this way, Igbo cosmology understands the sky as the Supreme Being's (Chukwu's) palace. He is believed to dwell there with a host of powerful divinities and primordial beings like *Anyanwu* (the Sun god), *Amadioha* (the god of thunder), *Igwe*, (the sky god). In the same way, some local major divinities are equally believed to live in the sky as well. The earth-surface is seen as the abode of human beings, the earth

deity, minor divinities and personified nature forces. Finally ancestral spirits, myriads of disembodied spirits and other personified forces some of which are malevolent and capricious to the living, populate the underworld (Ejizu, 1987; Kalu, 1992; Arazu, 2005; Chukwu, 2008; Tuche, 2009).

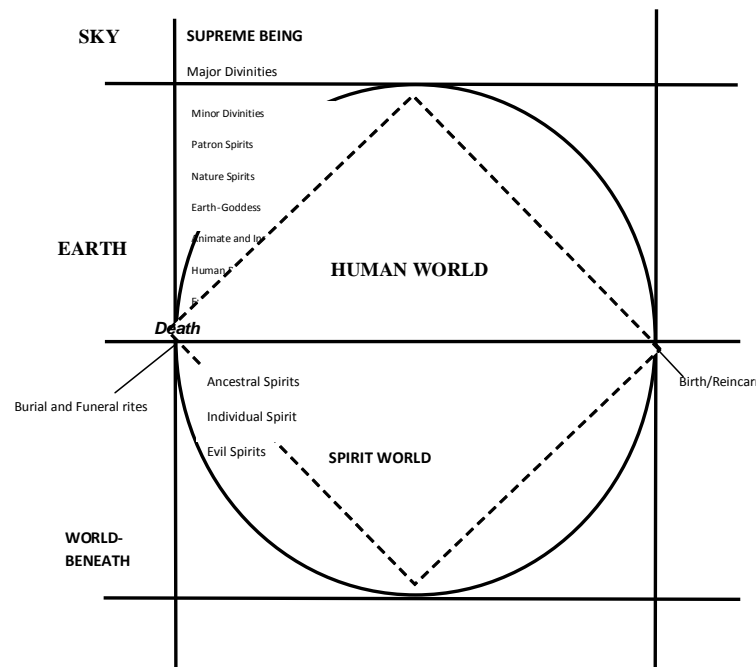
One important characteristic of this spatial ordering of reality in Igbo worldview is the due recognition extended to the exalted position and power of the preternatural order and supersensible beings over humans and the material order. Yet, humans and their world are located at the center of the traditional Igbo cosmic structure. This is because human life, for the Igbo, although received from God, is the greatest good to be fostered. In this way, Igbo traditional world-view is seen as heavily anthropocentric. In it, the activities of the various categories of spirits as well as the happenings in the other realms of the universe are seen as meaningful insofar as they relate to human life and the general welfare of humans in the environment.

Furthermore, in Igbo worldview, the human world is perceived as a mirror of the spirit world. In this way, the traditional Igbo cosmology inspires and sustains a religion that is this-worldly affirming (Nwoye, 2005). Seen in this way, and knowing that human life and the general welfare of the human world are the central focus of attention, the primary thrust of most religious activities among the Igbo, is geared towards the enhancement of human life and the promotion of human being's total well being. Thus influenced by such anthropocentric cosmology, slaves used to be buried alive with their masters so as to continue serving them in the spirit world.

In such a cosmology the human world itself is seen as an alive or dynamic universe that humans share with a host of malevolent human spirits (such as witches and sorcerers); guardian spirits of various professions such as hunting, fishing, farming, and so on; animal spirits; evil spirits; and the Earth Goddess (Achebe, 1975; Ejizu, 1987; Kalu, 1992). In this perspective, a filial relationship is believed to exist between the Earth Goddess and the water spirits, called Mami Water. Such Igbo worldview further reflects the fact that Igbo deities are arranged spatially in four levels as follows:

- (i) Sky – male
- (ii) Earth – female
- (iii) Water – female
- (iv) Ancestral – male

The structure shows that in Igbo religious worldview, male deities predominate in the first and fourth levels while female deities dominate in the second and third levels as seen earlier. The deities in the sky, such as lightning, thunder, and sun, who live near the Supreme Being, are males while the earth and water under the purview of the Earth Goddess and Queen of the Coast



**Figure 1.** Diagrammatic representation of Igbo cosmology. Adapted from Animalu (1990:9).

are females. In addition, female ancestral rituals exist, but most rituals are male, as if the females lose their identity at death.

In Igbo worldview, human existence is perceived as precarious in the effort to tap the resources of good spirits to ward off the machinations of evil spirits. In this way, the socio-political and economic aspects of life of the Igbo are predominated by a highly spiritualized and religious world. In it, relations to kin, neighbours, and spirits are seen as at once a source of security and often that of affliction and distress.

Some of the negative implications of the kind of precarious world-view which the Igbo evolved include the prevalence of the element of fear of countless hosts of spirits and cosmic forces in the people's religious experience. People feel constantly threatened by all sorts of supersensible forces. Supporting this estimate Ezeanya (1969:20) observes:

"We notice that the unflinching fidelity to the various religious practices is motivated not so much by the love of the divinities or ancestors as the fear of the consequences that might result from failure to perform certain rituals demanded by the gods".

For the same reason, charms and other protective consciousness are particularly helpful in defending oneself against unpredictable malevolent spirits and their

agents. A related problem with this aspect of Igbo cosmology is the tendency among the Igbo, to manipulate and bargain with the gods as an integral feature of their religion. It is this point that Kalu (1978: 42) was making when he observes that:

"A votary would variously plead with patron gods, placate evil spirits and end by threatening the god that if he failed to perform, his grove would be over-grown with grass. After all, what use could there be in a god or a charm, which failed to yield dividends on the amount of energy and money, spent on it".

A tendency similar to the given orientation is the widespread exercise of divination and other forms of oracular practices as the traditional Igbo endeavour to decipher the dispositions of the spirits and nature forces in order to predict and control them.

In Igbo religious worldview, key areas, such as land, river, hills, forests, caves, are believed to be controlled by female deities. Such sites are also connected with agriculture, fertility, morality, mores, beauty, and blessings. Yet among the Igbo, yam is regarded, as the king of crops and one of the indices for assessing a man's wealth is the number of yam tubers he has in his barn. The importance of yam in the economic and social life of the Igbo guaranteed the religious prominence of *Ifejioku* (yam god) in many Igbo communities. It also

accounts for the dominant presence of yam as a ritual object in many Igbo religious ceremonies such as the Igbo naming ceremony, the *Okuku Onye Uwa* ceremony, and *Abam n'Obi* ceremony as will be presented in subsequent reports by this same author.

Consequently, the god of yam is accorded primacy of place among the people, and yam cultivation is a male occupation. Many religious rites are centered around the cultivation and harvesting of agricultural products. According to Oguagha (1989: 89):

“In Igboland, an elaborate ritual ceremony preceded the harvesting and consumption of the new yam. In such a ceremony, the senior elder of each lineage is expected to offer sacrifices at the shrine, which is followed by a feast. It is after the ceremony that new yams are declared fit for consumption”.

#### **IGBO PHILOSOPHY OF BALANCE OR COMPLIMENTARY DUALITY**

Igbo cosmology places emphasis on the importance of striking a balance between masculine and feminine principles. The great deities as we have seen earlier are *Chukwu*, the sky-father above, and *Ani*, the Earth mother below (Ejizu, 1987; Kalu, 1978). The belief among the Igbo is that the two principles are needed and in the right balance in their contributions to the welfare of humans. In some expositions of Igbo religion, its core is the polarity between *Chukwu* and *Ana* (or *Ani*) – a polarity in which both poles are, necessarily, crucial. In this way, the belief is that cosmological imbalance of male and female, *Chukwu* and *Ani* causes drought or disease. This means that for the Igbo both sky and earth must cooperate to bring forth crops. Consequently for the Igbo, death including drought, disease, famine and suffering results from cosmological imbalance. Similar devastations result, according to the Igbo, from parallel social or ethical imbalance. In this way, one story of Igbo conversion to Christianity suggests that the murder of twins was not consistent with Igbo principles (Mbefo, 2001). It was a communal repudiation of cosmic balance, of the feminine principle, which should always be honored in Igbo thought. Thus its abolition was not only seen as the universally just thing to do, but the deeply Igbo thing to do as well.

One of the greatest fears among the Igbo is to die and be thrown into the Evil Forest, receiving no burial rites. For them, this calamity means being banned from the company of the ancestors, an outcast of the other side of life, following death. As Isichei (1977: 25) explains:

“The ancestors – those who live well-spent lives die in socially approved ways, and are given correct burial rites – live in one of those worlds of the dead, which mirror the

world of the living. The living honours them with sacrifices. The ancestors watch over the living, and are periodically reincarnated among them ... The unhappy spirits who die bad deaths, and lack burial rites, cannot return to the world of the living, or enter that of the dead. They wander homeless and dispossessed”.

The given citation points to the fact that life for the Igbo moves in a complimentary fashion. From conception, through birth, puberty and adulthood, to ripe old age, the Igbo are preoccupied with the optimal enhancement of their lives. In that way, a successful life here on earth is understood by them as a sure passport to gain one a good place among the ancestors (Ejizu, 1987) an important place of habitation in after life. The Igbo burial/funeral ceremonies (*Emume Enim Ozu*) are designed to accomplish the conferment to the dead the much needed passport for joining the company of the ancestors.

#### **IGBO SOCIAL-CULTURAL AND MORAL VALUES**

A major social practice among the Igbo is the ritual naming of the newborn. For an Igbo child, the ceremony of being named is the beginning point of being socialized into the membership of the community. Some of the names given to the child during such a ritual, such as *Onwubiko* (death, I implore you) bear testimony to the suffering and desperation experienced by the parents preceding the child's birth. Such names often help to make the child to resolve to acquire good decorum to avoid adding to the pain of existence already suffered by the parents before he or she was born. Furthermore, influenced by Igbo worldview, Igbo birth rites initiate sex-role orientation at an early age. The child is expected to model after the reincarnated ancestor or deity represented by the godfather or godmother (the *Onye-Uwa*). People point to gestures, character traits, looks, and other signs to confirm that the child really is a reincarnation of a loved one or a deity. Thus, a middle-aged man may call a baby ‘grandfather’ because he perceives the baby as a reincarnated grandfather. From birth, rites of passage are designed to celebrate and initiate the child into the family and community.

Igbo socialization processes, in general, nurture an orientation to solid personal achievement. Within them, however, wrestling, secret society outings, masquerade and dances, and hunting, all reinforce male orientation among the Igbo. Females suffer more restrictions in outings, more subdued play, and opportunities to participate in dancing.

In terms of girls' upbringing, the biggest anxiety that faces an Igbo mother is pre-marital pregnancy of the daughter. In many Igbo communities, crude herbal abortion practices exist but no ethics of confidentiality. In

most villages, at least, in the past, if a girl became pregnant, a palm tree on the bank of a stream dedicated to women would ripen. At night, young boys and girls, in groups, would carry garbage and sing obscene, satirical songs, to the accompaniment of staccato rhythm, to the pregnant girl's homestead and dump the garbage there. Such a dance of shame is understood as a social stigma among the Igbo. Yet, when the child is born, ululation rents the air. In that way, the same people who danced in scorn for the premarital pregnancy celebrate the child. This means that among the Igbo, there is no concept of the bastard as there is always a known father. In the event of birth of a child out of wedlock, the male's family hastily pays a visit to the girl's family to claim the child, or else the girl's father names the child. Children occupy a pride of place among the Igbo. Consequently, abortion is frowned upon as an offense against the Earth Goddess.

The shame of premarital pregnancy encourages the need for disciplined upbringing of teenage children. Sex-role standards are enforced as a solution. These include, first, sending the young girl after first menstruation to be prepared for marriage. Second, when people have left for the farms, such girls, stay in groups to baby-sit, do house chores, and play. They tend to sleep together in the house of a respected old woman. An indiscreet young male going near would look like a skunk prowling around the chicken coop. Furthermore, courtship is through intermediaries, message bearers, and family representatives. Marriages are arranged and regarded as family, rather than private affairs. The key emphasis of marital ethos is on female subservience. Childbearing preoccupies Igbo females. Early marriages are common, particularly in the past, but more rarely presently, due to the influence of Western education and Christianity.

Care for the aged is not institutionalized. Children are taken as the greatest insurance for old age. In this perspective, where the children succeed they are expected to look after their aged parents. In this process, the first sons and all daughters have a priority to take in and look after aged and ailing parents regardless of their family size.

In traditional Igbo religious worship, people pray that they may die in the soil of their birth, where their umbilical cords were buried. For this reason, Igbo civil servants who have attained the age of 70 and above prefer to go back to the village and await the journey into the ancestral world. In this way, Igbo cultural norms bind the society, and the village norm still dominates the attitudes of the people including the elites and the Christians among them. Those located in the sophisticated environments still cling to traditional customs and go home to their villages regularly for important functions, such as for naming, marriage, or burial ceremonies.

In Igbo worldview nobody of worth is to be buried like a dog without fanfare except for children without a name or those who committed abomination against the society

before their death. In line with this ethos, the dead are usually accompanied by music and dance, and other rituals and transported to the ancestors with canon shots and alarums to the netherworld (Mbefo, 2001). The understanding among the Igbo is that the noise of merry-making alerts the predecessors, of the coming of the dead person to meet and join them. It is believed that where this ceremony is omitted the dead man or woman goes half-way and would have to come back in visions as ghosts to disturb the living until such a time as they complete the send-off ceremony, namely, burial rites. Among the Igbo, aged parents often give the living instructions of how their burial should go while they are still alive. Confirming this Mbefo (2001:40) observes that:

“When the missionaries preached hell-fire at the beginning of their enterprise as the lot of those who never received baptism, many Igbo traditional religionists preferred to go down to hell with their ancestors than to be separated from them on account of baptism.”

Related to the mentioned image is the vital role, which the ancestors are believed to play as the most benevolent allies of human beings in the spirit-world. Family and lineage elders among the Igbo are therefore particularly concerned with maintaining the most cordial association with ancestral spirits through routine prayers and ritual offerings.

In this context, the understanding is that a human's moral life is paramount in keeping the cosmic equilibrium. All norms of conduct, including taboos, even those that might be mechanical, are expected to be strictly complied with. In case of doubt about any infringement, the services of diviners are employed so that things could promptly be set aright. In this way, the prospects of death as involving opportunity for reunion with friends and relatives tend to raise for the traditional aged Igbo a feeling of enthusiasm and optimism, rather than fear and trembling.

The moral heroes of the Igbo world are picked from the animal world. These include the tortoise that is admired for its capacity to deploy its creative ingenuity in the direction of finding solutions to the problems of living. The tortoise is also believed to know when to open and close its armour in keeping with the sensations of safety or danger. It is believed to exude an odour that repels potential attackers. The tortoise is also admired among the Igbo because it is believed to move at its own pace without having to be dictated to from without. For the Igbo these qualities reflect an imaginative deployment of intelligence for personal safety and well-being. They are the qualities the Igbo would like to be identified with as full-fledged humans. Similarly, the Igbo believe that although the world is often hostile and difficult to live in, yet like the ram each should endeavor to learn the virtue of endurance in facing the obstacle of the human

experience.

According to Mbefo (2001), four classes of people are recognized in Igbo worldview. These include the *Ekwueme*. These are those calibers of humans who accompany action with their words. They are reliable, trustworthy, and have won the respect of the community. A sub-group of the *Ekwueme* category of human beings belongs to those that can be referred to as the *Ome-Mgbe-Oji*. This refers to the careful and the humble that nevertheless act when they can make it. They are those who know their limit and act within their possibilities. The other group is the *Oji Onu Group*. This refers to the group of rhetoricians and boasters, people who know how to manipulate and manufacture words to confuse their audiences. Their weakness is their inability to match words with action. They are therefore referred to derisively as the *Oji Onu Egbu Oji* or 'those who fell the *Iroko* tree or build houses by the mouth alone'. They live extravagant lives and the life of pretensions. The fourth is the *Akarogoli*. These are the lazy and the immature adults. They say 'Yes' and 'No' to life at the same time and lose their bearing in the end, often ending up dying unsuccessful; and, at times, through dangerous living, die bad deaths.

Among the Igbo, sexual infidelity does not automatically lead to divorce because it is perceived as a religious offence against the Earth Goddess. Ritual cleansing and propitiations are undertaken. Where such anomaly becomes rampant, divorce is often the result. Allegations of witchcraft, sorcery and poisoning quicken the decision to divorce because life is at stake and life is looked at as a supreme value among the Igbo. In the event of divorce, the woman takes custody of the young children until they are of age to be returned to their father.

Children belong to the man in Igbo society, when divorce occurs. Young adults stay with their fathers, while the bride price is returned to the man. In this way, the financial burden persuades the woman's family to discourage their daughter/sister from doing anything that would incur divorce. In general, among the Igbo, a woman with a large number of children is unlikely to follow the option of divorce when things go bad in the marriage.

Childrearing among the Igbo is the primary concern of the woman and her mother. By puberty, sex typing with tasks, boundaries of behaviour, and sex-role preferences emerge. The image of females as a nurturing agent is entrenched in the minds of the people (Kalu, 1992a). As mothers start to farm again after weaning the baby, supervision falls either to girls who are undergoing puberty rites before marriage or to older siblings of either sex and in any age of childhood.

Sibling relationships are highly focused on the mother as a point of reference because of polygny. Children from one mother relate to each other with a stronger bond of affection than they do with their half-siblings. In the

struggle for limited economic opportunity and education within such settings, sibling rivalry among children of the same mother is reduced but is allowed to operate or even escalate among children of the same father but different mothers in childhood and through adulthood. In this context, children of the same mother are encouraged to present a united front.

An important cultural practice among the Igbo is the custom of projecting their own notions of authority through human-made structures. This practice, for example, gives a deeper dimension to Igbo architecture as a symbol of authority. In this regard, among the Igbo, the *Obi (Obu)* house as showed in (Photograph 1) defines social, economic and political principles of Igbo life seen as a social ideology of Igbo leadership. It is expressed at several levels of Igbo life. Within the frame of the family compound, the *Obi (Obu)* house as the seat of family life as (Onwuejogwu, 1972) sees it, is the center of family life and authority through certain principles of architectural design.

Spatially, the Igbo *Obi (Obu)* is located at the center of the family compound; that is, in the public section of the compound and set apart spatially from that of a man's wife (private section). Its public nature is expressed through its direct physical and spatial link with the family entrance (*Mgboezi*). This is the connecting point between the family space as an inner social reality and external space, which is the village as an outer social reality. The central location of the *Obi (Obu)* in the family compound approximates in its structure Igbo notions of achievement and leadership which is but part of greater ideal of the village community of which it is a part. Similarly at lineage levels just as at the nuclear family levels, the *Obi (Obu)* expresses Igbo social ideology of achievement and leadership. Hence it has on it those items of decorations such as chip-carved doors, which are lacking in other Igbo house forms.

The earlier observations show that, among the Igbo, the *Obi (Obu)* house which the first-born of a dead father takes over after the ceremony of *Ikpocha Obi/Abam n'Obi*, embodies the social principles of achievement and leadership as well as continuity as the survival ideology of Igbo life. The details of this ceremony will be given in a subsequent report by the researcher.

In the past, wealth and children were considered as, in one way, related. Children were more valued than money. This is expressed in the Igbo name *Nwakaego*, meaning, "Child is more precious than money". Customary life among the Igbo is based on *Omenani/Omenala*, the ancestral rules of the land grounded on the laws of the earth goddess, *Ani/Ala*. In the area of values, Igbo men and women are expected to have children, particularly male children. A barren woman is pitied and regarded as a failure. As Igbo kinship is patrilineal, relatives of the husband of a barren wife or a woman who has only daughters or whose children have





**Photograph 1.** Igbo Architecture as a Symbolic System adapted from Aniakor, (1989: 52). "The State of Igbo Architectural Studies". In *Journal of Igbo life and Culture Uwa ndi Igbo* Vol. 2. Nsukka, Okiki Arts Centre. The above picture is a typical *Obi/Obu* house in various Igbo communities. Every *Obi/Obu* is strategically positioned on every compound in such a way that the *mgboezi* faces it directly. It is this structure that is ritually cleansed and taken over by the first son through the *Ikpocha Obi* ceremony. The researcher came across this particular photo in a book *Igbo Architecture as a Symbolic System* by written by Aniakor (1989: 52) at the University of Nigeria Library.

died encourage and expect the man to marry an additional wife, to ensure that his lineage continues. His wife would normally encourage him, because she too wants his line to continue. A childless woman is not directly ostracized. However, she is not appreciated as much as a mother is, since children as we have seen earlier, are a person's life insurance and the focus of one's life. Although loved and desired, children cannot trap a mother in a terribly unhappy marriage. Despite, or because of, a mother's love, a difficult marriage can create an ambiguous attitude towards one's children, and by extension towards the goddess who grants children.

In Igbo society arranging a marriage involves in-depth inquiries by both families of the prospective couple. They inquire into their future in-law's family to find out if there is madness or certain other diseases in the family, if they are criminals, have flaws of character, or have sold off family members into slavery, to learn their status, etc. Some of these traits are believed to be hereditary.

Marriages involve not just a couple but rather two kind of roles and mutual rights and obligations. The goal is to make sure the partners are responsible in order to avoid future marital problems with potentially negative consequences for a large number of people.

In a patrilineal society like the Igbo, kinship is primarily traced in the male line. In this context among the Igbo, every individual belongs to a group of people, the agnate or *Umunna*. This group defines itself through common descentance from one ancestor/father. He may have lived ten generations ago, but all group members, both men and women, are related to this man in the paternal line (Uchendu, 1965). Similarly every individual belongs to a *Chi* or an *Onye-Uwa*, the guardian spirit who stand prosy for his or her earthly existence. The *Okuku-Onye-Uwa* ceremony, as aspect of the Igbo marriage ceremony, is intended to give recognition to this link between the bride being married and her *Onye-Uwa*.

The Igbo market week consists of four days: *Eke, Orie,*

*Afor* and *Nkwo* (Animalu, 1990). Different towns or villages hold their markets on different market days. All local deities have special market days that are sacred to them. Because the Igbo perceived motion as cyclic changes of space and time, they used the same names, as above, *Eke*, *Oye*, *Afor*, *Nkwo*, to designate both locations in space, and locations in the time of the four-day Igbo market week (*izu*). This practice according to Animalu draws attention to the notion of the principle of duality summed up in the Igbo proverb that says, "Wherever something (example, an ellipse) stands, something else (in particular, its involute or shadow) will stand beside it".

This means that among the Igbo the understanding is that there is no one way of looking at things, even as regards which gods to serve as insurance to their protection from the dangers and problems of the human experience.

## POLITICS AND GENDER IN IGBO WORLDVIEW

Due to the predominant place occupied by male deities and male occupations in Igbo culture, the Igbo are a patriarchal people. In this way, women do not inherit land among the Igbo. A woman's male children in such cases inherit the land. In general, masculinity dominates the gender ideology among the Igbo. Males currently dogmatically pursue opportunities in the business world that do not require much academic training. Women cultivate cocoyam, cassava, vegetables and cereals. Although these products yield some monetary returns, they are less in value compared to yams, the principal crop cultivated by the males. In this way, at the social level, sex differentiation is enshrined by emphasis on deference to males. For this reason, among the Igbo, a woman cannot call her husband by his name: she addresses him by his social title or praise name.

The Igbo are by character strong, tolerant, competitive and ultra-democratic, highly individualistic with an excessive penchant for achievement and egalitarianism (Ekwunife, 1990). Among them enormous emphasis is placed on solid personal achievement that promotes the life of independence as one matures with age. Some prayers offered at most Igbo religious rituals are entered into to ensure that one progresses from the life of dependency of childhood to the independence and solvency of adulthood.

Chieftaincy titles among the Igbo constitute a form of reward or social control model designed to support acceptable norms and values by rewarding those who have upheld them. Such titles or rewards make the recipients advisers to the political leadership of the village. Among the Igbo, titles bring prestige. They also grant the title holder specific roles of legal and religious authority. For example, the *Ozo* title was immediately

preceded by the *Ndichie* initiation (initiation into the world of the elders), which gives the initiates the right to participate in all secret deliberations, rituals, and homages paid to the elders or to ancestors.

The *Ozo* title itself, as has earlier been mentioned, gives the recipient enormous political, legal and religious authority and power in many ways. Its bearers constitute a sort of ruling elite in Igbo social authority structure. Here the most interesting aspects of the powers of the *Ozo* men is their authority to decide on matters without any precedents and to amend local customs where need be (Ekwunife, 1990). Males or females could be so rewarded as the praise name indicates the credentials of the recipient. However, most of the titles refer to male-oriented qualities – strength, military prowess, successful yam cultivation or hunting, or eloquence in speech, and wisdom in judgment. Often membership in a dominant secret society would be a prerequisite for accession to certain titles.

The position of women among the Igbo is moderated by two considerations. The first is age. After attaining the age of a grandmother, the female enjoys some of the exclusively male rights. In that way, when operating as a great-grandmother, she can even upbraid a male of younger age in public without shocking the community.

The second factor is marriage. Being married is highly valued among the Igbo. Married women play a role in their patrilineages as lineage daughters (Okonjo, 1976; Allen, 1976; Mba, 1982). In this status, they serve as a police force against the wives married into their patrilineages. They are ritual specialists dealing with confessions of infidelity or adultery by wives and cleaning the patrilineage of pollutions and abominations. In addition, they could, as a group, "sit on a man/woman" whose sexual rascality soiled the name of the patrilineage and may prevent the man from sending away his wife. Moreover, a barren, middle-aged woman can "marry" a girl to bear children for her and then pay for all the required obligations of a husband whose role she enacts.

Although experience continues to teach the Igbo that those female children (daughters) generally look after their fathers better in old age than males (sons). Yet, there is a higher preference for male babies because of the maintenance of the family name. Hence, among the Igbo, the assertion, "Afamefula" (may my name never be lost), becomes a matter of identity and a guiding principle in the lives of individuals, and communities. Consequently a study of the names given to children is expected to betray the desire that people bearing the name of the ancestors may always warm one's homestead.

A variety of masquerade and secret society traditions exist among the Igbo and play a big role in the male child's life after the age of six. Masquerades among the Igbo, according to Agukoronye (2001: 98) "are believed to

represent ancestral spirits, and are sometimes called 'spirits' to reflect this belief". Each masquerade tradition has grades, and male children are initiated into the early grades during school age. These societies serve as models of adult society. The boys emulate adult life, and, significantly, the father becomes less an authority figure in the boy's life. The authority of the leaders of the secret societies substitutes for the authority of the father, though this is not a break in the ties and bonds with the parents. Membership separates boys from girls.

### IGBO EMPHASIS ON RECIPROcity AND MELIORISTIC OUTLOOK

A major orientation among the Igbo is the emphasis that is placed on the principle of reciprocity. This principle is depicted in Igbo Religious folklore as synonymous with the spirit of *Ufiejoku* grounded on the notion of the seed yam mentality (Animalu, 1990). The important thing about the seed yam mentality in Igbo thought and culture is that it is the principle of regenerative relationship that, in their view, is sanctioned by nature. This idea originates from the observation that *Ani*, or *Ala*, the earth, does not practice in her dealings with humans, "the law of winner takes all". It is observed that when she receives a gift, even of old yam from the farmer, she gives back to the farmer a brand new yam in appreciation for the old yam received.

Based on this observation, a common orientation among the Igbo is to demand that in their dealings with their fellow humans and the gods, the principle of reciprocity be strictly observed. That is, when the Igbo offer sacrifices to their gods or in any other ceremonies of the religion, they expect something good to come out of such transaction. Animalu (1990) supporting the above observation points out that the Igbo accepted the Christian missionaries because they preached reciprocity in the relationship between them and God, which agreed with the *Ufiejoku* principle of reciprocity between humans and *Ani* mediated by exchange of yam (*ji*). This is in contrast to the Igbo rejection of colonialists and imperialists because they preached the 'profit' motive that goes one way, in favour of imperialism. Instead of the Igbo saying, *bili kam bili*, or its English equivalent, 'live and let live', imperialism practices "live and let die" (Animalu, 1990). It is by means of this principle that the Igbo try to insert order out of the chaos of their human existence.

The melioristic orientation in Igbo thought and worldview derives from their understanding that *Chukwu*, the Supreme Being and *Onye-Uwa* or *Chi* and *Ana*, as well as the ancestors are in the details of their existence. And that without their permission the evil machinations of the world, be it from witches or sorcerers, minor deities or other forces directed at them will come to naught. In this

way, the melioristic orientation is the Igbo cosmological framework for clinging to hope when things go bad in their lives. Yet, the melioristic attitude of the Igbo mind is more than just accession to naïve optimism. According to Animalu (1990: 43): This means that an important survival attitude among the Igbo is the balanced belief, encoded in their worldview, that with time, things can change for better or for worse; in that once there is life, there is hope. These observations concur with James (1974: 84) definition of meliorism as "the doctrine that improvement is at least possible".

"It helps the Igbo to practice 'caution' in a time of plenty or in victory and 'endurance' in a time of hardship or defeat, with the hope that a change in the cycle is to be expected if the extremes are reached".

### SOME IGBO RITUAL OBJECTS AND SYMBOLS

Among key Igbo ritual objects and symbols include the kola nut (*kola acuminata*), *Ofo* and *Ogu*, and *Ikenga*. In this paper, more clarification is devoted to the concepts of *Ofo* and *Ogu* as well as *Ikenga* in Igbo culture and worldview. The importance of the kola nut among the Igbo will be discussed in subsequent reports. *Ofo* is the ritual symbol of authority among the Igbo (Ejizu, 1986). An *Ofo* is obtained from the twig of the *ofo* tree (*Delarium Senegalese*). This falls naturally away from the branches of the parent tree. These twigs represent the authority of a man to control his wives, and children. Thus according to Afigbo (1972:21) the *ofo* was among the Igbo "the supreme ancestral symbol, the staff of traditional authority and influence as well as the symbol of justice, truth ad right living".

The *Ofo* concept achieved a high level of formal elaboration in Igboland, embodying various kinds of authority and sacredness. In this context, there are various kinds of *Ofo* staff for title associations, cults, and personal gods (Horton, 1956). But the basic form is the one derived from the *Ofo* tree itself and was intimately associated with paternal control.

Among the Igbo the eldest son of a man inherits the family *Ofo* on his death, through the ceremony of *Abam n'Obi*. The custody of the lineage or village community *Ofo* lies with the eldest male member of the lineage or village.

It is important to mention that in Igboland as Oguagha (1989) and Ukpokolo (2010) points out, it is the general belief that the holder of an *Ofo* stick could communicate with a variety of supernatural forces including various spirits, and the dead. In this way he is perceived to act as an agent of social control since he could invoke punishment by supernatural forces on refractory lineage members. The unwritten regulations encoded in the principles of *ofo* and *omenala* function as reference

points and provided ethical foundation, which ensured that these values are respected, and that members of the group employ them as the parameters that guide their behaviour to protect both the collective and individual's interests, and to ensure that peace and social harmony.

These observations show that its most important aspect is its symbolism of ancestral authority, especially when it is formerly handed on to *Okpara* (the first-born son) through the *Abam n'Obi* Ceremony. According to Anyanwu (1989: 104) "ofe is believed by the Igbo to have been set aside by Chukwu (God) as the symbol of truth". Meek (1937) in his own case suggests that the fact that portions of the *Ofo* branchlet usually, 'break off section' from the parent branch is a reason for the use of the *Ofo* as a family symbol. Here the suggestion is that, sections of the tree break off just as families break off from the parent stock. This analogical explanation is reasonable. This is because the *Ofo* is handed down from generation to generation, and thus becomes, for the Igbo, the embodiment of the spirits of the ancestors. Hence Meek (1937: 105) describes it "as the Igbo means of transmitting "Holy Orders".

Among the Igbo, *Ogu* is the *cultus* symbol referring to a small bundle of cord wound round a twig of the *Ogirisi* tree. At its first consecration it has all the appearances of an amulet. Its principal aspect however, is its significance as the symbol for effective invocation to the gods, the spirits and the ancestors. Such invocation is always built around the notion of truth and justice. Hence *Ogu*, remains the emblem for true and just dealings in people's relations with their fellows. In everyday usage according to Anyanwu (1989: 104):

"Ogu is the symbol of prayer, and of invocation for good or evil; and the Igbo believe that when such invocation portrays justice and righteousness, *Ofo* is applied to give it effect. Hence, *Ogu* is the spiritual force which stirs up the gods and ancestors, in exoneration or condemnation of any deed or situation, and which determines to what degree *Ofo* can launch its force or power in any situation. It is therefore the prayer to the gods and ancestors, typified by the *Ogu*, which blesses the *Ofo* and gives it the strength to work".

The observation shows that among the Igbo, *Ofo* and *Ogu* are complimentary in their religious significance as ritual objects and symbols of the religion.

It may be noted in conclusion that the retaliation of a wrong is never considered an offence in Igbo traditional worldview. This explains the usual procedure of an *Ogu* holder when praying against a wrong deed either to him/herself or to anybody else. If it pertains to him/herself, s/he usually invokes a curse on him/herself if s/he has done such a bad deed against the perpetrator, before proceeding to call down a curse on the person who has wronged him/her on that account. It is this

function of translucent justice, which gives *Ogu* its sanctity, among the Igbo, as the spring of right of righteousness, while *Ofo* comes in to launch an attack in pursuance of these virtues (Anyanwu, 1989).

Another important Igbo ritual object and a cult symbolism is the *Ikenga*. According to Onwuejeogwu (1972: 92) the *Ikenga* is "the cult of the right hand which symbolizes individual achievements through hard work (with one's hand)".

Among the Igbo, the *Ikenga* is commonly represented by a carved wooden seated figure of a man with two horns on his head, a sword in his right hand and a skull in his left hand. Onwuejeogwu (1972: 92) summarized the meaning of these symbolic objects as follows:

"The two horn horns mean that the owner of the *Ikenga* must go ahead in his business with the stubbornness of a ram. The knife in his right hand means that he must cut down any obstacle on the way and the skull in the left hand means that he must always take the lead in order to succeed".

When a man succeeds in major undertakings, among the Igbo he makes sacrifices to his *Ikenga* in appreciation. The *Ikenga* is associated with an individual's personal god (*Chi* or *Onye-Uwa*), which guides and determines the course of that person's life from birth to death. The ceremony of *Okuku-Onye-Uwa* is a female equivalent of the *Ikenga* ritual that is conducted at the moment of a man's major successful undertaking in life (Oguagha, 1989).

## IGBO BELIEFS AND THEORIES OF ILLNESS AND MISFORTUNE

In Igbo worldview, worry and tribulations arise when the values of children, marriage, health, prosperity, and harmony are threatened. Indeed, among the Igbo, life is perceived as precarious in nature. This is because of disease, shortage of resources with which life can be attended, and the difficulties of getting on with those with whom one is deeply and daily involved. In Igbo society presently while some sources of affliction have been reduced (smallpox, warfare with neighbouring ethnic groups, starvation etc) others have appeared (AIDS, heart attack, traffic accidents, premature retirements, and unemployment). All these are experienced by the people as sources of affliction and worry which they need to act upon in order to solve them. Part of the goals of Igbo religion is to assist in helping worshippers to confront and control these problems. This follows from the fact that Igbo people believe that misfortunes can be caused by spirit agents whom we cannot see, and human ones, whose hearts we cannot know. Because cursers or sorcerers in Igbo worldview are people with whom there

is conflict, they are understood as people with anger, malice or resentment in their hearts. The Igbo use the metaphor of the heart to speak of volition and emotion and of the self that is often opaque to other people.

The first response to a problem in Igbo worldview is usually a restricted one. The difficulty or challenge is perceived as limited in scope amenable to a simple solution. In the case of illness, the symptomatic perspective almost always entails a medicinal mode of action. Should this response fail to achieve the intended effect, the next move is the use of divination to explore the basis for the problem and what can be done to assuage the situation. Hence the pragmatic attitude of experimentation informs the Igbo's approach to the crisis of affliction and uncertainty in their world.

In Igbo worldview, use of both medicinal and relational (spiritual) measures sometimes helps. The insufficiency of relying on one means for dealing with misfortune seems clear to them on many occasions especially when misfortune comes, continues and worsens. For example, when family members fall ill one after the another, when a man fails to keep a wife, when the patient dies anyway, after the first attempt at controlling the problem has failed the conclusion is suggested that something more than the ordinary is involved. The people are forced to reflect again about whether the diviner or the hospital doctor spoke truly, or if other causes were at work simultaneously. This pushes them to think further whether rituals were done properly, or whether the invisible agent suspected had desires and purposes that had not been fully understood. For the Igbo, uncertainty about the problems and the means for dealing with it, are interrelated. Hence Igbo worldview favours a holistic approach to the problems of the human experience.

The given observations reveal that both physical and spiritual, in Igbo worldview, are the two theories of causes of affliction or misfortune in human life. They use the pragmatic approach to sort out which one is involved, physical or spiritual, in any given case. They start with experimenting with the natural process of setting things right before they resort to the spiritual process as a last option. This way of attending to afflictions and misfortunes is what some Igbo elders refer to as the technique of *Ijee n'iru*, *Ijee n'azu*.

In Igbo cosmology, just as among the Kalabari people of the South-Eastern Nigeria (Horton, 1962, 1967b), the key spiritual agencies of the religion come into three categories: (1) the Supreme Being, (2) the Divinities including nature deities and patron spirits and (3) the ancestors. These, according to Horton (1967b), are conceived by most Igbo as independent and autonomous to one another and are each served in their own rights. The Igbo tend to share an eclectic/egalitarian orientation and a non-hierarchical attitude in their assessment of and interaction with the spiritual agencies of their religion.

Igbo society derives a sense of security from kinship

relations, locality, religion, and keeping of tradition.

One of the chief cosmogonic myths that underpin Igbo worldview is the myth of *Nne Mmiri* or the *mammy water* goddess, the chief of the local water spirits and deities, the source of wealth and fertility. According to this myth, the Igbo 'water mother' or *Nne Mmiri* or water goddess, controls the entry and exit into and from this world. She is the goddess of crossroads. Before one is born, he or she must cross a river. There, the *Nne Mmiri* or water goddess confronts the individual. She challenges the pact of destiny, *akara aka*, made between one's body, *ahu*, and one's soul, *Chi*, witnessed by the Supreme God, *Chi-Ukwu*. One's destiny can be changed with the help of the goddess. But if the goddess helps a person to change his or her destiny on earth, for example, to become wealthy or successful in life, rather than merely a housewife and mother, then that person must be the goddess's worshipper. If this is not recognized on time, or if the person so assisted by the goddess before birth later refuse her calling, then the goddess can cause madness, misfortune, or premature death, either of the individual or beloved ones.

The indications show that for the Igbo, humans are at the mercy of the myriads of highly aggressive spirits and forces that surround them in their world like a beleaguered city, ready to strike at the least provocation. This makes the traditional Igbo worldview "a highly precarious vision with tremendous implications for the life of the people" (Ejizu, 1987: 133; Kalu, 1978). In this way, humans' fortune and destiny are perceived as part of the unwritten covenant between them and the spirits.

## CONCLUSION

The activities of Christian missionaries greatly changed the religious landscape in Igboland, Nigeria, West Africa just surveyed. However, many of the basic features of the indigenous beliefs and practices of the Igbo have survived to this day. Among these are a number of important transitional ceremonies with strong religious import. This article has attempted to present a socio-cultural context and worldview from which scholars, worldwide, interested in Igbo studies could draw for their effective understanding of those four transitional ceremonies popular among the Igbo people of Nigeria, West Africa, namely: the Igbo naming ceremony; the Igbo ceremony of taking-over of a homestead; a component of Igbo marriage ceremony called *Okuku Onye Uwa*; and Igbo burial/funeral rites. These are important transitional ceremonies in Igbo religion, which have, in some parts of the culture area, resisted change because they mark and celebrate the significant changes and closures that take place in each individual's life. They constitute a unique set of definitional ceremonies of Igbo culture and religion because in them, unlike in other forms of transitional



ceremonies, both the key individual directly concerned in them as well as the members of his/her community take part in the ceremony. The members of the community participate in them as the "witnessing community" (William, 2000: 23) or as "outsider witnesses" (Myerhoff, 1986) and add credibility to the ceremony by their presence. This article serves as an emic introduction to Igbo socio-cultural values and worldview that give background and meaning to the practices and rituals encompassed in such definitional ceremonies of the religion.

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