

The Relevance of Iwele Deity on Contemporary Umuoba Anam Community

**Anulika Anastasia Okonkwo, Oguechuo Godfrey Afamnede
& Jude Ifechukwu Nwabueze**

Abstract

This study explores the enduring significance of religion and spirituality among Africans, focusing specifically on the relevance of the Iwele deity in the contemporary Umuoba Anam community. The study examines the ritualistic and symbolic representations of deities within an Igbo community, highlighting the Iwele deity's unique position amid a decline in traditional belief systems. This research aims to elucidate the reasons behind the continued veneration of the Iwele deity by individuals who identify as Christians within the Umuoba Anam community, as well as to assess the deity's relevance in a modern context. The researcher employed both primary and secondary methods of data sources. Primary data were gathered through interviews with local practitioners, including native speakers and the chief priest, while secondary data included scholarly texts. Historical and cultural area approaches were utilised in data interpretation, supported by theoretical frameworks in the analysis. Findings indicate that the Iwele deity exerts a positive socio-economic and religious influence on the lives of community members, despite the challenges posed by globalisation, which has led to a decline in traditional worship practices. This study advocates for community efforts to address social issues and promote the restoration of cultural values, ultimately aiming to reintegrate the Iwele deity's significance into the lives of Umuoba Anam's inhabitants.

Keywords: Religion, Spirituality Iwele Deity, Relevance, Umuoba Anam

Introduction

Umuoba Anam is a town situated within the Anambra East Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. Before the advent of Christianity and Western education in Igbo lands, Umuoba Anam, along with other communities within the Omambala area, was distinguished for its traditional medicinal practices and various cultural institutions, predominantly engaging in agricultural activities. Within Igbo traditional society, there exists a profound belief in the efficacy of divine powers and authorities; Umuoba Anam is no exception in this regard. This belief is evidenced by the myths associated with the manifestations of the dead, the existence of mermaid spirits, and other extraordinary supernatural forces that significantly influence African communities.

The Iwele deity is regarded as a powerful divine spirit force, highly esteemed and venerated within the Umuoba Anam community. The town comprises five villages: Umuobalichi, Umuezeanya, Umuoji, Umuoche, and Umuoke, with the Iwele shrine located in Umuobalichi. This shrine is of considerable antiquity, reflecting the historical roots of the community, as it occupies the oldest area of Umuoba Anam. Adjacent to the shrine is a significant river known as Ayoko, alongside a market square called Ikedinuzo, where marketplace activities occur on Afor market days. This gathering spot serves not only as a venue for the sale of agricultural produce but also as a place for communal relaxation following daily labour. The proximity of the Iwele shrine to the market fosters an environment of security, solidarity, and unity among the community members.

Worship of the Iwele deity is characterized by the use of various symbols and images, encompassing practices such as consecrations, sacrifices, musical expressions, incantations, libations, and the celebration of specific festivals. As Ojiekwe (2014) articulates, symbols are more than mere communicative tools; they possess intrinsic power that can influence events and behaviours (p. 2). Ojiekwe further elucidates that symbols serve as potent repositories of information, playing critical roles within various contexts. In the worship of Iwele, distinct symbols are employed under varying circumstances, with some, such as oji and nzu, believed to possess supernatural significance.

The Umuoba Anam people have long held a belief in the existence of supernatural forces, a conviction that predates colonial influence. In Umuoba Anam, adherents of the Iwele deity ascribe numerous socio-religious functions to this divinity, including promoting unity, curbing crime, advocating for human rights, imparting justice, fostering peace and love among worshippers, creating a sense of communal oneness, protecting cultural norms and traditions, and ensuring the overall growth and development of the community. Furthermore, the Iwele deity plays a role in enhancing morality within the community. However, recent observations indicate a decline in the strong belief in the socio-religious impact of the Iwele deity, as societal issues, including incest, homicide, kidnappings, sexual abuses, abortions, and robberies, have become more prevalent. This situation casts doubt on the enduring efficacy of the deity's socio-religious influence.

As noted by Udoji Mbane (personal communication, January 13, 2025), when individuals misplace items and invoke the Iwele deity for assistance in identifying the perpetrator, the deity is believed to exact penalties on the offender, which may manifest as illness that compels them to seek knowledge of its cause. Additionally, the deity may target family members of the offender if the individual is deemed less significant. A notable instance involves the offering of a cow to the deity as an appeasement during fishing seasons; however, the Iwele deity rejected this offering because the cow had been sourced inappropriately, demanding a virgin cow instead.

The sacred animals of the Iwele deity include the crocodile, python, and bees, each serving distinct purposes within the worship practices. During fishing seasons, announcements are made to inform participants that those deemed 'unclean' are prohibited from engaging in the activity; sacrifices are made to the Iwele deity to ensure the safety of the sacred animals. Accounts reveal instances where individuals disobeyed this directive, resulting in supernatural repercussions.

According to Anizor A. O. (personal communication, March 27, 2020), there was an occurrence involving an individual, Mr Okeke, during a fishing festival where he fell into the river, exclaiming that he had not transgressed with the Iwele deity's consort, as he had engaged with another's spouse, ultimately leading to his request for forgiveness. Furthermore, the Iwele deity dispatches bees to individuals who have committed wrongs, while pythons serve as omens, often prompting house visits where their presence indicates a message or caution for the inhabitants. Failing to respect the totem and neglecting to appease the deity can result in calamity befalling the individual. The Iwele deity functions as a moral compass for the community, believed to protect its members, facilitate just dispute resolutions, and enforce orderliness, thus safeguarding their economic engagements. Reports have shown that grievances brought before the deity often yield prompt and effective resolutions. In instances where powerful individuals unlawfully dispossess less affluent members of society, the mere mention of the Iwele deity's judgment compels many oppressors to restore unlawfully taken properties. For example, as narrated by Nnazor G.U. (personal communication, April 2019), there was a notable case wherein the deity exacted retribution on an individual who unlawfully seized another's land, illustrating the deity's role as an arbiter of justice.

Despite the transformative influences of Christianity, modernisation, and globalisation, a remnant of Iwele worshippers continues to gravitate towards these ancestral beliefs, which seem to resonate with them during times of necessity. For instance, during the planting season, members of the community often consult the Iwele deity, seeking assurances for prosperous harvests through sacrificial offerings, pledging to return in gratitude with offerings of goats or cows proportional to their agricultural success. Moreover, in cases of dispossession or intimidation by affluent individuals, victims frequently revert to the Iwele deity as a last resort to reclaim their rights. Likewise, when possessions are lost to theft, individuals often invoke the deity's assistance in recovering stolen items, as the fear of Iwele prompts culprits to return stolen property upon realising the potential divine repercussions.

The gravity of the Iwele deity's influence instilled a sense of accountability among the community members, particularly in earlier days, compelling them to adhere to ethical and moral standards. Even among the youth, some engage with the

deity, seeking financial assistance to establish businesses and promising repayment once their ventures yield success.

In light of these considerations, there exists a pressing need for a phenomenological exploration of the Iwele deity, examining its socio-religious impacts and enduring relevance amidst the contemporary conflicts arising from the intersection of cultural heritage and modernity. This study aims to elucidate the significance of the Iwele deity and the community's continued interest in their customs and traditions. Such an inquiry seeks to emphasise the positive potential of reconciling cultural heritage with Christianity and modernity, ultimately contributing to the alleviation of societal immorality exacerbated by the forces of modernisation and globalisation.

The Concept of Deities

Deities, according to Iroegbu (2009) (as cited in Ojiekwe (2014), are defined as supernatural beings with such powers and attributes believed or thought to control some parts of life. This perspective originates from the fundamental belief of Africans in the existence of two worlds. Ugwu (2002) sees the two worlds as the visible, tangible, and material world (*uwa*) inhabited by God's creatures, and the invisible, intangible, and immaterial world (*Ala mmuo*) inhabited by the Supreme Being and His other agents—deities. According to Brown (1975), deities are spirit beings that reveal themselves in many different ways, and human beings have always felt their presence and responded in worship, thus creating a relationship between mankind and the deities, leading to what we now call religions. The greatness of deities is also portrayed in African traditional religion by Mbiti (1975), who asserts that the knowledge of deities is not documented in any sacred books, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories, or religious ceremonies (p. 60).

Mbiti (1975) further explained that Africans express their concept of deities through the attributes accorded to them. They personify nature's gifts—such as forests, graves, trees, and hills—and dedicate them as representatives of the deities' presence"(p.9). Madu (2004) confirmed this when he stated, "The cosmological sketch of the Igbo of Nigeria consists of three-tier intimately related but distinct worlds, each of which is well inhabited—the heavens, the earth, and the underworld. The heavens are the abode of the Supreme Being (Chukwu/Chineke) and such major divinities as Amadioha (Thunder god); the earth is home to the earth goddess (Ala/Ara) and man; the ancestors and many spirit forces inhabit the underworld."(P.10)

Idowu (1973) observed that "the people of West Africa generally believe in pantheons of deities who share aspects of divine status and are thought to have emanated from the supreme being"(p.50). Ogbajie (1995) explained that "the categories of beings in the Igbo invisible world are many, with peculiar powers invoked in specific situations. The world of the Igbo cannot be fully understood without knowledge of mystical forces"(p.34). Quarcoopme (1987) noted that there are

deities that are not brought into being through divine order. These deities are ancestors and heroes deified by humans—deities made by man. The Igbo believe that aside from the Supreme Being, there are many intermediary spirits (mmuo or arusi) who initially operate within the cycle of human beings under the law of Chukwu"(p.22). According to Amaegwu (2011), "These divinities are subordinates endowed with special powers by Chukwu in the affairs of humans and material forces of the universe. They rule the world and also interact with ancestors and other benevolent spirits"(p.33)

Afigbo (1981) traced the origin of Igbo traditional religion to two main periods he termed "the B-horizontal" and "the C-horizontal." He explained "that the former was marked by recession or pure intuition, the fall of man, the withdrawal of the creator, and the dominance of daily life by a host of gods and spirits. God left the earth under the watchful eyes of the deities. The latter marks recent times in Igbo land since traditional religion started with fathers. The forefathers lost vision, viewing created things like Ala not as a creator but as a controller"(p.10)

Njoku (2002) claimed that principal deities are part of the original order of things. Idowu (1962) argued that divinities were not created but brought into being, stating that, from the perspective of the theology of traditional religion, it would not be correct to say that they were created; rather, they came into being in alignment with the divine ordering of the universe (p. 169). The Igbo man prays and seeks services and protection from these deities. Uchendu (1995) explained that "if they fail in their duty, they are always threatened with desertion" (p. 76). This implies that the Igbo demand services from the deities in exchange for worship and sacrifice. The Igbo people approach the deities because they serve as mediators, conveying their prayers to Chukwu. Sacrifices offered to the deities are intended for acceptance by Chineke. Arinze (1970) concurred that "worship of the lesser deities is an act of worshipping the high god, who is considered to be imminent in subordinate beings or is symbolised by the images of lesser deities. In any case, whatever power the inferior deities possess ultimately derives from God, the source" (p. 105).

Onuoha, as cited in Nweke (2017), agrees that these are messengers of Chineke, referred to as ambassadors of gods. They include Anyanwu (the lord of life and light), Ala (the earth goddess, mother of life and queen of morality), mmuo mmiri (the divinely appointed temptress), Ahiajoku (the lord of agriculture), and Aguru Nsi (lord of divination and healing). The spirit forces (Arusi/Alusi) may be created by God or man and serve as mediators of vital forces between God and humanity (p. 107).

According to Opoku (1978), the paramount function of the divinities is mediating between humans and God. They operate between the realms of the profane and the sacred, possessing the power to reward or punish humans with misfortune, disease, or even death. Some among them are associated with various environmental features; however, these tangible objects are the abodes of the deities, not the deities

themselves. Most deities are usually regarded as males, though some are thought to be female, and most are believed to dwell in the sky (p. 112).

Onwubiko (1991) notes that Igbo traditional society believes in deities that can bring evil to a community rather than avert it. Iroegbu (2009) explains that "a powerful spirit may be consulted for guidance in politics, business, dispute resolution, and medicine, asserting that deities play a significant role as a form of supreme divinatory court, citing the Arochukwu oracle (Ibinikpabie). He further explains that communities may invoke their deities for regeneration, protection, growth, and for oath-taking"(p.43). Talbot (1969) agrees that "deities like Ibinukpabi of Arochukwu are believed to provide answers to mysterious issues through qualified priests, asserting that the goddess has the power to expose sorcerers and witches, make barren women fertile, and ensure success in trade, crop fertility, and military victory"(p.10). Madu (2004) adds that "the Agwụ deity is a tutelary divinity of diviners seeking to disclose secrets and provide spiritual advice"(p.23). Anyanwu (1999) emphasises that "Igbo deities are numerous and classified into major and minor categories. Major deities are those universally acknowledged, such as Anyanwụ, Ala, Amadioha, and Ahajiokwu. Minor deities are associated with specific societies and hold influential positions within them"(p.45). Metuh (1999) identified such deities "as *Ogwugwu*, *Idemili*, *Ojukwu*, *Ngwu*, *Ulasị*, *Ubu*, and *Ele*"(p.10)

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Euhemerism as its framework. This theory was propounded by an ancient Greek philosopher, Euhemerus, who lived around 300 BCE. Euhemerus is best known for his work titled *Hiera Anaglyphs* (or Holy Writings), in which he proposed that the gods were originally great historical figures whose deeds were exaggerated over time into mythological narratives. His ideas influenced later interpretations of mythology and laid the groundwork for comparing myths and understanding the human origins of religious beliefs. Euhemerus, in his words, explains the general belief in the existence of divine beings by using the theory of the gods of Egypt, which were deified benefactors of mankind and that the gods of Greece were of Egyptian origin. He gave an account of an imaginary journey where he found a happy isle. In his own words, he claimed that this imaginary isle had a temple of golden pillars on which Zeus had recorded, in a sacred script, his deeds and those of Uranus and Cronus. This is the basis of theology or Theo gong, where Zeus, Uranus and Cronus were seen as originally mortals (human beings). Euhemerus argued that Zeus was a mortal king who died on Crete and that his tomb could still be found there with the inscription bearing his name. Euhemerus went further to prove that these original heroes are being deified after death, and some of them raise themselves to divine status before death. This theory sums up some facts about the deity and man's

faith. The question raised here calls for an investigation into the origin of the human inhabitants of the Earth.

Empirical Explanation

Ojiekwe (2014) explores the Okekparakpara deity, a key divine power revered by the people of Enugu-Agu Achi. This deity is situated in the Owuru community, part of the Umumba clan, and its establishment is intertwined with the community's history, as it was the initial settlement for the Umumba people. Ojiekwe (2014) notes a strong consciousness surrounding the Okekparakpara deity, indicating that even with the arrival of Christianity, many worshippers hesitated to embrace the new faith due to fears of divine retribution and a loss of protection. Obiechina (1975) highlights the deep connection between Igbo traditional religion and culture, underscoring the significance of such deities.

The Okekparakpara deity evokes fear, often referred to as "the god of thunder," as it is associated with this natural phenomenon. Worship practices involve various rituals, including the use of symbols, sacrifices, invocations, and the celebration of specific festivals dedicated to the deity. However, Ojiekwe's study focuses solely on the Okekparakpara deity in Enugu-Agu Achi and does not address the Iwele deity from Umuoba Anam, which is the focus of our Study. Although he provides valuable insights that will inform our study, his work lacks a comparative analysis of the community of Umuoba and does not encompass a broader range of deities. Ikechukwu (2018) further contributes to the discourse on Igbo deities by discussing the overall cosmology that recognises a singular supreme God (Chukwu Okike or Chineke) faced through various intermediaries identified as divinities. However, such theories do not delve into the practical relevance of these deities in contemporary society, particularly concerning the Iwele deity.

Onuorah (2018) addresses the significance of Ani, the earth goddess, noting her roles as a provider, protector, and enforcer of morality. While Onuorah discusses Ani's relevance, which includes judicial and social dimensions, this work does not focus on the Iwele deity, which is vital for our ongoing study. The current study intends to analyse the Iwele deity's relevance in modern Umuoba Anam across the established categories of religious, economic, judicial, and social relevance. By highlighting the unique roles and significance of the Iwele deity, this research aims to fill the identified gaps in existing literature and contribute to a deeper understanding of its importance within the community.

The Shrine of Iwele Deity

A shrine is said to be a holy or sacred place which is dedicated to a specific deity or ancestor. Iroegbu (2009) describes a shrine as a place of consultation with esteemed extra-human forces to answer answerable questions to allay fear and provide a way to resolve problems, whether it pertains to economic, political, or religious matters, as well as issues of kinship, theft, accusations, and the pursuit of power, all of these domains demand supernatural insight and competencies.

The Iwele deity's place of worship has no wooden image in her shrine. Rather, it is a space, an open ground, except for her '*Obi mmuo*'. Unfortunately, according to the caretaker (the priest), the inside of the shrine cannot be snapped for it is said to be a sacrilege against her honours, but there is a small hut where worshipers and those who have cases in the shrine settle to wait for their turn to be administered, and is also another hall which is meant only for the priest. Iwele's liturgical worship is carried out at the shrine of Iwele according to the demand of the deity. There is also another *Obom* at the shrine of the Iwele. It is where most cases involving women are settled. Also, other unserious matters are held there and this takes place every Afor market day. Behind the shrine is her river and forest, where fishers and hunters are allowed to hunt and fish. Even women and children go snail hunting at night in the forest unless on specific days when it is forbidden. There are also trees around the shrine that represent the subordinate deities used by Iwele to carry out different missions.

Gender Roles and Taboos: Women face significant restrictions within Iwele worship. They cannot enter the shrine during menstruation or officiate rituals, largely due to beliefs surrounding purity and potential defilement. This practice reflects broader societal norms within Igbo culture. There is a concern that women may be more susceptible to emotional influences, which could compromise the sacredness of the rituals. Despite restrictions, women may seek the deity's intervention in severe circumstances, like accusations of murder, but must coordinate this through male relatives. The community operates under a complex web of taboos and prescribed conduct, where failing to adhere can lead to divine retribution.

Relevance of Iwele Deity

Religious Relevance

In the context of Igbo religion, it is relatively rare to encounter shrines dedicated exclusively to the Supreme Being. This absence has led some early foreign scholars, such as Williams J. Samarin and J.H.N. Nkosi, to assert that the Igbo people, among other African cultures, do not worship the Supreme God but instead primarily venerate deities and ancestors. However, it is essential to clarify that the Igbo people do honour the Supreme God through various intermediaries, including deities, lesser gods, and

ancestral spirits. The Supreme God is regarded as supreme and beyond the direct human approach.

In the worship of the Iwele deity, adherents perceive the Supreme God as the Almighty, above all other entities. Rituals are performed through these lesser deities, creating a belief system wherein devotees maintain a harmonious relationship with the spiritual realm. The absence of proper ritual observance can lead to psychological imbalances among devotees, which they believe may result in various adverse effects, including illness, diminished agricultural yields, and reproductive challenges. The worship of the Iwele deity primarily aims to establish a harmonious connection between the physical and the spiritual world. This practice fosters a collective consciousness of a transcendental being and emphasises humanity's reliance on divine authority, which consequently promotes ethical behaviour and community standards.

Political Relevance: The Iwele shrine functions as a court of justice, ensuring fairness and sincerity in communal affairs. Worshippers resort to the shrine for the resolution of disputes, presenting their cases alongside offerings that may include money and other gifts contingent upon the nature of their complaint. Delegations are sent to invite the accused to defend themselves on specific days corresponding to the shrine's rituals (Afor or Orie days).

To provide a framework for truth, the priest retrieves the Qfo, a sacred staff, to invoke the deity's presence as witnesses. Both the complainant and the accused stand barefoot before the shrine, swearing truthfulness under the watchful eyes of the spirits. Notably, the shrine also serves political functions, as leaders compel loyalty from their constituents by requiring them to swear allegiance before the deity. This practice not only emboldens communal bonds but also establishes formal agreements through sacrificial offerings. During ceremonial events, such as a king's coronation, the priest employs the Qfo to urge the new ruler to uphold truth in governance, lest they face divine repercussions. This practice plays a critical role in enforcing traditional norms and principles, with authority derived from the deity manifesting through the priest's actions.

Economic Relevance

The Iwele deity significantly influences economic activities within the community. Market women who honour the deity receive favourable outcomes on market days, bolstering their sales and agricultural productivity. The deity assists young entrepreneurs by offering financial support for business ventures, which they promise to repay once successful returns are achieved. Furthermore, the community turns to the Iwele deity for blessings during planting and fishing seasons, ensuring that their endeavours are fruitful.

Social Relevance

In matters about truth and honesty, the Iwele deity serves as a moral adjudicator through oath-taking rituals. During disputes, the Priest performs incantations and prayers while participants stand barefoot before the shrine, receiving kola nuts as part of the pledging process. This ritual emphasises truth and accountability, effectively neutralising biases based on wealth or status. The Iwele deity's procedures ensure that both affluent and marginalised individuals receive equal treatment before the deity. Moreover, akin to the role of masquerades in reinforcing social order within Igbo culture, the Iwele deity's presence encourages responsible behaviour among the community members. This sacredness acts as a social deterrent against wrongdoing, fostering harmony within the community.

Findings and Conclusion

The research into Umuoba Anam and the significance of the Iwele deity reveals intricate sociocultural dynamics shaping community norms, beliefs, and practices in Igbo society. The findings illustrate how the worship of the Iwele deity is not simply an act of spirituality but a multifaceted institution that provides moral guidance, conflict resolution, and social cohesion. It underscores three significant areas: Religious Relevance, Political Relevance, and Economic Relevance. Despite the challenges posed by modernisation and the declining belief in traditional practices, remnants of the Iwele faith continue to influence community behaviour. The findings indicate a dissonance between modernity's encroachment and adherence to traditional beliefs, raising questions about the resilience of such socio-religious structures.

The Iwele deity remains a cornerstone of the Umuoba Anam community, embodying deep-rooted cultural beliefs that transcend mere religious practice. This study highlights the sociocultural significance of the Iwele deity, revealing its role as a moral arbiter, community guardian, and facilitator of social cohesion. As members navigate the complexities of contemporary challenges, the deity is often invoked for guidance and support, suggesting that traditional beliefs can coexist alongside modern influences. Therefore, a phenomenological exploration of the Iwele deity's relevance offers insightful avenues for understanding how cultural heritage can adapt and remain pertinent amid societal transformations.

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