



## Deities as the third arm of traditional Igbo government

Okonkwo C. Eze & \*Emmanuel C. Alaku  
Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu Alike, Ikwo

\*immanence2013@gmail.com

### Abstract

Igbo studies, especially on political organisations, have enjoyed robust scholarly attention in historical discourse in recent times. The Igbo, unlike their immediate neighbours such as Benin (Edo) and the Igala, ran two parallel systems of government in the pre-colonial period. While some practised a centralised system of government, a reasonable number of Igbo communities contended with decentralised systems. Some reasons for the reign of peace and harmony amongst the Igbo have remained largely uninvestigated and unappreciated. The role of deities as the judicial arm of government in the defence and execution of the law in Igboland has been sketchy in the literature. This extant gap appears to have been ignored by most Igbo scholars who, having been trained in mission schools, have negatively profiled deities and their roles in the traditional Igbo political system. This Eurocentric view calls for a re-interpretation so as to broaden the frontiers of knowledge of this religio-political institution and its role in justice delivery among the Igbo in the decentralized group. This study, therefore, investigates the role of deities in the sustenance of village democracy and autonomy in Igboland. Data garnered from the above sources were organised, analysed and presented through descriptive and analytical approach. This study stirs up deeper insight into this more or less dormant area of Igbo history and also arouses scholarly attention thereto. The study found that deities in non-centralised Igbo communities substituted monarchical institutions and thus brought spiritual dimensions into the Igbo system of governance.

**Keywords:** Deities, Justice, Autonomy, Government, Igbo.

## Introduction

Traditional African societies like many others around the world, developed institutions of governance for communal organisation, preservation, and sustenance of law and order. There existed in some African societies certain systems of administration such as monarchy with the authority and responsibility of protecting and safeguarding lives and properties. The citizens, in turn, owed loyalty and submissiveness to such authorities that exercised executive, legislative, and judicial powers over them. Some other communities, for reasons yet to be fully investigated abandoned constitutional monarchy for other systems of administration. The Igbo society developed itself and its institutions in response to challenges that were a threat to its corporate existence.

Of all the ethnic groups in Nigeria, only the Igbo were credited with double-barreled organisational structures namely: constitutional monarchy and village democracies. While the former had a king as the focus of political authority, the latter was a system imbued with separation of powers among the various arms. However, it has to be noted that traditionally, the arms of the Igbo government were not dichotomised in line with the Western construct (C. C. Opat, personal communication, January 9, 2022). The system generally referred to as 'statelessness' has been written about as though it was pan-Igbo, or understood in the

same manner throughout Igboland. It has become increasingly clear that wide differences existed within Igboland (Ejizu, 1986). There existed two distinct forms of traditional government in Igboland. There was the constitutional monarchy as practised among the West-Niger Igbo with a few city-states like Aro, Osomari, Oguta, Onitsha, and Nri on the Eastern part of the Niger. In most of these states, there were various myths of origin; while some believed that they were autochthonous, others have attempted to trace their root to outside Igboland all in an effort to validate the emergence of kingship institutions.

However, there were (and still are) some Igbo who shared common boundaries with non-Igbo states or kingdoms but remained essentially non-centralised which are traits of democratic governance. While the Igala practised a monarchic and hierarchic system of government, the Igbo have remained gerontocratic and democratic (Shelton, 1971). It is surprising to some scholars that the Igbo people had no single ruler and yet lacked no essential norms of government (Nwabara, 1977). The Igbo political structures were designed not only to combine popular participation with character, experience and integrity of individuals (Isichei, 1977) but also to assign particularly vital roles to deities in justice administration. These structures were sustained by the Igbo metaphysical view about life and the universe. The import of these structures was that they enriched the republican Igbo values

and modes of social organisation (Shelton, 1971).

In Igboland, there was a hierarchy of deities including the cult of Ala (Earth goddess) which stood as a powerful integrating force in the absence of centralised political authority (Metu, 1981). The Ala deity occupied an undisputed prominent position in the socio-political lives of the sedentary peoples of the forest region of West Africa because the land (Ala) remained the source of their livelihood (Agbedo, 2008: 1-18). Indeed, the *Ala* deity was generally the arch-divinity of every locality in Igboland (Iwe, 1988: 1-11). Prayers and appeals were made through incantations, libations, and invocations to deities before certain initiatives or public deliberations were taken (Iwe, 1988: 1-11). The centrality of deities in traditional Igbo government could only constitute an incoherent and unintelligible phenomenon to an outsider (Akaruese, 2008: 77-98). Despite the buffeting hurricane of evangelism and Pentecostalism that have attempted to uproot virtually every aspect of Igbo socio-cultural and political life, the relevance of deities in the political governance of the people has remained unremitting.

### Conceptual clarification

To have a better grasp of this study, it is worthwhile to conceptualise or interpret the term deity. Etymologically, deity is a derivation from the Latin term *deitas* or *deus* meaning god or goddess with some divine

qualities ascribed to it. These attributes were believed to bring deities into closeness with God which not only qualified them as intermediaries between God and man but also imbued them with the powers to save, destroy and provide for the needy (Anyacho, 2005). Deities, like God, are invisible but serve as life-giving or inspiring powers (Agbedo, 2008: 1-18). Deities in Igbo cosmology were (and still are) servant-gods or children of *Ezechitoke* and *Ala* (Earth goddess) (Shelton, 1971) that address both the spiritual and physical needs of man.

The concept of deities by the early missionaries as *dues absconditus*, *deus remotes* or *deus incertus* (meaning an absconding god, remote god, or god of uncertainty, respectively) (Ugwu, 2007: 62-73), appears misplaced. Deities were believed to be pervasive realities that hardly can be said to have absconded or remote or uncertain. Given that deities were considered omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, they were charged with many responsibilities in the life of an Igbo man. These responsibilities assigned to deities were on account of the remoteness and invisibility of the supreme God-Chukwu who created varieties of deities to whom He delegated the power to control the various aspects of nature and the activities of men (Shelton, 1971). Put differently, deities acted as the ministering spirits whose sole business was (still is) to fulfil God's commands (Basden, 1983). Deities are of two dimensions: natural and invented. The invented are such as war

defence charms or charms for personalities that are deified. The natural deities are further divided along gender lines giving rise to both male and female deities. Despite the omnifariousness of deities in Igboland, the focus of this paper shall be restricted to their roles in politics, justice administration as well as the safeguarding of the conduct of the people as the custodians of public morality.

### **Deities and political legitimisation**

The Igbo society, like all other human groups, developed itself and its institutions in response to the challenges that constituted a threat to their corporate existence. It is believed that the Igbo *ab initio* generally practised monarchy with all the characteristics appertaining to the institution and the society characterised by rank and hierarchy (Ifemesia, 1979). By implication, the institution of kingship was initially in vogue among the Igbo but lost its relevance over time in the political administration of some communities. Ifemesia further contends that:

In one such place, tradition explains that the institution went by default for a time when no candidates were forthcoming because no one was in a position to discharge the onerous responsibilities attendant upon kingship ... .in some cases, it is said that an earlier king (or succession of kings) was so autocratic and tyrannical, and

his (their) general attitude and behavior so objectionable to the bulk of the subjects that, when he (they) ceased to reign, the people determined to have kings no more. (Ifemesia, 1979)

From the insight above, it can be postulated that the Igbo had their own share of universal wickedness and man's inhumanity to man especially autocratic government occasioned by some kings.

In place of aristocracy and monarchy, some Igbo communities opted for deities which gradually came to dot the cosmology and political landscape of the Igbo nation. This brought about a spiritual dimension to the political governance of the Igbo people. It is plausible to argue that those Igbo communities without kings preferred the institution of deities because of their impeccable and incorruptible nature to human beings – the Eze or kings that could be influenced or imperfect. Although there existed some dreadful deities such as Agbala of Awka, Kamalu of Ozuzu, Igwekala of Umuneoha and the Ibini Ukpabi of Aro that had long operated on the cosmic terrains of Igbo credulity (Nwezeigwe, 2007). There were also local ones that occupied central positions in the life and activities of each town (Iroegbu, 1995).

Deities, in Igboland like in Ibibioland, provided a rallying point not just for the Igbo people but even beyond. Again, the oracular deities are potent multi-functional gods that

perform a host of tangible and intangible services (Omeje & Magwai, 2013: 107-129). Owing to deities' power over life and death, elders (Onyishi or Okpara) on ascension to the exalted position of leadership often took an oath of allegiance before a deity, at least, *Ala*, *Ana* or *Ani* - the Earth goddess. In Igbo cosmology, morality, religion and God are not merely personal affairs but a matter of social concern and common experience, engendering social rights and responsibility (See Iwe, 1988: 1-11). There can be little doubt that political functionaries in Igboland required the consent of deities to lend credence and legitimacy to their actions. As was to be expected, all laws had the *Ala* sanction, and the *Ala* priest was, therefore, always on hand with his *ofo* to inject a religious aura into the oath of office (Wabara, 1977). The notion that the Onyishi or Okpara was the gods' appointed agent on earth legitimated his power and made it both unquestionable and unassailable (Rodee, *et al.*, 1983).

In Igbo cosmology, the elders have always been believed to be endowed with wisdom and political sagacity by the deities. It has been argued that the institutions that exercised the most extensive quasi-governmental authority in Igboland were deities which, administered oaths of office to all public functionaries (Ellis, 2008: 445-466). This was why when decisions had to be made, and when a tradition was either irrelevant or controversial, decisions typically were made collectively by males, elders, and those whose

experiences and judgments were proven to be useful in the past (Rodee, *et al* 1983). This was probably because such elders were guided by deities including the earth goddess from whom they derived their authority and, therefore, accountable to same.

Deities in Igboland were known to have played the role of channelling authority over what were hitherto self-governing people (Ellis, 2008: 445-466). In a similar vein, deities were consulted during the selection process of elders especially where the determination of their seniority was difficult. Not just in the selection and installation of Igbo political leaders, deities also constituted checks and balances against the other arms of the traditional Igbo government. The role played by deities placed recognition and prominence on the chief priests (Attama or Ezemmuo) who built up an image of political, social, and material power in the Igbo society. In other words, the political arrangements of the Igbo society received their vitalisation from the religious imperatives in such a way that both political and social lives were inseparably interwoven (Akaruese, 2008: 77-98). It is reasonable to argue that the involvement of deities here amounted to sacralisation of authority; a demonstration that punitive social control was religious (Kalu, 1988: 19-34).

It is apposite to observe that Igbo political institutions could hardly function in isolation from religious ones. For instance:

Political decisions by the Council of Elders received a stamp of finality with the Onyishi or Okpara pouring palm wine to the earth goddess. The seal from such a leader was to sanctify the agreement, as well as make it binding on the general public. The contributions of the chief priest of a deity during the decision-making further enhanced the religious aura attendant to the process. (H.O. Obetta, personal communication, December 27, 2021)

Deities, in this regard, were not those in close connection with individuals but public and general ones believed to dispense rewards and punishments according to merit (Basden, 2008). In his own argument, Ifemesia opines that superior decisions or enactments irrevocably binding on all concerned in a community often took place before a powerful deity (Ifemesia, 1979).

### **Deities as the stamp of finality in deliberations**

The Igbo cherished justice and fair play as a *sine qua non* for the corporate existence of the society. In Igbo jurisprudence, there were courts at all levels of the political structures from the family to the village; a development that imbued the head with dual responsibilities both as a judge and political leader. However, the jurisdiction of such heads was determined by the seriousness of

the case before them. On account of this, deities were conferred with the power to exercise jurisdiction over a wide range of issues or matters thereby regulating the powers, practice, and procedure of traditional government in Igboland. This applied mainly among village democracies in Igboland. In Aro, for instance, it was a general belief that *anaghiachi Aro, anaeso Aro* meaning that "the Aro man never abided by the dictates of another man," a development that provided the bedrock of Aro's democratic and diplomatic practice (N. Udensi, personal communication, August 24, 2022). The Elders in Council and other functionaries in non-centralised Igbo society, though visible, only represented the invincible gods in human affairs. In this regard, deities were always invited to preside over serious cases as a result of which everybody including the clergy, abided by their verdicts to forestall the wraths of gods.

Against this backdrop, it can be said that deities were the guardians of public morality and justice just as they shielded the people from faltering in issues that could threaten the corporate existence of the society and sustenance of *joie de vivre* (joyous life) of the people. As the apex court, deities were always on the side of the vulnerable, poor and oppressed, hence they were regarded as the last hope of the common man in the face of malicious damages (M. E. Agbo, personal communication, December 30, 2021). P.A. Talbot (1967) appears to share this view when he noted that *juju* (deities) were a

sanctuary for the oppressed, the forbiddor of bloodshed, the avenger of crime (no matter how craftily hidden), and the preacher of peace and goodwill. A breach of public morality or abominations (*nso ala*) called for appropriate sacrifices from the culprit to appease the deity. Against the axiom, *homo homini lupus* (man is a wolf to his fellow man), deities acted as disinterested umpires of greatest integrity that dispensed justice in a manner far beyond human competence (Mgbemene, 1998: 4–11). In fact, deities were seen to exemplify fairness, honesty, justness and sound reasoning. This distinguished the Igbo traditional justice system from the modern type which often deliberately defeated the reasonable expectations of honest men.

On the other hand, some scholars have tended to argue that nothing is any longer sacred about deities. For instance, Nwala (1988: 12–18) has observed that the sacred Ibini Ukpabi had been converted into a business outfit imbued with extortion of wealth from unsuspecting clients even before colonialism. By implication, deities have lost their power and have consequently been pushed into near oblivion probably owing to prevalent attacks from Christianity, science and technology. This point of view is open to argument as there are still some deities that have continued to enjoy patronage and acceptance from a variety of clients. In fact, given the economic crunch being experienced by many rural and urban dwellers of Igboland, deities have continued to maintain

the status quo as the adjudicator in the political sphere of the people. This is because many Igbo people still believed that deities had, in most cases, delivered substantial justice without bias.

The Igbo people, like every other group, certainly had their share of universal wickedness, and of man's inhumanity to man found in every society (Ifemesia, 1979). Since it appears the Eze or Kings could not be trusted to deliver justice (*ikpeziriezi* or *ikpenkwumoto*– upright or fair judgment), their continued relevance is questioned. Furthermore, the concept of *ikpeama Eze* – implying the infallibility of the institution – has been leveraged by the kings sometimes perpetuated injustice to pervert justice and go scot-free. In the words of Oraegbunam (2021: 53–85), the concept of *ikpeama Eze* (*the King is always above the law or that the law is meant for the commoners*) was used to scorn those communities that had kings and chiefs who naturally would never be imputed with guilt in any event. By implication, the adoption of gerontocratic and democratic institutions with deities as the arrowhead of the judiciary was but a demonstration of the Igbo disapprobation of a system that manoeuvred justice. Consequently, deities came to dispense justice with a stamp of finality more so as they were *ab initio* involved in the enactment of the law of the land.

Deities, in this way, became *dues ex machina* (machine of the gods) that could be called



upon according to the need to compel anyone to comply with any stipulated regulation made by the community (Onyeneke, 1997: 149–154). In other words, deities performed judicial functions and other responsibilities for the good of all. In the context of this, it has been observed that the various functions of the deities, including the perceptibly good, bad, and ugly, do not stand in isolation but are believed to be coherently related to the well-being of the community and its constituent units and members (Omeje & Magwai, 2013: 107–129). It is pertinent to note that deities, in their adjudication of cases, oftentimes, ensured justice for the plaintiff, justice of the defendant, and also justice for the society whose norms were violated or breached. Deities as a divinity of care for the just and vengeance against the wicked and evildoers have generally been regarded as God's Minister of Justice in Igboland (See Iwe, 1988: 1–11). It is against this backdrop that the priest of a powerful deity was always invited to safeguard the morality and probity of the village (Wabara, 1977).

Deities in Igboland have enjoyed popularity and reliance from non-Igbo clients because of their impartiality in the adjudication of cases and protection of the weak, the poor, and the vulnerable in society. This was particularly observed among those non-Igbo communities at the borderland. Evidence abounds of cases where such deities as the *Adoro* deity of Alor Uno, Nsukka is believed to have adjudicated cases among Odumogu,

Ogboligbo, Agbedo and Agbokete in Igalaland and subsequently appropriated the victims' property (D. Abbah, personal communication, January 20, 2022). To avoid serial mysterious deaths in the victims' families and in an attempt to appease the deity, a son or a daughter was always given up as a servant (*Igbere* in Nsukka dialect or *Igbale* in Igala language) to the deity. In a similar vein, Ngamgbo Ariom of Ezza-Effium, from Abakaliki Zone, is known to have adjudicated the case of the abandoned property of the Umuezeokoha and Umuezeoka people who lived in Agila, Igumale, Ulayi and Ichama in Idomaland at the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra war (E. Nworie, personal communication on September 15, 2022). The deity has helped a lot of people to reclaim their property snatched from them.

Another one was a master who refused to honour the agreement he reached with his apprentice. It has been observed that Onyebuchi Nwiboko whose master, Sunday Nwaji, both of Izzi in the old Abakaliki division, was reluctant to 'settle' (to give money to the apprentice who has served one at an agreed price) after seven years of apprenticeship did so four days after the case was brought before Ngamgbo Ariom deity in 1997 (N. Obaji, personal communication on September 15, 2022). It can also be argued that Igbo deities were employed by the weak to police their land and property against dispossession and injustice from the strong and the wicked in non-Igbo societies like the Igala and the Idoma in Kogi and Benue



States, respectively. Deities were preferred because they were incorruptible, cost-effective and quicker in justice dispensation. Similarly, *Ibini Ukpabi* of Arochukwu was a deity of the greatest singular influence among such oracular deities of the time hence it drew the widest clientele from Igboland, from among the Ijo and from other non-Igbo ethnic peoples around (Mgbemene, 1998: 4-11). Just as deities adjudicated private cases, so did they do to public or inter-communal ones. In this regard, Ijoma (1998: 12-24) postulated that people who had been unfairly treated or those who could not get reparation at a lower level of authority usually took their cases to deities for arbitration because of their even-handedness. As a result of this system, deities complemented the efforts of the Council of Elders and other segments to ensure the orderliness of society by judging human actions, penalising defaulters, and vindicating the just (C.C. Opata, personal communication, January 9, 1994). In the case of inter-communal disputes, recourse was made to a powerful judicial oracle or deity with a regional network. One such deity was the famous *Ibini Ukpabi* with unremitting influence that drew votaries from the entire Igboland and even beyond (Ifemesia, 1979). Deities were considered a pillar of the traditional Igbo government, dispensing justice on both criminal and civil cases to the satisfaction of all. In a case of theft or any similar crime where the offender was not

immediately known, deities were believed to be capable of hunting down, punishing the offender, and thereafter, recovering the items or properties (Omeje & Magwai, 2013: 107-129). In 2011, Amuche Ajima's house at Ibagwa Ani, Nsukka was repeatedly burgled. When all efforts to stem the ugly trend or identify the culprits failed, she brought her case before the *Ube* deity of Uhunowerre, a nearby town. After a warning and twenty-eight days (28) of grace, the deity swung into action and Amuchechukwu Ugwu of the same town was purportedly killed (D.O. Ugwu, personal communication, October 12, 2021).

By implication, the deceased was believed to have been part of the gang that tormented Amuche Ajima. In the Nsukka area, similar deaths were believed to have been at the instance of deities who were offended by the victims' demeanours. In most cases, about one million, five hundred thousand naira (#1.5m) was paid as ransom for the corpse to be buried. Without this option, such victims were not given a normal burial, and their possessions, especially movable property and personal effects were either ritually alienated or publicly cast away as refuse (See Iwe, 1988: 1-11). The orders of deities were, therefore, easily enforceable unlike those of modern courts.

Instituting cases before the oracular court referred to as *Ikpoarusi* or *Ikpomma* was much cheaper, more affordable, and accessible than the modern judiciary,

especially in the local peripheral economies. The spiritual significance and prowess of deities not only set the ethical standards for the Igbo but also immortalised the pinnacle of social justice in the history of Igboland (N. Udensi, personal communication, August 24, 2022). The fear of retributive justice of deities which included the forfeiture of the victim's corpse as well as properties made debtors and the general public guard against dishonest and criminal intents in their dealings with others (Eze, 2018: 52-61). Given this, priests of deities came to be regarded as ministers at the altar of truth; by implication, they were entrusted with the responsibility of upholding and defending truth, fairness, and justice without fear or favour (Onah, 2011). All in all, these deities have proven to be irrevocably committed to complementing traditional Igbo government functionaries to realise governments' *raison d'être* without any centralised authority.

Another way through which deities augmented the efforts of the human functionaries of the Igbo government was in the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Igbo and principal authorities of their non-Igbo neighbours. In Nsukka, for instance, the institution of *Attama* – an Igalala derivation – not only created awe about the holder but also brought about a bond between him and his counterpart from Igalaland (S.E.Ogbu, personal communication, January 6, 2022). In other words, deities provided security not just for their priests but also for their disciples and faithful.

Furthermore, deities provided a sort of diplomatic immunity on any delegation sent to a neighbouring community with an *omu-tender* palm frond or twig (Kalu, 1988: 19-34). This was one of the ways through which deities filled the vacuum created by the non-existence of professional armies or diplomats found in centralised societies or states.

### **Deities as guardians of moral code**

Human nature is much the same all the world over, and amongst the Igbo, as and any other group, evil deeds are mostly the outcome of selfish desires (Basden, 1983). As a result of this, the Igbo invented the concept of deities to function in a fiduciary capacity to uphold people's conduct for the good of society. There is hardly any Igbo man who did (still does) not believe that deities had (still have) power over the life and death of the innocent and the guilty, respectively. As Nwabara puts it, deities had the power to kill a liar, a perjurer, a poisoner, or any person who had committed an abomination that could unleash unpleasant consequences on the entire community (Wabara, 1977). Deities created a situation where official and unofficial practices or codes of conduct were in tandem with the local legal framework.

In other words, deities constituted a check on conduct that was prejudicial to the corporate existence of the community. This was why the eventual installation of Igbo political leaders was always consummated with oaths and covenants taken before a deity including the earth goddess (*Ala, Ana* or *Ani*). New

leaders - either the Onyishi, Okpara, or title holder - were expected to take a vow not to divulge any official secret, not to compromise or promote any falsehood, perjury, and/or any other prejudicial acts that could drag the Council of Elders or the community into disrepute. Any infringement on any of the laws of the land was treated as a dangerous alienation of society from the peace and protection of the divinities (Iwe, 1988: 1-11).

Thereafter, the staff of authority (*Ofo*) given to the entrant was for him to seek justice, defend justice and advance justice (P.C. Abonyi, personal communication, January 9, 2022). It is difficult, in fact, not to believe that deities exercised the most extensive quasi-governmental authority in Igbo through the administration of oaths of office to all public functionaries (Ellis, 2008: 445-466). Basden's (1983) view that the fear of retribution was not profound as it never acted as a deterrent to evil appears unsustainable in the light of the foregoing. This is because these deities were credited with the powers of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence (Agbedo, 2008: 1-18); they were always called upon in any case of surprise or emergency for protection (H.O. Obeta, personal communication, December 27, 2022). Similarly, deities with particular responsibilities were always invoked during meetings to guide the thoughts, conducts, utterances, and decisions of the other arms of the government.

Understandably, the oath of office and covenant with deities laid the foundation for sincerity of purpose and cohesion, an ingredient for good governance expected of any government. In his argument, Ifemesia (1979: 33) opines that "Igbo ideas and beliefs, for instance, were very closely interwoven, their institutions and practices most intimately connected, and all of them constituted integral parts of the society in which they were established." On his own part, Eze contends that assigning responsibilities to deities by traditional Igbo political leaders does not only imply that they are renegeing on their tutelary functions but also depicts them as escapists (H.O.I. Eze, personal communication, November 25, 2021). Interestingly, notwithstanding the prejudice against deities by the Whites, they played formidable roles in the sustenance of the colonial judicial system in Igboland.

As Ellis (2008: 445-466) observed, "deities worked very closely with (chiefs of the Native Authorities as their courts remained dependent on oaths sworn before these servant-gods". In all probability, "this was because the new judicial system had not grown deep roots in the 1920s and the new order provided neither solution to deeply felt needs nor viable means to control space-time events" (Kalu, 1977: 75-90). It is, therefore, not surprising that the native authorities supervised by colonial officials recognised the relevance of tutelary deities to determine the truth of cases before their courts. Given that deities could be said to have carried out some

judicial duties in a semi-legal manner, their superiority to the social system of leadership was acknowledged throughout Igboland, hence; they were consulted by all as an arm of social leadership (N. Udensi, personal communication, August 24, 2022).

In Igbo society, communities entered into covenants and oaths for security purposes. Covenant, (*Igbandu*), in Igbo cosmology, is an oral agreement between two or more parties or individuals made under an oath before a deity, avowing that all those under such oaths shall henceforth, sue for peaceful and cordial co-existence and that none of the parties or individuals shall be a party to, or see to any evil scheme that can terminate the life or jeopardise the wellbeing of his or her neighbour. Arguing on this, Kalu opined that *igbandu* was common among the itinerant commercial communities such as Arondizuogu and Nkwerre-Orlu in Central Igboland just as it was in other parts of Igboland (Kalu, 1988: 19-34). The whole essence was geared towards entrapping or restoring harmonious co-existence, defence-pact, or forestalling suspicion and or fear between or among warring or misunderstanding parties or individuals.

In this regard, Ukpabi (1971: 101-109) has argued that the Eketekere confederates namely Amaokpu, Uhunowerre, Ihakpu, Ibagwa Aka and later Ovoko (Eketekere Confederacy) in the old Nsukka division bound by an oath on *Offia Ala* (sworn at Amaokpu) agreed to maintain peace among

themselves and defend each other from external power. By implication, such a pact was spiritually observed by clusters of powers; hence, it went a long way in checking the conduct of the confederates. In this way, deities have exercised control over both the private and public conduct of the Igbo people. Similarly, the institution of deities provided a strong shield to many Igbo communities in the absence of professional armies found in centralised administrations. Against this backdrop, it can scarcely be doubted that deities wield a lot of authority to determine most of the political decisions of traditional Igbo society.

Oath-taking and covenant-making were both ways through which deities were able to constrain people's inclination to misdemeanour and anti-social activities (Igbo and Ugwuoke, 2013: 160-167). Rival claimants to land or any other property were made to swear before the authority of a deity as the temple of justice in support of their claims (Iwe, 1988: 1-11). However, to modern legal practitioners and jurists, oath-taking has not only become outdated, barbaric, uncivilised, and anachronistic but also superstitious, mysterious, spiritualistic, and inconsistent with the dictates of the modern system (Oraegbunam, 2021: 53-85). The northern borderland Igbo and their immediate neighbours especially the Idoma Igala still upheld the terms of oaths and covenants as any deliberate infringement causing harm or damages to either lives or property (Shelton, 1971) incurred the wrath

of deities. This has popularised Igbo deities beyond Igboland and its environs. According to Udobata R. Onunwa:

...people travel to Nsukka even from outside Igboland to swear to an oath at the shrine of the Adoro Deity at Alor Uno. This female deity is believed to strike dead anyone who swears falsely by its name. At its shrine...one sees many household property (sic) packed at the outskirts. They belonged to the victims of false oaths. Those who swore falsely to an oath and died have their personal belongings brought and packed at the shrine of the deity. (Onunwa, 1990)

Covenants were also entered into by friends, business associates as well as relations to forestall suspicion and malice. This was exemplified by the covenant (*igbandu*) between Thomas C. Nwali and his nephew Chinedu Urama before the Akpal'Ocha deity of Ugwu Attama, Enugu Ezike in 2018. Three years later, the latter was said to have been found guilty and was subsequently struck dead by the deity in 2021 (J. Ugwuoke, personal communication on August 23, 2022) probably, on account of his violation of the terms of the covenant he willingly entered into, and by which he incurred the wrath of the deity. History has it that the former was falsely accused by the latter of involvement in poisoning; hence their family compelled

them to go into a covenant to forestall suspicion and rancour. This means that individuals turned to deities for adjudication in cases of disagreement or suspicion.

In very serious disputes involving false and unsubstantiated claims on land and/or economic trees; deities, most often, through their priests, hoisted a knotted palm frond (*omu*) or red textile material (*ikekwa* or *ugere*) or skull of an animal or all the three items on the land in question. The interpretation thereto was an interim injunction pending the determination of the dispute. Any breach or trespass was considered an abomination (*Nso Ala*) which attracted propitiatory sacrifices to forestall the wrath of the gods. The injunction, it is interesting to note, was to checkmate open hostilities between the parties and possible breakdown of law and order. In a similar vein, where a debtor refused or was dilatory about fulfilling his financial obligations to his creditor, the priest or the Onyishi or Okpara could place a knotted palm leaf (*omu*) on the debtor's farm or property. In the discharge of this injunction, the authority of the judge was derived from a deity rather than forefathers (Meek, 1930). Such a move was always regarded as sacred and divine hence it was binding on all concerned. Deities, therefore, served as a strong arm of the traditional political system administering justice to the satisfaction of all. Their politico-spiritual significance and prowess had satisfied the needs of a large population

of the Igbo for a long period of years before the advent of colonialism in Nigeria.

### **Conclusion**

This paper attempted an interpretative reconstruction of the multifunctional position of deities in the survival of Igbo society. It is indeed difficult to understand the workings of traditional Igbo political institutions without understanding the centrality of deities in the gamut of administration. Before the advent of colonial rule in Igboland, deities were the confirming authority of all social and political leadership positions. Priests were, therefore, imbued with dual responsibilities of installing all leaders as well as ensuring that their conduct did not constitute any prejudice to the ethics of the positions they were to occupy and the law of the land.

This paper contends that dispute resolution has remained one of the historical duties of deities in Igbo cosmology. Oath-taking and Covenant-making are viable options for modern litigation because of the unending adjournments of cases, compromises, falsehood and high cost of justice. In this way, deities ensured greater cohesion, social justice, and political stability of the Igbo society in the pre-colonial days. Deities, in non-centralised Igbo communities, were able

to checkmate individuals as well as other political agents from over-reaching their mandates and thereby set the system aright.

The paper further noted that in the life of the Igbo, religion, law, justice, and politics were inextricably tied to supernatural beings because several people still sought judicial decisions from deities. Law was instituted and adjudicated by deities and was transmitted sometimes through ancestors who were believed to be alive in their descendants. Consequently, there was no need for surveillance as everybody strove to maintain the wishes of deities for a peaceful, corporate existence and stability of society. We have argued that although there seemed to have been no visible political head in most Igbo communities, there was no anarchy because of the omnipresence of deities. Hence, these deities were an appurtenance of good governance in centralised climes like Igbo communities. From the foregoing, therefore, the study has established the supreme role religion and deities played and have continued to play in maintaining viable government in Igboland up to the present time. In other words, deities have remained the ultimate legal institution, especially, among the generality of the populace.

**References**

- Agbedo, C.U. (2008). "Deities and spirits in Igboland: The Elugwu-Ezike cultural perspective" *Journal of Religion and Culture*, 8 (1), pp 1-18.
- Akaruese, L.O. (2008). "Religious discourse and the principle of self-sufficiency: A philosophical excursus" *Journal of Religion & Culture*, 8(1) pp 77-98.
- Anyacho, E. O. (2005). *Essential Themes in the Study of Religion, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, Obudu: Niger Link Printing Co. Ltd.
- Basden, G.T. (1983). *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*. University Publishing Co.
- Ejizu, C.I. (1986). *Ofo: Igbo ritual symbol*. Fourth Dimension Publishers.
- Ellis, S. (2008). "The Okija shrine: death and life in Nigerian politics" in *Journal of African History*, 49, Cambridge University Press. pp 445-466. doi:10.1017/S0021853708003940
- Eze, O.C. (2018). "Deities in a changing Igbo society: Ndi Nsukka, 1960 – 2016". *International Journal of Intangible Heritage, Vol.13. pp 52-61*.
- Ifemesia, C.C. (1978). *South Eastern Nigeria in the nineteenth century: An introductory analysis*. New York: Nok Publishers.
- Ifemesia, C.C. (1979). *Traditional humane living among the Igbo: An historical perspective*. Fourth Dimension Publishers.
- Igbo, E.U.M. & Ugwuoke, C.O. (2013). "Crime and crime control in traditional Igbo society of Nigeria" *Developing Country Studies*, 3(13), pp. 160-167. [www.iiste.org](http://www.iiste.org).
- Ijoma, J. O. (1998). "The evolution of the Aro kingdom" in J.O. Ijeoma (ed.), *Building on the debris of a great past: Proceeding of the first all Aro national conference, 1996*, Fourth Dimension Publishing Co Ltd. pp. 12-24.
- Iwe, N. N. S. (1988). "Igbo Deities" *The 1988 Ahiajoku Lecture (Onugaotu) Colloquim*, pp 1-11 <http://heritage.igbonet.com-ahiajoku-lecture-igbo-deities-the-igbo-idea-of-the-sacred-contemporary-observances-under-the-eyes-of-the-gods-sacalization-and-control-of-social-order-in-igbo>.
- Iroegbu, P. (1995). *Metaphysics: The Kpim of philosophy*. Int'l Universities Press Ltd.
- Isichei, E. (1977). *A history of the Igbo people*. Macmillan Press Ltd.



- Kalu, O.U. (1977). "Missionaries, colonial government and secret societies in South Eastern Igboland; 1920 – 1950". *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol.ix, No 1 December, pp. 75-90.
- Kalu, O. U. (1988). "Under the Eyes of the Gods: Sacralization and Control of Social Order in Igboland" *The 1988 Ahiajoku Lecture (Onugaotu) Colloquim*, pp. 19-34 <http://heritage.igbonet.com-ahiajoku-lecture-igbo-deities-the-igbo-idea-of-the-sacred-contemporary-observances-under-the-eyes-of-the-gods-sacalization-and-control-of-social-order-in-igbo>.
- Mgbemene, A. E. D. (1998). "A godly heritage" in J. O. Ijoma (ed.) *Building on the debris of a great past: Proceedings of the first all Aro national conference, 1996*. Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd.pp. 4-11.
- Meek, C.K. (1930). *An ethnographical report on the people of the Nsukka Division*. Onitsha Province.
- Metuh, I.E. (1981). *God and man in African religion: A case study of the Igbo of Nigeria*. Geoffrey Chapman.
- Nwabara, S.N. (1977). *Iboland: A century of contact with Britain. 1860-1960*. Hodder and Stoughton).
- Nwaezeigwe, N.T. (2007). *The Igbo and their Nri neighbors: A study in the politics of Igbo culture and origin*. Snaap Press Ltd.
- Nwala, T. U. (1988). "The Igbo idea of the sacred: Contemporary observances" *The 1988 Ahiajoku Lecture (Onugaotu) Colloquim*, pp. 12-18. <http://heritage.igbonet.com-ahiajoku-lecture-igbo-deities-the-igbo-idea-of-the-sacred-contemporary-observances-under-the-eyes-of-the-gods-sacalization-and-control-of-social-order-in-igbo>.
- Omeje, K. and Magwai, J. (2013). "Oracular deities as traditional sources of credit among the Igbo of Nigeria" *Journal of Ethnological Studies*, 51(2), pp. 107-129 <http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalinformation?journalcode.yf.120>.
- Onah, G. I. (2011). *Intellectualism and the development of a people. Adada Lecture Series 1*. A Publication of the Association of Nsukka Professors (ANP), September 10.
- Onunwa, U. R. (1990). *Studies in Igbo traditional religion*. Uruowlu-Obosi: Pacific Publishers.

- Onyeneke, A. (1990). "The Future of the masquerade in Igbo society" in L.O. Ocho (ed.) *Okikpe: Nsukka yesterday, today and tomorrow*, Everlead Printing & Publishing Co Ltd. pp. 149-154.
- Opata, C.C. (1994). Administration of justice in Nsukka area: A case study of Oha-Lejja in Nsukka Local Government Area in the 19th and 20th centuries. Unpublished B.A. Project submitted to the Department of History, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Oraegbunam, I.K.E. (2021). "The principles and practice of justice in traditional Igbo jurisprudence" *Ogirisi: A New Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 6. pp 53-85 Doi:10.4314/og.v6i1.52335 Accessed on 6 December.
- Rodee, C.C., Christol, C.Q; Anderson, J., & Greene, T.H. (1983). *Introduction to political science*. McGraw-Hill International Book Company.
- Shelton, A.J. (1983). *The Igbo-Igala borderland: Religion and social control in indigenous African colonialism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Talbot, P.A. (1967). *Tribes of the Niger Delta: Their religion and customs*. Frank Cass ed.
- Ugwu, C.O.T. (2007). "The eclipse of African identity: religion on lens of the camera" in *Essence Interdisciplinary International Journal Globalization and African Identity*, Vol.5. pp. 62-73.
- Ukpabi, S.C. (1971). "Research note: Nsukka before the establishment of British administration" *ODU; A Journal of West African Studies, New Series*, No 6, pp. 101-109.