

## INFLUENCE OF MODERNITY ON THE ROLE OF ALA DEITY: EFFECTS ON IGBO OF NIGERIA

**Dr. Samuel Chigozie Izuegbu**

Department of Religion and Human Relations

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Email: sc.izuegbu@unizik.edu.ng

### **Abstract**

Among the traditional Igbo society, *Ala*, the Earth goddess was highly revered and feared. She was believed to be the author of the Igbo moral code which held the entire society together and fought against crimes among the people. The Igbo never did anything without resorting to *Ala* for help and direction. Taboos (*nso ala*) and abominations (*aru*) were all offences against *Ala* deity. The traditional society lived in peace and in less fear of crimes because the Earth Goddess was ever ready to fight her way. In the contemporary society, the moral code of the people, the justice system, traditional leadership among others have been affected by modernity against what it ought to be under the influence of *Ala* deity. The advent of Christianity, education, cultural contacts, developmental projects among other things have adversely affected the position of *Ala* deity among the people. This research therefore brings to bare the position of *Ala* Deity in Igbo traditional society and how modernity has affected this once valued Deity. Though, presently, some young people are going back to Traditional Religion where *Ala* Deity is primed but even at that, modernity still has influences on the practice. Using secondary source of information, data were collected and analysed using functionalist theory. *Ala* Deity held much influence among the Igbo which modernity has much affected.

**Keywords:** Influence, modernity, *Ala* deity, effects

### **Introduction**

Among the traditional Igbo society of south eastern Nigeria, *Ala* is held in prime position. It is a general belief in Igbo land that *Ala* is the custodian of Igbo moral code. This belief no doubt affects human attitude to certain observances in Igbo land. This may be accountable to why many serious things that happen among the Igbo are attributed to offence against *Ala*. It is likely for one to hear a statement like “*imeruola ala*” (you have offended the earth). In most cases, *Ala* takes a second rank after the Supreme Being among the Igbo. The earth deity is therefore considered very powerful among the Igbo people.

An average traditional Igbo man does everything possible to avoid incurring the wrath of *Ala* deity. The deity is believed to be a female deity and the author of Igbo moral code. This makes it that an Igbo in practice avoids anything capable of offending *Ala* deity. The primordial Igbo society was guided by the dictates of *Ala* deity through her priests and priestesses. Festivals were held among the people in the honour of *Ala* deity. Those who were by any means suffer injustice go to the deity for appeal. All these were in practice and the society was moving based on the principles prescribed by *Ala*.

In the contemporary Igbo society, it is becoming clear that the grip *Ala* deity had in the traditional Igbo society has reduced. Most people among the Igbo are no longer

interested in or having any recourse to *Ala* as the custodian of morality. Puzzled by this development, the present research sees modernity as the main reason for non recognition of the prime place of the *Ala* deity among the Igbo. This work therefore, is an attempt to understanding *Ala* Deity and her role in maintenance of morality among Igbo traditional society as well as the influence of modernity on the role of *Ala* in the contemporary Igbo society.

## **Definition of Terms**

### **Modernity**

Modernity is defined as a condition of social existence that is significantly different to all past forms of human experience. This view held by Shilliam (2017) implies that modernity has to do with changes witnessed in human existence as time goes. In line with the above definition, modernity in the present research is taken to mean the changes that have occurred especially to the Igbo tradition *vis-a-vis* the reverence to *Ala* deity in the contemporary Igbo society.

### **Deity**

Deity is a god or a goddess. In the present research, *Ala* deity is one of the deities among the Igbo which was held in honour because of her roles among the people.

### **Understanding *Ala/Ani* Deity**

The opinion that African Traditional Religion is polytheistic rather than monotheistic has so far through the findings of various authors been proved false. This is because African Traditional Religion in recent times through the findings can comfortably claim to be monotheistic. Idowu (1973) did not hesitate to state that African Traditional Religion is monotheistic coming from the point of view that there is one common feature in all the religions he studied. That feature is the notion of the Supreme Being. This notion of Supreme Being had earlier been identified in Arinze (1970) among Igbo people. Idowu was fast enough to observe the major argument that tries to refute the monotheistic nature of African Traditional Religion which hovers on the existence of some deities. It was to accommodate these deities that Idowu maintained that, the African Traditional Religion practice what he called Bureaucratic monotheism or Olodumarism. Either of the terms suggests that the Supreme Being in African context has ministers or commissioners (subordinates) as in today's government, who are in charge of certain portfolios in the realm of His (The Supreme Being) leadership of the world. Basden (1996) observed that these deities are the intermediaries of the Supreme God in Igbo cosmological assessment.

Nzomiwu (2011) maintained that the Igbo often go to these intermediaries just as one may easily go to the commissioner in a state instead of going to the Governor directly. It is because of this that people who did not understand African Traditional Religion thought it to be a practice of polytheism instead of monotheism. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, this idea of Supreme Being with intermediaries is paramount in Igbo religious belief. The Igbo has these deities. It is not a miscarriage of truth if one asserts that no part of Igbo land is without this belief in the intermediaries. Now, among the Igbo of Nigeria, one of the prominent deities is *Ala* or *Ani* (Earth) Deity. For Ugwu (2002), *Ala* is often mentioned wherever a traditional Igbo man prays especially with kola nut calling on the earth goddess: "*Ala bia taa oji*" (The earth goddess, come and eat kola).

Supreme God as mentioned earlier created other mediators. Among these mediators is *Ani* (Earth) deity. This is referred to *Ala* goddess by authors like Madu (1997), Ikenga-Metuh (1999), Ugwu (2002). Whether the term is goddess or deity, it refers to the same mediator (*Ani*) in question. Madu identified this deity as one of the most influential among the Igbo. According to him:

The Lords include *Ani/Ala* who is based on earth, the female principle, and mother of life and queen of morality .... There is a very close link between Igbo and the land, for their continued existence depends on the benevolence of the soil. *Ala* deity is the principle of life, and for the Igbo, life “*ndu*” is the most important value, and thus anything imaginable on earth can be done to protect, enhance and preserve life. Thus, they make rituals to *Ala* the goddess of life and custodian of life. (p. 68).

Here, *Ala* is a female deity. This deity dwells on earth. Her position may be accountable to the influential position she occupies among the Igbo. Thus, *Ala* is the custodian and protector of life among the Igbo. The people believes their existence depends on the *Ala*. Ugwu (2002) agreed that earth goddess “is seen among the Igbo as the most important of all other deities” (p.47). He further observes that the Igbo describe her as mother from whom all they have come. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) posit that “*Ala* is the author of fertility, queen of the underworld, it is on her that we move, stand, sit, walk, sleep and plant our crops” (p.161).

*Ala* receives sacrifices from time to time from her priests especially during seasonal celebrations on her shrine found in most private houses and public squares of different villages. Ugwu (2002) holds that “*Ala* is mentioned second to the Supreme Being and then other gods follow” (p.48). Nzomiwu (1999) was emphatic to this when he posits that “*Ala* (the earth goddess) is the most powerful deity after Chukwu (the Supreme Being)” (p.82). *Ala* according to Nzomiwu is the most important deity in Igbo social life. She satisfies a feminine touch in the concept of God. Green (1964) states that *Ala* is the nearest and dearest of all minor deities and represents the principle by which God makes the land fertile and ensures the continuance of life on its surface. *Ala* is worshipped as the sustainer of life and champion of justice, Nzomiwu insists-and defender of the weak and innocent. This is seen in the practice that whoever feels cheated because of his or her low position among the people beckons on the earth goddess who was sure to come to his or her aid. Forde and Jones (1950) affirm that *Ala*, earth spirit is the most prominent deity and is regarded as the queen of the underworld and the owner of men whether dead or alive. To an average Igbo traditional man, *Ala* is a great mother. She is the president of other minor deities and the ancestral spirit of all subjects to her.

From the above, one can deduce that *Ala* is a powerful deity in Igbo land. *Ala* is a female deity which occupies the earth and thereby controls the activities of the people living on earth. She is a custodian and sustainer of life. She is the second after Chukwu (Supreme Being). The Igbo often refer to her for she protects lives in the society.

### **Igbo Moral Code and Role of *Ala* Deity**

The Igbo moral code is enshrined in what is called ‘*omenala*’ (that which is allowed to be done on earth or traditional custom) which is the corpus of most of the legal, social,

moral and ritual norms of the people. Though, the different kinds of rules are designated using certain terminologies and traditions. These terms may include *ajo ihe* which denotes anything conceived to be evil, whether it is a physical or moral evil, a misfortune or a deliberate fault; moral faults are distinguished by terms *mmehie* (transgression). The Igbo distinguish three types of moral faults and have different names for them. *Ikenga-metuh* (1999) identified these moral faults as “*ajo omume* (bad behaviour), *Njo* or *Ajo oru* (bad deeds) and *Nso Ala* (taboos or prohibitions of the earth-deity)” (pp. 239-240). Nzomiwu (1999) noted the above moral faults however; he translated *Nso Ala* to mean “pollution of the land or abomination” (p.83). However, the translation may not be well accepted. *Nso Ala* fits in as taboo. Taboos are those things forbidden by the custom and they have grave consequences. Committing a taboo is known as *ime aru* (abomination). It may be interested to highlight more on the above moral faults among the Igbo.

*Ajo ihe* is considered the least of all moral faults. *Ikenga-metuh* (1999) states that the least reprehensive consist of breaches of rules of etiquette and social conventions, and other minor faults which are generally condemned but carry no specific sanctions. These include such disapproved behaviour as “not greeting elders, laziness, unhygienic habits, gossiping and so forth” (p. 240). These behaviours reduce public esteem of the culprit. It is believed that if they are not corrected they inevitably bring the subject to a very bad end or a very serious misfortune.

The second moral fault is called *Njo* or *Ajo oru*. These are sins properly called. According to *Ikenga-metuh* (1999), such are deliberate transgressions of serious moral norms of the society. This kind of moral faults has three qualities; it is deliberate; it flouts the laws of the land; it carries some social or mystical sanctions or both. Examples of such faults and the sanctions attaching to them illustrate the fact that they are really moral faults because lack of choice or deliberate are recognised as attenuating factors in estimating their gravity and the sanctions they carry. For example, insulting one’s parents or any elder may merit the offender a beating or a fine. Where it is repeatedly done or done in such circumstances that would expose the elder to ridicule, it may end the offender a curse believed to bring some misfortune on him. Other *Ajo oru* include theft, adultery and fornication and among others.

The third category in the scheme of moral faults comes under *Nso Ala* (taboos or prohibitions of the earth goddess). The term *nso* suggests the fact that the prohibition is total and absolute because, any infringement threatens the natural order and the very existence of the society. To infringe any of the prohibitions is *aru* (abomination). According to *ikenga-metuh* (1999):

The most serious taboos are those against the earth deity. These more than others are believed to threaten the stability of the society itself as well as that of nature, because the Igbo say that apart from the sky, every other thing rest on the earth. (p. 241).

Nzomiwu (1999) pointed out these offences called ‘*Nso Ala*’ to include: “homicides, incest, adultery, poisoning, stealing of seed yams and suicide” (p. 83). Whoever goes against the *nso ala* has committed *aru*. Once this *aru* is committed, the land has to be appeased and whoever that committed the *aru* faces severe punishment which may

include banishment from the community. From these explanations, it is obvious that the Igbo place more emphasis on the earth deity when it comes especially to Igbo moral code. Now, it is more convenient to discuss the role of earth deity in maintenance of morality in traditional Igbo society.

### ***Ala*, the Author of the Igbo Moral Code**

Morality is that quality of human act or behaviours by which it is called right or wrong, good or evil Madu (1997) traces morality from its etymology. For him, morality is derived from Latin plural “mores” meaning “morals or manners” (p.113). Morality is used to mean generally accepted code of conduct in a society or within a sub-group of society. It is also used to mean the pursuit of good life.

The Igbo moral code is said to be compiled and handed down to the ancestors by the earth deity. This unwritten code of moral conduct contains a great number of prohibitions (*nso ala*). This includes moral as well as religious demands and contains social, political, economic principle or norms, and prohibitions. Nzomiwu (1999) noted that “many of these are concerned with the maintenance of justice in the society” (p. 82). The fact that the deity gave this moral code to the Igbo, it is on it that *Ala* becomes the custodian of morality in Igbo land. Forde and Jones (1950) states that the priest of *Ala* is guidance of public morality. So, *Ala* being the giver of *omenala* protects the *omenala* thereby influencing morality in the Igbo society.

Again, *Ala* is known for justice. There is often an appeal or invocation to *Ala* when one wants to show that one is speaking the truth or seeks justice. People knowing that *Ala* abhors lie in the community, often try to avoid falsehood. A typical Igbo man who wants to show he is speaking the truth often stands on the land barefooted. *Ala* has such a powerful knowledge to decide whether one speaks the truth or not. In this way *Ala* helps people to avoid falsehood and always speak the truth, hence, she influences morality.

*Ala* is believed to be the defender of the weak and innocent. This is why the Igbo do not want to offend *Ala*. Everyone tries to be protected and defended by *Ala*. To this, people avoid those prohibitions so as to be defended by her. The earth deity is feared also because of her punishment. Uchendu (1995) affirmed that as the custodian of Igbo morality, *Ala* must take action to save the community when there is offence against the land. Death is not considered enough punishment for an Igbo who has offended against *Ala*. Such a person is denied ground burial which is considered worst social humiliation for any Igbo. The fear for such punishment in a community compels people to maintain high moral standard in the community. Nobody wants this severe punishment from *Ala* and so, each person strives to avoid committing any thing that may attract such punishment.

Pertinent to note is that where a community is believed to have co-operated in the crime of its members by omission or commission, this may be by failing to give him the fraternal correction which it owed to him, *Ala* could punish the whole community for the crime of this member unless expiatory sacrifice was duly offered. This to a large extent makes the whole community eager to embrace morality in entirety. People are by such cautioned to be morally sound. On that note, *Ala* influences the Igbo morality.

In all, *Ala* may be seen as the hub around which Igbo morality rotates. The traditional rulers often rule their people in the name of *Ala*. Any attempt to deviate from certain principles in the community attracts the anger of *Ala*. Each individual strives to keep the moral code among the Igbo. As the custodian of morality, *Ala* constantly monitors activities of individuals, and the community in general. Individuals and community know that *Ala* watches their activities and as an impartial judge, she is ready to pass judgement without fear, with its concomitant punishment. Bearing in mind this, people in the Igbo society try as much as possible to live morally to avert dangerous repercussion from *Ala*. So, one establishes here that *Ala* performs great roles among the Igbo in traditional setting.

### ***Ala*, Morality and Modernity in Igbo Society**

Research today discloses that the role of *Ala* in the primordial society has been so much affected by trends of change. The recent negligence of *Ala* by many Igbo can account for this loss of importance. Various changes in the society have in no small measure affected the hallowed position of *Ala* in Igbo society since change is an inevitable phenomenon that can affect even man's religious belief. Idowu (1973) was fast enough to observe that one or two things have happened to man's religion in any given situation: modification with adaptation or extraction. Igbo traditional religion is not an exception on this scheme.

The advent of Christianity in Igbo land has to a large extent affected the tradition and religion of the Igbo as well as the place of *Ala* among the people. As researches revealed, the Igbo of Nigeria is one ethnic group that is ready to adapt easily to other cultures. One could easily understand that the advent of Christianity has a lot to do with modernity. Christianity no doubt came with civilization which affected the status quo of the traditional society. This made it that what was previously obtainable became obsolete especially in the minds of younger generation. As a group that is so receptive, the Igbo of Nigeria embraced Christianity as well as modernity inherent in it. Greater population in Igbo land today is Christian. The 'new' religion as it were saw everything about the traditional religion as fetish and so the new converts were not to in any way reverence the practices inherent in the traditional religion. This has provided an opportunity for people to see anything from traditional religion as the worship of idol. For this reason, the role of *Ala* becomes questionable in maintenance of morality today. People today face their imported religion with little or no regard to *Ala* and her role among the Igbo, a situation to which many have attributed the present moral decadence. Undoubtedly today, some priests of *Ala* or their children that would have taken over the priesthood are today Christians, so it seems *Ala* deity is going into extinction as Idowu (1973) mentioned.

Cultural contact today is another area of this assessment. The era of rural to urban migration seems to affect the prominent role of *Ala*. The Igbo now are found in various parts of the world. Most of the beliefs held in primal society are now becoming questionable. At this point, it is to be recalled that one of the taboos of *Ala* was twins. It was an abomination against *Ala* for one to give birth to twins. Today, through culture contact, such a taboo has turned a blessing. This cultural change has brought the role of *Ala* to a questionable point among the contemporary Igbo society. This in a real

sense of it may suggest that not all that were seen as taboos were for the good of the society.

Education is a *sine qua non* in any social change. The present of western type education has exposed many to particular point where the roles of *Ala* become doubtful. Many, whose fathers were priests of *Ala* deity were expected to take over from their fathers but today, due to education they have abandoned the service of *Ala*. Most of them are today very rich. This affects the role of *Ala* in the contemporary Igbo land. It is a question of education-oriented morality rather than *Ala*-oriented morality.

Certain developmental projects have not helped matters in giving *Ala* the prominent place it used to occupy in the minds of the people. A lot of *Ala* shrines were destroyed due to road constructions and other things. Those who did such did not die and so, the high esteem to which she was previously held is now in doubt. Many Churches built today are on the hitherto the evil forests where victims of taboos of *Ala* were put to death. By the erection of such modern edifices and consequently, people go in there and come out unharmed, it has affected the popularity of *Ala* deity among the Igbo. This has shown that as people abandon the veneration of *Ala*, her grip of the society is no longer seen.

However, one can assert that the Igbo moral code, (*omenala*) is still in existence. In any case, with certain influences enumerated in this paper, there is a doubt for whether *Ala* still exists or not. Whichever, it may be said that a traditionalist in the today's Igbo society, can affirm that *Ala* still maintains morality among the Igbo and attributes the evils in the society to non regard to *Ala* deity. This is seen even as the young people in the recent times go back to revive the traditional religion that was left only in the hands of old people for decades, a move described as neo-paganism by students of religion. *Ala* to those who hold unto the traditional religious belief of the Igbo is still very much in control of morality. To those who do not believe, they affirm their morality from the point of view of their religion. Be that as it may, it is safe to conclude with Mbiti (1975) that to those who believe, it is true but to those who do not believe, it is not true.

### **The Effects on the Igbo Society**

From the foregoing, modernity is a reality that has affected human society. The Igbo society is not an exemption especially in her beliefs and practices. With modernity, there has been serious influence on the people's *omenala*. The earth deity is celebrated through festivals within the year. In the contemporary society, some of the festivals are no longer observed and where any is observed, there is serious modernization. The new yam festival among the Igbo for instance is celebrated to appreciate the earth goddess for giving the people prosperous harvest. Presently, it is changed as some Christians instead of celebrating it the old way, take tubers of yam to the church for blessings. This is an effect of modernity.

Again, among the people, morality is now determined by the Christian Bible not as prescribed by *Ala* deity. However, most of the moral codes of *Ala* deity are in line with the Christian moral code. Justice, honesty, truth, peaceful co-existence among others are parts of moral codes *Ala* deity prescribed which are equally in Christian moral

codes. However, most of the people who observe these moral codes now do it not because of *Ala* deity but according to their Christian faith.

The modern law making and justice system are equally of great effect to the role of *Ala* deity among the Igbo. The laws usually obeyed now are those of the state and not the deity. This has made it that the position of *Ala* deity in issuing laws keep going down. Justice now is sought at the court of law. It is today seen as barbaric among the people to see individuals who take their cases to the shrines of *Ala* deity. People now seek justice from the modern judicial system and this has made the position of *Ala* deity questionable among the people.

The traditional rulers in the primordial society wielded much influence over the people because their most utterances were according to the dictates of the *Ala* deity. They were seen as the representatives of the deity and their words were not to be questioned as such. With modern system of government, such power is now lessened. Today, the state governments issue certificates to the traditional rulers which by implications show them as made-made rulers not by the deity. The modern system of government has affected the role of *Ala* among the people.

It is equally imperative to observe that the weak and innocent in some cases today suffer more than in the traditional society. During the reign of *Ala* deity, the weak and innocent seek refuge in the hands of the deity. With the modern system of justice, it is becoming difficult for the weak and innocent especially the poor to seek justice due to high cost of litigation. This has been a dangerous effect on the poor who are innocent in gaining justice.

### **Conclusion**

The traditional Igbo society no doubt held *Ala* to be the custodian of morality. It was her who compiled and handed down the Igbo moral code. This Igbo moral code is called '*omenala*'. Any infringement against the moral code is an offence against *Ala*. *Ala* is ready to punish the offender or even the community when it errs either by omission or commission with the offence. This fear of punishment from *Ala* made people observe a very sound moral life in traditional Igbo society. Today, due to influence of changes in Igbo society, questions as to whether *Ala* really exists or controls morality have arisen. In any case, this paper affirms that the prominent position of *Ala* among the Igbo of Nigeria has been seriously affected by contemporary changes. Only among the current adherents of the Igbo Traditional Religion does the notion of *Ala* regarded presently among the Igbo. It was obvious that *Ala* helped in checkmating crimes among the Igbo. With modernity, *Ala* deity has become almost obsolete owing to its effects on the role of *Ala* deity in the contemporary Igbo society of Nigeria. It is the expectation of the researcher that if the contemporary adherents of Igbo Traditional Religion would revitalize the reverence of *Ala* deity and detach any obnoxious practice there before, the practice may soon have the admiration of many in Igbo society as some young people embrace the practice recently.



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