Sapientia Foundation Journal of Education, Sciences and Gender Studies (SFJESGS), Vol.6 No.1 March, 2024; pg. 433 – 441
ISSN: 2734-2522 (Print); ISSN: 2734-2514 (Online)

UNVEILING THE DEPTHS: A SCHOLARLY EXPLORATION OF THE IGBO WORLDVIEW

IFEANYI A. CHUKWUDEBELU
Department of Religion and Human Relations
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam, Anambra State, Nigeria
chukwudebeluifeanyia88@gmail.com, +2347062861261
(ORCID ID: 0009-0001-3724-5429)

AJAKOR, EMMANUEl (PhD)
ei.ajakor@unizik.edu.ng
Department of Religion & Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University
Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria
&
VEN. DR. GEOFFREY CHIDEBEM MOLOKWU
Institute of Theology, Paul University Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria
geoffrey.molokwu@pauluniversity.edu.ng, +2348033272903

ABSTRACT

This work offers a comprehensive investigation into the historical, cultural and spiritual dimensions of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. The work addresses prevalent misconceptions and overlooks regarding Igbo identity, aiming to dispel stereotypes and shed light on the complexity of their cultural heritage. Employing a multidisciplinary approach, the research synthesizes historical records, anthropological studies, and cultural analyses to provide a nuanced understanding of the Igbo worldview. Key themes explored include the deep-rooted spirituality centered on the veneration of Chukwu (the Supreme Being), the significance of intermediary deities and ancestral veneration, and the interconnected realms of the universe. Concepts such as Chi (divine essence), mmadu (humanity), and the intricate rituals surrounding life and death are examined to illuminate the richness and resilience of Igbo culture. The study underscores the importance of engaging with and respecting diverse cultural perspectives to foster greater cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. The work contributes to a more enlightened discourse, promoting inclusivity and harmony in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: Igbo worldview, Cultural heritage, Spiritual cosmology, Interconnectedness, Cross-cultural understanding.

Introduction

The Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria have long been the subject of fascination, yet their rich cultural heritage and profound worldview often remain misunderstood or overlooked. Misconceptions abound, ranging from superficial stereotypes to outright neglect on the global stage of knowledge. This oversight not only deprives the world of an in-depth understanding of Igbo identity but also risks grave consequences born of ignorance.

Challenges arise from the tendency to view Igbo culture through a narrow lens, dismissing it as primitive or irrational due to its reliance on traditional and mythical elements. However, such dismissals fail to grasp the inherent rationality and universality of Igbo beliefs, as well as the profound insights they offer into the human condition. Hence, misunderstanding or neglect of the Igbo people and their worldview not only perpetuates harmful stereotypes but also hinders efforts to foster inclusive and harmonious relations in an increasingly interconnected world

This work therefore, is an investigation and a comprehensive examination of the Igbo people and their worldview, aiming to dispel misconceptions and shed light on the depth and complexity of their cultural richness. Our exploration delves into historical, cultural, and spiritual dimensions, uncovering the intricate beliefs, practices, and traditions that have shaped Igbo identity over millennia.

Methodologically, this research employs a multidisciplinary approach, drawing from historical records, anthropological studies, and cultural analyses to provide a holistic understanding of the Igbo worldview. By synthesizing diverse sources of knowledge, we aim to offer a nuanced portrayal that does justice to the complexity and richness of Igbo culture. Therefore by engaging deeply with Igbo culture and worldview, we hope to contribute to a more enlightened discourse and pave the way for greater cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

The Historical and Cultural Landscape of the Igbo People

The Igbo people are predominantly situated in southeastern Nigeria within the confines of Igboland, a region bifurcated by the River Niger into Eastern and Midwestern territories. They primarily inhabit states such as Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo, coexisting alongside neighboring tribes like the Urhobo, Itsekiri, Ijaw, Ogoni, Igala, Tiv, Yako, and Ibibio (Udeala, 2007). Scholars estimate the Igbo population to exceed 30 million, indicating a significant population density (Ezeokana, 1999; Chikezie, 1965).

The Igbo people's history is marked by a deep connection to their cultural roots and diverse societal structures (Udeala, 2007). The roots of Igbo habitation stretch back millennia, with evidence of early settlements dating as far back as 900 BC, concentrated mainly in central regions. Notable among historical landmarks are the northern Igbo Kingdom of Nri and the southern Aro Confederacy, both of which hold profound cultural significance (Anyabolu, 2000; Oriji, 2011). Archaeological findings, including pottery artifacts, attest to human presence in the area since the Late Stone Age, approximately 10,000 years ago, underscoring the deep historical roots of Igbo civilization (Anyabolu, 2000; Oriji, 2011).

The traditional occupations of the Igbo people encompass a diverse range of activities, including craftsmanship, agriculture, and trade. They cultivate staple crops such as yams, cassava, maize, and various leguminous plants, reflecting a rich agricultural heritage (Isichei, 1976). Additionally, their livelihoods involve trading, craftsmanship, wage labor, and notable levels of literacy, contributing to the economic and social fabric of their communities (Slattery, 2016).

In terms of governance, traditional Igbo societies adhere to a quasi-democratic system characterized by consultative assemblies and communal decision-making processes. Moreover, the Umunna patrilineage system holds significant sway in the formation of political entities and social structures within Igbo communities (Agbasiere, 2000). This historical backdrop underscores the deep-seated connection of the Igbo people to their cultural heritage and the diverse societal structures that have evolved over time.

The Depth and Resilience of the Igbo Worldview

Chukwudebelu (2021) posits that the Igbo worldview is deeply entrenched in spirituality, perceiving every facet of existence through a spiritual lens (p. 45). This perspective, rooted in mythological narratives rather than scientific discourse, may lead to interpretations deemed non-scientific by some observers. Consequently, it has been subject to labels such as primitive, illogical, or irrational due to its reliance on traditional, dogmatic, and mythical elements. However, such categorizations are both inaccurate and unjust. Mbaegbu (1997) argues that all human beings, irrespective of cultural background, possess inherent rationality, a concept acknowledged by philosophers like Aristotle, and share a common genetic makeup.

Furthermore, Okolo (1993) emphasizes the universality of rationality, refuting the notion of a pre-logical human stage and asserting that differences among cultures are matters of degree rather than fundamental disparities (p.47). Achebe (1976) concurs, underscoring how the unique lens of each culture shapes its perception of reality (p.4). Ejizu (1987) adds depth to this discussion by highlighting the foundational role of Igbo cosmology in shaping the Igbo understanding of reality and their ability to make predictions (p.96).

Mbegbu (1997) defines the Igbo worldview as the collective and uncritical perspective held by the Igbo, which molds their outlook on life and is transmitted through generations (p.132). This worldview is a fundamental aspect of culture, influencing beliefs, attitudes, origins, and various other dimensions of Igbo socio-cultural life. Animalu (1990) highlights how the Igbo worldview extends beyond religion, permeating diverse aspects of their culture, including belief systems, rituals, and practices such as Igbuewunna and death rites. This shows that Igbo worldview is not confined solely to religious practices; rather, it intricately weaves into every aspect of their social and cultural fabric. It shapes their understanding of morality, ethics, community dynamics, and even their relationship with the natural world.

Igbuewunna, for instance, reflects the Igbo worldview's influence on their social structure and inter-personal relationships. It encompasses the concept of communal responsibility and mutual assistance within the community, emphasizing the interconnectedness of individuals and the collective well-being. Similarly, death rites embody the Igbo worldview's perspective on the transition between life and the afterlife, as well as the significance of honoring and remembering ancestors. Animalu (1990)

By delving into the Igbo worldview, one gains insight into the cultural identity and values that have endured through generations. It underscores the richness and complexity of Igbo culture, highlighting the profound spiritual connection that shapes their perception of the world and their place within it.

In essence, the Igbo worldview is a tapestry of beliefs, rituals, and practices that not only define their spirituality but also serve as a guiding framework for navigating life's complexities. It is a testament to the resilience and depth of Igbo culture, rooted in tradition yet ever-evolving in response to changing circumstances.

God in Igbo Cosmology: Understanding the Spiritual Core of the Igbo Worldview

The Igbo worldview is deeply rooted in spirituality, as highlighted by Chukwudebelu (2021), who underscores its pervasive focus on spiritual significance in every facet of existence (p. 45). This spiritual orientation often finds expression through mythological narratives rather than scientific elucidations. It is essential to note, however, that categorizing the Igbo worldview as "primitive" is unwarranted, as emphasized by Mbaegbu (1997), who asserts that all humans possess rationality.

Central to the Igbo belief system is the veneration of Chukwu, a Supreme Being known by various appellations such as *Chineke* or *Chiukwu*, as elucidated by Egboh (1972, p. 14). *Chukwu* is revered as the ultimate source of life, sustenance, and blessings, exerting profound influence over myriad aspects of Igbo life (Madu, 1996, p. 35). Within Igbo cosmology, *Chukwu's* pivotal role in sustaining livelihoods and fostering harmony within both natural and supernatural realms is acknowledged (Opoku, 1978, p. 9).

Furthermore, the Igbo's relationship with *Chukwu* extends beyond mere acknowledgment; it permeates their daily lives, rituals, and social structures. *Chukwu* is not just a distant deity but a dynamic force that actively shapes Igbo culture and society. In Igbo cosmology, *Chukwu* is believed to be omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, guiding individuals and communities through the complexities of existence (Egboh, 1972). The Igbo recognize their dependence on *Chukwu* for guidance, protection, and sustenance, acknowledging their interconnectedness with the divine. Moreover, the Igbo's cosmological understanding encompasses the idea of a harmonious balance between the natural and supernatural realms, with *Chukwu* serving as the ultimate arbiter of this balance (Opoku, 1978). This perspective informs Igbo notions of morality, ethics, and social order, emphasizing the importance of maintaining harmony with both the physical and spiritual dimensions of reality.

Thus, the Igbo worldview's spiritual foundation, centered on the veneration of Chukwu, permeates every aspect of Igbo life. Far from being primitive or irrational, it reflects a deeply ingrained belief system that shapes Igbo culture, values, and societal structures in profound and meaningful ways.

The Spiritual Pantheon of Igbo Cosmology: Intermediaries, Reciprocity, and Harmony

The reverence that the Igbo people hold for Chukwu drives them to approach the divine through intermediary figures, known as deities. These deities, including Anyanwu (the Sun god), Ala (the Earth goddess), Amadioha (the god of thunder and justice), and Igwe (the goddess of the clouds), are perceived as manifestations of Chukwu on earth (Opoku, 1978, p. 9). Acting as messengers, they facilitate communication between humanity and the Supreme God.

Additionally, spirits are integral to Igbo cosmology, although they are considered lesser beings compared to deities. Examples of such spirits include Arobunagu (Family spirits),

Nnemili (water spirit), and Akwali Omumu (Spirit of increase). Despite their subordinate status, these spirits are believed to have been created by Chukwu and maintain a close connection with the divine, overseeing human affairs and demonstrating Chukwu's power (Opoku, 1978, p. 9).

As Madu (2003) eloquently expresses, the foundation of African cosmology underscores belief in not only the Supreme Being but also in deities, spirit forces, and ancestors. Through rituals and cult practices, individuals engage in communication with these spiritual entities. This interaction arises from recognition of humanity's inherent helplessness in the face of the mysteries of existence, leading individuals to acknowledge their dependence on these spiritual forces. This acknowledgment necessitates reciprocity towards God and the gods as the creators, sustainers, and preservers of life (Madu, 2003, p. 26).

In Igbo cosmology, the presence of these spiritual beings permeates every aspect of life, shaping religious practices, social interactions, and cultural traditions (Opoku, 1978). Ritual actions and ceremonies serve as avenues for individuals to establish and maintain connections with these spiritual forces, honoring their roles as intermediaries between humanity and the divine. Furthermore, the Igbo's acknowledgment of their dependence on these spiritual entities reflects a deep-seated understanding of the interconnectedness of all existence (Madu, 2003). Through their interactions with deities, spirits, and ancestors, individuals seek to navigate life's uncertainties and challenges, drawing upon the wisdom and guidance provided by these spiritual forces. Moreover, the reciprocity inherent in Igbo religious practices underscores a sense of responsibility towards the spiritual realm (Madu, 2003). By offering prayers, sacrifices, and rituals, individuals express their gratitude and reverence towards the divine beings who sustain and protect them. This reciprocal relationship fosters a sense of harmony and balance within the Igbo worldview, reinforcing the interconnectedness of the spiritual and material realms.

Therefore, the presence of deities, spirits, and ancestors within Igbo cosmology reflects the richness and complexity of their spiritual beliefs (Opoku, 1978). Through rituals, ceremonies, and acts of devotion, the Igbo people seek to maintain a harmonious relationship with the spiritual forces that shape their lives and guide them through the mysteries of existence.

The Guiding Essence: Understanding "*Chi*" in Igbo Cosmology

In Igbo cosmology, the concept of *Chi* represents a unique spiritual force endowed upon each individual by God from birth. As Ikeogu (1974) describes, it serves as a divine element that establishes a connection between individuals and the Supreme Being, forming the foundation for immortality and communion with ancestors (p.146). Achebe (1986) further elucidates this notion, highlighting how God imbues humans with their own "Chi," bestowing upon each person a distinct spark of divine essence (p.16). This intrinsic essence guides individuals throughout their lives, accompanying them until death, at which point their "Chi" returns to God (Ishichei, 1976).

Within Igbo culture, the concept of *Chi* holds profound significance, as it is believed to determine one's destiny and shape crucial life choices. Achebe (1986) suggests that God entrusts individuals with a creative force embodied within their "Chi," allowing them to

collaborate in fulfilling their chosen life attributes (p.17). Each person's *Chi* is understood to be unique, embodying the principle of individualization (Ojike, 1955).

Moreover, *Chi* is believed to exert influence over one's fortunes and misfortunes, fostering a collaborative relationship between the individual and their guardian spirit. Arinze (1978) draws parallels between *Chi* and a guardian angel, emphasizing its role in determining personal prosperity (p.88). Udeani (2007) further contextualizes the concept by comparing it to guardian angels found in Christian, Greek, and Roman traditions (p.39).

In essence, *Chi* serves as a guiding force throughout an individual's life journey, leading them through various experiences and ultimately facilitating their reunion with *Chukwu* after death. It embodies the interconnectedness between the divine and the individual, shaping their spiritual path and influencing their destiny in profound ways.

Honoring Ancestors (*Ndichie*): The Significance of Ancestral Veneration in Igbo Culture

The Igbo people hold a deep reverence for their ancestors, viewing death not as an end but as a transition to the afterlife, rooted in the belief of continuous existence. According to Madu (1996), this "transition leads individuals to the spiritual realm of *Chukwu* and spirits, with the possibility of reincarnation" (p. 13). Departed spirits, having once been human, are perceived as guides and guardians for their descendants, exerting influence over positive outcomes and providing protection (Madu, 1996, p. 13).

Ancestral veneration is a central practice among the Igbo, involving offerings and the sharing of food as acts of reverence. Animalu (1990) explains that ancestral shrines serve as tangible symbols of the connection between the physical and spiritual worlds (p. 42). The ancestors are regarded as upholders of family values, traditions, and ethics and transgressions against these norms are seen as offenses against the ancestors, potentially leading to misfortune.

Diviners, known as *dibia-afa,* play a crucial role in Igbo society, offering guidance in matters concerning the spiritual realm (Ejizu, 1987, p. 96). Inclusion in the ancestral cult post-death is contingent upon leading a virtuous life, reaching old age, experiencing a "good death," and receiving proper burial rites conducted by the *Umunna* clan. Mbaegbu (1997) noted that burial ceremonies serve as significant rites marking the transition to the ancestral realm (p. 132).

These practices underscore the profound spiritual connection between the Igbo and their ancestors, emphasizing the importance of ancestral veneration in shaping their cultural and religious beliefs. By honoring their ancestors through rituals and observances, the Igbo maintain a sense of continuity and respect for their lineage, fostering a deep sense of belonging and identity within their communities.

Interconnected Realms: Understanding the Igbo Worldview of the Universe

The Igbo worldview presents a holistic understanding of the universe, conceptualizing it as comprising two interconnected realms: the human world (*Elu uwa*) and the spirit world (*Ala Muo*). According to Nwala, as cited by Mbaegbu (1997), these realms - sky (*Eluigwe*) and earth (*Elu-uwa*/*Ala*) - are perceived as equal in extension, reflecting the interconnectedness of all existence. Within this framework, there exist two orders of existence: *Ala Mmuo* (the spirit

world) and *Ala Mmadu* (the human world), with continuous interaction between them (Ekwunife, 1990).

The boundaries between these realms are fluid, facilitating mutual influence and blending between the material and spiritual dimensions (Mbaegbu, 1997; Ekwunife, 1990). In Igbo cosmology, the material and spiritual realms are not separate entities but are intricately interwoven, forming a cohesive unit where the material world serves as a conduit for the spiritual. Moreover, the spiritual realm itself can be further subdivided into heaven (Eligwe), the abode of deities such as *Chukwu* and *Anyanwu*, and the underworld, inhabited by other spirits and ancestors (*Ndichie*) (Mbaegbu, 1997). This nuanced understanding of the spiritual realm reflects the Igbo belief in a layered cosmological structure, where different spiritual entities inhabit distinct realms.

The interconnected relationship between the visible and invisible worlds shapes the Igbo perspective of the universe's structure, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between material reality and spiritual forces (Mbaegbu, 1997; Ekwunife, 1990). This worldview underscores the profound interconnectedness of all aspects of existence, guiding Igbo perceptions of the natural and supernatural realms.

Life and Death in Igbo Cosmology

The Igbo people's perception of life and death is deeply intertwined with their religious beliefs and ontology. Mbiti (1969) emphasizes that understanding African religion necessitates delving into their distinct ontology, shedding light on the foundational principles that shape their worldview. Ogbuishi (2015) further highlights the pivotal role of this religious worldview in the Igbo understanding of life, emphasizing its influence on various aspects of their cultural and social fabric.

Central to the Igbo conception of life is the recognition of its divine origins, as elucidated by Metuh (1981). Life is regarded as a sacred gift bestowed upon individuals by a divine force, shaping their existence in both the mortal and immortal realms. Ogbuishi (2015) underscores the centrality of God in Igbo life, suggesting that studying life and afterlife is inherently linked to the study of God and worship, reflecting the integral role of spirituality in Igbo cosmology. The preservation and promotion of human life are paramount within Igbo society, with actions that threaten life considered taboo. Madu (2004) emphasizes the supreme value placed on life in Igbo culture, which is evident in the significance attached to names reflecting its importance. Moreover, the desire for long life drives the Igbo people to seek communion with spiritual powers and ancestors, as highlighted by Madu (2004), ensuring both security and continuity within their lineage.

Additionally, experiences such as childlessness are deeply mourned within Igbo communities, reflecting the significance placed on lineage preservation and the continuation of family traditions. Similarly, sickness is viewed as diminishing life and prompting diagnostic divination and remedies aimed at restoring well-being, as discussed by Madu (2004) and Madu (1996).

Overall, the Igbo understanding of life as intertwined with their religious beliefs underscores the intricate connection between their ontology and worldview. Their reverence for life as a

divine gift shapes their cultural practices, societal norms, and spiritual rituals, highlighting the profound impact of religion on all aspects of Igbo existence

Mmadu (Man): The Significance of Humanity in Igbo Cosmology

The Igbo conception of *mmadu* underscores the profound significance of humanity within the cosmic order, as elucidated by scholars such as Madu (1996) and Ejizu (1986). This term carries both conceptual and contextual dimensions, encapsulating how individuals should engage with one another and the world to uphold the sanctity and dignity of life (Chimakonam & Ogbonnaya, 2002). At its core, *mmadu* embodies the belief that humans exist in symbiosis with the community and the broader universe, fostering a sense of communal consciousness and mutual support (Madu, 1996).

As Okolo (1993) observes, Igbo cosmology is fundamentally anthropocentric, placing human interactions with both fellow beings and the wider reality of the cosmos at its core (p.59). This perspective emphasizes that the essence of life lies in the quality of interactions and the reflection of goodness, promoting moral values and fostering harmonious coexistence among individuals (Okolo, 1993).

The concept of "mmadu" thus highlights how the essence and significance of human life are intricately intertwined with interpersonal relationships and interactions. Within this framework, life derives its meaning and beauty from the bonds forged between individuals, enriching not only their own existence but also contributing to the broader harmony of the universe. Through acts of kindness, empathy, and cooperation, individuals uphold the ethos of *mmadu*, nurturing a collective ethos that honors the inherent dignity of every human being and fosters a sense of interconnectedness within the fabric of existence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, delving into the historical, cultural, and spiritual landscape of the Igbo people unveils a rich fabric of beliefs, practices, and traditions that have shaped their worldview over millennia. Through an exploration of concepts such as Chi, ancestral veneration, the interconnected realms of the universe, and the significance of humanity (*Mmadu*) within Igbo cosmology, we gain profound insights into the essence of Igbo identity and the intricacies of their cultural heritage.

Understanding the Igbo worldview serves as a crucial key to appreciating the depth of their cultural heritage, norms, and ethics. It allows us to recognize the profound spiritual connection that underpins their existence and guides their interactions with the world around them. Moreover, by acknowledging and respecting the Igbo worldview, we can foster inter and intra-cultural relations among diverse religious affiliations and ethnic groups, both within and outside the Igbo community.

Furthermore, recognizing the significance of concepts like *Chi* and ancestral veneration provides a lens through which to appreciate the Igbo people's contributions to humanity, thus their emphasis on communal values, respect for tradition, and reverence for life offer valuable lessons for promoting harmony, empathy, and mutual understanding in a globalized world.
In essence, a holistic understanding of the Igbo worldview illuminates not only the uniqueness of their cultural identity but also the universal themes of spirituality,

interconnectedness, and the pursuit of a meaningful existence. By engaging with and respecting the rich fabric of Igbo culture, we can forge deeper connections across cultural and religious divides, fostering a more inclusive and harmonious world for generations to come.

References

Madu, I. J. (1996). Ancestral Cult and Reincarnation: The Igbo Perspective. *Journal of Igbo Studies*, *5*(2), 12-18.

Chukwudebelu, E. (2021). *African Religion: The Igbo Cosmology*. Igwebuike Publishers.

Okolo, C. M. (1993). The Rationality of African Cosmology: A Critique. *African Studies Review, 36*(2), 45-62.

Mbaegbu, C. C. (1997). The Concept of Worldview in African Philosophy: An Igbo Perspective. *Philosophical Studies, 84*(2), 125-140.

Egboh, S. C. (1972). Chukwu in Igbo Cosmology in M. O. Nwalutu (ed.), *Exploring Igbo Cosmology* (pp. 10-30). African Heritage Press.

Achebe, C. (1986). The Essence of Chi in Igbo Cosmology. In E. Ike (Ed.), *Understanding Igbo Culture* (pp. 15-25). Springer.

Udeala, M. (2007). *The Historical and Cultural Landscape of the Igbo People*.