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Rituals of Protection: *The Akalogoli Charm and Igbo Beliefs on Malevolent Spirits in the Early 1900s*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**Burning palm flower [man burying
akalogoli charm to ward off evil
spirits]. Photo: Northcote Thomas,
early 1910s.**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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RITUALS OF PROTECTION

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In the early 1910s, Northcote Thomas captured a photograph titled “Burning palm flower [man burying akalogoli charm to ward off evil spirits].” The term Akalogoli is thought to derive from the Igbo words akala, meaning sign or mark, and ogoli, referring to a wastrel or ne’er-do-well. It denotes a malicious, tricky, or malevolent spirit, believed...

Burning palm flower [man burying akalogoli charm to ward off evil spirits]. Photo: Northcote Thomas, early 1910s. In the early 1910s, Northcote Thomas captured a photograph titled “Burning palm flower [man burying akalogoli charm to ward off evil spirits].” The term Akalogoli is thought to derive from the Igbo words akala, meaning sign or mark, and ogoli, referring to a wastrel or ne’er-do-well. It denotes a malicious, tricky, or malevolent spirit, believed to be the wandering specter of individuals who led troubled lives.

In Igbo culture, as well as in neighboring communities, people who died under unfortunate or unnatural circumstances—such as suicide, execution, or mysterious illness—were often denied proper burials. These deaths, known as onwụ ike (hard death), left the deceased in limbo. Instead of being buried in family land or a graveyard, their bodies were disposed of in the wilderness, often referred to as the “evil forest” (a term readers of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* might recognize). In such cases, the individual’s spirit would be unable to transition into the afterlife, where they would typically become ancestors or await rebirth. As a result, they were believed to remain on earth, sometimes becoming violent spirits or mischievous

poltergeists. These spirits caused disturbances such as making household items disappear, frightening people, or causing distress to relatives.

In Igbo belief, spirits have an aversion to earth or soil. This is also seen in the legend of owummiri (mami water), a spirit that hovers above the ground when walking. Throwing soil or earth on malicious spirits is therefore believed to repel them, a key element in rituals like the one Thomas documented.

Northcote W. Thomas – Anthropological Report on the Ibo-speaking Peoples of Nigeria, (Igbo-speaking people of the Awka district), 1913.

Achebe, C. (1958). Things Fall Apart. Heinemann

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odi

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explore ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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