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Ala, the Earth Mother: *The Sacred Guardian of Igbo Morality and Fertility*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**Symbol of Ala, the Earth Mother, at
Bende. P. A. Talbot, c. 1920s.**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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ALA, THE EARTH MOTHER

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Ala (also spelled Àlì or Anì) is one of the most significant deities in Igbo cosmology, embodying the earth, morality, fertility and justice. She is the giver of life, the receiver of the dead, and the enforcer of divine law. Among the Igbo, she is deeply revered, and her sacred laws, known as omenala, govern social conduct, especially regarding purity, justice and community harmony.

01

Ala's Role in Igbo Society

Ala is not just a spiritual entity but also a central figure in the daily lives of the Igbo people. As the goddess of fertility, she is responsible for the prosperity of the land, ensuring bountiful harvests and the well-being of the people. Any violation of her laws, especially those related to purity and moral conduct, is believed to bring misfortune, famine, or disease to the community.

The account given by Chief Osu of Obiakpu, Ale-Nsaw (Alinso present-day Egbema) documented by P. A. Talbot (1927), provides a striking example of how Ala's influence extended into social customs and laws. In his testimony, he describes how in the past, women were considered sacred to Ala, and strict rules were imposed on chastity. Men were forbidden from touching or even looking directly at a woman's legs or feet. Adultery was not just a moral failing but a severe crime with lifelong consequences, offenders were heavily fined

and permanently ostracized from society.

Among the Ale Nsaw Ibo a strict rule as to chastity was imposed by the direct command of the Earth Goddess. On this point Chief Osu of Obiakpo stated:

Our people are generally known by the name of Ale 'Nsaw (Ale's tabu or the land of the tabu) because in our ancestors' time there were many forbidden things in our part. All our women were sacred to Ale, therefore in olden days no man might reach out a hand to touch a woman's leg or foot. Should a man meet a woman going to bush, he must at once hide his eyes or pass by another way. In those days it was a very terrible sin for any man to commit adultery. Should one fall into this crime, he was not only heavily fined but at once made outcast. Never again was he permitted to join any 'company.' Never again might he drink or eat with others. As regarded his own family, because he was of their kin they would help to collect the fine, but after this was paid off they would have nothing further to do with him.

Some of Nigeria Fertility Cults – P.A. Talbot

02

Ala as the Enforcer of Justice

Ala is also regarded as the ultimate enforcer of justice. Igbo laws, known as omenala Ala (the customs of Ala), are believed to be dictated by her. Crimes such as murder, theft, incest, and sacrilege are considered direct violations of her divine order and must be atoned for through rituals and sacrifices. In many traditional Igbo societies, oaths of truth were taken in her name, and any falsehoods were expected to be met with divine retribution. Therefore Igbo can be said to be a ethno-religious group.

03

Ala's Presence in Art and Symbols

Ala is often represented in Igbo art, sometimes as a sculpted figure with extended arms, embracing both the living and the dead. The image of her symbol in Bende, photographed by P. A. Talbot in the 1920s, reflects her enduring presence in Igbo spiritual life. Shrines dedicated to Ala, known as Mbari, are elaborate clay structures decorated with symbolic figures representing her power, fertility, and moral authority.

04

The Enduring Influence of Ala in Contemporary Igbo Culture

Despite the impact of colonialism and the spread of Christianity, Ala's influence persists in many Igbo communities. Many traditional laws and moral expectations continue to reflect her ancient principles. Even today, Igbo people often invoke omenala (tradition) in legal and ethical discussions, signifying the deep-rooted presence of Ala in their worldview.

Ala, as both a nurturing and disciplinary force, represents the Igbo philosophy of duality and balance, she provides life and sustains it, but she also punishes those who disrupt harmony. This balance ensures the continuity of not just the physical world but also the moral and spiritual order of Igbo society.

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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 explores 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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