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An Igbo Family Shrine: *Ikenga, Ofo, and Ancestor Reverence in Onicha Olona*

By Chuka Odike

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AN IGBO FAMILY SHRINE

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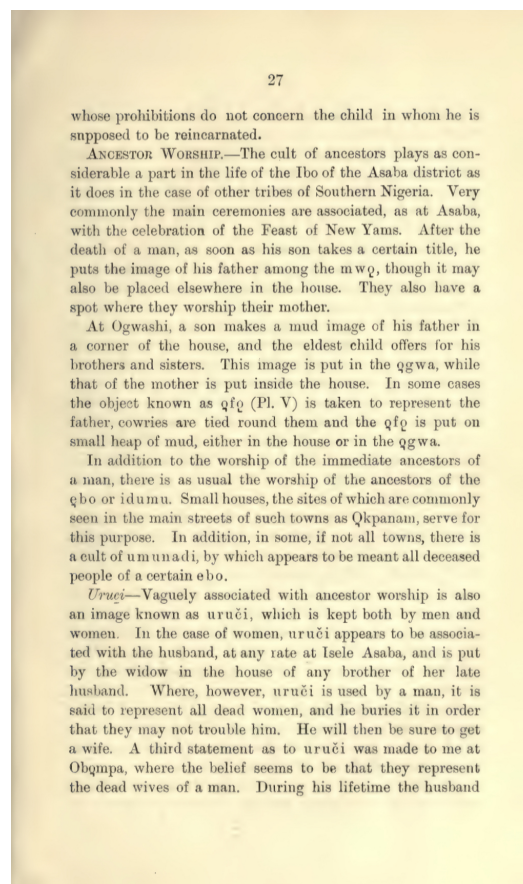
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WORSHIP OF ANCESTORS NZE, OFO AND IKENGA (ONICHA OLONA).

The family shrine is a cornerstone of Igbo spirituality, reflecting the community's connection to their ancestors, deities, and symbols of authority. In the early 1910s, Northcote Thomas, an anthropologist, photographed a family shrine in Onicha Olona, located in present-day Delta State. The shrine prominently featured key elements of Igbo religious and cultural life: the Ikenga, Ofo, and representations of ancestors.

The Ikenga is a revered symbol of personal achievement, strength, and male authority, often depicted as a carved figure with horns. It embodies the individual's chi (personal god), strength, and success. Every Igbo man traditionally keeps an Ikenga, which is regularly venerated to ensure continued blessings in personal endeavors.



ANTHROPOLOGICAL REPORT ON IBO-SPEAKING PEOPLES OF NIGERIA. BY NORTHCOTE W. THOMAS, GOVERNMENT ANTHROPOLOGIST. PART IV. LAW AND CUSTOM OF THE IBO OF THE ASABA DISTRICT, S.NIGERIA. Page 27.

The Ofo represents justice, truth, and the ancestral authority of a family or community. It is a sacred staff or stick that connects the living with the spirits of the ancestors, symbolizing morality and

governance. In the family shrine, the Ofo serves as a reminder of the sacred trust passed down through generations.

Ancestor veneration is central to Igbo spirituality. The shrine contains symbolic representations of deceased family members, honouring their role as spiritual intermediaries. These ancestors are believed to watch over the family, guiding and protecting their descendants in exchange for regular offerings and respect.

The head of the family, typically the eldest male, serves as the primary priest of the Igbo family. Known as the Okpala or “Okpala Ukwu” as the car may be, this figure acts as a custodian of the shrine, performing rituals, making offerings, and maintaining spiritual harmony within the family. The Okpala ensures that the ancestors’ spirits are appeased and that the household remains aligned with divine principles.

This familial priesthood underscores the intimate relationship between the Igbo people and their spirituality, where religion, morality, and kinship are inseparably intertwined.

Thomas, N. (1910s). An Igbo family shrine with Ikenga, Ofo, and representation of ancestors, Onicha Olona, today’s Delta State. Photograph.

Ikenga and Ofo in Igbo Culture. (n.d.). In Nigerian Heritage Journal.

Okpala’s Role in Igbo Religion. (n.d.). In African Traditional Religion: The Igbo Perspective.

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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