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The Iconic Anyanwu: *Unveiling Igbo Cultural Heritage at the UN (United Nations)*

By Chuka Odike

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Artist Ben Enwonwu (right) with Secretary-General U. Thant unveiling Enwonwu's statue Anyanwu, the Igbo sun deity, UN Headquarters, New York, October 1966. UN Photo/ Teddy Chen.

Ben Enwonwu's Anyanwu is an iconic sculpture that reflects the Igbo sun deity, symbolizing hope and renewal. The statue was presented at the United Nations headquarters in New York in October 1966, with Enwonwu and U. Thant, the then-Secretary-General of the UN, unveiling the piece. This event signified a moment where African art, particularly from Nigeria, was recognized on a global stage, and Enwonwu's work played a pivotal role in representing the cultural heritage of the Igbo people. Anyanwu blends traditional African themes with modern sculptural techniques, representing both spiritual and artistic brilliance.

Anyanwu, derived from Igbo words “anya” (eye) and “anwu” (light or sun), translates to “eye of the sun” or “the sun itself” ¹. This deity symbolizes life, energy, and power, revered in Igboland for its nurturing and healing qualities. The sun's cycle represents creation, vitality, and spiritual authority, with communities seeking blessings through prayers and rituals

The worship of Anyanwu (the sun deity) in Igboland is historically tied to the reverence of the sun as a symbol of life, energy, and power. While Anyanwu has a broad significance across Igboland, its adoration is particularly prominent in the northern and central parts of Igboland, especially among the Igbo of Anambra, Imo, Enugu and some parts of Delta States.

In these areas, Anyanwu was often linked to Chukwu (the Supreme God), being regarded as a manifestation of divine power. The sun's regular cycle of rising and setting was seen as a metaphor for creation, vitality, and spiritual authority. Communities would honor Anyanwu through prayers and rituals seeking blessings of good health, protection, and agricultural fertility.

Efforts to preserve Igbo traditions continue through cultural festivals, academic research, and art. Enwonwu's sculpture remains an iconic symbol of Igbo heritage, celebrated for its artistic excellence and cultural significance

This deity was also symbolically tied to kingship and leadership, with some rulers associating their authority with the divine power of the sun. It played a key role in the cosmology and spiritual beliefs of many Igbo people.

Journal of African Studies, Vol. 10-15 (1970-1975)

World History Edu. (2024, February 21). Anyanwu: The Igbo Sun Deity.

Exploring Igbo Mythology Gods and Goddesses: Divine Tales from Nigeria.

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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