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Akalogoli Charms: *Warding Off Evil Spirits*

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**Burning palm flower [man burying
akalogoli charm to ward off evil
spirits]**

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AKALOGOLI CHARMS

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In Igbo culture, spirituality weaves through daily life, connecting the living with ancestors and the unseen world. One fascinating practice is the use of akalogoli charms, as captured in a striking early 1910s photograph by Northcote Thomas, showing a man burying a charm made from burning palm flowers to ward off evil spirits. This ritual...

A man buries an Akalogoli charm made from burning palm flowers to repel evil spirits, a powerful Igbo ritual captured in the early 1910s. Photo - Ukpuru In Igbo culture, spirituality weaves through daily life, connecting the living with ancestors and the unseen world. One fascinating practice is the use of akalogoli charms, as captured in a striking early 1910s photograph by Northcote Thomas, showing a man burying a charm made from burning palm flowers to ward off evil spirits. This ritual reflects deep Igbo beliefs about life, death, and the restless spirits that linger when proper burial rites are denied. This article explores the akalogoli charm, its cultural significance, and the broader Igbo worldview on spirits.

01

The Akalogoli Charm: Meaning and Purpose

The term akalogoli likely comes from the Igbo words akala (sign or mark) and ogoli (a wastrel or good-for-nothing), suggesting a troublesome or malicious spirit. According to Igbo beliefs, akalogoli are the roaming spirits of people who suffered a “bad death,” known as ọnwụ ike (hard death). This could include those who died by

suicide, were executed for crimes, or succumbed to mysterious illnesses. Unlike those who receive proper burials and transition to the afterlife as ancestors, these spirits are stuck on earth, unable to complete the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

The “Maw-Afia” – The spirit of a deceased man appearing to his friends, observed in Onitsha, Asaba, and other riverside towns. All spirits (maws [mmụọ]) are believed to rise from the ground. G. T. Basden (1921). *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*. These restless spirits are believed to cause trouble, from minor nuisances like hiding household items to more serious disturbances like frightening people or distressing relatives. To counter their mischief, Igbo people use akalogoli charms, such as the one depicted in Thomas’s photograph, where a man buries a charm made from burning palm flowers. The act of burying the charm, often combined with throwing earth, is thought to repel these spirits, as many Igbo spirits, including owummiri (water spirits or “mami wota”), are believed to avoid contact with soil. This ritual highlights the Igbo understanding of earth as a powerful element that can cleanse or deter malevolent forces.

02

The Igbo Cycle of Life and Death

To understand akalogoli charms, we need to look at the Igbo worldview on life and death. In Igbo cosmology, life is a cycle that includes birth, death, and rebirth. When someone dies, a proper burial ensures their spirit joins the ancestors in the afterlife, where they can guide the living or return as a reincarnated child. This cycle is sacred and central to Igbo identity.

However, a “bad death” disrupts this cycle. Those who die in dishonorable or unnatural ways are often denied traditional burial rites. Instead, their bodies may be cast into an ajo ọfia (evil forest), a forbidden wilderness area, as described in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Without proper rites, their spirits cannot transition to the

afterlife and may become akalogoli —tricky or violent poltergeists that haunt the living. This belief reflects the Igbo emphasis on community harmony and the consequences of actions that disrupt it, even in death.

03

The Ritual of the Akalogoli Charm

The photograph by Northcote Thomas, taken in the early 1910s, captures a man performing a ritual to bury an akalogoli charm made from burning palm flowers. Palm trees hold deep cultural significance in Igbo land, used in everything from wine production to roofing. The burning of palm flowers likely serves a dual purpose: the fire purifies, and the ashes create a potent charm. Burying the charm in the earth is key, as soil is believed to repel spirits who hover above the ground, like owummiri. This act of burial is both practical and symbolic, grounding the spirit's influence and restoring peace to the community.

The ritual is typically performed by a dibia (diviner or spiritual expert), though community members might also participate under guidance. The dibia may use sacred items like nzu (edible chalk) or ọmụ (tender palm fronds) to enhance the charm's power, as these are common in Igbo spiritual practices. The goal is to neutralise the akalogoli's ability to cause harm, ensuring safety for the household or village.

04

Cultural Context and Historical Insights

The akalogoli charm is part of a broader Igbo tradition of spiritual protection. Igbo cosmology recognises a variety of spirits, from benevolent ancestors to malevolent entities like akalogoli. This belief system is shared with neighbouring cultures, such as the Efik and Ibibio, who also have rituals to manage restless spirits. The use of earth as a deterrent is particularly significant, as it reflects the Igbo view of the land as a sacred force, often personified as Ala, the earth goddess who governs morality and fertility.

Historical accounts, like those from colonial-era anthropologists such as Northcote Thomas, provide valuable glimpses into these practices. Thomas, who worked in Igbo land in the early 20th century, documented rituals and beliefs through photographs and writings, though his interpretations sometimes carried colonial biases. Modern Igbo scholars and cultural practitioners emphasise that akalogoli are not merely folklore but part of a living spiritual tradition that continues to shape Igbo identity.

05

Modern Relevance and Challenges

While akalogoli charms and similar rituals remain part of Igbo culture, they face challenges in the modern world. The spread of Christianity, which often views traditional practices as incompatible with its teachings, has led some Igbo people to abandon these rituals. Urbanisation and migration to cities also make it harder to maintain traditional practices tied to specific lands or communities. However, many Igbo people continue to honour their spiritual heritage, adapting rituals to new contexts or using social media to share knowledge.

Efforts to preserve Igbo culture, led by groups like Ohanaeze Ndigbo, emphasise the importance of documenting practices like the akalogoli charm. Festivals, community gatherings, and online platforms play a key role in keeping these traditions alive, ensuring younger generations understand their roots. The burning palm flower ritual, though less common today, remains a powerful symbol of the Igbo ability to confront and manage the unseen forces in their world.



Logo of the Ohanaeze Ndigbo organisation

The akalogoli charm offers a window into the rich spiritual world of the Igbo people. By burying charms made from burning palm flowers, Igbo communities protect themselves from restless spirits, reflecting their deep respect for the cycle of life and death. This practice, rooted in the belief that earth can ward off evil forces, highlights the Igbo's resourcefulness and spiritual resilience. Despite modern challenges, the legacy of akalogoli charms endures, carried forward by those who cherish Igbo culture and its timeless connection to the past.

- Achebe, C. (1994). Things fall apart. Anchor Books. (Original work published 1958)
- Ụkpurụ. (2018, March 18). Burning palm flower [man burying akalogoli charm to ward off evil spirits]. Tumblr.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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