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Igbo Ancestral Halls: *Why They Matter and Their Different Names*

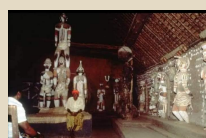
By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

An Igbo Traditional Shrine

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By Idenze Ezeme · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com

Ekpe (leopard society) meeting house. Photo – G.I Jones

The Igbo people of Nigeria love their culture, family, and ancestors. A big part of this is their ancestral halls, called names like Obu, Obi, Ibaa, Obiri, and Ovu in different Igbo areas. These halls are special places where people honour ancestors, have meetings, and celebrate traditions. This article explains why these halls are important, their names and shows how they vary across Igbo communities.

01

Why Ancestral Halls Matter

Ancestral halls are not just buildings. They are holy places where Igbo people believe they can talk to their ancestors, who guide and protect them. The halls often have shrines with items like the *ọfọ* (a stick that shows power) or *ikenga* (a carved figure for strength).

People use them for events like weddings, settling family fights, or celebrating festivals like the New Yam Festival (Iri Ji).



Community elders conducting the ceremonial cutting of the new yam, a central ritual in the Iri Ji Mbaise Festival.
Photo Credit: Steemit – The Iri-Ji Mbaise Festival

The halls also show who's in charge. They are usually tied to the family or community leader, called the *Ọkpara* or *Diokpa*, who keeps traditions alive and leads meetings. The halls are made with simple things like mud, wood, or thatch, but they have symbols that show Igbo beliefs.

The House Plan of Umera Ozi's Ancestral Hall by Frank Mbanefo, a native of Onitsha and an architect.

02

Different Names for Ancestral Halls

Igbo communities are different from each other, and each area has its own name for these halls. A well-known list of these names shows how diverse Igbo culture is. Here's a simple breakdown of each name and where it's used, with extra details for clarity:

- OBU: Igbo Izugbe
- Obi: Isuama
- Obi: Nnewi, Aguata, Anaocha
- Ibaa: Onitsha, Ogbaru
- Obu: Ohafia, Eberiba
- Obu Nkoro: Awgu,

- Obu: Awka
- Obu: Ndoki
- Obiri: Ikwerre, Asa
- Obiri, Obokoro: Echie
- Obiri, Ibari – Uratta (Owerri)
- Obiri-ama, Obokoro – Mban̄, Obowo
- Obiri, Obuma, Obokoro – ikeduru
- Ibaa – ihiala
- Ibari, Obuma – Mbaitoli
- Ibari, Ibagwa – Agwa, Ohaoma(Ejemekwuru, Izombe)
- Ibari, Obiri – Ohaji
- Ibaala – Ndokwa
- Obi, Ogwa – Aniocha
- Obu-ogwa – Nsukka-Asadu
- Ovu – Ohuhu(Mbaise)
- Ovu – Ngwa

1. OBU: Igbo Izugbe

- Igbo Izugbe means the shared Igbo culture or language. The Obu is a common name for a hall where people meet, pray to ancestors, or hold events. It's an idea all Igbo people understand.

2. Obi: Isuama, Nnewi, Aguata, Anaocha

- In Isuama, the Obi is the family leader's home, used for decisions and ancestor prayers.
- In Nnewi, a busy trading area, the Obi is a fancy place for family meetings and fixing problems. It shows Nnewi's pride.
- In Aguata and Anaocha, the Obi is similar, but in Anaocha, it might have carvings linked to the old Benin Kingdom.



An Igbo Ancestral Hall

3. **Ịbaa: Onitsha, Ogbaru, Ihiala**

- In Onitsha and Ogbaru, the Ịbaa is a special spot in the family compound for praying to ancestors. Onitsha, a big trading city, uses it for blessings during events like births.
- In Ihiala, the Ịbaa is a private place for elders to do rituals, keeping family traditions strong.



The Ancestral House (Iba) in Onitsha, 1960-1961. Photo – A Mighty Tree

4. Obu: Ohafia, Ẹbịrịba, Awka, Ndoki, Awgu (Obu Nkoro)

- In Ohafia, the Obu is a main place for the chief (Ezieogo) and gets decorated for festivals, like war dances.
- In Ẹbịrịba, the Obu is for meetings and cultural events, showing the area's unique style.
- In Awka, known for blacksmiths, the Obu is for prayers and community choices.
- In Ndoki, the Obu is for honoring ancestors and gatherings, tied to their river life.
- In Awgu, Obu Nkoro is a special hall, maybe for local traditions.

5. Obiri: Ikwerre, Asa, Uratta (Owerri), Ohaji

- In Ikwerre and Asa, the Obiri is a community hall where elders talk about important things. Ikwerre has its own Igbo style.
- In Uratta (Owerri), the Obiri (with Ịbarị) is for prayers and

community events, showing Owerri's lively culture.

- In Ohaji, the Obiri (with Ibari) is for rituals and farming gatherings.

6. Obiri, Obokoro: Echie

- In Echie, Obiri is for spiritual events, and Obokoro is a bigger meeting place for the community, showing Echie's special ways.

7. Obiri-ama, Obokoro: Mbanọ, Obowo

- In Mbanọ and Obowo, Obiri-ama means "community hall," and Obokoro is for gatherings and prayers, showing how close these areas are.

8. Obiri, Obuma, Obokoro: Ikeduru

- In Ikeduru, Obiri, Obuma, and Obokoro are different halls. Obuma might be a private shrine, and Obokoro is for public meetings, showing Ikeduru's complex traditions.

9. Ibari, Obuma: Mbaitoli

- In Mbaitoli, Ibari is for spiritual rituals, and Obuma is for community meetings, helping keep the area organized.

10. Ibari, Ibagwa: Agwa, Ohaoma (Ejemekwuru, Izombe)

- In Agwa and Ohaoma (Ejemekwuru, Izombe), Ibari and Ibagwa are simple halls with palm fronds and clay altars, showing their farming life and humble beliefs.

11. Ibaala: Ndokwa

- In Ndokwa, the Ibaala is a hall for honouring ancestors during festivals, showing Ndokwa's unique Igbo identity.



The Iba of Ezekwezili (Jerry Ugbo), the designated Senior Priest (diokpala) of Umu-Anyo. Photo – A Mighty Tree

12. Obi, Ọgwa: Anịocha

- In Anịocha, the Obi is the family leader's home, and Ọgwa is an open space for events like masquerade dances.

A typical Obi of the Mbari Igbo people in the Museum of Traditional Nigerian Architecture. Photo – Research Gate

13. Obu-ọgwa: Nsukka-Asadu

- In Nsukka-Asadu, the Obu-ọgwa is an open courtyard for masquerades, stories, and meetings, showing Nsukka's love for storytelling.

14. Ovu: Ọhụhụ (Mbaise), Ngwa

- In Ọhụhụ (Mbaise), the Ovu is a family shrine for ancestor offerings, important in Mbaise's close families.
- In Ngwa, the Ovu is a family meeting place, especially during farming festivals, tied to Ngwa's farming roots.

03

How the Halls Look and What They Mean

Most halls are made with local materials like mud, wood, or thatch, but some now use cement. They have a courtyard for big gatherings, a main room for meetings, and small spaces for shrines.

- Low Doors: People bow to enter, showing respect for ancestors.
- Shrines: Decorated with chalk (nzu), palm fronds, or offerings, showing purity and spiritual ties.
- Carvings: In places like Nnewi or Onitsha, doors might have carvings of animals or stories, keeping family history alive.

Iba Social Religious Seating by Frank Mbanefo.

Challenges and Changes Today

City life, Christianity, and global changes make it hard for ancestral halls to stay the same. Some Igbo people follow Christianity, which can clash with ancestor worship, so halls are sometimes turned into community centres or museums. Igbo people in cities build modern halls that mix old symbols with new designs. Social media helps share Igbo culture and keep it alive.



Obi Onitsha 'Sammy' Okosi I, the first Christian Obi of Onitsha, who became Obi of Onitsha through British colonial and Roman Catholic intervention after the death of Obi Anazonwu in 1899, poses with European-style 'royal' regalia.

Keeping the Halls Alive

Groups like Ohanaeze Ndigbo work to save ancestral halls by writing down their history and fixing them up. Festivals like Iri Ji or masquerade events show how important the halls are. Schools and communities teach kids about these traditions to keep them going.



Logo of the Ohanaeze Ndigbo Organisation

Igbo ancestral halls, whether called Obu, Obi, Ibaa, Obiri, or Ovu, are key places that hold Igbo culture, family, and ancestor connections together. Each name shows the special style of different Igbo areas, but they all have the same goal. Even with modern changes, these halls stay important, thanks to festivals, community work, and efforts to share Igbo culture.



An “Age-Grade” group performs the Oziziani dance in a vibrant parade before the Iba. Photo – A Mighty Tree

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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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