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Igbo Cosmology: *The Principle of Dualism and Balance*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Photo: Ugonachomma Igbo art piece of a man- woman couple, carved to the average person's height. British Museum.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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IGBO COSMOLOGY

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Igbo cosmology is fundamentally based on dualism, the idea that the universe is made up of two opposing yet complementary forces. This duality is often expressed through gender symbolism, where male and female elements exist in a balanced relationship, shaping the structure of life, society, and spirituality.

01

The Philosophy of Balance

The Igbo believe that everything in existence has a counterpart, ensuring equilibrium between forces of nature, human interactions, and the spiritual world. This balance is reflected in various aspects of life:

1. The Mortal and Spirit Realms: The material world (ụwa) coexists with the spirit world (ala mmụọ), where ancestors and deities reside. Life is a constant interaction between these two realms.
2. Gender Complementarity: Men and women have parallel yet distinct roles in Igbo society, evident in their institutions, titles, and organizations. For example:
 - Okenye (elder men) and Oke Ibirị (elder women)
 - Daada (female counterpart) and Deede (male counterpart)
 - Ozo (male title society) and Iyom (female title society)

- Omu (female spiritual and market leader) and Obi (male ruler)
- Sacred and Living Spaces: Just as humans have designated living spaces, nature has its own sacred places, such as forests and groves where spirits are believed to dwell.

02

Healing and Natural Duality

In Igbo medicine and herbalism, the principle of dualism is also present. The saying “nne ahihia n’agwo oke ahihia” means “female plants cure male plants” and vice versa. This reflects the belief that remedies are found in complementary opposites, ensuring balance in health and well-being.

03

Symbolism in Igbo Art

A striking example of this dualistic philosophy is found in Igbo art, such as the Ugonachomma sculpture, a representation of a man and woman standing together, carved to the average human height. This symbolizes unity, harmony, and the inseparable bond between masculine and feminine energies.

Igbo cosmology teaches that the universe thrives on balance and complementarity. Whether in social structures, spirituality, nature, or medicine, the principle of dualism remains central to Igbo thought. It is a worldview that promotes harmony, coexistence, and the continuous interaction between opposites to maintain order in the universe.

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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 explore 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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