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Igbo Knowledge of Stars and Seasons

By Idenze Ezeme

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The Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria have a rich culture that includes a deep understanding of the stars and the changing seasons. Centuries earlier, the Igbo depended on observations of the celestial world to guide their agricultural activities, spiritual rituals, and social life. This article looks at Igbo knowledge of stars and seasons, how this traditional knowledge shaped their way of life and the respect it still gets today from traditional knowledge systems.

The Igbo are mainly farmers and have always depended on the seasons for their survival. This reliance made the star and seasonal knowledge essential. Understanding the changing positions of stars and other celestial bodies in the sky was significant for the Igbo. Prediction of the beginning of the seasons, planning of farming activities, and highlighting relevant cultural events were all related to these observations. These observations were often linked to stories, myths, and spiritual beliefs that explained and gave meaning to events in the sky (Onwuejeogwu, 1981).

The Igbo people identified certain stars and groups of stars that marked the start of a new season. For example, when certain stars appeared in the sky it was time to begin planting; other star patterns announced that harvest would soon be at hand.

Special significance was accorded to the Pleiades constellation, which the Igbo called Ama Ndu. Seeing it in the early morning sky was usually a sign that the rainy season was near. This time was very important for planting crops like yam, which is a main and culturally important food for the Igbo people.

Another important constellation is that of Orion's Belt, which in Igbo is referred to as Oso Di Ndu. The position of the stars showed when the dry season started, which was the time for clearing land together and going hunting. Studying the stars can also help create or share stories about great warriors and heroes in the culture.

The North Star was very important for finding directions, and Igbo called it Otu Ndu. It stayed in one spot in the sky, helping travelers and farmers find their way during night activities. It was not just useful but also symbolized stability and guidance in Igbo stories and beliefs.

Seasons and Agricultural Practices

Traditionally, the Igbo divided the year into two major seasons: the rainy season Udumiri, and the dry season Uguru. These were further divided into smaller cycles that guided agricultural and social activities respectively.

The rainy season, from April to October, was when crops like yam, cassava, and maize were planted. This involved planting at the right time of the year, as planting too early or too late could reduce the yields. This was based on observations made from star settings and changes in wind patterns that told them the right time to plant crops.



The rainy season is very important to the Igbos because it is important for their farming. Photo: Alfred Marshall



A Bountiful harvest today by a farmer in Ngor Okpala, Imo State. Photo: We Are Igbos

The dry season, beginning in November and extending up to March, was a period of harvest, storage, and preparing the fields for their next cycle. During this time, the Igbo people give thanks for the

harvest and ask for blessings in the coming year through community festivals and rituals. The appearance of constellations helps mark these seasons.

Igbo spiritual life is soaked in knowledge of the stars. The priests and diviners, mostly engaged in studying celestial patterns, were in high demand for interpreting the stars and guiding their community on what to do. Rituals were performed to honor the gods linked to stars and seasons, making sure the physical and spiritual worlds stayed in balance.

For instance, one of the big cultural events in their calendar, the New Yam Festival, was fixed according to the appearance of particular stars. The New Yam Festival marked the end of a particular harvest and the commencement of a new agricultural cycle. It is a time of renewal and thanksgiving.

Although modern technology has changed farming practices, the Igbo traditional knowledge of stars and seasons is still important. It is a source of cultural pride and reminds us of the close connection between humans and nature. It's important to document and preserve this knowledge because it offers valuable lessons on sustainable living and indigenous science.

Researchers and educators are now mixing Igbo astronomy into academic curricula, emphasizing its scientific validity and cultural significance. This approach promotes respect for indigenous knowledge systems and highlights their contribution to global science (Umeasiegbu, 1992).

- Onwuejeogwu, M. A. (1981). *An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom & Hegemony*. Ethnographica.
- Umeasiegbu, R. (1992). *The Way We Lived: Igbo Customs and Stories*. Heinemann Educational Books.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR****Idenze Ezeme**

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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