



# Ozi Ikòrò

AFRICAN HISTORY · CULTURE · INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

CULTURAL HERITAGE

## Spiritual Hygiene In Igbo Spirituality

By Idenze Ezeme

Ozikoro.com · Cultural Heritage · 4 min read

FEATURE  
IMAGE

**Nzu (white chalk), Oji (Kola Nut),  
Edo, Ose-Oji (Alligator Pepper)**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

Ozi Ikòrò

SPIRITUAL HYGIENE IN IGBO SPIRITUALITY

# Spiritual Hygiene In Igbo Spirituality

*By Idenze Ezeme · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com*

Chief Mgbeze of Okpanam, photographed by Northcote Thomas in 1912 after his title-taking ceremony. He holds a pair of alo staffs and wears the eriri ukwu on his ankles. Mgbeze is painted with chalk to symbolize purity and communion with the ancestors.

**I**gbo people believe in the spiritual and physical sides of life. In their traditional religion, Odinani, they believe that everything that happens in the human world, Uwa Mmadu, comes from the spirit world, Alammuo. The concepts of pollution and purification are essential in Odinani since they affect both the spiritual and physical parts of life.

In Igbo spirituality, people believe that pollution can hurt the spirit

and purification can make it clean. Individuals and their communities are believed to have a spiritual side, which implies that just like they can be hurt physically, they can equally feel spiritual harm.

Spiritual hygiene is the care of one's spiritual health. Just like we clean our bodies by bathing and brushing our teeth, we have to take care of our spiritual health to live a balanced life filled with happiness. In Odinani, physical and spiritual hygiene work together.

An Igbo proverb says, "Otu mmadu otu mmuo," meaning literally, "A person is both human and spirit." The proverb shows the belief that every person has a physical body and a spiritual part and that these two parts are very close. In Igbo spirituality, the mmuo is considered the source of a person's life energy and is usually associated with ancestors and other spiritual beings.

The saying highlights the importance of understanding and respecting the spiritual side of human life and the connection of everything in the universe. It reminds us that man is not different from nature but strongly connected with it. Spiritual hygiene is as important as physical hygiene. Just like physical cleanliness prevents diseases, spiritual cleanliness helps stop spiritual pollution, which may block personal growth.

That includes keeping a clean spirit in daily life and doing cleansing rituals, whether small or big.

You cannot talk about spiritual cleanliness in Igbo beliefs without mentioning "Nso." This word has bad and good meanings. In the bad sense, Nso means "to stay away from" or "not allowed." In the good sense, it means "holy" or "sacred." So, Nso can be seen as a "holy rule" or "holy restriction." In Igbo beliefs, Nso is linked to some sacred actions or practices. Breaking an Nso is believed to cause spiritual pollution, which can harm an individual or even the whole community. That is why spiritual cleanliness is essential in Odinani as a way of life.

## *Aja and Its Role in Keeping Spiritual Cleanliness*

Another very central concept in Igbo spirituality is “Aja.” In Odinani, Aja points to the idea of making sacrifices to spirits with the function of balancing and harmony between the spiritual and physical worlds. Those sacrifices will appease them; on the other side, they could give protection. Among them are foodstuffs, animals, and anything offered in a sacred place at some point during a festival.

An Igbo proverb best describes Aja’s wisdom: “Ka ana achu aja, ka ikpe n’amah ndi mmuo,” which means “Let’s keep sacrificing, let the spirits take the blame.” The implication is that with sacrifice, man is saved from evil results because the spirits are responsible for anything that goes wrong. This means that the Igbos believe everything in the universe is interrelated. They feel it is proper to be on good terms with the spiritual world. Aja also implies a way of purifying from the state of spiritual pollution by getting assistance from the ancestors and spirits to keep it under control.

There are so many parts of Aja that demonstrate its importance for spiritual purity in Odinani.

These include Ichu Aja, meaning to get rid of impurities; Ichu Noonu or Ikpochi Onunu, closing an open grave; Ichu Ochuchu, getting rid of a bad type of impurity; and Obo di n’ana, spirit revenge on land, among others.

These practices show that spiritual cleanliness is important in the Igbo way of life. Another important idea in Igbo spirituality about spiritual cleanliness is “Ikpu Alu,” which means “to remove something bad.” Ikpu Alu, like all other forms of spiritual cleansing in Odinani, may be done for a person or a group. This is used in the worst cases of spiritual dirt requiring this special kind of cleansing.

Igbo spirituality practices are simple yet beautiful. Odinani followers maintain spiritual cleanliness daily by washing their legs, faces, mouths, hands, or whole bodies before performing rituals such as Igo

Ofo or Igo Mmuo to connect with the world of spirits and using other traditional items such as Ose oji (alligator pepper), mmanụ nkwu (palm oil), nnu (salt), Akwa (egg), etc. to ward off “Uchu.” Uchu refers to bad energies—an evil that creates spiritual pollution.

- Achebe, C. (1958). Things fall apart. Heinemann.
- Northcote Thomas Archive. (1912). Photographic and ethnographic documentation of Igbo title-taking ceremonies and cultural practices.
- Isichei, E. (1977). A history of the Igbo people. Macmillan.
- Ogbukagu, I. K. (2008). Traditional Igbo beliefs and practices: A comprehensive guide. Onitsha Press.
- Talbot, P. A. (1926). The peoples of Southern Nigeria. Oxford University Press.

#### 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.



# Ozi Ikòrò

*History worth reading.*

African history · culture · indigenous knowledge

---