

## **Concept of Agwụ in Igbo Traditional Ritual Enactment**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

The concept of Agwụ is enmeshed in controversy in contemporary Igbo society. As a result, some people equate “Agwụ” with the demon or devil in the Christian Bible while others see it as a good thing that can happen in one’s life. A clear understanding of the concepts of Agwụ and its ritual enactments cannot be achieved without a discourse on the main elements of African traditional religion. These are: belief in Supreme Being, belief in Divinities, the unit of ancestors and the belief in magic and traditional occultism. Knowledge of these beliefs help in situating “Agwụ” and its relationships with the Supreme Being and man. The study highlights the structure of “Agwụ” and its personnel leading to an explication of the actual performance of “Agwụ” ritual. Here, the objects for the ritual were named. Finally, an attempt was made at evaluating “Agwụ” as a concept. The study found that the concept of “Agwụ” is real amongst the Igbo. It is therefore, suggested that any case of possession by “Agwụ” should be resolved for a better society

### **Introduction**

Igbo traditional society is one of those societies that surround themselves with many belief systems. One of those belief systems is the concept of “Agwụ”. Unfortunately this belief in the existence of “Agwụ” seems to cause confusion in an individual, lineage, towns and entire society’s life.

To some people, the concept of “Agwụ” has some equivalence to the Christian concept of demon or devil. Such people argue that since in the Christian perspective, demon is regarded as an evil spirit, “Agwụ” in the traditional Igbo society is equally termed a bad spirit. They further contend that the two have some relationships. An evaluation of some existing literature on the concept of “Agwụ” would illuminate our discourse here. According to Ogbalu (1981:54):

“Agwụ” is the god of medicine and divination. He is worshipped by every person during a person’s “Iru Agwụ” ceremony particularly males, if they are to behave well and have common sense. To him is assigned the responsibility for the behaviour of men who act as if they have no common sense.

In this case, Ogbalu tries to portray “Agwụ” as the deity or spirit which has power or control over the behaviour of every individual. This, in Igbo, complies with the general belief that anybody in this space has his or her own “Agwụ” spirit. This “Agwụ” spirit in the sense that it has control over the behaviour of man, connotes the conception of the devil as possessing super human powers and can influence men. It becomes analogous to the demon as a super natural being of nature, an intermediary (or barrier) between God and man. An instance could be seen in the gospel of Luke 8:27-33 where a man is tormented by demons and they were cast by the power of Jesus Christ Thus, the solution or the means to normality of one who is possessed by demon, is prayer. But in the case of “Agwụ” in the traditional Igbo society, it is through “Ilu Agwụ” ritual. The preceding statement of Ogbalu is similar to the postulation of Ndupu (1972:12) who explains that

“Agwụ” is to pagans what the guardian angel is to the Christians. It is supposed to be owned by both male and female person alike. In fact, it is the first god which people worship when they are born into this world.

Here Ndupu tries to link “Agwụ” with the guardian angels. In this case, “Agwụ” has some relationship with God or ‘chi’ (in the Igbo concept) and both contribute to man’s coming into the world. But with the concept of guardian angel as the director of man’s action towards good, it could be seen that “Agwụ” falls short of this attribute most of the times. It inflicts people with certain calamities and for that, should not be grouped under the category of the guardian angels rather under those of the apostate angels whose leader is Satan.

The connection made between “Agwụ” and ‘chi’ by Ndupu, can equally be viewed in that aspect of Igbo belief, as intermediaries between God and man. Thus Mbiti (1975:65) expatiates as follow:

It is sometimes also believed that between God and human beings, there are other beings, who populate the universe. These are the spirits. There are many types of spirits. God is their creator first as he is the creator of all human beings. The spirits have a status between God and man, and are not identical with either...and some of them may be used to do certain things.

This shows that “Agwụ” is one of God’s creatures. It could then be said that God uses “Agwụ” to do certain things.

Furthermore, Ogbalu (1981:54) maintains that every medicine man or a diviner has his own “Agwụ” usually represented in carved wooden form to which he offers anything presented before taking or tasting it. Here again, he tries to explain the fact that like all other deities, “Agwụ” is equally being symbolized so as to bring its concept to the reach of the people. In essence,

Agwụ” chooses his own priests, prophets and all those who become afa men or medicine men. These men (and women in few places) receive their power from him. They foretell the future through him and he reveals herbs and roots and other medicines to the men he has chosen (Ogbalu, 1981:55).

This is true because there have been so many cases where people exhibit some abnormal behaviour. When such an abnormal behaviour is noticed, it is normally taken to a diviner. If in the process, Agwụ is found to be the cause of that abnormal behaviour, ‘Ilu Agwụ’ is performed for the person otherwise the situation might get out of hands. Uchendu (1965:98) states that:

Agwụ” is a most proselytizing spirit always in need of servitors. It is very envious of people’s wealth, which paradoxically, it claims to bring. To serve “Agwụ” is to enter the long rites of ordination which may eventually make one a ‘dibia’. Not many people have the wealth and patience to attain this height. Some stop after the initial rites or at any stage of the ordination process. Where they feel they can confidently challenge “Agwụ’s” call to its service is to face a long trial and temptation involving loss of property, loss of children, barrenness, and in many cases are “Agwụ”-psychosomatic syndromes. The effective weapon with which to combat “Ara Agwụ” is “igwo aja”-rites of priestly ordination.

The above implies that one should abide strictly to the rituals of “Agwụ” as far as he is being possessed by him until all the rituals are performed. If one violates this, he will then face the consequences alone. Consequently, some people equate “Agwụ” with Christian demon or devil.

In his own opinion, Okonkwo (1974:143) defines “Agwụ” as “an ambivalent spirit, a god of mischief and ingenuity”. He goes further to say that “Agwụ” is a deity found amongst kinsmen throughout Igbo land”. Going further, Okonkwo explains that:

Some do have good Agwụ, the Agwụ which makes one to produce effective medicine is the one which is strictly believed by the Igbo. Infact, there are doctors of whom the Igbo believe that the god (Agwụ) for diagnosing, is imbibed in their kinsmen. May be their ancestors were medicine men (Okonkwo,1974:143).

In Igbo cosmology, “Agwụ” shrine is common. Okonkwo says that such shrines are characterized “mainly of small bush found around homes”. He also observes that the “Agwụ” spirit exerts much control over its devotees. Thus:

*In the past, the dibia (medicine men) do not take much amount in Igbo land in that it is only small amount that “Agwụ” require them to receive. If they receive more than what “Agwụ” demands, it will lead them to madness (Okonkwo, 1974:143).*

To avoid the wrath of Agwụ, one has to placate it. Obienyem (1979:13) makes it clear that “Agwụ” imposes some abnormal or mischievous character on one he possesses such as misplacement of acquired materials (especially money), madness or deviant behaviour. Arinze (1970:64) contends that “Agwụ is one of the spirits whose intentions are so doubtful that it is better judged for women and children to keep away. This spirit can be capricious to the extreme, who can also enrich his devotee”. Okonkwo’s definition of “Agwụ” as the god of mischief and ingenuity is therefore in line with Arinze’s view of “Agwụ” as capricious and ambivalent spirit capable of good and evil acts.

In the words of Ilogu (1974:74), “Agwụ” is seen as “god of divination and herbal medicine that belongs to one of the innumerable minor deities. Furthermore, Agwụ is seen as a personal god. It has shrines where people go to offer prayers and sacrifices.

The suggestion that it is only males that are possessed by “Agwụ”, deviates a bit from the idea that “Agwụ” is one of the evil spirits or devils. This is so because those spirits do not possess only males. But in the general view of the Igbo, “Agwụ” possesses both men and women. It has been observed that “Agwụ” has control over every being even over the medicine men and diviners. But, how is “Agwụ” involved in the act of divination and herbal medicine? In this case Metuh (1985:162) says:

*Information tells me that the gift of divination is inherited from one’s matriclan if one is possessed by “Agwụ”; if invariably it turns out that there has been a history of divination practice in one’s matriclan, hence the Igbo say, “ndi na-eme Agwụ ka Agwụ na-akpa”. It is only those who minister to “Agwụ” that are possessed by “Agwụ”.*

This affirms that it is only “Agwụ” who calls one to the office of divination and herbal medicine. It equally guides them in the act. Arinze (1970:64) asserts in details as follows:

The clearest and indispensable sign of vocation to be a “dibia” is possession by the spirit of “Agwụ” who is special spirit of (ndi dibia) healers. “Agwụ” is the patron spirit of divination and diviners. It is called “mmuo mkpasa” spirit of confusion, because one of signs of vocation to be a “dibia” is a sort of madness called “ara Agwụ”...due to possession by the deity. The rite of iru-Agwụ or “ikpuAgwụ (tying up or covering up Agwụ), should not only bring the victim back to normality but should also harness the power of “Agwụ” in him for the practice of divination or healing with herbs if he is a medicine man.

He adds that “it is only after this rite that the candidate begins his training. This does not conflict with the fact that the office of divination is largely hereditary” (Arinze, 1970:64). In support of the call process among the Igbo, Basden (1982:54) says:

The “dibia Agwụ”, medicine-man like the diviners is called on his profession by “Agwụ” the patron spirit of diviners and medicine men. Like the diviner, the profession is inherited through one’s matriclan. Most “dibia” succeed their father because a medicine practice is a source of wealth, and knowledge of medicine is jealously a secret. Ranks of the “dibia” are partly recruited from new born boys in whom the “dibia” declares he recognizes features or characteristics resembling those of a deceased fellow-craftsman.

This assertion is true in the Igbo cosmology, as the Igbo believe in reincarnation and that it is “Agwụ” who calls the “dibia” to their profession. Onwuejeogwu (1982:34) shares the view that ‘Agwụ

are ambivalent in their character-they reveal the secrets of the invisible and visible world to traditional medicine men called 'dibia, in the mystical codes of divination called 'afa' and are also responsible for mental illness". Hence all deities manifest their will through this deity called Agwụ, that determines the fall of the diviners beads in afa divination...".

In their contribution, OsuAgwụ, et al (1981) state that when a worshipper of any deity is constantly being confronted with many awful things, he will meet an afa man (a diviner) to divine for him the cause of all those calamities.

From all that had been discussed, it could be inferred that all the literature reviewed are saying the same thing in one way or the other. They discuss what "Agwụ" is, the characteristics of "Agwụ", what "Agwụ" is being worshipped with, how it influences people and what to do when one is possessed by "Agwụ". "Agwụ", though seen from the discussion to be a minor deity, is very troublesome and renowned in Igbo land. In this respect, it shares some elements of similarities with the characters of Esu and Iskoki in the Yoruba and Hausa cosmologies respectively. "Agwụ" is seen to have control over people's behaviour. Though it is troublesome, it is equally benevolent if well treated and this is when one yields to his call in the performance of "Ilu Agwụ" ritual.

### **Agwụ and its Position in Igbo Traditional Religion:**

In Igbo philosophy, like most African cultures, God is Supreme Being and apart from Him are other supernatural beings. These beliefs are main elements that make up the African traditional religion. Such elements are divided into component parts and each has its entailment. The under listed are the divisions:

1. Belief in Supreme Being
2. Belief in Divinities
3. The unit of ancestors and
4. The belief in magic and traditional occultism

In this hierarchy, "Agwụ" falls within the second category that is the Divinities.

The divinities are regarded as messengers of God who assist Him in the administration of the universe. This stems from the African belief that God partitioned the universe into different departments and each department has a divinity that looks after it. Each of the divinities equally works in conformity to God's will and not on his own. All these divinities have different names by which they are known in each ethnic group. For example among the Bantu, they are generally known as "muzimu", to the Yoruba they are called "Orisa", got from Orise which means the source or origin. The Igbo know them as "chi". These show that the divinities are dependent on the Supreme Being for their existence.

The Igbo people's view about "Agwụ" is channeled to almost one direction, that is, the view that it has control over people's behaviours and may be benevolent or malevolent to people in one aspect or the other. To "Agwụ" has been ascribed the power of medicine, divination, mischief and creativity. It is also believed that, "Agwụ" is the god that deprives one of the ability to get money or of doing something normal. In this situation, one can say that "Agwụ" is the spirit that sometimes disturbs man with different catastrophe. As a divinity, "Agwụ" in its relationship, is one of the messengers of God who work or assist Him in the government of the universe. This is the belief of the Igbo traditional society. But one may ask: how is it a messenger of God where it brings about calamities to man?. Does it mean that God is malevolent? The Igbo traditional belief for they contend that anyone who does evil must receive punishment. God uses the lesser beings to afflict the evil doer. But in the case of an upright man who is afflicted by "Agwụ", what should one say? One thing that is clear here, is that "Agwụ" is a creature of God. But in his own opinion, Okafor (1986:32) groups "Agwụ" under the categories of the apostate angels of God of whom Satan, the prince of demons is its controller. He contends that "Agwụ" inhabits man just as the demons in the Christian concept do. Okafor further states that "all these will put the person in a state of disequilibrium" and this will be the case until "Agwụ" is placated in the "Iru Agwụ" ritual. However, Okafor appears to overlook the fact that the said Christian demon or devil, with which he groups the traditional Igbo "Agwụ", does not in any way do anything good to its victim except

destruction. But for that of “Agwụ”, it sometimes brings fortune to the possessed especially when the person recognizes him and serves him. One can understand “Agwụ” as a forgotten mediator between man and God who then struggles for recognition, thereby causing problems or bringing calamities into the life of the possessed until it is appeased.

One can infer that “Agwụ” as a supernatural being, is beyond human control and it comes with different kinds of catastrophe to inhabit man. Man, (i.e. the Igbo in this case) in order to free himself from such catastrophe being caused by “Agwụ”, seeks a means of placating or appeasing the being. And so the idea of “ilu Agwụ” ritual performance came into being. It is a curative ritual enactment which does not involve the use of medicine per se. The performance venue is mainly at the “Agwụ” shrine using symbolic paraphernalia. In any religious practice there must be worship, sacrifice and symbols representing the being that is worshipped. This also is applicable to “Agwụ”. It has its symbols which are found in its shrine where “ilu Agwụ” ritual is performed. In some places, “Agwụ” is represented only with carved objects like dogs. But its shrine is mainly a forest or small bush and there grows some trees like “Ogilisi”, “Ogbu” and others. Sometimes, one is marvelled by the germination of “Akpu” (silk cotton) tree at the position of the shrine few years or months after the “ilu Agwụ” rites. When this happens, it signifies greatness for the possessed and family, for “Aro” or “Aro Agwụ” (Oke Agwụ i.e. male Agwụ) is said to have possessed the devotee.

“Agwụ” as a deity or lesser god is indeed beyond human knowledge. Certain abnormalities which an Igbo man cannot avoid are attributed to “Agwụ”. For instance, one who is fond of not knowing how he or she uses his or her money or one who gets brain-fag without any observable cause, are attributed to “Agwụ”. When such inconsistency is noticed constantly in one’s behaviour, a way for normalcy is sought. In this, some inquiries are made through divination, and then rituals and other ceremonies are performed. Those rituals that are observed in the shrines of “Agwụ” to “free” the possessed are called “ilu Agwụ” (welcoming and giving Agwụ a place in one’s life and within the person’s homestead). This is to appease the “Agwụ” (god) to forgive that person. The ritual performance forces “Agwụ” to cease his malevolence and become benevolent by shedding its munificence on the devotee.

“Agwụ” comes to people in different ways. Sometimes, it comes through liquidation in one’s business, or one falling from a tree or any other dimension. Some medicine men in many parts of Igbo land regard “Agwụ” as the deity that protects their medicine or wealth and they do ask him to collect their money from their debtors. To some people, “Agwụ” is not destructive in that one good turn deserves another. Compliance to the demands of “Agwụ” brings good fortune. That is why any “dibia” who seeks the protection and guidance of “Agwụ” should first of all comply to its demands. The demands of “Agwụ” of which refusal brings misfortunes to people are:

1. If one is appointed by the ancestral spirits to serve as medicine man
2. The performance of “ilu Agwụ” ritual as when due.

### **Agwụ Personnel and Shrine:**

All deities have their attendants who are called priests. “Agwụ” as a deity is not an exception. The word priest therefore suggests one who serves a particular deity or god. This is to say that he meditates between the gods and men. Parrinder (1954:100) does say that “the word priest is properly used for an official servant of a god”. It can be deduced from this that the word priest serves both Christians and the traditionalists. Metuh (1985:54) categorizes these priests into four groups in Igbo land. They are: “Okpala” (family head) who is the spirit of the ancestral shrines, The “Isi mmuo” – head of spirit cults who take charge of the shrines, The “Eze ala”- the chief priest of Ala shrine, and finally there is, “Eze Nri”-the priest king of Nri town who is as it were the high priest of the cult of Ala for a large part of Igbo land. Arinze (1970:155) has it that:

a priest would be addressed as isi... plus the name of the deity or ‘Arusi’, whose shrine he is in charge of. There are ‘Isi Edo’, ‘Isi Amadioha’ – priest of ‘Amadioha’, ‘Isi ala’ – priest of ‘Ala’. In this case the ‘Agwụ’ priest (onye isi Agwụ) should also be called ‘Isi Agwụ’-priest of ‘Agwụ’.

The “Agwụ” priests see to every sacrifice the villagers want to offer to “Agwụ” or the “Ilu Agwụ” ritual performance. It is their sole responsibility to serve their kinsmen by administering the needed sacrifices for them whenever it is required. On this, Ray (1976:12) says that “ritual specialists, priests, prophets, diviners and kings are the servants of the community and their roles is to convey the messages of ‘Agwụ’ to the people”.

The “Agwụ” personnel, according to an informant, is not given training by any human being, rather, it is “Agwụ” itself who trains or teaches them in the dream how to perform the task. Nobody in the family can claim the day of its emanation. But if the person is called to be a “dibia” (medicine man), that would be a different case.

However, any male born in the family of “Agwụ” devotees learns much pertaining to “Agwụ”. This is done whenever the ritual is being performed by “Agwụ” personnel. Hence whenever the priest goes to perform any ritual, the males in such a family accompany him. Every male born in such a family will not essentially be an “Agwụ” priest but what it meant is that in such a family, there is every likelihood that the males there are allowed to observe and participate in the ritual performance because, nobody knows who might be chosen by “Agwụ” next.

The gods or deities and their attendants are highly regarded in Igbo traditional society. This is as a result of their belief that the gods are sacred and should be guarding and guiding their priests or attendants from committing any crime. Mbiti (1975:156) stresses on this when he says that “it is possible that diviners have knowledge of how to use some of the unforeseen forces of the universe and good imagination”. The most important function of “Agwụ” personnel is the performance of ritual or sacrifice which anybody wants to offer to “Agwụ”. The client will know whether to perform the sacrifice, where, how and what should be used for that, after consulting a diviner.

Like all other deities, “Agwụ” has its shrine. Any ritual for this deity must be done in its shrine. Trees like “Abosi, Ogbu, Oha and or Ogilisi” are used for delineating the Agwụ shrine. Ogbalu (1982: 56) says that:

*Some plants are used in offering worships to the idols e.g. Ogirisi, Ogbu, Ogirisi is particularly very important, all Okpesi are made from it, many idols including Ikenga are carved from it and pieces of it are placed in front of idols before sacrifices are offered to them.*

The plants used for the shrines differ according to location. Some use two or more, others use as many as they like. They are regarded sacred and entry into the shrine is restricted. Nobody dares tamper with any of the contents therein. Mbiti (1975:22) contends that “they regard such places as holy and sacred places where people meet with God”. The primary or early stage of the structure of the shrine differs from that of later. In the first instance, the shrine is constructed with only those afore-mentioned plants which should be cut into eight pieces. These pieces of plants cut are usually tied round with white clothes. But one significant event in the structure is the later germination of “Akpu” tree or Iroko tree within the precincts of the shrine which signifies greatness to the owner. Later, for the fact that those plants are lively, they grow into big trees which will encompass the shrines and make the structure bushy. This is why sometimes, when there is ceremony or ritual to be performed there, people would be asked to tidy up the shrine.

### **Conclusion:**

The “ilu Agwụ” ritual enactment is that performed for one who is being influenced by “Agwụ” so that he would be free from the embarrassment of “Agwụ”. When any abnormal behaviour is noticed in a person, his kinsmen would take him to a diviner who divines the will of the gods and makes it known to the people. The person who came to the diviner will then know what to do. Ogbalu (1981:72) shares this view by saying that “some worship idols in time of sickness. They go to diviners and the diviners assign them sacrifices”. It is the “Agwụ” personnel (EzeAgwụ or Onyeisi Agwụ) who is responsible for “Ilu Agwụ” ritual. It is his duty to collect all that is marked for the ritual performance. The following

according to informants, are used for the ritual: Eight pieces of yam, a chick, eight pieces of coins, round dry fish (Mgbakolu azu), salt, bottle of palm oil, small earthen pot and or plate and a cock.

When these are complete and placed in "Ukpa"(rectangular basket in front of the "Ogilisi" trees already positioned on the ground, some incarnations would be made by the "Agwụ" priest (being the officiating minister) while preparing some concoction which is eventually put inside the small earthen plate and placed at where one should call the seat of the "Agwụ". This is believed to be the spirit of the invoked deity from the maternal home of the possessed. Having done the above, the fowl (cock) and all that are brought for the ritual, would be slaughtered and cooked. Normally the sacrificial food is placed on "Ogilisi" leaves laid on the ground which the children around have to share among themselves while the aged, would eat the bigger part not placed on the leaves.

From the foregoing discourse, it could be deduced that the "Agwụ" concept is very strong in Igbo traditional society. But the question today is whether there is any reality in this concept. Responses to this question should be both positive and negative. It is positive in the sense that traditionalists maintain strongly that the concept of "Agwụ" is real. It could be equally interpreted negatively in the Christian and modern view. But whatever way one might approach one's responses; it could be wise for the Igbo people to re-awaken the belief in the existence of "Agwụ" in order to find answers to certain socio-political trends prevalent in their domains. This indeed, should be pursued immediately if the Igbo should solve the seeming political madness among its people and find their feet in the political entity called Nigeria. This is because everything that happens has a cause. The crucial question being posed by politicians, social commentators and moralists is: Why should a right thinking person allow himself or herself to be used as an object of disintegration among his or her people? The answer may be in the concept of "Agwụ" and his characteristic possession.

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