

## Igbo History and Culture

(adapted from <http://www.monge.net/thingsfallapart/>)

### Chi, The Spiritual Double

According to an Igbo proverb, "Nothing can stand alone; there must always be another thing standing beside it." So too, a human being must have some company. Chi is a person's spiritual "double," linking him or her to the ancestors, the unborn, and to Chukwu, the great God that created all the other gods and humankind. While a man who says "yes" may get his chi to agree with him, that same man may find himself in trouble if he goes against a strong "no" emanating from his chi. In the Igbo world-view, chi gets the last word.

### Ani and Agbala

According to Kalu Ogbaa in *Gods, Oracles and Divination*, Ani is the earth goddess in charge of morality; she also controls the fertility of people, animals, and plants and serves as a symbolic womb for the dead before they are reborn. The Igbo, who traditionally were farmers, held Ani in high regard because they depended on her for food. Ani is the daughter of Chukwu, the creator of the world and of all other gods. Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, is the voice or messenger of Ani. Although Agbala is a male, he is strongly associated with the female earth; his name can also mean "woman," and he is served by a priestess. Agbala has an important role in the governing of Umuofia because his pronouncements are considered unquestionable and must be carried out by the clan.

### Mmo: Community of the Living and Dead

The first title taken by a man was also an initiation into mmo, the spirit world in which the ancestors lived. The spirits ruled along with the living men, sometimes revealing themselves through oracles, priests, and the egwugwu. The egwugwu were a select group of men initiated into the spiritual knowledge of the clan. During festivals and ceremonies, men dressed as egwugwu became the spirits or ancestors of the clan. The egwugwu could also function as a council of elders to settle tribal disputes.



### Igbo Titles

Ozo was the title an Igbo man took as soon as his wealth and prestige were great enough to warrant that his voice be attended in communal decision-making. The next title was idemili, with the man taking it called "Ogbuefi" from that point on. Two more titles could also be taken, as well as a very rare fifth title, which carried the connotation of "king." However, this title was ceremonial; a king was never an actual ruler.

### Story Telling in Oral Cultures

African oral tradition is rich in folk tales, myths, riddles, and proverbs. These forms are imaginative, but they also serve religious, social, and educational functions. The Igbo, like other peoples throughout the world, use folk tales and proverbs to instill the clan's morality in their children and to pass on their beliefs about spirituality and the nature of the universe.

### Kola and Chalk

The chalk made of white clay was used by the Igbo in rituals. It symbolizes peace. An Igbo custom was to break a kola nut with a guest. Together, kola and chalk symbolize an intimacy between host and guest. This ritual allows Okoye, in the opening scenes of the novel, to bring up the debt of Okonkwo's father, Unoka, in an atmosphere of good feeling.

### Ezinma the Night Rider

Achebe never explains Chielo's mysterious night ride with Ezinma on her back, but according to Robert Wren in *Achebe's World*, this could have been her way of introducing the family to the idea that the girl had been chosen by Agbala to eventually succeed Chielo as high priestess.

### Iba, the Fever of Malaria

Iba, the sickness that visits Ezinma in Chapter 9, usually refers to the fever that accompanies a malarial attack. Malaria is caused by a parasitic infection of red blood cells. Human beings get the parasite when they are bitten by an infected *Anopheles* mosquito.

### Marriage, Igbo Style

Bride-price helped ensure a marriage's stability. If a man turned out to be a bad husband, his wife could return home and the family could deny him the return of the bride-price. If she left him without a good cause, he could demand the bride-price back. After the bride-price was settled, a second ceremony called uri took place, after which the bride paid a long visit to the groom's family. The isa-ifi ceremony was the formal acceptance of the bride into her husband's family. A girl was normally married at 16.

### What's That You're Wearing?

Achebe describes the egwugwu's body as being one of "smoked raffia." The long, plumelike leaves of the raffia palm were used for tying up plants and making mats, baskets, masks, hats, and even for the costume that Okonkwo wore. The red cam wood tree provided a dye that the Igbo women used in the decorative painting of their bodies, much the way henna is used in the Middle East.

## Colonialism in Igboland

Things Fall Apart is set near the end of the 19th century, at the time when the British colonial authority, missions, and trade had penetrated Igboland (now southeastern Nigeria). The British term for their activities from about 1900 to 1920 was "pacification."

African resistance to pacification was met by the British policy of "collective punishment." No effort was made to identify guilty rebels; instead, a whole village, or even more than one village, would be punished. British soldiers would shoot people and destroy their homes. However, some communities did not resist the colonists and even welcomed them and traded with them.



## Court Messengers

Court Messengers, named kotma by the Igbo, were usually Africans from families of aliens or ex-slaves—people who had no stake in the existing social order. Kotma were employed by the District Commissioner. They were the lowest people on the governmental totem pole, but they still represented colonial authority. It was their job to bring messages, summonses, and warrants from the British courts. The kotma soon took on a police function, bringing people to trial and guarding the prison. Many kotma abused their power. Since the Igbo had no kings, the Commissioner had no way of indirectly imposing his laws on them through native rulers, and so the kotma became an integral part of British colonial rule.

## Religious Righteousness

The Reverend James Smith arrives in Umuofia, fully prepared to slay (kill) the "prophets of Baal." This is a reference to the Book of Kings in the Bible. The Hebrew prophet Elijah tells the prophets of Baal (a nature god) to call on their god and have him show his power. When Baal fails to do so, Elijah has Baal's prophets put to death.

## Missionaries Among the Igbo

Christian Missionaries arrived in Nigeria as early as the 16th century, along with the Portuguese explorers. Their stay was brief, however, since deadly malaria and other tropical diseases made missionary work too dangerous. By the mid-19th century, quinine had been discovered as a malaria remedy, and missionary activities increased. The first wave of missions was established on or near the Niger River.

By the turn of the century, most of the violent opposition to Christianity had subsided or had been stamped out. The Roman Catholic Holy Fathers were the second Christian Missionary group to arrive in West Africa. The earlier group was the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) of the Anglican Church of England.

The missionaries moved further into the Igbo hinterland of southeastern Nigeria, right behind the colonists, as "pacification of the natives" continued.

The missionaries established schools and trained many African converts to teach and preach. One of them was Chinua Achebe's father, who worked for the C.M.S. Achebe's great-grandfather was friendly with the missionaries, and he did not object when his ward and grandson, Isaiah Achebe, became a Christian.

## Outcast from the Clan: The Osu

No one knows the origin of the osu, but Robert Wren points out in *Achebe's World* that they may represent a "living sacrifice" to the gods. That is, instead of being killed they were made to suffer by living as social outcasts. As Achebe tells us, these outcasts were among the early Christian converts. Osu were the lowest class in Igbo society. Above them were slaves (ohu) and the free born (amadi). An osu could never change his or her status. The osu formed their own farming communities and, when they were large enough, even instituted their own title system.

## The Igbo Today

The British ruled Nigeria for less than 60 years (1903-1960), but the colonial legacy was still far reaching. The rules of various tribal peoples were replaced by a version of Western constitutional government over a federation that presently consists of 19 states.

After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, regional politics based on traditional tribes dominated the country. In a military takeover in 1966, many Igbo were killed. In 1967, the Igbo declared their homeland in the southeast a new country – Biafra. They fought a bloody three-year war of independence, which they lost. Since then, the national government has been held alternately by military and civilian leaders. Nigeria continues to struggle with sustaining a successful democracy in a huge country with a population of over 100 million people of many ethnic groups, with different languages, customs, and lifestyles.

