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*Article*

# The Rites and Rituals of Ibe-Ugwu as a Gateway to Womanhood in Igboland; The Ukawu Example

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**Abstract:** This research has its focus on the African Igbo people of Southeast Nigeria. In all the manifestations of culture across the globe, there exist practices which celebrate life circle transitions especially from birth until the termination of human life. One of such practices is the rite of passage. 'Ibe-ugwu' (circumcision) is a rite of passage observed among the Ukawu people of Ebonyi State, Southeast Nigeria. The rites and rituals have their main focus on preparing and equipping the female adolescents of Ukawu (Igbo) community to assume the roles of wives, mothers, and women in the society, ready to make their own contributions towards the development of the community, family and by extension the global community. It is the contention of this work, that the continued neglect of such cultural heritage is one of the major reasons for seeming African Igbo loss of identity, moral decadence and social vices amongst her youths today. The work advocates for a revival of such African Igbo cultural heritage. This research makes use of documented, observation and interview methods of data gathering while deploying the sociological (structural functionalist) approach in its data analysis.

**Keywords:** rites; rituals; gateway; womanhood; igboland

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## Introduction

In every human culture, Igboland inclusive, there exist important practices which celebrate life cycle/transitions, perpetuate community cohension, or transmit traditional values to subsequent generation (Arinze, 2011). These transitions reflect norms of care and behavior based on sex (gender), age, life stage and social class. Many of Igbo cultural practices like 'Ibe-Ugwu' (circumcision) promote social cohesiveness and unity. The practice of rites and rituals of 'Ibe-ugwu' have been observed amongst the traditional Ukawu community over many years, before, during and even after the invasion of African Continent by the white colonialists and their missionary collaborators (Gennep, 2018).

These activities before the present dispensation aided the society in checking human excesses against such anti social vices like masturbation, lesbianism; hysteria and further sustaining homes and marriages. No wonder Afrocentric scholars long devoted extensive interest and attention to the study of such rites of passage like 'Ibe-ugwu' in African cosmology having observed the all important role they play in the sustainance of womanhood, child bearing and by extension a peaceful home (Hird et al, 2012). Despite all the numerous advantages of this African (Igbo) culture, it would appear that its observance is on the decline.

## Theoretical Framework

In support of this research, the theory of sociological (structural functionalist) approach has been adopted. In any given society, there exist institutions which correlate in carrying out their functions for the sustainance, stability and cohesion of the society. According to Levy (1952), the term institution as used here will mean a particular type of normative pattern ('Ibe-ugwu') that affects human action (woman) in terms of social system (womanhood or adulthood). In this sense, the rites and rituals in 'Ibe-ugwu' are institutions or parts which refer to those particular normative patterns: conformity with which is generally to be expected and failure to conform with which is generally met

with the moral and societal indignation of those individuals who are involved in same general social system and who are aware of the failure (Parsons, 1940).

The theory of structural functionalism is anchored on its sociological origins in the works of its founder, Auguste Comte. According to Comte (Poloma, 1979), society was like a living organism. However, it was the British sociologist of the mid-Nineteenth century, Herbert Spencer who discussed specific differences and similarities. Thus, for Spencer, the parts that develop in living bodies and in social bodies each serve a function or purpose. The modern structural functionalism is attributed to the American sociologist, Talcott Parsons who argued that the survival and cohesion of human society rests on the activities and duties societal parts or institutions play (Parsons, 2000, 1). These parts or bodies grow into unlike organs having unlike duties; in the social system like in the living bodies, any change in the part affects the family, informal education, religion and so on, which of course includes the rites of 'Ibe-Ugwu'. The parts are interdependent. The rites and rituals are for the purposes of initiating the celebrants into a higher social class (womanhood/motherhood/adulthood) with their religious significance establishing the people as normally fit and supernaturally connected to perform their new rolls in the family and society at large.

Perry & Perry (1931) argue further that Durkheim even observed that modern society is like an organic whole having a reality of its own. This whole has needs or functions that must be met by the member parts in order for it to exist in its normal state. This captures the need for the rites and rituals of this traditional practice of 'Ibe-Ugwu', and if the needs are not met, a pathological conduction develops. So also the Igbo society must meet the needs of the people for the sustenance of that particular society. According to Levy (1952), the term institution as used here will mean a particular type of normative pattern (Ibe-Ugwu) that affects human action (Woman) in terms of social system (Womanhood). In this sense, the rites, rituals and 'Ibe-Ugwu' celebration are institutions which refer to those particular normative patters; conformity with which is generally to be expected and failure to conform with which is generally met with the moral and societal indignation of those individuals who are involved in same general social system and who are aware of the failure (parsons, 1940). Through this functionalist approach, the rites and rituals of 'ibe-ugwu' prepare the younger population for the task ahead as they grow to womanhood and by extension, an increase in societal demands.

## Research Methodology

In this article, the researcher relied on documents and interview methods of data gathering. The interview was randomly chosen to reflect age and gender. Adults (male and female) members of Ukawu community were randomly selected and interviewed and it afforded the researcher the raw data for analysis. These two methods availed the researcher of sufficient material.

## The People of Ukawu

Ukawu community is located in the present day Onicha Local Government Area, Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Ukwu has an estimated population of 9,377 people going by the year 2006 population estimation. The word 'Ukawu' according to oral tradition is derived from two separate words – 'Uka' which means plenty and 'Awu' meaning alligator. If the two words are put together it becomes 'Ukawu', meaning plenty of Alligator.

Oriaku (2021) in an interview with the researcher in the course of this research, confirms that by oral tradition, Ukawu community originated from Ezube community and precisely from Agwurama's family in Ezza. This account for their spoken Ezza dialect of Igbo language. Agwurama Egube was said to be a hunter, who went in search of games and in the process he found himself in a place full of 'awu' (alligator). He killed so many of them and decided to settle in the area for the sustenance of greener pastures. Later he went home and brought his brothers to join him. Subsequently, Egube brought his wife Nwokpore and settled in Ukawu. Egube with his wife later gave birth to three children namely; Amankpua (1<sup>st</sup>son), Amofia (2<sup>nd</sup>son) and Okuzzu (3<sup>rd</sup>son) who later became the three sons of Agwurama Egube that make up the present day Ukawu community.

This migration theory of Ukawu people is in line with the concept of theory of migration as posited by Skeldom (2012). According to Skeldom, the field migration studies has remained a surprisingly under theorized field of social inquiry. Sen (1999) capabilities framework to migration defines human mobility as people's capability (freedom) to choose where to live including the option to stay – instead of a more or less automated, passive and cause and effect response to a set of static push and pull factors. This is apt and further applicable to 'Ukawu' migration as a movement and option to choose where to settle and live and stay.

### **Ibe-Ugwu As A Rite Of Passage**

Oral tradition holds it that the practice of 'Ibe-Ugwu' (circumcision) is as old as the people. No sooner than the people started to procreate and marry, that they instituted the rites to groom their females to prepare and assume a higher societal role of motherhood. The research observes that though 'Ibe-ugwu' means circumcision in English language, it does not represent anything in meaning or close to female genital mutilation. It simply represents the social, cultural and religious performances that usher a female child into womanhood. Hence, every 'Ukawu' man or woman sees 'Ibe-Ugwu' as an initiation process that every individual, especially the female folk must experience before being recognised as a full adult woman of the community, ready for marriage and for procreation.

No wonder Gennep (1960) notes that these social customs (like Ibe-ugwu) are used to mark specific moment of the life course which many societies use to articulate events that hold significance, for individuals and families of the celebrants or initiates and for the greater and larger society as well. Associated with each life stage is a specific social status and a definitive set of obligations and normative sequential stages of the life course, generally from childhood to adulthood and taking on a new social role at each phase.

To his effect, Kanu (2019) observes that one of the common rituals among the diverse African societies is the life circle rituals as the prescribed ways of performing religious set, praying, singing, sacred songs, dancing to the gods. Rituals are series of actions that are always performed in the same way especially as part of a religious ceremony, something that is done regularly. It is a set of order or words used in a religious ceremony as a series of action that are performed compulsively; anything that is performed habitually and according to the dictates of the ancestors and common to a particular religion or society (Metuh, 1987).

Chukwu (2021) informs the researcher during interview in the course of this research, that 'Ibe-Ugwu' ceremony is performed during the harvesting period (around the months of August and December each year) in preparatory for the adolescent (females) for marriage. The ceremony is a seven (7) day event. It kicks off with the celebrant or initiate restricted to a room for the seven days. The celebrant can only see the latest initiates or co-celebrants or those who have just passed through this rite of passage. These are some of the people allowed to visit the initiates in their seclusion and permitted to bring gifts to them. They are also permitted to meet with their would be husbands (if they have any) mostly at night so as to afford the initiates an opportunity to have robust sex to display their sexual strength or prowess to their husbands in readiness to becoming mothers, wives and the attendant higher social status and recognition. While the initiation lasts, the initiates can only come out from their seclusion early in the morning to take their bath. The reason is to avoid non initiates from seeing them. It is to be noted that in the traditional Ukawu community, houses were built of thatch roofs and mud with bathrooms and toilets located about 20 meters away from the living rooms. The initiates would be fed during this period with special food like fruits, vegetables, and others high protein and carbohydrate food content for their fattening. While the initiation lasts, it is expected that the initiate will stay in the room with their would be husbands for the seven days engaging in sexual relationship throughout the duration. On the other hand, if the initiates have no intending husbands or suitors, they would be taught the demands of housewife, child bearing, care of the children and husband, patience and general family virtues.

In the morning of the seven days of the initiation, the latest women initiates would go into the room and check the initiates beddings expecting to observe blood stains so as to confirm their



virginity. If they were observed to be virgins (by the blood stains), they would be praised and blessed by the women at the completion of their initiation. This is because the traditional Ukawu culture encouraged total abstinence from premarital sex and virginity attracts special blessing from the people and the gods of the land. Women who are observed to have kept their virginity before marriage (initiation) were treated with deepest respect and accorded special recognition within the entire Ukawu community till they die. Virginity is highly prized, praised. Every female born in Ukawu community will strive to remain a virgin until her marriage.

On the last day of the initiation rites, the initiates are decorated with the traditional white chalk (Nzu) depicting purity and freshness; dressed in traditional attire of 'george' wrapper tied across their chest, covering their breast down to their knees. They are later taken round the market square while dancing to the tune of the traditional music. The celebrants would be forced to sit on a particular stool at the market square. This stool is called 'OKPOKORO'. Its significance is to remind the celebrants that they are henceforth not permitted to leave their husbands house nor divorce them, no matter the circumstances. Marriage in Ukawu community is for better and for worse. Divorce is abhorred in its entirety. The husbands in return and show of appreciation are expected to take good care of their wives roundly and in all circumstances. It is an abomination and taboo among the traditional 'Ukawu' community for the celebrants or women initiates to sleep with other men nor have any sexual intercourse with any man not their husbands. Extra marital affairs among Ukawu women are sacrilegious with heavy penalties to the extent of ostracization. This was a direct check on sexual promiscuity, extra marital affairs and whoredom in traditional Ukawu community.

Still at the market square, kola nuts are shared together with the ritual of the pouring of libation to beckon on the gods of the land to witness the occasion, guard and guide the celebrants throughout their motherhood and womanhood on earth. The village head, family heads and traditional priests are all involved in this ritual as the gods and ancestors are engaged in the communion. This represented as display of communal love among the people and fraternal bounds. At the end of the market square rituals, the celebrants are carried shoulder high to their respective (husbands) homes where they continue to entertain their guests while receiving various types of gifts.

It is worthy to further note, that this initiation of female adolescents are carried out during the moonlight of the harvesting period because in traditional Ukawu land, the moon is believed to be the only source of light at night and rituals are scheduled to take place on those night hours of full moon so that the participants could avail themselves of the natural lighting during the initiation period. Celebrants are taught the secrets of adulthood in readiness for marriage. The importance of this festival is simply deducible from the fact that in traditional Ukawu land, sex is only for the purpose of procreation and nothing more. Thus, youths are discouraged from having sex until they are married. Having sex is only permissible at night and not in the day. In 'Ukawu' cosmology, pregnancy that occurred from sex in the day is believed to cause albinism. This view may not be scientifically correct. Nonetheless, it has reinforced the African Igbo moral precepts anchored on the dignity of the human sex organs which must not be exposed to all and sundry (Uba, 1985).

### **Severity Of Ibe-ugwu As An Initiation Rite**

It is observed that rites of passage in African Igbo cosmology like the 'Ibe-Ugwu' involve some ordeal which requires tolerance, endurance, courage and strength. By successfully performing these rituals, the erstwhile adolescents (females) attest to their readiness to assume the responsibilities of adult life. Some of the rites leave physical evidence of adult status such as tattoos and scarification on the body which often leaves scars which are envied evidence of adult status. The degree of emotional involvement varies from one stage of the rite to another and the amount of physical discomfort ranges from performances that seemed a form of sadistic torture (like the robust sex), to fairly pleasurable experiences (like the body decorations).

It is evident therefore, that this initiation of women normally involves beautification (e.g new hair style or arrangement), sequestration and dietary restrictions accompanied with instructions on such things as sexual behaviour, behaviour to in-laws, care of children and similar information designed to equip the average woman for life with a man. It is instructive that prior to the rites of

“Ibe-Ugwu”, girls are barred from sexual contact with men. Here, the work stresses that societies that indulge infants tend to demand more of their adolescents than those that place greater restrictions on the infants.

### **Values And Beliefs Associated With 'Ibe-Ugwu'**

The rationale for “Ibe-Ugwu” is to allow the female gender (adolescents) time to rest, to refresh herself and to be formally prepared intellectually, emotionally and physically in readiness for the revered status of a married woman or married life. She is opportuned to raise whatever questions she has about these subject or issues. In a way “Ibe-Ugwu” is a medium through which parents and other relatives reward their daughters and loved ones for their services to the family; an occasion for honouring them publicly for their proven strength of character and their high moral standards. The lectures, the incantations and the nocturnal visits to shrines and the village square are experiences that die hard.

The rites and rituals of “Ibe-Ugwu” are for adolescents (females) who are healthy and mentally sound. Brainerd (1978) succinctly describes piaget’s formal operations period as a ‘period of lives’ stage when adolescents comprehend historical time and geographical space and contrast ideals as well as grasp, contrary to fact conditions as they conceptualize and think about their own thinking. This obviously corresponds with the life of the girl or female initiate when she is initiated into womanhood/adulthood. The African Igbo especially the community use the opportunity of ‘Ibe-Ugwu’ (circumcision) for the revelation to the young adult woman of historical secrets about the ethnic group and their culture generally.

In support of this position Uba (1985) agrees that the use of symbols (similes) and metaphors is generally believed to force the female adolescents to look for options which will enable them take different viewpoints. The various experiences to which such rites and rituals expose the female adolescents enrich their imaginations and extend their powers of verbal expression, thus enabling them to make allusion as well as assertions within the limits of logical possibility which replaces the illogical fantasy of childhood. The time the adolescent female gets to complete the initiation corresponds to the end of the developmental aspects, to which Piaget (1965) has drawn attention, namely the directive function of language, the formation of concepts, translation of concrete experiences into verbal symbolic terms, and the evolution of logical thinking.

Uba (1985) posits in line with the aforesaid opinions that the tradition of the Igbo (Ukawu) man involves notions about the universe, about the time and space, about things considered private to people and places, and those other things that are communally owned and shared. All the experiences of ‘Ibe-Ugwu’ in Ukawu Community cumulatively enable generations of female youths to develop from childhood to womanhood/adulthood. The female adolescent finds that in spite of her attempts to fit into the society she is alienated and that despite her feelings and the urge sometimes to revolt, she cannot simply break away from the tradition by either leaving it or organizing an uprising.

Alternatively, the intensive experiences and training which the rites and rituals of ‘Ibe-Ugwu’ instil into the female adolescents enable them to meet five basic challenges in the society.

The challenge of Adventure: the environment of 'Ibe-Ugwu', the seven days seclusion of training and discipline and adventures are meant to instil endurance, during and after the invitation (especially of sex).

The challenge of creativity: The ceremonies associated with the rites of 'Ibe-Ugwu' and the exercises undertaken are challenges for learning and recreation. There is no doubt that some of the initiates take some time off to reflect on what was going on, to think of alternatives and to arrive at an understanding of the culture of Igbo (Ukawu) adult.

The challenge of Service: The ceremony of 'Ibe-Ugwu' emphasizes self service to the community. The initiates who subject themselves to the fattening ceremony want, among other reasons, to make sure that they put best into married life by way of giving full, satisfactory and satisfying service to her husband and her children extending to the whole society. She undergoes 'Ibe-Ugwu' to make sure that she goes into marriage as a full fledged and well brought up Ukawu (Igbo) housewife.

The challenge of logical Inquiry: the communal experience the female as a youth enjoys provides a strong sense of solidarity, belonging and identity. Solidity here expects them as part of it's most active and virile members to identify themselves with the aspirations of the community and also to project its norms.

Moral development and moral judgement. It is evident, that the rites and ritual of 'Ibe-Ugwu' in Ukawu is a fallout of child rearing practices in the larger Igboland, showing that ego development affects moral judgement in furtherance to that ego development in Igboland while related to general cognitive development, depends on other factors such as social environment. Thus, every generation of Ukawu man and by extension the Igbo adult and elder sees the youth as would keniston (1977), as a product of the price which youth pays so as to assimilate the norms of their culture. Almost always, the youths by the fact of such initiation rituals and accompanying ceremonies, have their suspicion confirmed by the psychological existence of an identity search, community grouping, a great deal of experimentation with major institutional forms, symbolic rejection of parental, values significant and wild spread counter cultures and an obsession with personal taste and –self expression, increased age segregation and altercation of family socialization practices.

### **'Ibe- Ugwu' as a socialization avenue.**

For purpose of socialization in the moral domain, societal values, beliefs and attitudes must be internalized in the young females. Thus, the Ukawu elders as it were, decided presumably at the dawn of history, that children (females) must come to adopt adult values as their own, and conform to them irrespective of the hope of external reward or fear of external punishment. Society's agent begin by imposing values and by controlling children (females) through the instrumentality of from the ceremonies of 'Ibe-ugwu' connected with the rites and rituals which are loaded with values, attitudes and beliefs intended for the moral growth of the female adolescent into womanhood. Hence, the initiation and all about it are supposed to help the adolescent to be critical of her moral judgement, to be astute, and to be morally comprehensive in her thought as motherhood and womanhood demand.

### **Morality in 'Ibe-ugwu' Rites and Rituals.**

In the African Igbo society, ethical viewpoints seem to reflect the mental maturity of people who hold them. This is also true of the Ukawu people in relation to the rites and rituals of 'Ibe-Ugwu'. The moral beliefs as were observed in the practices and attitudes of the initiates built into the institution of Ibe-Ugwu help the Ukawu female adolescent to become susceptible to reason, to persuasion and discussion by the entire family or kindred during or after major family meals. Topics of such meeting include misdemeanor, marriage and the need for family members to represent or reflect the family ideas outside. Among the Ukawu people of Igbo extraction are indirectly assisted through the rites and rituals of 'Ibe-Ugwu' to outgrow her childhood nations that moral rules are fixed and final. The cultural content of 'Ibe-Ugwu' at the conclusion of the initiation rites of 'Ibe-Ugwu' into adulthood (womanhood) as the adolescent mind is filled with cultural learning. She tends to generate conclusions similar to her culture. The process of cultural learning is not supposed to rid her of the inner turmoil, refection, and systematic thought she should experience in order to reach her conclusion. Thus female adolescents have opportunities for the first time to develop intellectual awareness of the reasons behind social standards, customs and manner. Now as adult, they think about them and their enactment. In such situation, conclusions are not predictable or wholesale; instead, new general findings are the usual outcome.

### **Symbolism In 'Ibe-Ugwu'**

A symbol in a general sense is a word or phrase or other form of expression having a complex of associated meaning (Shaw,1972). A symbol can be viewed as having values different from those of relating objects or ideas of the symbol or of giving things symbolic associated character or meaning. The function of symbolism is to represent a reality or a truth and to reveal them either instantaneously

or gradually. Symbols can be material or visual. In “Ibe-ugwu” the white chalk (nzu) used in decorating the body of the initiate, the 'okpokoro' wooden seat, the beads around the neck and wrists and the market square outing are representations of symbols in the ceremony. While the white chalk (nzu) represent the purity of the initiate and beauty of womanhood which must be appreciated and adored all the time by her husband, the Okpokoro wooden traditional stool stands for marital faithfulness and fidelity which the initiate must observe as long as she lives. The market square outing symbolizes presentation to the wider community as a full fledged woman who can now bear children and not just a daughter of a man but now a mother of children and wife to a man. The white chalk (nzu) further symbolizes the purification of the initiates from all the impurities brought about by her misdeeds as an adolescent while growing up and before the initiation. The final transition is the home-coming of the initiated at the end of the ceremonies at the market square which confers on the initiates a stable social status which gives her all the right and obligations of her new status firstly as an adult, woman, wife and mother of children. All these are conferred on her through the instrumentality of the rites and rituals of 'Ibe- Ugwu'. Nothing more can be said.

## Conclusions

It is evident, that the practice of ‘Ibe- Ugwu’ affects and represents the cultural identity of a people of Ukawu. Without these rites and rituals of passage (Ibe-Ugwu), the people will become disoriented and may lose their root, identity as they continue in their lives journey of complete existentialism. When the rites of transition are marked, ritualized, witnessed and supported, it creates a kind of experiential map of self-development (Lertzman, 2002) and actualisation.

The rites and rituals of ‘Ibe-Ugwu’ still remain a part of the religious, cultural and traditional life style of Ukawu Community. Such practices provides the suspicious avenue for honouring natural development stages, connecting the individual to self, others and immediate environment, revitalizing and restoring the human experience (Grimes, 2000). The instrumentality of the rites and rituals of 'Ibe-Ugwu' for development and sustainability of the Ukawu society cannot be over-emphasized. This indeed confirms that in African Igbo society including that of the Ukawu people, and by extension globally, the rites and rituals of 'Ibe-Ugwu' (circumcision) culturally and religiously provide the gateway to womanhood in Igboland.

## Recommendations

Let this work be a driving imperative for African/Igbo communities to wake-up and return to their roots culturally by the observation of this cultural facets which showcase the beauty of womanhood via a life of chastity and fidelity.

The time is ripe for the revival of and survival of the people’s cultural heritages which must not be allowed to go into extinction because of its numerous positive takes in the society.

The continuous encouragement and observation of cultural heritages such as this will reconnect the people back to the lost glories of wholeness which our forebears once enjoyed.

This work serves as a springboard for further researches in similar areas for cultural revival and preservation of humankind against the imminent extinction of cherished human values globally.

## Appendix

### List of interviewees

1. Christopher Oriaku (57 years), a Civil servant. Interview conducted on 22nd August, 2021 at Ukawu.
2. Moma Chukwu (59 Years) a Civil Servant. Interview Conducted on 22nd August 2021 at Ukawu.
3. Ukaeru Godwin (70years) farmer. Interviewed on 22nd August 2021.
4. Udumaga Onwudinro (78 years). Farmer. Interviewed on the 22nd August 2021.
5. Ugama Ukem (Female, 75 years). Widow. Interviewed of the 22nd August 2021.



6. Okonkwo Ukeh (male, 74 years). Widower. Interviewed on the 22nd August 2021.

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