

THE INCARNATE BEING PHENOMENON AMONG THE IGALA OF KOGI STATE: THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF WOMEN EXEMPTION FROM PARTICIPATION

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Abstract: This study explored the phenomenon of the incarnate being among the Igala of Kogi State, Nigeria, focusing on the cultural and religious dynamics that lead to the exclusion of women from participating in such spiritual roles. Through a multidisciplinary approach that includes ethnographic fieldwork, cultural analysis, and feminist theory, the paper critically examines the intersections of tradition, gender, and modernity. The study also investigated the shifts in perception and practice in contemporary Igala society, highlighting the need for more inclusive reinterpretations of cultural heritage.

Keywords: Incarnate being, Igala, gender exclusion, traditional religion, feminism, ritual purity, cultural transformation

Introduction

The Igala ethnic group, located in the eastern region of Kogi State, Nigeria, has a vibrant culture centered on spiritualism, oral tradition, and ancestral worship. Among their spiritual traditions is the belief in the incarnate being—referred to in local dialect as "Egwu" or "Ibegwu" which is regarded as a physical manifestation of ancestral or spiritual power. These beings are perceived as divine emissaries who maintain moral order, enforce social norms, and serve as links between the spiritual and physical realms¹.

The rituals surrounding the incarnate being are deeply embedded in Igala cosmology, with significant roles in community festivals, funerals of elders, and spiritual adjudication. However, these rituals are characteristically male dominated, with women systematically excluded from participation and initiation. This exclusion is often justified through traditional beliefs concerning ritual purity, gendered spiritual roles, and ancestral injunctions².

As modernity continues to influence traditional societies, the exclusionary nature of such practices has become a subject of critique. Education, urbanization, and religious diversity have increasingly encouraged women to

¹ I. Okpewho. *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity*. Indiana University Press, 1992.

² K. Yusuf, *Women and Traditional Religion in Nigeria: A Historical Analysis*. Lagos: Unity Publishers, 2015.

question these long-held customs³. This paper investigates the socio-cultural reasoning behind the exclusion, how it reflects patriarchal structures, and what changes are emerging in contemporary Igala society.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the spiritual significance and communal reverence afforded to the incarnate being phenomenon, its exclusionary framework raises critical concerns about gender equity and cultural representation. The problem lies in the contradiction between a culture that venerates ancestors and spiritual manifestations yet perpetuates gender discrimination under the pretext of tradition. Why are women systematically barred from a practice that claims to represent collective ancestral wisdom and moral order? To what extent is this exclusion rooted in cultural logic versus patriarchal dominance? This paper aims to interrogate these questions using cultural, anthropological, and feminist lenses.

Conceptual Clarification

The term incarnate being typically refers to a spiritual or divine entity that assumes bodily or human form. The Latin root "*incarnatio*" means "becoming flesh," indicating a transition from an immaterial or divine mode of being to a material, embodied existence. The Incarnation is "the self-communication of the absolute mystery of God in the form of finite existence, climaxing in Jesus Christ" (Foundations of Christian Faith)⁴. This highlights that the incarnate being is not merely a divine appearance but a full assumption of human nature.

From a philosophical standpoint, the incarnation raises questions about identity, dualism, and embodiment. Søren Kierkegaard viewed the Incarnation as a paradox (the Absolute paradox) in which the eternal enters time, and the infinite becomes finite⁵. For Kierkegaard, this paradox demands a leap of faith, as reason alone cannot reconcile the contradiction. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a phenomenologist, though not writing about religious incarnation, emphasized embodiment as the basis of being-in-the-world⁶. His work is often used to explore how divine embodiments might not be alien to human nature, but rather an intensification of what it means to be human.

In various world religions, the idea of divine beings becoming human is also present. Hinduism speaks of avatars, especially Vishnu, who incarnate in various forms to restore cosmic order. A typical example is Krishna Rama. According to Anantanand Rambachan, the avatar concept signifies divine intervention in human history without compromising transcendence⁷.

African Traditional Religions often hold beliefs in spiritual beings manifesting in human or material forms. John S. Mbiti notes that "there is no sharp dichotomy between the spiritual and physical; spirits may take form and

³ S. O. Adofu. Economic History of Igala Women in Kogi State, 1900-2020. *Wukari International Studies Journal* 8(1), 22-32

⁴ K. Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith. 1966.

⁵ S. Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments. 1844.

⁶ M. Maurice, Phenomenology of Perception. 1945.

⁷ A. Rambachan, The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of the Vedas. 1994.

dwell among humans”⁸. These cross-cultural examples show that the incarnate being functions as a mythopoetic symbol of divine nearness and moral action.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic approach. Secondary data sources including existing literature, oral history recordings, and historical texts was consulted. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and cultural justifications. Feminist anthropological perspectives were applied to assess the power dynamics and gender constructions embedded in the practices.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the feminist anthropology framework and the symbolic interaction theory. The Feminist Anthropology framework critiques the male-centered bias in anthropological interpretations and emphasizes the need to include women's voices and experiences in the understanding of cultural practices. This framework was advanced by Moore in 2006.

Symbolic Interactionism is a theory put forward by Blumer in 1969. This theory explores how people create and interpret symbols in society. The incarnate being is a potent cultural symbol, and its interaction with social actors reveals underlying beliefs and power dynamics.

The Geographical Location of Igala Land

Igala land occupies the eastern portion of Kogi State, bordered by the River Niger and Benue. The region is characterized by its hilly terrain, riverine settlements, and subsistence agriculture. Historically, Idah served as the political and spiritual capital of the Igala Kingdom. The area is linguistically homogenous, with the Igala language serving as the primary means of communication and cultural expression.

The Incarnate Being Phenomenon among the Igala

The Igala are an ethnic group primarily located in the central region of Nigeria, whose complex religious and social structures have been the subject of scholarly inquiry for decades. Their indigenous religion, like many African traditional religious systems, is characterized by a dynamic interplay between the transcendent and the immanent. Within this framework, the notion of an incarnate being, that is, a divine or spiritual presence that takes on a tangible, embodied form, plays a significant role. Researchers have noted that in the Igala world view, the divine is not distant but becomes manifest in rituals, ancestral figures, and even in the medium of ritual specialists. In many African contexts, the boundary between the spiritual and the material is permeable. As John S. Mbiti famously observed, African religions “live in the immediate presence of the invisible”⁹. The divine is immanent in everyday life, appearing through nature, ritual practices, and the actions of human agents. This forms a useful conceptual background for understanding the Igala model, where divine presence can be understood as having an “incarnational” dimension, that is, an active, embodied participation in the human realm¹⁰.

⁸ J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. 1969

⁹ J. S. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969.

¹⁰ J. S. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969.

Central to Igala cosmology is the belief in a supreme creator or high god, accompanied by a host of lesser deities and ancestral spirits. The high god, while transcendent, is seen as the source of a living and interactive spiritual realm. This divine realm is populated by forces and beings that are not permanently fixed in an abstract sphere but, rather, can interact with humans through various forms. Incarnational manifestations are part of this broader conceptualization, where the divine energy or presence temporarily assumes a concrete form for the sake of communication or intervention in human affairs.

Among the most illustrative examples of incarnate being in Igala practice are the roles of ritual specialists¹¹. These individuals, including priests and diviners, are often seen as channels through which ancestral and divine presences are expressed. In many ceremonies, the ritual specialist may undergo symbolic transformations (through costume, dance, and other performative acts) that are interpreted as a temporary “incarnation” of an ancestral spirit or deity. Such practices are not seen as mere symbolism but as actual participatory moments where the boundaries between the human and the divine blur¹².

Another significant domain in Igala religion is the masquerade as incarnate being tradition. Masquerades, which appear during festivals and special events, are understood to be physical manifestations of spiritual forces. The masks and regalia are not simply artistic adornments but are imbued with spiritual power, symbolizing the entry of ancestral beings or deities into the community. These incarnate figures serve both as intermediaries who transmit divine messages and as moral exemplars whose appearance reaffirms communal values and cosmic order¹³.

Scholars such as Onwuejeogwu¹⁴ have emphasized that in Igala society, the personification of the divine through ritual forms underscores the belief that the sacred is not confined to an inaccessible realm. The embodied presence of ancestral and divine forces in rituals serves not only to validate the spiritual efficacy of the rituals themselves but also to reinforce social cohesion and communal memory. This idea aligns with broader anthropological observations across West Africa where bodily transformation and ritual embodiment are central to community life and identity.

The incarnate being among the Igala can also be read in theological terms. Some scholars argue that the very act of embodiment in ritual functions as a form of divine intervention, a localized analogue to incarnational theology in other traditions¹⁵. Here, the Igala incarnate being is not a static entity but is dynamically re-created in the interactions between ritual practitioners and their community¹⁶. This perspective has been compared to notions

¹¹ T. A. Miachi. *The Incarnate Being Phenomenon in African Culture*, 2012.

¹² A. E. Afigbo, *Ritual and Society in Igala Culture*. Lagos: University Press of Nigeria. 1982.

¹³ C. Okoro, *Masquerades and Mysteries: The Incarnate in Igala Festivals*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1995.

¹⁴ N. Onwuejeogwu, *Igala Ritual and Society: An Anthropological Perspective*. Enugu: Eastern Nigerian University Press, 1980.

¹⁵ A. E. Afigbo, *Ritual and Society in Igala Culture*. Lagos: University Press of Nigeria. 1982.

¹⁶ J. S. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969.

of the living presence in other African spiritual systems, where deities manifest not as permanent fixtures but as temporary incarnations that renew the sacred connection between the transcendent and the mundane¹⁷.

When compared with other African traditional systems, such as the Yoruba concept of embodied divinity in the forms of Orishas or the Edo traditions of ancestral veneration, the Igala model presents both similarities and differences. Like the Yoruba, the Igala incorporate the idea that the divine becomes manifest in material forms during ritual performances. However, whereas Yoruba Orishas often have well-defined mythologies and cultic practices, the Igala approach is more closely tied to ancestral forces and community-centered rituals. This comparative perspective enhances our understanding of how incarnational ideas are adapted to local social and cultural realities¹⁸.

The concept of the incarnate being among the Igala is a multifaceted phenomenon that underscores the intimate and dynamic relationship between the sacred and everyday life. Through ritual specialists, masquerade traditions, and the veneration of ancestral spirits, the Igala demonstrates that the divine is not an abstract, remote force but an active, embodied presence that intervenes in the social and spiritual realms. Scholarly works like; Mbiti 1969; Onwuejeogwu 1980; Afigbo 1982; Okoro 1995, provide robust frameworks to appreciate how these indigenous practices resonate with broader African theological and anthropological discourses. The Igala model thereby contributes to a richer understanding of incarnational theology as a globally relevant concept, rooted in local traditions and community life.

Socio-Cultural Context for Women Exemption

The Igala people of central Nigeria maintain a rich and complex indigenous religious system that includes belief in divine manifestations, ancestor worship, and ritual embodiment. Within this cosmological framework, the incarnate being, an ancestral or spiritual presence that takes form during rituals, particularly masquerades and priestly embodiment, is a significant religious phenomenon. However, women are systematically excluded from direct participation in many of these rituals, especially in those involving masquerades and the embodiment of certain spirits or ancestors.

This exclusion is not accidental or incidental but deeply rooted in socio-cultural, cosmological, and political structures that define gender roles in Igala society¹⁹. This discussion examines these underlying factors with scholarly references and detailed contextual analysis. Igala religious thought conceptualizes the spiritual world as hierarchically ordered, with the supreme deity (Ojọ) at the top, followed by lesser deities (*ẹbọ*), ancestral spirits

¹⁷ T. A. Miachi. *The Incarnate Being Phenomenon in African Culture*, 2012.

¹⁸ J. S. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969.

¹⁹ T. A. Miachi. *The Incarnate Being Phenomenon in African Culture*, 2012.

(*Ibegwu*), and human mediators such as priests and masquerade performers. Access to spiritual authority is stratified along gender lines, with men positioned as public custodians of ritual power²⁰.

The rituals involving the incarnate being—particularly masquerades and ancestral invocation—require access to esoteric knowledge, which is traditionally passed down patrilineal through secret male societies, such as the *Egwu* and *Ibegwu* cults. Women are excluded from these societies, not merely by custom but by ontological belief that women are “spiritually incompatible” with certain forms of divine presence. The secret societies that control the masquerade traditions in Igala land are fiercely patriarchal, and participation is based on initiation and ancestral lineage, which women are denied access to²¹.

Masquerade festivals, such as those involving the *Egwu-Ata*, are central sites of incarnational manifestation in Igala tradition. The masquerade is believed to be an embodiment of ancestral spirits or the *Ibegwu*, sacred ancestral beings that “descend” during festivals. The performer wears elaborate costumes and masks that symbolically transform him into an incarnate being. Women are not allowed to wear masquerade attire, perform as incarnate beings, or even in some cases observe certain rituals involving masquerades. This exclusion is based on a combination of spiritual purity codes, symbolic gender oppositions, and social control mechanisms. Masquerades are considered the physical manifestation of spirits, and it is taboo for women to touch or even come close to the masquerade attire, lest they incur spiritual consequences²². The mask itself is sacred and seen as an ontological threshold between the human and spirit worlds. In Igala belief, women are associated with fertility, biological reproduction, and domesticity, while men are aligned with spiritual warfare, protection, and ritual performance.

Igala society is patrilineal and patriarchal, meaning descent and inheritance pass through the male line. Religious and political authority is concentrated in male elders, who also serve as custodians of shrines and mediators of spiritual practices. Women, though respected in the domestic and economic spheres, are socially positioned as ritual outsiders. Women in Igala culture are structurally confined to the private sphere and are denied roles in sacred institutions that deal with the incarnate or ancestral spirits²³.

Women’s bodies are considered to be in a state of cyclical impurity due to menstruation, childbirth, and other natural biological processes. These bodily functions are seen as spiritually disruptive in a ritual context, particularly when dealing with powerful ancestral or divine forces. The notion that women’s bodily cycles could destabilize spiritual order reinforces their exclusion from direct ritual engagement²⁴. Thus, women are not trusted to mediate the sacred, not because they are incapable, but because their bodies and roles are socially interpreted as ritually unstable.

²⁰ A. E. Afigbo, *Ritual and Society in Igala Culture*. Lagos: University Press of Nigeria. 1982.

²¹ N. Onwuejeogwu, *Igala Ritual and Society: An Anthropological Perspective*. Enugu: Eastern Nigerian University Press, 1980.

²² C. Okoro, *Masquerades and Mysteries: The Incarnate in Igala Festivals*, 1965.

²³ A. E. Afigbo, *Ritual and Society in Igala Culture*. Lagos: University Press of Nigeria. 1982.

²⁴ J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969.

Interestingly, while women are excluded from directly participating in incarnate rituals, they often play supporting or symbolic roles. In some ceremonies, women prepare food, sing, or offer moral instruction, but always at a remove from the core ritual performance²⁵. In rare cases of symbolic inversion, female figures may appear in ritual texts or oral traditions as embodying spiritual insight or danger, but these are mythic archetypes, not actual participants in incarnational ritual. Such figures are often treated with ambivalence, respected, feared, but never granted actual ritual authority.

What Has Changed in These Modern Days

Contemporary Igala society is experiencing gradual yet significant transformations in the interpretation and enactment of traditional institutions, particularly regarding gender roles and the participation of women in sacred systems such as the incarnate being institution. Several interconnected factors contribute to this cultural shift.

The increased access of women to formal education is among the most influential drivers of change. As Igala women attain higher levels of education, they are more empowered to critically examine, and question gendered cultural norms that have historically excluded them from significant religious and social institutions²⁶. Education has broadened women's intellectual capacity and participation in civic discourse, enabling them to challenge patriarchal ideologies with informed resistance²⁷.

The spread of Christianity and Islam, both of which advocate varying degrees of spiritual equality, has challenged the legitimacy of traditional Igala religious structures that endorse male dominance²⁸. These Abrahamic religions have, to varying extents, provided theological frameworks for the reinterpretation of indigenous practices, leading some adherents to question the exclusivity of male religious authority.

The global discourse on human rights, especially in the realm of gender equality, has found resonance within Nigerian society. The influence of national and international women's rights movements has emboldened Igala women to demand access and inclusion in institutions from which they were historically excluded²⁹. These movements have created platforms for local women to articulate their grievances and push for reforms in cultural and religious institutions.

Urbanization and internal migration have exposed Igala populations to alternative social norms and pluralistic values. As individuals interact with other cultures, particularly in urban centers, they adopt more flexible attitudes toward gender roles. This exposure has led to limited reforms in some communities, where women are now permitted to undertake secondary roles in ritual practices—such as singing, drumming, or preparing ceremonial

²⁵ S. O. Adofu. The Role of Women in Igala Leadership: A Historical Perspective. *Nasara Journal of the Humanities*, 11(1), 2024, 33-41

²⁶ O. O. Okpoh Jr. "Gender and Identity in the Middle Belt of Nigeria." *Lapai Journal of Humanities*, 5, (2), 2005, 21-45.

²⁷ C. Nwajiuba. "Education and Gender in Nigeria." *African Research Review*, 5(2), 2011, 129-141.

²⁸ J. D. Y. Peel. *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. Indiana University Press, 2000.

²⁹ J. Ibrahim, et al. *Federalism and Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*. Centre for Democracy and Development, 2004.

attire—though they remain excluded from core spiritual functions such as participating in the initiation ceremony of the incarnate being³⁰.

Despite these evolving dynamics, full inclusion of women in the incarnate being institution remains elusive. The spiritual and symbolic functions at the heart of the institution continue to be guarded by male elites who draw on cultural, ancestral, and metaphysical justifications to uphold their authority³¹. While women have gained peripheral visibility, systemic gender exclusion remains deeply entrenched in the traditional religious fabric of Igala society.

Conclusion

The incarnate being phenomenon stands as a profound representation of the spiritual and metaphysical depth embedded within the Igala cosmological worldview. It encapsulates not only religious symbolism and ancestral veneration but also the sociocultural mechanisms through which communal identity, authority, and continuity are constructed and sustained. As a central institution within the traditional religious order, it reinforces communal cohesion and reflects the sacred dynamics between the visible and invisible realms of existence.

However, the exclusionary framework that systematically denies women full participation in this institution exposes an enduring gender asymmetry. This exclusion is rooted in patriarchal interpretations of tradition that have historically privileged male authority over spiritual knowledge and ritual power. In the context of contemporary discourses on gender equity, human rights, and inclusive citizenship, such structural marginalization stands at odds with the evolving values of equality, social justice, and participatory cultural practice.

While the preservation of cultural heritage remains essential to safeguarding indigenous knowledge systems and affirming communal identity, such preservation must not become a rigid reinforcement of oppressive structures. Rather, it should be subject to continuous critical reflection, allowing for adaptive reinterpretation that aligns with the ethical imperatives of the present. A dynamic and living tradition is one that evolves in response to the aspirations and realities of its people, without losing its core essence. Therefore, the incarnate being institution must begin to confront its gendered limitations and explore pathways toward a more inclusive and reflective future.

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³⁰ C. I. Ejizu. *Ofo: Igbo Ritual Symbol*. Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986.

³¹ U. Egodi. Gender Relations in Nigeria: Implications for Development. *African Journal of Gender Studies*, 3(1), 2008, 12–27.

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