

Chapter Nine

EARTH GODDESS (ALA) AS THE PARAGON OF EQUITY IN THE LAND OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

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Executive Summary

This piece studied *Ala* deity in relation to the need for a balance between the worlds of the living and the dead. It argued that “Ala” maintains equilibrium between the land of the living and the land of the dead by harmonizing the activities of human, animals, plants and other deities on the surface of the earth and the ancestral spirits, myriad of disembodied spirits and other personified forces beneath the earth to live peacefully with one another and to help each other to actualise its purpose on earth. The phenomenological method of inquiry was employed during the course of this research.

Keywords: Goddess, Gods, Land, Ling, Dead, Spirits, Earth, Sky

Introduction

Igbo people believed that the World is made up of three planets: the Sky (Igwe), the Earth (Ala mmadu) and the land of the Spirits (Ala mmuo). That the Supreme Being (Chukwu) dwells in the Sky with the host of powerful deities and primordial beings such as the Sun god (Anyanwu), the god of thunder (Amadioha) and the Sky god (Igwe). The earth (Ala) is among the primordial deities in the ontology of creation which comprises both the land

of the living which is the surface of the earth and the land of the dead which is inside the ground; the earth (Ala) is also seen as a deity which controls all the activities of man on earth and beneath the earth. The Earth surface is seen as the abode of human beings, the earth deity (Ala), minor divinities such as manmade deities such as Ubiniukpabị of Arochukwu, Alaogbaga of Chokoneze Mbaise etc. and personified nature forces such as water deity, deities which inhabits in trees and mountains. The land of the spirit (Ala mmụọ) is populated with ancestral spirits, myriad of disembodied spirits and other personified forces of which some are benevolent and some are malevolent to human activity (Kanu 2015a).

Igbo also believed in Supreme God (Chukwu) as the creator and the controller of all the activities of these three planets of the world; and also believed in deities (chi) as the messengers and mediators of the Supreme God. Deities are created by God and are not equal with the Supreme God, but rather are His subordinates.

Deities came into existence through the limitation of human knowledge on what is encountered on daily bases such as death, sickness, drought, earthquake, war etc. which made man to keep wondering the reason behind these misfortunes. This fear of unknown made the Igbo man to turn to the search of deities as a means of finding solution to the unknown.

Earth goddess (Ala) is among the foremost Igbo pantheon whom they believed to be one of the primordial deities in the ontology of creation. Ala involves the surface of the earth (Ala mmadu) and beneath the earth (Ala mmụọ), and the former inhabits human and the later inhabits spirits. Earth goddess (Ala) which is also in charge of fertility, agriculture, morality and instrument of security and revealing of crimes. Most villages and

communities in Igbo land have a place of worship for the Earth goddess, where they present sacrifices to appease the. They also offer sacrifice to 'Ala' during planting, first fruit and harvest season for thanksgiving.

Anyanwu (2017) asserts that "Chukwu" the Supreme Being heads the sky deities which include *Anyanwu, Amadioha Igwe, Onwa*, etc. While *Ala*, the earth goddess rules the myriads of terrestrial spirits such as deities associated with rivers, hills, caves, trees, and others created by human intellect and will. Earth goddess (*Ala*) is also in charge of the land of the spirit (*Ala mmuo*) and all the activities that go around in the land of the spirit. She is the queen mother of other deities on earth because they depend on her for their survival and existence.

The Shrine of Earth goddess (Ala)

Shrines are places where deities are consulted and worshiped. Shrine as place of worship for the Earth goddess (*Ala*), is where her worshipers consult her for different purposes. Most times, the name given to the *Ala* deity shrine, differ from one Community to the other, depending on the perception of such Community. Most names given to such shrine bears the prefix or suffix of "ala" to indicate that such shrine is specifically for the Earth goddess. Examples of such names given to the Earth goddess (*Ala*) include: *Onwala, Ihuala, Alaogbaga, Alankwoala, Alaukwuogbe, dgz*. One can consult the Earth goddess anywhere he is without going to its shrine because, it is believed that the Earth goddess is the land one stands on, build houses, farm crops and bury the dead; so anywhere one is, it is believed to be standing on the Earth goddess and can consult her from that point.

The construction of the shrine of Earth goddess (Ala) is a joint venture that co-involves all the members of the community. Within the exigencies of labour and financial contributions, the community makes sure that the best architectural designs are expended; thus, one that reflects the strength of such a community (as reposing on the power of its gods). Just as the shrine of Earth goddess varies from one community to the other, the architectural features and attributes that symbolise the specific powers and strengths, vary from one community to another. However, certain basic similarities are exemplified.

Cole (1982) observes that among the Qrlx in the central Igbo land, the shrine of *Ala* deity is localised in some fifty to sixty meters from the tangent of the village square, characterised most often by a rectangular house of about ten by twelve square meters, and structured in the way that it provides a focal spatial orientation to the square. The shrine architecture is equally rectangular in form; with two sides of semi-paramedic walls towering vertically as beam raster, giving a slanting form to the thatched roofs, which harmonizing structurally with the triangular side views. The walls are most often embellished with fanciful motifs that are similar with the relief carved panels that project the overall emblematic image of the community. In some areas, the shrine of the Earth goddess is surrounded by the sacred trees, whose large leaves and shades induce the aura of the sacred presence of the place. One always found around the shrine house items people used for sacrifice such as drinks, particles of food items, money, life goats and chickens, bones of animals used for sacrifice et cetera.

Earth goddess (Ala) as the Queen Mother

“Ala” the earth goddess is the wife to the thunder deity (Amadioha,). She is also the mother of all the deities in Igbo land. The earth goddess is seen as the mother of both human and

spirits in Igbo community because of her feminine characteristics of human mother. As human mother becomes pregnant and gives birth, it is also believed by Igbo people that during reincarnation, the land of the spirit “ala mmụọ” is where human being is originally formed. It is where human before they were born on earth takes decision on the type of life to exhibit on earth and the type of family or person to reincarnate into. It is said that within this time, “Ala” is pregnant. It is believed that “Ala mmụọ” is the womb where she received people back into her womb when they die.

Earth goddess (Ala) in her feminine characteristics nurtures, protects and guides her children as human mother nurtures, protects and guides her own children. Her symbol is a statue of a woman breastfeeding her child. Earth goddess (Ala) is the fertile soil where plants and crops grow which becomes the food for human and other animals. She protects and guides her people by providing enabling environment to leave peacefully with one another and the spirits. As the human mother always wants her children to leave a moral life, so the Earth goddess (Ala) is the maker of laws called “Omenala” and the crusader of morality. She is the moral judge who judges human actions and she decides what is right and wrong. Crimes and taboos on earth are seen as sin against Ala the Earth goddess and it must be appeased for peace to rain in the community.

Earth goddess (Ala) is the controller of other deities and other deities are seen as her subordinate. Such deities that are subordinate to Earth goddess include: water deity (mmụọ mmiri), god of agriculture (Ahjanjoku), Agwu deity, gods inhabiting in rocks (Okwute), trees (Osisi) and other gods created by human intellect. These deities act by the command of

Earth goddess to answer the request of whosoever consults them.

Every community in Igbo land has a designated place of worship for Earth goddess (Ala) where they presents sacrifices and also ask for her favour. Earth goddess has a chief priest, in some places, the priest usually a woman.

Spiritual messengers of Earth goddess (Ala) is community based. Every community in Igbo land has a sacred animal which is often linked with the name of such community or village, they do not kill or eat such animal because it is sacred to them and the messenger of Earth goddess. The Ala messengers could be the Tortoise (Mbe), Python (Eke), Monkey (Enwe), or any animal Ala deity of such community has chosen as its messenger. Any time such animal visited a person, it is believed that it is the Earth goddess (Ala) who visited, and must have a message she wants to pass across. In this situation, the person or the community will find out what the message is all about by visiting a diviner (Dibia Afa) who, after consulting Ala deity, will tell the person or the Community the reason for her visitation and what to do to maintain good relationship between the queen mother 'Ala' and the inhabitant of both the land of human and the land of the spirits.

Earth goddess (Ala) as the goddess of fertility and prosperity

Ala the earth goddess is seen as the sustainer of life and the god of multiplication. She multiplies anything presented to her. She is connected to crop, prosperity and human fertility. She was often referred to as the archetype of all forms of maternity (Eboh, 2003).

Rituals and sacrifices dedicated to the Earth goddess were performed before planting and after harvest to ensure a plentiful

harvest and show appreciation. Communities also organized annual festival where they present sacrifice of first fruit to Earth goddess (Ala) for being with them throughout the planting season. Some Villages or Communities call this festival “Ahiajoku” while others call it “Iri Ji”. It was believed that such sacrifices would in turn bring them an abundance of crops and many children.

During the time of drought or other agricultural misfortunes, the people undertake ritual processes meant to examine how they may have disobeyed Earth goddess and caused her to withhold her blessings and at the same time appease her with sacrifices for healthy crops and abundant harvest.

As a benevolence deity, barren women go to her for the fruit of womb. After presentation of rituals and sacrifice as directed by the chief priest of the Earth goddess, the woman may be pregnant and have children. Sacrifices are always presented to her for general prosperity in every sphere of human endeavor.

Earth goddess (Ala) as the goddess of morality

Earth goddess (Ala) is the chief custodian of morality, who guides the activities of both the living and the dead, to live in harmony with one another and provide an acceptable law which makes them to live morally within the community. These established laws called “Omenala” guides the affairs of both the living and the dead and maintain equilibrium in their activities. In this way, the man is guided by the Earth goddess not to steal crops from his neighbour’s farm, the breadfruit tree beside the road not to fall on a passerby, the chicken not to drink its eggs and the spirit of the dead not to disturb the family members after a burial rite is completed. In this way, the law “Omenala” guides

both the living and the dead to live morally and peacefully with one another within the community.

Earth goddess (Ala) who is in charge of “Omenala”, taboos and crimes among Igbo communities are against the standard of Ala which is called “Nsọ Ala”. Earth goddess (Ala) enacted punishments against those who committed a crime by breaking the moral law “Omenala”. Such crimes include murder, theft, rape, kidnapping, adultery and incest etc. Crimes are seen as causing imbalance and disharmony both in the land of the living and in the land of the dead. Catastrophic disasters such as famine, drought or flooding are seen as punishment for crimes committed by human. Oriji (2011) asserts that immorality is seen to disturb the ritual equilibrium of the Igbo community which could potentially bring harm to the entire society. However, the reaction from Earth goddess (Ala) could attract consequences to the entire community or an individual, hence the need for ritual purifications to appease “Ala” in order to revive harmony between her and the inhabitant of the earth. On the other hand, Eboh (2003) states that if the earth goddess is not defiled through abomination (aru), then the community will be economically and politically progressive.

People who committed any of those crimes are expected to die a shameful death and those who died a shameful death were not afforded a befitting burial which essentially ended their life cycle since without funeral rites a person will not reincarnate. The fear of being punished by “Ala” is the driving force in the maintenance of high level of morality in the community by doing what is right, and morally good and averting sacrilegious acts.

Earth goddess (Ala) as a security force and crime control

Man’s nature is influenced by his desires for survival, dominance and control over his environment. This leads to issue of conflict

among them. Such conflict could attain the dangerous dimension of taking of life, physical and spiritual injury, material destruction and natural disasters. The need, therefore, for conflict resolution of these prevalent issues, to avoid destructions and mistrust among people and to ensure peace, security of life and properties, the community employs Earth goddess (Ala) as the security agent (Anyanwu, 2017).

One of the essential services rendered by “Ala” is to secure the life and property of its worshipers. The strength in Earth goddess (Ala) has given the community that owns it assurance that nothing would harm their lives and properties. What determines the life and strength of every community is its unity and common force as centred on the strength of its local deity. Thus, the centred and the animating force of the community is reposed at the strength and fame of “Ala”, who is in charge of laws and customs “Omenala” of the community. No community is complete without the shrine of the “Ala”. A community that has a powerful god is respected by other neighbouring communities. Ugwueye (2007) observed that the purpose of establishing “Ala” in various communities is mainly for protection. However, according to Essien (2011), because of the awe deity creates in the minds of the people, many people in Annang land have shunned or avoided embarking on any criminal act.

Earth goddess (Ala) as agent of human security has the capacity to cover both physical and spiritual realms; because activities in spiritual realm (Ala mmụọ) affect the physical, and the activities on physical realm (Ala mmadụ) affect spiritual realm. Turaki (1999) describes this view further by saying “Everything in life can be influenced by and responds to the world of spirits. Whatever happens in the physical realm has direct bearing on the spiritual world”.

One can consult “Ala” for security anytime and anywhere without going to its shrine. For example, in case of loss of item or destruction of property, the person will invoke or consult “Ala” by saying “*elu lee aka m, ala lee aka m*” whosoever that did this evil to me, “Ala” visit the person or group with your wrath. By just saying this, the person has consulted “Ala” to take charge of the situation. Earth goddess (Ala) must visit those that committed such atrocity with its wrath. Here, it is advised for one to check well before consulting “Ala” in case of any loss, because if what is said to be lost is within the house of the owner, or with his or her children, the wrath of “Ala” will be upon whosoever that committed the evil without minding whether the person who committed the crime relates to the owner of the property or not.

Again, an Igbo man or woman may secure his or her property from theft by wrapping a handful of sand and place it on any of his property. The reason for doing this is to prevent people from stealing the item. Here, the person has invited the Earth goddess (Ala) to keep watch over the property. The sand represents the earth deity ‘Ala’. Ugwueye (2007, p.37) adds that “a handful of sand from “Adqrq” grove could be wrapped in a piece of cloth and placed on valuable property. The power of “Adqrq” in the wrapped sand protects the property from being stolen or it punishes whoever does so.”

One can also consult “Ala” with the help of its chief priest, who produces powerful device or powerful bonds which hinders the enemy from both physical and spiritual realms (Ala mmadu na Ala mmuo) from taking away lives, causing physical or spiritual injuries or material destructions. With the help of a Priest, (Ala) is consulted to solve both personal, social and community problems. Sometimes, “Ala” without consultations take vengeance on anybody who offends her.

Earth goddess (Ala) exposes wicked acts and fish out the culprit, thereby making community members to shun or avoid any criminal activity. "Ala" chief priest can perform 'Ebi' ordeal to unveil secrets or fish out culprits in a community to resolve difficult controversies in a community.

Earth goddess (Ala) is seen as the highest court of appeal in Igbo theocratic system of governance. Any time there is confusion in the course of handling land dispute by the community or cases of murder, poisoning, or stealing, either of the parties involved in the dispute would be required to take an oath with "Ala" to prove ownership or innocence. If after one year of the oath taking, the oath taker survives and did not die, the land automatically belongs to him or the person has proven innocence of the allegation leveled against him or her.

Parties involved in a dispute, could also consult "Ala", which after divination by the chief priest would reveal the owner of the property. Apart from divination and consultation of Earth goddess (Ala) by parties for any dispute, "Ala" may be used for covenant (Igba ndu). Igbo people believe that the earth goddess, 'Ala', would always rise at any time in defense of the oppressed or any form of corrupt practice on the land.

Interaction between the land of the living (Ala mmadu) and the land of spirit (Ala mmuo)

Igbo people believed that the Earth (Ala) is divided into two equal parts. The first is the land of the living, which is the earth surface that inhabits human, animals and plants; and the second is the land of the dead, which inhabits ancestral spirits, myriad of disembodied spirits and other personified forces of which some are benevolent and malevolent to human activity. All human challenges or favour on the land of the living (Ala

mmadu) have direct connection to the land of the spirit (Ala mmuo), but Ala deity controls and maintains equilibrium to both on the land of the living and in the land of the dead.

It is believed that life on earth started from the land of the dead and must be supported by its forces. For example, it is only when a seed of plant or its root is planted or enters inside the ground that they were able to germinate and produce its replica. It is also believed that before a woman gets pregnant, the spirit of the unborn baby is formed in the land of the dead (Ala mmuo) where the unborn baby decides its destiny and the type of family and person to reincarnate to, before entering into the woman's womb as pregnancy. And when the person dies, he or she will also be buried and the body will return to the sand of the earth, its spirit will move into the land of the spirit either to retain or change its destiny and reincarnate into human again on the land of the living.

Remember, before one reincarnates into human again, he or she must have lived a good life on earth, died a peaceful death, and given a complete funeral rites. If not, may face punishment of non-acceptance in the land of the spirit, which sometimes make its spirit to hover on the surface of the earth, interrupting and disturbing the activities of human. The spirit of the dead will either be asking for the completion of its funeral rite so that the spirit will be accepted in the land of the spirit or the spirit will continue to hover on the surface of the earth because of its non-acceptance in the land of the spirit due to the evil the person committed while on earth.

The immediate family of the deceased stands the risk of death if they have not given a complete burial rite to their dead relative, but participated in another person's burial either by partaking in the goat or cow killed for such person's burial rite or bought any

of these animals for someone's burial rite. The spirit of the dead relative may kill the person or cause a terrible sickness that will eventually kill the person if remedy is not provided fast.

From time to time, man journeys from the land of the living to the land of the dead through dreams. During such dreams, one is allowed to see the state of things concerning the person's life or its relative which is yet to manifest or have started manifesting in the real life of such individual or group. Remember we said earlier that whatever favour or challenge one faces on the land of the living (Ala mmadu) started from the land of the dead (Ala mmuo). So, through dreams one moves to the land of the dead where good and bad omen started before manifesting into the land of the living. For example, when one had a dog bite or dangerous animal pursuing such person in the dream, such person should expect a downfall if nothing is done. One can avert such looming danger through prayer or by evoking "Ala" through its priest to avert the catastrophe. Also, when one eats in the dream, it is food poisoning in the realm of life which has the capacity to inflict in the person's physical body sickness that would torment the person pending when counter spiritual forces are sent to the land of the spirit to destroy the efficacy of the pending danger.

Any time man is having challenges of life from the land of the spirit, he must send a stronger force to the land of the spirit through the help of the priest of "Ala" which will destroy the efficacy of the forces from the land of the spirit. This only happens when the man has appeased Ala deity for its wrongdoing. But if the hands of the man are pure, (Ala" will preserve the person's life without any appeasement and invitation from the man or its family.

Conclusion

Ala as a deity is one of the primordial deities created by God as His subordinate and messenger on earth which is in charge of all the activities of man both in the land of living and the land of the dead. Earth goddess (Ala) is the queen mother of every life on earth and in charge of fertility, agriculture, morality, used as an instrument for security and crime control. "Ala" maintains equity with the activities that goes around the surface of the earth and beneath the earth. "Ala" controls the myriads of terrestrial spirits such as deities associated with rivers, hills, caves, trees, and other deities created by human intellect and will.

Earth goddess (Ala) is benevolent and at the same time malevolent, she is believed to be in charge of fertility as she gives children and fertilises our crops for bountiful harvest and general prosperity in life. She gives protections to man and also a source of crime control. Out of being punished by "Ala", made man to live moral life with his neighbour. "Ala" as malevolent punishes any one that goes against her rules without mercy.

Earth goddess (Ala) is worshiped till today by both the Igbo Christians and the pagans anywhere in the world either knowingly or unknowingly. Because "Ala" is everywhere and can be consulted from any place, Igbo man always consult her anytime he or she is in difficulty or facing the challenges of unknown. They do this when they pour libation on the ground to ask "Ala" to take charge of the situation. When they keep a rapped handful of sand on any property of theirs, this means that they have evoked the power of "Ala" to protect such property. In the case of any misfortune, they may call the help of "Ala" to take charge by saying "*Elu lee aka m, Ala lee aka m*" and ask for "Ala" to punish whosoever that causes such misfortune. There is a popular song that Igbo people sing even in the church which says: "*Elu na Ala megide onye si na ogaghị adiri mu na mma*".

Anyone who sings this song is evoking the power of “Ala” to be against that person who is against him. Even in our churches nowadays, men of God request their members to come to church with the handful of sand from their family for prayers. This is either requesting “Ala” to favour them or be against to whosoever that plans evil against them.

Indeed, “Ala” maintains equilibrium between the land of the living and the land of the dead by harmonizing the activities of human, animals, plants and other deities on the surface of the earth and the ancestral spirits, myriad of disembodied spirits and other personified forces beneath the earth to live peacefully with one another and to help each other to actualise its purpose on earth.

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