

The Influence of Christian Religion on the Rite of Passage of Ikwe-ezi in Mgbidi of Imo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The rite of passage of Ikwe-ezi in Mgbidi was a ritual that was planned, managed, and executed by elders both male and female in the Mgbidi communities of Imo state, Nigeria; the procedure of the ceremony was clear-cut and well adhered-to by the people of the land. However, the introduction of Christianity to the different Mgbidi communities changed the narrative. The crux of this paper is to highlight the changes introduced to the Ikwe-ezi by Christian religious authorities, which, of course, grossly affected its narrative and simplified the steps of its proceedings. After careful investigation through a series of interviews with elders of the Mgbidi community, it was found that despite the alterations introduced by Christianity, there appears to be concurrence between the Traditionalists and the Christians as regards the Ikwe-ezi rites of passage. It was also found that after the alterations introduced by the Church, two versions of the Ikwe-ezi now exist: the first has the approval of Christians and Traditionalists who have resolved to identify themselves with the ritual. Hence, they participate by making their daughters undergo the Ikwe-ezi. The second version can be performed in absentia: if the girl and her parents cannot visit the village either because they live in a

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faraway city or overseas, the girl's parents will send money to their relatives in the village to purchase the items for the rituals and they will be conducted in their absence. However, even if the girl's parents do not want to be partakers of the rite, their relatives in the village may perform the Ikwe-ezi without their consent and that of their daughter.

Keywords: Ikwe-ezi, Christianity, puberty, rite of passage, Igbo

Résumé

Les rites de passage des jeunes filles des Ikwe-ezi en Mgbidi étaient autrefois planifiés, gérés, et exécutés par les aînés, masculins et féminins, des communautés Mgbidi dans l'état d'Imo, au Nigéria; les procédures de la cérémonie étaient précises et suivies par tous les gens du pays. Cependant l'introduction du Christianisme dans les diverses communautés du pays a apporté de profonds changements. Le but de cette communication est de mettre en évidence les conséquences de ces changements chez les Ikwe-ezi quand les autorités Chrétiennes entrèrent en conflit avec le rituel Mgbidi et imposèrent, entre autre, un changement de narratif et une simplification des procédures rituelles. Une recherche basée sur une série de conversation avec les aînés des communautés Mgbidi a révélée qu'en dépit des modifications introduites par le Christianisme, les traditionalistes et les Chrétiens développèrent une certaine convergence en regard du rituel Ikwe-ezi. Les deux versions du rituel qui émergent alors contribuent maintenant à la continuité de son existence: la première version a l'approbation des Chrétiens et de ceux qui, parmi les traditionalistes, ont résolu de continuer le rituel dans sa nouvelle forme, en faisant en sorte que leurs filles puissent participer au rituel. La seconde version, qui peut être conduite in absentia, répond aux besoins des jeunes filles ou de leurs parents qui ne peuvent visiter leur village parce qu'ils vivent dans un ville éloignée ou outremer; les parents de la jeune fille envoient alors de l'argent aux membres de leurs familles restés dans le village pour qu'ils se procurent les objects et denrées nécessaire au rituel qui se tiendra alors même en l'absence de la jeune fille. Afin de maintenir la continuité de ce rituel essentiel pour le bien-être de la communauté, la parenté au village se chargera du rituel même si la jeune fille ou les parents de la jeune fille ne veulent pas participer à la tradition, et en l'absence de leur consentement.

Mot-clés: Ikwe-ezi, Christianisme, puberté, rite de passage, Igbo

Introduction

Prior to the colonization of Africa by Europeans, Africans had their different modes of worshipping their gods and deities, and these gods (through priests/priestesses) dictated the ritual processes involved in each rite of passage, every community with their traditional peculiarities. The rite of passage of Ikwe-ezi in Mgbidi, Imo State, Nigeria, was performed each time a girl attained puberty and is still performed today, although changed. The ceremony was planned, managed and executed by selected elders of the Mgbidi land; it was an essential ritual held in high esteem by the different groups composing the Mgbidi community. This ceremony was structured according to the customs and tradition of the people of Mgbidi; for years they performed the Ikwe-ezi for the process of transiting adolescent girls from one social status, that of child, to the other, that of woman. The rituals involved were specific to the communities and all instructions were observed by all parties involved.

In an interview with Chief Nicholas Chukwudi Okereke the Ebubedike 1 of Mgbidi (2023), he disclosed that the practice started on the 10th of February 1786 with the daughter of a peasant. Moreover, Innocent Duru (2017), a reporter for *The Nation Online Newspaper*, writes that Chief Festus Orji Achonu, the Principal Palace Secretary to the traditional ruler, revealed in an interview that the practice started with the beautiful daughter of a peasant as a result of her beauty, because many people were jealous of her. The beautiful peasant girl eventually became pregnant out of wedlock; this provoked the elders to converge and declare the act (pregnancy out of wedlock) a taboo and they resolved that she should be banished from the town. Her helpless father cried but found no help; resigned to the fate of his daughter, he swore that nothing would ever put an end to Ikwe-ezi in the land. And that marked the beginning of the Ikwe-ezi rite of passage. Moreover, the gods gave their consent and that is why nobody has been able to stop the Ikwe-ezi Mgbidi rite of passage since then. Yet, though the practice has not ceased, it has been modified because of the introduction of Christianity into the Mgbidi community of Nigeria.

The introduction of Christianity to Mgbidi brought about strong opposition to the Ikwe-ezi rite of passage, as Christian authorities frowned at the fact that the girls were required to parade nude at the market place. Specifically, their nudity was required so that the old and wise women of the land could make an assessment of the girls to ascertain whether or not any of the girls was pregnant. Any girl found to be pregnant would be forever banished. Christianity kicked against this rite because some girls may have been sexually abused during its performance. This led to violent fracas and many lives were lost. However, in order for peace to reign, and to aid the preservation of the Ikwe-ezi rite of passage, the Traditionalists capitulated to some of the demands of the Christians. Among other elements, the Christians and the Traditionalists compromised on the nudity:

wrappers would be made to cover the girls' waists, but their breasts must be exposed. This negotiation was instrumental to the sustainability and preservation of this ceremony from one generation to the other from precolonial times until today.

In the course of this research, prominent indigenous members of the Mgbidi community were interviewed by the researcher; moreover, newspaper publications were consulted and data sourced through personal interviews. Finally this paper includes a corpus of mosaic paintings by artist Michael Chukuwemeka Ikobi, a member of the Mgbidi community, as well as by the author. These images seek to narrate the step-by-step procedure of the Ikwe-ezi Mgbidi and at the same time to provide visual documentation. Both the paper and the paintings are intended to serve as a tool to preserve the Ikwe-ezi ritual and hence further aid its easy transition from generation to generation.

A rite of passage, in respect to this study and as defined by Norbeck, 2021, is understood to be a set of distinctive rituals peculiar to a people within a geographical space involving the transition of an age group from one social status to another. He adds that several of the most significant and common rites of passage are linked with the biological crises, or milestones, of life - birth, maturity, reproduction, and death - that bring changes in social status and, thus, in the social relations of the people concerned. Other rites of passage celebrate changes that are wholly cultural, such as initiation into societies composed of people with special interests, such as, for example, fraternities.

Rites of passage similar to the Ikwe-ezi that involve progressing pubertal girls into adulthood are performed in other parts of Nigeria and throughout Africa, such as the Dipo rite of the Krobo people of the Eastern Region in Ghana. Anorkor, Christopher and Belgrave (2021) write that the aim of the Dipo is to assist pubertal girls to move into adulthood by shaping moral values and social responsibilities, preventing unsafe sexual behavior, and learning home management skills. However, unlike the Ikwe-ezi rite, which is performed each time a girl sees her first menstrual flow, Anorkor, Christopher, and Belgrave go on to state that the Dipo ritual takes place every year in April. The training portion of the ritual is designed to last for several weeks and each day represents an important step towards adulthood. The last stage involves the girls being purified on the bank of the sacred river, stripped naked and washed, their hair cut and finally prepared to wear the beautiful and colourful glass beads that are typical of the region, an important symbol of femininity, beauty and wealth for the Krobo woman.

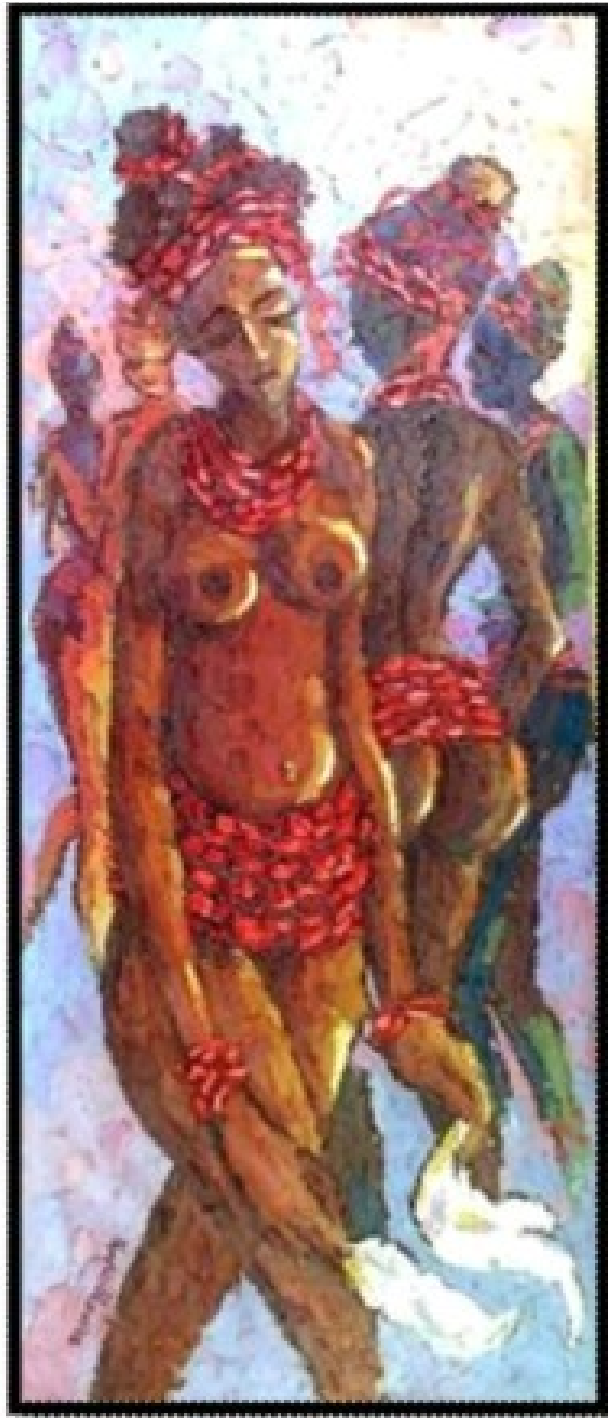


Plate 1: *Virgin Dance* depicts virgin girls undergoing a rite of passage. The painting is an attempt to portray how most rites of passage in Africa that have to do with social status would require that the participants strip nude in the process of performing certain parts - which, of course, was frowned at by Christianity.

Title: *Virgin Dance*

Artist: Etim Ekpenyong

Medium: Etimpaste (an alternative water-soluble painting medium)

Year: 2010



Plate 2: *Virgins of Our Land* is a surrealistic rendition of the Ikwe-Ezi rite of passage. The calabash that represents the heads of the girls symbolizes vessels of virtue: because these girls have been able to preserve their virginity, and by so doing honour their family and community, they are highly regarded by the whole community. Moreover, like the painting in Plate 1, this piece also seeks to portray that point of the rite of passage where nudity is demanded from the individual who is being transited from one social status to the other - an aspect that Christianity objects to.

Title: *Virgins of Our Land*

Artist: Etim Ekpenyong

Medium: Etimpaste (an alternative water-soluble painting medium)

Year: 2010

Thus, in order to prevent the extinction of such rite of passage, both parties (the Traditionalists and the agents of the new religion) came to a compromise by restructuring the ceremony to suit both parties. Hence the ritual was preserved for generations to come.

The Rites Of Passage of Ikwe-ezi in Mgbidi before Its Alteration by Christianity

According to oral tradition in Mgbidi and corroborated by artist Michael Chukuwemeka Ikobi, the precolonial Ikwe-ezi rite of passage began when a girl saw her first menstrual flow. She was required to inform her parents, after which her parents were mandated to notify the entire community with one or two gunshots. Then she was sent to the stream to fetch water with which to bathe in preparation for Ikwe-ezi, after which the *fatten room* process would commence. A booth with a thatched roof was built for her in her father's compound in which she underwent the fattening ritual. The young girl invited her friends to gather long stones of local chalk with which they prepared *uhie*, a lotion made from the red rock that the girl applied to her skin every day until the end of the *fatten room* retreat, which should have lasted for two weeks. During her retreat, she did not perform any house chores; rather, she remained in her hut grinding *uhie* for immediate use. Throughout this period, special delicacies and delicious meals were prepared by her mother for her to eat to enhance her health and beauty because, after the Ikwe-ezi, it was hoped that diligent and responsible suitors would woo her.

Immediately after the *fatten room* period, Chief Achonu explains that every girl who performed the traditional ritual was required to walk round the market with both breasts bare, so that people (especially the elderly women) would be able to ascertain whether or not she was pregnant. If she was pregnant before entering the fattening room, on the day she went to the market with her breasts visible, she would be forever banished from the community (Duru).

According to Ikobi (2023), the next phase of the Ikwe-ezi was that the maiden would go to a river called Mmiri Nwataoma ('water of a beautiful child') with a small yam which was thrown into the river as a gift to the goddess Obana. When she did this, it meant she had completed the Ikwe-ezi ceremony, and that she was now pure.



Plate 3: Mmiri Nwataoma, the river where the girl performing the Ikwe-ezi is expected to go at the end of the ritual with a small yam. This yam will be thrown into the river as a gift to the goddess Obana.

Photographer: Comrade Madu Ogochukwu Gabriel
Year: 2022

After this had been done, two nights of celebration were held, where the girl distributed large quantities of coconut and fish to all who had come to celebrate with her. The yam, coconuts, and fish that the girl gave to her well-wishers were gift items - symbols of gratitude. This gift-giving part of the ceremony was performed on two different nights; the first on the Orié market day called *Ikpobaaliudu ego*. Chief Achonu states further that the second ceremony was done on Eke market day, and it was called *Ibuoyo*. On these two days, the girl was required to give out a coconut and a fish to her guests who came to congratulate her (Duru). The guests may have reciprocated her good gesture by giving her money. During these two days, the celebrant would dance to traditional folk music, often to the delight of her guests, and she was likely to be showered with gifts.

Ikwe-ezi Mgbidi and the Alterations by Christianity

Christianity was a new religion first brought to the Igbo nation by European missionaries Rev. Schon and his associates at the shores of the River Niger, and soon followed by many others. Chukwuma O. Okeke, Christopher N. Ibenwa, and Gloria Tochukwu Okeke, in their 2017 article 'Conflicts between African Traditional Religion and Christianity in Eastern Nigeria: The Igbo Example,' state that when Christianity arrived in Igbo land in 1857 the

traditional religion of the Igbo people had a serious contender. According to the authors, initially the challenges which Christianity posed to the traditional religion were not regarded as grave by the people because conversion to Christianity at the early stage was not an easy task.

Christian missionaries and authorities found several aspects of the Ikwe-ezi ritual objectionable. As Christianity spread and gathered momentum in Mgbidi, the church saw a need either to abolish or to modify the Ikwe-ezi rites of passage to suit Christian doctrines. First they objected to the fact that the girls were required to perform part of this ritual nude, then they could not accept the girls' dealings with Obana, goddess of the river, particularly that they had to go to the stream, dip their feet into the water, and then visit the shrine of the goddess. Christians sought to eradicate the ritual and initially the Traditionalists resisted. Sadly, this resulted in the outbreak of violence and many lives were lost. Eventually, for the sake of peace, and in order to preserve and transmit for future generations the Ikwe-ezi rite of passage, the Traditionalists accepted the reformation of the ritual.

The new form of the rite of passage still begins when a maiden sees her first menstrual blood, which is followed with one or two gunshots; the next stage (though optional) is the fatten room period. Going to the stream to fetch water to bathe is also optional. Moreover, the modified Ikwe-ezi omits both the baring of both breasts during a public visit to the market and the girl's visit to the shrine of the water goddess, considered to be too pagan. However, the new ritual allows the girl to bare one of her breasts in public while concealing the other during the visit to the market. The exchange of gifts, especially food, was retained and the feasting was extended into the Christian church. Punishments for pregnancy during the Ikwe-ezi ritual persist.

Currently, any girl found to be with child while performing the Ikwe-ezi will be forever banished from the community, never to set foot in it again. Although she is allowed to travel through the land in a vehicle, she must not set her feet on the soil; if she attempts this, she will be lynched and the family will pay dearly for it (Duru). If the girl were to die, her body would not be buried in her homeland because she has defiled herself through fornication and pregnancy; her corpse automatically becomes unclean, and burying her in her homeland becomes a taboo. Chief Evaristus Igbeleje (AchKuchiyerewata) (2023) stressed that if a banished girl sneaks in and out of the community unnoticed, her parents will pay dearly for it because the gods of the land that sees all will find them out and mete appropriate punishment on them; they will continue to suffer the wrath of the gods until they appease the gods for consenting to their daughter's visit, for it defiles the land and may have adverse effect on the soil and harvest.

According to Chief Marcel Ogbeleje, the Chairman of Umuokpara Mgbidi Village association, Lagos State chapter:

Ikwe-ezi is a part of our culture and tradition. Therefore, any girl who is of age and did not undergo this ceremony will not be regarded as a native of Mgbidi. It is called 'Fatten room'. It is done when a young girl sees her first menstrual period. The influence of Christian religious on it is that some certain aspects of the tradition has been amended, such as nudity and going of Obana shrine and drop a small yam and going to the stream dip their legs into the water, after which they are required to collect some water with a small clay pots. All these have been stopped due to the opposition by Christians. (Ogbeleje, M. 2021)

Ogbeleje reveals that also motivating the Traditionalists to accept these reforms was that, while these girls went about the community nude, they made themselves vulnerable to sexual assault by unscrupulous men. He further explains that after the first celebration, the next and the final one comes after four days. It is the bigger ceremony. Food, assorted drinks, and music will be made available as family and friends join in celebrating and rejoicing that the girl has successfully transited from one social status to the other. She is now free to marry if she so wishes. Moreover, even if she eventually gets pregnant while still in her father's house, it will not be considered a problem unlike if she got pregnant without first undertaking the Ikwe-ezi rite of passage. Suffice to say that the corpse of a banished girl will not be buried in her hometown.

The advantage of the Ikwe-Ezi, it is that our young girls are preserved until after the fatten room ritual because they acknowledge the implications of getting pregnant before the Ikwe-ezi, and the parents are also very careful to educate their daughters about the implications of them mingling with male friends before the rite of passage. Because of all the modifications by Christianity, this ceremony is preserved from generation to generation due to the consensus. Therefore, both Christians and the Traditionalists are required to make their daughters who are of age partake in the Ikwe-ezi or else such will be completely ex-communicated from the entire town. (Ogbeleje, 2021)

Due to the fusion of Christian beliefs, the rite is rounded-up with a thanksgiving ceremony at the church. Moreover, at present times, even Traditionalists do not parade their daughters at the market. But they still make their daughters expose one of their breasts while the other is covered with an African print. (Ikobi, 2021)

Presently, both parties (the Traditionalists and the Christians) seem to be satisfied with the way the Ikwe-ezi is carried out. Igbeleje (2023) expounds that the very essence of the Ikwe-ezi is to guard pubertal girls against promiscuity, so in as much as the parents of a girl who has seen her first menstrual flow have agreed to have their daughter perform the Ikwe-ezi (despite the alterations by Christianity), all are satisfied. Igbeleje (2023) further explains that the Traditionalists will only frown at those parents who refuse to allow their daughter to perform the Ikwe-ezi, or do so when their daughter is no longer a teenager. This censure is because, according to custom, the Ikwe-ezi is meant to be performed when the girl is between the ages of thirteen and fourteen years of age, as soon as she sees her first menstrual period.

After the alteration of the Ikwe-ezi ritual by Christianity, there now exists two versions of it, as explained by Chief Evaristus Igbeleje (2023): the first version is performed by Traditionalists and Christians who choose to identify themselves with the reformed Ikwe-ezi and make their daughters undergo the rite. The second version is performed on behalf of absent Mgbidi people by their relatives in the village with or without their consent; this version allows the reformed Ikwe-ezi to be performed *in absentia*.

Ikwe-Ezi in Absentia

Ikobi (2023) explains that some Christians of Mgbidi who wish to identify with the Ikwe-ezi, but due to distance between their city or country of residence and Mgbidi are not able to appear with their daughter, can request for the ritual to be held even though the girl is absent. Such Christians will give their consent to relatives in the village who wish to carry out the Ikwe-ezi on their behalf; they do this by sending money to these relatives for purchase of the ritual items. Then, the rite will be done by their relatives in Mgbidi on their behalf *in absentia*.

Furthermore, although diehard Christians may vow never to participate in the Ikwe-ezi ritual, Ikobi (2023) discovered that some of their close relatives in Mgbidi – grandmothers or aunts of pubertal daughters – have resolved to perform the rite on their behalf even without their consent since, according to tradition, it is a taboo for a girl that has reached puberty not to undergo the Ikwe-ezi. “The Ikwe-ezi can now be performed *in absentia* with or without the consent of the parents of the girl.”

To perform the rite *in absentia*, Ikobi states that, even though the girl does not appear in the village to undergo the Ikwe-ezi (and that, therefore, the elderly women will not be able to ascertain whether or not she is pregnant), there are alternative methods available for the ritual’s success. Primary among these is an announcement by the girl’s relative to the entire community that their granddaughter or niece in the city or in diaspora has

reached puberty, calling out their name, the native gun is SHOT (a fundamental aspect of the ritual), the girl is not pregnant, and has been abstaining from sexual relationships with the opposite sex. The family member will then proceed to buy all the ritual items such as yam, coconut, and fish which she will give out as gifts to well-wishers; all this may be done without the knowledge of the girl and her parents.

The present versions of the Ikwe-ezi are essentially meant to continue the public intervention of Mgbidi elders and the exercising of their rights in the demonstration of a girl's attainment of womanhood, as well as anchoring the cultural identity and heritage of the Mgbidi community.

A Set of Mosaic Paintings by Michael Chukuwemeka Ikobi: A Visual Narrative of a Step-by-step Process of the Ikwe-ezi Mgbidi Rite of Passage

The following body of mosaic paintings by Michael Chukuwemeka Ikobi is a visual documentation of the Ikwe-ezi in Mgbidi. In this section of the article, brief descriptions of the mosaic paintings are done based on medium, theme, colour and style. The mosaic paintings will further preserve and document in visual form the ritual, and aid its smooth transmission from one generation to another.



Plate 4: *Maidenhead* is a mosaic painting produced in 2018. The painting is composed of a stylized female genital with a drop of blood depicting the first menstrual flow of a girl; and the predominant colour is purple.

Title: *Maidenhead*

Medium: Mosaic on tarpaulin

Dimensions: 98 x 77 cm

Artist: Michael Chukuwemeka Ikobi



Plate 5: *EgbeEzi* is a mosaic painting produced in 2018. The form is created in the representational domain; it is a spark of light from a gunshot that heralds the commencement of Ikwe-ezi. Depicting a fundamental part of the Ikwe-ezi Mgbidi of Imo state. The predominant colours are deep blue used to depict the sky, and the yellow spark from the gun shot.

Title: *EgbeEzi*

Medium: Mosaic on velvet

Dimensions: 66 x 61 cm

Artist: Michael Chukuwemeka Ikobi



Plate 6: *Adaora* is a mosaic produced in 2018 on Masonite board. The form is created in the realistic domain depicting the joy and pride exhibited by virgin girls who partake in the Ikwe-ezi Mgbidi of Imo state. The painting is composed of a single figure of a maiden robed in a loincloth wrapped round her chest with a string of red coral beads adorns her head: one of the traditional attires designed for the rite of passage of the maidens of Ikwe-ezi in Mgbidi Imo state. The colour scheme is predominantly blue.

Title: *Adaora*

Medium: Mosaic on Masonite board

Dimensions: 61cm x 92 cm

Artist: Michael Chukuwemeka Ikobi



Plate 7: *At the Stream* is a mosaic painting produced in 2018. It is composed of two feminine hands whose wrists are adorned with coral beads; the hands bear a clay pot and fetch water from the stream. The mosaic painting depicts the part of the rite where the girls are required to go the stream and fetch water with a clay pot.

Title: *At the Stream*

Medium: Mosaic on canvas

Dimensions: 61 x 61 cm

Artist: Michael Chukuwemeka Ikobi



Plate 8: *NmiriNwataoma* is a mosaic painting produced in 2018 on Masonite board, depicting the period before the fatten room, as the maidens return from the stream where they went to fetch water as part of the rite. The painting is composed of a stylized female figure bearing a well decorated clay pot of water on her head. And the colour scheme of the painting is brown.

Title: *NmiriNwataoma*

Medium: Mosaic on Masonite board

Dimensions: 61 x 61 cm

Artist: Michael Chukuwemeka Ikobi



Plate 9: *The Bath* is a mosaic painting produced in 2018. The painting is composed of a single nude female figure bathing in preparation for the Ikwe-ezi; her hair is elaborately made. “The Bath” depicts the period before the maidens commence the fatten room ritual.

Title: *The Bath*

Medium: Mosaic on canvas

Dimensions: 61 x 61 cm

Artist: Michael Chukuwemeka Ikobi



Plate 10: *After the Bath* is a mosaic painting produced in 2018. The painting is composed of a single female figure dressed in a white wrapper tied round her chest and another piece of white cloth wrapped round her head. The colour scheme is chiefly yellow and white.

Title: *After the Bath*

Medium: Mosaic on canvas

Dimensions: 76 x 76 cm

Artist: Michael Chukuwemeka Ikobi



Plate 11: *Neka* is a Mosaic painting produced in 2018 on Masonite board; the colour scheme is predominantly brown. The painting is composed of a maiden robed in a loincloth with her left breast exposed; moreover, she bears on her right shoulder a neatly folded wrapper that conceals her right breast; a string of coral beads adorns her neck.

Title: *Neka*

Dimensions: 61 x 92 cm

Medium: Mosaic on Masonite board

Artist: Michael Chukuwemeka Ikobi



Plate 12: *The Report* is a mosaic painting produced in 2018 on Masonite board. It is composed of four female figures dressed in blouses, wrappers and head scarves, and they are in deep conversation with each other. The crux of their discussion is whether or not a particular maiden is pregnant after being assessed by their eagle eyes.

Title: *The Report*

Medium: Mosaic on Masonite board

Dimensions: 91 x 61 cm

Artist: Michael Chukuwemeka Ikobi



Plate 13: *Hospitality* is a Mosaic painting produced in 2018 on straw board. It is composed of a single female figure dressed in a single wrapper wrapped round her chest, her hair is elaborately made, her neck is adorned with coral beads, and she bears in her hand a calabash containing gifts of coconut and smoked fish for her guests. The colour scheme is predominantly blue.

Title: *Hospitality*

Medium: Mosaic on straw board

Dimensions: 76 x 64 cm

Artist: Michael Chukuwemeka Ikobi



Plate 14: *Ji* is a mosaic painting produced in 2018 on Perspex. *Ji* means ‘yam.’ The mosaic shows a material element of the rite of passage ceremony of Ikwe-ezi of Mgbidi of Imo state. The image is composed of two yam tubers, one of which is half cut to reveal the white inner part of it, showing that it is of good quality. Yams are also something the girl may offer her guest in appreciation for honouring her invitation to celebrate her successful rite-of-passage. The colour scheme is blue and yellow.

Title: *Ji*

Medium: Mosaic on Perspex

Dimensions: 75 x 43 cm

Artist: Michael Chukuwemeka Ikobi



Plate 15: *The Gifts* is a mosaic painting produced in 2018 on canvas. The colour scheme is purple, and it is composed of three coconut fruits and two fish in a bowl. Coconut and smoked fish both plays a vital role in Ikwe-ezi Mgbidi because, after the girl performs the rite, she is required to share coconut and smoked fish in appreciation to the monetary gifts she may receive from her visitors.

Title: *The Gifts*

Medium: Mosaic on canvas

Dimensions: 76 x 76 cm

Artist: Michael Chukuwemeka Ikobi

Conclusion

The Ikwe-ezi Mgbidi rite-of-passage has been in existence a very long time. It remains a well-established ceremony because both the young and old amongst Traditionalists and Christians within the Mgbidi communities have given their consent to its performance. Therefore, it was successfully preserved and has been transmitted from one generation to the other, from precolonial times until today.

For any custom or tradition to be successfully transmitted from generation to generation, it must enjoy the consent of everyone within the given community irrespective of their religious backgrounds, or else such a rite or festival will gradually fizzle out. Religion is a powerful and jealous force, and each religion demands from its members total adherence to its doctrines. Christianity forbids its members from exposing their private parts in public for any reason, nor does it permit its members to visit the shrines of idols. Therefore, for the Ikwe-ezi Mgbidi rites of passage to survive unto the next generations in Imo state, the Traditionalists had to yield to Christian reforms. In this process, the ritual lost its links with the river goddess, but salvaged its implicit connection with the fertility of the land. We know that this connection remains because when asked if the disappearance of the Ikwe-ezi rite-of-passage would have consequences for the whole community, Igbeleje (2023) points out that there would be dire consequences indeed since the gods gave their consent to ritual and, presumably, failure to enact it would lead to their displeasure.

However, thanks to a compromise between the Traditionalists and the Christians, Igbeleje said the issue of the Ikwe-ezi disappearing is not likely even though some diehard Christians have vowed never to be partakers of the rite. In a type of backlash to the doggedness of these Christians, some of their relatives residing in Mgbidi have resolved to perform Ikwe-ezi in the village on their behalf even without their consent. In a different situation, some Christian indigenes of Mgbidi who are in the diaspora, as well as those residing in cities far from Mgbidi who chose to identify with the Ikwe-ezi, authorize their relatives to carry out the Ikwe-ezi on their behalf by sending money to them. Both these types of ritual – those conducted without the consent of the parents and those who are conducted on behalf of people who cannot physically appear in the village – will be performed by their relatives in Mgbidi on their behalf *in absentia*.

The Ikwe-ezi Mgbidi is exclusive to the communities within Mgbidi; neighbouring communities such as Ibi-Asoegbe, Aji, Amiri, Otulu, Ozara and Oguta are not partakers of the Ikwe-ezi. These different communities may have their own rites of passage exclusively designed for transiting their pubertal girls into adulthood. The Ikwe-ezi came into existence centuries ago, precisely on 10 February 1768, and has undergone dramatic

adjustments - not without resistance from the Traditionalists of the community. However, in spite of this, Mgbidi elders have managed to maintain the ritual as a functioning institution to date, and they are pleased with present state of the Ikwe-ezi because as regards the alteration, they were among the agents of change rather than the passive recipients of Christian-inspired dogma. It is therefore recommended that the Ikwe-ezi Mgbidi should be well documented in book form and preserved. Moreover, a museum should be established where paintings, sculptural pieces, photographs and paraphernalia associated with the Ikwe-ezi be housed for future generations and for research purposes.

About the Author

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About the Mosaic Artist

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