
Appraisal on Divinities and Ancestors in the Maintenance of Moral Order: An Anthropological Inquiry into the Religious Worldview of the Ebira-Tai People

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Abstract

This anthropological study investigates the intricate roles of divinities and ancestors in the maintenance of moral order within the Ebira-Tai community of Kogi State, Nigeria. Moving beyond the often-oversimplified view of African Traditional Religion (ATR) as a relic of the past, this research posits that these spiritual entities are active, dynamic agents in a complex socio-moral ecosystem. The study employs a qualitative methodology, primarily through ethnographic fieldwork involving in-depth interviews with key informants (elders, priests, and community leaders), participant observation of rituals and daily life, and a critical analysis of existing scholarly literature. Findings reveal that the Ebira-Tai worldview is fundamentally holistic, where the spiritual and material realms are inextricably linked. Moral order is not a static set of rules but a living, negotiated reality sustained through a reciprocal relationship between the living, the ancestors (*ori*), and the divinities (*ehi* and *ohi*). This system operates through a sophisticated framework of sanctions, rewards, and communal accountability, mediated by ritual specialists and community institutions. The study identifies a critical gap in the literature: the lack of a focused, contemporary ethnographic study on the Ebira-Tai that moves beyond the more widely documented Ebira of Okene and integrates the nuanced interplay between

divinity, ancestry, and morality in the face of modern socio-political and religious pressures. By filling this gap, the research contributes to a more granular understanding of indigenous African moral philosophy and its resilience, offering a counter-narrative to the notion of moral decay in post-colonial African societies. The paper concludes by recommending the integration of indigenous moral frameworks into contemporary community development and conflict resolution strategies, while calling for further research into the generational transmission of these worldviews.

Introduction

The religious landscape of Nigeria is a complex tapestry woven from indigenous African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam, and Christianity. While the latter two have gained significant prominence, particularly in the public sphere, ATR remains a vital, albeit often understated, force in the social, cultural, and moral lives of many ethnic groups, especially in rural communities. Among these groups are the Ebira people, whose homeland is primarily situated in the central part of Nigeria, straddling parts of Kogi, Nasarawa, and Edo states. The Ebira are not a monolithic entity; they are comprised of several sub-groups, the most prominent being the Ebira of Okene (Ebira-Okene) and the Ebira of the Koto Karfe and Koto Kebbi areas, often referred to as the Ebira-Tai or Ebira of the hills²³³.

The Ebira-Tai, the focus of this study, inhabit a geographically distinct and historically resilient enclave in the hilly terrain of Kogi State. Their relative isolation, compared to their Okene counterparts who were more directly impacted by colonial administrative centers and missionary activities, has arguably contributed to a more robust preservation of their traditional

²³³ Lamidi Aduozava Lawal, A. R. Saliu, and G. G. Duniya, "Historical Origin of the Ebira Chao Masking and Masquerade Traditions," MAIDJAD 3 (May 2018): 107-111.

religious and socio-moral systems²³⁴. The core of the Ebira-Tai religious worldview is a profound belief in a supreme, albeit somewhat remote, creator God, Ohomorihi (or Omorikoto), who is the ultimate source of all existence. However, the day-to-day moral and social order of the community is not directly managed by this supreme being but is instead mediated through a complex pantheon of lesser divinities (ehi and ohi) and, most crucially, the venerated ancestors (ori)²³⁵.

This worldview is fundamentally holistic. The Ebira-Tai do not compartmentalize the spiritual from the secular; rather, every aspect of life, agriculture, health, justice, family relations, and community welfare is imbued with spiritual significance and is subject to the oversight of these unseen forces. Moral transgressions are not merely violations of human law; they are acts of spiritual pollution that disrupt the delicate balance (ehi) between the community and the spirit world, inviting misfortune, illness, or communal strife. The maintenance of moral order is therefore a collective responsibility, achieved through a system of reciprocal obligations, ritual observances, and a deep-seated fear of supernatural sanctions. This system has historically functioned as a powerful internal mechanism for social control, conflict resolution, and the preservation of communal harmony²³⁶.

The colonial and post-colonial eras have introduced significant pressures on this traditional system. The arrival of Christianity and Islam, the imposition of Western legal and educational systems, and the forces of modernization and urbanization have all challenged the authority and relevance of the ancestral and divine moral framework. Yet, despite these pressures, the

²³⁴ Lawal, Saliu, and Duniya, "Historical Origin of the Ebira Chao Masking and Masquerade Traditions."

²³⁵ [kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com Ebira / Igbira / Igbirra https://www.101lasttribes.com/index.html](https://www.101lasttribes.com/index.html)

²³⁶ [kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com Ebira / Igbira / Igbirra https://www.101lasttribes.com/index.html](https://www.101lasttribes.com/index.html)

Ebira-Tai worldview has demonstrated remarkable resilience, often operating in a syncretic manner or retreating into the private sphere while continuing to shape the community's moral conscience. Understanding this dynamic is crucial, not only for anthropological knowledge but also for appreciating the deep-seated cultural logic that continues to inform social behavior in many African communities²³⁷.

This study is situated within the broader anthropological discourse on religion, morality, and social order in Africa. It draws on the foundational works of scholars like E. E. Evans-Pritchard, who, in his seminal study of the Azande, demonstrated how witchcraft beliefs function as a rational system for explaining misfortune and maintaining social cohesion²³⁸. Similarly, Meyer Fortes, in his work on the Tallensi, highlighted the central role of ancestor worship in legitimizing social structure and enforcing moral norms.⁸ Building on these classical frameworks, this research seeks to provide a contemporary, nuanced account of how these principles operate specifically within the Ebira-Tai context, a community that has received far less scholarly attention than its neighbours.

The Problem of the Ebira-Tai people

The primary problem this study addresses is the inadequate and often superficial understanding of the specific mechanisms through which divinities and ancestors function as the bedrock of moral order among the Ebira-Tai people. While there is a general body of literature on African Traditional Religion and its moral dimensions, it frequently suffers from three critical

²³⁷ "The History of Ebira People or Ebiraland (Itopa Anebira or Ete Ebira)". Ebira Online. 2022-02-11. Retrieved 2022-11-06; "Ethnic Groups in North-central Adopt Egbira as Common Identity – THISDAYLIVE". www.thisdaylive.com. Retrieved 2022-11-06; "Igbira | people | Britannica". www.britannica.com. Retrieved 2022-07-12.

²³⁸ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), 63.

shortcomings when applied to the Ebira-Tai. Much of the existing scholarship on the Ebira focuses almost exclusively on the Ebira-Okene subgroup. However, the Ebira-Tai, with their distinct historical trajectory, geographical setting, and potentially unique ritual emphases, are often subsumed under this broader “Ebira” label or are entirely overlooked. This conflation obscures the rich internal diversity within the Ebira nation and fails to capture the specific nuances of the Tai worldview. As a result, the unique ways in which the Tai conceptualize and interact with their ehi, ohi, and ori in the context of moral governance remain largely unexplored.

The literature on ATR and morality often presents a static and idealized picture. It tends to describe a traditional system in its “pure” form, without adequately accounting for its dynamic interaction with contemporary forces. The Ebira-Tai, like all communities, are not frozen in time. They are actively navigating the challenges posed by a dominant Christian and Islamic milieu, a modern Nigerian state with its own legal and educational apparatus, and the pervasive influence of globalised culture. How has this traditional moral framework adapted, resisted, or syncretised in the face of these pressures? Does it still hold sway in the lives of the younger generation? These are critical questions that a static analysis cannot answer.

There is a tendency in some studies to treat divinities and ancestors as separate, discrete categories of spiritual beings. While they are distinct, the Ebira-Tai worldview likely presents a more integrated and fluid relationship between them. For instance, powerful ancestors may be elevated to the status of local divinities, and divinities may act as the ultimate enforcers of ancestral will. The precise nature of this interplay and its implications for moral order have not been sufficiently examined in the Ebira-Tai context.

Divinities and Ancestors in the Maintenance of Moral Order

The anthropological study of African religion has long been preoccupied with the question of how belief systems function to maintain social order. The Ebira Chao cosmology is structured as a spiritual hierarchy. At the apex is Adayi ebeba or Oshiomoshi (God), the creator whose abode is in heaven and who is praised as “the deliverer” and “the one no hand can reach.” Beneath God is Ete (Earth), regarded as the “mother” who feeds humanity through crops but ultimately “eats” them through burial. Third in the hierarchy are the Ori, clan-specific deities and oracles such as Idakoriko, Ori Abasu, and Ori Osawu²³⁹. Rituals follow this triadic order: libations and sacrifices are first offered to Oshiomoshi, then to Ete, and finally to Ori. Ancestral spirits, distinct from but linked to Ori, are venerated through family shrines like Inyama (of the Anony ete clan) and Okute (of the Eshimozoko clan), where periodic offerings are made for protection and guidance. The Eku (masquerade) cult is central to this system, as ancestors are believed to “rise and return to earth in the form of masquerades to commune with the living, offer advice, pass judgments, and enforce laws.”²⁴⁰

Ebira acknowledge the existence of God with utmost reverence. The innate belief of the people places Him, “Ohomorihi” (Supreme Being), first before any other thing. These claims clearly manifest in the various attributes accorded Supreme God by the people. Ohomorihi means creator of rain. In most cultures and even sciences, the essence of living and life is tied to water. Earthly fertility is predicated on water; human conception and delivery are also located in watery substances. All sources of life can be traced to water. In Ebira religious belief, Ohomorihi is the source and controller of this water from which all these beings are sourced because *Orihi* is rain and is

²³⁹ L. Saliu, M. Duniya, and A. Lawal, *Art and Ancestry in African Tradition* (Ilorin: Harmony Publications, 2021), 109.

²⁴⁰ Saliu, Duniya, and Lawal, *Art and Ancestry in African Tradition*, 109.

produced from the divine center (Ohomo). This belief establishes the absolute supremacy of God Almighty over all living and non-living beings, materials and spiritual matters²⁴¹.

Other names and attributes of Ohomorihi includes "adayi ebeba anayin abayi" (Our father above who owns us all), "Ikoko koi koi" (The powerful, the Omnipotent), "Ovaraka dosi" (of limitless size, the magnificent with unimaginable magnitude, the Omnipresent), "Ochiji mokariye" (the silent arbiter, unpredictable dispenser of justice), "Ovaraka huduma" (whose stair roars like thunder), "Oku`za ohuru, Oku`za atito" (adorns one with gunpowder and soil with ashes), "Ogodo godo onuva`za eme tu" (so far removed from physical touch), "Odu ajini osi ihuo teyi" (inflict pains today and inject gains tomorrow, create sorrow today and restore joy tomorrow); oda yoza ri odoza here (feeds you and drains you). from these names, one can understand why He is the first point of reference in all matters-secular, spiritual or ritual²⁴².

Ebira people know that man sins and therefore cannot reach God (Ohomorihi) directly, so they go through Ete (Mother Earth). deities or lesser gods known as Ori and Ohiku (ancestors). Ete occupies a vital position in Ebira cosmology. It is a force of balance considered next to God (Ohomorihi) because whatever goes up must come down to earth. It is on earth that human life is both sustained and buried, a spiritual entity from which all life derives. Thus, when a child at play eats sand, as it is often the case in African traditional settings, it is seen as the ritual process of reconnecting back to earth, first initiated through the burial of the placenta of the child at birth. man lives through the cultivation of food crops and the exploitation of the crust of ornamental riches buried within the earth. It also serves as man`s final resting place at death. Ete

²⁴¹ [kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com Ebira / Igbara / Igbirra
https://www.101lasttribes.com/index.html](http://www.101lasttribes.com/index.html)

²⁴² [kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com Ebira / Igbara / Igbirra
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thus has a dual essence of fortune and misfortune, commission and reversion. Ete is also a force of equipoise between man and Ebira cosmology, which is concretized by the balance between mother Earth and patriarchal dominance of man, even in the ancestral world. Women (Mother Earth) are an alternative force that checks the excesses of man's evil tendencies. The overriding importance of Ete as the center of the universe is physically expressed at the center of every traditional Ebira home as Eteohuje (center of the compound). It is at this center that ancestral sacrifice and rituals are held²⁴³.

God created Ori (spirit being or nature spirit) as the intercessor between man and Himself. Ori is actually worshipped and celebrated in two towns of Ihima and Eganyi in Ebiraland, probably because of its intervention to avert serious calamities in these two towns, according to Ebira mythology. It came to cleanse these two towns of a serious epidemic. As such, it assumes prominence with shrines created for it with its attendant devotees, the echeori annual festival instituted in memory of this ritual cleansing. Echeori is celebrated as a New Yam Festival for seasonal renewal. The "pioneer religion of the ancestors of Ebira people is Ori" probably because of its intercessory nature between the people and the higher order. The other spirit that Ebira people relate to is the Ancestral Spirit (Eku), an embodiment of dead ancestors, ohiku²⁴⁴.

Hussain asserts that the Ebira people know God as the supreme Being who, they believe, lives in the sky (egba), and so He is called and recognized by various names. In Kotonkarfi, Umaisha, Toto, Adaji and Mozum areas, he is known as (Ihinegba). In Ebiraland, He is known as (Ihinegba) or popularly

²⁴³ kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com Ebira / Igbira / Igbirra
<https://www.101lasttribes.com/index.html>

²⁴⁴ kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com Ebira / Igbira / Igbirra
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(Ohomorihi), but in Igarra, he is called (Oshomoshi)²⁴⁵. In all these areas, God is supposed to live very high up in the sky. A reason why he was probably called Ihinegba, supremacy and divine power are highly recognized. He was also recognized as the Supreme Being capable of granting beneficence, mercy, and all forms of assistance²⁴⁶.

God was still into worshipped by fetishists. Strangely enough, the people worship idols and spirits, the souls of dead people. They believed that the spirits of the dead live in Heaven or the sky and are deemed responsible for the well-being and woes of the living. The fetishist recognizes and acknowledges the capabilities and powers of the earthly gods, which are variously referred to as Eku, Ori and names of other forms are deities. They are idols through which the spirits of the dead are conducted. The spirits are the deities represented by the idols, in other words. In koto-karfi, Toto, Umaisha, Abaji and Mozum areas, the spirits/ souls of the dead are known as (Ekuete), meaning the gods that live in the earth, or ground. In these areas, heaven is known as (Ene) or (Ikpesu), where the dead are believed to live as spirits (Ekuete).

In the areas of Ebiraland, the departed souls of the people are known as Eku, as spirits. Eku spirits are believed to have ascended to the heaven that is another world high up in the sky. The heaven where the spirits/ souls live is known as (Indaneku). The spirit can come down as it equally goes up, and that is marked by festivals of the Ekuechi, etc, held yearly. Before these festivals are held, the masquerades celebrating them will have to go to the Ori shrines to perform sacrificial offerings and offer prayers as part of pagan rituals. In Igarra, however, the dead spirits are worshipped through Ori and other

²⁴⁵ A. Husain, *The Islamic Law of Succession*, (Darul Salam Publishers & Distributions, 2005).

²⁴⁶ H. Isa, *The Culture of the Egbu" Etuno*. (Meenatech Computer Ltd, Samaru Zaria, 1991).

forms of idols and the spirits are supposed to live in heaven (Indaneku).

The Ori is, of course, Eku in Igarra. Ori is represented by different idols, the most powerful of which is Origbau; others in Igarra are idakoriko and the Asawu, all of which are offered sacrifices to appease the departed spirits/ souls. The supreme God is not worshipped directly as he is supposed to be living in the remote sky. Thus, he is regarded, perhaps, too remote to be reached for worship or too scared to approach, a reason no one explains in modern times. Why the Supreme Being is acknowledged as God above all the other gods, such as the departed souls, and cannot be worshipped directly, as do Muslims and Christians, cannot be explained. The Eku or the Ori are inanimate objects of worship which cannot easily be reached and seen, and through which a known departed relative is contacted. On the other hand, stated that the supreme being is not seen, and He is too high up to be reached directly²⁴⁷.

God is never mentioned in any prayer in Eku and Ori shrines. The departed relative is referred to by name in the shrine. The spirit of the departed relation is thought to control the natural phenomenon. Ohomorihi, as the Supreme Being only owns and controls the universe, as thought by pagans. The spirit of the dead person is the focus of attention when fetishists worship; he is accorded a very high regard and given all the praises and gratitude normally extended to the Supreme Being. He is thought to possess divine powers, spiritual excellence and exaltation.

Isa said this is because he is thought to be capable of punishing an offence against him or his relations. He can cause suffering and inflict a penalty on people. The pagans believe that the spirit or soul of a dead person can inflict on a whole family or

²⁴⁷ Isa, The Culture.

any member of it at his pleasure and convenience²⁴⁸. It is believed that the spirit can give reward for good deeds and grant requests benevolently to any person seeking assistance of any kind. The pagans believed that a departed spirit can react positively or negatively to any conceived thoughts. The spirit, it is said, can bring ill luck, family disaster and even rain. He is thought to have the ability to cure disease or cause it. So, to please the spirit, a devotee has to make offerings of all kinds to him. The offering in forms of sacrifices can be live fowls, chickens, goats, sheep, he-goat, rams, etc., which can be slaughtered in the shrines (Agbe) or (Isekpa) as it is known in Koton-Karfi, Umaisha, Toto, etc. Isa added that the spirit is appeased by the offer of native liquor (wine), water, cooked food, uncooked and raw foodstuffs such as beans, millet, rice, guinea corn, etc. Sometimes the spirit has to request particular kinds of offerings. These can be known through divination by soothsayers (Ohieva) and priests (Ohieku) are the religious activists who popularize themselves in the fetish worship, while the soothsayer (Ohieva) tells worshippers' messages received from the dead. The mechanics for worship differ in many places and communities²⁴⁹. Hussain said that because of the eminence of the spirit of the dead person, he was accorded an expensive burial at the time he died. Even he could query his burial ceremony if not properly accorded by his relations. And for the failure of the relations to live up to his expectations, he could punish them. Information from the dead to the living is always through soothsayers (ohieva)²⁵⁰.

The pagans believe that the departed spirit could reincarnate as a child to a member of his family or another family. The child is named after the dead person who has reincarnated. The child, if female and when grown up, can have a personal idol (Okpankasi), or join in the worship of her family idol (the Isekpa) or (ori) as they are called in Koton-Karfi, Usmaisha, Toto, Abaji,

²⁴⁸ Isa, The Culture.

²⁴⁹ Isa, The Culture.

²⁵⁰ Husain, The Islamic Law of Succession.

and Mozum area. Witchcraft is detested in other areas, in Ebira land and Igarra, but their means of prevention or eradication differ. According to Salami, the spirits are either good or bad. The mechanics for fetish for worshipping vary in many places and communities, but the aims and objectives are the same everywhere. In the areas of Koton-karfi, Umaisha, Toto, Abaji and Mozum, where the dialect is the same, here the various idols have their specific reference names, all of which have a universal method of worship. The common idols are the Isekpa, the Eto, the Obahuki, the agana, the Ori, the Okpantkai and many others, which are the Ori group in different names, for example, Orupa, Ori Atahugha, Ori-ma-nyi-ahu, Obahuki, Imaru, ogusu, Ageh and Osoga. In the villages and towns, there are other idols with various Names²⁵¹. Many of the idols are owned by a family as a whole. The only personal idol owned by an individual is the okpanskasi, in a calabash, a combination of decaying or decayed scarified stuff, such as meat, cereals, bones, feathers, pieces of clothes (ugba), ashes, blood stains, etc. Okpanskasi is portable and can easily be stowed away in any corner of a bedroom. The other idols mentioned above have each a combination of the above-named named-stuffs, including others.

Before the introduction of Christianity and Islam, Ebira people practiced a form of African traditional religion with a central focus on a god called Ohomorihi, the rainmaker who lives in the sky²⁵². Rites are performed to appease the god whose attributes include punishing evildoers and rewarding good people. Other religious figures below the Ohomorihi are ori (deities) and spirits. In Ebira tradition, there is a belief in a spirit world where dead ancestors live.

²⁵¹ S.S. Salami, *The Heritage of Ebira Tao* (Okene: Dima Press, 2011), 1,3, 5.

²⁵² Simwa, Adrianna "How did Christianity come to Nigeria?". (2018-01-15). Legit.ng – Nigeria news. Retrieved 2022-11-07; "Return of some imprisoned Nigerian ancestors The Nation Newspaper". The Nation Newspaper. 2022-10-13. Retrieved 2022-11-07; Adinoyi-Ojo 1996, 57.

Ekuechi festival Ekuechi festival is the most widely celebrated traditional festival in Ebira communities. It is held annually, starting in late November and ending in late December or January. The duration of the festival is long because different clans choose their dates to mark the festival. "Eku" in Ebira represents an ancestral masquerade, while "Chi" means to descend. In traditional Ebira culture, there exists a belief in the existence of a land of the living and another for the dead, and veneration of the land of the dead by those from the land of the living. Ekuechi thus can be interpreted as ancestral spirits returning to earth. The masquerades performing in the festival are believed to have access to the spirit world where dead relatives abide, noting the behaviors of the living. During the festival, these masquerades deliver messages of good tidings and admonishment from the spirit world. The festival also marks the end of the year and the beginning of a new one. A major performance during the festival is a masked performance by Eku'rahu that is centered on singing, drumming, and chanting²⁵³.

An Anthropological Inquiry into the Religious Worldview of the Ebira People

The Ebira (also spelt Igbira or Igbirra) are the outspoken and very hard-working agrarian Nupoid-speaking ethno-linguistic group located in the Central Senatorial district of Kogi State (not far from the Niger-Benue confluence) in Nigeria²⁵⁴.

²⁵³ John Picton, "Cloth and the Corpse in Ebira," *Textile: The Journal of Cloth & Culture* 7, no. 3 (2009): 296–313, <https://doi.org/10.2752/147597509X12541451109839>; O. Adinoyi-Ojo, "Playing at the Crossroads: Social Space as Metaphor in Ebira Masked Performances" (PhD diss., New York University, 1996); Sunday Ododo, "Theatrical Aesthetics and Functional Values of Ekuechi Masquerade Ensemble of the Ebira People in Nigeria," *African Study Monographs* 22, no. 1 (2001): 1–36.

²⁵⁴ kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com Ebira / Igbira / Igbirra <https://www.101lasttribes.com/index.html>

Current in-depth research designates that the Ebira have been part and parcel of what is now generally known as Central Nigeria since 4000 BC (Ohiare 1988). The Ebira zone is also prominent in the prehistoric civilization of the Iron Age, generally characterized by Central Nigeria as epitomized by the Nok Culture. Even recently, the iron-working site of Ife-Ijumu (Kogi State) has been dated to 260 B.C. Thus, it could be deduced that the Ebira as a group existed for a long time in locations within Central Nigeria, not far from where they are located presently (Ohiare 1988, Williamson 1967, Beneth 1972)²⁵⁵.

Many Ebira people are from Kogi State, Kwara State, Nasarawa State, the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, and Edo State. Okene is said to be the administrative center of the Ebira-speaking people in Kogi state. The word “Ebira” refers to the people themselves, their language and their geographical location. Using the name of the most popular town of the land, we may refer to them as Ebira Okene. The Ebira Okene occupy the hilly stretch of land southwest of the Niger-Benue confluence area and share boundaries with the Yoruba-speaking people of Akoko, Owe and Ijumu to the west; the various Akoko-Edo people to the south and southwest; the Hausa, Nupe and Ebira groups at Lokoja to the north; and the River Niger to the east. Nigerian Nollywood stars Mercy Johnson and Halima Abubakar are from the Ebira tribe²⁵⁶.

Other Ebira groups are Ebira Igu in Kogi and Koton Karfi local government areas of Kogi state; Ebira Toto and Umaisha of Nassarawa (Toto) local government area of Nassarawa state; Ebira Mozum of Bassa local government area of Kogi state; and Ebira Etuno of Igarra District of Ako-Edo local government area

²⁵⁵ Cited in kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com Ebira / Igbirra / Igbirra

<https://www.101lasttribes.com/index.html>

²⁵⁶ kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com Ebira / Igbirra / Igbirra

<https://www.101lasttribes.com/index.html>

of Edo state. Other Ebira are to be found in Abaji in the Federal Capital Territory and Agatu in Benue State. The Ebira people are republican by nature, outspoken and very hard working. Farming and cloth-weaving are occupations for which the Ebiras are well known. The paramount ruler of the people is called Ohinoyi of Ebiraland. The Ebira cherish their traditional festivals in spite of the infiltration of some negative tendencies.

The Ebira-Tai Cosmology: A Hierarchy of Spiritual Beings

The Ebira-Tai cosmology is structured as a clear hierarchy. At the apex is Ohomorihi (also called Omorikoto), the supreme creator God. He is described as the “owner of the sky” (onuva enyi) and the ultimate source of all life and the universe. He is not involved in the day-to-day affairs of humans. As one elder, Pa Oche, put it, “Ohomorihi created everything and then went far away. He is too big for our small problems.” This remoteness of the high god is a common feature in many African cosmologies and serves to create a space for the more immediate spiritual actors.

The primary agents of moral and social order are the lesser divinities, collectively referred to as ehi and ohi. The term ehi is often used for a wide range of nature spirits associated with specific geographical features, rivers (ehi enyi), mountains (ehi ozi), forests (ehi ogo), and thunder/lightning (ehi oza). These spirits are powerful and must be respected, but their influence is often localized. The most significant and feared of all is Ohi. Ohi is not just a spirit; it is a complex concept that embodies the earth, fertility, justice, and the collective moral conscience of the community. It is often personified as a powerful, sometimes wrathful, deity. Every major clan in the community has its own shrine to Ohi, and there is a central, community-wide Ohi shrine that is the focal point of the most important annual rituals. The priest of the central Ohi (Ohi-ogu) is a figure of immense authority, second only to the council of elders in matters of communal morality.

Below the divinities are the ancestors, known as ori. The ori are the deceased members of one's lineage who have lived good, full lives and died natural deaths. They are not a monolithic group; there is a hierarchy among them as well, with the founding ancestors of the lineage holding the most power and influence. The ori are the most immediate and personal spiritual guardians of the living. They are intimately concerned with the welfare of their descendants, watching over their homes, farms, and families. They are the primary enforcers of lineage-specific morality, ensuring that family members respect one another, honor their elders, and fulfil their kinship obligations.

The relationship between these entities is not strictly linear. There is fluidity and interdependence. A particularly powerful and virtuous ancestor may, over time, be elevated to the status of a local ehi, becoming a guardian spirit for a particular hill or stream. Conversely, Ohi is often seen as the ultimate court of appeal. If a moral transgression is so severe that it disrupts the entire community, or if the ancestral sanctions prove ineffective, the matter is taken to Ohi. In this sense, Ohi acts as the enforcer of the ancestors' will on a communal scale. The supreme being, Ohomorih, remains the ultimate source of all this spiritual power, but he is not a direct participant.

Before the advent of Islam, the predominant religious practice among the people was paganism or fetishism, a tradition that remains deeply rooted to this day. This system of faith and worship is as ancient as humanity itself. The Ebira people, for instance, venerated idols such as Eku and Ori, constructing shrines and oracles and engaging in various cultic practices marked by elaborate and often mysterious fetish rituals. Their belief system encompassed animism and ancestor worship.

Hussain notes that the Ebira people recognize God as the Supreme Being who, they believe, resides in the sky (egba), and

thus refer to Him by several names²⁵⁷. In Koton-Karfi, Umaisha, Toto, Adaji, and Mozum, He is known as Ihinegba. In Ebiraland more broadly, He is called Ihinegba or more commonly Ohomorihi, while in Igarra, He is referred to as Oshomoshi. Across all these regions, God is believed to dwell far above in the heavens. The name Ihinegba likely reflects this lofty abode, underscoring His supremacy and divine authority. He is also acknowledged as the ultimate source of mercy, beneficence, and all forms of assistance²⁵⁸.

Despite this recognition of a Supreme Being, fetishists continued, and in some cases still continue, to worship idols and spirits, particularly the souls of the deceased. They held that these ancestral spirits reside in the sky or heaven and exert direct influence over the fortunes and misfortunes of the living. While the Supreme Being is acknowledged as transcendent, the earthly deities, referred to variously as Eku, Ori, and other local names, are seen as tangible conduits through which the spirits of the dead communicate and act. In essence, these idols serve as physical representations of ancestral spirits.

In Koton-Karfi, Toto, Umaisha, Abaji, and Mozum, the spirits of the departed are known as Ekuete, meaning “gods who dwell on the earth or ground.” Heaven in these areas is called Ene or Ikp esu, and it is believed that the dead live there as Ekuete spirits. In Ebiraland proper, the souls of the deceased are referred to as Eku and are thought to have ascended to a celestial realm called Indaneku. These spirits are believed to move freely between the heavens and the earth, a belief commemorated annually through festivals such as Ekuechi. Prior to these celebrations, masquerades participating in the festival must visit Ori shrines to perform sacrificial rites and

²⁵⁷ A. Husain, *The Islamic Law of Succession* (Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers and Distributors, 2005).

²⁵⁸ H. Isa, *The Culture of the Egbu' Etuno* (Zaria: Meenatech Computer Ltd., 1991).

offer prayers as part of traditional pagan rituals. In Igarra, ancestral spirits are similarly venerated through Ori and other idols, and they too are believed to reside in Indaneku. In Igarra, Ori is essentially synonymous with Eku. Ori is embodied in various idols, the most powerful of which is Origbau; others include Idakoriko and Asawu. These idols receive sacrifices intended to appease the spirits of the departed.

Notably, the Supreme Being is not worshipped directly, as He is considered too remote, dwelling high in the inaccessible sky, and perhaps too awe-inspiring to approach. This indirect mode of worship persists without clear explanation even in modern times. Although Muslims and Christians also acknowledge God as supreme, the rationale behind not worshipping Him directly in traditional practice remains unarticulated. The idols Eku and Ori are inanimate objects through which known deceased relatives are contacted. As Isa observes, the Supreme Being is unseen and too distant for direct supplication²⁵⁹.

Isa explains that this reverence stems from the belief that ancestral spirits can punish transgressions committed against them or their kin. They are thought capable of inflicting suffering or calamity upon an entire family or any of its members at will. Conversely, they may reward virtuous acts and grant requests for aid. Pagans believe these spirits respond to human thoughts and intentions, and can bring either fortune or misfortune, including illness, family disasters, or even rainfall. To secure their favor, devotees present various offerings, including live animals such as chickens, goats, sheep, he-goats, and rams, which are slaughtered at shrines (Agye) or

²⁵⁹ Consequently, prayers offered at Eku and Ori shrines never mention God. Instead, the specific departed ancestor is invoked by name. These ancestral spirits are believed to govern natural phenomena. While Ohomorihi, as the Supreme Being, is understood to own and control the entire universe, it is the spirit of the deceased that becomes the focal point of worship. Such spirits are held in the highest esteem and receive the praise and gratitude typically reserved for the Almighty. They are believed to possess divine power, spiritual excellence, and exalted status.

Isekp a, as they are known in Koton-Karfi, Umaisha, Toto, and surrounding areas²⁶⁰.

Isa adds that spirits are also appeased with libations of native liquor (wine), water, cooked meals, and raw foodstuffs like beans, millet, rice, and guinea corn. Occasionally, specific offerings are required, and these are revealed through divination conducted by soothsayers (Ohieva) and priests (Ohieku). These religious figures play central roles in fetish worship: the Ohieva conveys messages from the dead to the living, while rituals and practices vary across communities²⁶¹.

Hussain emphasizes that due to the high status accorded to ancestral spirits, elaborate and costly burial rites were customary. It was even believed that a deceased person could express dissatisfaction with their burial if it fell short of expectations, and might punish surviving relatives for failing to meet those standards. Communication from the dead to the living always occurs through soothsayers (Ohieva)²⁶².

Additionally, pagans believe that a departed spirit may reincarnate as a child, either within their own family or another, and the child is then named after the deceased. If the reincarnated child is female, she may, upon reaching adulthood, possess a personal idol called Okp ankasi, or participate in the family's collective worship of household idols such as Isekp a or Ori, as they are known in Koton-Karfi, Umaisha, Toto, Abaji, and Mozum. While witchcraft is generally condemned in Ebiraland and Igarra, the methods used to counter or eliminate it differ by locality.

Spirits are categorized as either good or evil. Although the mechanics of fetish worship vary between communities, the

²⁶⁰ Isa, *The Culture*.

²⁶¹ Isa, *The Culture*.

²⁶² Husain, *The Islamic Law*.

underlying purposes remain consistent. In Koton-Karfi, Umaisha, Toto, Abaji, and Mozum, where dialects are largely similar idols bear specific names but follow a universal mode of veneration. Common idols include Isekp a, Eto, Obahuki, Agana, Ori, Okp ankasi, and others that belong to the broader Ori group, such as Orupa, Ori Atahugha, Ori-ma-nyi-ahu, Imaru, Ogusu, Ageh, and Osoga.

Villages and towns host numerous idols with diverse names. Most are owned collectively by families, with the exception of the personal idol Okp ankasi, which is kept in a calabash containing a mixture of decayed sacrificial materials, such as meat, cereals, bones, feathers, scraps of cloth (ugba), ashes, and bloodstains. This portable idol can be discreetly stored in a bedroom corner. Other household idols incorporate similar components, often with additional elements²⁶³.

Priests are enlisted to conduct offerings to these idols. The sacrifices (ozu), which literally mean “prayers,” are performed in the presence of worshippers who must attentively listen to the priest’s invocations. The priest calls upon the specific ancestral spirit by name, announcing that the offering is being presented to him. A cock or hen designated for sacrifice is then prompted to move forward toward the idol from the priest’s position. If the bird complies, it is deemed accepted by the spirit and is subsequently slaughtered. Forward movement signifies acceptance; refusal indicates rejection.

²⁶³ The most common family-owned idol is the Isekp a, typically housed in a shrine or small hut within the compound. It is often suspended from a forked or tripodal tree branch. Idols serve primarily as protectors of their worshippers, warding off or healing diseases, safeguarding towns, families, or clans during crises like invasions, and offering general assistance in times of peace. Historically, they were also employed to avert wars or shield warriors in battle.

The Framework of Morality: Core Values and Taboos

The Ebira-Tai moral universe is built on a foundation of core values that are believed to be sanctioned by the spiritual world. The most fundamental of these is respect (ezu). This is not a vague concept but a concrete set of behaviors that govern all social interactions. It means showing deference to elders, obeying parents, honoring one's spouse, and treating guests with hospitality. A lack of respect is seen as the root of all social discord and is a primary cause of ancestral displeasure.

Another core value is truthfulness and honesty (ivi). Lying, cheating, and stealing are not just social faux pas; they are acts of spiritual pollution that can bring a curse (ogu) upon the individual and their entire family. The community strongly believes in the power of the spoken word, and false oaths or malicious gossip are considered particularly dangerous.

Sexual morality is also heavily regulated by spiritual sanctions. Adultery, incest, and premarital sex (especially for women) are grave taboos (ezi). These acts are seen as a direct affront to the ancestors, who are the guardians of the lineage's purity and continuity. The violation of sexual taboos is believed to invite the most severe punishments, including infertility, mysterious illnesses, and even death.

The concept of ezi (taboo) is central to the moral framework. These are specific prohibitions believed to have been established by ancestors or divinities for the protection of the community. They can range from prohibitions against eating certain animals (often totemic animals associated with a clan) to rules about farming practices (e.g., not working on certain sacred days) to social conduct (e.g., a man not entering his mother-in-law's kitchen). The violation of an ezi is not a personal choice; it is a communal offence that can bring misfortune to everyone.

Mechanisms of Enforcement: Detection, Sanction, and Restoration

The spiritual world is believed to be constantly vigilant. Moral transgressions are rarely hidden for long. The primary mechanisms for their detection are as follows:

1. **Dreams and Visions:** Ancestors frequently communicate with their living descendants through dreams. A troubled ancestor may appear in a dream to a family head, complaining of a specific wrong that has been committed by a family member. This is often the first sign of a moral problem.
2. **Illness and Misfortune:** Unexplained illness, crop failure, infertility, or a series of accidents within a family or the community are interpreted as clear signs of spiritual displeasure. The nature of the misfortune is often seen as a clue to the nature of the sin. For example, a persistent skin disease might be linked to a sexual taboo, while a barren farm might indicate a violation of an agricultural *ezi*.
3. **Divination:** When the cause of the misfortune is unclear, the community turns to divination. The most common form is through the Ohi priest or a specialized diviner (*omu-ivu*). Using various methods (such as casting seeds or interpreting the patterns of thrown objects), the diviner consults the spirits to identify the specific transgression and the offended spiritual entity.
4. **Communal Consensus:** Sometimes, the transgression is so public and egregious that the community itself knows the source of the problem. In such cases, the pressure from the community acts as a form of social sanction, often forcing the individual to seek ritual cleansing.

Once the transgression is identified, the process of sanction and restoration begins. The primary goal is not punishment in a retributive sense, but the restoration of balance (*ehi*) between

the human and spiritual worlds. This is achieved through a series of rituals:

Confession and Apology: The offender must confess their sin, often publicly before the family or the community, and apologize to the offended party (if human) and to the spiritual entity.

Sacrifice and Offering: A ritual sacrifice is made to appease the angry spirit. This usually involves the offering of a chicken, a goat, or kola nuts, depending on the severity of the offence and the specific spirit involved. The blood of the sacrifice is seen as a powerful cleansing agent.

Purification Rituals: The offender and sometimes their entire household may undergo purification rites, which can include bathing with special herbs, abstaining from certain foods, or being secluded for a period.

Restitution: If the transgression involved harm to another person (e.g., theft, slander), the offender must make material restitution as part of the reconciliation process.

The role of the ritual specialists is crucial in this process. The Ohi priest is the ultimate authority on matters of communal morality and is responsible for conducting the most serious cleansing rituals. The ancestral priests (ori priests), who are often the eldest male in a lineage, handle family-level issues. The council of elders (omu-ebira) provides the social and judicial framework, ensuring that the ritual process is followed and that the community's peace is restored.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for different stakeholders to ensure the preservation, understanding, and constructive engagement with the Ebira-Tai indigenous moral framework.

Here's a refined and condensed version of your proposal, preserving its core ideas while enhancing clarity and flow:

1. Launch a Cultural Documentation Initiative

Partner with local universities or cultural institutions to systematically record oral histories, rituals, songs, and genealogies of the Ebira-Tai traditional religion. Prioritize capturing the wisdom of elders before it fades.

2. Facilitate Intergenerational Dialogue

Organize regular forums, integrated into youth groups or cultural festivals, where elders share stories and explain the values behind traditional practices in open, respectful settings.

3. Embed Cultural Values in Education

Incorporate Ebira-Tai history and values (e.g., respect, honesty, communal responsibility) into civic and social studies curricula in community schools, framing them as heritage rather than religious doctrine.

4. Ensure Culturally Sensitive Development

All development projects in Ebira-Tai should begin with a cultural assessment and include input from both traditional and modern leaders. Designs must be flexible enough to respect local moral and spiritual worldviews.

5. Recognize Traditional Conflict Resolution

Support indigenous justice systems that stress restorative practices and communal harmony. Train traditional mediators in basic legal principles to align with national human rights standards.

6. Preserve Cultural Heritage Sites and Festivals

Government agencies should fund and support the protection of sacred sites (e.g., Ohi shrines) and promote festivals that celebrate Ebira-Tai identity, including its spiritual dimensions.

7. Promote Long-Term and Comparative Research

Encourage longitudinal studies to track cultural change over time and comparative research with other Ebira subgroups or neighboring ethnic groups to distinguish uniquely Tai elements from broader regional patterns.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes several significant contributions to the existing body of knowledge in anthropology, religious studies, and African studies.

First, it provides the first dedicated, contemporary ethnographic account of the religious worldview of the Ebira-Tai people. By focusing specifically on this subgroup, it corrects the historical oversight in the literature that has treated the Ebira as a monolithic entity. It reveals the distinct features of the Tai system, particularly its strong emphasis on decentralized, lineage-based ancestor worship and the central, multifaceted role of Ohi as a communal moral enforcer, which differs from the more king-centric Ohi cult of the Ebira-Okene.

Second, the study offers a nuanced and dynamic model of how the indigenous moral order is maintained. It moves beyond the static, functionalist models of early anthropology to show a system that is alive, contested, and adaptive. It demonstrates that the spiritual enforcement of morality is not a relic of the past but a living reality that continues to shape social behavior, even in a context of intense religious and cultural pluralism. The study details the sophisticated mechanisms of detection (dreams, divination, misfortune) and the restorative, rather

than purely punitive, nature of the sanctions, providing a rich case study of a non-Western, communitarian justice system.

Third, the research contributes to the theoretical understanding of the relationship between divinities and ancestors. It shows that in the Ebira-Tai context, these are not separate, parallel systems but are deeply integrated and hierarchical. The ancestors are the primary, personal moral guardians, while the divinities, especially Ohi, act as the ultimate communal arbiters and enforcers. This fluid and interdependent relationship provides a more complex picture than the simple dichotomies often presented in the literature.

Fourth, by documenting the strategies of resilience, syncretism, privatization, and crisis-driven revival, the study offers valuable insights into the processes of cultural continuity and change in the face of modernity. It challenges the narrative of inevitable decline and shows how indigenous worldviews can be remarkably resourceful in finding ways to persist and remain relevant.

Finally, the study serves as a powerful testament to the intellectual and moral sophistication of African Traditional Religion. It provides a detailed, emic account of a system that is internally logical, functionally effective, and ethically rich, thereby contributing to the ongoing project of decolonizing African knowledge systems and affirming their value in the contemporary world.

Conclusion and Comment on Future Research

This anthropological inquiry into the religious worldview of the Ebira-Tai people has revealed a complex and resilient system in which divinities and ancestors are not distant, abstract concepts but active, dynamic agents in the daily maintenance of moral order. The study has shown that the Ebira-Tai moral universe is a holistic ecosystem where the spiritual and the social are inseparable. The fear of ancestral displeasure and the

wrath of *Ohi* are not signs of primitive superstition but are the foundational pillars of a sophisticated social contract that emphasizes respect, honesty, communal responsibility, and the restoration of balance.

The findings confirm that this system, while under significant pressure from Christianity, Islam, and modernity, has not been extinguished. Instead, it has adapted, often operating in a syncretic or privatized form, and continues to exert a powerful, if sometimes subtle, influence on the community's ethical landscape. The generational gap in its observance is a real challenge, but the system's deep roots and its ability to provide meaningful answers to life's uncertainties ensure its continued relevance, particularly in times of crisis.

In conclusion, the Ebira-Tai case study powerfully illustrates that indigenous African moral frameworks are not antithetical to modern life but can be a vital resource for building strong, ethical, and cohesive communities. Their emphasis on restorative justice, communal accountability, and a deep connection to place and history offers valuable lessons for a world grappling with social fragmentation and moral uncertainty.

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