

Odeshi, Divine Protection, And the Religious Imagination in Igbo Traditional Religion

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ABSTRACT

The quest for protection against physical, spiritual, and existential threats constitutes a central concern in human religious life, and within Igbo Traditional Religion this concern finds expression in practices aimed at preserving life, harmony, and cosmic balance. Odeshi, often portrayed in contemporary discourse as superstition or occult violence, has consequently suffered serious misinterpretation. The problem this research addresses is the persistent reduction of Odeshi to irrational or morally dangerous practice without adequate engagement with the Igbo cosmological, ethical, and religious frameworks that give it meaning. Adopting a qualitative, hermeneutical, and analytical method grounded exclusively in selected indigenous Igbo religious and philosophical texts, this research examines Odeshi through the lenses of Igbo cosmology, the theory of forces, ritual symbolism, moral discipline, indigenous medicine, and eco-spirituality. The study finds that Odeshi functions not as an autonomous or amoral power but as a religious symbol of divine protection, ethically conditioned and mediated through deities, ancestors, ritual observance, and communal norms. It further establishes that protection in Igbo Traditional Religion is inseparable from moral order, peace, environmental harmony, and the sacred valuation of life. The research concludes that Odeshi, when properly interpreted within its indigenous religious context, represents a coherent and meaningful expression of Igbo religious imagination oriented towards life preservation rather than violence, and therefore calls for interpretive understanding rather than condemnation in contemporary religious and scholarly discourse.

Keywords: Odeshi, Divine Protection, Religious Imagination, Indigenous Knowledge, Eco-Spirituality.

INTRODUCTION

In Igbo Traditional Religion (ITR), the quest for protection is inseparable from the broader religious aspiration for a peaceful and ordered existence. Human life is understood as deeply embedded within a sacred cosmos in which peace, harmony, and security are not accidental conditions but religious achievements sustained through proper alignment with spiritual forces. In Igbo spirituality, peace is not merely understood as the absence of conflict; rather, it denotes a state of order, harmony, and equilibrium sustained through moral uprightness, religious observance, communal solidarity, and a respectful relationship between the human person and the natural environment (Okafor, 2018). In this context, protection is not merely defensive; it is a proactive religious obligation aimed at sustaining the conditions under which life can flourish.

The religious worldview expressed in Igbo spirituality holds that disorder, violence, illness, and sudden death are symptoms of deeper disruptions within the sacred order of

existence. These disruptions may arise from moral transgression, neglect of ritual obligations, violation of taboos, or imbalance between visible and invisible forces (Okafor, 2018). Consequently, protective practices emerge as religious responses designed to restore balance and prevent the breakdown of peace at both individual and communal levels.

Within this framework, *Odeshi* must be understood as a religious expression of the Igbo commitment to preserving life within a peaceful spiritual environment. Rather than functioning as an isolated or sensational practice, *Odeshi* operates within a wider religious logic that prioritizes life, harmony, and continuity. The emphasis on protection reflects the Igbo conviction that life is sacred and constantly exposed to both benevolent and malevolent forces (Amanambu, 2024). Religious practices that secure protection are therefore not optional but integral to sustaining existence itself.

Importantly, the Igbo religious imagination does not separate protection from morality. Peaceful existence is

believed to be sustained only where moral order is respected and religious norms are observed. Protective rituals are meaningful only when embedded within ethical discipline and communal responsibility. These understanding challenges modern interpretations that reduce *Odeshi* to superstition. Instead, *Odeshi* emerges as a religious strategy aimed at preserving peace, preventing existential imbalance, and safeguarding life within a spiritually charged universe.

Igbo Cosmology and the Sacred Ordering of Reality

Igbo cosmology presents reality as a structured and hierarchically ordered system governed by sacred power. At the apex of this system stands the Supreme Being, *Chukwu* or *Chineke*, who is understood as the ultimate source of existence, authority, and life. The belief in one Supreme Being is foundational and unchallenged within Igbo religious thought, even in the presence of multiple deities (Kanu, 2018). These deities do not rival the Supreme Being but function as mediators and administrators of specific aspects of cosmic and social life.

The Igbo pantheon includes deities associated with natural forces, morality, fertility, justice, and communal wellbeing. Each deity operates within a defined sphere of influence, contributing to the maintenance of cosmic balance and social order (Kanu, 2018). This cosmological structure underscores the Igbo conviction that the universe is not chaotic but intentionally ordered, with spiritual agencies actively involved in human affairs. Human existence is therefore lived in constant interaction with the sacred realm.

Life (*ndụ*) is regarded as the highest religious value within this cosmology. Human beings are understood as existing within a delicate web of relationships involving God, deities, ancestors, nature, and the community. Any threat to life is simultaneously a threat to cosmic harmony (Amanambu, 2024). Protection, therefore, becomes a religious necessity aimed at preserving the integrity of this sacred order.

Odeshi derives its intelligibility from this cosmological framework. It is meaningful only within a worldview that recognizes the permeability of reality and the constant interaction between spiritual and physical forces. Detached from Igbo cosmology, *Odeshi* appears unscientific; situated within it, the practice reflects a coherent religious response to vulnerability in a spiritually structured universe.

Force and the Metaphysical Logic of Protection

A central concept underlying Igbo cosmology is the idea of force (*ike*). Reality is not understood as composed of inert matter but as constituted by varying intensities of force. Every being (divine, spiritual, or human) possesses force, though not in equal measure. God is the supreme reservoir of force, while deities, ancestors, and human beings participate in this force

according to their hierarchical position within the cosmos. Human life is perceived as a dynamic concentration of force that must be constantly sustained and protected. Health, strength, courage, and security are manifestations of balanced force, while weakness, illness, and vulnerability indicate depletion or destabilization. This metaphysical understanding explains why protection occupies such a central place in Igbo religious life (Ibeabuchi, 2013). Protective practices aim at reinforcing personal and communal force against destructive influences.

Within this metaphysical framework, *Odeshi* functions as a ritualized reinforcement of life-force. It is not conceived as an independent or self-generating power but as a mediated form of sacred force activated through religious procedure and moral alignment. Force, in Igbo thought, is not morally neutral; it responds to ethical order, ritual correctness, and spiritual legitimacy (Ibeabuchi, 2013). This understanding distinguishes *Odeshi* from mechanical or manipulative notions of power. When force is detached from moral discipline or cosmological order, it is believed to collapse or turn destructive. Thus, *Odeshi* is sustained not by technical skill alone but by conformity to religious norms and respect for the sacred hierarchy. Protection, in this sense, is not domination but participation in sacred power ordered towards the preservation of life.

***Odeshi* as Religious Symbolism**

Symbolism occupies a central place in Igbo religious life, serving as the medium through which invisible spiritual realities are made accessible to human understanding. In Igbo Traditional Religion, religious symbols are not decorative or merely representational; they are participatory realities that draw human beings into the sacred order of existence. Objects, gestures, words, and rituals function as symbolic bridges linking the visible world to the invisible realm of divine and spiritual forces (Amanambu, 2024).

Within this symbolic universe, *Odeshi* functions as a religious sign of divine protection rather than an autonomous source of power. The symbolic value of *Odeshi* lies in its ability to represent and mediate sacred force oriented toward the preservation of life. Igbo religious thought does not isolate symbols from meaning; rather, meaning is generated through the symbolic connection between ritual action and the sacred structure of reality (Kanu, 2018). Thus, *Odeshi* derives its religious significance from its placement within a network of beliefs concerning God, deities, ancestors, and moral order.

The symbolic dimension of *Odeshi* also reflects the Igbo understanding that protection is fundamentally spiritual before it becomes physical. Symbols operate by shaping

religious consciousness and directing faith towards divine agency. In this sense, *Odeshi* does not claim power independently but points beyond itself to the sacred forces believed to govern life and death. Its symbolism reinforces trust in divine order and reminds participants that security is ultimately sustained by spiritual alignment.

Importantly, symbolic misinterpretation often leads to the demonization of indigenous religious practices. When symbols are stripped of their cosmological and ethical context, they appear dangerous. However, when interpreted within Igbo religious symbolism, *Odeshi* emerges as a protective sign deeply embedded in the sacred worldview that seeks peace and balance within the cosmos.

Rituals as Channels of Protective Power

Ritual constitutes the primary means through which Igbo religious symbols are activated and given efficacy. Ritual actions (such as prayer, sacrifice, invocation, and symbolic gestures) are not empty performances but structured engagements with sacred power. In Igbo Traditional Religion, rituals are carefully regulated acts designed to restore harmony between human beings, spiritual forces, and the environment (Nnoruga, 2025).

Protective rituals are particularly significant because they address moments of vulnerability where life is perceived to be under threat. Such rituals typically involve prayerful communication with spiritual authorities, especially deities and ancestors, who are believed to mediate divine power. Prayer in this context is not abstract contemplation but a concrete appeal for intervention, protection, and restoration of balance (Nnoruga, 2025).

Sacrifice further reinforces the ritual logic of protection. In Igbo eco-spiritual traditions, sacrifice functions as a means of appeasement, thanksgiving, and reconciliation between humans and the spiritual world (Nnoruga, 2025). Through sacrificial acts, human beings acknowledge dependence on divine power and reaffirm their commitment to moral and cosmic order. Protective practices such as *Odeshi* draw legitimacy from this sacrificial and prayerful framework, without which they lose religious grounding.

The ritual context therefore situates *Odeshi* within a broader religious economy of exchange, responsibility, and obedience. Protection is not demanded as a right but sought through humility, reverence, and ethical commitment. This ritualized dependence underscores the religious nature of *Odeshi* and distinguishes it from coercive or manipulative practices that disregard moral and spiritual accountability.

The Ethical Foundations of Protection

A defining characteristic of Igbo Traditional Religion is the inseparability of spiritual power from moral discipline. Sacred

force is believed to respond positively to ethical conduct and negatively to moral transgression. Moral order is therefore not an optional supplement to religious life but its very foundation. Protection, within this ethical framework, is sustained only where moral discipline and ritual obedience are maintained.

Taboos (*nso ala*) play a crucial role in regulating moral and spiritual behaviour. These taboos function as protective boundaries that safeguard both individual and communal wellbeing. Violations of taboos are believed to disrupt spiritual balance, invite misfortune, and weaken protective structures. Consequently, individuals associated with protective religious practices are expected to observe strict moral codes.

Within this moral universe, *Odeshi* is understood as ethically conditioned power. Its efficacy depends not on technical mastery but on moral purity, truthfulness, respect for life, and adherence to communal norms. Moral failure is believed to neutralize protection, exposing the individual to harm. This ethical conditioning reveals *Odeshi* as a religious practice governed by moral accountability rather than an amoral tool for violence.

The ethical foundation of *Odeshi* reinforces its alignment with the Igbo pursuit of peace and social harmony. Protection is meaningful only when it contributes to communal stability and respect for life. Where *Odeshi* is misused for aggression or injustice, such misuse is interpreted as a violation of religious norms rather than an authentic expression of Igbo spirituality.

Deities and the Mediation of Protection

Igbo Traditional Religion understands divine protection as a mediated reality rather than an abstract or distant intervention. The Supreme Being (*Chukwu*) remains the ultimate source of life and power, yet protection is ordinarily accessed through deities (*alusi*) and ancestors (*ndichie*), who function as intermediaries within the sacred order of the cosmos. This mediatory structure reflects the Igbo conviction that the divine operates through ordered channels rather than direct arbitrariness. Deities in Igbo cosmology are associated with specific moral, natural, and social functions. They are not autonomous powers acting independently of God but are entrusted with the administration of justice, fertility, morality, health, and communal wellbeing (Kanu, 2018). Their protective role is therefore inseparable from their responsibility to sustain order and discipline within society. Protection is granted not as magical immunity but as a consequence of conformity to sacred and moral norms.

Ancestors equally play a vital protective role within Igbo religious imagination. As morally upright members of the

community who have transitioned into the spiritual realm, ancestors are believed to maintain concern for the welfare of their living descendants. Their presence reinforces moral continuity and communal stability. Protection mediated through ancestors is thus deeply ethical, aimed at preserving lineage, land, and communal peace.

Within this mediatory framework, *Odeshi* must be understood as operating under divine and ancestral authorization. Its legitimacy is not self-generated but grounded in alignment with recognized spiritual authorities. When detached from this hierarchy, protective practices are believed to lose efficacy and invite spiritual consequences. This understanding situates *Odeshi* firmly within the religious structure of Igbo spirituality.

Indigenous Medicine and the Logic of *Odeshi*

African traditional medicine operates within a holistic worldview that integrates physical, spiritual, and social dimensions of health. Healing is not limited to curing disease but includes restoring balance between the human person and the spiritual forces that sustain life. Indigenous medical systems therefore recognize that vulnerability may arise from spiritual exposure as much as from biological causes (Ezekwesili-Ofili & Okaka, 2016).

Herbal medicine in African traditional practice is rarely isolated from ritual and spiritual context. Medicinal plants are selected not only for their therapeutic properties but also for their symbolic and spiritual significance. Preparation and administration are often accompanied by prayers, invocations, and ritual observances that activate their protective and healing potency. Protection, within this medical-religious continuum, is preventive as well as curative. *Odeshi* can be situated within this logic of indigenous medicine as a form of spiritual prophylaxis. Rather than functioning as a substitute for healing, it represents a religious strategy for preventing harm by reinforcing spiritual resilience. The protective aim of *Odeshi* parallels the broader objectives of African traditional medicine, which seek to strengthen the individual against both visible and invisible threats.

Importantly, contemporary scholarship on African traditional medicine emphasizes that many modern pharmacological discoveries are rooted in indigenous herbal knowledge. This recognition challenges earlier dismissals of African medical systems as unscientific. Within this renewed appreciation, religious protective practices such as *Odeshi* deserve careful interpretation rather than outright rejection, especially when understood within the Igbo indigenous epistemological framework.

Herbal Power and Sacred Force

The Igbo religious imagination does not sharply distinguish

between natural and sacred power. Plants, land, and natural substances are understood as carriers of force that can be directed toward healing, protection, or destruction depending on moral and ritual orientation. Herbal substances acquire religious significance when consecrated within ritual contexts and aligned with spiritual intention.

In African traditional medicine, herbs function not merely as chemical agents but as embodiments of life-force activated through ritual knowledge. This understanding resonates with the Igbo theory of force, according to which material substances participate in sacred power. Protection derived from herbs is therefore both physical and spiritual, reinforcing the idea that safeguarding life requires more than mechanical intervention.

The symbolism of *Odeshi* intersects with this herbal-sacred logic. Just as herbs are ritually empowered to heal and protect, *Odeshi* represents a sacralized embodiment of protective force. Its meaning lies not in the substance itself but in the religious imagination that perceives protection as a gift mediated through sacred means. This imagination resists reductionist interpretations that isolate practice from belief. Thus, *Odeshi* reflects the Igbo conviction that life is sustained through respectful engagement with sacred power.

Eco-Spirituality and the Preservation of Life

Eco-spirituality in Igbo Traditional Religion is rooted in the belief that the environment is imbued with sacred significance and participates actively in the moral and spiritual order of the universe. Nature is not a neutral backdrop for human activity but a living reality inhabited by spiritual forces that demand respect and responsible engagement. Disruption of the environment is therefore understood as a spiritual offense capable of generating disorder, misfortune, and insecurity within human society (Nnoruga, 2025).

The Igbo understanding of protection extends naturally into this eco-spiritual framework. Life can only be protected where harmony exists between human beings, the spiritual world, and the natural environment. Practices that safeguard life (whether ritual, medicinal, or symbolic) are thus oriented towards maintaining balance rather than encouraging domination (Nnoruga, 2025). This religious logic explains why protection is conceived as defensive and preservative rather than aggressive.

Within this eco-spiritual worldview, *Odeshi* aligns with the Igbo commitment to life preservation. Properly situated, it functions as a means of resisting destructive forces without violating the sacred balance of existence. Its misuse for violent or exploitative ends is therefore interpreted as a distortion of religious values rather than

an authentic expression of Igbo spirituality.

Eco-spirituality reinforces the ethical boundaries governing protective practices. Any form of protection that undermines communal peace, environmental respect, or moral order contradicts the foundational principles of Igbo religion. Thus, *Odeshi* must be interpreted within a broader religious vision that prioritizes reverence for life.

Contemporary Reinterpretation

Contemporary discourse on African indigenous practices increasingly emphasizes the need to reinterpret traditional religious systems from within their own epistemological frameworks. Earlier colonial and missionary interpretations often dismissed African protective and medicinal practices as irrational or dangerous. However, recent scholarship recognizes that such judgments were rooted in epistemic misunderstanding rather than critical evaluation (Ezekwesili-Ofili & Okaka, 2016).

Studies on African traditional medicine now acknowledges its systematic nature, ethical regulation, and integration of spiritual and empirical knowledge. Indigenous protective practices are increasingly understood as preventive strategies rooted in holistic conceptions of health and security. This shift creates space for re-examining practices such as *Odeshi* without reducing them to superstition or sensationalism.

Within the Igbo context, reinterpretation does not imply uncritical acceptance. Rather, it involves discerning authentic religious meaning from abuse. Indigenous knowledge systems themselves contain mechanisms for regulating misuse through moral discipline, taboo, and communal accountability. *Odeshi*, when evaluated through these internal criteria, emerges as a religious symbol of protection subject to ethical boundaries and spiritual authorization.

Such reinterpretation affirms the relevance of Igbo religious imagination in contemporary discourse on protection, security, and wellbeing. It also challenges modern systems to recognize indigenous religious knowledge as a legitimate contributor to broader conversations on life preservation and human vulnerability.

CONCLUSION

This research has argued that *Odeshi*, when examined strictly within the framework of Igbo Traditional Religion, represents a coherent religious expression of faith in divine protection rather than an irrational or occult phenomenon. Anchored on Igbo cosmology, metaphysics of force, ritual practice, moral discipline, indigenous medicine, and eco-spirituality, *Odeshi* reflects a religious imagination deeply committed to the preservation of life and cosmic balance.

The Igbo religious worldview does not separate protection from morality, spirituality, or communal responsibility. Power

is sacred, mediated, and ethically conditioned. Protective practices that violate moral or spiritual order are understood as corruptions rather than authentic traditions. This internal regulatory logic demonstrates that Igbo religion possesses its own critical mechanisms for evaluating the legitimacy of protective practices.

Reinterpreting *Odeshi* through indigenous categories of meaning fosters understanding rather than condemnation. It affirms the intellectual integrity of Igbo Traditional Religion and highlights the continued relevance of African religious thought in addressing contemporary questions of vulnerability, security, and wellbeing. Ultimately, *Odeshi* stands as a testament to the enduring human quest for protection within a sacred and morally ordered universe.

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