

Deities and Shrine in African Traditional Religion: The “Spark” in Igboland

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Abstract: The Igbo people of South Eastern Nigeria are highly religious people that developed complex beliefs and ideas. The Igbo beliefs affect every aspect of its traditional life. ‘Chukwu’ the Supreme God is the Chief Superintendent of all human activities. He is helped by some minor gods. The spirits are messengers of both good and evil. The “Ala” (Land goddess) wields much power since most actions take place in ala. In spite of their belief in life hereafter, the Igbos greatest thrust is for success and prosperity in this mundane world.

Key words: Deities • Shrine • Africa and Traditional Religion

INTRODUCTION

Igbo people are found mainly in South Eastern Nigeria. They are dark-skinned, strong and hardworking. They speak Igbo which some authors claim is a corruption of “Hebrew” [1]. The Igbo are deeply religious people and practice their traditional religion very seriously before they embraced Christianity. There was a violent clash at the initial contact of the Igbo traditional religion and Christianity. The reason for the “Religions volcano” may not be far-fetched. Change often is resisted. Beneficiaries of old system are often suspicious of the opportunities of the new system. Fanaticism exists in religion and most religious fanatics are not receptive to openness and reason. The Igbo cultural life and their religion were intermingled which led to further divisions and further clashes. For instance, the masquerade on a Sunday being a day of worship for Christians may clash with those going to church who will not like to be denied their religious obligation. The masquerades on the hand take themselves as superior beings who should determine the level of operation with mere mortals.

It is gratifying to note that there has been a remarkable improvement on the relationship between African traditional religion and Christianity with more of their followers laying down their arms. Presently, traditional religion practitioners in Igboland are less numerically than the Christians. However, some still hold tenaciously to the practice of Igbo traditional religion.

The central point of worship in Igbo traditional religion is the Deity (God) and deities (Gods). The shrine is the common place of worship. Hornby [2] defined

“Deity” as god or goddess and formally “God”. It also described a ‘shrine’ as a place where people come to worship because it is connected with a holy place and event. ‘Traditional’ according to Hornby [2] is a belief, custom or way of doing something that has existed for a long time among a particular group of people; a set of these belief and customs [3]. said that tradition means what one generation hands over to another which could be socio-political structures, ethics, religion, art etc. Religion is defined as the belief in the existence of a god or gods and the activities that connect with the worship of them [4]. For this paper, religion will include the worship of God as portrayed by Christianity.

Igbos and Their Perception of ‘Deity’ and the Use of ‘Shrine’: Almost all activities in a traditional Igbo setting are based on religion, the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria are highly religious people with belief in supreme God (Chukwu or Chi ukwu). They also believe in other gods with less power and positions as ‘Chukwu’ [2] opined that traditional societies everywhere exhibits a unity in the expression of its political, economic and cultural life with religion and morality as the unifying force. According to him, the Igbos believe the world was created by Chineke (The God that creates) or Chukwu (Chi-ukwu, the Great God). Chineke is believed to be the author of heaven and earth who makes animal and plant life grow. The Igbos believe that Chineke or Chukwu gives to each man at the time of his birth that man’s particular portion of his divine essence known as Chi. According to Odoh Amselem of Nkalagu [3] this Chi is like the personal spark of Chineke given to each person to guide him all his life. The divine

could be consulted and through 'Afa' (A kind of divination) indicate the nature of the chi a young man has and who among the dead ancestors has influenced the Chi.

The Igbos believe that their departed ancestors still live in spirit. They maintain that the spirits of departed members of the extended family are never far away and that they are ready to take part in all matters pertaining to the welfare of the "Family" or the community. According to Ogbonne Ijeoma of Ovoko [4] this strong belief in the continuity of the group with the past members, found in most parts of West Africa is the basis of the ethical consideration of this people.

'Ala' (Earth goddess) is another "spiritual force" to be reckoned with in Igbo belief system [3] stated that 'ala' is most important divinity in Igbo social and moral life. According to him, ala is the guardian of morality, the source of fruitfulness in women, vegetation and agricultural products. She ensures health and wellbeing to the community by preventing the incidence of plagues, famine, droughts and barrenness among women. Since the dead ancestors were buried in the earth, the earth goddess is believed to work in close conjunction with the spirits of ancestors to produce the moral code by which the community lives and regulates its affairs.

As earlier mentioned, the spirits of the ancestors interfere in the affairs of the living. According to Parrinder [1] as long as the ancestral spirits are pleased with proper sacrifices, propitiation and ceremonial attention, they are believed to guarantee life and amicable relationships in the community. They can even intervene with the gods of the spiritual world on behalf of the living and prevent the evil divinities from carrying out their diabolic designs against the living. For the fact that the ancestral spirits want the perpetuation of good behavior and peaceful social order and because they had lived good moral life in their lifetime, they are believed to come back in subsequent re-incarnations by influencing the Chi of newly born children. It is believed that the spirit of those who lived evil life in their time would be exterminated in aimless wanderings. Only goodness, it is believed, could ensure continuity of the spirits after death.

The above elucidation is to show how deep the Igbos are in their religious beliefs which intertwined with their social, political and economic life. The presence of God, gods, goddesses, spirits and the need to always consult with them, offer sacrifices, appease them etc. necessitated the need for permanent places to perform these functions. This was the foundation of the shrines. The shrine can be erected at the foot of a very big tree or besides a stream or

river or at the middle of a very thick forest. One's personal shrine can also be erected in front of his house or some other place. This personal shrine is for the person's own Chi, the owner of the shrine is the priest of that particular shrine. He makes sacrifices and consultations at his shrine based on his own desire. A second person can only participate on invitation.

A family can own a shrine and it becomes the family's shrine. In this case, the eldest of the family becomes the chief priest. The extended family (Umunna) can also own a shrine and it becomes umunna shrine. The eldest or the head of the families becomes the chief priest. In the case of village, town, or clan shrine, the family that brought or introduced the shrine may as well produce the priest of the shrine. When this happens, priestly successions come from the family as long as the family exists and is interested. If a family's shrine is adopted by the village to be its shrine, the priests or chief priest will continue to emerge from the family that previously owned it. In some places in Igboland, the diviner determines through 'Afa' who should preside over the shrine as priest or chief priest.

Sometimes, some abnormal behavior or instincts may be noticed in a person, divination (Afa) may reveal that he should become a priest of a particular shrine or that he becomes a native doctor (Dibia) or diviner. In the case of becoming a dibia or diviner, he may erect his own shrine and preside over it or he will become a priest of the umunna shrine.

Religion Succession in Igbo Traditional Religion:

As earlier stated the Igbos belief in Supreme Deity, gods and spirits is very strong. The Igboman also believes in deriving the maximum benefit from this physical world. Ilogu [4] agrees to this when he spoke of the Igboman's belief in the reality of the spiritual world. From this spiritual world he derives "power" or "force" and injected with this sort of life-force, a sort of elan vital, he is more able to share successfully in the supreme value which is "goodness". According to Ilogu, this goodness is believed to be achieved through co-operation with the "vital force" which exists in the cosmos. A man who falls in line with this "life force" is often said to be fortunate. It is this sort of belief, Ilogu further stated, that has led to the practice of trying to channel this "Life force" to individuals' advantage through magic, talisman, charms and "Power-rings".

In order to continue to relate well with the deity and spirits and maintain their worldly welfare, Igboman keeps the priestly office alive by succession. Once a family takes

charge of a particular shrine, the priests or chief priest of the shrine will continue to emerge from that family. More often than not, the eldest member of the family takes up the priestly function. This persists from generation to generation. In the case where a family has lost all its male members, the nearest relations will take up the duty. If the nearest relations are not willing, person(s) from other families may be appointed to take up the priestly function. This appointment may be a product of consultation among the elders or through divination. Sometimes also, volunteers take up the priestly function in shrines that no longer have presiding priests.

Priests of most shrines in Igboland are known to be indigenes of their various communities. "Foreigners" often are not priests of shrines. However, some families that integrated in a particular community and have lived there for a very time and naturalized could become priests in some communities. Some are traceable as not being original indigenes only through their names. This is the case in Nkalagu Community in Ebonyi State of Nigeria where a priest of a particular shrine is not an original inhabitant as his name is not common with those of the indigenes.

CONCLUSION

The Igbos belief in the supreme God (Chukwu) gods, goddesses, "Ala", spirits, ancestral spirits, led them to build places of worship, sacrifices, consultation, prayers, appeasement etc of gods. These places became the shrines. The shrines have priests that preside over them. Shrine priesthood is inherited and most often foreigners and strangers are not found as priests. However, the issue of "Foreign descent" is questionable as over 90% of the population of a particular community migrated from somewhere.

Situations are also changing rapidly as Christianity has dealt a great blow on Igbo Traditional Religion. Most of the would be priests are now Christians and most shrines are now deserted with no priest attendant. Existence of some of the shrines is now in stories. Some shrines are overrun by bushes while some have been cleared for residential buildings. However, there are still places in Igboland where shrines and their priests are much alive and are revered highly by the adherence of Igbo traditional religion.

It should also be of note that there are shrines that have no specific priest. Everyone can offer sacrifice to it. Also, there are shrines that every male is qualified to preside over as a priest. More researches on Igbo cultural life and religion are needed to be able to tap some functional qualities of the complex religious life of this "Great nation".

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