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THE RESURGENCE OF FETISH PRACTICES IN IGBOLAND

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Abstract

The indiscriminate placing of articles of sacrifice on major roads of communities in Igbo land has become a common sight and worrisome. This aspect of the people's traditional religion and culture was drastically affected by the inception of Christianity and western ideals. Many scholars have condemned the manner in which early Christian missionaries in Igbo land consigned all they could not understand about Igbo culture and traditional religion to the garbage bin. Also, new converts treated some aspects of their culture with disdain, as Christianity took root and flourished. However, with maturity in the faith, the Igbo people realized that Christianity has a lot in common with traditional religion and that again Christianity should be practiced from an African perspective. There are now concerted efforts to inculcate aspects of Igbo culture into the practice of Christianity and ensure the preservation of the indigenous culture. Some of these efforts include the inculturation programme of the Catholic Church. Is the present patronage of deities and consequent placing of sacrifices on the road done in the spirit of the preservation of the peoples culture or otherwise? This paper, using Durkheim's Cultural Adaptation Theory attempts to examine the reasons for the resurgence of the patronage of deities and general fetish practices as well as their implications. The paper suggests that the different deities in Igbo land are being patronized for very negative reasons and should be discouraged.

Introduction

Before the advent of Christianity, different African groups communed with the Supreme Being in different ways. For the Igbo groups of South-Eastern Nigeria, there was *Chukwu*, the great God who was believed to live in the skies. There were deities, the different deities who mediated between man and the great God. The ancestors also occupied a very important place in Igbo cosmology, as the ultimate aim of every Igbo male who lived aright and accorded a full traditional burial rite was to join his ancestors at the end of his sojourn on earth.

With the coming of Christianity and western ideals, there was an overhaul in the people's beliefs and values. The Igbo in embracing the new religion was made to accept the existence of a new omnipotent God and the fact that the local deities of his traditional religion were nonexistent. However in the nascent stage of Christianity, missionaries like Shanahan strove to highlight the noble aspects of Igbo culture and believed that there were areas of convergence between Christianity and African Traditional Religion. An example, being that the reverence for saints in Christianity could be likened to the reverence the Igbo have for their ancestors.

Christianity has been a flourishing enterprise in Igboland with the establishment of many missions notably the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Pentecostal. However, in the growth of these enterprises, there has been clamour for an indigenized form of Christianity, where the people's culture and values are inculcated into Christian worship and practices, resulting in the preservation of the indigenous culture. Presently, there is a trend across Igbo communities with a resurgence in the patronage of deities resulting, in indiscriminate



placing of sacrificial materials and objects at road intersections in most communities in Igboland. This paper seeks to examine the reasons and implications of this trend and the relatedness of this resurgence to the clamour for the preservation of Igbo culture.

The cultural adaptation theory formulated by Emile Durkheim between 1893 and 1933 presents the pedestal on which the resurgence of the patronage of local gods and deities can be understood. Using the events of the industrial revolution, Durkheim had postulated that catalysts like urbanisation and other prevailing conditions introduced new patterns of behaviour which led to the emergence of new culture. For Durkheim, the conditions and behaviour which persist are those that are useful and meaningful and are considered indispensable and an integral part of the community. The conditions and activities are therefore retained because of their relevance to the society. Can this apply to the retention of some aspects of Igbo culture?

The Igbo and Their Worldview

The Igbo are found in South-Eastern Nigeria. Tracing their origin has been an enigma, with many scholars presenting their different opinions. However, based on the date of the potsherds discovered by Hartle in the Nsukka area of Enugu State, it has been shown that by 2555 B.C + 130 the Igbo had already occupied their present habitation'. Scholars like Afigbo agree that Awka-Okigwe Cuesta is the primary dispersal point of the Igbo². Presently, they are found in five states of Nigeria with pockets of settlements in Delta and Rivers States.³

Igbo people are acclaimed travellers and this is affirmed in the Igbo proverb that "the widely travelled man is wiser than a grey haired fellow". There is hardly any part of the globe that is not inhabited by the Igbo. The characteristics of the Igbo, according to Ozigbo, include:

The social institutions of family, kinship and marriage provide services, amenities and security for individuals and the communities. Caring for one another was the essence of living, while mutual reciprocity, interpersonal contacts, functional interdependence and co-operation marked the kin-group. Sickness, poverty ill-fortune, accident, old age and death were not only the concerns of the individual but also those of the family and kin-group.⁴

Going further, Ozigbo surmises that even though the above characteristics are still associated with the Igbo, they have been negatively affected by egalitarianism which manifests in individualism, capitalism and selfishness. This assertion is quite central to the arguments and sentiment of this paper and will be revisited in subsequent sections.

In commenting on Igbo world view, Udefi extols the place of the observance of *Omenani*, the totality of the customs and value orientation in Igbo cosmology. Citing Uchendu, Udefi reiterates that there is constant interaction between the world of the living and the dead, the visible and invisible force. The Igbo he contends uphold the tenet of retributive justice, "whatever a man soweth he reaps". Hence, he is very cautious in keeping his hands clean and holding onto *Ofo*, the symbol of justice⁶.

For Madu, in the Igbo world view, there is an existence of a hierarchy of beings. The Supreme Being, *Chukwu* is at the apex, with the deities, spirit forces and ancestors coming next'. He also deciphers a three-tier world, intimate and distinct, consisting of the heaven, earth and the underworld. While the heaven is the dwelling of the Supreme Being- *Chukwu* or *Chineke*, other beings and entities like *Amadi oha* (god of thunder) and *Anyanwu* (sun



god), the earth is inhabited by the earth goddess - Ala and the minor deities like *Edo*, *Idemili* and man. The underworld is inhabited by the different spirits and ancestors.⁸

In emphasising the importance of world views in the lives of the people, Madu echoing Ejizu's position asserts:

A world view seeks to answer fundamental questions about the place and relationship of man with the universe. Answers to these fundamental problems provide man with the blue print for controlling his environment and establishing his social and political institutions⁹.

The Place of Ancestors and Deities in Igbo Cosmology

In reviewing the essence of Igbo World view, it was seen that ancestors and deities are among the important constituents of Igbo cosmology and they play outstanding role. Obiefuna identifies the ancestors as the dead who are believed to have lived "a life of rectitude" and shown good example'. He is quite emphatic that it is not all dead that transmute to ancestors and that ancestors play intercessory role for the living. Metuh in highlighting the unique and distinct place of ancestors asserts:

Ancestors constitute a special category among the spirits of the departed and have a special place in African World view and traditional cults and must not be confused with other spirits of the departed who are not ancestors¹¹.

The place and role of the ancestors in Igbo cosmology provide a veritable pedestal for the understanding and acceptance of the doctrine of sainthood in Christianity. The emphasis and nexus lie on the need to be of good character to qualify as both an ancestor or saint and the capacity to serve as an intercessor for the living.

The deities (gods) are also intermediaries and intercessors between God (*Chukwu*) and man. The Igbo appreciate their roles in their lives. They view gods as arbiters and averters who must never be offended in order to maintain stability and harmony between the dead and the living. Sacrifices are made to the gods in anticipation of some form of favour and protection. Metuh succinctly explains:

The main objective of the African is to live a life of harmony with humanity and nature. Man strives to be in harmony with God, the deities and his fellow men both living and dead.... For him, the first evil is disintegration for this would spell disaster both for himself and his immediate world... Man must constantly consult oracles and divination to assure himself that he is in right relationship with all the forces.¹²

On the place of gods in African traditional religion, Erivwo explains that some gods inhabit rivers, lakes and the sea, while others are found in forests and farmlands. These gods choose the people who become their priests and who serve them at their abode. In explaining further, he reiterates that the roles of the gods include serving as:

... a guardian and protector of its adherents: warning them against dangers of thieves, witches and so on. In return for this service (it) expects its adherents to offer regular worship and observe certain food taboos.¹³

Traditionally, festivals are celebrated in honour of these gods. During these events, the people pay homage to them. Sacrifices of choice items are presented to them in appreciation for their benevolence and protection. Establishing the right relationship between god and man is quite paramount for the Igbo. Striving for the right relationship regulates the behaviour of the Igbo who have the intrinsic belief in retributive justice. They are, therefore, expected to refrain from evil and always do good.

The African god can be said not to be abstract since they are venerated and worshipped as carved images in designated grooves and sites. This simplifies the relationship between the people and a particular deity. It makes supplication easy and gives a measure of confidence and nearness too. The Igbo believe that the gods are there to ensure his well-being, and not vice versa.

In embracing Christianity, the Igbo acquired a new world new with the centrality of the personality of Jesus. In this encounter, they accepted the message of Christ's important salvific mission, but did not destroy the notion of their own gods. Both Jesus and the gods appeared as a consortium in the spiritual realm of the people.

The Inception of Christianity in Igbo land

Christianity was introduced into Igbo land in the second half of the 19th century. The Anglican mission came first through the activities of Ajayi Crowther in 1857. He was a freed slave who proceeded from Sierra Leone to help in the planting of Christianity in Nigeria, firstly in Yoruba land, and later in South-Eastern Nigeria.

The Roman Catholic mission was instituted in the lower Niger from 1885 by four Holy Ghost Missionaries, Father Joseph Lutz, Father Horne, Brother Hermas and Brother Jean-Gotto. The coming of these early missionaries resulted in the building of schools of different levels, churches and the grooming of indigenous religious personnel. The different missions recorded an appreciable success in the acquisition of converts and registered a strong Christian presence. For example when Reverend father Lejeune, another Holy Ghost priest took charge of the Apostolic Prefecture of the Lower Niger in 1900, there were already 7 schools and 445 pupils. At his death in 1905, the schools had increased to 18 schools with 1614 pupils.¹⁵

The inception of Christianity in Igbo territory was an arduous task. The nascent period saw series of experimentation to discover policies that will enable Christianity be planted firmly among the people. The early missionaries like Bishops Shanahan and Charles Heerey trekked through forests, rivers and swamps for evangelisation. With time their efforts yielded fruit and there is no doubt, judging from the number of Christian faithful in Igbo land as well as number of Churches and related organisations, the Christian enterprise is a huge success. Africa, especially Igbo land is now resending missionaries to Europe and America for re-evangelization.

Conversion of Igboland

Scholars, like Madu, Obefuna, Kalu, Nabuife among others have deplored the method used by early Christian missionaries in the evangelisation of Africa including Igbo land. Madu for example, believes the missionaries brought an Europeanised brand of Christianity and that they had very minimal tolerance for African culture and values. He questions why the message of Christianity could not be taken to the African through an African perspective, and he drew similarities between some Christian and traditional religious tenets. He is of the view, that for the Igbo to fully grasp the theology of hell or eternal damnation, it may be better to explain or recast it into the concept of reincarnation in "which evil is constantly being purified by rebirths"! For him establishing other areas of convergence between Christianity and traditional religion will make the African (Igbo) to identify more with Christianity. However, because the African culture and values were not incorporated in the proselytisation of Christianity, there is syncretism and resurgence of traditional beliefs.

Obiefuna explains that the missionaries came with pre-conceived notion of Africans as people without civilization, culture or value. For some Europeans Africa was a remote place at the extreme of the universe, where people worshipped and sacrificed to gods. For others still, it was "a timeless place where there is no art, letters or social organization but instead fear and violent death".¹⁸

The veracity of these conceptions is not just contentious but ridiculous and certainly influenced to a large extent the mind set with which the missionaries came to Igbo land. In the evangelisation of Africans, the preservation of the human dignity which was so glaring in the teachings of Christ was absent. There was no conscious effort to understand and appreciate the African traditional religion, culture and value. They made the mistake of equating African traditional religion with culture. All that they could not understand was relegated to the trash bin. Obiefuna reiterates that one of the consequences of this method of evangelisation was that the Christian faith was not entrenched deeply in the lives of the people.¹⁹ The Roman Catholic Church in realising this anomaly embraced the policy of inculturation which aims at encouraging the inculcation of the good aspects of the indigenous culture of Africans into Christian practices.

Kalu in his own overview on the African's conversion from the traditional religion to Christianity asserts that the incidence of conversion of the African has not been adequately studied owing to lack of the requisite models. He explains that even though conversion is a type of social change quite alright, it should not be subjected to existing models of other social changes that occurred in other climes. He advises that the peculiarities of the African environment and other activities should be taken into consideration before the conversion on African soil could actually be referred to as the 'rout' which was used in describing the assumed total conversion of Africans to christianity.²⁰

Metuh in explaining the conversion of Africans to Christianity says that African traditional religion being an ethnic religion and being practiced in a restricted space became a "shattered microcosm" in encountering Christianity and Islam which were universal religions. He explains further that the conversion of Africans did not come mainly from the efforts of the missionaries as assumed. According to Metuh, the fragile structure of traditional societies was already weakened by foreign trade, colonialism and western education, so the acceptance of Christianity was just a natural consequence of the dismantling of existing traditional structure and not necessarily out of conviction.²¹

Nnabuike and Ezeh in examining the activities of the Holy Ghost fathers in Igboland cited instances where their methods of evangelisation were criticised. They were accused of undermining the culture of the people and being overly interested in building structures rather than the welfare of the people.²² Liberman, a Holy Ghost priest that worked in Igboland was accused of favouring the policy of 'civilisation perfection', which was aimed at helping the African who was socially, culturally and scientifically handicapped to achieve a perfect civilisation.²³

The views of scholars above were reviewed in an attempt to provide reasons for the apparent shallow faith of the African upon conversion as well as his syncretic behaviour and occasional relapse into his assumed traditional religion. However, it becomes pertinent to ask in all these criticisms, whether the efforts of the early missionaries have been rightly appraised and appreciated? There have been instances where there was wholesome and actual acceptance of the true message of Christianity by Africans. This, from all indication, was done from the genuine desire of the people to embrace the teachings of the missionaries.

The exemplary lives and martyrdom of the martyrs of Uganda readily comes to mind. These were twenty-two Catholics and twelve Protestants who were killed between 1885 and 1887 for refusing to indulge in homosexuality which was purportedly introduced into the Kingdom of Buganda by the Arabs and which was accepted by the people as norm. These young men accepted to die rather than bow to the unholy demand of the Kabaka (King) to indulge in this vice. Some of them had their limbs chopped off, while some were roasted over hot coals. Eventually they were canonized. The act of these martyrs truly shows an undiluted acceptance of the message of Christianity.²⁴

The acceptance of Catholicism by Igwe Ogbuanyinya Onyekomeli Idigo of Aguleri took place in 1888. The conversion of a person of his status was salutary both for the missionaries and the indigenes. He went as far as leaving his house to co-habit with other converts in the Christian village. He accepted the faith without counting the cost.²⁵

The missionaries have been accused of relegating the culture of the people to the background in their bid to win souls. There are instances where the missionaries like Archbishop Charles Heerey initiated “constructive dialogue between the Christian faith and certain aspects of Igbo Social customs”.²⁶

For Libermann, another Holy Ghost Father, he renounced comments which regarded blacks as “stupid, incapable, heartless rogues”.²⁷ He strove to divest the missionaries under his care “all that smacked for Europe, its customs and spirit”.²⁸ He admonished them to behave like the blacks to impose nothing on them, and to train and teach them the way they ought to, and not to attempt to change their way of life, their customs and rites²⁹. This dispassionate analysis of the approach and manner of the evangelisation of the Igbo has been done to rationalise the apparent shallow acceptance of the message of Christianity and to ascertain if it justifies or otherwise the resurgence of fetish practices. There may have been lapses in their methods of evangelisation, but the missionaries made genuine efforts to effectively spread the gospel in Igbo land and they should not be held accountable for the lapses witnessed in the practice of Christianity in Igboland. The salvific mission of Christ demands a personal relationship and a connectedness between an individual and God.

The Present Patronage of Gods and Deities

It is a common sight to see sacrificial objects and materials displayed at road intersections and sacred groves in most Igbo communities. In Umuchu, a town in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State, at the grove of *Uchu* deity, even though there is no chief priest serving the deity presently, sacrifices of animals and other items litter the grove. In Awka-Etiti, another town in Anambra State, people are concerned and surprised at the number of sacrifices seen along the major roads in the town. At Njaba River, located at Njaba Local Government Area of Imo State, night travelers report being overwhelmed by the number of people who come out to sacrifice at this river, at night.³⁰

Two issues come to mind when examining this trend. First, in different communities in Igbo land, it is often claimed that a good number of people have accepted Christianity. If this is so, the identity of these people who throng, the different deities in Igbo land remain circumspect. Secondly, why are these sacrifices done clandestinely? In an attempt to provide answers to the above question, there is need to recall Durkheim's cultural adaptation theory, in which he reiterates that both the individual and culture keep changing and adapting to new conditions and that each community retains those cultural practices that are relevant and valuable to them³¹. However, both the good and bad aspects of culture are retained.

The belief system and world view of the Igbo regulate their behaviour. The gods and deities remain an integral part of their belief system. If with the prevalent Christianity in Igboland, the people have resorted to the patronage of their gods and deities, it may then be explained in the context of Durkheim's cultural adaptation theory that in spite of embracing Christianity, the Igbo have retained aspects of their culture that are important to them. In proffering explanation for the syncretic behaviour of African and Igbo in particular, Madu, a Professor of African Traditional Religion, asserts that the Igbo are basically religious and spiritual. This he says, explains why in spite of accepting Christianity they seek spiritual explanations to their problems. For the Igbo again, life is made up of the physical and spiritual.³²

For Kalu, on accepting Christianity, the Igbo never destroyed their gods, the gods simply went on retreat.³³ The Christian God appears far and remote, while the gods and deities can be visited and seen anytime. In his daily life, the Igbo encounters mysteries which can never be solved physically; hence, the fervent need of visiting the gods. In addition he needs favours - more children, good health and better yield. In seeking answers to these, the Igbo resort to the services of those that can help him. He believes that through sacrifices the beings are kept in good disposition to ward off malevolent forces away from him.

From interviews conducted with some Igbo youths who claim to sacrifice to the deities, they claim that through sacrifices, they enter a contract with these gods, where their business trips are successful, they come back to show their appreciation. Where they succeed, their testimonies about the benevolence and potency of the gods attract more people to the deity. In dealing with the gods, there is always an element of fear which remains very potent once you are captured. In terms of rationality and fear, fear is superior to rationality. With fear, even though there is no empirical evidence to prove some of the actions of the gods, people still believe in the efficacy of their powers.³⁴

The patronage of deities is also seen as a form of identity for the Igbo. In his patronage of the deities, he believes he is only practicing the religion of his forefathers. This, however, presents another dimension to the study. In sacrificing merely to obtain favours from the gods, can the Igbo really claim to be practicing the religion of the forefathers? Their forefathers practiced religion without being syncretic. They practiced their religion that defined their way of life and which did not require them to engage in clandestine activities. They did not sacrifice to deities only when they needed something. In the end, the present syncretic behaviour of some of the people could only be an avenue for seeking relevance.

The attitudes of some of Christian Westerners leave a lot to be desired. Their activities are no longer in sync with the gospel of Christianity. With the legalisation of homosexuality, gay marriage and lesbianism, some Igbo people reason that it is preferable to revert to their traditional religion which considers these activities as "atrocities". Again, some people see the Christian God as being too merciful and lenient, and does not punish offenders as soon as they err. This is unlike the African gods that punish instantly.

The implications of the resurgence are not far-fetched. The present belief and opportunistic behaviour of the people that they can only obtain favours from the deities' breed laziness. It is deceitful to harbour this kind of belief which prevents them from working hard and being resourceful. The patronage of the deities has also encouraged vices like ritual killing and cultism. The social media is replete with stories of young men who engaged in clandestine activities in quest for quick money. It has also led to the emergence

of a set of youth that has no defined outlook on life, a group of opportunists who cannot differentiate between vices and virtues. In patronising the gods for material gains, they no longer uphold the tenet of the retributive justice of “as you sow, so you reap” for which the Igbo is known.

Conclusion

The resurgence of fetish practices among the Igbo is an unfortunate development which resulted from the breakdown of communalism for which the African was known and the get-rich-quick syndrome and entrenchment of capitalism. Azikiwe in lamenting this development asserts:

In the process of subjugating the African race, the European conquerors substituted communalism with their own concept of individualism., the African ceased to be his brother's keeper. Thus the most unethical superstructures, self becomes more important than the rest of the group³⁵.

The resurgence of the fetish practices including the patronage of deities does not conform to the current policy of inculturation of the Catholic Church. It only shows as Obiefuna suggests that even with the acceptance of Christianity by the Igbo, there is an obvious lack of depth in the faith and commitment of converts. The Igbo may not have fully accepted the intrinsic message of Christianity which remains the salvific mission of Christ. The present syncretic behaviour of Igbo Christians heightens the relevance of Nwankwo's stance as he questions the level of spirituality of African Christians and their manifestation of that “transformative inner connectedness” which remains the kernel of Christianity.³⁶

With the preponderance of sacrifice to the deities, the people are just engaging in spiritism and occultism. The practice of African traditional religion in the pre-colonial days was done within the context of acceptable rules and regulation. For the present generation, engaging in the sacrifice to deities demands no moral responsibility. They are driven by greed and avarice. The communal life which held the Igbo together has been broken by capitalism and materialism. The people should be encouraged to embrace the pure and genuine gospel of Christ for the enrichment of their lives. They should be encouraged to decipher between occultic practices and African traditional religion.

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