
Cultural Dualism and Commitment, Rituals and Rites Among Igbo Societies, 1900 – 2000

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ABSTRACT: *The extremities of modernity and Christianity, and the concomitant innovations emanating from them, caused the syncretism observable in Africa. The microcosm was definitely upset. Equally discernible were consequent dualisms in life styles, festivities, rites and allegiances. Among the cultures affected were rituals, initiations into manhood, exclusive and secret societies and rites of passage/burial. The economic implication of the dualized but single burial/passage rite was the paying of levies/dues to the traditionalists on the one hand, and to the Church, on the other, per a single burial outing. This was to the extent that the cultural commitment of the African was tested; and what were left became re-evaluated. Factually, the beauty of rituals/rites became predicated on dualisms. The order of a burial rite usually read: interment follows immediately after church service and traditional obsequies continue. It, therefore, made economic sense to subscribe to a single species (either traditional or Christian) of rite to reduce both costs and lipservice to the Christian and trado-spiritual cosmogonies. The paper concluded that the extent of commitment to cultures determined the best approaches to the observation of rituals, rites and initiations. For instance: The burial rite of the Ntalakwu in Bende Local Government Area of Abia State was indeed a best approach. It plugged undue economic wastes and lip-serving two systems (not masters). This was exemplified at the burial of Pa Azubuike who was neither a former Churchgoer nor a Christian but a full initiate of the Ekpe, Aku Akang and Eketensi cults. The practiced rhythm and staccato of the Eketensi renditions was awesomely electrifying in a 21st century Igbo community. The burial was hundred percent traditional. It was unheard of, and by all indices, was courting the Christian hell on earth. This paper was written through oral interviews, and the use of primary and secondary sources.*

KEYWORDS: Cultural, commitment, modernity, rites, traditions, Christianity

INTRODUCTION

Unarguably, tremendous changes have occurred in the world from the pre-colonial times to the 1960s. The innovations introduced, therefore, have made it difficult for anyone to find his or her place within a culture composed of conflicting elements; and

concomitantly in a world that is continuously made smaller by enhanced communications and by globalization.

It will be stating the obvious that pre-colonial African societies were affected by the innovations of colonialism or European adventurism that had tints of capitalism. Consequently, the teething problems were not the innovations and their trauma they caused but commitment to the traditions and cultures of the various African communities on which were unleashed colonialism. To what epoch, past, present or the future would this commitment be hinged on? Stressing on the factors of commitment, Margaret Mead (1970, 9-10) explained that peoples of different cultures always distinguished themselves from other groups through the apportioning of special names and the adherence to cultures/customs that have been handed down from generation to generation. They remained who they have always been –“sheltered, fed and protected within a system of customs that [their] whole being expressed” and they felt, and still feel, secured in their customs and the identities which were imbued on them by the customs.

Societies became faced with choices and commitments at the inception of competing and, often, conflicting styles and systems of life which were underpinned and made law by religious and political institutions. Consequently, as civilizations grew and developed, concomitant commitments became a matter of choice between entire systems of thought; and further innovations (as we prefer to refer to them) enunciated new commitments and the possibility of making people remain non-committal to their cultures. Further means of dealing with the new innovations and commitments were elicited; and new reasons for doing so were adduced or given. In a world of intervening variables, the impact of the macrocosm on the microcosm of other systems provided a different way of doing and perceiving things. This, in turn, compelled people to thoughtfully ask questions regarding crosscutting systems and imagined to which of the systems (aboriginal or alien) one could commit his/her life; or, perhaps, to none at all? Other commentators have asked to know if there are values in human cultures, as they exist today, worth saving, worth committing oneself to or be thrown into the dustbin of history (Mead, 1970: 10).

Regarding cultural dualisms and commitment, reducing the reality of change and the assimilation of novel ideas, institutions and cultures, and innovations in general vis-à-vis the distant past and the dependability of human memory in relations to what was known was very important to mankind. Therefore, continuity was, and still is, preserved by the rejection of memories that disturb the sense of continuity and identity that emanate from the people's past. Conservatively, past events which occurred in different territorial patches from the domestic have been fitted into familiar forms; and the processes of change nexus the introduced innovations in the past from alien settings in contradistinction to the present became accommodated in the internal social milieu (Mead, 1970: 42-43).

From the north to south, east to west, were peoples who lost their cherished ancient and complex cultures and adopted simple, at times, crude working alternatives from the new cultures or new environmental challenges. In extreme cases, people abandoned thousands of years of cherished cultures in preference to the cultures of the modern world, especially as have been suggested by various commentators under shock. It was also one of the ironies of development that they occurred unconnectedly even within the same environment. For instance, at the time the British mounted a military expedition against Arochukwu in the Cross River Igbo area in 1902 in the present-day Abia state, it, in the same year, commissioned the Lagos-Ibadan railway line in the present-day Lagos and Oyo States. In her reminiscences, Mead (1970: 13) established corollaries when she observed that:

In some places old women search for special plants and mutter spells to relieve the fears of girls waiting for their children to be born, while in another country research laboratories study physical processes to develop methods of limiting human population. Armies of savage men go into fields to take one more victim from a people they have fought for 500 years, and international assemblies review the vast destructiveness of atomic weapons [with the former savages in attendance].

Anthropology studied diverse peoples thousands of kilometres apart from each other. Oftentimes, the anthropologists could not properly discern the cultures of the peoples they studied; and the peoples they studied, in turn, did not understand them. It was the Etic (alien) versus the Emic (aboriginal) perspectives. But technology bridged the gap.

Presently:

We can talk under shared skies, in a world where airplanes fly over distant mountings, and [so-called] primitive people can listen to radios or operate recording machines in every part of the world. The past culture[s] of complex civilizations [are] largely unknown to the technologically simplest peoples of the world. The step from their past to our present is shortened, but [we] share one world...and [the] desire for all that new technology and new forms of organization can bring now serves as a common basis for communication (Mead, 1970: 14).

Different peoples and their cultures as a result innovations introduced through enhanced communication and technologies experienced internal dynamisms which, in turn, caused the origination of dualisms in ideas, belief concepts and cultures. Often regarded as having been turbulent, the innovations created dissensions in relationships between groups and, more evidently, between the elderly and the young regarding what have been transmitted and ought or ought not to be accepted; the strong and the weak; the possessors and those who possess nothing; and those who have knowledge and skills and those who lack them. In the contention of several commentators and unarguably too, the previously held secure and almost sacred belief that those who knew had authority over those who did not has become seriously questionable.

The so-called primitives were, and still are, presently and confidentially making contributions in world assemblies, such as the United Nations and the Commonwealth of Nations. In spite of the fact that a worldwide culture was developing it was not at the expense of one culture for the other since people accepted what were or would be useful to their environment and well-being. People stuck to doing things as they always did in their cultures in spite of the adoptions and adaptations of innovations. Old ways were not totally thrown overboard. Some continued to build their houses the same way before the innovations but with water systems; and continued to fish as they always did but with engine powered boats. The demands of the so-called primitive cultures changed from fishhooks, gunpowder and mirrors to tape recorders and radios. They consequently heard peoples from other cultures singing and wanted to hear their own songs. The spread of a worldwide culture of communication and democratic theories did not obfuscate the value of each small (microcosmic) culture, even as they wanted to participate in the macrocosmic (alien) cultures. It became a biological model based on “a complex system of many living creatures interacting within a single set of surroundings - the world. Consequently, the universality of this model translated that the gain of one part of the world is the gain of another part. “Each part is essential to each other. Inferentially, change occurs when the balance within the (emic) system is disturbed by etic innovations; and new arrangements have always been evolved to adapt the new conditions into the aboriginal system (Mead, 1970: 20). No culture can be examined in isolation of its past, since cultures unarguably derived from different pristine societies and have been sustained through transmissions to future generations, and from the elderly to the young. Concomitantly, living cultures of different degrees of complexity exist presently and did so between the primitive (prehistoric), historic and post World War II cultures.

Typologies of Cultures

Anthropologists and ethnographers discerned kinds of cultures, namely:

- i. Postfigurative: In which children learnt primarily from their elders;
- ii. Cofigurative: In which both the children and adults learnt from their peers; and
- iii. Prefigurative: in which adults also learnt from their children.

In spite of the great advances in the dynamics of technologies and scientization in societies, the three typologies of cultures itemized delineated the kind of society being studied and written about. It was not that innovations did not occur in the societies or modern shifts made, or that adoptions and adaptations did not occur, but that the members of the societies continued to share and espouse particular teachings, beliefs and ideals which derived authority from their past. They fell into the postfigurative with poachings from the cofigurative and prefigurative systems.

The postfigurative system depicted epochal 'timelessness' in which parents/elders lived without conceiving change in a substantive way and communicated/passed information which embodied their cultures to their descendants thereby portraying and falling victims to the same sense of 'unchanging continuity' or timelessness that have from pristine times characterized human societies. This has been the case when events were not put into writing or carved in monuments and/or mnemonics. It, thus, became traditional and, in fact, sacred for each change to be assimilated into what was known and preserved in the memory and the behaviour of elders of each generation and transmitted as such to future generations, *ad infinitum*. Therefore, the basic learning processes of later generations were through communication by rote in a variety of, and in addition to, unspoken ways:

His elders expressed their sense that this was the way things would be for him because he was the child of their bodies and their spirits, their land and their tradition (Mead, 1970: 21-23).

This learning and the processes were impressed into the young through traditional observances, renditions and, often, through mnemonic devices/processes. For instance, the military lore, origins and routes of migrations of the Abam to their present territory were, and still are, contained in the lyrics of the Abam War Dance and in other festivities, such as the **Ikpo** and **Ikprikpe** dances. These dances revitalized and sourced, and still do, the Abam-ness in them. The learning became impressed, resultantly, upon the young that nothing could challenge their sense of self-identity and future. No matter how traumatic the effects or shocks of these innovations would have affected the cultures and beliefs of aboriginal societies, semblances of previous cultures before the new challenges were always retained (Charles Okeke Okoko, 2015). In the words of Mead (1970: 23):

Contact with other peoples might not change this sense of timelessness at all; the awareness of difference strengthened the sense of one's own particular and unchangeable identity. Even extremely difficult conditions of forced migration, involving long voyages on unmapped seas and arrival on an uninhabited island only emphasized this sense of continuity.

Continuity of cultures depended on the living presence of at least three generations and the continuous relays of information which progressed from generation to generation and bridged the gap. The old continued to impress on the young that all their acts and ways of life were unchanging and eternal. They, thus, guided, and still guides, the young to new ideas vis-à-vis the complete model of what life was and would represents in the future.

The postfigurative culture remained underpinned by an unconscious absence of a realization of change; and the very successful and the often-permanent impression of cultural forms on the young/child of the cultures being studied. Consequently:

The conditions for change, although hidden, are always present, even when traditional procedures are merely repeated. There is always a possibility that some previously accepted procedure, custom or belief will be questioned. This chance increases when the peoples of one postfigurative culture are in close contact with those of another. Such contact sharpens their sense of what constitutes their own culture (Mead, 1970: 25-26).

The retention of cultural habits, customs and characteristics among members of communities were achieved by and from birth; and sometimes by selection which were symbolic of total and unquestioning commitment via highly traditionalized systems of transmission; and on the continuity which the elderly/ancestors expected from the young who became the valves for further transmissions of cultures to even unborn generations. Cultural commitment has consistently depended on the elderly creating situations for the young to perceive them as they did of the parents who reared them and transmitted same to them. The systemic dynamism has not depended “on any description of the past that is not also shared by those who have heard that account since they were born and who, therefore, experiences it as actuality” (Mead, 1970: 27).

Certain questions still pertaining to transmission of cultures and the expected commitment to them have been: “who am I?” What is the nature of my life as a member of my culture? ‘How do I speak and move, eat and sleep, make love, earn a living, become a parent, meet by death? Answers have been arrived at from transmissions of cultures from previous generations and the elderly and are, therefore, accepted “as having been already determined” to be there. Successes or failures did not ‘unmake’ you a member of the practitioners of a culture or cultures. “The past of a people was the past preserved in the succeeding old and imparted to the younger, in their children and in their children’s children” (Mead, 1970: 33). These constituted the understanding and the expectations of the people vis-à-vis the assimilation, adoptions and adaptations to customs recently acquired in contradistinction to those from age-long periods. The old, middle aged and the young, irrespective of gender, received and communicated the same set of messages, as transmitted, regarding: What it was to be human, to be a boy or a girl, to be a first born, or to be born into the family of the eldest brother or the family of the youngest ancestor (Mead, 1970: 33).

Postfigurative cultures, contextualized to cultural dualisms, were enduring in the sense that even when in contact with other cultures tended to reestablish what cultural identity was, and still is. This was heightened to the extent that their sense of identity became so firm that mere substitution of ideas or items were possible without loss of identity. Furthermore, unchanging postfigurative cultures were characterized by rituals of initiations which did not, and still do not, preclude forms of torture overlaid by festivities, such as the **Igba Oso** and **Eketensi** rituals. Evenso, human beings tended to retain more of a cultural identity acquired through some suffering rather than through pleasure and delight.

Summarily, regarding cultural typologies, and contextualized to this theme, the typical postfigurative culture such as matrilineality, was the pristine culture, for instance, that existed totally in isolation of other (distant) cultures, or even when contacts were made, had their histories preserved only in the memories of their members. Continuity was preserved by the rejection of memories that disturbed the sense of continuity and identity.

Rituals/Rites

The involvement in rituals/rites was simply to incur significance which was, and still is, an essential property of beingness that in turn became how one was perceived by self and by others. Put differently, the processes of rites which often entailed initiations inculcated in man a beingness that was expected to achieve self-knowledge by imparting significance to the phenomena of his experience via the rites of either maturity, transition or passage and/or both which were achievable in a lifetime.

The philosophical and tangible realities within and withal communities formed the fulcrum of conventional and natural significance and were all aspects of symbolizations, thus symbolic. There were obvious signs more conventional than the combination of phonemes that made up a word; and made more obvious if one moved from the denotative to the connotative implications in contradistinction to what was meant or not. Or was dependent on the age-old adage that stated that: if what is said is not what is meant, then what ought to have been done remains undone. Among the Abam, for instance, the bead, **Asii**, was significant, during a girl's puberty rites, not only as waist beads or that used for the beautification of self, but connoted purity and fertility. Consequently, Aylward Shorter (1972: 139) opined that:

Signs which veer towards the purely conventional require explanation. Signs that veer towards the symbolic speak for themselves through an existential context and need only to be experienced.

Thus, it was the context of female puberty, fertility and motherhood that the beads, **Asii**, proudly worn by maidens of the Cross River Igbo communities, symbolized. Symbols were, therefore, essentially an appeal to experience, *pensee engagee*, or the science of that which is concrete or a reality which depended on a context that was socio-cultural and, to a large measure, historical (Claude Levi-Strauss, 1966, 1-33).

Levi-Strauss was of the opinion that symbols in a society had a structure, formed a set of classifications or a model that channelled thinking and talking about aspects of nature and social life, while Victor Turner reversed his literary and mythological concept to the cultural and historical. Rehearsing the inferences Levi-Strauss and Victor Turner, Shorter (1972: 139) stated that:

Symbols appeal to experience in society, culture and history, and, therefore, it is altogether natural that they should find expression in action, particularly collective action, and action which is a process of greater or lesser duration. Such symbolic action we call ritual. It is a dramatization of ideals, values and expectations, a bridge between the level of ideas and the level of practical daily life.

Symbolic ritualization was a force for social integration, a favoured process or rite, through which members of a society shared their innermost experiences with others and

expressed internalized values which were otherwise inexpressible and could be experienced in association with or in participation with the practitioners. These have become what are referred to as maturity and ritual rites.

Rituals/rites were, and still are, structuralized into:

- i. The structural aggregation of symbols;
- ii. The value communicative structure;
- iii. The telic or purposive, ends and means structure; and
- iv. The role interactive/communicative structure.

Cumulatively, ritual was the interplay of different human actors in different social categories and dimensions which operated within *communitas* and structures in a series of repeated and balanced oppositions. Rehearsing V. W. Turner (1969: 203), Shorter, 1972: 140):

These are modalities of social inferiority and superiority, and ... there is a human 'need' to participate in both modalities at once. This is the foundation for a dialectical process with successive phases of structure and *communitas*. Ritual provides a continual possibility of synthesis, and there is a repeated ebb and flow between inferiors seeking structural [advancement] superiority and superiors seeking the freedom [more relevance] of [from] *communitas*.

Rituals/rites were, and still are, transmutable. Three typologies were discerned to include:

- i. The Redressive Ritual was often intended to redress a calamity or affliction on a social group, such as floods and earthquakes that in turn affected every member of the group or considered at another level, an affliction that befell an individual who became looked upon as the symbol of the tensions within the community;
- ii. The Life Crisis Ritual was concerned with the individual directly, and not the society in a bid to enter a superior ritual and social status. In this typology, the individual was introduced into a specific community, cult association or category, and the theme of suffering as a means of entry into this category was emphasized. Some examples of this type were the circumcision and puberty rituals, and the other forms of maturity initiations; and
- iii. The Liminal Ritual was the category that instanced a "period of ambiguity, uniformity, passivity, lack of structure and lack of status" and which addressed the root of the individual's beingness and which propelled him/her towards society thereby imbuing in him a profound sense of oneness with it (society). The *raison d'être* for Liminal Ritual was that:

It gives structural inferiors a symbolic structural superiority, and structural superiors aspire to the rediscovery of their humanity through the experience of *communitas*. This is why [they are the] people who don masks and join secret societies (Shorter, 1972: 140).

The structures and categories described above were not as rigidly followed or observed as they seemed in Africa which unlike in Europe where they were institutionalized, were structures that were more communitarian and woven into the fabric of society.

Initiation Rites

While some areas and peoples have all but abandoned their traditional methods of initiation preferring rather to have the Church and school as the basic agencies/agents of acculturation. Others have managed to cling tenuously to their traditional methods though they have not been able to completely stave-off the challenges of westernization and Christianity (Turner, 1969: 203).

Initiation rites usually marked the graduation from childhood to adulthood. But the rites were gender-specific: Those for the males and for the females. Emezue in his essay described the initiation of males as Manhood initiation while those for women was, and still is, referred to as **Iru Mgbede** among the Onitsha in Anambra State and **Ule Nso** among the Ohafia in Abia State, Nigeria. Explaining further: Manhood initiation prepares the male among other things for his future role as a citizen, husband and father, while **Mgbede** prepares the girl child to become a good wife and mother. The terminologies for maturity rites differed from one community to another. For instance, among the Ozu Abam were the **Igba Nnunu**, **Ije Oso** and **Iranpusa Ekpe** while among the Idima and Ndi Oji Abam were the **Igboto Nma** and **Igboto Omu**, respectively. These initiation or maturity rites ushered one into exclusive sects in the southeast Cross River Igbo subculture area. The **Ije Oso** in Ozu Abam was the enunciation into the **Oso** process, while **Ila Oso** was the final stage of the **Igba Oso** maturity rite, after which you became qualified as a member of the **Ukerabuo Cheogo** for the males and the **Uke Ekwe** as their female counterparts (Sydney Emezue, 2005, 51). It must be pointed out that the extent of the initiations vis-à-vis the maturity rites one attained impacted on the burial rites of individuals when they died.

Initiation/maturity rites were categorized into, first, the socially mandatory in order that individuals qualified into full-fledged members of the Abam society; and consequently traditionally discharged certain responsibilities towards the community (*communitas*). The initiations were made more relevant because the individual graduated into the social peak under the aegis of his/her age grades. At the attainment of the **Ukerabuo Cheogo** and **Uke Ekwe**, among the Abam, often at the age of seventy, they became compulsorily exempt from physically entailing responsibilities.

Second, there were exclusive rites that were not mandatory but voluntary. In this case, people performed feats in warfare, wrestling and in farming. In pre-colonial Abam, those who won laurels in wars, and especially returned from such wars with human heads, automatically became initiated into the **Ufiem** cult of brave men. The symbol of the **Ufiem** was crossing the palm frond line, **Ikpu omu**. Oftentimes, one heard someone asking another, albeit derogatively, if he had crossed the palm frond line - **Ikpuola omu**. Among the Ohafia, was, and still is, the **Ikpirikpe Ndi Iyom**, a cult for women who performed exceptional feats either behind the battle line or in it. They were known to have aided the male warriors through the supply of intelligence and food during warfare in pre-colonial times. Presently, the qualification for entry into the **Ufiem** and **Ikpirikpe**

Ndi Iyom is determined by other factors other than feats in warfare. It is common knowledge how village wrestling champions, referred to as **Nwamba** (pussycat), in pre-colonial times were the automatic emissaries during warfare between communities. Although difficult to categorize, the hunter par excellence, who killed lions and other carnivorous animals in hunts were in their own class. Among the Abam, they also qualified as emissaries of war. The renowned hunters were variously referred to as **Ogbuagu** (lion killers) or **Ogba tutu** (skilled shots) (Charles Okeke Okoko, 2016).

Third, the last category of maturity rites was, and still is, self-initiatory. These were memberships of secret societies or cults. Presently ferment is the debate regarding what associations are exclusive and those that are secret. J. C. Nwadike argued that the so-called secret societies were indeed exclusive (J. C. Nwadike, 2016). But among the Abam, membership of the **Ufiem** caste of brave warriors was, and still is, exclusive and not secret. All that was needed was picking up one's machete, headed off to the warfront and returned home with a "genuinely" cut human head to qualify for membership. The **Ufiem** was, thus, non-initiatory but has always been membered by those who walked the corridors of war or of fame (Okoko, 2016).

But cults, such as the Ekpe and Aku Akang were, and still are, secret cults that required rigorous initiation processes that usually climaxed by the initiates being taught signs for identification. The signs/symbols were generally referred to as the "**Nsibidi**" among the peoples of the Cross River valley, especially the Ibibio, Efik, Yakurr and the Cross River Igbo communities.

It is important again to point out that initiation rites were slightly different from maturity rites. It was difficult, in most Igbo communities, to differentiate between the two. Maturity rites were mandatory while initiation rites were avoidable in order to escape the inherent rigours. For instance, the **Ije Oso** and **Ila Oso** or **Igbapusi Oso** and **Igba Ekpe** were age grade based rites. Both festivities were commenced with **Ije Oso** and **Iranpusa Ekpe** and ended with **Igbapusi Oso** and **Igbapusi ekpe**, respectively. These were rightly manhood initiation rites which had, and still have, socio-economic implications. The attainment to the levels of the **Ukerabuo cheogo** and **Uke Ekwe** meant that the individuals worked hard to have been able to pay the levies for the duration of four years for the **Ekpe** and another four years for the **Oso** maturity festivals (Anthony Kalu, 2019).

Rather, initiations into secret societies had spiritual dimensions. The participants undertook certain rigorous activities which were intended to test the human spirit. As mentioned earlier, membership of the **Ufiem** cult of warriors or fame only entailed embarking on legitimate warfare. Other warriors at the warfront always corroborated the feat of cutting human heads. The nocturnality of the initiation rites was to create an eerie feeling and provided a serene time to commune with requisite deities. Evenso, oaths of silence were concomitantly administered in the processes of initiation. The survival of secret cults had over the years depended on the feeling of the initiates of becoming

cheated if the secrets confided/entrusted to them during initiation were revealed to non-initiates - **Ikpoo**. According to Emezue, the completion of necessary rites and trainings helped a man to become more discretionary and prudent in his approach to life (Emezue, 2005, 51-55).

As mentioned earlier, initiation was, and still is, a pre-condition for membership into exclusive institutions and secret cults. It must also be pointed out that wealth was not a pre-condition for initiation into manhood, but the preparatory requirements for initiation entailed the payment of dues or levies. These were described by commentators as mere tokenisms. Although the taking of certain titles among some Igbo communities, such as the **Ozo** title among the Onitsha and the **Omume** title among the Afikpo, entailed obvious costs.

While elaborate and costly initiation rites were rife among boundary communities, initiation into manhood was inextricably tied to military service among the Abam, Ohafia and Ihechiowa. According to Emezue (2005: 52):

Another prominent feature of manhood initiation in Igboland is that the process, often the climax, is the initiation into masquerade societies. As part of the benefits of initiation a person comes to know the secrets of masquerades, and above all the art of disguise involved As soon as a young boy attains a reasonable age, he joins his peers in an informal playgroup. They often meet at the village square where they play, learn and share some traditional myths, riddles and lores The child is encouraged to observe his elders undertake acts of relative bravery especially masquerading. He is also encouraged to imitate them by improvising masks with trunks of the pawpaw tree with rags. Adorned in any of these he frightens and chases people around him especially women. Elderly women give him gifts especially [roast] yams in appreciation of his dexterity in mimicking a masquerade.... This aspect of initiation does not entitle the young lad to the knowledge of the secrets of the masquerade. He is considered too young to be let into these guarded secrets.

Circumcision Rites

Circumcision was performed on both male and female infants. But in some matrilineal and non-matrilineal communities, circumcision was, and still is, performed on female teenagers while undergoing puberty rites, **Iru Mgbede** or in **Ule Nso**. It was, and still is, the:

Surgical removal of all or part of the foreskin of the human male or of the corresponding tissues of the female. Circumcision of males has been widely practiced as a religious rite since ancient times. An initiatory rite of Judaism, circumcision is also practiced by Muslims (*see* Islam), for whom it signifies spiritual purification. Although its origins are unknown, earliest evidence of the practice dates from ancient Egypt. By the time of the Roman takeover of Egypt in 30 BC, the practice had a ritual significance, and only circumcised priests could perform certain religious offices (Donald F. Tuzin, 2009).

In tribal settings, circumcision was always associated with traumatic puberty rites. Occasionally the severed part was offered as a sacrifice to the spirit beings. The operation certified the subject's readiness for marriage and adulthood and was the evident testimony that he or she had the ability to withstand pain. Among traditional societies, circumcision was highly recommended and it was used in distinguishing cultural groups from their uncircumcised neighbours.

Circumcision until the feminist ferment of the first quarter of the 19th century was a universal concept and practise. Although it was absent from the Hindu-Buddhist and Confucian traditions, the New Testament Christian churches had, and still have, no specific doctrine about it. Other than the Old Testament based religious organizations, the Abyssinian church among Christian bodies recognized, and still recognizes circumcision as a religious rite (Donald F. Tuzin, 2009).

What was actually performed on the females was clitoridectomy which was the cutting off of all or part of a woman's or girl's clitoris (Donald F. Tuzin, 2009). It was practiced in some societies as a social or cultural rite of passage. Put differently, it was the reduction of the size of the clitoris and its ugly appearance while in erection; and in order to also reduce the sensation that was caused by such erection, therefore, concomitant sexual urge. The so-called female genital mutilation was inhibitory and not barbaric. For instance, in traditional Abam, Amaseri and Ihechiowa societies, precautions were taken before circumcision. Before the operation, relevant herbs that stemmed bleeding and aided clotting were gathered and prepared by the specialist midwives. A hole was also dug in the ground for the collection and proper disposal of blood and excised materials. The flow of blood into the hole was spiritually intended to establish contact with the earth deity, **Ala**, who in the first place powered the fertility and eventual birth of the child.

Female genital mutilation was referred to as barbaric and Africa-specific without a modicum of regard or to the reasons why those who engaged in it did so. The description of the act itself as mutilation was also barbaric because those who referred to it as such could not come to terms with the probable reasons vis-à-vis their new thought system for a hitherto worldwide culture. Rehearsing T. A. Baasher (1977), Chidi Anene and Johnson Nwosu (2016) agreed that the ancient ritual of female genital mutilation "has been practiced in all continents of the world at one time or the other". Moreover, female genital mutilation, rightly circumcision or clitoridectomy, was part of the initiation into womanhood in traditional societies in both the North and South divide. Colonialism, indeed, created a worldwide chasm in thought and education. In spite of the fallouts from the etic-emic perspectives, the question remained: Why was circumcision practised in the first place? Why the resistance to female circumcision and not to males? Was it feminism orchestrated by occidental women and some African elite? What was wrong with initiation into womanhood? What were the advantages of circumcision? (Anene and Nwosu, 2016: 120).

The African anthropologists were relieved of the burden of proof of the reasons for circumcision in African societies. Evenso, it became gendered anti-woman and rural to circumcise. The activities of the feminists became so vociferous that the word circumcision elided to mutilation; and it was accepted as all right. Being aware of the health implications, the antagonists of circumcision, especially the females in a non-existent European-modeled health system in Africa, no one bothered to investigate the hygienicity entailed in the process vis-à-vis the herbs, as mentioned earlier, that were used for blood clotting, sterilization and the general treatment of the circumcision environment (Baasher, 1977).

The sight of uncircumcised male genitalia, according to Kalu Ogburanwa, was, and still is, ugly, while the behaviours and sexual latitude of uncircumcised females were considered untoward. The question that was, and still is, prevalently asked vis-à-vis the untoward behaviour of any female: Was she circumcised - **Ebikwara ya ugwu**? On the part of the men folk, an uncircumcised male could not flaunt his phallus in village streams/rivers. He either moved away from others or did not swim at all. Presently, male circumcision has been modernized with the introduction of the apparently harmless methods among which is the ring method that removed the foreskin of the phallus. Why has it been difficult to do same to female circumcision instead of dismissing it as mutilation and barbaric (Kalu Ogburanwa, 2019).

The prevalence of AIDS/HIV is not enough to forbid circumcision. Commentators have queried about the psycho-cultural implications on societies where it was, and still is, symbolic of chastity. Some of the reasons adduced as health risks were “severe bleeding, infections, shock, difficulty with menstruation and urination as well as painful intercourse” (Anene and Nwosu, 120). Aptly cogent reasons, but at what time did these harmful factors occur? Or for how long they took place?

In some traditional societies, circumcision took place at infancy (a few days after birth) while some administered circumcision during the **Iru Mgbede**, marriage and puberty rites, which of course made it painful to have intercourse with one’s husband in immediate post-circumcision period. The psychological import of female circumcision was underplayed as non-biological. Rather, appropriate doses of upbringing vis-à-vis sex and moral education were proposed. This was also underpinned by critical Christianization. Perhaps, a research on female responses to sexual overtures by the males could be carried out. Circumcision was an initiation into manhood, womanhood (no matter when the circumcision took place), exclusive and secret cults. Being circumcised was requisite for initiation into the **Ekpe** and **Ikprikpe Ndi Iyom** cults.

The Ekpe (Leopard) Society

The Cross River Igbo area engaged in pervasive military and trading activities in pre-colonial times. The Igwu and Inyang Rivers that were tributaries to the Enyong River

provided the only waterways to the Cross River area at these times. Presently, a motorway runs from Umuahia through Bende and cuts across Abam communities to Ohafia and southeastwards to Arochukwu (Osuagwu and Okoko, 2016: 171).

The Ekpe secret society was, and still is, a common feature of the Cross River Igbo, Bende to as far as the Old Aba Division that was, and still is, dominated by the Ngwa clan. Yet, it was more prevalent among communities that had sustained contacts with the Arochukwu who were the middlemen between peoples of the hinterland and coastal communities of the Efik and Ibibio in the Cross River valley. Ekpe was the Ibibio word for Leopard. Thus, the Ekpe cult was symbolic of the Leopard spirit and connoted bravery. Secret societies were prevalent also among borderland communities, such as the Arochukwu and the others that shared, and still share, common borders with the Cross River valley.

The Abiriba introduced the Ekpe cult into the Cross River Igbo area from where it spread to Abam, Ohafia and Ihechiowa, among others. In fact, the Catholic Church bell at the present-day Central School in Ozu Abam originally belonged to the Abiriba Ekpe society which early initiates brought to Abiriba from Calabar in the 1930s. Thus, when the Catholic Church at Ozu Abam learnt of the disused bell, they sought for and bought it from the Abiriba Ekpe society at the cost of thirty-six pounds (Okoko, 1983). It did not matter then who owned the bell and how it originated. The Church needed a medium to relate to its nascent congregation. Perhaps, in the Christianization of rituals and initiations, the Church did not discriminate against new converts or recriminated the old members in its fold who had relationships with the Ekpe cult.

Among the many traditions that recounted the inroads of the Ekpe society into the Cross River Igbo area, that of the Bende, a non-matrilineal community to the west of the Cross River Igbo area, was profound. The tradition recounted how a certain trader called Omeribara Okpo who lived at Okoyong in the Cross River returned to Bende with the Ekpe cult and its associated articles, namely, the **Inyankpe** mask, **Ntang** mask, **Ukara** (the exclusive **Mboko Ekpe** designed with the motif of **Nsibidi** or the secret symbols of Ekpe), carved images of a man and a dog called Okereke and **Nkita** Ekpe. Other Ekpe items included Akpa Ekpe (the bag of Ekpe charms) with which new initiates were administered oaths of secrecy and allegiance, and four Ekpe drums (Osuagwu and Okoko, 171).

As mentioned earlier, to become initiated into secret societies were to court significance. It imbued, and still imbues, inferiors with a symbolic superiority while superiors aspired to a rediscovery of their humanity by associating with members of the community (*communitas*). The authority and influence that accrued from membership of the Ekpe cult, in societies where it existed, attracted and elevated more members of the community to the extent that they assumed political, administrative and judicial functions. According to Osuagwu and Okoko (2016: 171):

Ekpe made laws and enforced them. Its judicial functions were very far-reaching. It began to settle all cases in the entire community except in the case of murder which was a grievous traditional offence. Ekpe ...became synonymous with good and orderly government. The decisions of Ekpe and judgments were given without fear or favour because they [were] devoid of bribery and corruption. The decrees of Ekpe were enforced to the letter and any [infractions] attracted sanctions and penalties. The authority, sanctions and laws of Ekpe encompassed both members and non-members of [the] community. However, the involvement of Ekpe in the settlement of land disputes made it very prominent.

Although Christianity and colonialism dealt some blows on the Ekpe cult, it was the fact that its involvement in social matters and in land disputes could be challenged in "English" courts. Having lost its juridical powers to modernity, the secrecy and authority it exuded in pre-coloniality still kept it open for consultations by believing members of the society. It was common to be summoned to an Ekpe cult in places where it existed. Presently, the Ekpe cult has assumed the dimensions of a culture of the strong and deftly as the leopard.

The Eketensi Cult

The reconstruction of the culture history of traditional societies in Africa by alien anthropologists down-played the esoteric and mystical dimensions, and portrayed them as mere ceremonials of the communities. So many reasons for this have been inferred and given. Other than apparent disinterest on the part of Eurocentric scholars and the quest for peripheral information that enhanced colonial governance by colonial administrators, was the fact that most of the anthropologists were non-initiates and could not have been let into the secrets of the cults. It has become imperative for these cultural rites of initiation into manhood, womanhood, exclusive and secret societies to be documented. It must be pointed out that the communities of the East African sub-region have had their cultures, even the esoteric and mystical, and the millenarian, documented. In view of this, this section undertook to survey the annual Bende Eketensi cultural cum spiritual-mystical festival.

It was almost impossible to separate the activities of humans from those of their gods and ancestors. This provided the mystical connect between cultural practices and how they became forms of worship and continuous veneration. In spite of the fact that the Eketensi was, and still is, celebrated during the new yam festival, and was in turn regarded as a new yam festival activity, it was underlain by the content and subterranean realities of the Eketensi. Although participated in by all or danced to by all, other than the fanfare were a series of initiations: the initial one was referred to as the **Itu anya** (anointing the eyes) which was preparatory to **Iwa anya** (opening the eyes to be able to see, as held, the spirits). The very processes of the activities, moreso, the esoteric utterances and contrivances, conveyed eerie feelings. But the initiates were consoled by the fact that at the end of the day they were able not just to commune with the spirits/ancestors but actually see them. This belief was, and still is, ongoing and has till date not been

contradicted by anyone. Perhaps, this belief led to the perpetuation of the festivity and the cult (Osuagwu, 2018).

Presently, the processes are obviously witnessing dwindling participation and skepticism vis-à-vis Christian evangelism. The extent of participation of the elite in the Eketensi festival in the last decades of colonialism and between the 1960s and 2000s glaringly declined. Of course, the accoutrements of the Eketensi cult dance which entailed that the males danced bare-bodied with smears of blackish ointments rubbed on, although intended to scare away malevolent spirits, became regarded as unclean by the Christian elite.

Feats were performed during the Eketensi festival. Lasting for about a week, the festival climaxed on the Eke day of the Igbo week (**Izu**) at the Mbara Mbayi square. Here, men who had accumulated more spiritual powers in their Eketensi engaged others in magical feats. Those who had scores to settle with each other did so at Mbara Mbayi. Evidently, cut-off arms were replaced, burnt skins were remade and, astoundingly, baskets were used to fetching water. This was the extent to which a non-initiate researcher could go. Whichever way the Eketensi was looked at, that it survived till date demonstrated the extent of the cultural commitment of the Bende and adjoining villages. Because it was celebrated annually, the culture and the requisite initiations into the Eketensi cult were transmitted and conducted consistently. The strength of the participants was over the years enhanced by the criticisms meted out from the pulpits of Christendom. Equally sustaining were the magical feats performed by the initiates. According to a Christian commentator, the Eketensi has lasted this far because it is a harmless cultural pass-time of the Bende and environs (Osuagwu, 2018).

Passage Rites

Passage rites, descriptively, should mean passing/engaging in all rituals and initiations from infancy through puberty to adulthood and ultimately death. As mentioned in the section on rites of initiations, they were categorized into the voluntary and involuntary. The involuntary initiations were the maturity rites prescribed by the society while the involuntary initiations were self-imposed, suggested by parents or engaged in during the initiation of peers. Oftentimes, the voluntary initiations were engaged in as initiations in the quest for superiority, significance and heightened recognition; and one was immediately ushered into the exclusive class. Definitely, they could not be properly termed initiations because no oaths of allegiance and secrecy were administered.

Among some Cross River Igbo communities, such as the Abam and Ohafia, returning home from warfare in pre-colonial times with cut human heads automatically ushered one into the **Ufiem** caste of brave warriors. While it was esteeming for young men to embark on warfare, decapitating an enemy human in a war situation was an additional honour to having gone at all. The risks involved in warfare entailed the initiation.

Another typology of voluntary rite was the initiation into secret cults, such as the **Ekpe** and **Aku Akang**. The two cult groups were regarded as secret because the young initiates were ushered into them by swearing to oaths of allegiance and secrecy. In essence, membership into exclusive societies did not involve spiritist medium, while secret cults required you present yourselves before a spiritual tribunal and during which they were sworn to some oaths.

The involuntary rites of initiation were societal requirements which ushered participants into the highest socio-political and cultural rungs. At best, they were maturity rites. These explanations have been necessary so that one knows from the outset that passage from circumcision through to burial rites were aggregative and determinant of the dimension of the burial one got at death in the Cross River Igbo area, as elsewhere.

Ironically, marriage rites topped all initiations and it did not matter whether the rites were voluntary or involuntary. The ability to go through the requirements prescribed in the marriage institution and most importantly had children, determined if members of the community went to their farms at the person's death. In essence, initiating into all secret and exclusive societies, performing feats in warfare and in all the maturity rites did not qualify one as an **Odegwu** unless you were married, and moreover, had children. It was your marital status that qualified you as a man (also as a woman), and then as a member of the society. The sum total of your significance was portrayed, and still is portrayed, during one's burial rites. Presently, obituary announcements would read: Interment follows after Church service, traditional obsequies continue. It is disarming these days when men who went through all the maturity and initiation rites are buried without fanfare. Prevalent these days is the deceased offspring hiring pastors to perform open air Church services to appease their alien visitors. Evenso, the traditional drums are beaten in silence to imbue the burial ceremony some ambience of Christianity.

Cultural Implications of Non-Timely Burials

In traditional African societies, it was anathema keeping the corpse of a dead relative for long (often for as long as three days) without interment. The assumption was that the spirit hovered on earth or was earth-bound during such a period. There were tales of the dead seen around the village as ghosts. Technically, the committal of the dead to the 'earth' signified a reunification with the 'Mother Earth' deity, Ali, at whose instance as a fertility god, that the conception of the deceased took place. Psycho-spiritually, immediate interment severed whatever relationships or links it (the dead) had with the living members of the family and lineage. Explained at another level, the ancestors, as held, were often provoked into reacting against the living for depriving them of their earned association with the dead. Although, examples have not been established, Abam traditions recount of such dead appearing to their living relatives in their dream-states, asking to know the reasons for their non-burial.

However, the reasons adduced for non-timely burial in pre-colonial times were the relatives inability to immediately fund their burials rite expenses, the circumstances surrounding one's death (if he/she was killed through poisoning, for instance) and proof that the deceased lived a descent life or otherwise was thrown into any designated evil forest. Presently, (2015), it is characteristically the desire to give a befitting burial to the dead by the children, not necessarily based on the deceased achievements in the society but to dispel, perhaps, subsisting rumours about the children's abilities or inabilities to give a resounding burial ceremony. Evenso, the children perceived it as a parting gift to their dead; and equally enhanced their perception by peers.

However, the Christian-type or modern burial does not imply any of the reasons adduced as factors for non-timely burial. The corpse could be kept in the morgue for as long as necessary without attracting either physical or spiritual sanctions. Even when Churches stipulated a two-week period as allowable time to bury one's dead, adherents openly flouted it.

Pre-Burial Interment - Itinye na Nsusu

This was the process prevalently employed in Igboland to preserve a corpse from decaying and becoming offensive. Moreover, there were no mortuaries in pre-colonial times. The corpse was preserved in dry gin or had lots of gin infused into it and an axe placed in-between the spread legs. Then the **Ogbili Nkwo** crude made from palm nuts was lit up. The burning **Ogbili nkwo** emitted fumes and fragrance that slowed the decay and bad odour from the obviously decaying corpse. The **Itinye-na-nsusu** was practiced when the deceased family did not have money to perform the burial rites immediately. Thus, the family dug the grave and laid the corpse inside it and covered the top with raphia fronds and wood. The **Ogbili nkwo** burned for the two or three days the family needed to prepare for the burial ceremony proper. Among the Abam, certain species of leaves were usually placed round a corpse to prevent flies perching on it preparatory to burial (Hamuel Chukwu, 2018).

Burial Rites: The Ntalakwu Example

A burial ceremony at Ntalakwu village in Bende Local Government Area portrayed no-dualisms. The deceased, Pa Azubuike, was neither a Churchgoer nor a professed Christian. The road to Ntalakwu did not also portray the expected trappings of modernity since some of her sons had occupied sensitive positions in the Abia State government. As it was, Ntalakwu was part of Igboland that was administered from the Cross River area; yet, there were no roads, pipe borne water and medical facilities. Other than the early orthodoxies with dilapidated Church buildings were mushrooming Pentecostal churches. The environment was rural and serenely eerie. Hawks and vultures dived from tree to tree; and the toads croaked. Heaps of cut palm heads and sacks of palm kernels for sale were prevalent. Thus, it was not unexpected that Pa Azubuike would not have been given a cathedral burial.

Pa Azubuike was fully initiated into almost all the secret societies and exclusive clubs of the Ntalakwu: both the voluntary and involuntary. Since the Christians were visibly absent in Pa Azubuike's compound, the traditionalist held sway. The various secret cults occupied select corners of the village awaiting the corpse of Pa Azubuike from the mortuary at Bende. The Ekpe and Akang cults produced esoteric sounds intermittently. The Eketensi were more visible with intermittent staccato of their drums. Yet, no pastors and reverends arrived at the scene. On inquiry, the reason given was that Pa Azubuike was a core traditionalist, **Onye amala**. The dice was cast when the corpse was brought to his compound at Ntalakwu. Since the Ekpe and Akang cults' activities were not for the eyes of non-initiates, the Eketensi spirito-cultural group danced to the admiration of all. It was captivatingly terrifying in an era of "hellish damnation" of sinners? Of traditionalists? Of what? (Chijioke Azubuike, 2017).

Reading through the burial programme of Pa Azubuike, it was stated that he was friendly with Christians, discharged his civic responsibilities effectively and observed all cultural rites, *ad infinitum*. The staccato drums of the Eketensi drowned the imminence of hell, relived traditionality at its best and reinvented the African state of nature. The burial embodied the ritualization of the people's social life away from the innovations of modernity. In spite of the activities of the orthodoxies and orthopraxies, the passage rites of the Ntalakwu remained untainted. As a commentator argued, the Ntalakwu have remained disconnected from civilization which was indeed a perfect fallacy. Rather, the cultural commitment of the Ntalakwu, which its forbears dutifully transmitted from generation to generation and insisted on, sustained the people's commitment to their cultures and rites; and retained their identity.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The innovations of modernity underpinned, especially, by the disarticulating effects of Christianity from the 15th century tested the extent of commitment of Africans to their cultures. Commitment to traditional cultures became harder and harder to sustain with the introduction of conflicting elements, often through impositions nexus colonialism; technology nexus television; and the dissolution of national boundaries through globalization. Before occidental encounters, Africans were who they were, sheltered, fed and protected within a system of customs that their whole being expressed. They were secure in the identities imposed by their various niches which were, in turn, handed down by their forebears.

As alien cultures impinged on the microcosm and on often isolated African communities, there set in a heightened degree of catharsis, since new sets of choices requiring commitment were instanced on traditional societies. The new choices and commitments elicited new means and reasons of dealing with them. It became a matter of choice between entire subsisting cultural systems and new systems of thought and ways of doing things. The question that was prevalently asked, especially by Africa's nascent elite was:

To which system of thought do I commit life? Or another: Can I commit my life to anything? Or at best: Is there anything in human cultures, as they exist today worth saving, worth committing myself to?

Contextualized to traditional African societies, cultural dualisms and commitment were constantly subject to the realities of change and the assimilation of novel ideas as introduced or that were impinging. Moreover, the distant past and the dependability of human memory in relation to what were known further nibbled away at commitment to cultures of traditional societies without writing culture.

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