

IGBO ANCESTOR-SHIP AND CHRISTIAN SAINTHOOD: THE BIGOTRY

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ABSTRACT: *Ancestor-ship (Igbo forebears) charged with intercessory of the living are once humans before admittance after death into the comity of ancestors. It is one of Igbo expositors that life is not terminated after death and that their dead exist in another spiritual realm mirroring the activities of the living and determining their fate. The Igbo ancestors are always remembered in every Igbo religious rituals and worships while they are also presumed to be present in meals with the living. The admittance into the ancestral cult is not automatic as several criteria are first put in place and considered: living a good life and dying at a ripe old age. For the Christians, sainthood is conceived and used as a title of apostles of Jesus Christ having acknowledged as holy and virtuous during their lifetime. Today, churches still practice the canonization (official declaration) of their dead clergies as saints. The Christian saints believed to be in heaven after death having lived a pious life also serve as an object of veneration and worship. This paper Igbo Ancestor-ship and Christian Sainthood: The Bigotry brings to bear the attributes/making of Igbo ancestor, their roles and place in the Igbo cosmology. It further looks into the Christian saints, what informs ones canonization, their roles and place in Christian worship. This work at the end establishes paradoxical of the Igbo ancestors denigration by Christians despite sharing the same attribute. It further notes that the condemnation and Christians denotation of Igbo Ancestor-ship to paganism amounts to religious bigotry. It suggests for neopaganism approach to some Igbo beliefs and practices that share the same values and attributes to that of the Christians as in the case of Igbo Ancestor-ship and the Christian Sainthood.*

KEYWORDS: igbo, ancestors, saints.

INTRODUCTION

Ancestor ship is one of the Igbo belief systems, which arrogate power to the dead over the living. It is a belief just like in reincarnation that shows that death is not total annihilation of life rather life continues but in a different cosmic. According to Obiakor (2010), "in Igbo world view, individuals, Ancestors and the spirits are major players". Among the Igbo, the fear of the Ancestral wrath is one of the bases for the Igbo to live descent life. Okeke (2015) in support says "it is believed that the ancestors are able to influence the lives and activities of their relations on earth, hence they can bring fortune or misfortune on them at the same time protect them against evil machinations of the wicked people, depending on how the living regard and remember them".

Ancestorship is a lineage/ a line up of departed elders of the same ancestral abode forming another community in the spiritual realm to superintend over the life of the living. This is why Opoku (1978) concludes that "the dead, the living and yet unborn form an unbroken family". Idowu (1973) notes "there is the general belief that communion and communication are possible between those who are alive on earth and deceased, and that the latter have powers to influence, help or molest the former".

The Igbo during rituals, libations and morning prayers always invite their Ancestors to be partakers because they strongly believe that their ancestors are ever present in their day-to-day activities protecting and interceding on their behalf.

It's in view of this Abanuka (2004) posits that "since the ancestors and their descendants, were of one skin (ofuanuaru) the ancestors are interested in the welfare of the community as a whole". At every meal the Igbo believes that their Ancestors, the unseen guest though in the spiritual realm mirroring their activities here on earth equally partake in the eaten as the Igbo after the oral invitation throws out a portion of the meal or kola nut or as the case may be outside believing that the ancestors being spirits have eaten them. Also Mbiti (1969) explains that many Africans believe that their beloved ones who are dead do not actually leave them but hover around and protect them".

The eldest of the family or whomever that is pouring the libation or saying the prayer will be calling their Ancestors (departed elders) in chronological order mentioning their names as much as he could remember to be part of the activity/event/ceremony. Admittance into the company of the Ancestors is not automatic as its membership goes beyond just being dead so it's not all Igbo dead family members that are Ancestors.

Sainthood is the language of the Christendom. The followers of Christ were called Saints because they were believed to have lived a pious life and are in heaven with God. After Christ's ascension, his followers were scattered abroad. The saints who were ones living, seen as holy and virtuous in their lifetime and at death upheld as object of veneration, worship and intercession for the living. The Christian sainthood began with the extermination of all the Apostles/disciples of Jesus Christ who are upheld by today Christians as martyrs having suffered because of their faith and horrendously attacked and died various forms of death. Ever before referring to the Apostles and Disciples of Jesus Christ as Saints, all Christians (believers) are referred as Saints a name that could as well connote Brethren (fellow Christian).

Sainthood in today's Christendom has shifted from its earlier collective name for all the believers (Christ followers) to a more complex with limited admittance to the cult. Christians of old are automatically called Saints. In line with the old method of referring/calling every believer a Saint, a particular Christian denomination, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints still uphold and call its members Saints.

Christians of today believe so much on the powers of the Saints of the old: seeing them as their models, naming their children after them as well as dedicating their churches in their memorial. Beyond these, the Saints of the old (the disciples, Apostles and other martyrs) are celebrated by Christians of today during worships and are often called to intercede on their behalf having been assumed to be in heaven with Jesus Christ. During prayer sessions today Christians precisely the Roman Catholics usually reel out the names of the saints inviting them one after the other to come and intercede on their behalf. The churches in the same vane have special days each saint is celebrated as in the case of the Roman Catholics who see such a saint's day as holy and abstain from work coupled with a holy mass.

Sainthood did not end with the Apostles/disciples and the martyrs of the early church. Some Churches of our time (the Roman Catholic) beyond the biblical stories of exploits of saints of the old still make provision for the canonization of Saints of the present time: based on testimonies and other tight verifiable facts, conditions and processes.

MAKING OF AN ANCESTOR (THE QUALIFICATION)

An ancestor being dead members of Igbo families in no means automatically qualifies all to be one. Every dead member of Igbo family joins the company of ancestors but all do not receive reverence nor take part in the affairs of the living. Amamchukwu (1989) posits “under the concept of ancestors are found all the living-dead, the spirit of children, sisters, brothers and other members of their families. Just as it is that, even today in an Igbo village, one is rarely asked; whose son are you?” This could be likened to the typical Igbo family setting where everyone is a member where activities go in hierarchal order with the father at the helms of affairs. This is so because in Igbo worldview, life in the physical world is believed to be influenced by that of the spiritual realm. As Metuh (1987) portrays “the abode of the dead, “ala muo” is a carbon copy of the abode of the living. The two differ only in that one is visible and the other invisible”.

This implies that, in the spirit world, every country or community/villages are marked out or defined just as they are in this world, so that each town, community or household has its own allotted portion to which as people die, they go. It is believed that the family setting on earth has its replica in the spiritual world where their dead family members come together to form yet another union. It is a circle where one dies, joins the ancestors, comes back through reincarnation and continues another life altogether. Just as reincarnation in Igbo cosmology stipulates criteria for one to reincarnate, same goes to ancestor. Metuh (1987) explains, “the abode of the good spirit of the dead, “ala mmuo” is a carbon copy of the abode of the living. The two differ only in that one is visible and the other invisible.

A geographical map of the land of the living would represent the spirit land in every particular town; village and homestead would be situated exactly where it is in the land of the living”. In the presence of all the dead members of Igbo family that join their ancestral fathers, certain remarkable achievements and respect for values of the communities during one’s lifetime are measured before qualifying to receive reverence. Ofoegbu (2001) points out that “death alone is not sufficient to make a person an ancestor. Much depends on how a person lived and how he died”. The Igbo see their Ancestors as models, those who have lived remarkable life during their lifetime, impacted positively to their people and most importantly died at a ripe old age and given befitting burial. Obiakor (2010:41) quoting Enyeribe lists these requirements as criteria for a dead Igbo person to become an ancestor worthy to be revered.

- i Bodily health and physical integrity
- ii An exemplary moral life
- iii Success, wealth and prosperity: maximum self-actualization and self-fulfilment: acquisition of titles; position of power and responsibility in his community.
- Iv A happy married life, with offspring to the third and fourth generation; the privilege of seeing ones great grand children
- V A ripe old age.
- Vi Dying a natural dead (onwuchi); and finally
- Vii Given befitting burial rites

With the above listed criterions, it’s obvious that certain crop of dead members of Igbo families though in the land of the ancestors to join their ancestral fathers are not ancestors that are qualified to receive reverence and veneration from the living. Igbo believe that one that is physically/bodily

handicapped is paying his or her karmic debt: as according to them it's a carryover of the person's deed in the previous life. Any Igbo that suffered or died of certain ailments such as leprosy (ekpenta), swollen stomach (itoafo), hernia(ibi) and chicken pox (kitikpa) is not qualified to be an ancestor. Anyone who died of these listed ailments among the Igbo was seen as a bad and shameful death (ajoonwu). It's generally said in the Igbo palace "o nwuruajoonwu" or "o nwuruonwuihere".

The Igbo is of the belief that the gods curse such disease; as the sufferer must have committed sin against the mother earth (Ala) an act that is termed as abomination (Aru). The Igbo of old try as much as possible to shy away from all acts capable of bringing them into coalition with the gods. When such act is committed, the perpetrator with the help of the chief priest will be subjected to appease the gods (ikpuaru) so as to avert the impending danger.

A morally bankrupt person in the company of ancestors is not revered, as the Igbo believe in law of equity, which stipulates, "he who goes for equity must go with a clean hand". An ancestor that receives reverence from the living must have lived an exemplary sound moral life while on earth. Igbo are of the view that there is no way someone who was a thief in his lifetime will be remembered and called to intercede on behalf of the living. Igbo believe in "ofonaogu" whenever they are fighting a just course. Igbo abhor lies, misapplication of justice, bribery, killing, covetousness, bearing false witnesses and oppressing the poor in fact every corrupt tendency. People that had anything to do with all these life unwholesome attitudes though may be welcomed in the ancestral family are never revered by the living.

Hardworking and being committed to the affairs of one's community while alive gives every dead Igbo person an automatic passport to be an ancestor to be revered: having left behind good attributes to the living to inherit and emulate. A loafer among the Igbo is highly rebuked, cajoled while alive and never revered as an ancestor by the living and never reincarnates as no one would like to have such a child in his family. A hardworking Igbo man through his affluence while alive can acquire any title of his choice having the capacity to meet up with its requisite.

Being hardworking among the Igbo gives one pride of place and becomes a force to reckon with in his community and beyond. So a wealthy person with titles usually becomes part and parcel of the communities' administrative body: represent his people at crucial meetings and appointed into the kings cabinet. At death the Igbo usually remember such an ancestor while pouring libation to the hearing of the younger ones with intent to tailor them towards living in like manner.

Among the Igbo, An ancestor during his lifetime, must not be one without an immediate family be it man or woman, he must be married and with children while in the case of men they can have as many wives as possible: mans chains of the individual to ascertain if they lived their lives with sufficient holiness and virtue to be considered for Sainthood. If there are enough evidence and its accepted for consideration, the individual can be called a servant of God.

Step 3: show proof of a life of heroic virtue.

The congregation for the causes of saints scrutinizes the evidence of the candidate's holiness, work, and signs that people have been drawn to prayers through their example. The congregation approves the case and passed to the Pope who in turn gives /calls the person 'Venerable'.

Step 4: verified miracles

This stage is called beatification; a miracle needs to be attributed to prayers made to the individual after their death. The prayers being granted are seen as proof that the individual is already in heaven

and hence able to intercede with God on others behalf. Incidents need to be ‘verified’ by the evidence before they are accepted as miracles. After beatification, the candidate is given the title ‘Blessed’.

There is one exception to the miracle requirement: a martyr someone who died for the faith, can be beatified without verified miracle.

Step 5: Canonization

This is the final stage in declaring a deceased person a Saint. To reach this stage, a second miracle normally needs to be attributed to prayers made to the candidate after they have been beatified. It involves special mass that recounts the individual’s life history.

Pickert (2008) quoting James Martins a Jesuit Priest & author of *My Life with the Saints* describe the Saints as “elder brothers and sisters –people who help you along”. The Roman Catholics honoured their dead ordained who had sacrificed their lives in the name of the Lord.

SUMMARY

The making of ancestor-ship (Ndiichie) in Igbo worldview entails the living and the dead. Among the Igbo, an elder that represents its people in the Igbo traditional institution: Kingship where laws are being made is equally addressed as (Ndiichie) this is clearly distinctive from the dead Ancestors “Ndiichie (Igbo forebears). They are elderly living members, drawn from various families, given special roles for the communities because the Igbo believe that (okenyebuokaraChukwu) meaning an old person is equivalent to god.

The Igbo Ancestors clearly stipulates its uniqueness whereby several moral principles are required before an Ancestor can receive veneration from the living. Any Ancestor that falls short of these standards is never invited during rituals: it is assumed that the Ancestor has no legacy worthy of emulation by the living because they are regarded as imperishable. As contained in the words of Ofoegbu (2001) “death alone is not sufficient to make a person an ancestor. Much depends on how a person lived and how he died”. So relatives who are regarded as Ancestors must have led a good moral life... Drunkards, loafers, adulterers, extravagant persons, cowards, lazy persons are considered to be evil. A thief is abhorred in Igbo society and therefore cannot be regarded as an Ancestor even a murderer”.

Going by Ezenweke quote on Mbitis articulated roles of the Ancestors which consist:

1. Unifying families and people, caring for each other, empowering, blessing, rewarding and inspiring.
2. Protecting families and clans from diseases, evil, enemies’ even war.
3. Mediating between people and the Divinity
4. Enforcing discipline in case of breaking social values.
5. Facilitating holistic healing

Same could be attributes of the Christian Saints going by their place in the life of the people especially in times of trouble, want, sickness and remission of sins. The Igbo Ancestor ship is geared towards encouraging and celebrating reward for living a perfect life just as the Christian Sainthood through its selection mode tries to bring to bear.

The Igbo Ancestors who were ones living before joining the cult of Ancestors were well known by their people and their antecedents which forms the parameter for their acceptability by the living to

mediate, intercede and receive veneration. This same verification and testimonial take place in making of Saints by the Roman Catholics. The Brethren and the Igbo through thesesystems try to fill the vacuum created by death a necessary end of every mortal coupled with their intents and hopes of the living that our works in life are not in vain. Neopaganism approach should be deployed in most of the Igbo belief system and World views that convey the same meaning with that of the Christians: Igbo Ancestor-ship and Christian Sainthood being one of them

CONCLUSION

The religious bigotry associated with the Christian often-derogatory remark on Igbo Ancestor-ship whereby it's being regarded and referred to as Ancestral worship. If the Ancestors were ones among the living, lived pious and worthy life of emulation, same as the Christian Sainthood what stops it from being accorded the same recognition and acceptance? Can that of the Christian Sainthood also be regarded and referred to as Sainthood worship? The bottom line is both the Christian Saints and the Igbo Ancestors were once living, died, adjudged to have attained certain appreciable spirituality before being accorded their positions. All attributes towards the making of Ancestor-ship and Sainthood still boils down to the living imitating their lives, aspire to live and be celebrated in turn.

Both the Igbo Ancestors and Christian Saints receive veneration, intercede and partake in the rituals of worship. Contrary to the Christians interjectory, as in the words of Egwuatu (2011) "Ndigbo have never worshiped their Ancestors. They only venerate them, which is no different than what Catholics do to their Saints or what every country does to its national heroes".

There is no rationale condemning Igbo Ancestors and dismissing them and their names as fetish and evil and reverencing theirs great and powerful so much so that a mans ancestral name is discarded during baptism and given a white ancestral name as Christian name. If James, John, stephen, Mathew and peter are saints in the Christian religion, Nwafor, Obiakor, Onuora, Okonkwo, Okeke and Ozoemena are Igbo Ancestors too.

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