

A Review of the Significance of *Eli-wekne* Rundele Deity in the Context of Culture and Development.

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Abstract

Eli-Wekne Rundele has been described as “the force that binds” the people of *Rundele (Ndele)*, irrespective of their religious inclinations. The fear the deity conjures amongst members of *Rundele* communities, has no comparison. In matters of protection and justice, *Eli-Wekne*, is an anchorage to *Rundele* people. The deity, located at *Omofo*, the ancestral home of *Rundele* communities, has often been dismissed as one of the surviving backward looking ancient religious superstitions that have not made significant contributions to the well-being of the people, without taking into account the positive role the deity has played in the lives of *Rundele* people and their neighbors. There are taboos associated with the deity which only members of *Rundele* communities must observe, irrespective of their religious persuasions. The paper relied mostly on primary sources which formed the bulk of the data used in this research. The findings reveal that there is no deity or aspect of culture in the entire *Ikwerreland* that shapes the life and worldview of the people, like *Eli-Wekne Rundele*. The paper concludes that the deity play very significant roles in the development of the communities of *Rundele*, especially as an agent of social control, and that accounts for its continuous relevance and existence, in spite of the onslaught of Christianity and modernity on African culture. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine and document this very important aspect of the culture of the *Ikwerre* of *Rundele*.

Introduction

Before Thomas Hobbes, the 17th Century social philosopher ever contemplated about human society and the problem of social order and how some semblance of order could be

created and maintained in society, the Ikwerre had already gone ahead to tackled the problem of social order in their communities. And they did this by establishing socio-cultural and religious institutions and acceded to them powers to act as institutions of social control.

In the Ikwerre cosmology, Eli (Ali) deity (Earth goddess/god) is the most important of all the deities in the land. Eli deity is believed to be responsible for guiding, protecting and upholding orderly and harmonious living among members of the community. Before the British imperialistic civilizing mission assault on the Ikwerre socio-cultural and religious institutions, Eli deity was central to the existence of the people. They acted as if their life depended so much on the deity. But today things have fallen apart in Ikwerreland, no thanks to modernity and the missionaries, who have been credited with the devaluation of these agencies of social control in Africa, and Ikwerreland in particular. However, it is important to note that one deity, whose significance and impact has not waned to date in the face of Christianity and modernity in Ikwerreland, remains Eli Wekne Runderle.

The deity, Eli Wekne Runderle, is still very much relevant, effective and efficient as an agent of social control among Runderle people in Ikwerreland. In the late 1990s and early 2000, when most communities in Ikwerreland, especially Runderle neighbours, were either dislocated or completely destroyed by one crises or the other, particularly cult clashes, the community was spared. Members of Runderle community believe it was because of the restraint of their Eli Wekne. One of the informants said before any Runderle person takes any action whatsoever, he or she must count the cost of the action. That is weighing the consequences of the wrath of Eli Wekne Runderle before taking such action. The paper would establish that the role of Eli Wekne as agent of social control in Runderle community, and why the people have not yet succumbed to the forces of Christianity and modernity. This is the main thrust of this paper's investigation. In light of the foregoing, the paper has been divided into three parts: the first discusses clarification of concepts and theoretical framework; the second part deals with findings and discussion, while the third part is the conclusion.

Conceptual Clarifications

Clarification of concepts covered in a study is very essential in academic writing, because it will enhance the understanding of the study. In light of that, some concepts covered in the study will be clarified in this section of the paper. The concepts are: culture and development.

Culture

Culture has been described as one of those concepts “characterized by their indefinability”. And any historian studying culture is advised to understand what they mean. In spite the fact that scholars have refrained from venturing into the definition of the term because of the problem associated with it (Uzoigwe, 1990). Generally, culture has been described as a people’s way of life. It is “those aspects of ...experiences that are worth preserving” (Uzoigwe, 1990, p.49).

Ralph Linton defines it as “the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation” (cited in Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p.3). For Clyde Kluckhohn, culture is a design for living held by members of a particular society (cited in Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p.3). Again, it is believed to determine the way members of society “think and feel”, “defines their actions and defines their outlook on life”.

Order is an imperative for any society or community to operate “effectively and efficiently”. And it is the presence of guiding principles of conduct, which must be shared and learned by members of that society or community that ensures this orderliness. Culture, therefore, play the role of guiding members of the society to avoid instability, and without which human society would be an illusion (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000). The fear of incurring the wrath of the deity restrains them from evil thereby preventing disorderliness in the community.

Raymond Williams (1976), a leading theorist of culture, claims that culture is one of the complicated words in the English language⁶. Irrespective of its usage, culture contrasts with nature. They are human creation; things that come about outside nature’s intervention. These things, Christopher Jencks describes as the aspects of human society that are learned (1993), although there is no consensus among scholars on what aspects of human life and its products should be seen as part of culture (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000).

Emile Durkheim believes that religion is the basis of the shared moral beliefs and values of a society which he describes as collective conscience or culture. He believes that collective conscience has a strong influence on members of the society, especially in pre-industrial societies, which are characterized by mechanical solidarity. But as societies evolve, division of labour takes place given room for interdependence, which he called organic solidarity. In this circumstance, collective conscience or a shared culture, though

still necessary, it is no longer as strong as it was under mechanical solidarity (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000).

To Durkheim, a shared culture or collective conscience is necessary if a society must make progress, because it acts as check on the behaviour of members of the society. In his view, this shared culture does not change but it is transmitted from generation to generation. And to avoid unpleasant consequences or punishment, members of the society must conform to the society's culture. Although credited for paving the way for the development of a social theory of culture, he has seriously been criticized for his view that social structure determines human culture, rather than human creativity (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000).

To Talcott Parsons, culture includes language, symbols and beliefs. He describes culture as a functional prerequisite—a basic need for any society to survive, and without which society is impossible. Culture enables members of the society to understand themselves and to work together for the good of themselves and the society as a whole. He believes culture is transmitted through the process of socialization, and can “change if not repeated and reinforced in peoples' behaviours” (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p.888). Parson has been criticized for applying his theory to all social systems. In the opinion of his critics, his theory can only apply in homogenous and not in heterogeneous societies where people share different cultures yet have not disintegrated (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000).

Karl Marx like other functionalists believes there is nothing innate or natural about culture. For him culture has a social origin; a product of human creativity. In his view, culture is an ideology of the ruling class. A part of the society's superstructure, shaped by its base or infrastructure. That is, the ruling class that owns the means of production uses their economic power to shape the culture or conscience of the society. In other words, “the material production” shapes or “produces the mental production of the society” (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p. 890). Contrary to this view, the neo-marxists believe there is no straightforward relationship between class and culture. They believe culture possesses considerable autonomy from economic influences. But for Raymond Williams, economic factors can influence culture, but cannot determine it. According to him, cultures are created by members of the society responding to their economic circumstances. It changes as society evolves and history unfolds (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000).

Development

This is one concept that has over the years had varied scholarly definitions and interpretations (Nnoli, 1981; UN cited in Ebeku, 2006; Bruntland cited in Ebeku, 2006;

Ibaba, 2008; Rodney, 1972; Amartya, 1999; South Commission, 1990). Scholars are in agreement that there is no universally accepted definition of development, and attempts by scholars have proved futile (Akinyele cited in Amodu, 2008). But the most broad definition seem to be the one offered by Todaro (1981), who states that:

Development, in its essence must represent the entire gamut of change by which an entire social system, tuned to the diverse needs and desires of individuals and social groups within that system moves away from a condition of life widely perceived as unsatisfactory and toward a situation or condition of life regarded as materially and spiritually better (p.70).

In other words, development is the ability of man to manipulate his environment in a way as to “maximize the well-being and welfare of his entire society” (Okowa, 1996, 2005). Development, a critical tool for the eradication of poverty, which is core to the problem of crime, is a major challenge to both the developing and developed worlds (Okowa, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

Thomas Hobbes, the 17th Century Social Philosopher, proclaimed the natural state of human society to be one of “continual fear, and danger of violent death, and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (cited in Turner, 1974, p.1). In his view, humans are continually in pursuit of power and profit, and primarily motivated by self-interest, which have the potential for generating war and strife in society. This led him to ask the question: How can some semblance of social order in society be created and maintained? (Turner, 1974). Sociological theory, therefore, is an attempt to explain social processes. Why and how is society possible?

The concern of history and historians, have since shifted to the need to draw useful lessons from past events from mere narrative, causation, description, and in some cases just knowing the events, through the application of theory in historical research (Adesina, 2012). However, some scholars of history have criticized the application of theories in historical research on the ground that such development would “expose the discipline too much to the imperialism of the social sciences” (Adesina, 2012, p.12). For them, facts about the past should speak for themselves. Indeed, facts about past events cannot speak for themselves, or anybody for that matter (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000). No doubt, it is facts about the past breathed upon by professional historians that becomes history. And that is the essence of historical reconstruction (Enyindah, 2019). To Adesina, “history and theory are complementary” (2012), and its relevance in historical discourse cannot be overemphasized.

Indeed, there are many theories to consider in explaining present or past social events. However, the data and its relevance determine the appropriate theory or theories to adopt in any historical research. It is against the foregoing that the paper adopts the functionalist perspective. As a theory of society, functionalism has its origin first in the works of Comte, Spencer and Durkheim, followed by the works of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries anthropologists, like A .R. Radcliff-Brown and Bronislow Malinowski (Turner, 1974; Ekpenyong, 2003). It was the first theory in the 19th Century to be utilized by social thinkers of the time to probe and address the problem of social order, which answer was found in the biological sciences (Turner, 1974).

The functionalist perspective, variously described as the consensus, integration, or functional model, has the following assumptions: That every society is relatively persistent stable structure of elements and well integrated, and each element has a function to contribute to its existence as a system based on a consensus of values among its members (Ekpenyong, 2003); that society consists of independent parts, and tends toward social equilibrium, the various parts are understood in terms of their contributions to the maintenance of the entire social system (Ekpenyong, 2003;Haralambos & Holborn, 2000), and see conflict in society as tentative strains between the elements that make up that society (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000). Eli Wekne has contributed significantly by creating order in *Rundele*, which is prerequisite for development, and in the absence which *Rundele* would not have been possible.

By mid 1960s, the relevance of functionalism as an explanatory theory of society had suffered serious decline to barrage of scathing criticisms against it (Ritzer, 2000). However, the continuing relevance of the theory has been sustained through the works of Robert K. Merton (Ritzer, 2000). Merton criticized early structural functionalists' bias for functions of one social system or institution for another. This defect was rectified with his idea of dysfunction. To him, structures or institutions that contribute to the maintenance of a system can also have unpleasant consequences for them. He also developed the idea of non-functions of structures or institutions. For him, there are consequences that are not useful to the system, not minding their usefulness in the past. He criticized the indispensability of all structures to the workings of the social system. He contends that some parts of the social system that redundant and not serving any useful purpose can actually be expended. By this means change in the society will be inevitable (Ritzer, 2000).

Eli (Ali) Deity in Ikwerreland

The origin of Eli deity in Ikwerre land is unknown. Some elders believe that the Eli deity is as old "as the village or as old as time". Others are of the view that they are imported

from outside. However, it is believed among the Ikwerre that Chiokike is the source of divinity (Nduka, 1993). The founding of a settlement in Ikwerreland comes with the establishment of the Eli deity, “to guide, protect and uphold harmonious living amongst its inhabitants” (Olumati, 2014). Others believe the establishment of the Eli deity in Ikwerreland was because of fear, the need to reverence and worship the Eli, being the source of life sustenance. For others, it was the desire to promote morality and obedience of the approved norms in the society that necessitated the establishment of the Eli deity in Ikwerreland (Olumati, 2014). It is believed that those who breached any of the norms and taboos would ‘smell’ the wrath of the deity.

The priest of Eli deity is chosen from among the male descendants of the founder of the settlement, who may not necessarily be the oldest person. The choice is not open to election, but divinely arranged by the deity and revealed through divination (Olumati, 2014). Every socio-political organization in Ikwerreland has its own Eli deity, ranging from the family to the community level. Expressing his view on the issue of gender of the Eli Wekne deity, Olumati contend that there is ambiguity surrounding it in Ikwerreland. According to him, Eli deity in Ikwerreland is regarded as a feminine, but frequently addressed in masculine terms.

In his words: “In spite of this general notion among the Ikwerre that the Eli deity is feminine, the people still perceive and address it in masculine terms” (Olumati, 2014, p.119). This is not the case with Eli Wekne deity of Rundele. In Rundele, Eli Wekne deity is perceived and addressed in masculine terms. Eze Gideon Omodu (2021) informed that Eli Wekne is the husband of Urie, the fertility goddess of Rundele. What that means is that the gender of Rundele arch deity, Eli Wekne, is different from the earth goddess (Eli deity) of other communities in Ikwerreland. Whereas the Eli deity in the whole of Ikwerreland combines the qualities and the attributes of both male and female, the Eli Wekne Rundele does not possess all the attributes of male and female. For instance, Urie *nwenre* Eli Wekne Rundele (Eli Wekne’s wife), is responsible for all matters relating to fertility in the community, according to Eze Omodu, a role performed by the Eli (earth) deity in Ikwerreland. According to Tasie, the priest of earth deity (Eli) is the husband of Eli (earth) deity in Ikwerreland (cited in Olumati, 2014), which further buttress the fact that she is a female. This is not the case in Rundele community.

Eze Omodu (2021) further informed that the celebration of Eli Wekne festivals take precedence over that of other deities in the community. Whenever there was ‘clash’ between the festivals that of Eli Wekne would not only prevail over the other deities’, but

would subsume them. For instance, Urie, Nwerne (Wife) Eli Wekne, would always join her husband's ceremony whenever it clashed with hers .

Eli deity is the source of morality that regulates all "spheres of human life and conduct" in Ikwerreland. And without morality probity there cannot be meaningful development in society (Olumati, 2014). In the words of Omoregbe, "...if a country produces" intellectual giants, "moral dwarfs", it is simply producing obstacles to its own development" (quoted in Olumati, 2014, p.169). Eli deity in Ikwerreland is the sole guardian of all "traditional values and moral conventions" of the community. Amadi and Wotogbe-Weneka assert that "traditional values and moral conventions are strongly guarded by the all-pervading forces of religion". They further stated that any discussion of the Ikwerre history and development would be incomplete without the elements of culture and religion (Amadi & Wotogbe-Weneka cited in Nduka, 1993). Culture in its tangible and intangible forms carries testimonies from the past (ICCRUM cited in Derefaka, 2002).

Eli Wekne Rundele Deity

Rundele (Ndele) in Emohua Local Government Area consists of five villages: Mgbuolua, Mgbuelia, Omofo, Egamini and Agba. Udele, the founder of Rundele migrated from Ogbia in Bayelsa State and settled at Rundele, from where he founded the Ikwerre communities of Emohua and Uvuahu (Ibaa) (Chinda, 2015). Udele was said to have settled within the Omofo territory before the 17th Century (Omodu, 2021).

The origin of the deity, like others in Ikwerreland, is not known. However, the deity might have originated from Ijo area following their migration from Ogbia in Bayelsa State. Another reason supporting this conclusion is the fact that, unlike other Ikwerre communities, where the chief priest of Eli deity is chosen from the family of the founder of the village or community, the chief priest of Eli Wekne is not a native, but a stranger from the Rumuani family in Omofo village. Eze Omodu (2021) informed that the Rumuani family came from Abua. He informed that from time immemorial natives of Rundele do not serve as chief priest to her deities. According to the informant, by Rundele custom and tradition such responsibility is given to strangers. That is, people from outside Ikwerreland.

Eli Wekne Rundele has been described as the force that binds together Rundele people. From time, the deity is revered by members of the five Rundele communities of Mgbuolua, Mgbuelia, Omofo, Egamini and Agba, irrespective of their religious or faith inclinations. The deity's traditional worship ceremony by Rundele people is performed every five years. During the period of the ceremony, strangers are not allowed outside of the five

communities or villages of Rundele. Only Ikwerre people are allowed outside during this ceremony.

The Eli Wekne worship ceremony begins with the performance of Mgbodogo Eli Wekne rites by its Chief Priest from the Ndah Okani family in Rumuokoro, Mgbuolua village. Mgbodogo is a clay pot. Mgbodogo Eli Wekne ritual is initiated by Ohna Rundele. Ohna Rundele is the council of all Owhor holders (Red cap Chiefs) from the five villages of Rundele.

On the day of Eli Wekne ceremony, Ohna Rundele from the four villages of Mgbuolua, Mgbuelia, Egamini and Agba, are to move in order of their initiation (Seniority) in a slow and solemn procession to Amawekwna arena at Omofo. First, Ohna Agba Rundele would in a slow and solemn procession move to Egamini to join Ohna Egamini. After receiving and entertaining Ohna Agba, the two would move in a slow and solemn procession and in order of their initiation to Omofo and to be received and entertained by Ohna Omofo. The same procession by Ohna Mgbuolua and Mgbuelia villages of Rundele would move to Omofo village.

First, Ohna Mgbuolua in a slow and solemn procession and in order of their initiation would move to Mgbuelia. After they have been received and entertained by Ohna Mgbuelia, the two would then proceed to Omofo to join others there. After all of them have been entertained by the host Ohna Omofo, the entire Ohna Rundele would then proceed to Amawekwna arena. After they have assembled at Amawekwna arena in Omofo village, the council would four times send for Mgbodogo Eli Wekne to appear before it. And until this ritual is performed by Ohna Rundele and Mgbodogo Eli Wekne showing up four times at Amawekwna, the Eli Wekne worship ceremony would not commence. But as soon as Mgbodogo appear before Ohna Rundele at the arena, the Igwe Uhie dancing drum would rend the air announcing the arrival of Mgbodogo Eli Wekne at Amawekwna in Omofo. Thereafter, the Chief Priest of Eli Wekne would then lead Ohna Rundele with Mgbodogo Eli Wekne to the shrine to commence the ceremony. And only Ohna Rundele and the Chief Priest of Mgbodogo Eli Wekne are allowed to the shrine. By divination the deity usually determined those who served it drinks during the ceremony. Men with pants (undies) are not allowed to appear before Eli Wekne shrine, except George wrapper round their waist. As part of the rituals, the people would sacrifice a native cow (Ehni) to the deity, which must not be eaten by humans, as they believe the cow (Ehni) belong to the deity.

Those that appear before the shrine to perform the sacrifice are usually in a solemn procession. According to Eze Omodu, anyone whose feet touch another's heel in his front

would be asked to leave the solemn procession and get back to the arena. It is seen as a sign of bad omen against the person and his entire family. Therefore, he would not be allowed to get to the shrine. At the end of the sacrifice, the Chief Priest and Ohna Rundele, would return to Amawekwna arena at Omofo in same slow and solemn procession. After the Chief Priests and Ohna Rundele are seated, the celebration would then commence. After the ceremony, the people and Ohna Rundele would leave the arena same way they came. Ohna Rundele would leave in order of seniority (initiation), and in a slow and solemn procession.

Eli Wekne Rundele and Rundele Taboos

From my personal observation, the fear of Eli Wekne Rundele is the beginning of wisdom for every Rundele person. From time, no Rundele person ever toys with anything that has to do with the deity, no matter how little. And amongst all the deities in Ikwerreland, Eli Wekne Rundele seems to be more efficacious than others. It may be the reason why mere mention of the deity among Ikwerre people outside Rundele, invokes fears. It is important to state that the fame of the deity is beyond Ikwerreland. Amongst the Ikwerre, the deity is known as a no nonsense deity; one that does not compromise with evil. For instance, during the Nigeria Civil War, the house where Mgbodogo Eli Wekne was kept was set ablaze by some Igbo people working for Biafra. All the buildings within the premises of Mgbodogo were razed down, except the building that housed the shrine. And all those who took part in the arson, died in the war, according to Eze Omodu, whose house is very close to Mgbodogo Eli Wekne shrine at Mgbuolua village.

Like every other community in Africa, and especially in Ikwerreland, Rundele people are guided in their daily life by some cultural inhibitions or taboos. However, unlike others, these taboos in Rundele have become so much associated with Eli Wekne to the extent that it is believed that only the deity can punish those who violate them.

One major taboo that binds the people is that no Rundele son or daughter shall be responsible or take the life of another Rundele person, no matter their location, be it within or outside Nigeria. To further prevent this from happening, it is a taboo for a Rundele person to cause bodily injury another Rundele person that would result to bleeding. This taboo extends to Rumuekpe community. No Rundele person shall cause body injury to an indigene of Rumuekpe that will results to bleeding. Also, no member of these communities can do anything that will result to the death of members of the two communities. Failing to appease Eli Wekne in the case of breach, would incur the wrath of the deity. Where the culprit decides not to or neglect to appease Eli Wekne for offence committed or failing to disclose the violation of a taboo, it is believed that the wrath of the deity would come upon

the fellow. Upon death, Eli Wekne Rundele would reject the fellow's body. There are ways the knowledge of the mind of Eli Wekne Rundele concerning any situation is communicated to the people. The casket of the rejected dead body may come to the surface of the grave after burial. The spirit of the dead may begin to trouble his family. There are many other signs showing that Eli Wekne Rundele has rejected the dead body for failing to appease the deity after committing offence.

In the pre-colonial period, any Rundele person who committed murder of another indigene was hanged on the Orange tree (Ugiri Gbeke) at Ahia Ezi Rundele (Rundele traditional meeting arena/place). Thereafter, his or her family was required to appease Eli Wekne Rundele, with a life cow (Ehni). But for the offence committed is manslaughter, he or she was not hanged, but was required to perform the ceremony of cleansing himself of the offence known as *Okpume eriri nu uli* (removing rope from the neck). The ceremony is one of the duties of Ohna Rundele and cannot be exercised by any other organ or group. And until this ceremony is performed by the culprit, he or she was treated as a social pariah in Rundele community, Eze Omodu stated.

Another taboo of note in the life of Rundele people is the one that prohibits man and woman from having sexual intercourse on bare floor or ground, or in the bush. This include where the foot of one of the parties having sexual intercourse on bed touches bare floor or ground. They are also prohibited from having sex on any platform other than bed. Those who violate the law are to appease the god of the land, Eli Wekne Rundele. Failure to appease attracted the wrath of Eli Wekne.

Also, it is a taboo in Rundele to crack palm kernel or nut on the ground. It is generally believed that the god of the land, Eli Wekne, dwells therein and should not be disturbed. It is a taboo to throw or pour sand on Rundele person or property. It is immaterial whether the property belongs to Rundele person or not. One way to scare away Rundele people from any property is by placing sand on it. Violation of this taboo attracts the wrath of Eli Wekne Rundele.

It is a taboo for a Rundele husband to throw outside the property of his wife, irrespective of her nativity, in the course of domestic quarrel, no matter the degree of provocation. This taboo also applies to outsiders who are married to Rundele women.

Other Rundele taboos affected by Christianity and modernity includes, killing of twins, children that first cut their upper teeth and denial of burial for uncircumcised girl-child. These taboos were proscribed during the colonial for being obnoxious. Eze Omodu

recounted how the killing of twins was finally stopped in his Rundele community in 1916. In that year, a missionary by name Wachukwu Wahiezi reported Ohna Rundele to the District Officer (D.O) for killing twins and were charged to the Elele Native Court. The Ohna told the court that it was a taboo to keep twins, justifying the killing of the twins. They were consequently convicted for conniving in the killing and were sentenced to prison and the court abrogated the taboo. And out of eight members of Ohna sentenced to imprisonment in 1916, only Wokne Wowhondah, the head of Ohna Rundele, survived the imprisonment.

Eli Wekne Rundele and Rundele Development

This paper would not agree less with the functionalist view that every society consists of relatively persistent stable structure of elements and each element has function to contribute to the existence of the system based on consensus of values among its members (Ekpenyong, 2003, p.40). Also, scholars have described the place of culture in guiding members of the society to avoid instability, and without which human society would be an illusion (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p.3). Culture has also been described as a design for living (Kluckhohn cited in Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p.3). It is against the foregoing that the paper highlights the significance of Eli Wekne Rundele in the development of the Rundele community.

The fear by Rundele people of attracting the wrath of Eli Wekne Rundele in the event of violating any of the taboos keeps them on their toes, irrespective of their faith or religious inclinations. To a reasonable extent, the deity has contributed significantly in stabilizing the community thereby giving room for development. In the past serious crises which would have destroyed the community, were averted because of the role the deity plays in the life of the Rundele community. Every conflict in the community is usually approached with moderation so as not to do anything that would incur the wrath of Eli Wekne Rundele. Even when the community had problem over chieftaincy institution, all the stakeholders pursued their interests with moderation and mindful of the fact that they had some force that bound them together.

By 1990s, the Niger delta region was enmeshed in different forms of youth's agitations and protestations against the Nigerian State and the multinational oil companies (Enyindah & Obuah, 2018). This was immediately followed by intense cult clashes and kidnapping, particularly in Ikwerreland until recently. Then it was normal to wake up every morning to learn of youths parading with fresh human heads in their own communities. It is important to note, and sadly too, that these criminal enterprises were in most cases sponsored by members of the Ikwerre communities against their own people for some

reasons only them knew, and leaving behind massive disruption of productive activities and dislocation of community life. But the Runde community was spared of these, perhaps because of the fear of incurring the wrath of Eli Wekne Runde (Minikwu, 2021). In his words, Minikwu said:

My community, Runde, was about the only community within this part of Ikwere land that was not sacked when others like Rumueke, Ogbakiri, Ibaa, Obelle, and Rumuji were sacked due to internal crises and cult clashes. This is because of the fear Runde have for Eli Wekne.

Eli Wekne Runde has not only ensured peace and development in Runde community the deity has positively impacted Runde neighbours, and most are my family's customary tenants. Growing up in Elele Alimini, and Omeneta village, Runde community immediate neighbour, in particular, I still remember seeing my people placed sand (earth) on their cassava, firewood, and other property in their farms. And as children, we would ask our parents to understand the reason for the ritualistic placing of sand on farm produce and others that were not immediately taken home. In response, our parents would say, "it is to prevent *Ele* Fuka (Runde people) from stealing them". That as long as the sand remained on those things, no Runde person would dare to touch, much less removing them, because of their Eli Wekne deity. In this way, the deity helps to checkmate those who ordinarily would have become a torn in the flesh of their neighbours, and not only jeopardize the economic interest of Runde people as customary tenants, but also their beneficial relationships.

Summary and Conclusion

Eli Wekne Runde deity plays prominent role in the life of entire Runde community. The study revealed that the deity is at the center of the life of the people. It is the force that binds the people of Runde together to the extent that no member of the community can do any evil to another without receiving the wrath of Eli Wekne Runde. It is for this reason that the death of any adult from the community is always a sight to behold. The entire community would keenly follow up the burial to see if Eli Wekne would accept or reject the deceased body. This has brought some level of discipline and stability to the community. This is why In spite of the impact of Christianity and modernity on indigenous cultures the people of Runde still worship Eli Wekne Runde. The relationship the people have with the deity is still as strong as it has been. The study revealed that even other deities in the community pay allegiance to Eli Wekne, and ones faith or religious persuasion does not really matter in matters of interest to the deity. Although the deity play the role of agent of social control in the community, some of the taboos which were

associated with the deity and considered obnoxious by the Christian missionaries and the colonial administration, were abrogated by the colonial administration. The study revealed that eight Ohna Rundele were convicted for defending the killing of twins in the community, yet the deity did not rise up in defense of its people and their taboos. Maybe in time to come some elements within the human rights community may decide to challenge Rundele community and their deity in court for the violation of the rights of members of the community to crack palm nut on bare ground and to have sexual intercourse in the farm and on bare floor or ground. And if that happens one would hope that the community and the deity would be as progressive as they were when some of their obnoxious taboos were abrogated by the British colonial regime in the early 20th Century.

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