

The beliefs in Ali, Yam deity and Ancestral Veneration among the Ikwerre and Ogba people, the challenge of Christian mission in the Northern Niger Delta.

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Introduction

The history of Christian mission in the Northern Niger Delta is not void of cultural challenges since its advent in the pre-colonial era. Adagogo-Brown and Oko-Jaja (2020) opined that Christianity came into the Niger Delta around the 19th century¹. Precisely In the year 1869 King Jaja of Opobo was quoted to have Opposed the establishment of Christian mission in Opobo owing to the perception that it will have a major effect to the culture of the people and their organized sacred indigenous religion. This attitude towards the Christian mission was tipycal of the people throughout the Niger Delta area.

Prior to the advent of Christianity in the Ikwerre and Ogba of the Northern Niger Delta, the people had a socio -religious activities that order their life and beliefs of the Supernatural beings and other socio-cultural practices like rituals and divinations. The indigenous religion made an appreciable impact in the life of the people before the advent of Christianity.²

¹ Adagogo-Brown and Oko-Jaja Tuonimi Eze (2020) King Jaja and Christianity in Opobo Kingdom of the Eastern

Niger Delta, *international Journal of history and philosophical research* vol 8 No 2 p19

² Tasie Onyedikachi Henry (2020) *The Impact of environmental degradation on the indigenous religion of Evo, Rivers State* p135 unpublished PhD Thesis of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Rumuolumeni

Hence, the people saw Christian mission as an alien that needed to be fought against. This was the reason for the strict opposition for many years. Ijaola (2016) asserts that the fear of the indigenous people that made them to forbid the establishment of Christian mission in the Niger Delta has finally been fulfilled. "The rise of ecological crisis like environmental degradation due to pollution was a factor of common concern"³. He further avers that Christianity was a major factor that aided the demythologization of the cultural beliefs and practices of the indigenous religion.

Ethno-history of Ikwerre and Ogba

Ikwerre and Ogba nations are distinct cultures of the lower Niger. They are both situated in the Northern margin of the Niger Delta. History has it that the two nations have similar migration identities. They are both from the progeny of Akalaka who left the ancient Benin Kingdom during the reign of Oba Ewure the first. Akalaka left the kingdom to escape the misrule of the Oba.⁴ It is good to note that historically, Ogba, Ikwerre and Ekpeye share a common historical origin, this is the spirit it can be agreed that Ogba and Ikwerre share similar traditional heritage as well as religious affiliation.

Ali in Ikwerre culture

The Ikwerre people of the Northern Niger Delta call Land "Ali" and view it in different perspectives. Farmland is known as "Ekwu" which is an uncultivated forest, "Ohia Igba" is a newly cultivated land while the swamp forest is called "Ohia mini". During the pre-colonial era, land in *Evo* and other natural resources were source of economic wealth to the families or the whole community.

The people of Ikwerre(*Evo*) considered land the greatest wealth bequeathed by their ancestors to the succeeding generations. This is due to the significance of the activities carried out on land ranging from political, social, economic and religious

³ Ijaola, Samsu Oluwatope (2020) From Colonialism to Neo-Colonialism, Christianity in the cultural demythologization and ecological crisis in the Niger Delta, Nigeria; *international journal of art and humanities Bahir Dar-Ethiopia Vol5(3) p163*

⁴ Obodoegbulam Agi Otto (2019) *Ogbaland in socio-cultural perspectives*, Pearl publishers international limited p1&2

activities. This explains why a lot of cultural sanctions are remediated for Land deity (*Ali*).

Ali deity in Ikwerre indigenous religions is referred to as the mother earth or the earth deity who is symbolized with the ground/soil. *Ali* deity is one of the major deities in the Ikwerre cosmology in which human being survival is dependent. For example, when a child is born, he is first place on the floor to have contact with the earth deity (*Ali*) as well as when someone dies, he is buried in the ground. *Ali* deity, is the one of the major support for agriculture through fertilization of the soil for bountiful harvest after planting.

***Ali* in Ogba**

Ali in Ogba is viewed as Orkuoru (Farmland) Akorhia (Uncultivated Forest) and Igburu (Swamp). It is ordinarily owned by the communities and viewed as the greatest source of wealth from the time of the forbears to this modern generation. As mentioned above, a lot of activities take place on it which includes: economic, social, and religious, this is the reason a lot of taboos are hedged with it.⁵

Ikwerre and Ogba beliefs in *Ali*

Ali in the both indigenous religions is believed to be the transport vehicle of human beings and other creatures to the hereafter when death occurs. This is why the earth deity is regularly offered sacrifice and offerings since it is also the source of soil fertility for improved crop yield. "The Ikwerre and Ogba people adore *Ali* as the 'mother earth' so much that they see it as the basic matrix of human material and spiritual existence. This is why actions that constitute taboo to *Ali* is seriously frowned at. These abominations includes: homicide, incest, suicide, stealing, sex in the bush, et cetera. They constitute agents of land (*Ali*) pollution in which requires elaborate placatory rites by a diviner to restore purity of the Community. "6 the people of Ikwerre and Ogba see *Ali* as a symbol which represents the invincible spirit in charge of issues that associates human, animal existence/survival. There is a common action that symbolizes the connection of human being

⁵ Obodoegbulam Agi Otto (2019) Ogba Religion the pre-Christian heritage, Pearl publishers international LTD

⁶ Olumati, Rowland (2015) The impact of Christianity and modernity on *Ali* - earth goddess

of the traditional religion of the Ikwerre people, rivers state, Nigeria, *An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia Vol. 9(1), Serial No. 36,*

to the earth deity who is believed to be the source of human existence. This relationship is often demonstrated with such gestures like pouring libation on the ground. This gesture has a deep symbolic interpretation, showing cordial relationship between *Ali* deity and human being. This gesture can be interpreted symbolically to mean asking for permission from *Ali* deity in offerings and sacrifices. When a food is kept on the floor, it symbolizes the feeding the deity.

Conceptualization of Death in African Traditional Religion

Death in the African world view does not mean the end to life and existence, Africans believe in life after death. This Obodoegbulam(2019) explained that African indigenous religion sees death in two phases, the good death and the bad death.

The good death is believed to be actualized when a person, who upholds the ethics of the society; attains a good old age and dies peacefully. Hence a bad death is when a social misfit, a weakling or a person dies young. Similarly, a bad death could also be a death following the attack of chickenpox, small pox, measles, leprosy, and swollen stomach which is a punishment from one of the deities⁷.

The conceptualization of the West African people on the phenomenon death is not the end of life but a transition from this present earthly life to another in the spirit world. It is a journey which man must make in order to reach life and beyond and continues to live as an ancestor.

To Opoku, death for the African indigenous religionist, suggest a continuous abode of the dead in the grave, but a transformation into spirits which proceed to the spirit world. This is the reason why the African people still relate to their ancestors because for them death does not sever connection with the living relatives. On the contrary, death extends the family relationship into infinity and the ceremonies and ritual performed by the living for the dead emphasize the unbroken family relationships between the living and the dead⁸.

⁷ Obodoegbulam Agi Otto(2019) Ogba Religion: The Pre-Christian Heritage

⁸ Opoku Kofi Asari(1978) west African traditional religion Accra: FEP international private ltd.

Therefore, it is proper to describe the indigenous religious communities of Africa, as a composition of living and dead humans. This is because both the living and the dead play their roles in stabilizing order and coherence in the society. Opoku further asserts that "it is the responsibility of the living to perform funeral rites of the dead properly and to give them a fitting burial, and thereafter to offer them sacrifice, food and drinks which constitute acts of remembrance and reverence. Whereas the dead play their part to the living by protecting them with increased power, direction, intervention and guide their families through the elders.

Parinder, avers that the dead are the living spirit whose primary interest is to care for their living relations. This is believed that the dead goes to the land of sunrise. Although the dead have departed, they are still very close to their relatives. They are believed to be watching over their family members like a cloud of witnesses. Hence, whatsoever concerns the living family as it pertains to health and fertility of the soil is their interest⁹. Most often, the dead spirits also seek rebirth into the same family, this is the reason for the type of names some Africans bear example *Iyabo, Yetunde, Wenenda, Ndamati* etc.

In the African traditional religious belief, the living dead are the owners of land. Therefore they must be consulted in any issue regarding the use of land. Africans often fear their dead and seek their help in times of need, they are aware that their living dead are ever at hand to harm or help them. Thus, because of these consequences that are given by the ancestors, the people obey the ancestors to maintain social order.

Ancestors and veneration

Ancestors among the people of Ikwerre and Ogba are well respected members of the society who at death received all rites of passage befitting their status.¹⁰ Ancestors are those that have departed this physical world through death. There different characteristics that can elevate one to the status of an ancestor, they include: leading and living a good life while on earth, received a befitting burial and their full funeral ceremony performed, lived to a very good old age with

⁹ Parinder Geoffrey (1962) African Traditional Religion London: Sheldon press.

¹⁰ Ibid 41

children to bury them. Anyone who dies childless cannot join the ancestor. As a symbol, a shrine is erected where the ancestor are venerated.

This shrine is called Ndiche in Ikwerre and Ndeze in Ogba. Each lineage elders erects a small altar at the center of the right hand wall of his living room. The altar is a six foot iron bar and two smaller ones pinned close to the taller one in a triangular form. The two smaller ones symbolizes human to indicate the purpose. A raised platform where kola, drinks, native chalk and other food item are placed. Offerings are made to the ancestors from time to time where members of the lineage both male and females are required to make sacrifices to the ancestors bringing gifts. Ancestors as believed by the Ikwerre and Ogba people of the Northern Niger Delta, protect their living family members from evil spirits. They also mediate between the living family members and the spirit world. Ancestors can only attain their status at death.

Since the dead in African traditional religion are regarded as not totally dead but has been transformed into spirit beings who is capable of hearing, guiding, protecting and providing for their living family member in the physical world, they are approached and spoken to with awe and reverence in order not to be offended and incur their wrath. The following are the examples on how they are consulted during funeral and after burial. They are addressed as if they are present and can hear, comprehend and react to their statement "Daddy you are really a caring and understanding man, i miss you, how we will cope without you". Veneration has been constantly misconstrued to worship, but it is an of respect accorded ancestors who are lesser spirits in the Ikwerre and Ogba religious cosmos. These lesser spirits which ancestor is categorized among share protective, legislative and judicial functions. Their function of mediation, bridges the gap which exist between the visible and super-sensible world.

Yam deity

Every member of Ikwerre and Ogba communities admire and love to eat yam. It is believed that the production of yam which is a king crop is aided by a deity. This deity which is known as Ajoku-ji in Ikwerre and Ihiegroku is generally recognized as the deity for the increase of yam production. The yam deity is believed to be the supervisor for all agricultural practices, this is because yam is

respected as the chief crop produced by the Ikwerre and Ogba people. The people enjoy a cordial relationship with this deity as their livelihood depend heavily on its benevolence. Therefore, every family have a shrine positioned in their compound where yam deity is worshipped. The yam deity also assist the people in fostering harmonious relationship between it and the people.

Hence, these cultural gains became a stumbling block to the missionary endeavours of Christianity in the Northern Niger Delta. Although the forceful introduction of western culture through the colonial administrator and Christian missionaries brought pressure to the socio-religious system of the people, yet it did not completely eliminate the traditional beliefs and practices mentioned above. Karl Marx, opined that in the life of man change patterns in religious experience and expression is a functional mode in many cultures. This is not different from Ikenga-Metuh who avers that the social process of religious change is indispensable of commercialization, industrialization, urbanization, literacy expansion, occupational mobility parameter for modernization which invariably affects or fastens religious change and adjustment.

More so, it is important to note that the worship of Ali deity, Yam deity and ancestral veneration benefited the Ikwerre and Ogba people prior to the advent of change influenced by the Christian missionaries through colonialization.

Advent of Christian mission in the Northern Niger Delta.

Christian mission came into the Niger Delta region fully around the 18th century through the Anglican Church of England. This why the prominence of the church is widely rooted in the Niger Delta. Some Ethnic nationality like the Ikwerre people in Obio/Akpor local government area of Rivers State considered the Anglican Communion as an indigenous church since it was the first church in the area that brought the Christian gospel to the people.

Gbule, opined that Ikwerre indigenous religion is premised on the worldview that there is a Supreme Being Chiokike (the Creator God), the divinities (renewu or agbara) ancestral spirits (rukani), magic and medicine, and man. Ali is considered the guardian of the peoples' morality and the sustainer of social cohesion and solidarity (Wotogbe-Weneka 1996, pp.143-146). Religion for the Ikwerre is the

whole life and provides them with the survival kit to combat the vicissitudes of life¹¹.

Christian entered into Ikwerre and Ogba land through inter-trade link between the riverine communities like Abonnema and Abua in Rivers State, where the missionaries settled on their arrival. Gbule, citing the advent of Christianity in Ibaa community narrates an oral interaction of one Madam Erinwo Wojiewhor who introduced Christianity into Uvuawhu in 1901 through her trading links with Abonnema in Kalabariland. "She had no formal education, but developed a spiritual revulsion for her father's idols and charms, quite early in life. She refused to participate in, nor ate things sacrificed to these idols. Even the pressure from her father to accept the traditional religious practices did not make Erinwo change her stance (Orlu1990, p.54)". She continued to violate traditional beliefs and practices, such as traditional worship, killing of twin babies, human sacrifice, trial by ordeal, and the sanctions forbidding people to weed grasses or crack palm kernel nuts on the traditional ekeh days.¹² The Christian mission that came to the Ibaa area of Ikwerre, can be traced to the effort of the gospel message of the Anglican church of the Niger Delta pastorate (NDP) which was established in Abonnema around 1891.

Christianity in Evo

The people of Evo share a unique oral experience on the advent of Christian mission in Ikwerreland. Christianity came into Evo in 1857 and spread through the communities. The Anglican Communion which was formerly known as CMS was the first Christian denomination to come into Evo and commenced worship in *Rumuokwurusi*. Missionaries built mission houses and school together where they taught people on how to read and write. These schools and churches were established at the sacred places initially reserved for the worship of deities.¹³

As the mission progressed, it was greeted with several resistances due to the dominance of the indigenous religion where everybody was an adherent. The

¹¹ Ndidi Justice Gbule (2021) Ada Wojiewhor Erinwo And The Making Of Missionary Heroine In Ikwerreland, *UZU JOURNAL: VOL. 8. NO. 3*,

¹² Ibid

¹³ Tasie Onyedikachi Henry (2020) *The Impact of environmental degradation on the indigenous religion of Evo, Rivers State* p135 unpublished PhD Thesis of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Rumuolumeni P136

effort of the early missionaries to fully integrate the indigenous people with Christian doctrines failed several times. This was because the people belief in the wrath of the indigenous deities like Ali, Ajoku, Ojukwu and ancestor was strong. As a result of that, the practitioners of the indigenous religion resorted to persecutions of the missionaries, claiming that the Christian missionary activities were detrimental to the indigenous religious beliefs, therefore invoking the wrath of their local deities.

One of the test the people used to challenge the missionaries was to allocate their sacred groves to them with the intention that their deities will harm them. The sacred groves were forbidden place where only supernatural beings abode. These super-sensible beings had their abodes in the trees, forest and rivers. Wheresoever's the deities were, the people regarded as sacred; prohibited for human activities.

Moreover, when the indigenous people decides to enter the area, religious activities like divination and ritual sacrifice were carried out in other to ascertain the mind of the deities before coming into the place. Motive of allocating the sacred groves to the missionaries, was to lead them to their untimely death. Hence, it was to their amazement that the missionaries survived. The survival of the missionaries in the sacred groves led to the conversion of the indigenous people to Christianity. The indigenous converts saw the Christian God as a superior deity to their indigenous deities.

Therefore, Christianity was accepted in Evo as a spiritual conquest that the Christian God had above the indigenous deities. Many times diviners and the missionaries had their feud as the shrine diviners displayed their charm powers to attack the missionaries and their converts, but to no avail. The spread of Christian mission spread through the establishment of school where the people were taught on how to read and write.

Thus, so far the presence of Christianity have had a major effect on the practice of the indigenous religion of the people where a large number of the indigenes are Christians, yet these Christian faithful have continue to unconsciously in the religious obligation of the indigenous religion. This can be seen in the veneration

of ancestors, worship of Ali and yam deity who they see as deities that their survival depends on. More so, "the resonance with traditional religious practices of the same could not be overlooked. Here religion, spirituality and social transformation are carried over from one to the other religion resulting in some kind of religious syncretism, and not without the side effects."¹⁴

Christianity in Ogba

Before the advent of Christianity in Ogba, socio-religious atmosphere was somehow begging for it. Among Ogba neighbours, this religion had made appreciable impact. Its close association with skill of reading and writing was perceived as a new wonder. Christianity came into Ogba in 1884. The missionary activities spread through Ogbaland through the waterside starting from Idu-Osobile. The missionaries built their mission house and school together. Their first attempt to spread the message was short lived as the indigenous people frustrated their effort making them to leave. It came back again in 1901 through the Niger Delta pastorate church to Ikiri. The advent of Christianity made appreciable impact in the traditions of Ogba people. They used alternatives to replace the known traditional worship. The Supreme Being was named *chukwu* which was the *Elu* and *Ali*, in order to change their mindset from adherence of multiple deities the Supreme Being was named *Chukwu*.

The alternative of divination in various shrines became the prayer houses of this modern era, the taboo of twins (*Ejima*) killing was abolished through the penal code of the colonial administration. They regarded the act as a pre-judicial murder which has capital punishment. These are a few of the many impacts Christianity made in Ogba.

Even though religion permeates the socio-cultural fabric of the society such that socialization and education in Christianity are filled with mores, ethos which has religious and moral implications for faithful Christians, the unique nature of the African to remain loyal to the inborn culture of veneration, and ritual worship of deities like *Ali* and *Ajokuji* in *Ikwerre* and *Ogba* have become a major challenge to

¹⁴Amadi Enoch Ahiamadu (2014) Religion, Spirituality and Transformative Action in Ogba Land of Rivers State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Theology and Reformed Tradition* vol 6

Christianity. This one of the major reason for the emergence of African indigenous churches in the latter part of the 20th century from the mainline churches “owing to disagreement over management, cultural identity and doctrines, especially those associated with prayers”¹⁵ and ritual sacrifices.

Conclusion

The discussion so far on the challenges of Christian mission in Ikwerre and Ogba is far enriching in that irrespective of the long stay of Christianity and its conversion of the indigenous people, it has not completely gain the loyalty of its adherent with them slipping off with some cultural beliefs and practices like ancestral veneration, ritual sacrifice to Ali and Yam deity.

The practice of new Yam festival in this modern time in Ogba and Ikwerre lands, does not have any explanation that is different from worship of Yam deity. Whereas, the constant oath-taking and pouring of libation on the ground either consciously or unconsciously is a symbolic way of worshipping Ali deity. Hence, a lot of Christian denomination do not see any line of difference in the two religion(ATR and Christianity) in performing funeral, burial, birth rituals which is an indirect way of worshipping Ali deity. As Olumati avers: “Ali cult is considered in this modern time as primitive, heathen, fetish and belonging to the uncultured ways of life and it has been demonized as a practice that have to be exorcised by the Christian Jesus power and Holy Spirit.”¹⁶ It is no gainsay that Christian mission in that form, will make the people fall into the danger of losing their identities as Ikwerre and Ogba people. Even though the people are on the verge of facing serious identity crisis in course of time due to Christianity and globalization, there is the possibility that they have uncensored loyalty for the indigenous traditions which should be elaborately checked.

¹⁵Olumati, Rowland (2015) The impact of Christianity and modernity on *Ali* - earth goddess of the traditional religion of the Ikwerre people, Rivers State, Nigeria *AFRREV, VOL. 9(1), An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia*

¹⁶ Ibid