

African Research Review

International Multi-Disciplinary Journal
Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

AFRREV Vol. 13 (2), Serial No 54, April, 2019: 138-144

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print) ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrev.v13i2.12>

Interrogating the Feminine Conception of the ‘Supreme Being’ as a Religio-Cultural Practice Among the Ijaw People of the Niger Delta

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Abstract

Culture which provides order and meaning to the social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes, forms the basis of a people’s heritage and existence. Cultural expressions and religious manifestations engender the thought-process and development of societal values and behavioural traits, the world over. Although, several studies have been carried out on the Ijaw People of the Niger Delta, little attention has been devoted to their cultural practices and belief systems. This paper thus, interrogated the Ijaw People’s conception of the Supreme Being (God) as Feminine, which is reflective of their matrilineal lineage system. This is with the aim of bringing to the fore, the people’s cultural practice and religious belief that God is a woman and its manifestations in their communal existence.

Key Words: God, Femininity, Religion, Culture, Ijaw People, Niger Delta

Introduction

Human beings are, of course, unique among all the animal species. This is unarguably so because humans make use of religion and other forms of culture as their principal means of adapting to the natural environment. It is along these lines that Webb (1991, p.33) while making a relation between culture and environment noted that “the state of nature in which man finds himself; that is, the physical and organic world to which human beings have to adapt in order

to survive. This natural environment includes the earth, bodies of water, climatic conditions, vegetation, and the various species of animal life which live on the earth with humankind". The fact that human beings depend on culture for their adaptation to the environment has important consequences for the pattern of human life in every society.

The culture of any given society, as the way of life of the people is used for their identification. It is most often made manifest in the people's institutions, be it political, social, technological, economic or religious. It speaks of the norms and values of the people as it acts as a nucleus upon which any society depends for its life or survival. Culture includes all the rules and regulations that govern the way the people live, whether the conscious; that is, formally stated beliefs and feelings or the unconscious, which are informal or implicit beliefs and feelings. Belief in this case refers to "the means by which people make sense of their experiences, ... the ideas that they hold to be true, factual, or real" while feelings are "a people's inner reactions, emotions or desires concerning experiences" (Crapo, 2002, p. 51). In some cases, people may choose to believe whatever pleases them and what they think they ought to believe. Once people are convinced of the truth of a new set of beliefs, they may change some of their previous feelings to make it easier to maintain those new beliefs. This makes culture the product of a people's mind. Cultural values, which often include particular religious beliefs, shape our behaviour and existence in the universe. Okaba (1999, p.149) in his contribution gave credence to this and averred that;

Of all cultural inventions of man, the religious institution stands out distinctly as the most expressive, integrative and encompassing – stretching into all facets of man's endeavour and experiences. It finds expression in man's culture, value and ethical systems. Religion interacts with and permeates the realms of the family system, rites of passage, economics, laws and politics, medicine and technology...Religion everywhere reflects the responses of man to the wonders and ineluctable perplexities of life.

Ifie (1993, p. 66) referred to this as "the phenomenon of man and his environment being deeply conscious of the mysteries of man's existence on earth among nature as a whole and responding to this physical and natural world". This is as a result of the fact that things happening in the spiritual realm, to a large extent provide meaning, direction and purpose to issues and events in the material world.

The Ijaw People

Lifed verbatim. Recast! The Ijaw people numbering about 10 million have long lived in locations near many sea trade routes, and were well connected to other areas by trade as early as the 15th century. The people consist of 40 loosely affiliated tribes based along kinship lines and/or shared cultural and religious traditions. As a consequence of the difficult territory which they inhabit, and as a result of the Nigerian politics, these people are further split into different states of the Federation. Tamuno (2000, p. 43) said of this as a deliberate attempt by the government to continue to marginalize the people as a status-quo of the colonial administration. He noted that;

the division of the Southern Protectorate into East and West in 1939 by the British marked the beginning of the balkanization of the hitherto territorially contiguous and culturally homogeneous Ijaw people into political and administrative units, is much to our advantage. The trend is continuing in the balkanization of the Ijaws into six states-Ondo, Edo, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers

and Akwa Ibom states, mostly as minorities who suffer socio-political, economic, cultural and psychological deprivations.

They live largely in the riverine areas of Edo, Delta, Ondo and Akwa Ibom while constituting the majority in Bayelsa and Rivers States. Their livelihood is primarily based on fishing and farming.

The Supreme Being

Every culture has evolved a system of symbolic beliefs and rituals to define its place in the universe. Religion is an organised system of shared supernatural beliefs that gives meaning to perplexing parts of human society and its environment and a system of rituals by which human beings strive for greater control over themselves and their social and natural environments. Psychologically, the beliefs and rituals of a particular religion symbolically express the kinds of stresses and anxieties that are common among the members of that society. The religious system hangs on human like beings and powers like gods, angels, ghosts, demons and other forces which respond to rituals and other symbolic acts and that inspire special feelings like awe or dread in the worshippers. It can be said that security from mysterious forces and eternal quest for the purpose of existence are the ultimate goals of all religions.

Religion edifies a people. It is “an attitude of the mind from which springs motives and beliefs... it also involves the expression of that belief in the acts of worship such as prayers and rituals. It speaks of man’s relationship with the unseen but felt and believed world and the culture of a people is an incarnation of its religion” (Elliot, 1948, p. 35). The many forms of religion as practiced in the Niger Delta today is as a result of the irresistible urge in the Niger Delta person to worship. This explains the various religious beliefs, attitudes and practices in the region. Although, there is the belief that all the forces come from one source (the Almighty God), the Niger Delta people give mutual respect to the different religious types because there is freedom of worship in the area.

Long before the arrival of white missionaries in the region, the indigenes already had the idea of a Supreme Being whom they worshipped in their traditional way, popularly known today as traditional religion. Strangers who visit the Niger Delta have often described its people as very religious. Especially important is the religio-cultural belief in the existence of the Supreme Being, God, which is the foundation of the religious life of the Niger Delta people.

After the belief in the existence of the Supreme Being, there arises the inevitable question on the gender of God. This brings us to the dictum of whether God is a man or a woman. Dime (2004, p. 2) gave a pointer to the various conceptions on the gender of God noting that;

For, whereas in most of Africa (and I dare say in most parts of the world), God is conceived in masculine terms, there are some localities, however few, where the Supreme Being is conceived as androgynous, omphalic or hermaphroditic, and ambiguous in yet others.

This means that the Supreme Being is regarded in some societies as masculine or feminine while others conceive of it as hermaphroditic – having both sexes. Yet, others see it as being asexual – without sex. The masculine concept of God generally, is undoubtedly the best known and most popular, even among tribes and social groups in Africa and the Niger Delta in particular. God is thus differently designated by the different ethnic groups in the region as He, the Creator, Eternal God, Almighty God, All Knowing God, and so on, and is traditionally

believed to be reached through the deities and ancestors, as man is seen as unworthy to reach Him.

However, the second concept of God with regard to gender which is not very popular but found among a very negligible number of people is the feminine conception of God. This religious-cultural belief is practiced among the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta.

The Feminine Conception of the ‘Supreme Being’ among the Ijaw People

The Ijaw people believe that the physical and spiritual worlds owe their existence, order and well-being to the Supreme Creatress. Dime (2004, p.10) expounded on this and provided us with feminine attributes and nomenclatures of God. According to him,

The classical example of this feminine concept of God in Africa is found among the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta of Nigeria, who speak of God strictly in feminine terms. All their names and attributes for God are strictly feminine, and they apply to Her alone. They have four principal names for the Supreme Being, namely, *Temearau*, meaning literally, “The Creatress or Creatix”, She who is the Moulder of the Universe. *Tamuno* is the Kalabari variant of *Temearau*. The second name is *Ayebaarau* or more laconically *Ayeba*, “the Foundress of the universe”, *Woyingi* or *Oyin*, “Our Mother” and *Oginarau*, “She who dwells in the heavens”... Some of her most frequent appellations among others are: *Pere Bau* – “The Sovereign Queen”, *Ogborogbo* – “the irresistible mighty Wind”, *Gburugburuarau*, “Great, mighty and formidable Mother.

This is given credence by the story of “Ogboinba: The Ijaw Creation Myth” as exemplified by Gabriel Okara (2009) which re-enforces the belief that creation, life and death are in the hands of Woyengi (Our Mother). According to him,

...The sky darkened, and there descended on the field a large table, a large chair and a large ‘Creating Stone’, and on the table descended a large quantity of earth. Then there was lightening and thunder; and Woyengi (Our Mother) came down and sat on the chair and placed her feet on the ‘Creating Stone’. And out of the earth on the table Woyengi moulded human beings. But they had no life and were neither men or women and Woyengi asked them one by one to choose to be man or woman, each according to his choice...Next Woyengi asked them one by one, what manner of life each would like to lead on earth. Some asked for riches, children, short lives, and others, long and peaceful ones and all manner of things. And these Woyengi bestowed on them one by one, each according to his or her wish. Then Woyengi asked them one by one, by what manner of death they would return to her. And out of the diseases that afflict the earth, they chose each a disease. To all their wishes Woyengi said, “So be it” (p. 135).

Clark - Bekederemo, Nigeria’s Ijaw and Urhobo born ace dramatist and playwright, has severally highlighted this feminine conception in his plays. One of such examples is *The Return Home* (2009). The play dramatises a religious institution of the Ijaw people that has survived till date. It is based on ritual purification of people who have died of abominable causes such

as accidents, murder or manslaughter, etc., to be cleansed spiritually, in order to be accepted by the ancestors. This is evident in Act One, Scene One where Fregene, a wood carver and son of Brabide, in the company of an elderly man and contemporary of his father, Maika. Fregene is seen carving a figure in wood while Maika makes fun of the artwork.

Maika : I call it falsification; the Almighty herself doesn't make them big and pointed like that; a few perhaps, but it seems to me you people make the exception the rule.

Fregene: Let's say with our little gift from our Almighty Mother we try to make some of man's dreams come true, arresting in fixed forms what is passing (p. 335).

Okaba (1999 p. 151) agreed with the above on the feminine qualities and attributes of God and relates them to names parents give their children at birth, within the Ijaw society. He affirmed that,

The universe owes its existence to Her great power. God governs its affairs and the machinery of life in it. Her supreme qualities and attributes are reflected in some common names given to children. These include: "Teme arau agono emi" (God is above), "Teme arau Preye" (God's gift), "Ayibanuaghan" (Thanks to God), "Oginarau-Ebi" (God's kindness), "Oyingi-Ogula" (God's judgement).

This religio-cultural practice of the Supreme Being as a woman is manifest in the socio-economic life of the people. As earlier hinted, one of the four principal names and feminine attributes of God is Temearau, meaning the "Creatress or Creatrix", "She, who creates," the woman that Moulds" or "the Moulder of the Universe". Along these lines, pottery manufacture with clay was an exclusive preserve of women in Ijaw societies. Women were enshrined with the responsibility of moulding household utensils such as clay pots, bowls, jars, etc used for cooking, fetching water from the river for storing, for serving meals, etc.

In tracing of descent, the Ijaws are matrilineal. Alagoa (1972, p. 12) laid emphasis on this as he avered that, "God is a female among the matrilineal Ijo. The implication here is that the Ijaws refer to God as a female because they are matrilineal". Off-springs lay more claims to the mother's people than the father's. This is evidently so in terms of assets and liabilities. The maternal uncles bear more of the responsibilities than the paternal uncles. As such, they wield more influence on the children. Ifie (1994, p. 11) gave credence to this and noted that,

Sometimes in the case of real trouble, the children... are often asked to go to their maternal families for help. It was the maternal uncle that often had the greater power over such children. The concept of *yinbiri* (mother's home family) and that of *zipere* (born for the maternal uncle) remain very strong and persistent even to the present day in Izon culture.

Even in the ancient and obsolete judicial structure of "an eye for an eye", if an offspring commits murder or manslaughter, a replacement for the dead person was usually made from the maternal family of the culprit. The replacement is a female and usually a teenager who can bear as many children as possible into the family. It is thus evident that in the event of damage or benefit, the mother takes more responsibility as opposed to the father. This practice existed until the later stages of colonialism.

In the aspect of “creating” or “producing” off-springs, even the world over, if a marriage is not fruitful, the first- person families and well-wishers would point at, is the woman because she only has the ability to conceive and give birth to children.

Another important custom of the Ijaw people related to this is the practice of taking a woman’s corpse to her family for interment. When a woman lives in her marital home and dies either prematurely or at old age, the body is ferried home to her native town. The children, accompanied by members of the husband’s family would perform the funeral rites and commit the body to mother earth in her home town. The implication of this practice is that women, being the ones that “create” or “mould” also guide and protect her children even at death from the spirit world. The children are thus expected to visit their mother’s grave or tomb as the case may be, in her native town from time to time for her guidance, blessings and protection. By so doing, they do not abandon their mother’s kith and kin but would be in regular contact, in case the kinsmen need their assistance or the children would need any assistance from their mother’s people.

Also, within the Ijaw cosmology, the belief in re-incarnation is upheld. This belief is sustained by the notion of *Saisaibeinmo-arau* or *Saibeinmo-arau* meaning a ferry woman who transverses between the land of the living and the spirit world. The *Saibeinmo-arau* is a female spirit being who rows the spirits of the dead in her canoe or ferry from the water-front, across to the supposed land of the spirit world where they stay until the time they return to the world in whichever form. In the process of ferrying, she protects the soul from any harmful spirit or river goddess that may distract or prevent her passengers from reaching their destinations peacefully. Her work of ferrying the souls across is continuous in the sense that at the point of delivering a soul, she also ferries back any available spirit who may be returning to the world. The *Saibeinmo-arau* (ferry woman) plays the feminine role of caring, protecting and delivering the spirits of the dead safely, to the different worlds. This feminine role is consistent with the fact of the Supernatural God being a female who creates, cares for, and protects her children.

Conclusion

What is understood as the Supreme Being varies across cultures. In considering the literature of the world's religious beliefs and metaphysical philosophies, the diversity of the underlying conceptions of the spiritual realm is fundamental to appreciating any points of reference or comparison. Comparison of views of the gender of spiritual entities is no exception. The gender of the God is thus conceived by different cultures in different ways.

The Ijaw people of the Niger Delta believe in the existence of the Supreme Being, God. However, as a religious belief and practice, God is conceived as a woman, known in Ijaw as *Temearau*, meaning “the Creatress or Creatrix”, “She, who creates,” the Woman that moulds” or “the Moulder of the Universe”. God is also called *Ayebaarau* meaning “the Foundress of the universe”, *Woyingi* or *Oyin*, meaning “Our Mother” and *Oginarau*, meaning “She who dwells in the heavens”, etc. These names, appellations and attributes are likened to the role of women in traditional Ijaw societies.

Within the Ijaw culture and the world at large, the woman is known to conceive in her womb and produce new or young ones. The woman nurtures the pregnancy until delivery. At birth, she gives nutrition, provides warmth and protection for the child which she does for the remaining part of her life. She is thus seen as the mother who has created or founded the life of a new one, provides for the child, protects him from any danger and wishes him well in all his

endeavours. Thus, the motion and belief are equally ascribed or attributed to the gender of the Supreme Being, as a woman.

To sum it up, the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta very strongly conceive of God in feminine terms. They believe that God who created the universe and oversees the affairs of man, is a woman. This belief is thus so pronounced in their social, religious and cultural ways of life.

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