



God of iron and iron working in parts of Ñsúkkā cultural area in Southeast Nigeria



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This study is aimed at evaluating the influence of the god of iron on ironworking communities in Ñsúkkā cultural area. In the study area, the Supreme God – *Chúkwú Òkikè*, *Chínèkè* or *Chúkwú Ábíamà* is believed to control the affairs of humanity. He is worshipped through intermediaries such as *Ányánwù* [Sun God], *Ámádídhà*, *Áhàjǹtòkù* [fertility goddess], *Àlà* [earth goddess] and the god of iron, which is called by different names in the study area such as *Ékwéñsū-Úzù*, *Òkóró-Údùmè*, *Chikèrè Àgùrù* and *Áshéné*. But, how effective is the god of iron in the study area? To provide answers to this question, ethnographic research method, involving in-depth structured interviews, field observation and photographic documentations, was used to gather data on the subject matter while data collected were analysed descriptively. This article is of the view that the influence of the god of iron in the study area is whittling down as a result of Westernisation and Christianity.

Contribution: The study indicates an increasing resistance to the Euro-centrism, which has suppressed beliefs in the god of iron and the associated practices.

Keywords: God; iron; smelting; blacksmith; Ñsúkkā.

Introduction

Ñsúkkā people believe in the existence of a divine being who controls the affairs of humanity. Shelton (1971) describes the divine being as a spiritual force without whom man could not come into existence. Affirming the existence of the Supreme Being in Ñsúkkā cultural area, Isichei (1976) opined that the people believe in *Ézéchitòkè*, who created everything, and other natural and spiritual forces within the universe. Igbo people in general believe in the existence of one God – *Chúkwú Òkikè*, *Chínèkè* or *Chúkwú Ábíamà* who is high and is expected to be reached through intermediaries. The intermediaries or pantheons serve specific functions or purposes and they include *Ányánwù* [Sun God], *Ámádídhà* [God of thunder and lightning], *Áhàjǹtòkù* [fertility god], *Àlà* [the earth goddess] and *Ékwéñsū* [the god of warriors]. Among ironworking communities of Òpí, Òràbà, Léjǹ, Úmùndù, Àkù, Ñrú, Èhálùmòná, Èdè Òbàllà and Èkwégbé in Ñsúkkā cultural area, there is a belief in the existence of a guardian divinity for successful operation. In Èdè-Òbàllà, the *god of iron* is known as *Òkóró-Údùmè*; *Ékwéñsū-Úzù* in Òràbà; *Chikèrè Àgùrù* in Àkù and *Áshéné* in Úmùndù (see Figure 1). Although the name ascribed to the *god of iron* varies from one community to another, there is a general consensus about its efficacy and mode of operations. Thus, Agu and Opata (2012) stated that there is a collective decision of the people to submit to the god as this invariably confers on it power, authority and respect, which is presumably irrevocable through generations. Accordingly, this pact is imbibed by the people and violations could lead to severe consequences such as death, mysterious sickness, loss of farm crops and other misfortunes.

Apart from the influence that the *god of iron* has on ironworkers, the influence of other deities or gods has been seen around the world and other aspects of human life. For example, in some parts of India, belief in spiritual forces has helped in protecting sacred trees, which has led to conservation of environment (Chunhabunyatib et al. 2018). This was also applicable in the Songkhram River Basin in Thailand, where there is the belief among the locals that the deities have special roles in how the wetland resources are used (Chunhabunyatib et al. 2018). Furthermore, the influence of *Nehil Gae* [Blue Cow], an animal of the antelope family that was damaging crops cannot be undermined. Farmers could not do anything to stop its havoc because it was sacred until the Indian government changed its name to *Nehil Goa* [Blue Horse]. Horses were not sacred and farmers started killing the animals to protect their crops (Christian 1973).

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FIGURE 1: *Ashéné* shrine.

From the aforementioned examples, it can be seen that the belief on the spiritual control of mundane habitat has been on-going for decades.

Ironworking refers to early iron smelting and blacksmithing. Smelting, the process of extracting bloom from iron ore during heating is extinct in most parts of Nigeria, especially in the study area while blacksmithing subsists (Ameje 2008; Anozie 1979). Archaeological evidences relating to iron smelting in *Ñsúkkā* cultural area are manifested in the form of slag, fragment of *tuyéré* and ore mining pits (Ameje 2008; Itanyi 2013). Studies of some iron working communities in Africa have shown that there are certain observances of rituals and adherence to dictates of deities by the smelters and blacksmiths for successful operations (Brelsford 1949; Burka 2016; Mc Cosh 1979). Meek (1937) and Pole (1982) suggest that only locally smelted iron objects are used in ritual contexts by some communities because of their affinity to the *god of iron*. In *Ñsúkkā* area, ironworkers observed certain rituals and codes of ethics, which are believed to be the dictates of the gods. These rules and ethics are waning as more blacksmiths are abandoning them because of Westernisation and Christianity; thus, this research focuses on the extent of influence which the *god of iron* has on ironworkers in *Ñsúkkā* cultural area.

Study area and location

Ñsúkkā cultural area is spread across seven local government areas, namely: Igbo-Etiti, Igbo-Eze North, Igbo-Eze South, Isi-Uzo, *Ñsúkkā* Urban, Uzo-Uwani and Udeniu. The area is situated at the northern fringes of Igboland, which shares borders with Benue and Kogi states. According to Agbo, Opata and Okwueze (2022), *Ñsúkkā* can be seen as a

sub-culture, name of a town and a local government area. *Ñsúkkā* is in the tropics and characteristically has two major seasons in the year: the dry and the rainy seasons. The majority of the people are subsistence farmers who cultivate crops and rear domestic livestock. Trade among them and their neighbours form parts of their economic system. Politically, like other parts of Igbo land, they practised gerontocracy. Before the advent of Christian missionary activities, the dominant religion in *Ñsúkkā* was the African Traditional Religion.

Research method

The study was carried out through ethnographic research method involving in-depth structured interviews, field observations and photographic documentations. The interview was to enable those who are knowledgeable about the industry and culture of the people to talk freely and give all the information they have on the subject matter. The key informants included the blacksmiths, chief priests and keepers of the tradition of the people. Secondary sources including reviews of published archaeological and religious materials such as books, journals, theses, monographs and magazines were used to complement the primary sources. The data collected were analysed descriptively.

A review of iron working sites in *Ñsúkkā* cultural area

Smelting

Scholars such as Anozie and Okafor pioneered studies in ironworking in the area. Anozie (1979) first excavated iron smelting site in *Úmùndù* while Okafor (1984, 1992, 1995) excavated iron smelting sites in *Òpí*, *Léjja*, *Òwèrrè-Élù*, *Àkù* and *Òrbà*. Okafor (1995) delineated three phases of early iron smelting in *Ñsúkkā* cultural area, with *Òpí*, *Léjja* and *Àkù* belonging to the earliest group dated about 8th century B.C.; *Òwèrrè-Élù*, *Ñrú-Íshíákpù* axis (800–1450 AD), belonging to the middle period and *Úmùndù*, *Òrbà* and *Èhánídíágu* (1430–1950) grouped into the late period. Similarly, Eze-Uzomaka (2009) has worked at *Léjja* and obtained dates of 4805 Bp – 200 Bp and 3445 Bp – 144 Bp. These seem to point to the earliest dates for ironworking in Nigeria. Subsequently, other scholars such as Ekechukwu (1988, 1989; Ezike 1998; Itanyi 2013) have studied ironworking in *Ñsúkkā* cultural area with an emphasis on documentation of the processes of black smiting, furnace type, slag type, identification of raw materials and causes of the decline of smelting.

Smelting starts from the preparation of ores (*ñné ígwé* or *ñné mkpúmè*), provision of fuel, and preparation of the reducing chamber (furnace). Reduction of ore takes place at a temperature of about 700°C and the separation of slag begins at about 1500°C (Anozie 1979; Childe & Schmidth 1985; Okafor 1992). The process described here was believed to be guided by the *god of iron* which also determines the success or otherwise of the outcome.

Blacksmithing

Blacksmithing as one of the indigenous technologies in Ñsúkkā cultural area is originally the process of converting bloom into iron tools for human use. Currently, blacksmiths in Ñsúkkā make use of scrap iron parts and dis-used engine blocks as raw materials for smiting, which are sourced from local markets such as Óríé Òrbà, Èké Èdè-Òbàllà, Àfòr-Òpí, Èké Ìdōhà, Ògìgè, Àfòr Óbóllò, Ñkwó Ògbédè markets and refuse dump sites. Blacksmithing, probably, dates to as early as iron smelting in Ñsúkkā and its environments (Eze-Uzomaka 2009; Okafor & Philips 1992). The knowledge about this technology is usually embedded in the practices and experiences of its holders, which are commonly exchanged via personal communication and demonstrations from the teacher to the apprentice, from parents to children and from neighbour to neighbour (Sithole 2007 in Owinyi, Mehta & Maretzki 2014).

A typical blacksmith house (*Úlò úzù*) could be either a rectangular or triangular house with a thatched roof, corrugated iron zinc or a combination of both. The house has no wall as wooden poles are used to support the corners for good ventilation (Uzuegbu 2020). Njoku (2002) gave a spiritual angle to the definition of a blacksmith workshop as he observed that the blacksmith workshop is not just a manufactory; it is also an abode of the *god of iron*. At the centre of the workshop is a strong log of wood, preferably that of an oil bean tree – *Pentaclethra macrophylla*, fastened with an anvil (*Íhūámà* or *Ífūámà*) (Uzuegbu 2020). This is a platform upon which red hot iron is placed and forged to a desired shape. The blacksmiths believe that *Íhūámà* or *Ífūámà* is the guardian spirit of the workshop as nobody can steal from the shop once it is in place. Blacksmithing starts as the charcoal inside the hearth is lit; air is introduced into the chamber with the bellows (*ékò*), which are made of hollowed wood. Each of the bellows has a tunnel, which narrows down gradually towards the end (see Figure 2 and Figure 3) (Uzuegbu 2020). As the charcoals lit up and turn reddish yellow, iron bar or iron scrap is placed inside the fire. After a few minutes, the iron bar will turn hot-red and it will be brought out with an iron fork (*Ñkpà*) and placed on the anvil before it is hammered into a desired shape with an iron hammer (Uzuegbu 2020).

The god of iron

Ironworkers believe that adhering to the dictates of the *god of iron* ensures safety and successful production. Ige and Rehren (2003:17) argue that ‘taboos and divine rules were instituted long ago by the ancestral smelters to ensure success’. Therefore, the *god of iron* is represented as a deity and is sited at different locations around the smelting and blacksmithing centres. At *Òtòbò Úgwú Dúnòkà* [village square of Úgwú Dúnòkà] Lèjja, there are heaps of iron slag arranged in a circular pattern and some shrines associated with the *god of iron* located therein. The first is *Òshúrú* shrine which represents the war goddess that encouraged the production of iron war implements. The second is *Òdégwòò* [a tall shrine in the form of a pyramid], which is worshipped by two



Source: Uzuegbu, J.O., 2020, 'Further archaeological investigation of iron smelting in Orba, Enugu State, Nigeria', *Ikenga International Journal of African Studies* 21(4), 1–14

FIGURE 2: Hammering of hot iron.



Source: Uzuegbu, J.O., 2020, 'Further archaeological investigation of iron smelting in Orba, Enugu State, Nigeria', *Ikenga International Journal of African Studies* 21(4), 1–14

FIGURE 3: Blacksmiths at work.

people at a time, with the priests sitting towards the northern side of the shrine. It represents fertility in both human and agricultural products (Opata & Apeh 2016). According to Urama, Eze-Uzomaka and Opata (2011), because of its position to the east of the village square, *Òshúrú* denotes a possible connection with heavenly entities (a crescent moon with a star). At *Òdinànsó* village square in *Òpí*, there lies

blocks of iron slag similar to that in Léjjà. The people believe that the slag grows from the ground; hence, they are revered and serve as objects of worship. The Áttámà [priest] of *Áshéné* shrine of Úmùndù, (pers. comm., June 2023) believed that iron smelting was introduced by a woman named *Áshéné* from Ídáh in the present-day Kogi State. Hence, she is revered and *Áshéné* shrine is dedicated to her worship and celebration of her achievements. The chief priest further enthused that the approval of *Áshéné* was sought before the commencement of smelting to forestall misfortune.

Early ironworkers devised means of sustaining the trade while excluding others from the occupation. They believed that it was a divine mandate of their lineage to maintain the exclusive right of occupation; thus, they belonged to *náshì* [guild], which had the exclusive right to smelt and smith (Anozie 1979; Okafor 1984). Ibeanu and Okonkwo (2010) posited that ironworking has been a craft for a closed caste that jealously guarded its privileges and duties and shunned the admittance of non-members. Njoku (2002) corroborated this when he stated that one of the strategies used by the blacksmiths to confine the technology within their lineage is by ritualisation and couching of the production process in mystery. It is their belief that any family, aside the ones permitted, that tries to smith would be confronted with several misfortunes. In Ámübè Ámállà Òrbà, blacksmiths form a close caste restricted only to the male of the *Égürù* (pronounced *Égr*) lineage and admittance is not extended to non-members. In Èhálùmòná, the blacksmithing lineages are Úmù-Úgwú Ékwù and Úmù Égürù. In Úmùndù, blacksmiths belong to Úmù-Áshéné lineage. In Àkù, villages such as Ámá-Ūwàni, Ámógwù and Úmù Òdèkè are smithing (*úzù*) lineages, while in Èdè Òbàllà, they belong to the Ámáúzu-Òdèli lineage. However, in communities such as Ñrú, and Ûgbènè Àjìmà, this exclusivity is not as effective as it used to be because outsiders may be allowed to learn so far as they are willing to adhere to the rules and taboos guiding the profession. According to Ugwuoti (a blacksmith in Ñrú), (pers. comm., August, 2022) people who are not from the blacksmithing lineage are now welcomed to the profession because the majority of their youths, as a result of Westernisation and Christianity, are no longer interested in learning blacksmithing.

Blacksmiths perform purification rites which they believe emanate from powers attributable to the *god of iron*. In Úmùndù, a person burnt to death by fire cannot be buried by any other person except a blacksmith. Also, nobody is allowed entry into a burnt house or barn except a blacksmith does so first. In the same way, it is believed that a person with an incurable wound will only get cured when the wound is faced before the smothering blacksmithing fire (Ugwu, pers. comm., June, 2022). Affirming the potency of the *god of iron* in Ñsúkkā cultural area, Asadu (2014) argues that iron objects possess spiritual power as they could be used to ward off evil spirits, witchcrafts and other misfortunes. This explains the reason people hang iron objects in front of their shops, farms and economic trees. Also, pacts between individuals and

parties can be made before the anvil with the belief that anybody who contravenes the pact will be punished by the *god of iron*.

Ékwéñsū-úzù [god of iron] festival is celebrated every year when blacksmiths deposit iron debris at *Ékwéñsū-úzù* shrine. In Òrbà, Agbo (pers. comm., May, 2022) states that during the festival, goats and chickens are sacrificed and their blood sprinkled on the altar of the god to appease and thank him for effectively guiding them throughout the year's job. During the festival, blacksmiths are not expected to eat *úgù* [fluted pumpkin] as anyone who violates this norm must not follow others to *òtòbò* [village square] where the feast is held and to the iron dumping sites. In Èdè Òbàllà, the festival is known as *òkóró-úduwè* and it is dedicated to the worship and appreciation of the *god of iron*. According to Enyi (pers. comm., April, 2022), the festival is held every September and it is spiced with sacrifices, rituals, prayers, eating and drinking at the shrine. In recent times, however, some blacksmiths celebrate the festival in local churches where prayers are offered to God for his guidance while others would rather stay in their houses to celebrate the festival. Affirming the position, Chidi (pers. comm., 2022) posits that some young blacksmiths in Òpí do not adhere strictly to the dictates of the *god of iron* in the annual festival. He maintained that they carry out other activities such as thanksgiving in local churches, dancing to modern music, drinking alcoholic beverages and smoking.

The celebration of *Áhàjìókù* or *Ñshùàjìókù* [celebration in honour of the goddess of fertility] in Igbo land has a link with ironworking especially blacksmithing. The festival is celebrated to thank God for good harvest made possible through farm implements made by blacksmiths. In justice dispensation, the *god of iron* is believed to play significant roles. Persons who are suspected to commit minor crimes such as stealing of farm products, lying and adultery are brought to the shrine of the *god of iron* or the blacksmith's workshop to swear. However, some informants stated that most people who are accused of these crimes do not swear before the *god of iron* because they claim to be Christians.

There are certain taboos and norms associated with blacksmithing in the area. They are formulated according to the dictates of the *god of iron*. It is a general belief among the practitioners that members who intentionally violate any of the taboos will experience low productivity, strange illnesses or death if solutions are not sought to appease the gods. Some of the taboos and norms according to our respondents include:

In Ámübè-Ámállà Òrbà, blacksmiths do not eat fluted pumpkin during the annual feast of *Áhàjìókù* or *Ñshùàjìókù* where the *god of iron* is appeased. Anyone who violates the taboo is not allowed to join others at the village square for the ceremony:

- Menstruating women are not allowed to enter the blacksmiths' workshop.

- Blacksmiths do not engage in sexual activities especially with menstruating women before carrying out their activities.
- A woman is not expected to sit on the anvil or walk across the *Anyáókù* [hearth] as this has consequences such as coming down with strange illnesses.
- It is also a taboo for people to steal from blacksmithing workshop because the house is believed to be sacred.
- Women are not allowed to forge iron, but may be allowed to assist in pumping air using the bellow.
- It is a taboo for anyone to carry edible food material across the hearth during smiting.
- A person burnt to death by fire is not buried by any other person except a blacksmith who is invited to perform the burial.
- Similarly, when a house or yam ban is burnt, the owner must not touch the remnant till a blacksmith comes to eat a part of it.

Discussion

The influence of the *god of iron* on the life of Ñsúkkā people as it concerns ironworking cuts across many human spheres. Religiously, blacksmiths believe in the potency of the *god of iron* as it influences their activities. Okpoko (2006) submits that in many blacksmithing communities, the sacrificial rites are performed to thank the deity for providing the people with iron implements, which they use for farming and weapons for protection against their enemies. Blacksmiths celebrate festivals such as *Òkóró-Údùmè* in Èdè Òbàllà; *Ékwéńsū-Úzù* in Òr̀bà and *Áshéné* in Úmùndù where iron gods are worshipped. In Úmùndù, descendants of *Áshéné* celebrate the festival in memory of their mother, who was believed to have introduced iron smelting. Sacrifices are offered at *Áshéné* shrine by the oldest man from the lineage as a prelude to the festival. In Ámübè Ámállà Òr̀bà, the festival begins when blacksmiths assemble at the village square before proceeding to *Ékwéńsū-Úzù* shrine to dump unused scrap iron. In Èdè Òbàllà and Òpí, the usual pomp and pageantry that accompanies the feast has waned as individual blacksmiths would rather celebrate it privately in their homes while others offer thanksgiving in churches.

Previous studies have shown that blacksmiths provide spiritual solutions to the people (Anozie 1979). In Úmùndù and Àkù towns, blacksmiths are regarded as medicine men and people with divine powers because they engage in rituals and other spiritual exercises for the communities. They engage in ritual and spiritual activities such as the cleansing of the land against atrocities such as adultery, murder, suicide, poisoning, rape and other heinous crimes. In the same vein, people with incurable wounds are believed to get healing when they face the wounded part to the fire repeatedly inside the blacksmiths' workshops. However, it is a possibility that it is the heat from the fire that helps in the healing. Also, flakes from hammered iron are used by the traditional healers to prepare potent medicines against witchcrafts. As aptly captured by Meek (1937) and Pole (1982), there are evidences to suggest that only locally

smelted iron objects are used in ritual context by some communities because of their affinity with the *god of iron*. The same applies to the blacksmithing communities in Ñsúkkā cultural area as was observed by our informants that only the locally made iron objects are used in performing traditional functions and in the cleansing of land against atrocities such as murder, rape, suicide, adultery and poisoning.

As we observed earlier, the celebration of new yam festival has direct link with iron working especially blacksmithing. Before the festival, sacrifices and prayers are made to the *god of iron* because blacksmiths are believed to be the first people to handle the new yams to be offered to the *god of iron*, who is believed to be the creator of farm tools.

Blacksmiths are useful in resolving civil and petty criminal cases. Persons accused of misdemeanour are brought to blacksmiths' workshops and made to swear for innocence before the *god of iron*. Such an action creates fear and instills discipline in the mind of the people. However, this situation is not applicable again nowadays because majority of the people claim to be Christians and so would not want to be associated with the *god of iron*.

It is the belief of blacksmiths that the *god of iron* would not allow those who are not from the lineage of iron smelters and blacksmiths to be involved in it. This view was shared by Okafor (1984), Anozie (1979), Ibeanu and Okonkwo (2010) as they posited that ironworking has been a craft for a closed caste that jealously guarded its privileges and duties and shunned admittance of non-members. In Ámübè Ámállà Òr̀bà village and Ûgbèné Àjímà, blacksmithing forms a closed caste, restricted only to the males of the *Égùrù* clan and admittance is not extended to foreigners. This exclusiveness has continued till the present day, although not as effective as it used to be because, presently, people from outside the clan are allowed to learn the skill so far as they are willing to adhere to the rules and taboos guiding the profession.

Conclusion

In Ñsúkkā cultural area, the Supreme God – *Chúkwú Òkìkè*, *Chínèkè* or *Chúkwú Ábíàmà* is believed to control the affairs of humanity as they worship him through intermediaries such as *Anyáwù*, *Ámádìòhà*, *Áhàjìòkù*, *Àlà* and the *god of iron*, which is called by different names such as *Ékwéńsū-Úzù*, *Òkóró-Údùmè*, *Chíkèrè Àgùrù* and *Áshéné* in the study area. The *god of iron* is believed to guide the activities of ironworkers (iron smelting and blacksmithing). However, smelting is extinct in the study area while blacksmithing still subsists in a couple of places. The divine rules as enunciated by the *god of iron* are encapsulated in the form of taboos, practices and rituals, which were made by ancestral smelters and blacksmiths and are adhered to by the people for a successful iron production. In recent times, a few blacksmiths do not adhere strictly to some of the rules as a result of Christianity and Western influences.

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J.O.U. and C.O.A. contributed equally to this work.

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