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Ibani (Niger Delta) Traditional Religion and Social Morality

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Abstract

The Ibani is of the Ijo extraction in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. The belief in a Supreme Being called Tamuno but also on multitude of deities because of the environment in which they live. They believe that these deities perform social functions that stabilize society. Ibani cosmology revolve round the tripod – God, deities and ancestors. This multitude of deities is propitiated with various items to intercede and ensure that society is safe and stable. The indigenous Ibani religion is not archaic or dead but living in the lives of the people and preached by them. Christian religion has not totally erased the believe and traditions of our fore-fathers. This paper examines the Ibani

religion and its impact on social morality and how both had combined to mould the lives of the Ibani.

Introduction

The Ibani of the Eastern Niger Delta like other culture groups in Nigeria revere/worship a number of deities. Bonny was the gateway through which Christianity in 1861, successfully entered the Niger Delta at various times; Christianity entered Nembe in 1864, Okrika in 1880; New Calabar (old shipping station) in 1874; Bille-Bolo in 1883 and Ogu in 1883. Brass was Christianized in 1868; Bakana in 1892; Kalio-ama, Amadi-ama and Abuloma in 1883 and Bodo (Ogoni) in 1908. Opobo (Queens Town) in 1890, Chief Sam Oko Epelle's Compound (Opobo) in 1891 and Benin River in 1975.

Ibani Cosmology and Religion

In Ibani world-view, no sharp lines of distinction exist between the sacred and the profane. It is built around a tripod – God, deities and ancestors (Jaja 1992). The world-view is essentially an integrated, holistic and dynamic one in which the two orders of reality-visible and invisible, the human world and the spiritual world-are believed to be intricately interrelated and intensely influence one another. The world of human experience is seen as one fluid coherent unit in which spirits, men, animals, plants and the elements are engaged in continuous interaction. Ejizu (1992) observes:

Even though the human worlds is the centre of focus and human life the greatest good, the invisible world of spiritual beings and other entities are be believed to be superior, while spirit and mythical forces in their various hierarchies (benevolent and malevolent ones), are said to wield tremendous powers and influence over human life and vital interests.

The Ibani traditional religion postulates a theo-centric society and culture. As Law (1979:135) observes:

The traditional African in his significant interactions in the universe of creatures is in intimate communion with the departed and venerable ancestors, the minor deities (of good and evil spirits), and ultimately with the supreme Deity from whom all proceed and to whom all are

eventually and ultimately accountable. And there is found the justification of the assertion that the traditional African is incurably religious.

The Ibani foremost deities were: Ibani Nyana Simingi which was the principal tutelary deity of the Ibani people inherited from the indigenous Inyong Okpon Community, during the reign of King Amakiri of Bonny. Ikuba, (Opu-Ikuba and Kala-Ikuba) was the war deity of Bonny. Its totem was the Iguana lizard. Nungbaw was another powerful deity worshiped by the people. There are multiplicity of deities which served various purposes. These we shall now examine.

Deity of Ibani Community

The Ibani people were profoundly religious and their environment, to a large extent, determines their spiritual and religious activities. This explains the retinue of deities scattered round the Kingdom. Deity Tolofari is a very powerful god of the Kalaibiyama-Bonny Community whose totem was a precious stone it was the tutelary deity of Azuogou in Ndoki. The deity was brought to Ayama-Peterside by Chief Ipoli when he came down to join his wife-princess Edimini Kamba-sa. It became worshipped by the entire Ibani people. There were other deities of less importance like:

S/N	Deity	Location	Totem	Other Information
1	Alakiri		Hi goat	Messenger of Opu Adum
2	Amakiri	Community shrine		
3	Torukiri			
4	Opu Adum	Nembe	Python	God of the sea, oceans, rivers etc of brackish water. It was dreaded by the people, because victims of this deity were not given proper burial nor were they buried at the normal burial grounds. Moreover, no one inherited the victims belonging, except, the priests of the deity;
5	Okolobeibo			
6	Adumta	Adumama	Female	Noted for safety and riches
7	Ikpali			Opu Adum's wife
8	Oje Kurutu			Adumta's son
9	Birikutanana			
10	Ogboloyi Doku			

11	Ogbolodo	Polo kiri	Deformed man	
12	Opu Panga			
13	Kondo			
14	Ofombele			
15	Owu-awo			Servants of Adum was said to have had many servants in the spiritual realm. Delegated many to torment men in the physical realm every hour of the day: Many of the water spirits serve him.
16	Buru-Maba			Was Oje Kurutu's wife
17	Obubu			
18	Amatemeso	Iwoama		
19	Kungupagha Arukara			
20	Simingi			Had moved some of its children to the Ekukiri creek area with a faction of the Inyong Okpon indigenous community now known as Tombia in the Kalabari area.

S/N	Deity	Location	Totem	Other Information
21	Opu Ikuba	Orupiri	Iguana	
22	Fibiribi	Ayama (Peterside)		
23	Okoba	Oloma	Fair female	
24	Adum Fubara	Iwoama		
25	Ibaninyama Simingi	Finima		
26	Aburuka	Aganya		
27	Otuburu	Ayambo	Crocodile	
28	Tolofari	Kalaibama		
29	Alamina/Ogoyen	Fibriri		
30	Birijiba	Ayaminima		
31	Obioso	Okpomna Dappa		
32	Finimaso	Ndakworoma		Bonny (female) Okrika (male)
33	Ekerema	Minima		
34	Akanja/Opuale	Epelema		
35	Simingi Amafina	Iloma		
36	Okemini-abalama	Abalamabie		

Though the present two Ibani Kingdoms of Bonny and Opobo had been Christianized in the Nineteenth Century; some of the population still worship these deities. People still attest to their continued existence, but their influences are less noticed by the overwhelming Christian population of Bonny and Opobo Kingdoms. Some deities are transcendental, these invisible beings still have powerful impact on the lives of those that worship and believe them.

Of all these deities of the ancestors of Ibani people, Simingi, Ikuba, Tolofari and Otuburu were of prominent national status. This explains why their priests performed legislative, Executive and Judicial functions in their states and communities and were even made co-signatories to some international treatise made with European countries and local treaties made with Sister Delta States at the early stages of the overseas trade.

In fact, priests played very important roles in the cultural economic and social lives of the people then, to the extent that priests of deities were consulted before Ibani people went to war with any other state. Sometimes to arrive at a decision the priest had the last say in the communities' affairs; even in a matter of life or death. There was a general belief that priests were the physical representatives of their ancestors and their deities, hence the total obedience to the words and instructions of the priests.

Priests were chosen by deities and were supposed to be individuals with unblemished character, transparent, honest, meek and slow to anger and above all must be willing to serve the god and the people. Priest of Deities were very wealthy during the oversea trade in Ibani Kingdoms of Bonny and Opobo as they competed with the Kings and influential Chiefs in the trade.

However, since the activities of these priests were not in consonant with the idea and objectives of missionaries and European traders, it was therefore not a surprise to find them on the wrong side of the missionaries. For example that Chief Priest Awanta of Ibani Nyana Simingi was captured and deported in 1847 to unknown destination on a trumped up charge of murder and buccaneering.

For the Ibani, the natural and the supernatural, though logically distinguishable are inseparable, dynamic and real. The divine, though transcendental essentially, is ever immanent operationally in human affairs.

The entire Cosmos”, Ejizu (1989) observers, “Is seen as a delicately balanced equilibrium and man’s welfare as well as that of his universe are essentially bound up with the continued maintenance of the primordial cosmic harmony

This is the genesis of a traditional Ibani society world-view, which has enabled the Ibani to have an integral and holistic perception and interpretation of human experience.

Ibani Traditional Religion and Morality

Opinions are divided on the relationship between religion and morality. The two concepts do not necessarily involve one another: They are distinct and one can exist without the other. It is possible to have an atheistic morality or an amoral religion. This was the view of early anthropologists who regarded religion as the medium for archaic survival. They argued that moral codes were found everywhere with statement and enforcement found in tradition and public opinion, not in religion. Some scholars who emphasized the separation of religion and morality Yinger (1970:48) observes that such people do so on ideological grounds. To some, the religious quest in the sense of union with God or eternal salvation may so dominate their lives that the moral issue-that is what happens to man on earth is utterly unimportant. There are others who protest against moral emphasis in religion because they do not want religious sanction to be involved in secular struggles of the day.

Another school of thought sees religion and morality as inextricably joined together, with the former informing the latter. This represents the position of many Theologians and majority of the adherents of the world religions. Some believe that religion is a necessary component of a moral system because of the motivational force it supplies. Some contend that a supernatural religious sanction is required to obtain a changeless frame of reference that cannot be upset by variable human experience. Simply put, this view emphasizes that there can be no morality without religion because religion is the expression of man’s relationship to his creator. Nzerem (1982) stressed this point when he observed:

If we are successful in teaching all the sciences and arts but fail to give our children a sense of direction to their creator, we would have failed woefully. We cannot cure the moral ills without reference to our eternal destiny.

Malinowsky (1936:25) put it thus:

Take away from the native the belief in the reality of their sacred lore, destroy their sense of the spirit world as it exists and acts upon them, and you will undermine their whole moral outlook

Morality is the most practical aspect of culture and constitutes the nucleus of the societal aspect of culture when one considers social culture as the material traces of ideas and ideals in the habits and associations of men. Every human society has its own culture, so does every basic and recognized norms of public order exist for the collective pursuit and realization of the common good and welfare of its members. The Ibani society has its custom called “Omenala” (traditions). Commenting on Omenala (customs) Ilogu (1974:24) that,

Culturally speaking, Omenala is the means by which the special ethos is measured, the values of the society are continued from one generation to another and the processes of socialization through the education of the young ones are facilitated. Harmony and equilibrium are in this way maintained as every member of the society knows what to expect from his neighbour and what to give to them, simply by observing the well known customary way of behaviour and moral code, that is Omenala.

Tradition and custom in African society, defined the various aspects of human behaviour and social activities that were approved and those aspects that were prohibited and forbidden. All the moral codes of morality were nearly always in the form of prohibitions, which were sanctioned by the deities and ancestral spirits. This accounts for why many scholars hold the view that African ethics and morality is derived from traditional religion. Ilogu further observes that,

Omenala (custom) is derived from the goddess Ala (earth divinity) and sanctioned by the ancestors; it is religious in nature, although it fulfills social, moral and cultural functions. Its hold on the community derives from the power of the goddess and the ancestors, hence the unquestioned obedience which the community gives to it.

Morality is part of *Omenala* their custom or social order. The Ibani religion is African in every aspect and Iwe (1991:6) observes that:

The measures for the maintenance of public morality were articulated in the spirit of A.T.R., which not only prescribed the sanction against public immorality but also stand as an indispensable agent of social control in all area of public morality and probity

Placid Temples (1959) corroborates this when he said:

Africans have traditionally been very conscious of the social dimension of morality. Morality is always seen in the social context. Hence any serious violation of the moral order has a social aspect which involves serious social consequences. The whole society is affected, for every evil act is an anti-social act which has adverse effects on the whole community.

Nwosu and Kalu (1982) agree with Temples view in their observation that, “a given cultural group enjoys a high degree of stability to the extent that the members of the group allow their actions to be governed by the dominant values and norms”. Lending support to our view, that African ethics and morality is the bedrock of social stability, Asouzu (1998) states that, “African traditional society recognizes and holds firmly to certain values... identified as necessary for correct functioning of the society and the welfare of the individuals”. To violate or go against the order as religiously legitimated, “is always to risk plunging into anomy... In such case the cosmic order has been wronged, and must be righted by appropriate ritual and moral acts” (Berger 1967:48). There is no doubt that Traditional African societies depended largely on the strict application of the moral codes of ethics for the smooth running of the society. By observing the customs, prohibitions or taboos and other normative values, social order and stability were ensured.

In Ibani cosmology, the traditional vision and attitude in the area of morality are holistic and integrated. Metuh (1981:56-58) observed that any event or human behaviour in disharmony with the normal order of nature or grossly antisocial is considered as an abomination and therefore disruptive of public order and public morality. Such abnormal events or anti-social behaviours and actions considered as an abomination, according to Iwe (1991:6), are also regarded as bad omen and offence against the deities, whose impending vengeance is bound to be not only personal but also social and catastrophic in its consequences.

Man has to control his nature and model it according to the normal socially accepted form. The earth goddess *amatemeso* is regarded as the promulgator of moral laws, who shows her dissatisfaction through some abnormal phenomena to which the people must react with sacrifices and propitiation (Jaja 1995). Thus any breach of the moral norm is seen as “*Nso*” (an abomination) to which the society must exact not only material reparation by the offender but also the performance of prescribed ritual for the purification of the offender and the polluted society (land) and for the appeasement of the offended deities (Jaja 2004:210).

Other elements in the traditional religious belief of the Ibani also contribute to the enforcement of morality in the society. One of such is the belief in life-after- death. As Iwe (1988:3) noted for the Igbo which also holds for the Ibani.

The strong belief in spiritual immortality and reincarnation provided the necessary personal and social motivation and encouragement to subordinate one’s moral life to the requirements of ethical discipline and public morality, which often came under divine sanctions. The Igbo in danger of moral prevarication or embarking on a wrong course of action are advised to remember life-after-death and the laws of reincarnation under which the wicked are severely deprived and punished.

The spirits of the ancestors are also believed to be the custodians of family affairs, tradition; morals and culture.

The Ibani believe that their lives are profoundly influenced by their ancestors, and the belief has far reaching

sociological consequences. Any departure from custom is likely to incur the displeasure and vengeance of the ancestors.

Thus people often conduct their affairs in such a manner that they do not incur the displeasure and consequent wrath of the ancestors. The other minor spirits also exert their influence in the control of morality, as they are believed to be very malicious and with power to influence the futures of man.

Ibani Religion in the 21st Century

There is no doubt that Ibani traditional religion has come under heavy knocks and strains. In the first place the increased influx of people from the hinterland puts serious strains on the Ibani culture and religion as the “new” people overwhelmed the indigenous people consequently watering down the Ibani religion. Secondly, the internal mechanism ruffled indigenous religious practices in secret. The question that arises is where do these many Christians fit in, in the spectrum between the old Ibani traditional religions and the thought-world of the Christian faith. Is it possible to discern a pattern of continuity or discontinuity between the past and the future? (McVeigh 1974).

It must be noted that Ibani religion was not only ecological; it deals with hopes and attitudes of the people. Indeed the Ibani confess and declare that:

... we should like to reflect further on hope as this is experienced in the traditional religion of Africa, in so far as this hope is not just something our people once had in the past, but is a conception of life which influences the attitude of the modern African (Edward Fashole-Luke et al. 1978)

For:

Because of the cultural form in which it is clothed, the Christianity of the missionaries cannot be assimilated, nor can it help (our) people to face up to difficult situations.

It is difficult to understand how such difficult situations have been tackled in the indigenous religious ways. The problem is that the West, or Europe may be able to set up clear lines of demarcation and explain what they mean when they use the word “religion”. For the Ibani and for Africa, religion or

religious considerations enter into and influence all spheres of life. Therefore, we can speak about “the wholeness of Human life”.

It is important to emphasize the fact that at every point of such contact, even when it has been on the most mundane materialistic level, it has had religious effects. African scholars and thinkers openly state that:

The result of the encounter between Africa and the Northern hemisphere world has been considerable frustration for many, perhaps for all Africans, at every level.

So that in Ibani, while the European settler robbed people of their land and products of their sweat, the church is said to have robbed the people of their soul, and body, for thirty pieces of silver and a promise of a European heaven. Western Education and culture has planted in the minds of the modern African a state of confusion and conflict. Thus, he finds in the vortex of schizoid religious – cultural mentality, a confused mind caught in the web of two conflicting culture (Ekeopara 2006:143).

In the ensuing encounter, the Ibani religion lost out. The wall of Ibani religious architectural designs went down, the totems desecrated and the ritual sacrifices abandoned. Before this onslaught these deities satisfied the fundamental needs of a people within their peculiar environment. The limits and boundaries of which the Ibani struggle to overcome. Indeed, the whole culture passes through the crises of existence, the bounds of each aspect reach out in an attempt to comprehend the whole community and its total experience, offering a new centre and new boundaries coterminous with a new society.

The Ibani like most other people turn to religion to answer the fundamental questions of life. Questions like life after, the essence of suffering and death. Abbot (1967) argued that;

from the various religions men... expect answers to the secret enigmas of the human condition which deeply troubled the human heart yesterday as they do today. Man's nature, the meaning and end of our life, good and sin, the origin and aim of suffering, the way to reach true happiness, death, judgment and sanction after death,

ultimate and ineffable mystery which envelops our existence, where we came from and where we are going.

Ignance Lepp (1969:23), also confronted with the same thought argues that everyone has two vocations. The first, summons him to ascertain the purpose of life, while the other requires him to use all the means at his disposal in order to achieve the purpose. Indeed that was what the Ibani religion is all about. Probably they are aimed at the same God or the same purpose but adopting different mediums.

Da-Wariboko (2010:42) explained that:

The oracles which are believed to possess extra super powers can either possess or speak through the priests or in form of birds to disclose what the client requires. The rituals/sacrifices involved may appear uncivilized or crude to the outsider but the power and result potent in practice are real to the African theologian, which is even adopted by the orthodox Christians though nocturnally to hide their identities.

This confirms that in spite of Christianity, oracular deities are still consulted up till today, only this time by cover of nightfall.

The Essence of Religion

It is a personal relationship with God. It is man interacting with his creator. In the course of this relationship, God answers man's basic questions about his life - why he is here on Earth; what are his expectations; where he is coming from and where he is going; where is his final destination and what will happen to him there?

Nobody can explain why a thing is made except its maker. Nobody can explain why a thing is placed in a particular place except the particular individual who placed it there. Consequently, no one can explain why man exists or why he is in the world except the one – the maker who placed him in the world. Man is simply on a journey in this world without knowing the purpose of his journey, where he is going or when he will get to his destination or even how soon that will be. These are the enigmas of human life which constitute the human predicament.

Religion therefore attempts to provide answers to these enigmas of life and show the way out of the human predicament. By so doing, it gives meaning to the human life and his moral life changes. It is obvious now that the only way out of this human problematic is for man to search and know his maker; only his maker knows why he created him. What his purpose in and where he is going. It is a dialogue an interaction between man and his creator; when man discovers himself his social morality becomes evident. That is what religion is all about. Religion is the interpersonal relationship that enables him answer questions bothering him, his concept of right and wrong becomes different. Consequently his life which was meaningless becomes meaningful and evident. Authentic religion focuses on repentance, on doing the right, transformation of life, holiness of life and the ultimate salvation. This is the essence of life which the indigenous Ibani religion did not allow full blossoming.

Conclusion

We have articulated that the Ibani traditional religion is the foundation on which the Ibani maintains his/her dignity according to socially accepted laws of conduct. This paper has also shown that Ibani traditional ethical principles drew strength and force from traditional religion of Africa. That social stability and order in traditional Ibani society was anchored on the respect for customs and traditions of the society. It argues that Christianity and Western Education and value system, has dealt a severe blow on the traditional ethical principles, which ensured peace, and harmony.

The 21st century introduced new challenges which affected not just the people but the whole concept of religion as the question bothering man was not just environmental but the essence of his existence, the question of his purpose on earth, where he is going, questions of hereafter, death etc.

We have also shown that the traditional religion served its purpose then and even now. Only now those who still patronize the Ibani religion do it by cover of nightfall. We have also shown that religion is interpersonal and try to find answers to all the questions that bother man. Finding God is finding answers to these questions and this is the true essence of religion which the traditional Ibani religion was unable to uncover in spite of the numerous deities in the society. However, there is no doubting the contributions of traditional religion and the importance of social morality in the moulding of

good citizens and a humane society where peace, solidarity and brotherhood enabled the tapping of the abundant resources of society at the time.

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