

**PRAYER IN IGBO COSMOLOGY: THE CASE OF MBIERI, MBAITOLI L. G. A.,  
IMO STATE, NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

The religious life of an Igbo man has experienced great changes through the ages. The modern religions have also influenced the people so much that the Igbo of the present generation have questioned the origin of prayers, while others doubted the efficacy of prayer. There are also arguments as to how prayer comes about and whether it started with Christians, or whether the Igbo great grandparents who followed the traditional religion actually prayed. This study is aimed at settling these arguments by exposing the originality of prayer in the life of an Igbo man, as well as significant roles played by prayer in Igbo traditional religion. This study will benefit students, teachers, researchers and the Igbo society as a whole. This study made use of the survey method in finding out the nature and role of prayer in Igbo cosmology, using Mbieri, in Imo state, Nigeria as a case study. Related literatures were reviewed, research questions were formulated and posed to 50 people through oral interview. Data were collected and analyzed critically. The interpretation of the data showed that prayer plays a significant role in Igbo traditional religion, and that the originality of prayer in the life of an Igbo man forms the basis for the implantation of Christian prayer. More so, prayers are efficacious and have existed in Igbo land before the advent of Christianity. In which case, it was not an invention by Christianity; rather Christian prayer found traditional prayer a fertile soil on which it built. The study therefore recommends that there should be cultural involvement Christianization in order to achieve a balanced religion. Christianity should be more deeply planted in Igbo culture so that Ndigbo may ever praise God with their names, their language, their music, and indeed all aspects of their culture. Attention should also be drawn to the fact that imported religion is characterized by proliferation of churches, greed, corruption, embezzlement and a lot of ill practices aimed at tricking the unsuspecting Igbo into believing that miracles abound where they are not, thereby turning the sick and needy into religious prostitutes.

**Key words:** Igbo cosmology, Originality and efficacy of prayer, Christianity, Traditional religion, Nigeria

## **Introduction**

Prayer plays a significant role in Igbo cosmology. Prayers are efficacious and Ndigbo have their method of communicating and channeling their petitions to the Almighty, even before the advent of Christianity.

Christianity has so much influenced the present generation of Ndigbo, that they have raised questions and arguments on the origin and efficacy of prayer. They are also in doubt about the prayer life of the Igbo grandparents.

This study is aimed at answering these questions, settling the arguments as well as clearing the doubts by tracing the originality of prayer in the life of Ndigbo and the roles of Igbo traditional religion.

The study took a survey into the nature and role of prayer in Igbo cosmology, using Mbieri in Imo State Nigeria as a case study.

## **The Concept of Prayer**

Like other peoples and races of the planet earth, the Igbo have been conscious of the Supreme Being that directs the order in the universe. Since the existence of this being has been manifested in many ways, it becomes necessary for other classes of beings on earth to aspire to have some interaction with him, by way of religious contact or worship. Throughout their history, Africans, because of their belief in God are very religious, with each people having their own pattern of beliefs and practices. The worship takes different forms, depending on the goals and demands of those involved. Religion expresses the kind of communication man has with the supreme force, and has a direct relationship to the people practicing it. According to Ogbukagu (1997),

There can be no religious worship without man; it is evident that religion can only be apparent through the activities of two agents, the Supreme force who identified himself to man and man who responds to God's revelations through religious practices (p.302).

Africans make supplications to God through traditional religious worship. Traditional religion predicates worship and worship in the traditional African understanding generally is rooted in African culture. Ogbukagu reveals that "Worship in the African tradition employs divinities (minor gods), ancestors and intermediaries to convey messages to the Supreme Being. They (minor gods) therefore act between God and man".

Since the Igbo believe fervently that they were created by God, for them, religious worship covers all aspects of their lives. Traditional religious worship therefore interacts with the Supreme Being, minor gods and ancestors, which are the three categories of supernatural forces, as its objects of worship.

Metuh (1981), opines,

One is not very long in Igbo country before knowing how much God does exist in the Igbo consciousness and how fervently he features in every day speech. The Igbo do not approach Chukwu only in the last resource of extremity, when all other gods, arbitrators, advocates, mediums and mediators have miserably failed. They never speak of futurity without

admitting òAhonze Tsukwuò i.e. òif it pleases Godò. Every morning the Igbo raise their hands to heaven and say òGod, I thank you for long life (P. 150).

Also any unpredictable future is in the hands of Divine providence, and such cases are primarily the concern of *Chineke*, not the deities, for only the Omniscient God knows what hope such an uncertain future holds out for man.

Igbo daily life is equally full of the sense of divine presence and need of God's care and protection. For morning greetings, the Igbo (Mbieri people) say *I teene?* òHave you come out well from sleep?ò And then go on to enquire about one's family, children and business. If everything is well with the neighbour, the well wisher says ò*Chineke e meene*ò òThanks be to God.ò ò*Chukwu aruka*ò òGod has done wondersò is usually the greeting, when pleasant incidents occur, especially when a new child is born.

Prayer is a constant element in African life and religion; it is a means of contact and communion with the Supreme Being, the gods and the ancestors. Prayers are, at times, spontaneous and determined by occasions and circumstances. Libation is often a feature of African prayer. It is the pouring of wine to a deity or to an ancestor, as a sign of goodwill and communion with it (Onwubiko, 199: 63).

According to Avila (2009), prayer is:

An act of communication by humans with the sacred or Holy God, the gods, the transcendent realm, or supernatural powers. Found in all religions in all times, prayer is an intimate friendship, a frequent conversation held alone with the beloved.

William James and Joseph Segond, describe prayer as òsubconsciousò and òemotional effusionò, an outburst of the mind that desires to enter into communication with the invisible. Experiences of prayer very often, do include òcries from the heart,ò òinexpressible laments,ò and òspiritual outburstò.

### **Nature and Significance of Prayer**

Prayer is a significant and universal aspect of religion, whether of primitive people or of modern mystics, that expresses the broad range of religious feelings and attitudes that command man's relations with the sacred or holy. Prayer has been described by some scholars as religion's primary mode of expression. Prayer is to religion what rational thought is to philosophy.

Historians of religions, theologians, and believers of all faiths agree in recognizing the central position that prayer occupies in religion. According to William James, òWithout prayer there can be no question of religionò and Sadhu Sundar stated that òprayer is as important as breathingò. Prayer is considered to be the purest in expressing the essential elements of a religion. Therefore, because religion is culturally and historically ubiquitous, if prayer were removed from the literary heritage of a culture, that culture would be deprived of a particularly rich and uplifting aspect.

From its primitive to its mystical expression, prayer expresses a desire on the part of man to enter into contact with the sacred or holy. As part of that desire, prayer is linked to a feeling of presence (of the sacred or holy), which is neither an abstract conviction nor an instinctive intuition but rather a volitional movement conscious of realizing its higher end.

Thus, prayer is described not only as meditation about God but as a step, a ðgoing out of one's self, a pilgrimage of the spirit ðin the presence of God. It has, therefore, a personal and experiential character that goes beyond critical analysis.

Prayer is also linked to sacrifice, which seems to support prayer as a cultic as well as a personal act and as a supplement to the bare word of man in his attempt to relate to the sacred or holy. In any case, the sacrificial act generally precedes the verbal act of prayer. Thus, the presentation of an offering often prolongs prayer and is viewed as recognition of the sovereignty and beneficence of the deity or super natural powers. The word of man (in prayer) however, apart from a concomitant sacrificial act, is itself viewed as the embodiment of sacred action and power.

According to Encarta Encyclopedia (2009),

í in religion, both a person's act of communion with God, or any other object of worship, and the words used. It is the natural result of a person's belief in God. Prayer may be individual or group, formal or spontaneous, silent or spoken. In one or more forms, it is at the centre of worshipí . In its narrowest sense, prayer is understood as spiritual communion for the sake of requesting something of a deity. In form designed to bring one into closer relation to whatever one believes to be ultimateí .

Prayer is a universal religious phenomenon because it stems from the natural human disposition to give verbal expression to thought and emotion. As man naturally communicates by speech with his fellows so he instinctively addresses the supernatural powers of his belief through the same medium. It has been suggested that man, at first thought to force supernatural being by magic to do his will and resorted to soliciting (praying to) them when he found that magic did not workí . Even primitive peoples without the benefit of revelation turned instinctively towards the supernatural in times of fear and crises (Obiagwu, 1983: 23)

### **Ndi Igbo and Prayer: The Case of an Mbieri Man**

Religiously, Ndi Mbieri, like all human beings, are very religious. The two main religions practiced in Mbieri are the traditional and the Christian religions. The spread of Christianity has remarkably overshadowed the traditional religion.

Traditionally, Mbieri people are said to have belief in God who they call *Chukwu*. Thus their belief influences their ways of life. For instance, an Mbieri man abhors engaging himself in *ðihe umune* (any act against the kinsman, especially as it relates to bloodshed) and *ðihe okposhi*, (incest). They see the above as grievous sins that will surely attract the wrath of *ðChukwu*, "*Onye ji ike niile*" (all powerful God).

God's presence is always felt in the lives of the people. His name remains a household name; hence they call God in anything they do. For instance, an Mbieri man will always prefix *ðn'ike Chukwu* (by God's strength) before he makes any proposal. Also *ðOnye nwe anyi duo gi* (may our God lead you) is a kind of prayer said for one embarking on a journey.

The Igbo man is noted to be deeply religious. This deeply religious nature is made manifest through his inclination to prayers. These prayers contain most intensive expression of African traditional spirituality.

The Mbieri man, like every other human being in the world has struggled to find ways of harnessing the forces in the universe to his own advantage. Hence the idea of prayer and the existence of numerous religions of the world. Prayer, therefore forms the greater part of Mbieri traditional religion.

Obiagwu (1983:31), Opines, òí different religions have different objectives of religion and their different ways of worship. So prayers could be said to be as old as the society itself.

Most of the different prayers said by the Igbo are recited by different people in their official capacities. For example, the priest, the family head, the kings, heads of social groups and individuals. Prayers, more often than not, are community based and community oriented.

Mbiti (1975), as quoted in Obiagwu (1983:31), says:

í a good number of these prayers are set in responsive form which emphasizes the group or community participation in prayer and shows also that the concerns expressed in prayers are common or shared concerns. The leader may intone the prayer while the assembled group responds in songs or recitation generally repeating some of the phrases altered by the leader or a well known formula.

The above citation buttresses the opinion that says,

òPrayers in Igbo land are said more in common than individuallyö. Public prayers in Igbo land are characterized by sacrifices. Anozie (1970), as quoted in Obiagwu (1983:31), shares the same opinion, òBesides the traditional morning prayers, public prayer is almost invariably bound up with sacrifice. Individual prayer is not a normal thing except in form of ejaculations to god, the spirits and the ancestorsö.

In Mbieri, ejaculatory prayers are uttered by people of all ages and by both sexes at anytime and at any place and as often as occasions demand. For example, when an Mbieri child sneezes, any elderly person around, especially the mother, spontaneously says ò*Ndu gi*” (your life), ò*Nosie Ike*” (stay strong) “*okpo gi nke oma ya zute mma, mana okpo gi nke ojoo ya were isi ya buru, onye isi gi na- awa aja, ya were nke ya churu*” (anyone who calls you for good shall see good, but any who calls you for evil, will use his or her head to pay; anybody who wants your head for sacrifice will rather use his or her own head.)

The role of children during prayers is mere participatory. No prayers are specifically said by children; rather they join in home or community prayers.

The traditional morning prayer of Mbieri is often said by the head of the family. The first and merited duty of the family head is to thank God for the care and protection of his family through the ancestors and the spirits. The spirits and the ancestors are next in authority to the Supreme Being, acting as intermediaries between God and the people who are offering the prayer. This reflects the social pattern of the people of Mbieri. Approaching the king requires going through those who are nearer the king like, *Ndi Nze*; so payer is offered to God through a succession of ancestors and spirits ending sometimes with words

of acclamation and support like *õHaam!* or *Ihaaa!*” or “*ofoö* (so be it). (Ukaawuba, Personal communication August 4, 2010).

This unique characteristic of praying through mediators in Igbo traditional prayer is akin to the method commonly used by the Christians of today especially those of the Catholic Church. The researcher observed that the Catholics believe in the Supreme God and pray to him but more often through the saints as mediators.

In Mbieri, the traditional prayer is usually accompanied by the breaking of kola (*oji*) and palm wine (*mmii ngwo*). They are presented first before approaching God and the deities to signify the worshippers` goodwill and friendliness between himself and the unseen power. The eating of kolanut and the drinking of palm wine are perceived as an expression of goodwill and a sensible manifestation of a desire for communion.

When an Mbieri man wants to pray in the morning, certain preparations are made. He washes his hand, face, as well as rinses his mouth (*õonu uraö* (foul mouth)), when this is done, then comes the breaking of kola nut, and it is at this point that the prayer is said.

In Igbo cosmology, this communion *õOrikoö* signifies the memorial of renewal of covenant *õIgbanduö* with Chukwu. This is also what Christians: The Catholics commemorate during Mass: The Body and Blood of Christ, in Holy Communion.

Another important instrument for such prayers is the *õfoö*. The officiating priest holds his ofo stick in his hand. After saying his prayers he places the ofo stick on the ground and breaks the kola nut.

Ofo in this context serves as a mediator between spirits of this world and the underworld. It also serves as the emblem of truth and man`s innocence of wrong doing against others.

After the breaking of kolanut, the bits of it which are thrown outside are believed to be offered to the spirits while the remaining are eaten by the people who are present. The better part of the kola the *õobi oji*” (the heart of the kola) is believed to be given to the spirits outside and certain words are uttered, such as “*ala were obi oji taa, o bu ya kacha mma* (let the earth goddess take the heart of the kola, which is the best and eat). The other minor deities in Mbieri like Odu Mbieri (Odu Ori) deity, Ezeala (ala deity) Amadioha (the sun of Ala, god of thunder), Odu Eze Elu (Kamalu ozuzu) Iyiafo (god of Okitankwo stream), Obaragu, Otaakwu etc. are also invoked during prayer. (Chukwudire, 2010:162). These deities are invoked because each has an aspect of help or assistance it renders, onye no n`oke no n`oru, ( all hands are on deck).

### **Forms of Prayer**

The Mbieri man prays to God and sometimes or more often through the spirits and the ancestors. That`s why they apply these forms of prayer, as cited in Obiagwu (1983:55), “*Invocations, blessings, petitions, thanksgiving and oaths and courses*”. Metuh (1981:55), arranged these forms of prayer thus, *õinvocation of God and the deities, confession of sins, petitions, blessings and courses*”

Invocations are widely and commonly practiced in Igbo traditional religion. They are shortened form of prayers. Some invocations are spontaneous while others are regular formula of addressing God. The Mbieri man believes that his desires could be obtained if he prays to and respects his various objects of worship. He also believes he would not incur punishments especially from the wicked deities if he pays them their worship and respect.

Petition is another feature of an Mbieri man's prayer. The Mbieri, like other Igbo, invoke God, the spirits and the ancestors in several occasions, but he never does this without petition. No Igbo man makes his prayer without finding causes for petition, because it is the petition rather than complaints that is the core of the prayer.

Amposah (1974:38), explains,

The petition is an expression of the will of man who asks favour from dependable beings for himself and his well wishers and damnation for his adversaries. The petition is materialistic request made for material blessings, health, longevity, peace, grace, potency, rainfall, protection from enemies and death, increase of children, food, floods or crops.

From the above citation, one may hold that the most important aspect in Igbo concept of prayer, is the petition, and petition goes along with blessings. Blessing is another important form of prayer in Mbieri, and Igbo land in general. According to Mbiti (1975:154), *“African people value them and are generous in extending blessing to one another.”*

The Mbieri man never says prayers without asking for blessings, for his family and for himself or pronouncing blessings to his friends. It is important to note that man in his capacity pronounces the different kinds of blessings, but they are unproductive unless God confers the blessings, and if an Mbieri man receives blessings, thanksgiving to God follows.

Thanksgiving in prayers portrays the recognition of God's goodness to man and the subsequent expression of man's gratitude to God for his goodness. The Mbieri man is always saying this proverb, *“E kelee onye akidi ya-agwota ozo, (if you show gratitude to the person that provides you with Mbieri cherished kind of beans, he will continue to provide). E too dike na nke o mere eme, ya- emeekwa ozo”* (if you praise a brave man for what he did, he will do it again). *“Okuko anaghi echefu onye foro ya odudu n'udu mmiri”* (the fowl does not forget the person that plucks off its tail during rainy season). On the other hand, Mbieri man abhors any situation that will give rise to proverbs like *“Nwangwi puo eze ya atagbuo onye zuru ya”* (when an ophan grows teeth, he bites the person that trained him), *onye mejoro dibia na-agworo ya ogwu, ndi na-achu ya a gwubeghi”* (he who offends the native doctor that prepared charm for him, those who are after him have not died) etc. The Mbieri man, like any other Igbo man does not say his prayers without expressing gratitude to God for his favours to him.

The taking of oaths and the pronouncement of curses in the name of God constitute a part of Mbieri, and Igbo traditional idea of prayer. In Mbieri, it entails asking the accused to swear by a spirit. The Mbieri man makes an oath to reinforce his affirmation or denial about some issues. In Mbieri, it is common to swear, mentioning the name of God and man, *“n'ihu chukwu na mmadu”* (before God and man). This is a simple and positive oath taking. But when one is accused of some deeds which are evil, one takes an oath to deny the allegation. This is a negative type of oath taking which is most often accompanied by curses. The person who is taking the oath asks the spirit to kill or harm him, if he is guilty but if not, may the curse go to his accuser.

The practice of uttering curses has their own advantage since they help to maintain peace in the families and the society at large. But curses are contrary to blessings and as such one may be slow or reluctant to agree that anything which is contrary to blessings in

any religion or society makes for peace and harmony. In any case, the principle of curses is that God would execute the curses, if they are justifiable, and they are liable to be revoked (Obiagwu, 1983:78).

### **Structure of Mbieri Traditional Morning Prayer**

Traditional morning prayers in Mbieri, just like prayers of the kind, are made up of the introductory part, the prayer itself and the conclusion. The introduction is a kind of invocation in which the object of worship is called upon to listen to the petition. In Mbieri, the leader of the prayer calls on God, the spirits and the ancestors. According to Amponsah (1974:38), as quoted in Obiawgu (1983:37), *“the object of worship is mentioned by its personal name. The name must be honorific praise names, attributes and proverbs are mentioned as part of the invocation to honour the deity / deities”*.

In Mbieri, the supreme high God is generally addressed as *“ōChineke”* (the God that creates) or *“ōChukwuö* (the great God). The ancestors are also invoked in the introductory part of prayer because it is believed they play an intermediary role between men and the spirits and God. They are believed to be much nearer to God and the spirits. According to Mbiti (1970: 230), as quoted in Obiagwu (1983:387),

they *“speakö* a bilingual language of human beings whom they recently left through physical death, and of the spirits to whom they are now joined, or of God to whom they are now nearer than when they were physical men.

The departed ancestors who are invoked in prayer are expected to relay human requests, fears and needs to God. They are also specifically believed to intercede for them here on earth.

Petition normally follows the introductory part of the prayer, and it is regarded as the heart of the whole prayer. The petition comprises more of blessings for his family and curses and damnation for his enemies.

The conclusion comes at the last part of the prayer. It is more often ended with some nice Igbo proverbs. After conclusion comes acclamation, which is usually chorused by the people present.

*Isee! or Haam! (Amen).*

### **Sample of Morning Prayer of Mbieri in Mbaitoli Local Government Area of Imo State**

#### **a) Introduction**

E e e e m! E e e e e m! E e e e e m! E e e e e m!

Akwaa ikiri, ndi mmuo aghaa anya! A guhee uzo a guhee onu. Ututu tufuo njo Chineke di nœlu, Ogodo ya na-akpu nœala, biko bia tara oji. Ala Mbieri bia tara oji. Nnudo, bia tara oji. Odu, bia tara oji. Nna nna nayi ha, bia tara oji. Oparaocha nnam bia tara oji. Ndi ichie nga anyi, bia tara nu oji. E e e e m! (clears throat 4 times)

If throat is cleared the spirits turn. When the door opens, the mouth opens too. Let the morning pick off evil. Chineke who lives in heaven and whose cloths torch the ground, please come and eat kola. *Mbieri land, come and eat kola. Nnudo, come and eat kola. Odu, come and eat kola. Our fore-fathers, come and eat kola. Our ancestors come and eat kola.*



**b) Petition**

*Biko chedome umuaka anyi. Biko asim mmuo egbule ha. Mmadu egbule ha. Ndi ojoo ahukwala uzo ahu ha. Ukwu ije akpokwala ha, Ubochi njo ukwu elikwela ha oto, Eje ayo bu isi ije.*

*Please protect our children, please I say, spirit, should not kill them, human beings should not kill them. The evil men will not see them, let them not experience any hitch on their journey. Let them not feel like going out on a tragic day. Safe journey is the best journey.*

**c) Conclusion**

*Nke onye diri ya, asim ebe onye no ya nosie ike, Onye anwula, ibe ya efule, Ome njo ga-ezute njo. Ome mma ga-ezute mma, Isi kotere ebu ya gbaa ya. Obiara ngam abiagbulem, ya lawa mkpumpku apula ya n'azu, onye isi anyi na-awa aja ga eji nke ya chuo, asim egbe bere ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebela, nku kwaa ya.*

*Let one's possession be for him, I say let people survive in their position., Let nobody die, and let no one get lost. The good shall meet good, while the evil shall meet evil. The head that torches the bee, shall suffer its sting. Let my visitor not kill me, so that he will not suffer haunch back on his way home. He who projects our head for sacrifice, will use his own. I say let the kite perch and eaglet perch, whichever says the other must not perch let its wing break.*

**d) Acclamation**

Isee! or Ihaa!

Amen.

Looking at the pattern of the above prayer, one will notice that it is made up of the introduction, the petition, conclusion and acclamation.

Obiagwu (1983:43) states,

There is no set formula for Igbo traditional prayers. The leader in prayer composes the prayer especially according to his own needs and the needs of the group he is leading in prayer. The words of the prayer show whether it is a prayer of thanksgiving or request. Further the Igbo man prays at several other occasions and at various times.

The researcher agrees with the above citation, especially as it affects Mbieri man, who prays at various times and occasions. For instance, he prays in the morning first before taking up any activity. He also prays against famine, when one's son is traveling overseas for further studies, during marriage ceremonies, at the birth of a child and other ceremonies. In Mbieri, no ceremony begins without prayer.

### **Libation and Mbieri Prayer**

Libation is one of the characteristics of prayers in Igbo society, as a whole, and Mbieri, as a community. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000: 681) defines libation as

“A gift of wine to a god. Merriem Websters Dictionaries and Thesaurus, (Microsoft), defines libation as, “pouring out of liquid as religious offerings” the pouring out of liquid, eg. wine or oil, as a sacrifice to a god or in honour of a dead person.

Libation as understood by the researcher is an act of pouring out of an offering of wine to a god or one's object of worship. According to the above cited dictionaries, the word “Libation” etymologically is from Latin “Libare” which means to “pour out”.

Mbieri man, while saying the traditional Morning Prayer and other prayers, invokes “Chineke” the Supreme High God, the spirits and the ancestors to partake in the kolanut that normally accompanies the prayer. While commenting about libation Glyn (1968: 349), as cited in Obiagwu (1983) says,

it is usual either before eating or drinking to place on the ground or, as the Ibanido, to throw in the air a small portion of food or water and as this is being done, a petition in the following or similar words is addressed to the names on behalf of their descendants, eat, drink and live, oí (p. 49).

The researcher is of the opinion that the pouring out of some quantity of wine and throwing out of some pieces of kola nut while praying is a profound manifestation of the sincerity of the invitation. This can be likened to the Christian invocation of the Holy Spirit. The gods are really wanted to partake in the eating and drinking, and this could be the reason why the names of the departed spirits are mentioned, to remind them of their togetherness with their children on earth to protect them from all evil forces.

Libation, as practiced by Mbieri man is offered at any convenient place, which means that libation has no special place where it is being offered. This act of libation at any convenient place is a manifestation of the Igbo man's knowledge of the Omnipresent of God and his recognition of this presence since he carves out no special place or occasions for this act. This offering which an Mbieri man makes before eating any meal or drink, is being interpreted by the researcher as the prayer said by Christians before taking their meals.

Nze Ndunagum, reveals that the content of libation depends on the occasion and purpose for which the libation is offered. According to him, an Mbieri man pours out wine during ceremonies like, festivals, naming ceremony, marriage, send forth (for one traveling) etc. What will be said during libation will be relevant to the occasion. It is also note worthy that not all libations are accompanied with prayers or utterances. In Mbieri, friends or kinsmen usually gather to drink as a way of refreshing themselves, in such moment one can pour out a drink without saying anything but that deed alone shows that they recognized the presence of the gods and spirits of their ancestors (Personal communication August 5, 2010)

### **Priests in Mbieri Prayer**

A priest is one specially consecrated to the service of divinity and through whom worship, prayer, sacrifice, or other service is offered to the object of worship, and pardon, blessing, or deliverance is obtained by the worshiper. In earliest history, the functions of priests were discharged by the head of the family; later the office became a public one, in many instances associated with that of the sovereign (öpriestö Microsoft® Encerta® 2009(DVD)).

In Igbo land, the priest is regarded as the official servant of the gods. The priest is known under different names in various areas and the initiation and training vary from place to place. In Mbieri, the priest is held in high esteem because it is a common belief that priests are called by the gods and because of that, no one ever objected to the call. Priesthood, in some places is hereditary while in some places one is called through some spiritual possession.

The duties of the priest are very many. His functions are not limited to religious duties. Hence, Mbiti (1970: 220), as cited in Obiagwu (1983:86), states,

The duties of priests are mainly making sacrifice, offerings and prayers, conducting both public and private rites and ceremonies, giving guidance, performing judicial functions (in some societies) caring for the temples and shrines, where these exist and above all fulfilling their functions as religious intermediaries between men and God.

As there are many functions of the priest, so also there are different types of priests in Mbieri; viz ó

1. The family priest: The family priest in Mbieri, just like many Igbo communities, refers to the head of the family. He is called the family priest because the seat of his worship is at home. He is the father of the family, who offers morning prayers to his ancestors, especially through the breaking of kolanut, and special libations to the ancestors. In his prayer, he invokes the lineage of his father, grandfather and great grandfather to ask for their protection and blessings for their children. The office of the family priest is hereditary.
2. *Onye isi agbara, onye isi ala*, is one who in some parts of Igbo land is called *Eze mmuo* (the head of a deity; person in charge of ala, as well as the head of man of a spirit). In Mbieri, this type of priest is usually in charge of one spirit. For example, you get the priest for *Iyiafo, Nnudo, Odu* etc. This particular type of priesthood is always hereditary. A person assumes the office of priest of a particular spirit because his father was one. Usually it is the *Diokpara* (the eldest son) who succeeds his father in case of old age or death, in which case the future priest is known, not by wealth or influence. The duties of *Onye Ishiala* primarily, centres around the shrine. He offers prayers on behalf of the individuals and at village levels. He generally offers prayers and some kola and libations to his *-arushi* every morning. At so many occasions, people go to him to offer prayers on their behalf. Those who go to *Onye ishiala* for prayers, usually go with some items which may include, kola nuts, yams, fowls etc. In Mbieri, *Onye Ishiala* also performs cleansing and other purification rituals (P. N. Iwunwa, Personal communication August 5, 2010).

3. Ndi Dibia: The *dibia* is commonly known as medicine man. In Mbieri, the popularly known medicine men or native doctors are the *dibia afa* (diviners) and *dibia mgborogwu na mkpaakwukwo*. In Mbieri, people consult the *dibia afa* before embarking on a journey, business or before undertaking a big project. They also go to enquire about things. *Dibia mgborogwu na mkpaakwukwo* is responsible for healing and treatment of several diseases, while the witchdoctors, though not well pronounced in Mbieri, are conceived as people who release people who are said to have been bewitched. The witchdoctors are said to produce the charms with which other people are bewitched; hence they are regarded as witches themselves.

### **The State of Prayers in the Present Age**

Right from ages, Ndi Mbieri as well as Ndi Igbo believed that man is created by God. They usually refer to God as the creator, (*Chi Okike*) who they refer to as *õObasi bi n'elu*", (God that lives in heaven). They say he owns everything in the world, including human beings, the protection of life and death, including good and evil, are in his hands. They believed that *Obasi*, has different messengers through whom prayers will get to him, *Chukwu Okike* (God the creator). That is why it appeared they worshipped many gods, but these gods were regarded as intermediaries between man and God. Some of these messengers live on the earth, in the sky, in the waters, etc. They differ according to communities where they are found. Some of them are ala, *amadioha*, *iyiafo*, *odu*, *nnudo*, *obaragu* etc (Ajaeree, 2002: 75).

According to Ogbakagu (1997:307), *õNothing passes through water and comes out the same*". This relates to the story of prayer in Mbieri, and Ndi Igbo in general, from the second decade of the twentieth century, when a new era was ushered in, in the history of Mbieri. Within this period, the whirl wind of Christianity blew across the town. The innovation of Christianity brought about tremendous changes in the life style and the entire world view of the people. The Roman Catholic Church, and the British Government, through the indirect rule system of the colonial masters were responsible for this drastic change.

According to Okoro (2004:68),

Prior to colonialism, and western culture cum civilization, African culture and morality blossomed. There was communalism and people cared for one another. Customs and traditions were highly respected. There was a lot to eat and drink, a little show of ostentation. Crime was very low and diseases were not rampant. The golden rule prevailed. When the missionaries (colonial masters) came, they washed away most of those virtues embedded in the African customs, labeled them all sorts of derogatory names and employed all manners of methods to reduce traditional religion and custom to ashes and historical anachronism.

Prayer in Igbo cosmology suffered a setback as a result of the above influence, because both their priests were brainwashed and converted. The forms of prayer were modernized to suite their doctrines, while the places and objects of worship were destroyed. Observing this, Ezekwugo (1992:79), states:

They discover that Africans use shrines, statues, effigies and images to worship God. These were branded paganistic, heathenistic, devilish, or satanic. In their places the imported religions, started using alters, sacristies, statues, crosses, medals, chaplets, and relics of foreign ancestors whom they call saints or martyrs. With all these they tended to claim that they introduced prayer and worship to our culture, when the fact is that they copied and tuned the system to suit their tablet. It is because of African customs, traditions and cultural values that the African is regarded as being highly religions in the sense that the hopes and fears of the ancestors, spirits ad divinities or gods and the Supreme Being guide everything he does whether seen or unseen.

The state of prayers in Mbieri, and ala Igbo of the present age is summarized in Ezeuko (1986:59), as he laments:

Ha atufuola ofo nna nnanyi ha kpoo ya ihe ruru aru. Ha na-ekwu si na ndi Igbo amaghi Chineke, ruo bu ekwnsu ka ha na-efe. Ugbua ha eweterela anyi ekpemekpe kraist, suchapusia oke ohia ha kporo ohia arusi ma ndi ekweghi ka ikuku mgbanwe a buru ha ka jisikwara ekpemekpe odinala Igbo aka ikeí  
Meaning:

They have thrown away the ofo of our great grand fathers, calling it satanic. They say that Ndi Igbo don't know God, they only worship Satan. Now they have introduced Christianity to us, cut down our thick forests, which they call devilish bush, but those who did not allow this world of change to carry them, still hold tight, the traditional religion

In Mbieri of the present age, most of the priests have been converted to the new religion, hence the concept of *ōIyaafo a gala choochi; arusi agaala uka; nnudo ejeene choochi* etcö meaning that priests of certain deities have been converted and baptized in the new religion. The issue of *ōarusi*" or a particular deity going to church, through its priest also affects most of the festivals dedicated to those deities. For instance most communities stopped celebrating new yam festival, igba amuma, anyamgba, owu, okorosha and others, and those who are doing them refashioned the system in such a way that the new religion would not call them fetish. But the question remains how well have the adherents of the new religion been handling the act of praying to the Supreme Being in such a way that it will yield the expected result, since on general terms, prayer is an act of praying to God, to commune with God, offer thanks, make requests known to God for something or for the good of somebody; the act of asking for a favour with earnestness (Obiagwu, 1983: 22).

## **Conclusion**

This work has attempted looking into the concept of prayer by an Mbieri man. It also exposed the originality of prayer in the life of an Igbo man, as a basis for the implantation of Christian prayer.

Prayer forms an integral part of any viable religious system, and the Mbieri man's inclination to prayers is one of the principal factors that manifest his profound religious nature. Prayer plays a significant role in Igbo traditional religion.

A look at the different forms of prayer by Mbieri man, highlights invocations, which are shortened forms of prayer, some are spontaneous while some are regular. Another important form of prayer regarded as the most important is petition, which people use to ask favours for his family and well wishers, as well as ask damnation for his enemies.

Another generally accepted form of prayer practised in Mbieri is blessing, which is pronounced by man, and executed by God. Thanksgiving is another form of prayer including taking of oath and pronouncement of curses.

The above depict the traditional concept of prayer in Mbieri, and in Igbo land. Though some aspects of the traditional prayer are not accepted, but the fact remains that prayers have existed in Igbo land before the advent of Christianity, in which case, it was not an invention by Christianity, rather Christian prayer and Christianity, found traditional prayer a fertile soil on which they built.

### **Recommendation**

The writer's recommendation draws the attention of the adherents of Christianity to the impression they have created, hence Okoro (2004:71), asserts:

Imported religion brought with it proliferation of churches, greed, corruption, embezzlement and a lot of ill practices aimed at bamboozling the non initiates into believing that miracles abound where they are not, turning the sick and the needy into religious prostitutes.

On the side of traditional religion, Ezeuko (1986:59), opines:

í Ajuju anyi weere buru, olee nke mere ka eziumume, ihunanya na ezioru, na izere njo too ntoala taa? Mgbe gboo, onye bitoro aka agaghi esonye n'ofufe na ekpemekpe odinala Igbo. Ego azutaghi ya. Ndi so n'ekpemekpe odinala na-ezere ihe ojoo, ha kwesiri ike n'ofu ha ji ma kwusieike na ha agaghi emegide ala ha zodoro ukwu. Ma ugbuga anyi si na anyi bu ndi Igbo a toghara atogha, olee ebe anyi kwu? Anyi o na-eziputa omenala anyi ebe o bula anyi no? Ka anyi o chere na agburi a toghapuru anyi n'ekpemekpe odinala bu iji mewe mpu n'ekpemekpe kraisti?

Meaning:

í Our question is which of them has laid the foundation of good behaviour, love, good work and avoidance of sin today? In the olden days a person with soiled hands will not take part in the prayer and worship of traditional Igbo religion. It cannot be influenced by money. Those who partake in traditional prayers always avoid sin, they adhere strictly to their ofo, as well as stand their grounds in order not to offend the land which they stand on. But now that we call ourselves Ndi Igbo that are freed, where do we stand: do we exhibit our culture wherever we are? or do we think that being loosened from traditional worship is to enable us perpetrate atrocities in Christianity.

The Igbo adage always says 'He who has ears, let him hear'. Arinze (1982:197), recognizes the essence of cultural involvement in achieving a balanced religion, as he states: í much has been accomplished, but much still remains to be done with faith and courage. Let us pray and work, research and study, write and discuss so that Christianity may be ever

more deeply planted in our culture so that we may ever praise God with what we have, our language, our names, our music our fine arts ó in short with our cultureí .

In the light of the above quotations, the following should be considered:

- There should be a check on the rate at which modern churches are being proliferated, as this is characterized by ill practices.
- Religious prostitution should be discouraged, while Christian faithfuls are advised to stick to their chosen worship group.
- Christian priests should preach the gospel the way it is, undiluted without fear or favour, so that evil man doesn't hide under the cloak of Christianity to perpetrate evil.
- There should be cultural involment in religious worships especially as it affects the language of the people.

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