

**rites of passage and sustainable
development in traditional Africa:
reflections for contemporary society**

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Abstract

The issue of rites of passage in African ontological scene has been widely discussed due to its glaring place in sustaining all-round development. Yet, its practice in the contemporary Igbo land in particular and Africa in general continues to dwindle which is attributed to the consequences of globalization despite the fact that its potency for development and sustainability have been greatly appreciated. This has hitherto, contributes in shaking the very foundation of African moral stool. Yet, there seems to be insufficient documented study on the challenges of the diminishing application of rites of passage in many part of Igbo land and its devastating effects on the moral foundation of many African states in general and Igbo land in particular. This study attempts to exhume the instrumentality of rites of passage with particular attention to puberty and marriage rites in fostering and sustaining development. The study further proffers strategic choices for the retrieval of this integral part of African life for the moral development of the average Nigerian youth. The present study is a qualitative one using mainly documented sources, observation and unstructured interview and the purposive sampling technique was used.

Keywords: Rites of Passage, Sustainable Development and Contemporary Society

Introduction

African theology and allied disciplines scholars have seemingly devoted extensive interest and attention to the issue of rites of passage in African ontological scene because of its glaring place in sustaining all-round development of African nations. Yet, its practice in the contemporary Igbo land in particular and Africa in general continues to dwindle. In many parts of Igbo land these rites of passage seem to be extinguishing gradually despite the fact that its potency for development and sustainability have been greatly appreciated. This observed anomaly is often attributed to the consequences of urbanization, civilization and globalization. However, there is no doubt that this play down syndrome on rites of passage in many corners of Igbo land contributes in shaking the very foundation of African moral stool. Issues that were usually held with sense of sacredness and awe have recently been desacralized. For example, the marriage institution which used to be held with utmost care and moral decorum due to the various rites and rituals attached to it has been reduced to mere social union. The resultant effects have been witnessed in the incessant marital crises and broken homes in many parts of Igbo land. This also is linked to the abuse and often times, the neglect of the importance of puberty rites in preparing and educating the young adult for the properties and games of marriage. Evidence abound that recently, marriage contracts are often, hurriedly made without appropriate preparations and understanding of the rules and meanings of marriage which are often received during puberty and marriage rites. Hence, the moral foundations of many African states, Igbo land in particular seems to have been uprooted. Yet, there seems to be insufficient documented study on the challenges of the diminishing application of rites of passage in many part of Igbo land and its devastating effects on the moral stool of African states in general and Igbo land in particular. This study attempts to exhume the instrumentality of rites of passage that have been known to have aided African civilization in the early days of Africa and still aid sustainable development in many parts of Africa where globalization has not totally destroyed its practice. The study further

emphasizes the challenges of the observed anomaly on the moral development of the average Nigerian youth and also proffer strategic choices for the retrieval of this integral part of African life. The present study is a qualitative one using mainly documented sources, observation and unstructured interview. The respondents were randomly selected using the purposive sampling technique. The choice of this technique is based on the convenience of the researcher to choose respondents that were easily accessed. The study limits its scope to puberty and marriage rites in Igbo land. The Igbo ethnic group remains one of the largest ethnic groups in the Sub-sahara and situated in the Southeastern part of Nigeria (Onunwa, 1991). *They occupy the Igbo culture area covering some parts of Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta States and the entire Anambra, Imo, Abia, Ebonyi and Enugu States of Nigeria* (Onwuejeogwu, 1980). The remaining part of this paper will be treated under the following sub-headings;

- Short historical credo
- Rites of passage in African Ontological Scene
- The instrumentality of Puberty and marriage rites
- Rites of passage and Globalization
- Recommendations and Conclusion

Short Historical Credo

It has been elaborately established in practice and theory that Africans are deeply or often notoriously religious. Religion colours all aspect of African life from the cradle to the grave (Mbiti, 1970). This is made manifest in her concept of the universe as a unified reality which is further explained in her view of the community and her sense of preservation and enhancement of human life. In Africa, nothing is an accident; things cannot happen without a cause thus, changes in ones life biological or socio- economic status or movements from and to different phases of life are appreciated as the work of the benevolent God or gods and must be ritually celebrated. In other words, as one moves along the passage of life; from birth to the grave, there are major developmental stages of life that one stops to ritually celebrate which are referred to as rites of

passage. Series of rites and rituals are imbedded in each stage which appreciates the supersensible being(s) and further prepares one for the life in the next stage (Ezenweke, 2012).

The above premise is based on the African worldview especially on the belief in the existence of myriads of spirits that are believed to possess various powers. Basden (1966) remarked that 'scattered here and there throughout the Igbo community, more particularly on the Eastern side of the Niger, are certain local deities alleged to possess supernatural powers' (p. 66). Many Africans, Igbo people inclusive, believe that these various deities influence the activities of man in the three-tier worlds of the Igbo people (Madu, 2004) or in the two interacting realities; the spiritual and the material, each impinging on the other (Ekwunife, 1990).

However, the notion of the various rites feature in varied but often relatively similar forms across sub-Saharan Africa. In many cases too, they have been altered in the twentieth century through the widespread influence of other cultures especially Christianity and globalization.

Rites and Rites of Passage in African Ontological Scene

Rites take a glaring place in African traditional life and it is an issue that forms the African lifestyle. Every stage in life or every activity in life has a formal procedure it takes. While rite refers to a set of given religious activities that are usually prescribed and performed for particular activities, rites of passage are a set of such activities that are performed to mark or ritually celebrate the various stages of transformations in the life cycle of an individual. This cycle of life starts right from conception of a child and ends at death. People throughout the world experience and perform rites of passage in their different cultures and religions. It is not unique to Africans but are witnessed in many other religious and secular scenes.

According to Oxford Advanced learner's dictionary, rite is a ceremony performed by a particular group of people, often for religious purposes. Rites of passage therefore are defined as sets of

ceremonies or events that mark important stages in one's life. It is a formal procedure for transition into a next stage of life. Fairchild (1965) averred that "Rites of passage are the ceremonies which cluster around great crisis of life, or periods of transition from one status to another, notably birth, puberty, marriage and death. (p. 262). Turner (1967) rather talks of life-crisis rituals as a change of physical or social positions.

The various stages of human development starting from birth, puberty, marriage and death are all very important and need to be celebrated. They involved crossing from one stage of life to another. Ray (1999) noted that in this phase, people are metaphysically and sociologically remade into new beings with new social roles. Newborn infants are made into human person, children are made into adults, men and women are made into husbands and wives, deceased people are made into ancestors, princes are made into kings and so on. This remaking of man involves the symbolic destruction of the old and the creation of the new. On the process, one is momentarily stripped of former self and status and recreate to something new, with new roles and expectations. It highlights the culture of African and X-ray their attachment to their gods and supernatural forces. It marks a turning point with its own moral discipline, moral obligation which tend to follow a stage in life.

The origin of rites in the religious scenario of Africa is not known and so, has no historical origin but believed to have been initiated and practiced by the forefathers. Some scholars believe that they came to be as order from the spiritual realm while some others believe that it came to be as a result of man's awareness of divine intervention as the sole actor for the changes that occur in man. Eliade (1959) shared same view and noted that "these rites are re-enactments of the paradigmatic model set by the divine beings" (p. 185) while Kristiansen (1960) later confirmed that "Rites of passage are the actualization of divine order which have been recognized and apprehended" (p. 306).

Rites of passage in Africa as earlier stated are religious ceremonies that do not only mark the transition between an individual's life stages but also reinforce the dominant religious views and values of their culture. As already noted too, rites of passage are not unique to Africans but are also witnessed in varied cultures. It may be likened to the various sacraments Christians receive that empower them to live expected life as the case may be. Parrinder (1976) corroborated that "Like some of the seven sacraments, these mark the turning points in life: birth, puberty marriage and death. They are accompanied with various religious or magical acts". (p. 90).

Scholars have classified rites of passage into various ways such as rites of passage and life-crisis rituals (Gennep, 1960) and life-crisis rituals and rituals of affliction (Turner, 1967). In the context of this paper, we shall share same view with Fairchild (1965) that there is no distinction between the rites of passage and the life-crisis rituals. Therefore, we may refer to rites of passage to include; pregnancy, birth, puberty marriage and death. One basic and general fact of rites of passage is that they are the major turning points in the developmental stages of man. Having said that it centers on transitions from one phase and assimilation into another, it invariably involves three main movements which includes; separation from old self, transition to new self and group and incorporation into a new group.

The Instrumentality of Puberty and Marriage Rites

Puberty is the movement or transition from childhood to adulthood, from relatively unproductive life to productive one and from dependency to independency. Because of its very important impact on community development, it is an occasion of considerable ritual. It is primarily to welcome or introduce the new adult into the adult world with its rights, privileges and duties. One is recognized as an adult and fit for marriage only after a successful puberty rites.

Puberty is the period of life at which a person attains the biological maturity necessary for reproduction. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defined puberty as a stage when a person's sexual organs

are developing and he/she becomes capable of having children. In some communities, puberty rites are mainly celebrated for the girls while in some it is for the boys as well.

Some of the Igbo of Nigeria call puberty rites for girls *iru mgbede* which means the seclusion for purposeful fattening and beautification aimed at announcing the eligibility of the girl for marriage. The period for this seclusion varies from place to place ranging from three to six months. The period of exclusion gives them the opportunity to learn the rudiments of life necessary to equip them for the new roles and responsibilities expected of them.

During the period of exclusion, the girls are given separate huts where they stay and restricted from going out during the day except at nights when they go to the village square to learn some dances, songs, folktales and orientations on women status and roles. During the day, they beautify themselves with calm wood dye, plaiting their hair and lavishly feeding themselves.

At the closing stage, they assemble at the village or market square where they parade themselves at the full admiration of friends, relatives and prospective husbands. After parading to display their beauty and costly costumes, they display their dance. It is a period for exchange of gifts from loved ones. They finally return to their daily routine life, fully prepared for marriage.

The puberty rites for the boys take a different shape to suit their role as would be family heads. It is usually in the form of initiation into age grades, secret societies and masquerade cults. In the masquerade cult, the authorities of the ancestors are made to bear on the initiates, who having undergone severe ordeals of initiation learn obedience to the elders who are the representatives of the ancestors.

Parrinder (1976) observed that:

In these schools, young men and women, separately live in community and undergo hardships which aim at introducing to and fitting them for life as adults. There are

hard tasks to be done, exercises, severe beatings with sticks, eating of dry or even disgusting foods, in order to teach obedience to the elders in charge. (p. 95).

The basic principle in these rites is to formally welcome the child into the adult world which in turn boasts her morale to accept adult roles. The whole process is also to reenact the human-spirit encounter and relationship thereby ensuring the continuity of the relationship between the living and the dead.

A close look at the puberty and marriage rites will immediately that their potency and instrumentality in fostering development and its sustainability in Igbo land cannot be over emphasized. For instance, since it is to mark transition from childhood to adulthood, from relatively unproductive life to productive citizen and from dependency to independency, it inculcates the right values for productive life with all its merits. The importance of productivity in human world remains a veritable tool for development.

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The act of seclusion symbolizes the death of old childish life while the reappearance symbolizes the resurrection into full adult ready and willing to assume adult status and responsibilities. In a nutshell, puberty rite is loaded with great significance. The youths are ritually introduced into the act of productive and communal living. It is a gate way to participate in the governance of ones community with other elders in line with the Igbo adage - *nwata kwochaa aka, o soro okenye rie ihe* (a child who washes his/her hands clean eats with the elders).

The period of exclusion also provides the young adults the opportunity to learn some dances, songs, folktales, plaiting,

handworks and orientations on women and men status and roles. In the course of this training, the secret and sacred issues of life are learnt.

It ushers one into an adult world and thereby gives one the sense of maturity which further entails maturity from child-like behaviours to commitment to moral values and attitudes. Maturity here also includes the show of perseverance in difficult situations. This may account for the reason for espousing them, especially the boys to strenuous exercises which further enculcate in them the spirit of hard work. These two virtues; perseverance and hard work have serious implications for development and sustainability.

More so, it's a period for classified education into the dos and don'ts of the society. Each group is prepared for the next stage of responsibilities. While the girls are prepared for ideal motherhood the boys are prepared for ideal heads of families and custodians of morality.

It enforces a life of harmony with humanity and with nature. In an attempt for man to strive to be in harmony with God, the deities and his fellow men both living and dead, his moral life is parading and displaying of dances and exchange of gifts from loved ones. strengthened and sustained. The outing ceremony which is usually at the village or market square provides recreational opportunity for all the members of the community and enhances social cohesion (Ezenweke, 2012). At the end of this, they return to their daily routine life, fully prepared for marriage.

Marriage rites often follow up puberty rites as many get married immediately after puberty rites. It is widely believed in Africa as in many other cultures that puberty is not a sure mandate into marriage but to be complemented by the will of the deities. Thus, getting married is purely an act of the deities who have the potentials to hinder marriage. For this reason, marriage is ritually celebrated. It is believed that if this is not properly done, the marriage may face

serious and series of crises.

Marriage rites entail the joining of two persons, their life missions, families and the entire lineages. In other words, the marriage rites are performed not only for the union of the male and the female for procreation and perpetuation of life and the formation of families, but also as an institution that helps both the husband and wife to best fulfill their mission and objectives in life.

African society does not lay emphasis on individual looks and wealth as the primary motivation for marriage, but rather the basic focus is on quality of beings and their innate potentials for the achievement of the desired goals. This notion helps both parties to aim at living a moral life since divorce or broken marriage is highly despised. Unmarried life or single livelihood is abhorred in many African communities and often taken as a taboo.

More so, it is always desired to have marriages between individuals within the same or similar orientations which is believed to have better potentials for the stability of marriage. This notion rests on the premise that individuals that have both passed through the birth and adulthood rites have more chances for a stable union since both of them would have a clearer focus in life and would also know how best to support the other's mission.

Marriage is therefore a very important issue in Africa and is handled with maximum care to ensure the stability of the community at large. There are many shades of marriage rites as there are many communities and tribes. In many cases however, it is an elaborate issue with chains of symbolically represented rites and rituals with deep meanings and significance. These rituals coded with deep meanings and enshrined with sense of sacredness are very instrumental in the preservation of marital vows and stable families. Since marriage is a means of creating friendship, it unites and strengthens relationship between people, families and tribes both socially, politically and economically.

From the ongoing, one may summarize according to that rites of passage bring into drama the major life events ... that convey individuals from one social status or role to another.

Through social conveyance, and change the self-perception of the initiate as well as society's perception of the young person through social conveyance. (Iborra and Markstrom, 2003). They therefore, contribute in the development of the individual and the survival of the culture and the individuals become bound through spiritual experience to the future of the society (Lertzman, 2002).

Globalization and Rites of Passage

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the world has ever increasingly merging into a homogenous entity especially in terms of economic, social and political relations in the name of globalization. The term globalization has been defined and explained in so many ways. While some define it with reference to economic linkages, others see its political and/or social dimensions. In other words, theories of globalization are grouped into economic, political, and cultural theories. In the context of this paper, we may limit the scope to the socio-cultural dimension of globalization.

For *Ritzer (2008)*, globalization is the “spread of worldwide practices, relations, consciousness, and organization of social life... that transforms people around the world with some transformation being dramatic” (p. 573). This is a cultural transformation that also affects cultural identity of people that are being transformed. In most of African countries and even in some western countries like Belgium, the concept of nation translates ethnic group. Each ethnic group has its own cultural specificity that defines the membership to that community.

Globalization therefore, entails the removal of the boundaries of relative cultural considerations and bringing people with different cultural values into closer contact (Hird et al, 2004). It implies the whole world seeing itself as a single entity with share visions and ideologies.

It further leads to social conflicts and appreciation of relative values or imposition of global cultures on another (Kasongo, 2010). Invariably, this unit states the impact of that globalization on the effective practice of rites of passage in many African states especially Igbo land.

The issue of globalization has led to lots of controversies especially as to the problem of a global culture whereby Western norms and practices are being marketed across the globe as the acceptable way of life. This has led to a cultural shock and the dilution or in some case a total neglect of the rich and dynamic indigenous traditions. This is also shown on the phenomenon of rites of passage. For instance, in the recent time, with the emphases on industrialization and modernization, many parts of Africa, Igbo land in particular no longer observe and practice rites of passage in a meaningful way and this has severe consequences on individuals, communities and even the biosphere as a whole (Grof, 1996).

It has brought in adolescent culture which is characterized by gross individualism and instability; ecologically, financially, politically and socially (Judith, 2006; Plotkin, 2008). It further disintegrates the rhythm of the human person with the cycles of community, earth and cosmos. It erodes in man the knowledge of that which he is and the place where he belongs.

More so, without proper rites of passage, it has been witnessed that people become disoriented and lose their way on the life's journey. This is because, when these rites of transitions are marked, ritualized, witnessed and supported, it creates a kind of experiential map of self-development (Lertzman, 2002).

Recommendations and Conclusion

Rites of passage still remain integral parts of religious life in Africa, celebrated through traditional ceremonies of initiation for honouring natural developmental stages, connecting the individual to self, others and immediate environment and revitalizing and restoring the human experience (Grimes, 2000). Their instrumentality for development and

sustainability cannot be overemphasized. Thus, despite the influence of globalization that contributes to its diminishing practice, this paper makes the following suggestions which would hopefully correct the observed anomaly.

There must be a driving imperative to wake up and come back to ourselves, to nature and to the community. This is to be done by taking the responsibility for what we are, not by loadable projects but by simply taking a single step, each of us in our own way, place and time, within our own immediate environment, to revive our orientations and initiations.

There is an urgent need to ask ourselves what one has to do for the survival of our rich cultural heritage. This may be possible through the reorientation of our lives to the cycles of our natural rites of passage that holds enough potential for the retrieval of our cultural and community consciousness and the killing of the sense of self. The paper concludes that through these suggestions, we may get back to wholeness which our fore parents once enjoyed.

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