

JUDEO - IGBO TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS CONCEPTION OF SIN: SOCIO - RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS ON IGBO SOCIETY

Charles Okeke, Ph.D.

Department of Christian Religious Studies
Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe

Abstract

The word sin is more of a religious term than ordinary. It is basically an action of defiance. That is, an action through which one deviates from the correct way or through which one misses the mark. This paper looked at how the Jews of the Old and New Testament periods understood the concept of sin in their society. Comparatively it looked at the concept of sin in Igbo traditional religion as well as the implications of sin on the religious society of the traditional Igbo man and woman. Since the traditional Igbo had no written record about the origin of sin, this paper looked at the origin of sin from Biblical point of view. Following the story of fall in Genesis 3, it became evident that sin originated from the fall of man. As a result, the whole life of men, both individual and social, became a struggle, and dramatic, between good and evil, between light and darkness, and everyone feels as though bound by chains. The Jews see sin as a rebellion against God. In Igbo traditional religion, sin is *aj? ihe, ihe ?j??* (literally, it means bad thing), *ns? an?* (abomination). The community abhors it. It is *ar?* (taboo) to commit *ns?* (prohibitions). The traditional Igbo sees *ar?* as norms, the breaches of which whether voluntary or involuntary unleash some mystical sanctions not only on the individual but also on the entire society. In both religions, that is Jewish and Igbo traditional religions, sin degrades, dehumanizes and pollutes the society.

Introduction

Sin in Igbo society is not separated from the religion of the people. That is, any sin committed by an individual affects both social and religious life of the people. In other words, it has both social and religious dimensions; and also, it affects the individual who committed the sin. It is believed that sin affects the society as well as the individual, and above all, the deity, who is believed to have been offended. The traditional Igbo believe that he is not free as the spirit is always watching and monitoring his actions here in the physical world. Any violation of the law of the land or any sin committed by individual, deliberately or un-deliberately, is regarded as an offence against the earth deity, *ns? an?* (abomination) and other deities, as the case may be. Ignorance is not an excuse.

Any sin committed offends the supernatural forces which include the supreme deity, deities, spirit-forces and the ancestors, and every effort must be made by the individual or the community to appease the spirit of the deity or cleanse the land to avoid the anger of the deity. Sin, also, affects the community. The people believe that spirit of the deity that is offended or whose taboo is violated visits both the offender, and in some cases, the community with punishment. This explains the reason the community abhors sin and ensures that an appeasement or expiation to the spirit of the deity is carried out once sin is committed.

The above is also true of the Jewish society as described in the Bible. The punishment due to the individual offender in Gen. 3 was extended to the entire humankind, which is death. And in the Decalogue, the covenant formulation was somewhat restricted. The punishment due to the iniquity of the father is to be visited upon the children, up to the fourth generation. And to avoid God's wrath, David had to appease the anger of God in Psalm 51, when the prophet Nathan came to rebuke him for taking Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. In Ps 51:18-19, David pleaded for the restoration of Jerusalem which met its fate due to the sins of the nation.

From the above background, one observes that sin is a grievous offence against the supernatural beings. Sin degrades the society and pollutes it. It is in this line that the researcher wants to make a comparative study of sin among the Jewish and Igbo traditional religions and establish its implications on the society, with reference to Igbo traditional society.

This study is comparative. And it adopts descriptive method. It focuses on Judeo-Igbo traditional conception of sin. The study is very significant as it will highlight the triple injuries associated with sin. Also, it will establish the implications or effects of sin on society. Sin truncates the society and brings disharmony between the visible and invisible world (*?wa a na-ah? anya na ?wa a na?gh? ah? anya*). It breaks relationship between the spiritual and physical and other elements. But once man reconciles with the supernatural being through sacrifice and other forms of appeasement harmonious relationship will reestablish.

Concept of Sin among the Jews

Following the story of fall in Genesis 3, one would see that sin became evident from the fall of man. Sin is committed through breaking of law. The Jews are a chosen people of God. God in his love and care gave them laws to keep in order to remain always with him. Violation of these laws became sin among them. The violation of God's commandments brings disunity between God and the Israelites. One of the grievous sins among the Israelites which grieve God so much is the worship of other gods. In Exodus 20:4-5, he warned the people, "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness or anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God". Here God regards himself as a jealous God. He hates being mixed with any other god or abandoning him to worship another god.

Moreover, among the Jews, sin is related to law. Therefore, sin, to

the Jews, is disobedience to religious laws. Religion itself permeates all aspects of their life. The people see sin as a rebellion against God, and enmity between God and man. For this reason, sin is treated in three-fold way: act, attitude, and state. Example of sin of act or action is murder; hypocrisy is an attitude of sin, and being unsafe is a state one finds oneself after sinning. Sequel to this, man also has triple state of being: body, soul and spirit. Man separates from God through these states. This is clearly evident in Paul's letter to Galatians, "for flesh desires against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh. And since these are against one another, you may not do whatever you want. Now the works of the flesh are manifest; they are: fornication, lust, homosexuality, self-indulgence, the serving of idols, drug use, hostility, contentiousness, jealousy, wrath, quarrels, dissensions, divisions, envy, murder, inebriation, carousing, and similar things" (Gal. 5: 16-22).

All the sins Paul listed above are sins of the flesh. They separate individuals from God, for God is spirit, and only desires life in the spirit. In the covenant formulation, its scope was somewhat restricted. According to the Decalogue, the iniquity of the father is to be visited upon children, to the third and to the fourth generations (Ex. 20:5). However, Deuteronomy 24:16, provides a humanitarian rule against the blood purges which the Hebrews occasionally witnessed, "The fathers shall not be put to death on behalf of the sons, nor the sons on behalf of the fathers, but each one shall die for his own sin". This is because of the love God has for his people. He, sometimes, relents from his punishment against the people of Israel due to their sin. Immediately, the people turn to him, he hears and helps them. This is why the Psalmist prays, "Against you only have I sinned, and I have done evil before your eyes. And so, you are justified in your words, and you will prevail when you give judgment" (Ps 51:6).

Thus, the sinner becomes particularly aware of his deep sinfulness in the awesome presence of the holy God. This particular awareness is evident in Isaiah when he cried out, "We have all gone astray like

sheep; each one has turned aside to his own way. And the Lord has placed all our iniquity upon him” (Is 53:6).

In the Old Testament, the 'Apodictic' laws, that is, the ten 'thou shall not' and the 'Casuistic' laws, that is, the 'if' or 'when', formed the guideline to every Jew. Violation of these laws is a sin against God. That was why the Major Prophets were furious with the kings who did what was wrong in the sight of the Lord. Example was Ahab, who was known as a sinful king. He did what was abomination in the sight of the Lord by marrying a foreign wife who introduced idol worship in Israel. He added another sin to the first by consenting to the killing of Naboth and took his vineyard. God sent Prophet Elijah to inform him of the consequences of his sin (1 kgs 21:1ff).

The Gentiles, on the other hand, are sinners by definition simply because they are not Jews. The Jews strictly avoid them. Their understanding is that, to mix with the Gentiles is to mix with sinners. But Jesus, in the New Testament, made it known to them that the Gentiles were also children of God and that the kingdom was also for them. In his contact with the Gentiles, the Jews frowned at Jesus for mixing with sinners and they sought to kill him. This is evident in Mark 2: 15-16: the scribes and the Pharisees, seeing that he ate with tax collectors and sinners, said to his disciples, “Why does your Teacher eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”

From the above backdrop one can have clear picture of sin among the Jews. At this juncture, then, this study will focus on how the traditional Igbo conceive sin.

Concept of Sin in Igbo traditional Religion

In Igbo traditional religion, sin is called *ihe ?j??*, *aj? ihe*, *nj? or ns? an?*. It is always in the negative sense. It is an abominable act with corresponding taboos, hence the community abhors it. The concept of sin is understood differently from *ns?*, that is, prohibitions. This is because, prohibitions are not sin if they are not yet committed. Prohibitions are things to be avoided. It is *ar?* (taboo) to commit

ns?. Okeke (2012) captures it very well thus, “The traditional Igbo see *ar?* as norms, the breaches of which, whether voluntary or involuntary unleash some mystical sanctions not only on the individual but also on the entire society” (p. 19).

In Igbo traditional religion, sin is both a generic and adjectival term. It is generic in the sense that it refers to all types of *ihe ?j?*, while it is an adjective that qualifies the particular sin committed. On the other hand, sin is understood differently from profanities. One should not make the mistake of understanding profanity as *ihe r?r? ar?*, *ihe ?j??*, *nj?* or *ar?*. Hence a woman who is menstruating cannot be said to be profane, neither can she be said to have committed a sin.

However, the word *ns?* according to Metuh (1985) may mean two different correlated things: one negative and one positive. *Ns?* means literally, 'avoidance' or 'prohibition', that is, what one must avoid, or what one is prohibited to do. This is the negative sense. In some other context, the same word *ns?* means 'holy'. This is the positive sense. Nevertheless, it is *ns?* and *ar?* to commit sin, which is abomination in Igbo society. *Ns?* and *ar?* are meant for everybody irrespective of age, sex or status (Okeke, 2012).

In Igboland, sins are grouped into major and minor. The major sins include sexual intercourse with a blood relation, cutting yam's tendril (*omeji*), leaving a goat or other animal to birth in tethers, murder, etc. Minor sins include sexual intercourse with non-relative, having sex in the bush with one's wife, or on the bare ground, eating animal prohibited by custom, etc. (Okeke, 2012). The Igbo believe that any taboo committed would either ruin the life and property of the guilty person and his family or the entire community unless the pollution is cleansed. Sometimes, open confession is required of the guilty person. Some also confess their guilt even at the point of death.

Biblical Origin of Sin

The Biblical origin of sin takes a narrative form. Thus, chapters 1 to

11 of the book of Genesis brought out the fact about humankind. Chapters 1 and 2 tell the story of God's creative activities. Thus, God created all things, including man and woman, and saw that all things he had made were very good (Gen. 1:31). God established a relationship with man. But man deviated from this original relationship. As a result, the whole life of men, both individual and social, shows itself to be a struggle, and a dramatic one, between good and evil, between light and darkness. Man finds that he is unable to overcome the assaults of evil successfully, so that everyone feels as though bound by chains (Flannery, 1981).

In chapter 4 of Genesis, sin started its expansion in the world from Adam's original sin. Thus, Cain murdered his brother Abel. Sin reached the proportion such that God had to send a great flood that covered the earth – a symbol of the chaos and destruction which sin has brought to creation. In chapter 11, human folly reached its peak. Thus, man tried again to become God's equal by building a tower to reach the heavens. This rejection of God spills over into man's rejection of his fellow man. There is now division and complete lack of communication among nations.

In 2Esdras, Adam was blamed for introducing sin into the world, “O Adam, what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but ours also who are your descendants. For what good is it to us, if an eternal age has been promised to us, but we have done deeds that bring death.” So, our first parents disobeyed the instruction given to them by God, “From every tree of paradise, you shall eat. But from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat, for in whatever day you will eat from it, you will die a death” (Gen. 2: 16-17). Thus, they were forbidden from eating the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The “knowledge of good and evil” simply means moral knowledge. The point at which a child can discriminate between good and evil, he becomes morally responsible for his action. But we cannot immediately assume that before the fall, they had knowledge of good and evil, for in Hebrew, knowledge implies intimacy. What perhaps threatened them was the

experiential knowledge. But here, the question of obedience is raised and the possibility of disobedience now exists.

Socio-Religious Implications of Sin on Igbo Society

It is strongly believed in every culture that every sin has its consequences. One may hide a taboo broken, but an untreated case may be unearthed by future misfortune (Okeke, 2012). Ikemelu (2005) affirms that “Every culture has inbuilt consequences and repercussions for fouling or desecrating it, whether secretly or publicly committed. It is not, therefore, an enactment or sentence to say evil shall overtake those who foul custom and tradition, sooner or later; it is merely stating a *fiat accompli*” (p. 8). Every sin offends the spiritual beings: the Supreme God, deities, spirit forces and the ancestors, and that explains the reason for cleansing the sin committed. Man therefore makes every effort not to annoy any of the spirits. These spirits observes Arinze (2008) “are God's agents, his messengers, and it is they who more or less run the world” (p. 92). According to Madu (1997), “These spirits interfere in (man's) daily lives, and the Igbos cannot afford to push them aside” (p. 6). “And for this man to survive, he must live a life of balance with the spiritual beings” (p. 47).

Sin in Igbo religion as in Judaism, has a relationship with traditional laws. The Igbo are very conscious of the laws of their land as being handed over by their predecessors. But because most of the peoples' life aspects are connected with the earth-goddess (*An?*), any violation of the law of the land is regarded as an act against the earth goddess, who the people also regard as the mother of life and queen of morality (Okeke, 2012). Hence the laws have two dimensions: social and religious dimensions. In other words: socio-religious laws. Anybody who is guilty of the laws of the land whether social or religious is said to have committed *ns? an?*, which is abomination to the land.

Any taboo committed offends the gods and even human beings. Ignorance is no excuse. Any deviation from this order is treated with

all seriousness, since the Igbo believe that violation of taboos does not incur punishment to the offender alone but to the entire community especially when the taboo is not cleansed and on time. This was depicted in Achebe (1958) in the case of Okonkwo/Ojiugo. Okonkwo committed *ns? an?* by beating his youngest wife, Ojiugo during the week of peace. Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess (*An?*) says to him, “The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish” (p. 22). Ezeani then listed out the items which Okonkwo would bring in order to appease the earth goddess. He says, “You will bring to the shrine of *An?* tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries” (p. 22).

Individual or personal sin against the mother earth can also be a disobedience to the voice of the oracles and elders and can bring calamity to the guilty person. Thus, in Achebe (1958), Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest man in *Umuofia* told Okonkwo that the oracle of the Hills and caves pronounced that Ikemefuna whom the people of Umuofia brought from *Mbano* as a recompense for their daughter they killed would also be killed. He advised Okonkwo to have no hands in the killing of the boy Ikemefuna. Thus, Ezeudu says to Okonkwo, “That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death. Yes, *Umuofia* has decided to kill him. The oracle of the Hills and caves has pronounced it. They will take him outside *Umuofia* as is the customs, and kill him there. But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you his father” (p. 40).

But Okonkwo later ignored this advice and killed the boy. His punishment came during the burial of Ezeudu. Okonkwo's gun exploded and killed Ezeudu's sixteen year old son. He was to go on exile for seven years. The earth goddess can hold the whole community to suffer when offended by sending punishment such as draught, famine, epidemics, death, etc. The abomination is termed a sacrilege. It is the duty of the priests, and the custodians of the customs and traditions of the land to see that these customs and

traditions are upheld by members of the community. When any sacrilegious act is committed, it is their duty to enforce the law on the individual to avoid the wrath of the earth goddess.

An abominable act emanates from a person's internal being. He is quite conscious of the abomination he has committed. This is why no excuse is acceptable for any *nso an?*. The kind and gravity of punishment to befall the culprit depends on the gravity of the offence and will be determined by the custodians of tradition. In some cases, the help of diviners is sought, or if the sin relates to a particular deity, the priest of that deity will be consulted to determine the type of punishment or appeasement the individual will perform to avoid the wrath of the spirit he has offended.

Ns? and *ar?* are among the beliefs that influence the traditional Igbo. Metuh (1987) describes *ns?* and *ar?* as “ritual or religious offences believed to disrupt relationship with the supernatural forces” (p. 240). They have to be avoided, shunned, because committing them tantamount to violation of the moral norms guiding the society (Okeke, 2012). Ikemelu (2005) confirms this when he says, “Both *ns?* and *ar?* disorganize, pollute, defame, indignify, dehumanize, demonize, immortalize and destroy the sacredness of man and society. Both may occur by omission or misbehaviour or misdeed, hence they may also be termed or described as *nso an?* and *al?l?man?*” (p. 14).

Conclusion

This study has gone a long way in establishing the meaning and origin of sin in the world. In doing this descriptive method was adopted, and survey was made through the passages on God's creative activities in Genesis 1-2, and then followed by narratives on the expansion of sin in Gen. 4. Thus, Cain committed the sin of murder by killing his brother Abel. Murder is a terrible sin against God. In Gen 11, it was observed that sin had reached its peak. Thus in trying to reach the heaven to be like God, men built a high tower in

Babel, but then the resultant effect of their desire followed. God scattered their language such that no one could understand the other anymore. Confusion had to set in.

Furthermore, effort was made to examine the concept of sin among the Jews vis-à-vis Igbo traditional religion. It was found that sin generally means the same thing in both societies; the difference is that among the Jews, sin affects God and, therefore, he punishes the offender, while the Igbo believe that the earth goddess is the custodian of morality and so, every sin committed whether personal or communal affects the earth (*An?*). She is the one who inflicts punishment on the offender especially when the sin is not appeased or appeased but late. For the Jews, 'the fear of God is the first thing' while for the Igbo, it is the fear of *An?*.

Every sin has both social and religious effects on the individual and community at large. It degrades a person, dehumanizes and pollutes the society. For this reason, it should be avoided. It is not an exaggeration to state that every sin committed whether in secret or in public has painful effects on the offender and by extension, the community. It is based on this that the following recommendations are made:

1. Every sin contains a triple injury: an injury against God, oneself and others. If this is the case, human being should consciously avoid sin, especially deliberate sin in order to avoid the punishment that follows.
2. Whatever that may warrant the occasion of sin should be avoided.
3. Parents and those who are custodians of customs and traditions should spell out to members of the family and community at large what it implies to commit sin.
4. The priests and other religious personnel should not relent in teaching and inculcating moral values in the minds of people because sin creeps in where there is moral laxity.
5. Since sin degrades, dehumanizes and pollutes the society, the sinner should not be tolerated in the society, but should be exposed and handed over to the agency whose

responsibility is to correct such a person in the acceptable way of the community.

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