



An Over-View of Niger Delta Indigenous Religion

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ABSTRACT

This essay is an outline and interpretation of Niger Delta indigenous religion. It examines the structure of the indigenous religion and points out that as heterogeneous and diverse as the people of Niger Delta are, so also is the indigenous religion of the people. Thus, an ethnic group may emphasize a belief system or an element which may be remarkably absent or vaguely conceived in another. However, this study reveals that in spite of these remarkable differences, a centralized structure of rituals and beliefs pervades the whole of Niger Delta indigenous religion. Consequently, the different beliefs and practices profess by various ethnic groups in the Niger Delta are only a divergent expressions of the same basic religion. Thus, in spite of the differences, a centralized structure of beliefs runs the entirety of the Niger Delta to create a homology.

Key Words: Niger Delta; Indigenous; Religion, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta ecosystem contains one of earth's highest concentrations of biodiversity with numerous species of both floras, terrestrial and aquatic fauna that live both on land as in water. As with the ecosystem, the Niger Delta presents a diversity of culture, many of which are scintillating and captivating. This heterogeneity is most profound in the indigenous religion of the people. The Niger Delta, with its widely differing societies, shows remarkable local variation in its indigenous religion. These local variations are most noticeable not only in the belief system of the riverine and upland dwellers (a mutually exclusive units into which the Niger Delta is divided)

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but also within the ethnic groups consisting these units. Thus, an ethnic group may emphasize a belief or an element which may be remarkably absent or indefinably conceived in another. In spite of this plurality, a centralized structure of rituals and beliefs pervades the whole of the indigenous religion of the Niger Delta. The varieties of Niger Delta indigenous religion share some basic characteristics. Generally, they are oral rather than scriptural; they have no single founder and are not enthusiastic with regard to membership drive. At the doctrinal level, there is also a pervading unity, especially in the belief in Supreme Being, belief in the divinities and spirits, veneration of ancestors and practice of magic and medicine. Thus, the myriads of indigenous religions found in the Niger Delta, as we shall notice shortly, could be seen as only a differing expression of the same basic religion. In the subsequent sections of this essay, we shall be examining the component units of this belief system, drawing out the fascinating unity which pervades the indigenous religions of the Niger Delta.

The Indigenous Religions of the Niger Delta

Among the many ethnic groups of the Niger Delta, the idea of God is fundamental. However, there is no generic name for God; rather He is addressed with unique names and attributes, according to the peculiar experiences of the various ethnic groups. Some of these names and attributes depict Him as the author of all beings, who underpins the world and the universe. Take for example, Osanobua, the name of the Supreme Being among the Edo of western Niger Delta. The name as suggested by J. O. Awolalu and P. A. Dopamu (1974:40) means “the source of all beings that carries and sustains the world or universe.”

In some Niger Delta communities, especially among those ethnic groups that are matrilineal, the Supreme Being was conceived as a ‘Mother’, until massive Christian presence brought radical changes in the people’s world view. A telling example is the Ijaw, who in the pre Christian era, addressed God as Temearau, the Creatress of all things, i.e. She who creates. For the Okrika, a sub tribe of the Ijaw, Tamunoba, the Supreme Being, in pre Christian era was also conceived in feminine terms. She was believed to have created the world, *sekiri* and people, *tomini*. This indigenous conception of the Supreme Being as feminine, Adokiye Oforibika (1996:110) explains was a reflection of worldly affairs, where women were seen specifically as physically producing children. This image of God as mother carries with it the idea of nurturing and nursing which depicts mankind as children of God.

Sometimes, the names by which the Supreme Being is addressed are expressive and categorical of His ingenuity and creativity. The Ikwerre of the north eastern fringes of the Niger Delta address Him as Chiokike. The name is emphatic of His creative prowess, as the Deity who brought all other beings into existence. This is further illustrated in the Ibibio name for God, Abasi Ibom, which implies the God of the sky and earth, and suggests that He is a father and overseer of all.

The various names which the Niger Delta people address God cannot simply be taken as mere tags probably invented to refer to the person of the Supreme Being but rather are meaningful and symbolic, as they are attestations not only of the people's experiences of the supernatural but also of their fears and expectations in an incomprehensible and mysterious universe. Generally, most of what the Niger Delta people know of God, His nature, attributes and characteristics are encapsulated and expressed in the various names they address Him (see G.I.K. Tasie and C.H. Ofuru, 2013:19).

Although the Supreme Being is the main focus of attention in Niger Delta indigenous religion, there are no shrines, temples and statues dedicated to Him. Similarly, there are no priests dedicated to His service. This suggests that no human can avow to be the representative or emissary of God. Since the Supreme Being is not conceived of in material, tangible terms, no visual depictions such as sculptures and paintings are made of him. Instead, the Supreme Being is pictured as a great spirit without any physical representations.

In spite of the prominence and power attributed to Him, the Supreme Being in Niger Delta indigenous religion is not directly approached and worshipped; rather, people put their requests and petitions before the numerous divinities that throng the pantheon. These divinities are limited with defined areas of jurisdiction. Their powers or areas of competence are directly linked to the exact attributes assigned to them. Although, they are inferior and subordinate to the Supreme Being, they are at the centre of the belief system, receiving sacrifices and petitions from devotees on behalf of the Supreme Being. On the other hand, they are the instruments through which God expresses His pleasure or displeasure on devotees. The divinities can simply be said to have been brought into existence by the Supreme Being and their purpose is to serve as His functionaries, especially in the specific area of life for which they have special attributes. Shrines are maintained by priests and priestesses as places where sacrifices and prayers are offered to the divinities who are believed to protect, bless and punish on behalf of the Supreme Being.

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Some of the divinities are manifestations of certain attributes of the Supreme Being, especially as expressed through the features of the environment such as the ocean, the mangrove forest, lakes, etc. which are typical of the Niger Delta. Some others can best be described as primordial, since their origin is not well known, and they are believed to have been with the Supreme Being right from creation. For yet others, they are deified ancestors. Thus, in the Niger Delta indigenous religion, the divinities are physically ever present, immanent reality and it is to their shrines people resort when challenged with difficulties.

Beginning from the western Niger Delta, the most important divinity among the Edo, and second only to the Supreme Being is Olokun, which literally means the “owner of the sea”. This by implication means that Olokun is the divinity of the ocean and water. Olokun represents God’s purity and holiness and this is exemplified in his special offerings which include white fowls, white pigeon and white clothe. Also very prominent among the Edo is Oto, the earth goddess, symbolized by an *Ikhimi* tree found in almost every homestead. The goddess is responsible for bountiful agricultural yield and her principal emblem is a tuber of yam. Oto is most active during the planting season, when sacrifices of *fufu* and snail are offered at her shrine and she is celebrated during new yam festivals. Equally notable among the Edo is Ogiuwu, the thunder divinity. Since it is believed among the Edo that Ogiuwu is the instrument of God in bringing evil men to justice, people say that God’s wrath and anger are expressed in lighting and thunder. Evil men, are therefore, warmed during lightning to go into hiding.

Among the Ijaw of the central Niger Delta, *oru* as divinities are known, are practically indispensable in the affairs of not just the individual but also that of the village group. Each Ijaw village group has a collection of divinities often referred to as *amoru*, village gods. Collectively, the *amoru* protect the villages associated with them against capricious evil forces and against the evil machinations of rival villages. Moreover, they symbolize strength, and promote group solidarity. Prominent among the divinities is Amakiri, whose symbol of authority is the sacred *ikimi* tree, noticeable in every Ijaw village, often planted at the inauguration of a new village. The primary responsibility of Amakiri is with fecundity and the promotion of peace and morality, especially sexual morality. Unethical sexual conducts such as incest and sexual dealings on bare ground are detestable to Amakiri.

However, the most important deity among the Central Ijaw is Egbesu. As the arch divinity, Egbesu is found among the prominent clans of Central Ijaw and it appears that each of the clan has adopted it to suit its own peculiarities. Thus we have Olodiana Egbesu, Arogbo Egbesu, Gbaran

Egbesu, Oporoma Egbesu, etc. In any case, Egbesu's primary role is that of war. In pre-colonial times, the Ijaw employed it in their wars against neighbouring clans within and outside of the Niger Delta. Even in modern time, this role of Egbesu seemed not to have diminished. There were strong indications that some Niger Delta agitators of Ijaw extraction employed Egbesu in their armed struggle against the Federal Government of Nigeria over resource control.

To ensure a successful outing, warriors undergo purificatory rites and the emblems of Egbesu are placed in the canoe, and the commander of the warriors himself handles a horse tail, one of the emblems of the deity, which symbolizes the presence of Egbesu. As a rule, Egbesu only fights what is right and champions the cause of the oppressed. This special attribute of Egbesu is also noticeable in his dislike for sorcerers, witches and those who engage in evil.

The Ijaw habitat is synonymous with rivers and creeks which largely explain the prevalence in belief in water spirits. Bin'abu which exact translation means 'water people' symbolically denotes 'water spirits', which inhabit the many rivers and creeks that dot the Niger Delta. There are many beliefs surrounding the nature and place of abode of these 'water people'. Some believe that their physical features, especially hand and trunk are similar to those of humans; whereas, their waists and legs are similar to the tail of fish. Others describe them as diminutive beings with hair thinly scattered on their bodies. As regards their sex, the general believe has always been that the majority of them are female, which has given rise to the popular phrase *mami wata* used in describing this class of spirit beings not only in the Niger Delta but in many parts of West Africa. However, recent studies are beginning to prove otherwise. W. Wotogbe-Weneka (1990) tends to suggest that the impression that the majority of water spirits are female is erroneous. His findings, among others, reveal that the water spirits are largely male.

As regards their place of abode, many believe that they dwell in seas and rivers, where they have established fabulous kingdoms. Yet their devotees set up shrines for them in their private homes. Very remarkable among the water spirits is Adumu, who sometimes manifests as python. As a result, in parts of the Niger Delta, the python is revered, as it must be treated with respect and dignity. Should it be killed inadvertently, it is reverently buried with full rites like those accorded nobles. Water spirits generally are believed to be very benevolent and lavish material wealth on their devotees.

In the pre-colonial Okrika of the Eastern Niger Delta many deities held sway. Prominent among them were Fenibeso (who was synonymous with thunder and lightning and which has been described as the head god of

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Okrika confederation (see Adokiye Oforibika, 2007), Okuna (god of fire), Berepeleowu (the great judge), Iku (rock in the water), etc. Fenibesos among the Okrika manifested in form of thunder and lightning to carry out his acts. He was represented by symbols of lion and eagle at his shrine. His main functions included being used in warfare and by his votaries for protection against malevolent forces. He also was used to carry out healing on sick people at his shrine after certain rituals and incantations. Moreover, he was the source of acquisition of wealth, fame, position and oratorical prowess (see Oforibika, 2007:17). On the other hand, Okuna as earlier stated, was a deity who carried out his actions with fire. Okuna's primary functions included the enforcement of moral probity and participation in warfare, mainly against the enemies of Okrika, by setting their houses ablaze mysteriously in the course of war. As for Iku deity, it ensured that justice prevailed in cases brought before him. Also he aided fishermen in their search for fish.

For the Ikwerre, the deity most closely associated with the existence and fortune of the individual was Chi, or as it was sometimes known, Chi nu Owa. Chi, the commonest appellation, refers to its general control of the individual's life. Owa refers more specifically to its control of his life-course or destiny. Although each individual had his or her Chi deity, a person is supposed to attain a degree of maturity before he or she sets up its shrine. This may mean that the head of a family appeals and makes offerings to his Chi on behalf of his less mature dependents. The individual depends primarily on his Chi for protection, good health, favour and good fortune. He thanks his Chi for achievements and successes, and it is equally his Chi he blames for his failures (see Tasie, 2007:21). If Chi is the most important divinity for the individual, Ali, the earth goddess, is perhaps the most important divinity for the Ikwerre village groups. Ali is the sustainer of social groups at all levels, and is angered by anything that threatens the unity and harmony of social groups. Hence she is seen as the ultimate guardian of Ikwerre moral code. Other notable deities among the Ikwerre include Ojukwu, often identified with small pox, Amdioha, associated with thunder and lightning, Ikenga, concerned with male achievement, Agwumagwu, the patron deity of diviners and medicine men and Ekwu, concerned with female prowess in cooking and matrimonial arts generally.

Among the Ogba, who are neighbours of the Ikwerre, three categories of divinities exist, namely divinities of the forest, divinities of the air and water divinities. A notable divinity of the air is Ihegroku, responsible for crop yields. The Ogba try as much as possible to curry the favour of Ihegroku because their livelihood depends on his benevolence. In appreciation, a feast

is annually hosted in his honour. Among the Ogba, deities who make their homes in the water and underpin and control activities within and around the water ways are classified as water deities. Ogba society is made up of two distinct groups: the upland and riverine communities. The water divinities perform the same function as the forest divinities for the riverine inhabitants. It is reported, for example, that Iheklegbu deity at Idu-Osobile is remarkable for averting all forms of mishaps within its vicinity. According to the Idu of Ogba, no form of water mishap ever takes place within Iheklegbu shrine. However, they are warned by its priest not to tremble even when danger stares them in the face. Similarly, anyone who attempts to bale out water from the canoe within the precincts of Iheklegbu shrine may not survive a mishap because by this act he has doubted the power of Iheklegbu, thereby excluding himself from the deity's protection. Ahua deity typifies the divinities of the air. It is believed to reside in the air and therefore, no shrine is dedicated to its worship. Its presence among the people is recognized through the affliction of small pox, chicken pox and measles (see Agi Otto, *Obodoegbulem*, 2007:49).

On the eastern fringes of the Niger Delta, are the Ibibio, whose principal deities are Isong and Obumo. Isong is the earth goddess whose principal function is to ensure the fertility of crops. Isong is loved by farmers who rely on her benevolence for bountiful harvest. As a show of appreciation, Isong is celebrated with a great festival during harvest. On the hand, Obumo is the thunder divinity, often referred to as the "owner of rain". Because Obumo provides rain farmers accord it great sacrifice during seed time and at harvest. Votaries observe the worship of Obumo on every eighth day. Obumo is so remarkable in the life of the Ibibio traditionalists that his worship receives greater prominence than that of the Supreme Being known as Abasi Ibom (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:100).

The supersensible world of the Niger Delta is very densely populated with divinities, that it becomes practically impossible to exhaust it in this study. We must be appreciative of the unique place of the divinities in the traditional religious life of the Niger Delta people. For it is through them as functionaries that the Supreme Being effectively administers the divine government of the universe.

One very significant element in the structure of Niger Delta indigenous religion is the belief in spirits. It is very difficult in some cases to make a clear cut distinction between spirits and divinities. However, divinities are of different category, since they are higher in status than spirits. It is also difficult to describe spirits in physical terms since they are often invisible to the ordinary man. But by and large, they can be described as entities which

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are almost abstract, as shades or vapours which can assume any shape at anytime. Generally, spirits are immaterial beings but when they wish, they make themselves visible to man, most often assuming very abnormal shape. Spirits are ubiquitous and Niger Delta people believe that there is no area of the earth that is not inhabited by spirits. They are found in the forests, mountains, hills, rivers, lakes, etc. Though, they are ubiquitous, people still designate certain areas as belonging to the world of spirits. Where this spirit world exists remains a mystery. Yet, Niger Delta people believe that the spirit world is a replica of the physical, tangible world and it is geographically near that it is only separated by a thin wall. In spite of the resemblance, the spirit world is profoundly at variance with the human world. It cannot be seen physically by men, yet people believe that it exists.

Spirits, generally in the conception of Niger Delta people, are malevolent. They are said to possess vital influence and force with which they can possess humans, animals, birds or even insects and molest people or destroy things. However, there are a handful of them that are benevolent and can be manipulated for luck, wealth and health.

Another important aspect of the cosmology of the Niger Delta people is the belief in ancestors. Ancestors constitute the spiritual nucleus of their families and are the closest spiritual link between their living off spring and the ethereal world of God, the divinities and other spirit forces. They function as a go-between their living descendants and the spirit world, aiding their welfare and promoting the well-being of their living descendants. A variety of petitions are therefore presented to them by their living offspring such as request for children, good health, wealth, bountiful harvest, good fortune, etc. The ancestors solicit for these benefits for their living descendants from higher spirit forces. But of far greater interest to the ancestors is the desire to increase the size of their family, ensuring the continuity of the family line. Thus the ancestors promote fertility, since it is a means through which they can physically reenter the human world as new born to perpetuate their kin group. As a result, the belief in reincarnation is very prevalent among Niger Delta indigenous religions.

In addition to promoting fertility and granting wealth and good fortune, the ancestors also protect their descendants from adverse spirit forces. They watch over their families and with their special powers avert negative evil influences from impacting on them. Similarly, they also watch over the moral conducts of family members, detecting and punishing those who infringe on family taboos and ethics. Breaches of moral conducts arouse the wrath of the ancestors who punish such acts with sickness and epidemics. Such

punishment is not borne out of wickedness but out of fatherly love and responsibility to correct an erring child.

The abode of the good departed, the ancestors, serves as the symbol of an ideal after-life, for which the living strive to attain when they too pass on to the hereafter. In the blessed land of the ancestors, therefore, they enjoy a social and political life, which in many respects are replicas of that which they enjoyed in the land of the living (Tasie, 2013:15). This is the ideal after-life scenario, in which one finds peace in being reunited with the family. It affirms the sense of community that forms the basis for the entire cult of the ancestors (Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yakubu, 2004:2). Given this sense of brotherhood, comradeship and communal life, one can appreciate the misery of the individual who is not admitted into the spirit land of the ancestors to partake of this communion. One who is excommunicated from this company of the deceased ancestors becomes a wandering ghost and lives an aimless haunting existence.

To qualify as an ancestor, the individual must have left behind children, both male and female. In the Niger Delta, children are considered as a necessary component of the family structure not just because of their filial responsibility to their parents, especially in times of sickness and old age, the latter needs care and support; but also and more importantly, children play roles in according their deceased parents proper mortuary rites. Moreover, a person must be a progenitor because ancestor cult is composed of one's descendants. In addition to leaving behind descendants, the deceased must have lived an exemplary life and kept the moral code of his community. Among the Niger Delta people such life of moral uprightness is believed to be rewarded with old age. So the deceased must have died at a ripe old age and of natural causes. People attribute some types of death to the deities, ancestral anger, vengeful ghost spirits and the activities of witches and sorcery. Deaths emanating from these agents are considered a curse and they nullify the chances of their victims becoming ancestors. A good death is followed with proper mortuary rites befitting the status of the deceased. Should the descendants of the deceased neglect to accord the deceased the necessary rites, it becomes a wandering and hostile spirit and haunts the living. The rites are as necessary to the peace and well-being of the living as they are to the salvation of the deceased.

Finally, one other important element in the structure of Niger Delta indigenous religion bothers on the belief in magic, sorcery and witchcraft. Magic as practiced by Niger Delta people, involves the human use of spell and rite to harness and control power and influence nature for his own benefit. Magic can be employed for good or for evil. Those who employ magic for

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protection, defence, healing and promotion of good fortune are referred to as medicine men. Generally, all over Niger Delta, some specialists use their privileged knowledge of the supersensible world to counteract the spells of the sorcerers and the activities of evil spirits and witches. They also use such powers to make rain or keep it away when necessary; to increase bountiful yield for farmers, and to enhance catch for fishermen and hunters; and warn of impending danger. By contrast is the activity of the sorcerer. Sorcery is any act of magic motivated by a desire to do harm to another person or to enrich oneself at the expense of another. Sorcerers are feared and hated because their activities impact negatively on individuals and on society. Sorcery is anti-social and illegal and is, therefore, secretive and performed clandestinely. Among the people of Niger Delta, the belief in sorcery is very palpable. When an adult is unable to find a spouse; when a pregnant woman miscarries or delivers a still birth; when there is incessant death in the community; when there is massive crop failure, etc., the sorcerer is often fingered as responsible. People, however, have fairly clear ideas on how to counter the activities of sorcerers. People fortify themselves by wearing charms and amulets prepared by medicine men, and even many homes are adorned with magical preparations which are hung at such strategic places as the door post, bed or roof to protect their occupants from untoward events and from death through sorcery.

One other belief that the Niger Delta people have to cope with very disastrously is witchcraft. Witchcraft is considered more pervasive and destructive than sorcery, though both have lethal effect on society. Generally, witchcraft is the belief that the spirits of living human beings can be sent out of the body on errands of doing havoc to other persons in body, mind or estate (Idowu, 1973:175). Beliefs surrounding witchcraft are very complicated and largely unsubstantiated; and because the activities of witches are shrouded in secret most of what we know of witchcraft are mainly from voluntary confessions of witches attempting to denounce membership of the guild and confessions through trial by ordeal. According to Niger Delta beliefs witchcraft can be acquired in a variety of ways. Some are bequeathed with this evil act by their mothers. Others buy it with little amount of money. Or it can be passed on through food. Witchcraft power may operate independently of its bearer's will or even knowledge. This probably may explain why some, even when they acquire witchcraft may not immediately know that they are witches; and why some find it difficult, if not impossible to free themselves from it.

Witches generally are believed to be women, especially poor, haggard old women. The witch is mostly nocturnal. At night, while people are asleep,

the witch is believed to leave her body asleep in her house, while her soul flies off to a meeting. This is a meeting of souls, and their activities are purely spiritual. During such meetings they feast on their victims. Usually, new initiates donate close relatives and the witches feast on them. When they feast on a vital organ of the victim, the victim immediately falls sick and may die if spiritual help is not sought. The whole activity of the witch is spiritual. The victim is physically at home, yet spiritually, he has been donated to the witchcraft guild and eaten by the witches. Status and growth in the guild are reckoned with not just on the number of victims one has donated for the cannibalistic feasts of the witches but on the quality of the victims who must be close relations or children of the donor. The general effect of the believe in witchcraft among the peoples of the Niger Delta is not only that it has reduced the respect, love and care for the aged, since old people seem to be associated with witchcraft; but also has created hostility and hatred, and pitched individuals against each other through witchcraft accusations and counter accusations.

From our descriptions of Niger Delta indigenous religions, it is obvious that the different beliefs and practices profess by various ethnic groups in the Niger Delta are only a divergent expressions of the same basic religion. Thus, in spite of the differences, a centralized structure of beliefs runs the entirety of the Niger Delta to create a homology.

CONCLUSION

The Niger Delta, as we have noticed from our discussions above, had a well-articulated world-view before the coming of Christianity. With particular reference to their spiritual life, the people conceived every facet of human activity and the environment as underpinned by one spiritual agent or another. Different zones of the environment were seen as controlled by different categories of spirit with different characteristics and functions. The Supreme Being called by different names by the Niger Delta people was regarded as the most powerful of these spiritual agents and responsible for the creation and sustenance of the universe and all that dwell in it. The divinities, though responsible to the Supreme Being, were seen as in charge of different aspects of life and under their various names form the pantheon in each locality. The spirits were conceived as predominantly malevolent and the ancestors as strict enforcers of the people's moral codes. It is to such a very religious people that the missionaries attempted in the 16th century to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ and eventually succeeded in the 19th century. It seems that the

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indigenous religion with its clear idea of the Supreme Being might have prepared the ground for easy penetration and understanding of the gospel message.

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