



Our Deities, our Strength, the Example of Nfam and Oolim in Ogoja Upper Cross River Region of Nigeria

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Abstract

Deities exist as semi-autonomous agents and functionaries in the African “universe,” but the final and absolute authority belongs to God. God therefore in the African context assigns to each of them a department over which to exercises some level of control. The Africans belief that God is too holy to be seen by a sinful and mortal man galvanised God who is all knowing to create deities. However, they (deities) are constantly under the vigilance and control of the Supreme Being to whom they owe obsolete allegiance. The deities act as intermediaries between God and man. They are therefore means to an end and not end to themselves. This research intends to provide answers to the question on whether or not deities are real and what they can do. In doing so, two schools stands out, those who believe and have benefited from them and those who do not believe and see nothing good in them. Two prominent deities of “Nfam” and “Oolim” in Mbube Ogoja area of Cross River region are used. This research adopts a socio-historical approach with emphasis on the local African Setting in conducting this study. Also of importance is an oral interview with local historians and gathering of secondary data from historical sources to buttress the explanation provided herein.

Introduction

African traditions, cultures, customs, norms and values remains the most criticized, vandalized and ravaged the world over. This attack on African culture and its tradition left Africans in the 21st century looking nostalgically into the past with only the “dregs” of its customs and traditions left for the generations to come. These activities no doubt has more impacts on the religious lives of the people so much so that only “stubborn” Africans still hold on to some religious practices notwithstanding the fact that they are regarded as “primitive,” “fetish” and “pagans.”

This research using two deities intends to unfold the significance of African deities and the strength associated with them. Deities according to

(Ekeopara, 2011) were conceived as the messengers and agents of the Supreme Being God in the traditional society. They acted as intermediaries between God and the human society. The duty of the deities was to control the world, control man and his actions and to punish bad or wicked people.

On his own part, (Edet F. F. 2016) opines that the belief in deities is another major feature in African Tradition Religion. He also said that deities are generally regarded as messengers or intermediaries. The Supreme Being employs their services in maintaining and controlling the created order in the universe. Deities are brought into being to serve the will of the Supreme Being. "It is generally theologically provably that the divinities have no absolute existence. They are in being only in consequence of the being of Deity." (Bolaji Idowu, 1962). To further stress the role played by these divinities, Omoregbe notes that:

God in African Indigenous Religion is the Great Monarch, the Monarch of Monarchs. In official worship, African Indigenous religionist approach God through his chiefs (the divinities as they approach their monarch in socio-political life). This explains why God is not worshipped directly in this religion. He is worshipped through the divinities (65).

In consolidation of the roles played by deities, Uka notes that:

There are special divinities concerned with matters of war, or hunting, fishing, farming, metal-work, etc. Each divinity has his own local name in the local language which is believed to be a manifestation or an emblem of His being (45).

In recognition of the indispensability of deities, (Ekarika J. P. 1979) notes that, deities has an integral part of the structure of African Traditional Religion;

"Each tribe has a number of these divinities and festivals are held in their honour e.g. "Anansa" for the Efik tribe, "Obodom" for Enyong tribe, "Anyang" for Nsit peoples etc. Most of these gods when

philosophically examined seem to “historicize” some happenings in ancient past and what the people have always experienced. They also help to explain the customs, ideas and its otherwise lost origin to historical sight.(158)

From the foregoing, it is easy to comprehend the significance or otherwise of African Deities. This essay will further interact with two of these very important deities, the Nfam and Oolim deities of Ogberia - Mbube Ogoja in the Upper Cross River Region of Nigeria.

Nfam Deity

Nfam was a communal religious practice which communed with God indirectly through the spirits, with its guiding deity known by same name. These spirits, the society believed, had the responsibility of safe guarding lives and property in the society.

Nfam, as earlier stated, was a communal property. Its name came from *Nfam*, its place of origin. It communicated with God through the spirits of the land that protected lives and property from the harmful effects of witches, wizards and sorcerers. Its institution in Mbube villages was said to have been as a result of the mysterious death of a warrior suspected to have been killed by witches.

Nfam cult was made up of men of advanced age from the different families in the village called ‘Elorbio’ with a membership of up to thirty persons. On providing a fowl and a keg of palm wine a new member was initiated. Replacement of a member was only after his death. The office of chief priest was not transferable while the chief priest was still alive. At his death, a solemn sacrifice was carried out and a member from his extended family was called upon to replace him. Seven live goats, a fowl and seven kegs of palm wine were the items of sacrifice.

Members were grouped into four, charged with different responsibilities. The chief priest and his assistant offered sacrifice, twelve members carried *Nfam* ‘gun’ called *Okwa Uke*. Another twelve carried a wooden box called ‘*Akpa Nfam*’ and the last group of four men were people who recover debt and cook for the cult members.

In the performance of *Nfam* among the people of Mbube, the element of time was taken into consideration. The period for the annual performance was the first and second week of August as it was a pre-new yam festival event which had to last for seven days. The new yam festival date is usually August 20th.

The first five days were used for the gathering of herbs from the bush, collection of items of sacrifice and settling of debts for the people. During the annual performance, the community provided the sacrificial items, the most important being a goat. Working on the herbs in the shrine was the sole responsibility of the chief priest. According to P. E. Abi, the display of items of sacrifice, symbols and emblems of *Nfam* outside its shrine signalled the departure to the shrine by members in a procession (10).

There was a formal plan in the performance of *Nfam*. The performance of the actual sacrifice was on the sixth day of celebrations. A gesture made by the chief priest with his staff of office meant that members should pick their assigned emblems, symbols and sacrificial items. At bending down and touching the items, they shouted 'wee' signifying total commitment to *Nfam*. Another gesture took members into a queue led by the chief priest's assistant whose tool, "*Ikpa Nfam*" (object like a mace) was pointed to the direction of their movement. Members' costumes were not specialized. Different dresses were worn, but must have sizeable pockets to house personal amulets. Each member gesticulated with a sheathed or unsheathed cutlass.

A member in a high pitch voice would start a chant which was mimicked by a second member. While the first member's chant was done with mouth open, the second member tapped his upper and lower lips with the stretched tips of his fingers. These chants were believed to awaken the spirits, signal children and women to remain indoors while members passed to the shrine. The chants also brought out mature men to the road side to watch yet another annual performance of *Nfam*. Members enacted the role of the invisible spirits while men who watched formed the audience of this performance. With the chant, the message of the appearance of *Nfam* was relayed from compound to compound giving children and women the time to go indoors. Suspense was created as the people on the road side stretched their necks to observe the appearance of members. Before the departure, the chief priest briefly eulogized *Nfam*, thus;

Nfam master of day and night, he who is
not seen but is always with the people.

The rescuer of life and destroyer of the unjust. The wanderer of the earth, your great deeds we remember, the recent not forgotten. We salute.

A recent deed (1976) was the death of a woman whose diabolical means to frustrate a divorced husband was checked by *Nfam*. The appearance of members on the road to the shrine created a spectacular effect on the audience. The chanting continued as the procession moved to the shrine.

As members filed out to the shrine, other members who came late nevertheless joined the procession. On entering the shrine, members moved round the *Nfam* sacred tree seven times and with a gesture by the chief priest, worship tools were placed on the ground with a chant of 'wee' in unison. The shrine became the second scene of performance. Members sat in the same posture. The chief priest sat on the stone at the base of the sacred tree, standing behind him was the assistant with a raised matchet and standing on the opposite side of the tree was the carrier of *Nfam* 'gun' (Okwa Uke). Other members sat on a row of stones that circled the chief priest. The ensuing dialogue that followed was between the priest, his assistant and the spirit on the one hand and the priest and his members on the other - the priest being the go-between. The chief priest's assistant offered a prayer and it was repeated by the chief priest to the hearing of *Nfam*, having poured libation and evoked the spirits.

The sacrificial fowl was strangled and its blood poured on the altar. The goat was taken round the members seven times with each round stopping at the back of the chief priest. At the end of the seventh round, the scrotal sac was removed and the goat was killed on the altar with a gun meant for that purpose. He offered a prayer to confirm the acceptance of the sacrifice in these words. *Nfam!* You are our protector, you give and we receive, for all we make this offering. You have heard our prayers. Show us your acceptance. Lots were cast using two leaves brought out from the *Nfam* box. Acceptance was shown with one leaf facing the ground and the other up while refusal was the reverse. Suspense was created as members waited anxiously to see the society's fate. An acceptance was announced by the chief priest who said 'Nfam ozee' (the sacrifice was accepted). Members' suspense was received with a chorus - yea.

Members took the shrine mace outside and back to the altar again in a procession. Debt collectors executed their duty of preparing sacrificial meals

using the animals and some plantain cut from plantations during the gathering of herbs. The performance ended on the seventh day with members marching round the village burning protective medicine at strategic places. It was the belief of the people that powers of the spirits were evident in the herbs which helped in tracking down evildoers (OHT).

Significance of *Nfam*

The significance of *Nfam* cannot be over-emphasized. As a traditional religious practice, its significance was woven into the socio-political and religious life of the people. *Nfam* provided a form of police and necessary intelligence service for the society. Its institution was for the self-preservation of lives of the entire community. It enforced and maintained traditions, customs, beliefs and order in the community. It also regulated social attitudes. In a way it became the spirit 'power' of the community where it functioned.

In acting as a police of the society, it formulated laws against anti-social behaviour such as stealing, fighting, and indecent sexual acts whose consequences were severe. Also, swearing falsely in the name of *Nfam* brought culprits to punishment. When *Nfam*'s taboos are observed faithfully, it functions positively; otherwise, it brings disaster not only to one person but the community at large. For example, according to Obi Njang, in about 1860 when the first group of men arrived Ogberia, one woman whose name he had forgotten stole some yams and when asked, she resorted to fighting her husband. A few days after, an epidemic befell the community. The village pond was filled with dead reptiles. The pond, it was believed, remained so until an appeasement was made to *Nfam* before there was a sudden disappearance of the dead reptiles (OHT).

Nfam, through its protection of human life right from conception in the womb to maturity against the evil of witches, wizards and sorcerers, also led to increased population in the community. There was also increased food production as harmful actions of witches on the crops of those they considered enemies were guarded against. With good health and increased food production in the community there was opportunity for citizens acquiring wealth leading to progress in the society. It also enhanced a high degree of morality in the community with its deterrent laws against immoral acts such as sexual promiscuity and indecent behaviour. In its cleansing acts and rituals, it purged the community of tension thereby making it wholesome, at peace and enabling the full realization of individual and communal potentials.

Oolim Deity

The *Oolim* in Ogberia Mbube is a deity which owes its origin to the ancient people of Ogberia. Its origin is devoid of any foreign element. It is one of the oldest and most revered deities in the annals of Ogberia history and is believed to be as old as the first man who settled in the community.

The *Oolim* deity was founded under a sound philosophy. Its conception and subsequent creation arise from the need to eliminate fear, and minister to the desire for collective security in the matter of the agrarian pursuit of the community of Ogberia Mbube. In their effort to secure an identity on the one hand and the need to stand firmly against evil on the other - both internal and external - family patriarchs saw the need for collective security which lay behind the birth of an indomitable deity.

The symbol of the *Oolim* deity was *Ukar-Oolim* (a stone), or mass of it which was rested at the base of the "ezizae" tree that was cut for that purpose during the establishment of the *Oolim* shrine. The establishment of the shrine was done in the compound of an initiated member. The ezizae tree signified that there was a deity at the base of produced knife-shaped leaves at the beginning of the dry season, heralding the dawn of the harmattan. The 'ashoror' tree acted as a shield to the community to counter evil forces.

The *Oolim* deity was communally owned by the collective goodwill of the community. Families sent representatives who served as inner caucus priests of the deity. Membership from the various family units was through a rigorous process of initiation which involved a seven-day period of solitary confinement of new initiates. The formal admission of a new member was by succession as would be decided upon by the immediate family unit for a replacement of a deceased member. The deity had no centralized shrine. Each selected member of a family unit had a shrine at either front of his compound or at the back. At the beginning, the *Oolim* deity had a central shrine until about five generations ago when the chief priest known as "Obaro" desecrated the shrine. The result, according to Obi Njang, was a disaster to the community as no fewer than sixteen men lost their lives. (OHT). During sacrifice for appeasement, all members were invited to an individual member's family shrine of the deity for the performance of a collective ritual sacrifice of appeasement.

Through the *Oolim* deity, the people's cultural aspirations were realized in the Bengwen festival that has held every year through the ages.

Oolim as Festival

The festival known as *Bengwen* was celebrated by devotees of *Oolim* deity who were duly initiated into *Oolim*. The festival spanned a period of four weeks and which climaxed on the actual day of festival. Organization of the four weeks ceremony commenced from a chosen Ngabe in the month of June of each year. The meeting by devotees held on alternate Ngabe days until the final Ngabe which was hosted in the eldest member's residence. Meetings on the various days of Ngabe rotated among devotees who hosted and entertained devotees. The importance of the meeting was to plan ahead and to carry the community along. The other reason for meeting was to ensure rules governing the solemn period were observed and to enforce the penalties on offenders.

When meetings commenced, the entire community was informed so as to observe the solemn period. No beating of a child was allowed, neither was fighting tolerated during the period. Women were not allowed to throw down a bundle of firewood from the head. No food was allowed to be carried out of the village or to be sold for money. These measures were to allow for sufficiency during the festival. The rule was to ensure perfect peace and tranquillity in the communities hence it was even forbidden to throw firewood from the head in a manner that would produce sound. Traditionally, women were responsible for the funfair in which *Bengwen* festival was celebrated because they were the custodians of food in the community during a season of famine. A fine of a goat, seven pods of kola nuts and a calabash of palm wine was imposed on members who violated the rules during the solemn period and the holy week of the festival. These rules applied to all without exception.

The week following the last meeting was the week of *Bengwen*. The festival held on *Ogidi* day. On the eve, members met at a spot called *Ekpatang* where ritual sacrifice was done in respect of the impending festival. The requirements for the ritual were kola nuts and palm wine. During the performance of the rituals, prayers were offered to the gods and ancestors for a successful festival. They were formally invited to come for the festival in the evening. Guidance for the whole community was solicited from the ancestors. Members later re-converged in the chief priest's residence in the evening and stayed into the night to chant "*Bengwen*" and to draw out the spirit of the gods and the ancestors to the town. During the period, prayers were offered by each member before chanting. Prior to this, palm fronds were hoisted at the entrance of each member's compound. During the

period of the last meetings on the festival eve, all fines imposed during the year were brought out by the “keeper” of the group and shared among members.

Bengwen festival was a tripartite actively of the initiates of *Oolim* who did the chanting and invocation, the passive ancestors who were expected into the town in the evening for the great festival and women and children who waited behind closed doors to sing the festival songs in a frenzied atmosphere of fanfare, felicity and goodwill to all men and women in the community.

Bengwen festival in Ogberia Mbube was a cultural institution nurtured from within the fabric of Ogberia society. It was an integral part of the culture of the people which was created as part of the worship of the *Oolim* deity and served as a ritual journey of the people from one end of the year to the next. The festival marked the transition of the people to a new year which climaxed in the new yam festival.

The festival involved the participation of everybody in the community and it was an occasion celebrated with fanfare, pomp and pageantry. Among the participants in the festival were the gods and the ancestors who visited the town as passive and unseen guests. The people and visitors from neighbouring communities were seen as guests who increased the population of the town on the day of festival.

Bengwen festival which falls on *Ngabe* day is used for ritual cleansing of the entire environment with fire display by the people at night between the hours of 10:00 and 11:00 pm on the eve of the festival. The fire element symbolized purification which drove evil spirits away and welcomed the good spirits, the gods and ancestors to the festival. During this solemn period of the night no movement was allowed until the ritual chanting of *Bengwen* was initiated by the priests at the backyard of the chief priest. The chanting which was done interchangeably by members was the imitation of the owl's hoot at night. It was initially chanted six times. The people waiting indoors as participants responded from the seventh time by banging on their doors to prevent evil spirits from entering the house. The people sat outside with firewood containing live coal which they threw up in ecstasy while chanting. The *Bengwen* festival songs were continuously sung with intense fire display which filled the sky with countless sparks. The interpretation of the songs was a yearning and a wish for new corn (*Okwiria-ofifeh*) to come forth to end

the season of poor harvest. New corn was a metaphor for new yams as it was often a taboo to mention new yams when a ritual had not been performed by a priest designated for that purpose.

The songs were a wish for abundance of food during the festival which was to come the next day and more food thereafter to save the people from the clutches of hunger which long set in as a result of the lean season.

In each of the songs, *Bengwen* was believed to be symbolized by a rolling shadow of dark clouds. The songs went on successfully through all the villages in Ogberia condemning the evils of the previous year as well as asking for a good yam harvest. The festival ritual songs were accompanied with simultaneous and systematic movements of footsteps in dancing and clapping of hands.

CONCLUSION

We have shown in this study the relevance of African Traditional Religion using two deities as reference points and has proved that African had respect for their Traditional Religious beliefs. A meticulous reading will show that Africans, contrary to the opinion of critics have a concept of God as indicated in their cultural practices. This is against the belief held in most quarters that Africans were fetish and never believe in or lack the concept of God. The study of the above deities proved that they (Deities) depend absolutely on the Supreme Being Himself, arguing otherwise will amount to a gross sense of ignorance of the culture of Africans.

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