



The Indispensability of African Religion to the Culture of Bolo People in Rivers State

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ABSTRACT

African Religion (AFREL) by nature is very pervasive and permeates all spheres of life. Culture is also seen as way of life of a people. Both institutions interrelate and in Bolo it is seen that from the pre-modern time to the modern times, AFREL of the people is indispensable to their cultural practices. This is seen through the roles played by spiritual forces like_ Tamunoba – Feminine idea of the Supreme Being in the pre-modern time to Tamuno – masculine idea now. The divinities –Oru, Ancestors - Duein feature prominently in cultural acts like masquerade displays- Owuti, wrestling- Mgbaso, Kabokon –story telling, Seniapu Osi- respect for elders, initiation to womanhood, Iria Ceremony and marriage –Ere Sime. In all these rites, invocations, incantations and pouring of libations are done. Several factors like Christianity, Western Education and culture and science and technology bring about changes, adaptations in cultural practices in the modern times, while certain aspects are still stable. There should be conscious efforts to revive the African cultural acts in Bolo and AFREL practices that are seen as benevolent should be engendered. Truth, honesty, youth and adults socialization into the cultural milieu of Bolo should be engendered.

INTRODUCTION

African Religion –AFREL by nature is very pervasive and runs through every cultural trait of the Bolo people to give it an underpinning. It does this through the roles played by the Supreme Being Tamunoba feminine idea in the pre-modern times and Tamuno masculine idea, belief in Karaminoru the arch divinity of Bolo, Ogbolodo, Iku, Amakiri – earth divinity, Ogwein, Seki – Crocodile, etc. and the ancestors – Duein in the 29 houses in the town. The cultural heritage of the Bolo people is very rich as the people are unique, egalitarian and pragmatic. Their rich cultural heritage entails masquerade

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displays – Owuti, wrestling Mgbaso, Kabo Kon – story telling, Seniapuosi respect for elders. The cultural acts of Iria – initiation of young maidens into womanhood and Ere Sime – marriage are very important to perpetuate the lineages. In all these Bolo's AFREL plays a prominent role in virtually all the rites carried out by ensuring invocations, incantations of the spirits and pouring of libations, before they are carried out.

This paper would go ahead to define concepts like AFREL and culture.

African Religion (AFREL)

AFREL is a very ancient religious act in Africa that has withstood the cataclysmic forces of change in the pre-modern and modern times especially with the advent of Christianity and western civilization and culture. Ejizu (2008) showing AFREL as an ineradicable phenomenon cited Leonard who said that Africans

“Are in the strict and natural sense of the word, a truly and deeply religious people, of whom it can be said as it has been said of the Hindu, that they eat religiously, dress religiously, and sin religiously. In a few words the religion of these natives, as I have endeavoured to point out, is their existence, and their existence is their religion” (2008:13).

He also went on to show that AFREL is predominantly oral in nature and adequately makes use of ritual symbols and objects as found out by Turner in his studies of the Ndembu people of North-Western Zambia. He showed this in his works among the Igbo in looking at “Ofo/Owho/Opfo” (ritual symbol). Oforibika (2008) saw how the oral nature entails folktales, songs, dances, liturgies, magic, medicine, witchcraft acts and the roles of the divinities, ancestors and other spiritual forces that bring about peace and concord in African Communities. Isizoh (2006) saw how all Ethnic groups in Africa have a way of accepting the sovereignty of the supreme Being – Creator, Sustainer, Preserver, Protector, Controller of the Universe. Values got from AFREL he saw as the sanctity of the family and the marriage institutions, protection of the weaker ones in the society, through a culture of hospitality and sacredness of life. Mckenny (1975) saw 6 elements of AFREL as belief systems, ceremonies, sacred items, grooves, moral values, holy people. From the above it could be seen that AFREL permeates all aspects of life of Africans.

Culture

Lechner (1992) saw culture variously as training and development of the mind, social and religious structures, intellectual, artistic manifestations that are part of the society. Ezewu, Fasokun, Akpe, Oluduro (1983) cited Tylor who saw culture as:

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“That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1983:34).

They went on to show that culture is an act of social invention, a heritage that is transmitted mainly orally from one generation to another, through socialization. They also asserted that culture is not static, but dynamic. It accumulates and becomes diffused in the course of contact with other societies. They saw some features of culture as being overt-includes artifacts, like houses, clothes, speech and covert-attitudes, belief systems and ideals. It is ideal entails the ways people ought to behave and manifest – those acts that are done and visible by others. Culture is both shared and learned, stable yet changing. Uduigwomen (2001) shows that the African Cultural heritage sees man as dualistic – entailing the reality of man as a compound of material and immaterial substances. He said that:

“The African culture makes no sharp distinction between the ego and the world. African culture makes the self the centre of the world” (2001:12).

Tanko (2006) in defining culture, said it includes “education, training, development of mental and bodily faculties and...mental training, and refinement of taste, keenness and balance of intellect and judgment”. Since culture covers the totality of human existence, it can be seen as a tool for development in all communities. Tanko went on to say that, “...from the second part of the 19th century, cultural anthropology has provided a very rich data as regards to the customs, rites, religions and values of the human race”. From the foregoing, it could be seen that culture is the totality of the way of life of people, and AFREL is pervasive in nature. Both culture and AFREL interact a great deal.

Brief Location Information of Bolo and Economic Basis

Oforibika (2008) showed that Bolo is found in the Wakirike confederation, made up of 9 major towns namely Okrika, Ogu, Ogoloma, Bolo, Ibaka, Ogbogbo, Isaka, Abuloma and Ele. Bolo, is in the eastern Niger Delta region in Ogu/Bolo Local Government Area of Rivers State, that is very rich in oil and mineral deposits, but the people live in penury and abject degradation. The people are basically fishermen and do some trading and subsistent farming.

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Oforibika (1996) discussed how the Bolo people are neck deep in their religion, before the advent of Christianity. In the pre-modern times, (before the advent of Christianity and western civilization in 1883, by Chief Joseph T.

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Koko), they conceived of the supreme being as female Tamunoba in charge of creation, sustenance of the world Tomonikiri and production of all there is – human beings – Tomoni. This to a large extent changed to a masculine concept with the advent of Christianity – Tamuno. They believe in the existence of several divinities – Oru. The arch-divinity is Karaminoru seen as feminine and wife of Fenibeso arch-divinity of Okrika confederation. Others are Amakiri-divinity of the earth, Iku, Ogbolodo, Agba, Ijibaso protector of “women’s rights seen as “forces of the society” according to Robin Horton. There are divinities seen as “forces of the wild” – water spirits – Mingibie Owu namely, Ogwein, Seki – crocodile, Ofirima – Shark, Doroya barakuda fish. The ancestors – Duein of the 29 houses and the town serve as custodians of the lineages and protect the people from the spiritual world, through invocations, libations and housed in shrines – Duein Wari in the town. These divinities served as custodians of the rich cultural heritage of the people and their morality. Divination – Ikianwaki, Ari – witchcraft, Dirimie – sorcery, several taboos, moral codes and etiquette bring about cordiality in the town and are part of their AFREL.

AFREL and the Cultural Milieu of Bolo in the Pre-Modern Times

The people of Bolo had a very rich cultural basis that so intertwined with their practice of AFREL, that it would seem difficult to know where culture ends and religion begins. Almost all their cultural elements are underpinned by religious rites and dictum.

One prominent area seen is that of masquerade displays – Owuti. Oforibika (1996) discussed that a special class of water spirits were those believed to own the various masquerades performed by Bolo people, masquerades played in the town were thought to have been inspired by water spirits, that took on human form and staged these plays in Owuele – “water spirits clearings” in the mangrove and fishermen that saw them copied them and brought the displays as cultural acts in Bolo. He said that one aim of the spirits in so revealing these cultural displays to men was to give the latter a source of securing enough fish harvests and ensuring their general welfare. Also, it was to make people appreciate the beauty of these plays, for its recreational sake and cultural preservation. The head of the masquerade spirits then was Amanyingise or Kiri Owu – meaning “mother of the town”, masquerade that came with the town”. She was seen as to have appeared first to man and her plays could only be performed by members of the group. Another relevant masquerade spirit was Ogwein. He played both on the Owuele and on the open sea or river. The Ogwein masquerade was played only once in eight to ten years, because of elaborate arrangements and great expenses involved; since the masquerade was colourfully dressed for aesthetic purposes. Ogwein was believed to be of great assistance to the Bolo people, in their fishing, trading and other Economic acts. He also helped people who lost their boats to recover them. In such a situation, the suppliant went to the swamp and called on him as follows:

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Bile ka foin ogwein, mi, fa aru

Ase Ibara chua me, ani sin pakumabo

“Ogwein you that do not sink, this lost boat I put into your hand, bring it out”
(1996:31).

Other masquerade displays then, included Doroya – Barakuda fish, Seki – crocodile, Oki – Shark, Pioru – a colourfully dressed masquerade, Okpekuro “strong chest”, it is observed that in all these masquerade cultural displays, there were a lot of invocations, incantations and pouring of libations carried out, to ensure that the spirits do not cause havoc in the process.

Another cultural element seen is Owu Mangi – chase and catch. This according to Opuogulaya (1975) was a festival observed during the time of new corn – “Iwopiangba” in pre-modern times. In Bolo, this festival was observed by all able bodied young men involved coming to the market square – Chiri Ogbo who partook of it. It engenders peace, friendliness and unity in the town. An informant showed how at this time diving – Mingibile was a practice in vogue in the cultural milieu. Here many men, in the town, stayed under water for several hours without drowning. This was both for improving their fishing skills and entertainment. Toru-Oki – swimming was celebrated in the past in the town, Kpotein – somersaulting, Mgba so – wrestling, Dein Tein – archery were all sports carried out to give a lively atmosphere devoid of acrimony in the town.

Oforibika (1996) saw a very relevant social, cultural religious festival as Iria. The full word is Irigha “I do not go astray” in marrying my relation. It is organized in Bolo to mark the coming of age of a girl, at which she is presented as fit and proper for marriage, maidens 16 – 20 years took part in it. The culmination of the 3 months stay in the fattening room is when they come out gorgeously dressed with beautiful hairdo, naked from breast to waist, to collect their ticket to get married, at the town square Karaminoru’s Chiri. In the course of the ritual, they wore copper spiral rods – Mkpala on their legs and decorated with indigo – Burumo and other artistic designs. The maidens visited the shrines of Amakiri, Karaminoru and Agba, where the various priests of these divinities poured libations, and implored the deities to allow them bear children and protect them from evil forces. One of the aims of this ceremony is to inculcate moral chastity on the maidens, until they are licensed to get married.

Young girls found not to be virgins were disgraced and treated with levity. The cultural heritage of the Bolo people includes Kabo – Kon tales by moonlight, Seniapu Osi – respect for elders, moral decorum-honesty, truthfulness, humanity and hard work. Service to Bolo is a “sine qua non”. Owoko seki – cultural dance at the market square, Akwa-Fari – drumming skills to entertain at occasions were all in vogue. Amaanga Yedie traditional education in fishing, pottery, weaving, of fishing gears were the fad. It was seen that socialization took place in areas of the roles of Tamunoba, the divinities Oru, ancestors – Duein, for protection and peace to reign in the town and cut down on immoral acts. For instance these spiritual forces

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frowned at stealing, murder, adultery, fornication and disrespect for parents and meted out requisite punishments to offenders.

Oforibika, (1996) showed that marriage is one relevant cultural act then. There were two forms of marriages in the 3 houses then in Bolo – Amayana, Igbacha and Opueje, namely Igwa or Gwamanga (mixed living) and Iya or Iyaye (my own). Igwa marriage was one in which the husband did not have full rights over his children and the woman retained her maiden name. The children inherited from their mother's line. During the rites for this form of marriage, the bridegroom presented gifts on a relatively, modest scale to the bride's parents and house members. These are Saji Bite (a type of George wrapper) and Tomoniru - palm wine. The culmination of the rites took place at the ancestral shrine of the woman's house, where the couple were presented before the ancestors of the house and the house priest – Wari Oru Alabo invokes on the ancestors to recognize the couple as man and wife, protect them, make them fertile and pours libations amidst wining and dining. In the Iya marriage in contrast, the man had full rights over the woman and children, who answer his name and inherited his property. The man made certain gifts to the woman's parents and house members viz – one Atoni (Manila) for the woman's father, one Atoni, for the mother, five Atoni for the mother's people, six Ikpo (coarse cloth); two Okuru (Raffia clothes), and one jar of palm wine. The culmination of the rites entailed the presentation of the couple at the ancestral shrine of the man's house, where the woman was tied with Okuru and Ikpo cloth symbolizing the indissolubility of the marriage. Here the priest of the house invoked the ancestors to witness the occasion and give their tacit approval. He also poured libation with local gin.

However in both situations it was a taboo for close relatives to marry. Ogungbile (2006) showed how there is an inextricable tie between the culture of the Ijesha people of Western Nigeria and their AFREL practices in the pre-modern times. He said that:

“Every space, social, cultural economic and political, is filled daily with religious ideas...a student of cultural and mission studies cannot but be fascinated by the impressive and determinant role that culture plays in certain religious manifestations and expressions in Nigeria”.

Attoe and Anwana, (2001) still went ahead to show how women empowerment in several cultural acts – democratic acts were subsumed in religious functionaries, thus:

“The political, economic, social and religious activities of women in pre-colonial times were most often coordinated through various women local organizations, such as age grade institutions and priestesses cults” (2001:21).

The above is to give credence to the fact that, AFREL in Bolo gave spiritual underpinnings to cultural elements in the town.

AFREL and the cultural Milieu of Bolo in the Modern Times

Modern times in this paper refers to events that took place from the time Christianity came to Bolo in 1883 through the late Chief Joseph T. Koko a business man, who got the “goodnews” of Jesus Christ as saviour in Bonny. It could be seen that there had been several changes, adaptations modifications, stability, in the relationship between the AFREL of Bolo and their culture.

Ogan (1988) said that one of the cultural landmarks of the Okrika people now (Bolo inclusive-mine) is the Odumu “python sebae” masquerade display. This is celebrated every 20 years and played on sea. It took place in 1954, 1974 and 1977 during the World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture. Bolo people sent some delegates to play in 1977. However, due to the political crisis that rid Okrika confederation from 1999 - 2007 and the advent of Christianity, it has not been played since 1977 again. In Bolo other masquerades displayed to a large extent have waned, though staunch traditionalists, still carry out the plays, and joined by some so called Christians. Libations, invocations, are still carried out to a large extent. Owumangi, Mgbaso, Kpotein, Dein tein have almost gone to extinction in the town due to modernity and Christianity’s influence, that does not give tacit approval to them. The traditional informal education is still in vogue to a large extent which entails respect for elders and engaging in acquiring fishing other skills to be functional in the society.

In the area of marriage it is seen that it is carried out now with much pomp and pageantry. The 2 forms of marriage are still in vogue, but some children of Igwa are seen to some extent inherit from their father’s lines. In Iya and Igwa marriages some Christians refuse to go to the ancestral shrines to be presented to the ancestors of their houses, where invocations are done and libations poured. Rather they engaged Christian priests in Iya marriage who prayed on the coarse raffia clothes, symbolic of the marriage’ indissolubility.

The Iria ceremony has undergone some change now. There is a variant called Tamuno Iria God or church Iria that does not allow the maidens expose their breasts to the public. Also, it does allow the maidens go to the different shrines of the divinities as was the fad. Now it has been observed that the elderly women that take care of the girls and ensured they were virgins called Egbelemereme are bribed to allow maidens who have boyfriends and committed abortions take part in the ceremony. This is a bastardization of this rich, noble, sound, cultural and religious ceremony.

Factors that bring about the cultural changes

An informant observed several factors as contributory to the changes, seen in the modern day’s cultural milieu of Bolo namely: Christianity, Western Education and culture, science technology.

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Christianity

The advent of Christianity in Bolo in 1883 brought about several changes in the cultural milieu of the Bolo people as seen above in the areas of marriage, displays of masquerade, the Iria initiation to womanhood ceremony and other areas. Christianity now blooms in Bolo that it has had deep inroads to some extent in the town. There are Anglican, Pentecostal, African initiated (independent) churches.

Western education and culture

This has brought about the emergence of several primary schools and secondary schools, and to large extent has put the traditional informal education in a lacuna. The western culture of speaking English Language has unfortunately overtaken the Okrika Language in Bolo. Dressing in trousers, shirts, skirts and blouses and other aspects of western culture is the fad. Women and men sparingly tie wrappers again. Western music, dance, dietary patterns have really affected the traditional variants. The western culture of individualism has to some extent eroded the extended family system that engenders hospitality and care for the needy which is truly African and the nature of the average Bolo person.

Science and Technology

This has led to the advent of audio, visual gadgets in the town television sets, radio, video cassette recorders, general service of mobile communication (G.S.M) for communication. The traditional story telling, wise sayings, proverbs that prevailed are no more, to a large extent. The advent of a health centre in the town has really cut down on the practice of traditional medicine. Western musical instruments, public address systems are used largely during wake keeping and several programmes in the town.

Recommendations

- 1) There should be a conscious effort to rejuvenate the cultural ethos of the Bolo people in all forms and ramifications.
- 2) Truth, honesty, the fear of God, which is the beginning of wisdom, should be the basis of socialization of children, youths and the generality of the people in the town.
- 3) AFREL of Bolo should not be wished away with, due to its relevance in giving a lot of credence to the cultural acts in the town.
- 4) The informal Education in all its forms, should be part and parcel of the Bolo people, in addition to the western Education prevalent.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is very clear that the cultural life of the Bolo people is underpinned by their AFREL practices in several areas. These include masquerade displays, several cultural displays, the Iria initiation to womanhood ceremony, marriage ceremony. This goes to show the pervasive nature of AFREL of Bolo in the social, political, economic, cultural, educational spheres. This was seen in the pre-modern and modern periods. Several changes, adaptations, modifications and maintenance of the “status Quo” in this relationship between religion and culture were seen. Factors such as Christianity, western Education and culture, science and technology are responsible for this situation. There should be a conscious effect to revive the culture and AFREL practices of Bolo because of their indispensability to each other.

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