

ABOMINATION AND ITS CLEANSING: A STUDY OF IGBO STRICT TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO VARIED LAWS AND SITUATIONS

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Abstract

The Igbo world is profoundly local and particular in her strict approach to varied customary laws and situations. The colonial agents stirringly atrophied and subsequently rendered extinct many vital aspects of Igbo traditional cherished cultural legacies. Based on ethnocentric concepts and beliefs, the European agents considered Igbo customary laws and values decadent, primitive and unprogressive. Owing to this condition, the researchers made frantic efforts to show that Igbo people are organized and civilized with their distinct system and approach to life. The motivation for the research was for the upliftment of the amiable tradition of the Igbo race which is more and more drifting into oblivion, or the abysmal chasm of neglect. The departure is subsequent upon the people's persistent urge for western oriented kind of life, a situation that is discordant or at variance with the Igbo people's cultural heritage and normal order of approach to things. The realms of deontology have therefore made it imperative for this kind of study to emerge. As qualitative research, the researchers adopted the primary and secondary sources of data collection and culture area approach for data analysis. As the older generation in the Igbo society, is passing to the great beyond, so also do the pre-literate sources of her cultural norms and values are being truncated and subsequently drifting more and more in the doldrums. It therefore, becomes necessarily mandatory, in order to stall further deterioration of these cultural beliefs and practices part of which being the ritual of cleansing and strict customary laws and situations.

Introduction

The lapse or inability to take some reprisal measures against the evil of the society in recent years is consequent on western and Christian influences owing to the westernization of African culture and traditions (Nwangwu, 2016). Since the emergent of and domination of Christian religion in Igbo cultural and political space, the people were either forced or compelled into assimilating both orthodox Christian teaching and western culture concurrently and without distinction. These necessary burdens persisted over the years and are considered to be the ineptitudes that generated the rash slight in the descent

and organized system of Igbo society that upholds law and order at all situations. These handicaps generally had to do with the problems inhibiting potential Igbo person from freely adapting to the rich culture heritage as handed over by the ancestors. The goal of this research however, is to bring to bear the usefulness of Igbo customary laws and traditions in maintaining a peaceful and egalitarian society.

The Igbo are known to be a very determined, resourceful and progressive group of people who often remain geared to surmounting/gaining any challenging situation or target in excellence; even while in Diaspora. The conviction of the Igbo man about himself has goaded him into meaningful life; his beliefs and practices cannot be violated without debasing him and all he is. Experience has demonstrated through times that an Igbo does not see himself as an isolated being or individual, but rather as one who is always in association with God, *alusi*, ancestors, communities; past and present, land, property as well as other people.

As early as the 15th century and before the arrival of Vasco Da Gama on the Bight of Biafra, the Igbo people were greatly advanced in technology, inventions and industries relating to arts, iron and metal works. (Nwogu, 2018). Examples of these facets of advancements in technologies comprised music, drama, medicine, carving, weaving, ceramics, iron, and bronze casting, religion drawing and painting including other achievements, provoked by and resulting from the advancements caused by pragmatic thrusts in civilization in early times.

The Igbo people can be very zealous or courageous in defending themselves and their rights against any aggressive drives generated by unfriendly external factor(s). They are prone to strong family ties, lasting love and unity among the different members of their families' heritage. The Igbo would rather opt to deprive themselves of certain benefits than to allow their fellow unfortunate members to their own families or community wallow in discomfort and misery.

The stock-in-trade among others is to ensure success in marriage, traditional religious practices and good up-bringing of children in society. These characteristics and achievements of the Igbo citizens assume different forms, magnitudes and in varied disciplines and other human endeavours. (Ogbukagu, 2021). From primordial times, there has been a clear-cut strict traditional approach to varied laws and situations. The Igbo modes of existence are fashioned out of the said traditional and customary laws in maintaining law and order in the society.

The restoration of the dignity of man and the consequent preservations of his inalienable rights and privileges is inherent in the people's traditional systems and laws; the sustenance of the people's identity (cultural norms and values). These human factors are

fundamental and seriously call for vitalization together with making conscious adroit and strict observance of the different aspects of the Igbo cultural heritage/institutions.

Abomination in the Concept of Igbo Cosmology

An abomination (*Alu*, *Nso*) is an act of misdeed that is vehemently abhorred and deprecated by the Igbo community and therefore totally reprehensible to all. It is defilement and desecration of the normal order or living and approach to things and a heinous offence that provokes calamity, doom and ostracism within a society. There are two types of abomination (*alu*) in Igbo cosmology, namely, *Aluluana* and *Alulugbada*. (Nwoye, 2019). The *Alulugbada* is more serious than the *Aluluana*. It (*Alulugbada*), constitutes the kind of *Alu* that is exclusively cleansed by the *Aka Nri* people of Agu-Ukwu community. The *aluluana* can be cleansed by the Diodo Nri group (originally from Achalla) together with their kith and kin who migrated to Umu-Ori and then to Ora-Eri with some of them (Umu-Ori) settling at Adazi- Nnukwu as at present, akin to *alu*, is *nso* which is a mild type of *Alu* or abomination (Okediadi, 2017).

Nso constitutes that which is forbidden, and therefore closely related to *Alu*. It is *Nso* for a child to slap any of his/her parents, to disclose the secret of masquerades to a woman and to unmask a masquerade in the public. Some offences classified as *Alu* in Igboland include: having sex with a very close consanguineous relative and a brother's or father's wife, a brother marrying his sister; a woman to climb a palm tree and/or cut a palm nuts head; a widow absent at the moment of death of her husband or present at the scene of a suicide especially by hanging.

The Ritual of Cleansing Abomination in Igboland

Once an offence has been declared and pronounced *Alu*, it becomes mandatory for the culprit to get himself cleansed after showing remorse for the offence committed. It is the Nri people that has the prerogative to declare taboos abolished. The cleansing of abomination is crucial and attracts spectators from the family and relatives of the culprit. The cleansing can be done in private or in public depending on the seriousness and gravity of the misbehaviour.

The purpose of the cleansing is to placate the malignant deities' people who were offended and to avoid the wrath of angry deities. It is only after sacrifices and rituals of cleansing have been performed that the culprit is again regarded as a part of the society. But until the cleansing, the culprit is considered an outcast and ostracized by complete boycott. This means that no one will visit him/her, exchange greetings or transact any business with him or her. *Ikpu alu* (cleansing abomination) in most Igbo communities is of two major categories, namely at town level and kindred level depending on the gravity

of the said crimes committed. The core items required for the cleansing of abominations include cow and ram (*evune*: known as *evune-ofo*), she -goat, kolanut, cock, hen or native old layer (*okuko-nligba*), one day old chick and so on. It is possible to cleanse a minor abomination at family level.

Cleansing at Town Level

Certain objects are vital and used as agents for restitution of heinous crimes committed against the land in the Igbo world. In fulfillment of indispensable atonements, special items or gifts such as *nne-efi* Igbo(cow) and *evune* (ram) among other items are necessary for consequent purification or cleansing of culprits involved in such vices before they can be re-integrated with the rest of their families and communities. In the process of cleansing, the cow and ram are taken in procession to the village square. This procession is followed by a ritual at the market square and then finally to the kindred of the culprit (Nwangwu, 2018).

Just before the visit to the various centres of the community, parents of the culprits provide their children with some money needed for the ritual. At each *Ebe* centre, where the spectators from the community members are in attendance, the cow and the ram are led round each *ebe* centre with each person collecting a heap of sand with the right hand throwing same upon the cow saying: “*Uso alu Solu*” (thus transferring the evil committed by the culprit to the animal or cow). Children of almost every family, each holds the money with the left hand using the right hand to collect a heap of sand to repeat same operation as adults dropping the money on the ground. (Nwokike, 2016).

At the end of *Ibia-efi-aja* (throwing sand on the cow according to Adazi-Nnukwu people), signifying transferring the culprit’s guilt and condemnation to the animal, the cow is taken to the village shrine and is anchored there, while the ram and the money are taken home by the chief priest. Other items mandatory for varied cleansing ceremonies are *Otusi* (a spear-loke staff of office made of lead), *Ofo-Otigbu-Nne-Efi* (*Ofo* that kills a cow), *Omu* (young frond) and of course the cow.

At the shrine, where the ritual would be conducted, the chief priest spends about two hours *ima-ogu* (using separate palm fronds serially in listing items to be covered in oath taking; cleansing abomination and other events) with *omu* and other preparations. According to E.O. Nwafor (personal communication, February 8, 2024), the *Otusi*, which is positioned to the earth, *nzu*, four short *ogilisi* (Newbouldia leavia) stakes driven into the earth and four kolanuts, the chief priest states the objects of the cleansing (*ikpu alu*) and then tells spectators that he is ready. In executing the last ritual and with the *ofo-otigbu-*

nne-efi in front of him, he prays, breaks the kolanuts followed by striking the *ofo* four times on the ground.

In Adazi Nnukwu community for example, after the ritual events, the cow is let loose and the head of this earth deity picks up his *ofo* and points same to the cow directly reciting certain incantations signifying condemnation of the animal to death. At this stage all Adazi-Nnukwu indigenes present instantly back the cow thereby returning to their respective homes in silence as no person must touch the cow, let alone eating it, people from other towns dismember the animal and informally share it among those present.

As a matter of custom, the Igbo people do not eat any animal used in cleansing abomination of their defiled land because the animal itself is unclean, as it has assumed the guilt of the culprit. These major cleansing rituals are then followed by other major ritual events as described via the cleansing at the kindred level; thus, bringing the cleansing exercise at an end. In the more recent days, the animal deployed to atone for abomination were slaughtered at the outskirts of the town by the neighbouring towns, or such animals may be allowed to move around as taboo animals. *Ikpu alu* at the town level is the gravest in the social order of the *ikpu alu* system in Igbo world system.

Cleansing Abomination at Kindred Level

Cleansing abomination at kindred level in Nawfia community for example, requires a sheep, a she-goat, a day-old chick, an old layer and eight kolanuts. (Nweze, 2020). The cleansing ceremony takes place where the crime is committed since this is a milder offence or *Aluluana*. To execute the cleansing, the members of the kindred involved collect money through levy to purchase the above items for the rituals. With these livestock and other things procured. The Nri people are invited to the scene of the offence for necessary cleansing action and then present the sheep with other items needed. The Nri person picks up the *Otusi* and positions it into the earth enough to balance it on its own weight, he also cuts four short *ogilisi* stakes and drives them close together about one half of their lengths into the ground with an *Otusi* in front to serve as an altar for the rituals. This is followed by drawing four parallel lines with *nzu* (white chalk) before the altar.

The priest calls for four kolanuts and proceeds to state the object of the cleansing. He picks up one of the kolanuts, with his right hand facing the altar (*ogulisi* and *Otusi*), he prays to the deities to temper justice with mercy and therefore accept their plea to forgive the offender, also for prosperity and long life; he says *odonigwugwu* (Amen) and breaks the kola. He gives a male cotyledon to the divinities in front of the altar, chews one and gives others out for sharing to people present.

He invites each offender as the need may permit, makes him/her kneel down and flings a day-old chick round his (the offender's) head and kills it sprinkling its blood on the *ogilisi* stakes, the *otusi* and the four lines of white chalk. The sheep is taken home alive, while yams and coco-yams are used in similar manner as the day-old chick in swinging round the head of each culprit, cut into pieces and then offered to the divinities by discarding them around in the proximity of the ritual exercise. According to O.J. Okeke (personal communication, March 5, 2024), Talinum *Triangulare*'s leaf is crushed with its resulting juice rubbed on forehead of the culprit as an inward sedative. These and other minor rituals mark the end of abomination cleansing at this stage.

After the cleansing, the chief priest of the kindred will parade the culprit, together with the goat to the Kindred's *Ana-Ndichie* shrine where the animal is finally slaughtered. Wastes from the goat are thrown to the altar of the shrine with the rest of the goat meat taken home by the head of the kindred. The *Umunna* (kindred men) next move to their ancestral home, kill the old layer and cook the same with yam for consumption by all the kindred men present. This is called *ife-nligba* (eating together) signifying re-union.

Moreover, cleansing abomination at family level is carried out in the same way as in the kindred level, the only difference being that the offence at that level is in the smallest order of magnitude.

However, as has been pointed out earlier, the Nri people particularly, the Akamkpisi group has direct contact and association with the ritual of purification in Igbo traditional system. They are being charged with cleansing abomination and declaring taboos abolished. The Nri people solely reserve the authority to cleanse abomination/declare taboos abolished among other functions, and *ipso facto*, execute this ritual of cleansing abomination. This exclusive right of the Nri people to cleanse abomination is commended by Jefferey (2019) thus:

The possession and use of the *Otusi*: a short wooden hafted iron spear is used by both men and women of Agukwu in the cleansing of abominations. The women spear is smaller than that used by men which usually has on it a bundle of odds and ends through which the spear passes. By means of these *Otusi*, abominations are removed in non-Umunri towns. In Umu-nri towns, abominations are removed by members of the Adama family. This actually occurs in Agukwu and Ora-Eri but in other Umu-Nri towns the observance is less strict and it is permissible for any Umu-Nri man to remove abominations. (p.67).

This quotation from Jefferey's work clearly demonstrates what social powers or rights the Nri people have over abomination cleansing.

Christianity amidst Changes in Igbo People's Worldviews

There is no doubt that the introduction of Christianity in Igboland has brought about the exposure to new forms of life and changes to Igbo people's world views. In spite of this development, there has been resilience of Igbo culture despite of western cultural influences. Apparently, it is also obvious that Christianity has been an asset in Igbo culture to resist western negative influences. It could also be said that with the huge influences from Western (Christian) cultures, the Igbo identity is no more visible. Based on the findings, among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, Igbo culture remains the bedrock upon which interpersonal relationships are formed despite incursions of western ideologies. This paper observed that the Igbo people have shown resilience in their identity in a multicultural global world.

According to Ilogu (1974), Western names such as Joseph, Mark, Henry, were given to people through baptism to transform them from "heathen" to "Christians". In marriage, monogamy was introduced in place of the predominant polygamy. Knighthood was introduced to replace *Ozo* institution. Ekechi (1997) states that "with the introduction of modern Western cultural modes of dressing, traditional decorations, drawings and paintings as well as women beautifications with camwood (*uri*), and red dyes (*uhie*), were considered unfit for Christians". This exposure to new forms of life and the possibilities it offered brought drastic changes to people's world views.

The advent of Christianity in Igboland meant the introduction of a Christian world view. The religious beliefs, practices, and the provision of social services of this immigrant religion have impact on the religious and cultural life of the traditional communities. Christianity at times has undermined some of the traditional religious and cultural values which have fostered peaceful co-existence over the years. The Igbo have embraced Christianity and western culture which have displaced the traditional religion in its organized form yet the traditional religious beliefs and practices still rule the minds of many Igbo Christians. One of such beliefs and practices that have survived the onslaught of the forces of change in Igboland is the belief in deities.

Mbiti (1969) states that "deities though in retreat are very much alive. The average Igbo Christian would not normally participate in the public worship of deities but would resort to deities for help when difficult life situations such as illness, misfortunes, deaths, barrenness, present themselves for solutions. "In this situation, culture clash is inevitable as the dominant culture strives to "over throw the recessive culture" (p.8). As conflict emerges, new modes of behaviour and lifestyle emerge which result in new identity. One of the major effects of this in this recent time is the resilience of Igbo culture. Alongside Christianity is the Igbo traditional religion (ITR) with a belief system that governs ethics

and morality among much of the population. Christianity was inherited as a form of achievement that abolished “twin killing and human sacrifices.

Ekpunobi and Ezeaku (2011) notated that: Some aspects of the traditional values and morality have been influenced by the processes of modernity that are passing through the African societies. Some values and morality are wearing new frames in order to grapple with the increasing socio-religious problems of the contemporary society. Christianity, with its message of hope and humanitarian concern attracted many Igbo people. The social security and human development that emerged at the time through education were all well attractive. The new possibilities ushered in by Christianity made people to embrace the missionaries without thinking of the implication it might have on them. The extent to which such western ideologies and their inherent traits of superiority have spawn conflicts with the outcome including destabilization of the economic, political and religious lives of the people.

Moreover, before the advent of Christianity, Africans were noted for their deep knowledge of God. Mbiti (1969) writes that “Africans are notoriously religious”. This could be seen from the fact that they believe in the existence of the supreme God – “*Chukwu* or *Chineke*” (Great God) and other minor gods whom they take to be the messengers of the supreme God, or who acts as intermediaries between man and the supreme God. They held “*Chukwu*” so high and cannot approach him directly and as such go through the deities. Deities are regarded as God’s representatives on earth. Some of these deities according to Otteberg (1958) are regarded “as the personification of phenomena such as rivers, hills, lightening and farms”. Different names are given by the people of Igboland for the deities in the pantheon. Ilogu (1974) recognizes four major deities in the pantheon of Igbo god. They are; “*Anyanwu*” (the sun god), “*Igwe*” (the sky god), “*Amadioha*” (god of thunder and lightning), and “*Ala* or *Ani*” (the earth goddess). Individuals worship the Supreme Being through their small deities and ancestors. Thus, the existence of many local deities in Igbo religion does not define their religion as polytheism. These deities have shrines, priests, and religious festivals as part of their worship. Igbo traditional religion involves several sacrifices, rituals, and initiations such as initiation into the masquerade court, the Ozo institution, Nze title, Ichie/oha/elders council. (Tolbot 1967, Isichie, 2004). There are relationships between the gods, oracles, and divination (Ogbaa, 1992, Iroegbu, 2009), such as *Amadioha* (god of thunder), *Ogwugwu*, *Ahiajoku/Ifejioku* (yam goddess), and *Chiokike* (god the creator).

The advent of Christianity has brought most of these gods and their worship to an end (Ilogu, 1996). the *dibia* (diviners) play important roles in Igbo religion and spirituality. Orji (2007) “explores the *Dibia* in historical contexts as priests, healers and diviners. They

together with the chief priest (*onye isi ala/ Eze mmuo*) are intermediaries between the gods (spirits) and the people (humans)” (p.41). A distinct feature of the Igbo civilization is the absence of any formal, centralized political authority. According to Ilogu (1974), “they have egalitarian and republican structure with sub-groups and recognize the council of elders as the highest decision-making body who are the custodians of *Ofo* (symbol of authority)”(p.6). Land is the source of economic existence of the Igbo and is shared among patrilineal lines. There are communal and individual ownership of land. Igbo people also engage in commerce, craftsmanship and trade. The social life of the Igbo people is built on core values and ethics such as taboos, sacrileges, equality, and honesty. Certain rituals are performed in course of reconciliation, where if the offence is outrageous, the defaulter is utterly banished such as killing of human beings. They place high premium on male children as custodians of culture and inhabitants of the “*obi*” (homestead). Igbo culture venerates nature which is believed to be inter-connected with “*Chiokike*” (god the creator).

As Katherine (2001) notes, “there is a strong Igbo belief that the spirits of one’s ancestors keep a constant watch over them, the living show appreciation for the dead and run to them for future wellbeing” (p.4). The Igbo people worship “*Chukwu*” and deserves to have their religious life correctly identified and labeled on their own cultural terms and relatives. It therefore, becomes necessarily mandatory, in order to stall further deterioration of these cultural beliefs and practices part of which being the ritual of cleansing and strict customary laws and situations.

Conclusion

The Nri town (Akampisi and Aguwu) is known for their role in cleansing abomination from time immemorial. They remain the custodians of moral values codes of conduct in the Igbo world from the ancient times. In the ritual of abomination cleansing, sacrifices of blood and libation are proffered. The researchers in their urge to intimate modern population and posterity with the principles from which the Igbo cultural heritage most of which are extinct were derived give an in-depth information on the cultural heritage of Igbo existence. The restoration of the dignity of man and the consequent preservations of his inalienable rights and privileges is inherent in the people’s traditional systems and laws; the sustenance of the people’s identity (cultural norms and values). These human factors are fundamental and seriously call for vitalization together with making conscious adroit and strict observance of the different aspects of the Igbo cultural heritage/institutions. As the older generation in the Igbo society, is passing to the great beyond, so also do the pre-literate sources of her cultural norms and values are being truncated and subsequently drifting more and more in the doldrums. It therefore, becomes necessarily mandatory, in order to stall further deterioration of these cultural beliefs and

practices part of which being the ritual of cleansing and strict customary laws and situations. To interact with well-knowledgeable elders of the Igbo society, from whose reservoir of experience, the younger generations can make extractions, with the resultant data, or information chronicled or recorded in prints for the continual absorption by aspirants, who will be in dire demand for them with time. There is hence a great need to extol and immortalize the principles guiding the Igbo culture for the necessary information and ultimate consumption by all future generations. People of the same cultural heritage or unit should exercise subsisting interest, understanding and drive over their own cultural bequeathals, thus promoting, fortifying, affirming and sustaining the integrity of their national identity as a corporate human group. Culture can be expounded as the sophistication of a people, their way of life, value system, habits, life-style, custom and tradition. On its own, custom is an orderly pattern of life, which a group of people or a community has developed and practiced over a long period of time. Customs and traditions on their parts constitute part and parcel of any group of people or community.

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