

PERSONALITY CULT AS A CULTURAL RESIDUUM IN AFRICA

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Abstract

The thrust of this paper is on personality cult as a cultural residuum in Africa. The idea of personality cult as known in the Igbo worldview (Africa) is that of the ancestors. The ancestors are the police of their individual families, who keep surveillance on their descendants. Though dead, they continuously participate in the holistic family activities. Viewing from this lens using observation and phenomenological methodology of study, it is pertinent to understand that different African countries inevitably had early fathers from religious to secular world who contributed immensely to the discovery and institutionalization of nation state. These personalities who supposed to be revered as forerunners of the nationhood have been subverted with modern personalities whose ideology and worldviews are quite strange to the national. This paper will highlight the position of ancestors in African Traditional Religion in order to establish the importance of personality cult in Africa. The essence of this is to restore the dignity of African personalities that have contributed towards nation building.

Key words: Ancestors/ancestor-hood; African Traditional Religion; Modernism; Cult and Cultural residuum

Introduction

The concept of personality is multi-disciplinary and cuts across different facets of life. Its length and breadth dovetail and galvanize the position of man who is invariably seen as the epicenter of development. A cult of personality or cult of leader according to https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/cult_of_personality “arises when a country’s regime or an individual uses the techniques of mass media, propaganda, the big lie, spectacle, the arts, patriotism, and government-organized demonstration and rallies to create an idealized, heroic, and worshipful image of a leader, often through unquestioning flattery and praise.” The personages of personality cult are men who distinguished themselves among their contemporaries. They are deified and revered. According to Metuh (1987:189) “man in African thought, presents itself as a cell, wrapping into one unit a number of life-forces all revolving around one nucleus-the self, the real man, which gives the whole complex both its name and direction.” Etymologically, man-*anthropos* of Greek derivative stands for both genders.

This follows that the cult of personality as will be elucidated in this paper comprises past heroes. According to Ifesieh (1976:129), the ancestors are:

Those highly honored; great, gentle, wise, faithful, influential parental guardians who were once genuinely respected as Dibuno/Dibiuno. Ndichie and by virtue of their children (begotten) and their activities became fathers of clan, villages and towns but have undergone a physical change (death) in their good matured and ripe ages but then are still “living” and are still members of their respective families.

From pre-colonial, post-colonial albeit modern era, the personality cult wields enormous religio-political prowess in re-engineering the society. The future of Africa is solely dependent on her past heroes hence without a proper review of the past events; one hardly deciphers the efficiency/efficacy of the present. This accentuates Igbo aphorism that says thus *adia ara isi aka agba urum*. The essence of this is to know and harmonize valuable qualities/traits inherent in the past to the present situation in life. In the pre-colonial Africa society, certain qualities were looked out for before deification. Bravery remains a salient quality that gains one a god-man position. The recent post-humors and honorary recognition bestowed the acclaimed winner of June 12, 1993 general election in the Federal Republic of Nigeria Chief M.K.O. Abiola, is a litmus test of the proceeding affirmation. Consequent upon, the current Nigerian government has embarked on a political hygiene pierced through the lens of African Traditional Religion which underscores the fact that high moral values must be maintained. According to Kress (1966) “political hygiene is a process by which politics as an activity is kept clean.” African pre-colonial society was religio-culturally, socio-economically, politically and economically subjugated by the colonial European government who only aimed on institutionalizing their personalities in place of Africa forebears. Owing to receptivity of Africans, the phenomenon of eulogy to political leaders, mostly the European characters crept into body polity and even religious domain. The black in their purview is evil and must be expunged. According to Picknett (2005) “the Mediterranean and Middle East witnessed a rapid and hysterical demote of their ancient gods – both male and female to the rank of demons in order that Christian myth on the Supremacy of the son Jesus Christ prevails.” The same case is found in the cult of Africa personalities (ancestors/ancestor-hood). It was this seed of discord cunningly baptized divide and rule that was imbued in the sinews and marrows of African descendants. According to Achebe (1958:124):

The Whiteman is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.

Invariably, since Africans contacted with the Europeans, there had been decay and opulent

decadence in the socio-political, religio-cultural, economic and even divine milieu of Africa because according to Ilogu (1974:201) “decay in ibo (sic) moral code started when Christianity preached directly against some ibo beliefs like the-spirit world of the ibo and the Earth goddess (Ala) and her sanctity around which a good deal in that moral code was built.” This is the genesis of our problem as we imbibe hook, line and sinker the European concomitants towards their cult of personality.

Definition of Concepts

For clarity, key terms to be defined are highlighted as follows: Ancestor/Ancestor-hood, Africa Traditional Religion, modernism, cult and cultural residuum. The ancestors are the police of their individual families, who keep surveillance on their descendants. Though dead, continue to participate in the holistic family activities. In Africa, there is a religion doggedly resisting the erosion of its value system by the influx and influence of modern religious ideologies. It is African Traditional Religion which is erroneously referred to as ancestor worship, juju or in other pejorative and despicable terms like primitive, salvage, native, fetish as erroneously used by the European anthropologist. It is an orally transmitted religion. Its belief, ethos and dogma are not written in a compiled chronicle but transmitted from one generation to another through arts, folklores, myths, pithy sayings, proverb, and personages of this religion through oral history. Modernism, a hysterical drift from the original could either come through inspiration within or contact from outside. In this epoch of modernism, just like in ancient and medieval era virtually every index responds to the rhythm of modernism hence only the source through all these emanate resists the force of modernism. There is no gainsaying that modernism has not influenced cult hence the word cult refers simply to “a system of religious beliefs and rituals or to that system’s body of adherents. More specifically, a cult is a particular form or pattern of ritual or worship. Thus, scholars and theologians refer to “the cult of the saints” or “the cult of the Virgin Mary”, meaning forms of worship dedicated to the adoration, service and honor of these persons or a deity. In a theological context, cult can mean a specific group outside that one accepted as primary by the speaker or writer; in this sense, some Christians consider Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses and other such firmly established groups to be cults (Richardson & Bowden 1983:137).” Cultural residuum comprises those vices in a society that impinge and obstruct the ontological order. It includes but not limited to bribery and corruption, nepotism, sacred cow syndrome, et cetera.

Personality Cult a Comparative Study

Historian Jan Plamper begins by outlining the history of the word “cult”, from its origins with religious and ritualistic usage in Ancient Roman times, to the semantic shift in meaning when coupled with secular referents during the Enlightenment and French Revolution. He

sees the Romantic era's "cult of Genius" as being the closest predecessors to the "cult of personality", manifesting in acts of appreciation, such as the erection of public status of Johann von Goethe and the holding of a Friedrich Schiller festival in 1839. Comparatively, in Africa worldview, similar respect is accorded the departed heroes. According to Ifesieh (1989:217): If they (Europeans) had the time, the patience, the will, the understanding needed of them to see the culture they were studying from inside (emic), Perhaps, they would have thought twice...they would have seen that it is natural and rooted in parental-filial relationship.

It was filial relationship that triggers the respect accorded to the ancestors – *Ndichie*. Moreover, these acts of reverence can equally be observed in other religio-political worldview of other nations and religions of the world. The Saints in Christianity are always beseeched to be benevolent on the protégé. That is why the protégé bears the name of the Saint (Patron Saint). This research therefore challenges our African theologians, religious scholars and traditional priests *Atama* as it is popularly known within the Nsukka Northern Igbo-land, to re-indoctrinate Africans, both Christians and non-Christians on the benefits of acknowledging impeccable personalities who master minded the institutions that make up the African society. A collection of these personalities will invariably make a history for Africa and challenge the stereotype, biased judgment of the ancestors (ATR) which in most cases make these persons appear more as foes to their descendants than friends. Significantly, the ancestors are benevolent, sagacious, protective and instructive when compared with the qualities inherent in most personality cults found in the world and therefore should be given a seat in the world hence, they serve as hub in the sustenance of Africa post-colonial society. Bizarrely, it still baffles my imagination that these Europeans after practicing deification of heroes in their worldview could not understand that ancestors were not worshipped as they assumed.

Personality cult, a cultural residuum, the term came to prominence in 1956, in Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech on the Cult of Personality and its consequences, given on the final day of the 20th congress of the Communist party of the Soviet Union.

Arising from the religious mood at the beginning of the twentieth century, modernism was a radical approach that yearned to revitalize the way modern civilization viewed life, art, politics and science. This change of attitude that flourished between 1900 and 1930 has, as its basis, the rejection of European culture for having become too corrupt, complacent and lethargic, ailing because it was bound by the artificialities of a society that was too preoccupied with image and too scared to change. According to Esposito et al (2006:4) "the last decades of the twentieth century brought a global religious resurgence, a development that defies countless theorists who predicted that the irresistible secularization of civilization would lead to the disappearance of religion." Consequently, the practice of personality cult

in Africa is as old as Africa itself. Just in the same light that different countries of the world deified their heroes, Africans genuinely respect and venerate *Ndichie* having lived good life, died good death and given befitting burial. The cult of saints in Christendom is crystal example of what the cult of personality in African “cult of ancestors” purports. In most cases, there are usurped auras that accompany these personalities which accord them teaming follower ship, ready at every point in time to shield and defend these personalities against their own whims and caprices.

In contemporary Africa political and religious world, we see these personalities in every nook and cranny. While some are self-acclaimed, there are still others who have really distinguished themselves through the characteristics exhibited and generally accepted universally as standards of cult of personality. “The cults are secular and anchored in popular sovereignty; their objects are all males; they target the entire population, not only the well-to-do or just the ruling class; they use mass media; and they exist where the mass media can be controlled enough to inhibit the introduction of “rival cults.” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/cult_of_personality)

The Role of Mass Media in Personality Cult

The Igbo people of Nigeria ethnic extraction in Africa communicated in the pre-colonial era and when there is urgency, they usually alert their people through the instrumentality of *Ikolo*. The words of Achebe (1986:23) “if war came suddenly to your town how you do call your men together, father of my mother? Do you wait till tomorrow? Do you not beat your *Ikolo*.” This lays credence to the fact that there was always a spontaneous response by the elders to ameliorate impending danger threatening the community. Through modernism which brought with it television, radio and other gadgets, Africans who are receptive to new development adopted this modern system of living. According to Ilogu (1974:91): through the various levels of educational facilities provided by the missions, the desire for, and the facilities for the technological practices of Europe, were gradually introduced into Ibo land (sic). It is this same way that the traditional system of disseminating information (mass media) invariably gave way for television, radio, newspaper, internet, social media et cetera. Be that as it may, the use of these modern gadgets became a homestead in various African homes. The subsequent political leaders have assumed a godlike position; they use these instruments in most cases, especially during electioneering period to ruin the image and personality of their opponent through propaganda. The mass media as two sides of the same coin can be positive or negative on the people. Positively, it has made information available to more people in spontaneous way and it has enabled individuals to spread their innovative idea to the world. It has equally been a strong weapon that great nations of the world use to pejoratively describe other developing nations especially when there is economic interest. This made Ike (2004:42) to opine that “the western media presents individualistic, free and independent view on information sharing.” According to Obawaya (2008:138):

The internet has become a very important tool in promoting co- operation among people of different parts of the world. This is known as information super highway; the internet has connected people all over the world and has helped in shrinking distances among people in the world.

The aforementioned has witnessed various degrees of abuse from both the political class and religious class respectively. It is not news that in most electioneering campaign processes, the incumbent political party buys up a television/radio station to air campaign jingles that are pejorative in meaning and thereby ridiculing the image of its opponent political party. Hate speech as the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria tags it is dangerous hence it incites genocide. This goes to say that the incessant strife in most Africa countries is inevitably based on “class struggle.” The cult of personality, having known the impending danger that gear towards political oblivion adopts propaganda to thwart the plans of their “political enemies.” Ike (2004:51) lent voice to the forging assertion by purporting that “Africa’s rulers are appointed thousands of kilometers from far off coasts by powers who are not Africans, often by an international gang of those who “call the shots of world global power at Paris, London, Spain, Washington, Saudi Arabia.”

Furthermore, the mass media and internet have made the world a global village. Through the internet, cult of personality in different continents of the world can be evaluated to know areas of enculturation and acculturation. This goes to say that the cult of ancestors is not totally different from what obtained in other nations even though the early missionaries were not patient enough to see from the emic point of view. It was filial relationship that triggers the respect accorded to the ancestors (cult of ancestors) – *ndichie*. Moreover, these acts of reverence can equally be found in the historical development of world political antecedents. The recent modernism with its indices of materialism and individualism has introduced into the system what Kalu (1987:13) referred to as “the small colonialist” who are cabal of nepotism. At the national level, they are inevitably “interest oriented” hence the *hoi poloi* (common man) in the society is bereaved of the proceeds of the government of the day and dividends of democracy where it is in practice. Through the mass media, despicable names are used for this rival group to send them into political oblivion or religious as case may be.

Convincingly, there is no gainsaying that a unilateral traditional African society which promotes lives and let live *egbe beru ugo beru* is the way forward to cushion the society and restore the dignity of African society which has been groping with western influence. The cult of ancestors in the pre-colonial era was basically aimed at protecting the family and the community at large against external aggression. It is regrettable that the post colonial cult of personality in Africa has developed and imbued the individualism policy that encourage corruption, nepotism, sectionalism, tribalism, ethnic bigotry which are residua to the culture of collective democracy propagated by the early political nationalists

which promoted nation building. According to Ike (2004:51) “with imposed rulers, the type with the tyranny exhibited in the image of the brutal British imposed Idi Amin Dada over Uganda; one sees what virtually all the parts of the continent have to contend with to this day.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research has meticulously studied personality cult, comparatively juxtaposed the cult of ancestors to personality cult of other world. The research discovered that the cult of ancestors as practiced in Africa prior to the adoption of modern ideology of personality cult which taught class system was/is a team of charismatic leaders who are deified. Their envious personality and numerous wisdom based on traditional reasoning and natural law, remain outstanding when brought on the same footing with the world enlisted cult of personalities like; Stalin, Mussolini, Hitler, Franco, Idi Amin, Pinochet, Pop Pot, Papa Doc, Vorster, Ian Smith and the many African dictators all of who, to mention but a few were no respecters of neither God nor man. Ancestors are custodians of value and morality which include but not limited to what Ike (2004) observed as:

the ability to celebrate life including spirituality, a sense of communal values, respect to elders, consensus-building, the extended family, the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation.

The Europeans should see through Africa lens what these established values are to the future of Africa, and carefully globalize the values for the betterment of humanity. Ike (2004) further maintained that “it would be Africa’s contribution in preparing the way for global sustainable development.”

More so, viewing from the undocumented nature of Africa Religion, the cult of ancestors being infused in Africa Traditional Religion, received the same quantity of blows from the European Olympia superiority. According to Odafe (2014:20) in Agbo unpublished (MA), “narratives in whatever form presuppose the awareness of emotion’s role in dealing with the past and in keeping memories alive.” Convincingly, the idea of personality cult was there in the pre-modern era as the cult of ancestors. When colonial masters invaded Africa, they swiftly enthroned their Olympia characters on these pre-modern Africa personalities and thereby bastardized Africa characters in obscene terms. It is imperative to understand personality cult through the lens of African wisdom calabash in Ike (2004) which purports: a free and mixed enterprise economy calabash; a participatory democracy and political pluralism calabash; a good governance calabash; and a cultural identity and integrity calabash.

The research concludes with Greene (1998:) affirmation which purports thus: Most people’s problems have complex causes: deep-rooted neurosis, interconnected social factors, roots

that go way back in time and are exceedingly hard to unravel. Few, however, have the patience to deal with this; most people want to hear that a simple solution will cure their problem. The ability to offer this kind of solution will give you great power and build you a following. Instead of the complicated explanations of real life, return to the primitive solutions of our ancestors, to good old country remedies, to mysterious panaceas.

Recommendations

- ❖ Members of personality cult (political and religious) should re-indoctrinate, train and retrain their exponents on proper ethos.
- ❖ Merit should be the watch word of personality cult. They should shun the culture of nepotism, bigotry and encourage the culture of meritocracy.
- ❖ Lip service followership for personal aggrandizement should be frowned at and severely punished when discovered to serve as a deterrent to prospective deviants.
- ❖ Religious and political leaders should discourage mystification of self and inculcate the spirit of Theocentrism in their followers.
- ❖ African political and religious leaders should shun sectionalism, tribalism and instill the virtues of respect, hard work, kindness, hospitality, truthfulness and rectitude, fear of gods and divinities.
- ❖ The mass media should maintain balance reportage in political and religious jingles to eschew hate speech or derogatory expressions

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