

UWEMEDIMO ATAKPO'S TREATMENT OF DECENTERED DEIFICATION AND INDETERMINATE RELIGIOSITY AMONG THE IBIBIO IN *EDISUA*

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Abstract

Professing one God, yet genuflecting on the altars of many gods is one of the problems that confronts the society in the contemporary era, which is recurring as a theme in both stage and film scripts. It reflects that the public disposition of fidelity to one God only to sneak to the altars of other gods for protection is orchestrated by the condition humankind confronts in their milieu. This habit rather portrays Ibibio people as unpredictable in their belief's system. In a qualitative research method, based on Frits Heider's Attribution Theory, this paper analyzes Uwemedimo Atakpo's portrayal of Ibibio society as polytheistic in their show of fidelity in one God only to disperse the fidelity to many gods in Edisua. Discussions reflect that many people savour their identification with one god but as adverse circumstances occur, they willfully switch to solicit for help with another god. Favourable situations rooted in material abundance and spiritual security encourage the maintenance of a single deity, while unfavourable human conditions would only induce people to spread their tentacles to many objects of faith which hold some promise to their plight. As long as challenges recur, outlets to surmount them would be explored. The paper concludes that the Ibibio people believe in one God but accept the existence and services of other gods as assistants to the supreme God. When drama captures a truth that shows depth in human nature, the promotion of the human faculty as a tool to serve humanity is appraised.

Keyword: Decentering, Deification, Ibibio, Indeterminacy, Religiosity

Introduction

The ruse in people's disposition towards the supernatural as the determinant of their fate has deepened the depth of concern for religiosity in the society. As human skirmishes with the social situations unfold, a galaxy of uncertainties erupts to heighten the disbelief in the potency of a single God. However, "the congregation needs signs and wonders in today's church.... Roaming for the supra-mundane bifurcates Christian faith" (Atakpo and Udofia 55). This has led to the constant portrayal of characters with the baroque disposition of unflinching fidelity to a single God in public that rather solve their life-challenging problems in secret by engaging alternative deities in the use of *juju*, oral-ghost medium, psychics, charms and even necromancy in contemporary Nigerian dramas and video films. This duplicity of religiosity agrees with the view of Edet Udo that "Christianity is not absolutely monotheistic" (241). There is need to reassess this public show of worshiping one God over the private practices of patronizing numerous gods as a character to condone or dissuade in the society.

Nonetheless, being that this ambivalent religiosity is constantly surfacing as a social motif in plays, attention should be given to the way Nigerian playwrights periscope the Nigeria's milieu on this subject. In *Little Drops*, for instance, Ahmed Yerima portrays Niger Deltans as Christian hypocrites who use Christian relics as mere ceremonial objects to induce public sentiment of being holy while their actual conviction of the supernatural lies in *Ebgesu*. In Wole Soyinka's *The Trial of Brother Jero*, Christianity is portrayed as a mere display of humorous gimmicks, where worshipers are bamboozled to exhaust their fortune in the hope of getting better in heaven in their poverty while the leader savours his heaven from the worshippers' fortune. In *Blood of a Stranger*, Dele Charley portrays religion as the arbiter of a

people's direction, yet deceitful. All these reflect the concern which dramatists are showing in the upheaval spurning forth from human attitude to God.

As children are born into a society today, many of them, like the children of Israel who never saw the miracles of Moses in Egypt, never confide in the marvels of the supernatural or feel the substance of God at work. They seem to acquiesce the benediction that God is their creator, the provider of their needs, and the protector of their lives with a pinch of salt. The reality they have come to embrace is that miracles are arranged or fixed to make many worshippers believe more in the man-of-God. To this effect, as church leaders intensify their crusade for the reality of miracles without identifiable substance, so do many members activate their antics of visiting traditional gods to materialize their miracles. The fidelity to Godhead gradually decentres as realized in the Ibibio society currently.

Examining the nature of challenges the Ibibio people face, and the means for which the challenges are tackled, their total fidelity to God begins to be doubtful. Take for instance, the role of the medium in divulging an impending evil plan, the reliance on *Mbiam* (deity of justice) to decide the truth in ambiguous controversy, the mysterious intervention of *Ekpo-nka-agwo* in the exposure of the adulterous woman, the potency of *Adung* (roots and herbs) in curing critical ailments which prayers are ineffective; all these problems, to the Ibibio, man seem to obey a different spiritual approach. More so, the history of the Ibibio seems to affect the way they approach spiritual things. According to Okon Ntia:

Customs and beliefs constituted one of the cultural bedrocks among Akwa Ibom people ... Among these customs and beliefs were 'Ekpo-Nkaowo, Ibet-ukot, Usioenyin ... Ukang, Mbiam, Idiong, Ifot, Idiok-mkpa, Abasi Ibom and Uduok-Ukot-Ikpa-isong etc. It was the duty of every Akwa Ibom man to obey the letter and spirit of these customs and beliefs in order to live long and enjoy all good things of life and avoid curses on themselves and others (114).

Beyond Ntia's position, Michael Haralambos, Martin Holborn and Robin Heald equally acknowledge that when believers fail to acquire riches in a world riches determine the grace of God, they can compromise their faith (417), while Onah Odey's implies that, the contact of one belief system with another may make both beliefs sects to adjust to trying the potency of the other (231). Therefore, believing in the powers they know can tackle these problems, and also sustaining fidelity to a supreme being they feel does not solve their problems is fact enough to presume decentered attitude from a people.

The treatment of this assertion by Ntia lays a direct linkage to the dimension Uwemedimo Atakpo presents the Ubani cosmos in his *Edisua*. More so, a playwright dubs his society into a creative piece to project his view in a situation first as an artist. For one thing, "the employment of art is in every way a fitting aid to nature; for it is the conjunction of the two which tend to ensure perfection" (Longinus 82). This paper discusses Atakpo portrayal of decentered Godhead and indeterminate religiosity of the Ibibio society in *Edisua*.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is "Attribution Theory", and it draws from the position of Frits Heider. The position of the theory is the every human activity is stimulated either by internal or external causes.

Attribution Theory has many contributors ranging from Frits Heider, Bernard Weiner, Herold Kelly and Albert Bandura. The focus of this paper is on the contribution of Heider. According to Em Griffin, "Heider said that attribution is a process of drawing inferences" (137). This suggests that the theory explains people's behaviour by attributing it to either external or internal situation in a fairly logical way (Synder and Higgins 404). This means that every human action is viewed to evolve from an internally orchestrated situation of a person undertaking it, or to have sprung from the social resonances that

radiate on the path of the person. To this effect, people who choose to displace their identification of faith and circumscribe their sincere devotion to the creator they know, may have been caused either by what they conceive of the creator that does not favour their scheme or what they themselves indulge in which repels the creator to their detriment. As an aspect of culture, attribution intersects the external and internal energies that set the human gears to accelerate towards the dimension of light, glory and success as conceived by the individual.

Attribution theory exposes internal instrument which activates the external factor that stimulates the internal drive to react. According to Godwin Ugal, the theory “attempts to summarize how we think about ourselves and others ... providing a better understanding of behaviour ... (and) identify some practical problems” (94). “Attribution refers to the process by which we infer the cause of our own and other people's behaviour” (Matsumoto and Juang 15). In the case of Ibibio, there is much reason for man to seek an alternative godhead to salvage his course. This is an open secret today.

Ibibio Society: An Historical View

Ibibio is an ethnic group in Nigeria found in Akwa Ibom State of the Niger Delta axis. It is also a major language spoken in the state. This people have always been linked to the Efik people of Cross Rivers State and the Igbo people in terms of origin and migration history to their present locale. Ibibio is often used to describe all the people of Akwa Ibom State. However, a remarkable distinction is presented thus:

The Ibibios are the largest ethnic group of coastal people from Southern Nigeria. They are divided into six sub cultural groups which are Eastern Ibibio, Western Ibibio, Northern Ibibio, Southern Ibibio, Delta Ibibio and Riverine Ibibio. The local governments constitute the following, Etinam, Ibesikpo Asutan, Ini, Ibiono Ibom, Itu, Mkpato-Enin, Nsit-Atai, Nsit-Ubium, Nsit Ibom, Uruan, Ikono, Uyo, Onna and Ikot Abasi. The Annang constitute the second largest ethnic groups in Akwa Ibom State (Ekanem *et al* 9-10).

Surprisingly, many of the historical claims seem to alienate the oneness in culture and political focus of the people with their neighbours. For instance, one history of the Ibibio people, according to F. Amoah “appears to have been oral tradition which tended to distort the fact of history. some unscrupulous chroniclers dare to rewrite the political-cultural history of the land, claiming origin from all kinds of bizarre and unauthenticated locations including Ghana, Ethiopia, Egypt, Zululand and so on (77).

Beyond this history, Ibibio is a renowned group in their rich oral culture and tradition which configures their notion of humanness, society, ritual and deity. This makes the Ibibio man more of a religious man than an atheist. According to Aniekan Nana, “the Ibibio concept of religion goes synonymously with her concept of sacrifice.... The Ibibio, like every other people easily perceive their imperfection.... As he has no explanation for them (it) then induces him to go in search of more security, long life, wealth and children” (121) hence the essence of inordinate quest for spiritual reliance on a deity or a set of them based on his single or multiple problems.

A typical Ibibio person sees the existence of a god in virtually everything around him. An Ibibio man knows that there is a god in the river, there is another in the farm; there is the god of the sun, and there is a god that guides children. So does hunting, leaf, medication, sickness and recovery as well as relationship with grandparents/grand-children, cognates and affines have a specific deity. In the idea of Patrick Ebewo, there is a deity for retribution in issues like concupiscence, manslaughter and falsehood in Ibibio land (12). These claims show the extent to which the Ibibio man conceives of his life, the society and the deities whom he reveres for fortune to exist.

Edisua: Synopsis

The author of the play is Uwemedimo Atakpo. He is professor of Film in the Department of Performing Arts, Akwa Ibom State University. The play was written and premiered in the University of Uyo. The Characters are basically Ibibio names. The main themes are religiosity and witchcraft, while the motif of betrayal reflects constantly.

The people of Ubani are hurtled by the new religion that has been introduced in their land. Mesembe, the Obong (Chief) of Ubani, is contemplating his position on relegating his custodianship of Ubani pantheon of gods to the background for the Christian faith that is flourishing in his locality. Asi, Yara Yuk's wife, saunters in and accuses Yara Yuk and his brother, Ebono, of using witchcraft to torment Edisua. Yara Yuk is informed to prepare to swear by *mbiammbubiam* at the shrine of *Atabrinyang*.

Yara Yuk has offered Edisua this time to the *Ekpenoi* coven witches. The presence of the church and their force repel the witches from taking her, and as it occurs, Yara Yuk is not willing to release Edisua, his daughter for a reason that Asi, his wife, has already raised alarm over it, being that he, on the other hand, is compelled by the coven to offer Edisua. The coven members fortify him to swear to *Mbiam* at *Atabrinyang* shrine to go unhurt.

The struggle to lynch Edisua by the wizards is stalled by the prayers and rituals of the church. As the wizards reinforce, NyaIta employs the service of Ekuriku who administers the charm of *Ekpebrenkang* while Asi solicits the services of the prophet and prophetess to do the same thing. Edisua cannot talk until the cord of her tongue which is in the coven is joined. As the battle to possess her thickens, *Edisua's* weapon of protection increases from Christian cross to pagan charm and both are hauled in unison to repel the witches. The witches fail and return to coven for re-enforcement.

All focus is on Yara Yuk's swearing of *mbiam*. The witches are bent on claiming Edisua. Asi, NyaIta, Ekuriku and the church are prepared to fight the witches and salvage Edisua. However, Okposi, one of the wizards, recalls that the Yuk's family is responsible for his poverty; and Yara Yuk, Ebono and Anwaofiong are Yuks. Okposi decides to avenge his ire by betraying the witches. He connives with Ekuriku and set the *Ekpenoi* force up to bring it to ridicule.

Yara Yuk swears by *mbiam* of *Atabrinyang* with pomp; Asi reminds Obong that she had indicted Ebono along with her husband. Ebono is compelled to swear without fortifying himself; a trap well laid perhaps from Okposi's axis. And on returning, the witches move to eat Edisua by regrouping at their coven.

Okposi has leaked all secrets to Ekuriku. They reinforce and wait on the *Ekpenoi* members. Anwaofiong, Asi's co-wife to Yara Yuk, is the wizards' general parading the already entrapped Ebono along with Okposi who has just betrayed them. This mission is spurned. They are caught and exposed. The witches are banished; Edisua lives.

Decentered Deification

Deification is synonymous to the word "divinization", which implies one attributing divinity to humans, spirits or objects viewed to play the role of the supra-mundane to one's satisfaction. According to Stephen Thomas, "the expression 'deification' and 'divinization' are translations of two Greek words found in the early Church Fathers: *theosis* (which) means 'the state of being a god' and *theopoiesis* (which) means 'being made into a god'" (7). The expression as drawn from its two Greek words denotes the acceptance of the potency of a specific godhead as the embodiment of the divine, omnipotent and omniscience with which the knowledge of good, evil and the retribution of grace is embedded. Deification, then, suggests ante reverencing an entity as one's maker. Decentered deification is the apportioning of the maker's signified to numerous entities, which Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne and

Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, see “scattered and dispersed (faith) among plurality” (220). Plurality explains “the idea that earthlings were placed on this planet by more highly-evolved humanoids..., higher beings- who have been monitoring our progress ever since” (Hunt 48). It is the humble acceptance of the mysterious as the force-fulcrum to both material and spiritual being capable of making or taking life at will, but subject to the appeasement of the devotees. Men think this way “when they feel they are being driven by God ... (or) when they feel they are fulfilling the will of God (for) immediate solution that will set things right” (Wright 418).

In Nigeria, for instance, the Yoruba people dislodge the compactness of the Supreme Being into many entities such as “The Creator”, “The Warrior”, “The Healer” and many others. In the Igbo society, godhead is dispersed also into numerous entities by numerous names still eliciting a deitic figure people worship as a God. Udosita Onunwa reflects that in Southern Igbo, God's name is *Chineke* which downplays *Chukwu*, an old name for God, “Tsuku”; and that it was a kind of force that dwelled somewhere in Igboland as an oracle. Missionaries shunned the nomenclature, *Chukwu*, to avoid aligning their carry-come God with *Orochuckwo* deity of divination. North-Eastern and Cross River Igbo call God *Obasi-di-n'elu*, and *Obasi* is adulterated from Efik/Ibibio *Abasi*. *Ezechitoke* is another name used by the Igbos who dwell near Igala. Many names denote possible many ideas still pointing to a supreme deity (167-168). In the same vein, Ntia writes that Akwa Ibom people believe in many things thus:

Akwa Ibom people believe in the existence of the supreme God... sorcery, soothsaying, prophecy or visioning process and practices... that all objects have soul... the existence of spirit to control man's earthly world... the existence of cosmological and terrestrial elements and their control by an echelon of beings ranging in power from the God of heaven or sky to the lowest material elements called deities (148-149).

On the other hand, the expression, *Dei*, or *Deux* is a Latin word for the maker or God which is the same thing as deity (en.m.wikipedia.org). The *dei* factor is the consummate of man's faith. Where many *dei* factors are implied, a decentered deification is the case. Such is found in Uwemedimo Atakpo's *Edisua*. This idea is implied in Mesembe's speech in these lines:

MESEMBE: Nting ken nting, nyikkenyik... our ancestors, it is you I call. You are witnesses to this invasion of our land by these white skin gods and their church... can the church solve our problem? (*Edisua*1).

Mesembe fears to flirt over to another “dei” figure in his speech, implying that the one who can solve “our problem” is worth identifying faith with. Thus, 'decentredness' of deification is reinforced by fear of what may occur and pose a challenge in Ibibio society.

The need to curtail sorrow is another reason for decentered deification in *Edisua*. This is captured in Asambi and Mesembe's dialogue thus:

ASAMBI: I have told you many times to let us try this new church... afteral (*sic*), we have spent a fortune on sorcerers and juju priest to no avail...

MESEMBE: That is enough... it is not our fault that we cannot have male children. We still have to try. I have sent my friend, Ekuriku... to consult the oracle of *Atabrinyang*... please,

leave me alone. You can go to your church if you like...
(*Edisua* 2).

Mesembe finds it hard to shift the fidelity of his faith to a new deity but Asambi who has a problem of childlessness can shift to any favourable one. Another instance of such decentered deification is found even among wizards. Atakpo portrays it thus:

EBONO: Now for the business of tonight; Yara Yuk has faltered...
EKPAT: He is one of us. At a trying time like this, we do not have to abandon him.

ANWAOFIONG: We will perform the rites of transition immediately so that he can swear before *Atabrinyang* tomorrow.

OKPOSI: What do we change his name to?

EBONO: Okpotoitiat... (*Edisua*13).

In this scenario, Yara Yuk will be subjected to the *mbiammbubiam* ordeal, another object of faith that ratifies purity in judgment; but he must be transmogrified (his soul must be changed) to be a different soul in facing *mbiam*. This act is a dispersal of affinity to an object of faith. A remarkable decentered deification is portrayed in these characters.

NYAITA: Please wise one, what shall I do? The whole Ubani know your magical prowess. I too know... but I must confess that at times, I am so confused.
EKURIKU: Why?
NYAITA: Because I cannot understand why this should happen... please help me save her life...
EKURIKU: Do you realize what that may cost you? (*Edisua*23/24)
NYAITA: I want her alive... Oh God, why am I to suffer like this? (*Edisua* 25).

In this conversation, Ekuriku is a witch-doctor, NyaIta wants his service of charms and rituals to save Edisua, his wife. He wants charms to be ministered and he is equally calling Christian God (the almighty God) again to help either save Edisua or help to make the charm meant to save Edisua to be effective. This is a typical attitude of the Ibibio man in his theism. He believes in one God; but he also confides in many gods.

In many occasions, assistance and relieve that may not have a clear logical interpretation may surface for a typical Ibibio man; the entity to arrogate the credit of assist may be vague. The vagueness of whom to give the glory is portrayed in these lines:

ASI: God forbid! Oh God, why should this happen to me?...
Yara Yuk must be questioned... this must be the last he shall eat.
1st VILLAGER: Have you told Ekuriku about this?
NYAITA: Yes, the charm she has now was given by him. It is the charm otherwise she should have died tonight.
ASI: It must be the cross, don't you know that witches fear

crosses (*sic*).
NYAITA: It can be either of them (*Edisua* 28).

In a situation as Atakpo portrays above, a morass of distrust may make a believer in a god to swerve to alternative one. It is a typical situation with Christians. In Christianity, there is assurance of life, health, protection and wealth but they still die like unbelievers, suffer horrible ailments, tangle in problems and stroll around impecunious (Cornwell 251).

Indeterminate Religiosity

Religiosity is the sentiment one reflects towards the object of one's faith. Religiosity and religion, in the view of Dan Brown vary in the sense that religion gives assurance of salvation, incites the beliefs in a specific theology, and reinforces the drive to convert other people to also have the same belief (42) while religiosity is an attitude of humility eliciting "the human liberty (to worship) and self-expression" (Hutton 255), and the unperturbed alacrity to indulge in the belief. To Plato, religiosity elicits humility "to obey (doctrinal) orders and endure in silence... To do so... one must not give way or retreat" (53). Religiosity becomes a calm fellowship, humility and fidelity to the context of religion while the uncertainty of repose suggests a quirk of confidence in a deity, hence indeterminate religiosity.

In *Edisua* various actions, interactions and interplays of character showcasing this indeterminacy in the sustenance of one's total confidence in a supreme factor are portrayed. One of which is captured in these dialogues:

MESEMBE: It is the custom of our people to ask anyone accused of such a crime to deny such charges before MBIAM. Lately, it has not been effective. The other method of testing IFOT has also been blocked (*Edisua*5).

Here, the Chief has expressed a panoramic view of Ibibio religious adherents. No one is certain of a total surrender to an entity. But as condition, when challenges and a dark cloud set in, the people are willing to place their fidelity elsewhere to solve the problem.

Another instance of indeterminate religiosity is portrayed in this dialogue:

NYAITA: Ekuriku is doing the rites tomorrow to loosen her tongue... (*Edisua tries to mime her relationship with the witches...*)
1ST VILAGER: This house is unsafe for her tonight. Let us take her to Ekuriku's house.
ASI: Edisua must be taken to the church. I bore her. If she dies there, at least her soul will go to heaven.
NYAITA: You and your church. If she dies, I will be the loser I married her and (*sic*)...
OKPOSI: I think Asi is right. Let us take her to the church (*There is a knock: Asi goes to the door. The prophet, prophetess and two members enter*).
ASI: You are welcome, holy prophet... please save my daughter (*Edisua* 28-29).

In this case neither Asi nor Nya Ita is sure of whose altar Edisua should be taken to for refuge against the witches. Asi assumes Christian altar; Nya Ita, traditional altar; villager, traditional altar; a witch, Christian altar. Indeterminacy on which deity one should willfully surrender to especially in a time of distress is typical of the Ibibio people.

When Christians are caught in such indeterminacy, it is at night or when people do not see them that they

sneak into the hut of a seer, a native doctor, a witch doctor or whomever their instinct centres. In some situations, a Christian can openly profess her solidarity to *juju* if it salvages him or her. Atakpo, portrays such indeterminate religiosity thus:

ASI: NyaIta, please don't just sit there, do something. Ekuriku said he would come back and see her.
NYAITA: I wanted to go and see him. But he said I should bring some money. I have spent all I had.
ASI: Money at this time should not be any barrier ...
NYAITA: I always had confidence in Ekuriku... But I would be so confused at a time ...
ASI; The prophet said...
NYAITA: You and prophet! He is too smooth-talking and everyone now wants money. Church or charms... to me is the same...
 (Edisua 48).

Asi has been advocating surrendering to God in church when people are around. Now in a tete-a-tete with her son-in-law, it is Ekuriku (*juju*) she is confiding for protection. She accuses Yara Yuk of witch hunting her daughter, and it is *mbiam* that handles the problem. Above all, it is *juju* with the full assistance of an offended wizard, who chooses to divulge the secret of the coven, that resolves the conflict of the play. This is the reflection of an Ibibio cosmos. Difficult situations such as power, job opportunity, deteriorating health situation, instant money, love portion, charm for improved business, potent medicine for protection – many of such are also got from alternative sources away from the church but the testimonies are openly arrogated to the Almighty God for making such good ways open to humanity. On this quirk of fidelity, John Hinnels writes that “people will always hold the belief that the physical world is animated by supernatural powers... (and that) inventing supernatural forces to explain natural phenomena” (30). When a thing is not identifiable through the five senses, it is believed people believe in its existence, this may result to even believing in a part or manifestation of God in trees, waters, air or wall-geckos.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Edisua*, has shown imitative art as human-centre. It has also reflected the role of the playwright as a social critic towards life regeneration for a better living. The paper has identified Ibibio people as polytheistic, and has identified the various instances fidelity to a single deity is spurned and diversified. When a play portrays the society and stimulates responses with the aptness that generates concern for humanity, the role of the playwright is set on motion. This is the case in UwemedimoAtakpo. However, in *Edisua*, it is human condition in Ibibio land that determines what people believe in.

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