ISSN: 978-978-48450-4-5 (Online & Print) Website: http://www.jmel.com.ng
JMEL - Journal of Modern European Languages And Literatures Vol. 4 July 2015

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF IGBO DIVINITIES: A CASE STUDY OF DIVINITIES IN OGBUNIKE

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Abstract

Igbo Traditional society is full of many belief systems. One among them is the belief in divinities. In the past, there used to be a very strong belief and veneration of these divinities in Igbo land. Today, people's knowledge of divinities is fading away as the elders who know and believe in them and who are the store-house of the knowledge about divinities are dying away. Consequently researchers will in future find it difficult to discuss about divinities meaningfully. To obviate this, there is a crying need to document things concerning divinities hence, this research on divinities in Ogbunike to show their taxonomy, sexes, and gender differential roles within and outside the community where they exists. Problems and prospects of divinities in Ogbunike will be investigated and suggestions and recommendations will be given. This will be a documentation of divinity veneration in Ogbunike for posterity.

Introduction

"Divinity is the state of things that come from a supernatural power or deity, such as god. A being having divine attributes, ranking below God but above humans" (Hornby, 2005:428). Such beings are regarded as divine due to their transcendental origins and or their attributes or qualities are superior or supreme relative to things on the earth. Dating back to the period of the pre-colonial era, it has been observed that Igbo people held tenaciously to the traditions of their forefathers. They were ready to die for their traditions in the event of any person trying to demean those traditions. That was why

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Okonkwo of Umuofia in "Things Fall Apart", Achebe (1958:184) fought Christianity to the core when it came with foreign traditions to destabilize his own traditions. He went to the extent of killing one of the Christian members.

Veneration of divinities by communities in Igbo culture area was one of the main trusts of Igbo tradition. Each community tried and got its own divinities both minor and major ones and assigned certain functions to them. They knew their origins, functions, sexes and gender differential roles. These divinities contributed in no small measure in holding each community together and people accorded them recognition and respect. Today, it is a different story because of many factors. Thus people no longer recognize and respect their divinities. There is an Igbo adage which has it that "Onye kpaa qba ya mkpumkpu agbataobi ewere ya kpoo ntu" This means that if one handles one's property carelessly, one's neighbour will use it to pack waste materials. This has been the case of Igbo people toward their traditional and cultural life. The rate with which the Igbo traditional belief is deteriorating calls for urgent attention because it is a signal that there is an impending danger in future.

Igbo belief towards the divinities has been strong in the past until the coming of the Whiteman. With their coming, new religion called "Christianity" was introduced and this has brought a devastating effect in the Igbo traditional belief system. Since that time, Igbo people have been dangling between two opinions on what to uphold, whether the traditions of their fore-fathers or that of the Whiteman. Since then there has been a lot of compromise and unfaithfulness towards what they believed. They are neither Christians nor Traditionalists.

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Nature of Divinities

The Igbo people believe in a supreme God who keeps watch over his creatures from a distance. He seldom interferes in the affairs of human beings. No sacrifices are made directly to him. However, he is seen as the ultimate receiver of sacrifices made to the minor gods. To distinguish him from the minor gods he is called Chukwu—the great or the high god. As the creator of everything, he is called Chukwu Abiama.

There are also minor gods, who are generally subject to human passions and weaknesses. They may be kind, hospitable, and industrious; at other times they are treacherous, unmerciful, and envious. These minor gods include Ala, the earth goddess. She is associated with fertility, both of human beings and of the land. Anyanwu is the sun god who makes crops and trees grow. Igwe is the sky god, the source of rain.

Many authors have written many things about the existence and nature of God and divinities. Among them is Ogbalu (nd. 45) who says:

> "Chukwu" is often said to mean "Chi uku" that is great God as distinct from small ones. These small ones are certainly not idols. They are "chi", the personal god of a man or a woman. They, like God Himself were not represented in any form or shape as was the case with idols.

Ogbalu is saying that there is a supreme God called "Chukwu" who is the creator of all beings, in addition to other small gods, but these small gods are not idols (arxs[) but are called "chi" (personal god). He further says that the "chi" resembles the supreme God because they do not have images which represent them.

In the same vein Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004:37) opine that:

> It is important to observe that the Africans believe in the existence of two worlds the visible, tangible and material world which was inhabited by God's creatures and the invisible, intangible and

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immaterial world inhabited by the Supreme Being and His other spiritual agents (divinities), spirits and deities.

The authors go further saying that these divinities have the qualities of the Supreme Being (God), and that they were brought into being for definite purposes. They also say that the Supreme Being is recognized by all minor divinities as the power whereas the divinities constitute a powerful nucleus in the supersensible world. And to avoid disasters and misfortunes, man has to be in right relation with them. Man does this by offering sacrifices to propitiate them. This is why man makes sacrifices to appease gods whenever he commits any offence against any god.

Still on the nature of divinities Ilogu (1974:34) observes "Next to "Chineke" in terms of power and authority is pantheon of gods: Anyanwu (the sun god), Igwe (the sky god), Amadioha (the god of thunder and lightning) and Ala (the earth goddess)". All these he says, are groups under primordial divinities. Ilogu confirms that apart from the Supreme Being (God), there exist other major and minor gods created by God to serve Him.

Origin of Divinities in Ogbunike

The origin of divinities in Ogbunike cannot be categorically stated because the fore-fathers who established them had lived over five hundred thousand years before the present generation. As there were no written records it is therefore not possible to state the date of their origin. This is true as no one has ever seen any of the divinities and it is

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difficult to mould or describe what one has never seen. This supports the claim of Ogbalu (nd.:46) when he remarks that:

> Legend and Myths themselves are scanty and only a few have anything to do with God. It was considered as serving no useful purpose to man's life or existence to talk or enquire as to origin or form of God. This sums up the Igbo man's attitude to most of baffling questions about creation, origin and nature of the universe.

What Ogbalu is saying is that there aren't enough legends and myths that say something about God or divinities because people considered it a waste of time for the created to inquire into the origin of his creator. This was the reason why people do not have many legends and myths that discussed something about the origin of invisible beings which predate man.

On his own part, Opoko (1978:54) adds that divinities are created by God to perform different kinds of roles assigned to them by the creator. According to him, divinities did not just start to exist on their own rather, they were created and as one of the created things they have limited powers but no one knows when they were created. Onwuejeogwu (1981:34) also opines that divinities are created by God and that they are invisible to human eye.

Despite all these points to prove that the origin of divinities cannot be stated, it was surprised to state that the origin of one of the divinities in Ogbunike was known. A reliable source Elder Ubadigbo Uzuegbunam (now late) says that "Aro" in Ogbunike originated in 1938 when there was epidemic spread of small pox (kitikpa) in Ogbunike. He stated that a Nando medicine man was invited by Ogbunike elders to prepare the antidote which stopped the spread of the small pox. After the eradication of the disease, people then put the antidote inside a clay pot and preserved it. It was kept in every village

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square of Ogbunike and a day was fixed for the remembrance of the help of the antidote every year. Based on this veneration accorded to the small pox antidote, the medicine was deified and given the name "Aro". Also a market was established in honour of the divinity, and was named "Eke-Aro".

Taxonomy of Divinities in Ogbunike

Divinities in Ogbunike are grouped into two, major and minor divinities.

Major Divinities include:

- Olisa:
- Ksa
- ogba
- Aro
- Ogwugwu

Minor Divinities include:

- Ekwo
- Okwubido
- Nensi
- Akpa

Gender Differential Roles of Divinities in Ogbunike

It was discovered that all the divinities in Ogbunike play their roles based on their gender differences. These are the divinities and the different roles they play in Ogbunike.

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***Olisa:** This is one of the divinities that was venerated in the past. The origin was not known. It is a male divinity and a god of protection whose function is to protect the entire community from danger. It is no longer venerated, it has been abandoned.

***K[sa:** The origin of this divinity is not known. It is a male divinity and a god of justice. It has a totem which is being represented by a tortoise. It's function is to bring justice among the Ogbunike people. K[sa is still venerated in Ogbunike today.

***Ogba:** The origin of Ogba is also not known. It is a male god and also functions as god of justice. Its main function as a male god is to pass judgments on evil doers. It is said that anybody that commits evil and denies would be taken there for judgment. If the person is guilty, he or she must be punished but if the person is found guiltless, Ogba would vindicate him or her. This function of Ogba is akin to what Ilogu (1974:34-35) said about Amadioha. He said that Amadioha is a god of justice which God uses to execute judgment on evildoers. It is still under veneration.

***Aro:** This god is said to have originated in 1938. It is a male god and its function is to protect the people from all kinds of problems, mostly from war and diseases. The disease called "kitikpa" (small pox) which it helped to eradicate in Ogbunike is always the weapon it uses to fight evildoers. A story was told about one woman who lost her selling cup in the market and asked Aro to help her search for it. The woman did not know that, while she was packing up her items, she packed the cup inside her bag. When she got home and was unpacking her load, she saw the cup but she did not go back to report to Aro that she had found the cup. While Aro was searching for the cup it came to the woman's house and saw it. He gave the woman two chances to report about her lost and found cup by offering some sacrifice but the woman did not. On the third time, Aro gave her a slap which sent small pox all over her body. After three days, the woman died. Aro is equivalent to "Enyo", the goddess of war Carlos (nd. 205). Aro is still venerated in Ogbunike.

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***Ogwugwu:** The origin of Ogwugwu is not known. It is a male divinity and a god of protection. Its masculine function is to protect the people of Ogbunike from all kinds of danger especially from disease. A feast called "Edeogwugwu is usually celebrated in its honour. Ogwugwu is still venerated in Ogbunike.

***Ekwo:** It is a goddess whose origin is not known. Its feminine function is to procreate. It is a goddess in charge of child bearing and it was called "Ekwo ogwugwu". It gives children to barren women and helps them during the time of labour. Ekwo in Ogbunike is akin to "Ala". Many authors, Ogbalu (nd.:45); Ilogu (1974:34-35) and Ugwu & Ugwueye (2004:39), all see "Ala" as a goddess in charge of child bearing. Ekwo is no longer venerated today in Ogbunike.

***Okwubido:** This is a male god whose origin is not known. It is a god of protection. It is named "Okwubido because of its masculine function, which was to stand and withhold any evil coming into the town. It would not allow any evil to cross its shrine which was at the entrance of the town. It was said that in the time past, nobody entered into the town with any evil charm because "Okwubido" would not allow it. It was said that, that was why people lived longer in the past than they do these days because "Okwubido" is no longer there to fight evil charms that people use against their fellowmen. "Okwubido is no longer venerated in Ogbunike.

***Nensi:** The origin of this god is unknown. It is a male god which is being represented these days by a masquerade known as "Enweaka" (A masquerade without hands). It is a special god in one of the villages in Ogbunike called "Azu". It is a god of justice and

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good fortune. "Azu" people still venerate it in the month of February every year to usher in New Year and to declare good fortune to them.

***Akpa:** This is a very minor god whose origin is not known. It is a male god. It has long been abandoned and therefore its function is not known.

Problems and Prospects of Divinities in Ogbunike

The problems of divinities in Ogbunike which came to light are:

(i) The introduction of Christianity: The coming of the white man and the introduction of Christianity in Ogbunike in 1894 affected the traditional belief in divinities immensely and therefore played down the significance of Ogbunike traditional belief system. This is in line with the view of Basden (1982:299) when he says, "Christianity is injurious to family life and affection, it introduces elements of discord; leads to disloyalty to rulers and want of respect to elders". Similarly, Egeonu in line with Basden's opinion posits, "Christianity set its face against anything that was remotely traditional, so that it tended to destroy much of the indigenous way of life.

(ii) The western civilization and religion has resulted in new way of thinking and attitude to social life of the people. The introduction of the urban and industrial area has made many people, especially youths in Ogbunike, to leave the village norms for urban area. In the urban area, they copy the tradition and culture of other people easily neglecting their own culture and traditions. For instance, girls and women put on trousers and boys plait their hairs and put on

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ear rings in the name of fashion. This is in line with what Ilogu (1978:91) observes and says,

> A preference for the European way of life was being indirectly built up in the minds of the Igbo, who already have had a cultural inclination towards adaptation to change by the enlargement of its "open society" system with variable new introduction.

(iii) The people of Ogbunike are not proud of practicing their traditional belief these days. This is why those that patronize the diviners and medicine men pay them visits only in the night instead of day time. They do this in order to avoid criticism or condemnation from their fellow Christian worshippers.

(iv) Another problem is that the genuine priests and priestesses of divinities in Ogbunike are phasing out and sometimes those to replace them are not available because they had either gone to school or learnt new trade. There are today in Ogbunike divinities without priests and priestesses and some shrines of such divinities had been overgrown by weeds.

Prospects of Divinities in Ogbunike

One of the most difficult issues bothering educated scholars in Ogbunike is whether Ogbunike traditional beliefs had a future or not. This fear arose when they saw the rate at which Ogbunike people are being attracted to new Christianity just as other towns in Igbo land. In the 18th century, the whole people of Ogbunike were born into Ogbunike traditional belief system, which was the only belief known to the people. Everybody

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practiced it right from birth. But a serious wave in religious change blew across Igbo land, which brought about a change in the life of the people of Ogbunike.

Christianity, Western Education and Islamic Religion were brought into Ogbunike. These succeeded in pushing the traditional belief to the background thereby making it unpopular among the people. This had directly and indirectly affected the belief, faith and trust in their divinities. As they had not full grip of the new religion, there arose a wave of moral decay. In support of this, Ilogu (1974:201) says, "Decay in Igbo moral code started when Christianity preached directly against some Igbo beliefs like the "spirit-world" of the Igbo and the "earth goddess" (Ala) and her sanctity around which a good deal in that moral code was built".

There are two opinions on the prospects of divinities in Ogbunike. The first is the opinion that Ogbunike divinities will continue to exist. It was observed that those that were of this view supported their view with the following points:

(1) There has been a new growing awareness of the need to keep and preserve the beliefs of Igbo fore-fathers. This has appeared in the school curriculum from primary to tertiary levels in Anambra State. With the teaching of Igbo language, literature and culture, the belief system of the Ogbunike people would be kept alive, thereby ensuring a bright future for it. This is in line with the opinion of Ugwu & Ugwueye (2004:127) which says, "The study of traditional religion has appeared on the school curriculum in recent years… at the university, apart from

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the Department of Religious Studies, the Traditional Religion occupies a prominent place in the Institute of African Studies".

(2) In addition, adherents of Christian and Islamic Religions do patronize traditional religion because they do go to diviners and herbalists for divination and healing respectively. The people believe in foreign religion outwardly but their heart is with traditional religion. When they have problems of sickness and witchcraft, they do go to the diviners and medicine men for help.

(3) Moreso, there had been an interest shown by the traditional medicine healers which had been recognized by government. Their herbal and root medicine is under research work in Western Medical Laboratories. In many Igbo town Traditional Healers Associations have attracted governmental recognition. In some cases, traditional healers work side by side with orthodox medical doctors (Ugwu & Ugwueye; 2004:239).

On the other opinion that the future of divinities in Ogbunike is blurred was supported by the following points:

(1) That the western education that had come along with foreign religion was higher and more sophisticated than traditional values. Because of the education people had, there had been a different attitude or approach to complex issues pertaining to their physical and spiritual well being. Some explanation for certain issue in human life such as killing of twins were regarded as superstitious. This has weakened the belief in some elements of Ogbunike belief in divinities. Consequently the traditional way of life was considered primitive and crude. On this Ilogu (1974:69) says:

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> …the children who went to school were unable to participate in the activities of their age sets life initiation into the masquerade societies, learning the social and cultic dances and the various acolyte duties associated with the various celebrations, sacrifices and the public worship of clan and family gods.

(2) There had been a national recognition for the foreign religions which traditional religion does not have. For example, Christmas and Easter, for Christians and Id-Elfitri and Id-Elkabir for Muslims had become national events for public holidays while Igbo Traditional religion has not even a single federal recognition.

(3) Moreover, there are no pastors, reverends, evangelists, fathers, sisters, brothers, prophets and prophetesses to propagate the belief of divinities in Ogbunike so as to fight back the foreign religions and regain her lost adherent.

(4) Some of the spiritual, Pentecostal, celestial churches and others had taken over some of the functions of the traditional religion, thus making it redundant. Many of the ancient practices and customers are found in some of the churches such as dancing, singing, clapping and drumming. The functions of the magicians, diviners and the medicine men had been largely taken over by them. They give oracles and perform miracles. Prophets among them give vision and interpret dreams.

(5) Furthermore, one is the success of western medicine in dealing with tropical diseases had seriously undermined the traditional way of curing and healing diseases. The western backed health care delivery system with its emphasis on curative and preventive medicine had led to a new hope and security of life and people of Ogbunike had left traditional medicine for the western.

Despite the views of these groups, it was discovered that belief in divinities in Ogbunike would not die or fade away very easily as it takes time for culture to do so.

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Conclusion

Veneration of divinities in Ogbunike was one of the main trusts of Igbo tradition. Each village in Ogbunike had a very strong belief in these divinities in the past. But today, peoples' belief and trust in them is fading away because of the presence of Christianity, which make them to have divided loyalty on the two religions. It was because of this reason that the writer embarked on the study of divinities in Ogbunike firstly, to make a documentation on Ogbunike divinities so that the future generation will know about them, even when it will seem that those who know about them might have died and secondly to make Ogbunike people to be steadfast in whatever they believe. This work therefore upholds that whatever that is worth doing, is worth doing well. For this reason, Ogbunike people should stop dangling between two opinions on what to uphold. They should stop the life of ambivalence towards what they believe and choose between the two options- Traditional religion or Christianity.

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