

SACRED *ISIOGBA* TRIENNIAL CELEBRATION IN EGWU ACHI, ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

*The purpose of this study is to examine the correlate of a traditional festivity and civilization in the contemporary period. This is an account of the religious festival and ceremony of Egwu people of Achi in Oji River Local Government Area, Enugu State, Nigeria. The work was carried out through interview of the Chief Priest and also through secondary sources, including review of relevant literature. The work combines history, religion and culture of the people of Egwu Achi. It discusses a Sacred River, *Isiogba*, which festival is observed every three years. The sacred river is a centre of offering and ceremony. The ancestors are expected to listen to prayers and supplications of their offspring and bless them with good health, wealth, good fortune and success. The festival which lasts for three days is a time for prayers, wishes, expectations, and thanksgiving. The time-tested festival is known for yielding results by way of answered prayers. The study finds out the uniqueness of the celebration which makes it to be retained even in this contemporary time. It concludes by stating that the pragmatic result of the festival and ceremony is not in doubt; the testimonies are very many.*

Keywords: Igbo Culture, Festival, *Isiogba*, Egwu Achi, Sacred River

1.1 Introduction

Human beings are by nature religious. This ontological nature of man knows no race, colour, creed, background, or even geography. In most things they do, they always reserve a place for religious belief. This assertion about man is however, predominant in Africa. Despite modern science and contemporary civilization, including the inroads made by globalization, Africans remain predominantly religious. Man's inclination towards religion is intricately connected with his existential deficiencies. This deficient appearance of man has long ago been argued by Blaise Pascal. According to Pascal, in his book *Pensees* (1968), man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and that is the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this. Thus all dignity consists in thought. It is on thought that we must depend for our recovery, not on space and time, which we could never fill. Let us then strive to think well. This thinking well brought man to the recognition of the idea and the knowledge of God, hence the birth of religion. Aside from thinking and reasoning, human beings would have resembled lower animals. The difference between man and animals is his religious thinking. Knowing his deficiencies, limits, weaknesses, man employed his thinking faculty to address his numerous existential challenges, one of which is depending and relying on higher spiritual force, God, for survival.

It is unarguable that only man is religious among all beings. Omoregbe (1993) argues that 'religion' derives from three Latin words as its roots, namely, *Ligare* (meaning to bind), *Relegere* (meaning to unite, or to link), and *Religio* (meaning relationship), thus the etymology of the word 'religion' shows that it is essentially a relationship, a link established between two persons, namely, the human person and the divine person believed to exist. It is something that links or unites man with a transcendent being, a deity, believed to exist and worshiped by man. But while religion is human and universal, Africans are unarguably extremely religious. According to Mbiti (1982), African religion is not found

in sacred books, but as a living religion, it is written in the lives of the people. African religion is also theistic. It is strongly believed that there exists a supreme being who can help in times of trouble, who answers all prayers and supplications, and who accepts sacrifices made to appease him. Mbiti (1982) states that all African peoples believe in god. The belief may have arisen from people's reflections concerning the universe. African religion prides in festivals and sacred places. Belief in spirits; unseen beings. African religion is theistic; Africans believe in personal God. There is hardly any atheist in Africa, that is, no one who does not have knowledge of a supreme deity. Theistic religions are also ways of life. It controls activities.

All religious thought is shaped by its cultural context (White, Baimel, and Norenzayan, 2021). Culture shapes life. Every people have their culture. Culture is all that we find guiding language, religion, morals, food, building, even burial. African religion is founded and is operated on African cultural milieu (Ogbujah, 2014).

Some integral pillars of African religion are festivals and sacred places (Acquah, 2011). Festivals are an important approach to worshipping, praying and supplications made to the gods, deities, and to God Almighty (Ndemanu, 2018). In fact Africans so much believe in spirits and the spirit realm. Spirits permeate the thinking and activities of average Africans (Ndemanu, 2018). God is a spirit, there are ancestors who are spirits, and there are spirits that permeate rivers, forests, land, crops, rain, sun, etc (Bojuwoye, 2013). During festivals, honour is directed to whomsoever it is due. Africans know which deity, spirit, gods, to render sacrifice, appease, and celebrate, during any festival. Festivals are inherited from African forebears (Kanu and Okoye, 2023). Festivals are part of African offspring from their forebears (Kanu and Okoye, 2023). That accounts for the importance attached to festivals. Mbiti (1982) observes that Africa has a very rich heritage of what past generations of African peoples thought, did, experienced and passed on to their children. This heritage forms a long line which links African forefathers with their descendants who now feel proud of it. All festivals are held in remembrance of something that happened in the time past. Festivals are integral part of African religion (Ndubuisi, 2018). They are celebrated during harvest, planting, hunting, fishing, victory, coronation, and many more.

African festivals and worships, often times take place in sacred places. Africans recognize sacred places. Most sacred places are for worship. According to Goring (1995) sacred (Latin: *sacrum*), means a sacred place belonging to a god. It has also been seen in terms of what it was: separate, holy, awesome, and remote. Sacred religious places abound in Africa. Every African people have its religious places. They are not for common or careless use, because they are considered to be sacred or holy. Some of them are man-made and others are taken over in their natural form. Natural places are set apart as religious places by common belief, practice and consent in the area concerned (Mbiti, 1982). Most sacred places are natural in nature, not man-made. Of the natural places used for religious purposes include groves and forests, trees, waterfalls, rivers, lakes, rocks and mountains. They are symbolically the meeting-point between the heavens or sky and the earth, and therefore of invisible and visible worlds. People use them for rituals, ceremonies, sacrifices, offerings, and praying (Mbiti, 1982). People also make vows there. Vow is a solemn promise to perform some offering or gift or enter some service or condition: a pledge.

Sacred places are not only African tradition. Most religions have their sacred places. These may be called altar, tabernacle, shrines, or synagogue. Religious minded people and believers go on pilgrimage; they do so to visit holy sites-sacred places. Locally, we have what people call mountain (prayer ground, miracle centre) where people go to offer prayers. There are also assembly halls and camp grounds, where people meet, at times once in a year. In these places prayers are offered, offerings given, tithes paid, vows made, sacrifices offered, and gratitude offered to God.

1.2 Understanding the meaning of Religion

According to Omoregbe (1993), the etymology of religion shows that it is essentially a relationship, a link established between two persons, namely, the human person and the divine person believed to exist. It is something that links or unites man with a transcendent being, a deity, believed to exist and worshiped by man. Whether such a deity exists or is simply the figment of the imagination of the

religious man is not important to the concept of religion, as long as the deity is really believed by the religious man to actually exist. For him the deity is a reality. Religious practices show how people express their beliefs in particular terms. They include praying, making sacrifices and offerings, performing ceremonies and rituals, observing various customs, and so on. Festivals are normally joyful occasions when people sing, dance, eat and celebrate a particular occasion or event. For example, there are festivals to mark harvest time, the start of the rainy season, the birth of a child, and victory over enemies. According to Mbiti (1969), Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. A study of these religious systems is, therefore, ultimately a study of the peoples themselves in all the complexities of both traditional and modern life. For Mbiti (1982), Africa has a very rich heritage of what past generations of African peoples thought, did, experienced and passed on to their children. This heritage forms a long line which links African forefathers with their descendants who now feel proud of it.

In her book, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (1981), Smart writes that throughout history and beyond in the dark recesses of men's earliest cultures, religion has been a vital and pervasive feature of human life. Accordingly, to understand human history and human life, it is necessary to understand religion, and in the contemporary world one must understand other nation's ideologies and faith in order to grasp the meaning of life as seen from perspectives often very different from our own.

But religion is not something one can see. It is true that there are temples, ceremonies, religious art. These can be seen, but their significance needs to be approached through inner life of those who use these externals. Consider the ceremony of baptizing a baby. How can we understand it, save by knowing what the idea of baptism means to Christians and by knowing what the hopes and feelings of those who participate in the occasion? We must see the way in which externals and inner meanings of religion are fused together. This is why history of religion must be more than the chronicling of events: it must also be an attempt to enter into the meaning of those events. We must also penetrate into the hearts and minds of those who have been involved in that history.

1.3 Healing Waters and Role of Rivers in Man's Existential Sojourn

There is a popular saying that 'water is life'. Afrobeat maestro Fela Anikulapo Kuti, once sang that 'water has no enemy'. The Holy Writer also refers Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity as the Living water. There are instances where rivers played healing, life-saving roles. Naaman the leper washed in River Jordan to get healed. Human hygiene cannot be effective without the use of water (United Nations, 2023). Even the world is said to be occupied by water more than land. The importance of water cannot therefore be over-emphasized. Water from rain, creeks, rivers, oceans, seas, rocks, spring, and even dews, is water and has surpassing uses. One cannot therefore afford not to believe in the healing and life-saving capacity of water. Rivers are also essential for water supply since they seem to be accessible and closer to human settlements. Water is therefore man's best and the sustainer of the physical life such that it is claimed that no human being can live without water. Therefore, reverence to water and its source are not out of place for mankind who knows the importance of this life-saving and life-sustaining liquid.

2 Achi – A Historical Perspective

Achi is a clan located in Enugu State, in Southeastern Nigeria (Alchetron, 2024). *Achi* is the largest town in Oji River Local Government Area of Enugu State (Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias, 2024). *Achi* town is made up of 12 villages (Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias, 2024). There are 6 villages in the northern section of the town and 6 villages in the southern section making 12 villages in all. Villages of *Achi*: 1. Elugwu Nkpokoro 2. Amankpunto 3. Isikwe 4. Agbadala 5. Egwu 6. Ehuhe 7. Adu 8. Umumba (Ogu) 9. Ihe 10. Amaetiti 11. Elugwu Akwu 12. Ahani. *Achi* people, right from the advent of Western education cherishes knowledge and learning. There are several primary schools in *Achi* with all 12 villages having at least one primary school. The oldest Secondary educational institutions in *Achi* include Corpus Christi College (founded in 1960) and Girls Secondary School (founded in 1962). Also found in *Achi* is Savory Memorial Seminary, an Anglican Seminary owned by Diocese of Oji-River, Anglican Communion (Alchetron, 2024). Another popular institution

is the Achi Joint Hospital, which is a fairly old hospital (Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias, 2024). For several years, it was and perhaps is still the best hospital in what used to be known as Awgu division in the then East Central State (Alchetron, 2024). There is a fairly old institution known as Achi Farm School (founded around 1960). The institution has for several years been training agricultural extension officers who are currently scattered all over eastern Nigeria (Alchetron, 2024).

3 Methodology

The work was carried out through interview. The result emanated from extensive interview and interaction the researcher had with the Chief Priest of *Isiogba* Sacred River, the custodian of the religious cultural practices of the people, Mr. Nwanorom Ohagwa. The interview and interaction extended to people of various age and gender, including background, status and calling. While the time of the celebration and festival was being waited, the researcher had time to interact with a cross section of the people, some of whom have travelled far to participate in the religious ‘pilgrimage’ of sort. At the end of the festival, the researcher also took some time to engage the participants on their perception and experiences. This also afforded the opportunity for clarification and better understanding of this occasion which the people have always regarded highly. Most of the observations in the work are therefore eye witness of the occasion that comes every three years and lasts for three days.

4.1 *Isiogba*: A Healing River

Isiogba is a river. Like every other river, it supplies water and other resources. As a river, it helps plants and grasses around it to survive and remain lush. However, as a river with healing power, it is a special kind of river. It serves the Egwu Achi people the purpose which River Nile serves the Egyptians, which River Jordan served the Israelites. The spirit or the deity that holds the *Isiogba* is symbolized as a woman. The symbolism of a woman, like Ala, the earth goddess, shows how useful and important it is. Woman is motherhood. Mothers are: loving, caring, multiplying, and sustaining. *Isiogba* also symbolizes neatness and cleanness. Nobody fishes in *Isiogba*, no dirt is allowed in *Isiogba*. Unclean people will never be allowed to approach *Isiogba*. Water from *Isiogba* is clean, always clean and ever clean. *Isiogba* accepts only white fowl as sacrificial offering. This underscores neatness and cleanness. The Chief Priest of *Isiogba* does not eat cassava. He does not eat cassava products, including the popular *abacha*. This is because he is seen to be different from the rest of the people. It is taboo if he eats cassava.

4.2 *Isiogba* Celebration: Historical Perspective and Meaning

Isiogba has become a name that evokes awe in people who are aware of it. When *Isiogba* is mentioned, what enters the minds of the informed is glad tidings, expectations of good things to come. *Isiogba* and the celebration that accompanies it has become an occasion that people will always look forward to attending and participating. Diaries have been painted in anticipation of *Isiogba*; calendars have been painted as reminder; alarms have been set to remind many of the time and date; while many have had a place reserved in their retentive memory for that time, even when it is every three years. That shows how important the celebration has come to become with the people. People wish to be there; many wish it is yearly. This celebration is not only for those at home. It has attracted those far and wide, the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the haves and the have-nots.

Isiogba is *Iyi*, a river. Although it is a river, it is a river that is more than a river. According to Chief Priest Nwanorom Ohagwu, *Isiogba* is a river of rivers, a special river, a healing river, a river of no equal sort. It is a river that serves many purposes: physical, mystical, material, and spiritual. It serves the primary purpose of supplying water to those who need portable water for drinking, for cooking and washing (domestic chores), for irrigation, animal, for cleansing, among others. But of more importance is the spiritual, cultural, and social, and by implication, economic purposes. In this study however, *Isiogba* is prominent for spiritual purpose. *Isiogba* is prominent for healing, for answered prayers, for relating with the ancestors, for votive offering/deposit; for vows, and for sacrifices. *Isiogba*, and its accompanying celebration reminds one of the legacies of our fore-fathers, of ancestors, of the deities, and of God almighty. *Isiogba* silences the Biblical doubting Thomases and rekindles the faith in the efficacy of water for which the Bible is prominent. For that reason, *Isiogba* unites Christians and African traditional worshippers. Jesus is the living water. Water is life. The spring of life, Jesus, is the

living water. The healing power of water is both Biblical and universal. *Isiogba* represents and confirms that the efficacy of water in healing, and in relating with the other-worldly. River *Isiogba* admits no plastic or iron buckets. It is taboo and therefore abhorred. *Isiogba* accepts only earthenware (*iteuro*) or gourde (*ebele*). These are natural water receptacles. One can however, fetch water with the earthenware or gourde and then empty such in plastic or iron buckets which must be kept far from the river. *Isiogba* is sparkling, neat, naturally purified, and naturally refreshing. Its healing power is attributed to the purity with which the gods have made it.

4.3 *Isiogba* Triennial Celebration: Discussion

Isiogba triennial celebration, as the name implies is a celebration that takes place every three years and lasts for three days. It is a celebration handed over to the sons and daughters of Egwu Achi. Egwu Achi sons and daughters look forward to the celebration every three years. It reminds them of the heritage bequeathed to them by their forebears for which they have no regret. This time, River *Isiogba* will be a Mecca of some sort. Everyone wants to be part of the celebration. It is a celebration and a year many sons and daughters of the land always expect. The year of the celebration is always a special year; and important year for that. The celebration takes place immediately after New Yam festival. It is a celebration of thanksgiving. It is a special time set aside for gratitude. When people's prayers are answered, wishes come through, and desires and expectations met, it is normal and human to show gratitude to the person through whom things come to pass. In this case, it is *Chukwu Okike, Chineke*, that is, God Almighty, through a medium which He has made available. It is also a time to make requests to God for blessing and for meeting future expectations. There is always a need in human existence. The need must be met, not by man who is a mortal and weak, but by a higher being who is omniscient, omnipresent, and all powerful. This personality is God. And since He has everything, mortals go to Him on a regular basis for help. This is always by way of prayers and supplications.

People whose prayers are answered come to show gratitude. They thank God for answered-prayers. As human beings, they ask for more. Of course, human existence presents challenges on a regular basis. So man's existential milieu is fraught with problems and challenges such that no period passes without something bothering or troubling man. Between the past celebration and the present, people may have given birth to children, made profit in business, got new and better contracts, got jobs, and many other blessings for which they have been praying and making supplications, believing it to come to pass. There are those who wish to be successful in their endeavours. Besides, those who have survived till that period do not withhold their thanksgiving because not all that witnessed one live to witness another. All come for the celebration of *Isiogba* to make request to Almighty God through the deity, *Isiogba*. Young, old, men, women, married, single, widow, widower, no one is left out; no one is exempted. It does not also matter the 'Foreign' religion one subscribes to: Christianity, Islam, and many others. The Sacred *Isiogba* Triennial celebration is not discriminatory. It is rather accommodating, irrespective of the plural nature of modern society. Even in these days of condemnation, no indigene has openly spoken in condemnation of the celebration. Even those who do not actually participate do not have something against it.

The celebration is always marked with pomp and pageantry. People dress gorgeously, in their clean and neat apparels. Most importantly, it is a day for prayers, of request from God, a solemn and sober period when God is expected to visit His children through the Minister represented by Sacred *Isiogba*. The people must be neat to visit *Isiogba* which is neat and clean. There is always a lot of eating and drinking, merry making, dancing, rejoicing. The climax of the celebration is a visit to the river. The Sacred River has a lot to offer. Drinking from it, dipping hand and leg into it has a lot of healing power. Every three years, during the celebration, people long to visit the river. Testimonies are rife of people who have received blessing after each celebration. Approaching the river, led by the Chief Priest, with music and dancing, and loud prayers and supplications, with cannon fire and loud ovation, one must remove shoes, men remove top dresses, women not to be menstruating. Fetching water will not require buckets or plastic containers. It only requires clay pots. Because the river is clean, everybody visiting it must also be clean, in and out, as it were. On the day of this celebration, there would be no Masquerades, no eggs, and no quarrel.

The most important lesson in the Sacred *Isiogba* festival, with its attendant ceremony is pragmatism. Pragmatism is a philosophy that is associated with the real, that is, there for all to see; that which is working; that which there is evidence. One of the strongest evidence is in its survival and continuation even after many years, and by ancestors we do not know. If it is not producing 'cash value' it would have been discarded and dumped into the dustbin of history. There are evidences of answered prayers, of progress, promotion, elevation, increase, successful marriage, successful business, and many more. The many testimonies go to show that the *Chukwu Okike* who is always appeased and venerated and prayed to is always answering, and positively too.

5 Findings

The indigenes of Egwu Achi have over the ages continued their festival with its attendant ceremonies at the Sacred *Isiogba* River. Three years seem to them to be three days. They keep in expectation of it. It is not for nothing that the religious festival have continued and endured over the years. The reason is intricately connected to African Religion. African religion functions more on a communal than on an individual basis. Its beliefs are held by the community; therefore it does not matter much whether or not the individual accepts all these beliefs. The ceremonies are performed mainly in or by a group of the family, by relatives, by the whole population of one area or by those engaged in a common occupation.

Religion is an essential part of the way of life of each people. Its influence covers all of life, from before the birth of a person to long after he has died. People find it useful and meaningful in their lives, and therefore they let it spread freely. They teach it informally to their children through conversation, proverbs and through participating in religious activities, such as ceremonies, festivals, rituals and so on. Since African religion belongs to the people, no individual member of society concerned can stand apart and reject the whole of his people's religion. To do so would mean to cut himself off from the total life of his people. Even if the individual is converted to another religion, this should not mean abandoning his African culture altogether. Some of the world religions like Christianity and Islam have founders who started them. This is not the case with African religion. It evolved slowly through many centuries, as people responded to the situations of their life and reflected upon their experiences. Just as there were no founders of African religion, there have been no reformers, preachers or missionaries to change it, improve it, or take it overseas to other continents. The Bible is the sacred book of Christianity, and the Qur'an is the book of Islam. African religion has no scriptures or holy books. It is written in the history, the hearts and experiences of the people. Having no scriptures, it has been able to move with the times, and it has produced no religious controversies. People are free to hold different views and beliefs without the danger of being accused of heresy or falsehood.

6 Conclusion

Sacred *Isiogba* triennial celebration has been a celebration that has lasted for years. Yet the celebration has not changed, nor has it been corrupted by the modern civilization. No one living today will say when it all started. It is a culture that has been left for the offspring of Egwu Achi people and they have lived up to it. The Chief Priesthood is inherited from generation to generation. The celebration is a day of rejoicing, of thanksgiving, of expectation of good things, of great expectations, and of glad tidings that are to happen in the no-distant future. This is the reason that over many years, the celebration has not ceased. Rather, year after year, it has grown from strength to strength; its awareness being made wider and far-reaching even in the age of social media, despite the challenges of Christianity and modernism. It is also noted that the celebration has been accepted beyond the boundaries of Egwu Achi. Those who are aware are always taking the advantage. No wise Egwu Achi son or daughter takes the sacred *Isiogba* festival for granted. The reason is that prayers are answered and wishes are realized. The pragmatic result of the festival and ceremony is not in doubt. No one deceives anybody. The result is always there for all to see.

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