

IGBO MYSTICAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES: A TRADO-RELIGIOUS ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

A study of the mystical emphasizes that there is something far greater at work in this life than just what sensory organs can see, hear, taste, touch and smell. Man is aware that the spirit is ever present and ready to assist in every endeavor that he undertakes. This mystical presence is the boundless source of inspiration and support. The study employed both the primary and secondary methods of data collection. The collected data were analyzed using phenomenological approach that enables the researcher to investigate into the preconceived assumptions of people about the mystical beliefs and practices. Literature for the work was drawn from books, journals, articles, and internet. The work observed that man seemed to be ignorant of the mystical phenomena around him. Those who are knowledgeable, exploit the powers for their selfish end. Therefore man should understand the implications of the mystical aspect of life for the restoration and sustenance of moral principles in the Igbo religio-cultural area.

Introduction

The classroom explanation of belief would sparsely give the basic answers to endless quests for the mysteries involved in life existence. It is believed that the mystical practices of the Igbo people have not yet been thoroughly surveyed. Because of that, man focuses on the ceremonial aspect of religion more than the mystical. By so doing, man jumps from one deity to another in his quest for the solution to existential challenges, which he could not secure from the ritualized aspect of religion.

Religious reciprocity tends to explain the purpose of craze for the miraculous in religious rituals. Reciprocity is simply the idea of give and take (offering something in order to gain something). This is the foremost primary basis for religious practices. Mystical encounters involve also contact with sacred objects but with some metaphysical entities which an ordinary eyes may not see. This paper tries to trace the mystical aspect of Igbo religious beliefs and practices, which had long been ignored by the adherents. Some of these beliefs and practices include: *ilo-uwa*, *Amosu* (Witchcraft), *Igba-afa* (divination), *Ogwu* (amulet), psychic attack/defense, *Agwu* (possessing spirit), *Oje-na-muo* (etheric traveling), *Oha miri* (rain making), *Ihi anumanu* (shapeshifters / therianthropy).

Religious Reciprocity

Religious experiences are made manifest in the carving of religious images of worship as tools through which man commune with the transcendental beings. The practical aspects involve, the pouring of invocation, libation, curse, divination, rain making, enchantment, rogation, psychic projection/attack, Witchcraft scourge and so forth.

These are kinds of practical approaches to the mystical aspects of religion. Man establishes these for the purpose of resolving unending problems. But, whereby the problems are not sorted

out, the tendency of discarding that particular idol or deity and pitch tent in another is obviously evident. Reciprocity is akin to duality or law of opposite. The belief that religion is a two-way affair is very common in Igbo culture and tradition. The study on karma reveals that, give and take is the law of nature. If one person keeps giving and another is always at the receiving, it does not match with the law of nature. This aspect of reciprocity is highly enshrined in religious culture (Vivekavani, 2018).

Reciprocity is part of communal life of African people despite their various life predicaments (Mligo, 2021). The idea of reciprocity is captured further in the Igbo proverbial expression of *aka nri kwoo aka ekpe, aka ekpe akwoo aka nri* (if the right hand washes the left hand, the left hand in turn washes the right hand); *oko koba madu ojekwuru madu ibe ya* (if one has desires, he goes to his fellow man). These two-way approaches in religion are allied to the law of opposites and dualities of life whereby every created being has its opposing part. In life, these dualities are opposing and complimenting each other. Examples include night and day; male and female; health and illness; poverty and wealth etc. People find themselves in certain pleasant or awful situations like suffering and delight, misfortunes and fortune, poverty and wealth, sickness and health, or even physical defects and wholeness without rational explanations or causes to such challenges or advancements. Man faces these conditions in turns. It is either he is sorrowing today or he is enjoying and vice versa. The cause of these situations fall back to man's behavior.

An Igbo expression goes thus, *ife onye metalu oburu* (whatever a man sows, that he reaps). This follows the laws of opposites whereby goodness follows good deeds and in turn, misfortune follows bad deed. These are the polarities and dualities believed to be in constant confrontation with man. When such confrontations occur, man becomes helpless and depends on the transcendental beings for redemption. The transcendental beings indicate that beings and its spiritual properties are present in each of the predicaments or categories, such as substance, quantity, quality, relation, time, action space etc. the transcendental has to do with spiritual, non-physical world. The involvement in transcendental ritual in life is known as esotericism, which has to do with things that can only be understood by an inner circle of people, those with an in-depth knowledge of an incomprehensible object.

Esotericism in Igbo Traditional Religion

Following the principle of duality, man by nature is made up of two parts – body and soul (physical and spiritual). The spiritual nature of man tends to control the physical part but it appears suppressed or neglected. The spiritual aspect of man is engaged in the performance of extraordinary feats like witchcraft, Divination (*Afa*), *Ihi anumanu* (shape-shifters / therianthropy), art of disappearance, bi-location with such abilities as healing power, precognition, superhuman agility etc.

One of such individuals who performed such esoteric feat was Okedibia Chinwuba Onumba of Aguleri, one of the greatest diviners (*dibia afa*) of his time who stunned the law enforcement agents with his art of mystical dexterity on *afa* divination. He was one of the first to be given the *dibia* licence and certificate by the British government. He was challenged by the British officials to decipher the number of seeds inside (*okwe*) a melon pod. He did not disappoint as he invoked the spirit of *afa* (*agwu*) and other preliminary rituals that enhance the exactitude of the *afa*-seeds. He mentioned that the pod contains seven seeds. When the pod was cut open, it was discovered that the exact seven number of seeds he revealed were contained therein. There are those who developed the esoteric skill of etheric travelling (*oje-na-muo*), of healing, of

rainmaking (*iha miri*), of psychic attack and defence/ protection, of ritual sacrifices and witchcraft etc. Such people need no locomotive means to travel nor allow rain to disrupt certain functions (if consulted) as the astral plane (ether) avails them the esoteric energy needed.

The idea of shape-shifters / therianthropy (*ihl anumanu*), or “*were-creatures*” or werewolf is known by some Igbo individuals which still exist in some parts of Igbo like Nnewi, Aguata areas. Therianthropy is the ability to physically transform oneself through an inherently superhuman ability. A person might transform into a wolf, lion, goat or other kinds of animals reliant on the particular initiation. The person does this either purposely or under spell or affliction with the transformations occurring on the night of a full moon. The possibility of a *werewolf* suggests that man could be triggered to take up animal forms as determined by the concept of “therianthropy” believed to be the ability of an individual to metamorphose into animals or hybrids by means of shape shifting. Some are also in the category of zoanthropy (a state in which a person believes himself changed into an animal and act like one). Therians are individuals who believe that they are non-human animals in a non biological sense. The animal, which a therian identifies as is known as theriotype. This phenomenon is known by some community as ‘shifting’. Shift can vary indefinitely in the length of time for which they are experienced, and the intensity with which they are felt.

Skills and memories abound on how our fore-fathers were able to accomplish their successes through their mystical knowledge and innate ideas. The Igbo man is among the range of groups that have practiced esotericism and are still proficient in the art. Esotericists developed forms of belief that contrasted with that of Christianity, although there are those who practice mysticism in Christianity.

Most people in our society today are mystics, some possess the power of auricular, while some are gifted with the talent of soothsaying, clairvoyant. Some of these mystics are ‘mediums’ reputedly able to make contact with the world of the spirit. Others have a special gift allowing them to see ghost or talk to the dead especially while in a state of trance. Such esoteric power most often is beyond their control. While in a trance state, one of the known mystic by name Edger Cayce possess the ability to peer into the past with uncanny psychic accuracy in a trance state, which he demonstrated repeatedly. This type of information is called “retro-cognition” and the psychic readings attest to the variety of material available in this manner: previous happenings in an individual's life, including accidents or forgotten traumas; as well as ancient history, including the geological evolution of the planet and details of tribes and civilizations that predate recorded history. Trance state is believed as readings, “everyone is psychic because psychic is of the soul. The Igbo believed that man is constantly receiving guidance and help from the esoteric realm, dreams, telepathy, and countless other types of messages from above” (Cayce, 1986)

Psychic Attack and Self-Defense

It is unfortunate that the contemporary society have forgotten their state as divine beings and are ignorant of the esoteric knowledge as a way to escape life’s troubles; and because individuals are seen as sparks of the divine and being ignorant of their mystical powers, they are trapped in the material world. Instead of seeking the path of the divine, they tangle themselves in the material world believing it to be the reality. It is a task to awaken the psychic consciousness in man and use it provide a wealth of insights into the mysteries of life and boundless source of inspiration and help.

Fortune (1930) buttresses on the psychic attacks and its self-defense. Within these pages are to be found amazing revelations concerning black lodges, the methods employed by man in making a psychic attack, motives for psychic attack, operations of telepathic suggestion and detailed instruction for the defense against esoteric attacks (p.172). In addition, Fortune (1930) deals with vampirism and where to look out for vampire (witchcraft) marks, projection of etheric body, and the substances used in black magic (p.33).

The search for esoteric knowledge of man leads the Westerners into such groups as Rosicrucianism in the 16th century and in the eighteenth and nineteenth century the emergence of Freemasonry across Europe and North America. Through the twentieth century, the movement spawned by Freemasonry produced hundreds of groups though many are relatively small, but collectively they existed as a loosely connected social movement. This movement saw itself as possessing a handful of ancient mysteries that accessed and spoke of past events in an individual's life as well as ancient history.

Agwu

The traditional belief of the Igbo people is that *agwu* is of the category of spirits created by *Chukwu Okike* (the creator God). Arinze (1970) calls it “the Igbo patron deity of healers and divination” (p.121). According to Achebe (1988), *agwu* is also known as the god of poets, healing, confusion and divine madness. It expresses intellectual and volitive faculties and is believed to exert immense influence in human affairs. *Agwu* as an *afa* life-force is the spirit possession of an individual. Every *dibia* offers prayer to *agwu* every morning soon after rising. *Agwu* plays the role of disclosure, disseminate information and exposes the nature of a problem being investigated. It is the *dibia*, with the help of *agwu* that explains the real divine situation since man cannot go beyond the physical. In the words of Umeh (1997), “whoever is possessed by *agwu* is infused with the pure sacred spirit and conferred with great knowledge and wisdom and potent powers” (p.85). He refers to *agwu* as second to God (the Holy Spirit). Onwuejeogwu (1981) states that, *Agwu* is the ambivalent supernatural force associated with divination and revealer of the secret of the invisible world to traditional men called *dibia* in the mystical code of divination called *afa*. Umeh (1997) reiterates that *agwu* is a spirit that shuns evil and so, the Igbo *dibia* frowns at evil even at extreme provocation, but possesses the knowledge of destructive forces.

Esotericism also involves the use of of *ogwu*. *Ogwu* in Igbo is ambiguous and means different things depending on the usage. Our concern here is the esoteric aspect, the art of enchantment, conjuring or sleight of hand requiring manual dexterity. In the days of old, when the norms of the land were still valued and the *dibia* stood the test of integrity, *ogwu* was very potent compare to what the later day *dibia* whose stock in trade is supposed to be nothing but to consult the deities in times of trouble and further delineate the solution of the looming problem. In the case of rain charmer, (*dibia oha miri*), who can cause rain to fall when there are rain clouds, or cause the clouds to move to another zone to deposit their burden of rain. He may not be an adept, but belongs to the Igbo occult world. The founder of the cult is not known and may had been an adept. The secret formula or ritual becomes a family heritage which can be transmitted through initiation. The rain charming ritual is effective when performed by the correct person (one who has been initiated by birth or through a ceremony) using the correct objects, in the correct mood and under normal circumstances. The rain charmer depends a lot on the occult theory of the “doctrine of signatures” about which everything external in nature points to something internal (R C Arazu, personal communication, June 19, 2020). Many rain charmers possess the rain stone (*mkpume miri*) supposed to be a deposit from the devastating

power of lighting. So much myth has been built around this stone. R Arazu (personal communication, June 20, 2020) added that “a rain charmer could even bring about rain by crying”.

Wicca – Witchcraft

Witchcraft, which has a special place in the history of the Westerners is another esoteric movement known even to the Igbo people. Scholars refers to it as a craft known to the initiates alone. The experience of most people on witchcraft has raised lots of doubts among the people and many do laugh at the whole idea, just as the agnostic would sneer at a Christian ritual of exorcism. Witchcraft is part of black magic. It is traditionally, the exercise or invocation of alleged supernatural powers to control people or events, practices typically involving sorcery or magic. There was a sporadic rise of witches and wizards in the fifteenth century when Pope Innocent VIII issued his notorious Bull, which specifically mentioned sorcerers and witches as enemies of the Christian religion who must be eliminated. Under the inquisitors, the most potent exorcism was to burn the witch who traffics with the demon on the stake (Arazu: 2003). These days, the practice of witchcraft has become an open cult used to terrorize and subject the people to untold hardships. A lot are using the esoteric knowledge to effect individual gains. Arazu (2003) reiterates that there are two main categories of witchcraft phenomenon, “the white and black witch or wizard” (p.83). He states that “the Latin adage *abusus non tollit usum* (the abuse does not eliminate the use of a thing) is valid for witchcraft. He maintains that what makes a witch, a witch, is the witch substance, which according to him is not inherently evil” (p. 83). Witchcraft can be used to enhance human potential to achieve extraordinary feats for the progress of the community. Those with such capability is referred to as white witches or wizards. Witchcraft operation is made possible through the use of the astral body beyond the physical, in the dream or trance field. Witchcraft operates mainly during sleep or trance as the case may be on both the operator and the victim. In the words of Arazu (2003), “it is only in sleep or trance state that the consciousness is switched on to the subtle body which is then used to save or harm some other astral body” (p. 86).

The black witches are the opposite of white witches who go about harming and hurting people and creating unnecessary tension to man. This phenomenon has been a nightmare to people that they dread even to cross a path with any suspected member. Arazu (2003), clears the air on this:

There is no amount of exorcism that can drive out witchcraft because the person involved is not possessed by any spirit or thing. In the case of witchcraft, there is something the person has taken through the mouth and that thing is the witch substance. One can also get initiated by those in the cult. With the help of this substance they can engage in extra sensory activities. At the appropriate time in the night the person goes out especially through the top of the head – a case of astral travels (p.89)

A witch goes into dream consciously and by working with the astral body is able to accomplish a lot of feats. A black witch always goes after blood – a life force. In the case of vampires, what they suck is not the physical blood but the ectoplasm of the blood. The ectoplasm is the magnetic life energy contained in the blood. This is what the witch or wizard sucks in order to recharge his/her life force or energy field (Arazu, 2003).

Esoteric Art Possession

Mbiti (1969) in Odozor (2019), asserts that there is a mystical order of the universe. This is to say that Africans believe in the efficacy of a mystical, invisible, hidden, spiritual force in the

universe, which they invoke and evoke through sacrifices, enchantment, rituals, sorcery, charms and so on. The power flows from the transcendental down to man for it is possessed hierarchically by the divinities.

Mbiti (1969) believes that “access to this power is hierarchical in the sense that God has most and absolute control over it; the spirits and the living dead have portions of it; and some human beings know how to tap, manipulate and use some of it”.

This esoteric force is not handed over or taught to uninitiates for they know not the values and implications. The Igbo adage has it that if by mistake an uninitiate has access to the art of charm making, then humanity will be in trouble (*ofeke maulu ogwu, madu agwu*). Those to whom this power or force is accessible to can use it for both good and harm, such as healing, rainmaking, witchcraft and sorcery. The efficacy of this power is dependent on the manner of acquisition and application. In most cases, those who possess this power innately are strong and better practitioners.

Assessment of Beliefs and Practices in the Life of the Igbo and Concluding Reflections

The belief in the unified view of reality has awakened the esoteric consciousness of the Igbo that every act is viewed from the angle of the mystical. These beliefs play crucial roles in establishing our connection with the transcendental beings and developing ideas that there is a supernatural energy that shape man’s attitudes, regulates cultural norms and plays vital role in individual and group behavior.

It is unfortunate that the contemporary society has forgotten their divine essence thereby being ignorant of mystical knowledge, which inherently they possess. The Igbo is experiencing a religious transformation, revival and reawakening of the divine essence in them, which is a huge growth in the exploration and practice of esotericism. The *dibia oje na muo* (one who travels to the land of the spirit), *dibia oha miri* (the rainmaker), *dibia ogwu* (the healer), *dibia afa* (the diviner) *dibia aja* (priest charged with sacrifice) possess the essential esoteric knowledge to handle special cases. *Dibia oje na muo* is a special type of *dibia* that rarely travels by land through *ekiri* (esoteric travel). They are the initiates and possessors of the mysteries of nature. They could move using the astral plane and land at their designated destination. There are Igbo esoteric aspects of *ogwu, nsi na aja*, which are believed to be used to harm people. Many believe in the efficacy of these.

Many Igbo traditions denounce the shedding of blood as taboo but on the contrary, what they do with their esoteric knowledge is worse and abominable. The case of shape-shifters (therianthropy) was alleged to be used to threaten or even harm one’s rival. Many possess the esoteric art of disappearance and reappearance at will particularly at dangerous times. This knowledge is handed on to people through the art of apprenticeship, but the inherent knowledge is the most potent.

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