

Traditional Religion ‘Egbela’ as a veritable tool for Probity and Accountability.

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ABSTRACT: *Egbela* is the traditional religion in Edda, a community in the Eastern Nigeria. It is addressed as *Egbela Jew* because the people believed that it was god that brought them from their archetypal home *Owi* Hebrew’s descendant. In appreciation of his guidance and military leadership, his worship was mandatory for all the people. This god is worshipped yearly at a certain time of the year. The occasion is purely religious because the priests and people sing in praise of *Egbela* who has fought a new set of pious and valiant men for successfully completing the rigorous induction into the traditional religion. Like other traditional gods such as ‘Ogun’ in Yoruba land, *Egbela* is also a complex being. He is both beignet and belligerent. While he extends his benevolence and protection to his devotees, he kills instantly people who violate his rules and others who stand in the way of his worshippers. Consequent upon his mighty power, and the dispatch with which defaulters and criminals are exterminated by *Egbela*, people are impelled to comport themselves. This is one of the major reasons why sanity prevailed in Edda traditional society. In view of this, this paper examines ways the traditional religion helps in shaping the values and morals of the people, thereby promoting probity and accountability, and sustenance of democracy and development. The study shall adopt descriptive method as its methodology.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Religion is a fundamental, perhaps the most important influence in the life of most Africans; yet its essential principles are too often unknown to foreigners who thus make themselves constantly liable to misunderstanding the African worldview and beliefs. Religion enters into every aspect of the life of the Africans and it cannot be studied in isolation. Its study has to go hand-in-hand with the study of the people who practice the religion. Traditional religion can be seen as the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. In other words, it is a system of faith, belief and worship. It could be defined by its root meaning, etymology, connotation, origin and from many other points of view. It is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forbearers of the present Africans, and which is being practiced today in various forms and various shapes and intensities by a very large number of Africans.

WHAT IS TRADITIONAL?

The word traditional means indigenous, that which is aboriginal or foundational, handed down from generation to generation, upheld and practiced by Africans today. This is a heritage from the past but treated not as a thing of the past but as that which connects the past with the present and the present with eternity. This is not a ‘fossil’ religion that is practiced by living men and women. It may be unwritten or written. Through modern changes, the traditional religion cannot remain intact but it is by no means extinct. The declared adherents of the indigenous religion are very conservative, resisting the influence of modernism heralded by the colonial era, including the introduction of Christianity, Islam, Western education, and improved medical facilities. They cherish their tradition; they worship with sincerity because their worship is quite meaningful to them; they hold tenaciously to their covenant that binds them together.

Religion is always spoken in the singular. This is deliberate. We are not unconscious of the fact that Africans is a large multitudes of people who have complex cultures, innumerable languages and myriads of dialects. But in spite of basic similarities in the religion systems – everywhere there is the concept of God (called by different names); there is also the concept of divinities and/or spirits as well as beliefs in the ancestral cult. Every locality may and does have its own local deities, its own festivals, its own name or names for the Supreme Being, but in essence the pattern is the same. There is that noticeable “Africanness” in the whole pattern. The paper disagrees with John Mbiti who chooses to speak of the religion in the plural “because there are about one thousand African peoples (tribal, and each has its own religious system....

PECULIARITIES OF THE RELIGION

This is a religion that is based mainly on oral transmission. It is not written on paper but in peoples' hearts, minds, oral history, rituals, shrines and religious functions. It has no founders. No one can lay claim of founding it. It has no disciples, or even the desire to propagate the religion, or to proselytize. However, the adherents are loyal worshippers and, probably because of this, the communities who have their roots in the indigenous religion, find it difficult to sever connection with it [1].

FOREIGN THEORISTS AND INVESTIGATORS

Before the foreign investigators gave the world an idea of what the religious beliefs of the Africans looked like there were theorists who have never been to Africa but regarded it as the "Dark Continent" where people had no idea of God and where the Devil in all his abysmal, grotesque and forbidden features, armed to the teeth and with horns complete, held sway [1]. These theorists had fantastic tales to tell about Africa. Even the missionaries that visited the African land called the land primitive. This shows the ignorance, prejudice, and pride of these theorists. They did not know, and they never confessed their ignorance about, Africa and the Africans. Hence [2] describes this period as "the period of ignorance and false certainty" [2].

1.4 Religiosity and Spirituality can be traced from Symbolic Interaction Theory

Religiosity and spirituality are other dimensions of human culture that significantly affects clients and the collective behavior of social work professionals; they can also be viewed through a symbolic interaction perspective [3]. This paper hinges on the traditional religion as practiced by the Edda, a community in Afikpo South L. G. A. Ebonyi State. The Edda are the main occupants of the present day Afikpo South Local Government Area of Ebonyi State in Nigeria. Before the intrusion of the White men into African tribal life the people Edda were famous for their war-like nature and life of adventure. Although the name 'Edda' struck fear into people's hearts in **Nkakwu Itim** the traditional Igbo society, the Edda did not fight to harass the helpless and the weak. They fought prestigious wars. Judging from their aggressive nature and intrepidity, one would have expected the Edda to occupy the low-lying and level areas of the nine hundred and forty three square kilometers (943sq, km) of land now called Edda. But the reverse is the case. Tactically, the patriarchs of Edda briefly sojourned on and abandoned the level portions of the land such as *Amanguzu* (which literally means a home of brief sojourn) and *Amaesieda* (which literally means a home for the genuine Edda) and settled on the hilly and mountainous regions including the smoky mountain. Edda is bounded on the North by Asu River, on the East by *Unwana* and *Eriei*, on the south by *Ohafia* and on the West by *Nkporo* and *Akaeze*. Edda is constituted by seventy two (72) villages (*Ogo and Ama*) each of which has secondary units or compounds (*Ezi*) in turn incorporating a number of lineage settlements. And it is subdivided into two Upper Edda and Lower Edda.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

[4], see religion as an integral part of human nature. It is the individual that both receives and responds to stimuli of spiritual communication.

Religion has been defined as "the communal expression of faith in institutional forms". [5]. That is, the meaning of God and religion evolve in the lifelong development of the self in communal interaction with others. Spirituality has been described as a way of recognizing the oneness and interconnectedness of all life, and of connecting with its transcendent dimensions [3] [2]. Spirituality involves a personal search for meaning in life that is relational, connecting with self and others. An individual explores his or her purpose in life that is meaningful, creative, and responsible [6].

African traditional religion holds out for the achievement of genuine peace, love and unity in the society and the world and for wiping out or at least minimizing bribery, corruption, deceit, unpatriotic acts and man-made misery from the face of the earth.

To [7], the word religion comes into English from the Vulgate where it is used to translate the Greek word "Threskeia". The word threskeia refers to the outward expression of belief.

[8], observed that in Igbo country, traditional religion whether referred to as 'religious beliefs' or superstitions' was deeply ingrained in the minds and lives of the people. He further stated that the tenets are 'blindly' accepted by the adherents and no questions are raised as to whys and wherefores. They are part and parcel of life itself, given the fullest allegiance and acted upon in sincere faith and loyalty.

III. DATA ANALYSIS.

THE IGBO TRADITIONAL RELIGION

The Igbo were nothing if not profoundly religious all accounts of their life reflects the fact. One of the earliest of these, a descriptive, by a German missionary, of [3], is a good example.

The Igbo are in their way, a religious people. The word *Tshuku* –God is continually heard. *Tshuku* is supposed to do everything..... Their notions of some of the attributes of the Supreme Being are, in many respects, correct and manner of expressing them striking. “Godmade everything: He made both white and black”, is continually on their lips. Some of the parables are descriptive of the perfections of God [9].

God created the visible universe – *Uwa*. Many aspects of the universe exist on two levels- the natural level and as spiritual forces called *Alusi*. These include the Sun *anyanwu*, the sky *igwe*, the earth *ala /ani* in different parts of Igbo land. *Alusi* is found among temporal as well as natural phenomena, in the four days of the Igbo week. Unlike *Chukwu*, who is always benevolent, the *alusi* are forces for blessing or destruction, depending on circumstances. They punish social offenders and those who unwittingly infringe their privilege. Hence the key role of the diviner, who interprets the wishes, and the priest who placates them.

The *Chi*, a personalized providence comes from *Chukwu* and reverts to him at a man's death. Each man has his own *chi*, who may be well or ill disposed. Each village has its sacred places and particular divinities, which inhabit a sacred forest, or rock, or cave or stream (p.25). A close look at the religious systems in the various subculture areas reflects basic cosmology deeply rooted in religion. This does not mean that we should generalize a fact that is found in a particular community to be a common feature in all other communities. *Chukwu* or *Chineke (Obasi di n'elu)* is a central idea of belief in all Igbo societies, even though the distribution of its cult now is not even [9]. In Edda, *Egbela* is the god they revere though some people like [7] beliefs that *Egbela* is not a religion of the Edda but an occult society.

[10], observed that the Igbo are traditionally religious, and they do not hide this fact. They believe that some social and supernatural powers are efficacious and in control of their existence, survival and prosperity. [12] observed that

Igbo religion has its main principle the monistic belief in spirit. Everything is reducible to spirit....namely pure spirits, that is, spirits that have existed in the spirit world long before man was created and have never lived on earth as humans, and human spirits, that is, spirit of the dead human beings. The Igbo believe that all spices of spirits....are more powerful than human beings (*mmuo ka mmadu*) and consequently demand respect honour and service from human beings. There is a covenant (*ogbugbandu*) between all categories of spirits on the one hand and all human beings on the other, to the effect that spirits would protect and demand and help humans while humans honour and offer prayers and gifts to the spirits.

The living, the dead and the unborn form part of a continuum. The ancestors – those who live well-spent lives die in socially approved ways, and are given correct burial rites-live in one of those worlds of the dead which mirror the world of the living. The living honour them with sacrifices. The ancestors watch over the living and are periodically reincarnated among them - hence the name *ndiiche*, the returners. The unhappy spirits who die bad deaths, and lack correct burial rites, cannot return to the world of the living, or enter that of the dead. They wander homeless and dispossessed, expressing their by causing harm among the living [9].

[10] asserted that *Chi* is a central point in the psychology, thought and belief of the Igbo. They recognize it as being responsible for their wealth and prosperity, life and health, success and failure, and for all their fortunes and misfortunes. *Chi* and its compound form, *Chiukwu (Chukwu)*, (transliterated as big *Chi*) are not equivalent terms for the Christian GOD. [10] quoting [12]

God among the Igbo is certainly nothing like God of the Christians. This is to say....our is not the one towards whom all creations aspire.... He has no heavens and no troops of angels ministering to him. He has promulgated no Decalogue, and he has not appointed a day when he will judge the living and the dead.... What we have is *CHI*, probably one of the most complex theological concepts ever devised to explain the universe. It is a concept which both accounts for the universe. It is a concept which both accounts for the universe, explains good and evil, tragedy and good fortune, order and conflict, character and destiny, free-will and metaphysical order.

THE RELIGION OF EDDA

In the traditional setting, the Edda man stands out as a typical example of an African who in response to his spiritual environment developed a multifarious belief system in which several deities are recognized and accorded due reverence in a bid to mollify the unseen, Supernatural Power. These gods are in charge of war, procreation, good health, security and order. The progenitors of Edda believed that the continued existence of their war-like clan and the ability to maintain their military supremacy over other clans in Igboland depended heavily on the cooperation of the gods; they therefore made their worship mandatory. The gods work harmoniously to protect the interest of the entire clan.

Nfijioku and *Nkamalu* are next door neighbors, *Nfijioku* is the god of fertility who ensures a rich harvest of crops, particularly yams. It is through the help of *Nfijioku* that a man takes all farming titles including the highest title *Nze Omume.Nkamalu*

tion without whom there would be no birth. Men worship *Egbela* the highest deity in Edda while women worship *Eziaku*. Among the Edda, a couple that acquires all the material wealth in the world and does

not have children has only an accumulation of spurious wealth. This suggests that the genuine wealth a couple could boast of children as the name of the god of procreation *Eziaku* implies.

EGBELA RELIGION:

When a boy starts to consider himself too big to participate in *Eziaku* yearly feast, it means he is looking forward to 'ipu ogo' (initiation) - the beginning of the eight year induction program into Edda manhood. Among the Edda, manhood does not mean mere transition from boyhood to adulthood (sequel to circumcision rites), but a labyrinthine quest into a heroic and religious life. Before a man is considered fit to fight and run other important societal errands, he must have been fully initiated into *Egbela* religious rites. Initiation into Edda manhood means initiation into *Egbela* worship because *Egbela* is the archetypal warrior and the patron of Edda warriors. A consensus of opinion among Edda chroniclers is that progenitors; and that it was *Egbela* who guided them from *Owi* to their present habitat Edda.

Egbela is powerful, belligerent, benignant and ruthless. While devotees enjoy his benevolence, he shows no mercy to offenders. He kills instantly people who break his taboo and people stand in the way of his worshippers. This duality is reflected in the epic text entitled *egbela juu*, composed in his honor. It is from this powerful deity that the Edda epic *egbela* - derived its name. Although many young men have abjured the worship of *Egbela* consequent upon the influence of alien cultures, religion and education, the fathers and uncles of such renegades still offer sacrifices on their behalf. *Egbela*, on his own still offer his protective influence to all Edda sons who worship him by proxy. He is ever ready to rescue a devotee in trouble anywhere and at any time.

MODE OF MEMBERSHIP

To qualify for membership, aspirants must pass through *isiji* and *isigwu* stages. These are stages of training involving rigorous exercises - physical and spiritual- designed to inculcate endurance, patience, resilience, reticence, fearlessness, stoicism and asceticism (not allowing oneself pleasures and comforts for religious reason). A neophyte who successfully completes the training and gets admitted into *egbela* worship is automatically admitted into Edda manhood. A man who has not undergone this exacting training is, among the Edda, still considered a woman and will not be allowed to talk when real men talk. Duration of training is eight years. This is the period when all the training in Edda way of life is given to initiates. Neophytes are regarded as heroes in the making on whose shoulders the future of Edda squarely rests. The strenuous training exposes them to the art of traditional warfare and medicine in preparation for the task ahead. The hard drilling steels their hearts against the hazardous task of defense. All war veterans are invited to give talks to the potential heroes. Throughout, the duration of the training, they do not have anything in common with women. During the spell of confinement in 'obi-ogo', (compound square) only men of honor are allowed to interact freely with them. They are told only tales of preponderant feats accomplished by the past heroes of Edda and are taught feats accomplished by the past heroes of Edda and are taught heroic songs which make their hearts warm up for action. Before the spell of confinement expires each year, a week of violent action is observed. In this week of action, initiates, especially the ones passing out, demonstrate to the audience of men, real men, what they are capable of doing in times of emergency. Some run across a conflagration of fire and emerge unescorted. Others, performing with the aid of the supernatural, turn to tigers and provoke a momentary stampede. Few daring ones race to the bad-bush' at the dead of the night and return with exhumed human skulls for display. While the display of power and courage goes on in various forms, the audience supports the activities with very exciting epic chants. Through the demonstrations, *umuneke* (initiates) assure the elders of the land that the community will be safe in their hands. The final phase of a man's rigorous quest for admission into Edda manhood is climaxed by *ibi isigwu*. This is a visit to *Igboro* Edda (evil forest) by potential heroes who have completed their eight-year induction program into Edda manhood. All the candidates would be presented before the chief priests of *Egbela* who would access, bless and initiate the worthy ones into *Egbela* worship and Edda manhood. At this juncture, the initiated ones standing before *Egbela* shrine do promise their loyalty to this great deity and dedicate their lives to the service and defense of Edda clan. A visit to *Igboro* Edda is an ordeal in which no participant (both the candidates and their escorts) is sure of his life. *Igboro* Edda is the center of action. It is a battle front. It is a bloody center. It is death itself. Able bodied men escort candidates for initiation to *Igboro* Edda in order to protect their candidates. Only clubs and whips are allowed. In this scene of heroic activity and death, all brave men converge once a year to prove their valor, piety and intrepidity; and to witness the admission of young men into Edda heroic life [13].

The first is the avowed promise of the members to keep all information about their association exclusively to themselves. Neophytes do not know much until they are fully initiated. Such vows are renewed from time to time. Because the members try to keep the secrets to themselves, non-members are usually afraid of them and suspicious of their actions and movements [14].

Candidates and men who perish in *Igboro Edda* in the course of initiation are treated with disdain. They are regarded as victims of 'night death' and do not receive decent burial. It is even a taboo to mourn such unfortunate person overtly. On the other hand, the return of successful candidates to the village square is received with pomp and pageantry. This is followed by two days of festivity. Everybody in the community men, women, young and old, is involved in this great carnival which celebrates the arrival of 'a new set of hero men'. From the forgoing, it is obvious that the formidable nature of the Edda is neither innate nor accidental. It is achieved through a training process specially designed to enable him to play his role in his society. In view of the rigorous, hazardous and exciting nature of the training, those who successfully complete it must have been well drilled and equipped to face any emergency and to save lives anywhere and anytime even at the risk of their own lives. [14], confirms that membership in *ogo* is mandatory for all males in Afikpo in order to qualify as a capable person for leadership roles in the community.

TOOL FOR PROBITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Egbela cult has become synonymous with Edda clan as a religious activity. All year round, the traditional schedules of the Edda man are regulated by the tenets of the cult which is seen by the average Edda as all powerful, omnipresent and omnipotent. Such is the status of *Egbela* that its influence extends beyond Edda territory to her neighboring communities. In Edda, it is tagged *Egbela Jew*, it is still a wonder to historians, anthropologists and generality of the people how the name 'Jew' came to be associated with the religion. All men who are on active service go there for re-dedication every year or on a special arrangement. People also go there to settle old scores with other men. *Egbela* serves as an antidote to all evils, it is believed that every initiate is given anti-toxin and anti-poison, either in herb or drug form. Some were vaccinated into the body, as today people vaccinate against malaria, etc.

The fact that *Egbela* has power of antidote to all evils instills fears in the believers. And this makes them to live a pious life knowing that what evil they harbor *Egbela* will certainly fish them out [7]. An Edda man who suddenly stumbles against a stone shouts, even at times without thinking, *Egbela....!*" The invocation of *Egbela* is to the believer an anchor (a weight) to his faith. The Edda people and any other people practicing *Egbela* exclaim *Egbela*, either as a helper in anticipation, or as of right to its membership. It is then surprising that such a society which places so much premium on honor, piety and excellence, that is, perpetuation of name and spirit long after death should be found unaccountability and improbity.

FUNCTIONS OF MYTH IN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Every religion uses myth to tell the history or the origin of the society, how culture and civilization came about. Myths are popular methods of education in *Egbela* religion, they communicate religious knowledge and morality while amusing or frightening those who hear or read them.

VIRTUE AND VICE IN THE TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Virtue in the traditional religion is often connected with carrying out obligations of the communal aspect of life. Examples include social behaviors such as respect for parents and elders, raising children appropriately, providing hospitality, and being honest, trust worthy, and courageous leaders in the society. Morality is associated with obedience or disobedience to god regarding the way a person or a community lives. In Edda, *Egbela* is believed to speak to and be capable of guiding the virtuous person as one's conscience. It is also believed that one has good or bad conscience, depending on whether he does the bidding of *Egbela* or malevolent spirits.

Despite arguments advanced by some philosophers and free thinkers such as Sheila Delany, Ngugi Wa Thiong' o and Thomas Paine against obligatory religious worship in communities and states, some states have continued to impose religion on her citizens. But to avert the disastrous consequences of religious crisis, many more states have gone secular, giving their citizens free hand to worship what they believe in. But in Edda traditional society, religion was mandatory because like several other states within and outside Africa, theocracy was a key factor in taking of decisions. It was also believed that the patriarchs of Edda brought the deity, *Egbela*, which they worshipped from their archetypal home, *Owi*, to the present habitat of Edda people. In appreciation of the guidance and military leadership of this god all the way from *Owi* to their present settlement, his worship was made for all the sons of Edda.

It was as a result of the high reverence for this deity, *Egbela* that the Edda epic is called after his name. Until a man is initiated into *Egbela* cult, he is called a woman in spite of his dangling phallus. Consequently, virtue, religion and manhood are inseparable phenomena in the life of every Edda man. In this clan, manhood does not mean mere transition from boyhood to adulthood (sequel to some circumcision rites), but rigorous quest into a religious, virtuous and heroic life of the people.

Before a man is considered fit to fight for the clan or qualified to run other societal errands, he must have been fully initiated into *Egbela* religion that the clan can vouch for his integrity. Every youth seeking

admission into Edda manhood are encouraged to follow his footsteps by laying their lives in defense of the clan whenever the need arises. Hence every youth is invited and given an opportunity for membership in order to be accepted and recognized as a man among the Edda. By this, the religion has been able to checkmate the characters and integrity of the people, therefore, traditional religion *Egbela* is a veritable tool for better accountability and probity.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Africa is the birth place of humanity and so it is also of, inter alia, Religion. The Igbo are among the oldest humanity, Igbo traditional religion is Igbo life and Igbo moral, ethical and humane practices as opposed to ty and pose the very question of survival of humanity in the world.

This paper draws attention to the great potential traditional religion holds for the achievement of genuine peace, love and unity in the society and the world and for wiping out or at least minimizing bribery, corruption, deceit, unpatriotic acts and man-made misery from the face of the earth. This paper therefore concludes that traditional religion should not be looked down upon or trampled under the feet but be seen as a veritable for probity and accountability.

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