

Infancy Rites among the Igbo of Nigeria

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Abstract

In African cultural heritage, life is not static or stagnant but life is a dynamic process which moves from one point of one's life to another. In the African conception, a human being does not stay at a particular stage of life for ever, for life is a process of becoming. A person passes through the stage of conception to birth and grows from birth and infancy period through puberty, adulthood and marriage to death and then is regenerated by reincarnation to resume the process once more. This is why it is described as life cycle. The main goal of this paper is to examine the celebration of the infancy rites among the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria more especially, the Ngwa sub-group. The paper further examines the various socio-religious, economic and moral implications and functions of these rites for the socio-cultural group in question.

Introduction

The Rites of passage are the transitional rites performed to “remake” an individual, indicating the passage from one phase or stage in life to another and marking turning points in his or her life. In the cycle of life, there are the stages of birth, puberty, marriage, death and regeneration. These life stages represent important turning points in life which involve transition or crossing into a new stage of life. Arnold Van Guenep is the first scholar to use the term ‘rites of passage’. He identifies these transitional periods in the individual's life as “crisis periods”. He is cited by Opoku as saying that at each of these “crisis periods”, there is always a change-social, physiological, and so on, in the individual. These changes are accompanied by social and/or religious rituals which are both to demonstrate the transition symbolically, to ensure that no breaks might occur between the various stages, and that the transition might be smooth. According to Opoku, Guenep points out that all these crisis periods are characterized by three important sequential rituals: separation, transition, and re-integration. In his book, *African Religions and Philosophy*, John Mbiti remarks that religion precedes a man before he is born into the world, accompanies him throughout the stages of his life, and follows him even after his physical departure from the world. It is this religious engulfment of life in Africa that best explains the origin, meaning and end of these rites of passage. This point is much more emphasized and clarified by Ray (1976) when he says:

In this phase people are metaphysically and sociologically remade into “new” beings with new social roles. Newborn infants are made into human persons, children are made into adults, men and women are made into husband and wife, deceased people are made into revered ancestors This remaking of man ... involves the symbolic destruction of the old and the creation of the new At this critical period people are neither what they were nor what they will become They are momentary anomalies, stripped of their former mode of being, ready to become something new (91).

It is clear that these passages of life are welcome by African peoples with religious ceremonies and rites which indicate that they are great events of life with deep religious implications. It should, however, be pointed out that such religious rites accompanying these transitional periods vary from one ethnic group to another. “A turning point in the life of a people”, according to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979: 172), “may not have the same degree of religious importance in the life of another people. Thus, we cannot hope to find the passages of life given the same significance among all West

African Peoples”. With these points at the back of our minds, this paper focuses on infancy rites among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria.

Description and Explanation of the Infancy Rites

By “Infancy Rites” is meant those ritual ceremonies that are associated with a child’s life within the continuum of birth and puberty. Among these rites we have the burial of the umbilical cord; circumcision; first hair/ nail-cutting; naming ceremony; and teeth-cutting.

Taken in isolation, the infancy rites do not constitute the rites of a complete life stage of the individual but of a linking period between birth and puberty. Following Guenep’s adumbration of the three ritual characterizations of each crisis period - separation, transition, and re-integration, the infancy rites would be included as part of the three ritual stages of the birth rites. At birth, the child is separated from its former world. The period of seclusion or interval that elapses from then to the time of giving the child a name coincides with the period of transition with its own preparatory rituals for ushering the child into the next stage. At the actual time of giving the child a name and presenting him to the public, he is re-united with his family as a full member of the family and a social member of the entire community. This period is called the re-integration at which stage the child is made ready to be ushered into an entirely new crisis period – puberty.

The Burial of the Umbilical Cord (*Ili Alo*)

The severing of the umbilical cord at birth is a dramatic event. A small native blade, triangular in shape and sharpened at the base (called *aguwa* or *aguba*) is used. With this blade in her right hand, the local midwife attending the delivery, pretending to cut very close to the base of the cord, asks:

“Do you want me to cut here?”

In reply, the group of women present in the delivery place would shout out in a loud chorus answer:

“No! No! No!”

The midwife continues to ask this question and receives the same answer until she touches the right place, about six to eight inches from the base of the umbilical cord, which she then cuts. The placenta is buried at the site of the birth and the baby is bathed. In some parts of Igboland, this burial of the placenta is what is recognized and celebrate. In such cases, the placenta is buried at the foot of a young palm tree or any other economic tree which automatically becomes the child’s inalienable natal tree. But the popular ceremony of burying the umbilical cord is different in most part of Igboland.

After birth, the mother and her baby are kept in seclusion. While in their seclusion, the child’s umbilical cord is tended with care until it falls off. The fall is usually hastened by the application of an oily matter into which a local spicy herb called *uda* is added. When it falls off, in about four days, it is buried. In some localities, its burial is delayed until the child is named. The umbilical or naval cord is buried by the side of a newly germinated palm tree, local pear tree (*ube*, that is *da-cryodesedulis*), bread fruit tree, local apple (*udara*) tree or plantain or banana tree. For its burial, the mother selects the most fruitful oil palm tree out of the many that the husband may indicate. Where he does not, she chooses from any of the economic trees mentioned above, depending on which is available, and buries the child’s cord at its foot. It is believed that this plant, which from then on is regarded as the child’s natal (or naval) plant, will become fruitful in proportion to the fame of the child’s subsequent achievements as an adult.

Although authors like Basden (1921: 60-64) and Thomas (1969: 71-72) saw no religious significance in the burial of the umbilical cord, the significant insight of Ileogu (1974) is outstanding enough to highlight the religious belief behind the ritual. “Buried in this practice”, according to him, “is the belief that we as human beings share life with *Ala* (Earth), that we have our nature which is partly made of earth, and that our substance comes from the fruits of the earth and at death we rejoin in

our bodies, the composition of earth whilst our soul joins our ancestors, who with the authority of *Ala* rule and govern the earth on which the community builds its homes and society” (23). It is only in the light of this insight we can understand why such a tree (that is the child’s natal tree) is chosen on the day of celebrating “*obi umuaka*” (literarily meaning “hearts of children”) and a shrine constructed where sacrifices are offered to remind teenage children of their relationship to *Ala*, to ancestors and to the community. This seems to be the origin of “*omenala*” (custom of the land) which is derived from the Mother Earth (*Ala*) and sanctioned by the ancestors. The child, therefore, by having his natal cord buried in the earth is dedicated early in life to the goddess *Ala*, to the ancestors, and to the community and symbolically admitted or introduced to the *Omenala* of his people. This ceremony reveals that although *Omenala* fulfils social, moral and cultural functions, it is essentially religious in nature and its hold on the community derives from the power of the goddess and the ancestors to whom a child is first dedicated in life (Ileogu 1974: 23).

Although the burial of the umbilical cord has deep religious significance, it is not marked by an elaborate religious ritual. Its social significance is great also. It has given rise to a social institution which Uchendu (1965) calls “the naval complex” (59). The Igbo who cannot point to the burial place of his naval cord is not a “*diala*” – freeborn or “son of the soil”. A child whose naval cord was not buried is denied citizenship and strangers cannot bury their children’s cords in their place of sojourning. In time, the child is led to build around his “tree of (*diala*) status” such sentiments and emotional attachment which are embedded in the phrase “*nkwu alom*” (“the palm of my naval cord”) or “*abirika alom*” (“the plantain of my naval cord”). This palm, plantain or any other economic tree else, as earlier pointed out, inalienably belongs to the child. Not only is it the symbol of *diala* status, “it is the foundation for the socially ambitious” (Uchendu 1965: 59).

Circumcision (Ibi Ugwu)

The rite of circumcision is usually performed on both boys and girls between the third and eight day after birth. The time, however, varies in different localities, the operation being postponed until the age of puberty is reached in some places. For example, in some localities, as Ileogu (1974: 185) observes, circumcision of males may take place within 24 days after birth while females are circumcised a bit later. In a few localities such as Ugwoba and Abakaliki, circumcision is often postponed to the puberty initiation period with greater religious and social celebrations while in Aboh on the South Western banks of the Niger only girls are circumcised about the time of their puberty. The eighth day is the most generally accepted for circumcision. The Igbo man will on no account omit it. In some areas like Oghe, for example, the people do not like having expectant mothers go to modern maternity homes for delivery, just because the child is brought home when he is too old to be circumcised. But many hospitals and maternity clinics now perform this operation at the needed period.

On which ever day, the practice of infant circumcision is accompanied with some religious rites and minor sacrifices. The mother leaves the compound for the first time on this day. She is escorted to the household farm, where she collects a few things for the ritual. The circumcision is performed by a skilled woman in the village. About the eight day (depending on the locality), the husband consults the oracle to know who will perform the circumcision. The person named is invited. “Chalk, kola-nut, alligator pepper and white fowl are among the items that must be provided. The officiant appeals to the ancestors and divinities with these items” (Ileogu 1974: 185).

First Hair-Cutting /Nail-Cutting (*Ikpu Ise Uwa /Ibe Mbo Uwa*)

Before the naming ceremony two ceremonies are simultaneously performed. They are *Ikpu Isu Uwa* (cutting of the hair brought to earth), and *Ibe Mbo Uwa* (cutting of the nails brought to earth). These ceremonies take place about the fifth to the sixth native weeks after birth (that is, between the 20th to 24th day). In the case of hair cutting, some Igbo people shave the baby at birth before seclusion but the

popular practice is to shave the baby after some native weeks. The Igbo believe that most, if not all children, are reincarnations of departed members of their family or of some *alusi*. Every child, therefore, is believed to be leading some kind of life in the spirit-world before coming into the world. So when he is born, the hairs on his head and the nails on his fingers and toes are regarded as sacred or as spiritual hair and spiritual nail (*isi mmoo/mbo mmoo*). They are therefore cut with some accompanying rituals.

Some food items are brought and a dish of yam fufu is prepared. A cock for the male and hen for the female is bought with which the ancestors and other spirits are appeased and evil influences warded off. Other little children of the compound are gathered to sing and clap while the child is being shaved. An old woman is invited, probably the grand-mother from either the paternal or maternal, side to carry out the shaving with the local blade – *aguwa*, while the grand father (where the direct father is a young man) does the little sacrifice. Part of the food is thrown into the bush or into the stream to appease any spirits that are against the child's stay on earth and the hair is buried in the child's father's compound. It is believed that the shaving of the child liquidates his membership in the spiritual world and makes him a member of the living community of human beings.

The nails are also cut and buried along with the hair. Afterwards, the children are fed with the major part of the food amidst singing and rejoicing as they welcome the child into their group. From this time on, subsequent shavings and nail-cuttings of the child are no more treated with any ritual.

Naming Ceremony

Among the Igbo, naming ceremony is the most elaborate and religiously significant of all the infancy rites. The naming does not come until after the twenty-eight day (7th native week) after birth. On the naming ceremony day, the ashes from the log are removed from where the mother and the child had been secluded. The mother will go to bath in a nearby stream as practiced in some parts of the Awka district. She carries the plank on which she has been sitting, a pot of camwood (*uhie*) and egg. Before she gets into the stream, she will say prayers to the divinities and ancestors, telling them that she is becoming clean and pure again on that day. She rubs the camwood on the root of every tree she passes (Thomas 1969: 71-72). After that she throws the materials into the stream. The camwood signifies the menses which has stopped, and the egg shows that the new baby is no longer a "yoke" but an individual (Awolalu and Dopamu 1979: 185). The woman goes home after bathing, and prepares food together with some supporters. There is usually a general feasting on this day.

The actual naming ceremony is an important function. It is a mark of honour and respect to be invited to give a name, and the privilege is usually reserved for one of the elder relatives. The child's parents and grand parents (from both the father's and mother's sides) play prominent parts. The extended family and, some times, the minor sub-lineage members are expected to attend. At the *Obi* or *obu* (compound) of the child's father (or grand father where the father is still fairly young) where the ceremony takes place, the senior titled member, that is the *Diokpara* of the lineage (the *Umunna*) presides. The child is placed by the *Ndebunze* (the cultus symbol of the ancestors) shrine. Names are given by the parents and some times by the grand parents also while the senior titled member holds the child in his hands. All present cheer loudly as he gives these names to the child. Next he places a hoe and a matchet, the chief farm implements, in the child's hands and says this prayer:

My son, with these farm implements your fathers lived well. We call upon you to acquaint yourself with them properly and be hard working. We wish you good fruits out of your labours. Live, grow and wax strong and may the gods of our land bless and guide you (Ileogu 1974: 44).

All present respond with the chorus of *Eha! Eha!* (So let it be! So let it be!), with cheers and exchange greetings, calling the child mainly by the *Ozo* title praise name (Ileogu 1974: 44-45). Presents are given to the child and those present are feasted with palm wine, pounded yam meal and meat.

In some places, the actual naming ceremony is performed by the elders specially named by the oracle. The party is made up of four people. Usually, the eldest man and woman in the family, a daughter of the family married outside (*Nwaokpu*), and a son of a daughter of the family married outside (*Nwadiala* or *Okenne*). The eldest man lifts the child into the air then prays for it. Water may be poured on the child to show that blessing will flow upon it like the flow of water. The father is then asked to name the child, and the four people pronounce the name simultaneously (Awolalu and Dopamu 1969: 185).

Names are not merely considered as tags by means of which individuals may be distinguished but are intimately associated with various events in the life of the individual as well as those of the family and the larger social group” (Wieschhoff 1941: 212-222). Igbo names always have a meaning. Several factors usually determine the name given to a child. The first is the day of the native week on which a child is born. There are four days in the Igbo native week bearing the names of the Igbo market days: *Eke*, *Orie*, *Afor*, and *Nkwo*. A male child born on *Eke* day, for instance, would probably be called *Okeke* or *Okereke* (all being the shortened form of the two words *Okoro* and *Eke*, jointly meaning a young man of *Eke*), *Nweke* (child of *Eke*), and so forth. A child can be named by prefixing *Nwa*-or *Oko*- (for male) and *Nwanyi* – (for female) to the other native days. Another factor determining the name a child bears may be the historical incident peculiar to the child’s birth or to the circumstances of the parents. For example, if a daughter were born to a father at the moment of his going on a journey to a distant place, she would probably be called *Ijeoma* (a blessed journey). Also if a man were born while the parents are on a journey or while sojourning in a strange land, he may be named *Onyeije* or *Onyeobia* (traveler or stranger). On the other hand, some names may be given to children to show the preference for boys or a certain concern for the future of the child. For instance, *Nwanyimeole* – “what can a woman do” – shows that a father is in need of a male child. *Onwubiko*, *Onwughara*, or *Onwughahara* – “Please death!” or “May death spare”, or “May death forgive” (usually given to *ogbanje* children) – show that parents have lost many of their children by death and pray that this child may thrive. The parent’s choice of names for their children may be dictated by the diviner’s opinion. *Njoku* and *Mmaji*, the male and female figures of the yam deity, for example, are conferred on children by divination. Children’s names may be given in expression of gratitude to God, the spirits or ancestors, like *Chukwemeka* – “God has done so well”, *Chukwukere* – “God created, and so forth. They may be given to express certain basic ethical values or to convey some moral lessons. For example, the names *Ndubisi* (life is supreme), *Ndukaku* (life is greater than wealth) express the premium the Igbo attach on life. As Ileogu (1974) puts it, *Ndu* or life is the Igbo *summum bonum* (173). Name may also be given to children by the parents to rejoice over their enemies. Finally, the names given to children may be determined by the philosophical or socio-religious faith which the child stimulates in the parents. Under this factor, we consider the names given as a result of the belief that a child is the reincarnation of a dead ancestor through the declaration of the oracle or by the suggestive display of some characteristic traits or some resemblance to a deceased member of the family. The child will consequently be given the name of the relative it is supposed to resemble and such will receive a joyful welcome back to earth.

This later form of naming has given rise to a more elaborate ritual than the ordinary naming ceremony. It is called *Igba Agu* (inauguration of name-sakes). *Agu* means “a name-sake” and normally people bearing the same name call themselves *Agum* – “my name – sake – and a continual sense of friendship and intimacy is always installed between people who are *Agu* to each other, no matter the age disparity. There is no fixed time for the ceremony since it can be performed at the convenience of the father. But the general thing is that it goes together with the naming ceremony. After the diviner has by the manipulation of his oracle, revealed which of the dead ancestors has been reincarnated in the new child (or the child has made a sign to the mention of the name of a particular ancestor as the ancestral roll is being called), a big dumbbell-shaped piece of *ogilisi* wood is prepared to represent the image of the ancestor (*Okpensi*). A fowl is killed and sacrifice made to the *Okpensi* which is now kept for the child as his *Agu*. The child is then given the ancestor’s name and is presented with his own

religious symbol, like the *ofo* stick with which he offers prayers and meal offerings to the gods and ancestors, later. It is always a time of great rejoicing and feasting, and large quantities of palm-wine are consumed in celebrating the occasion of the ancestor's return (Ileogu 1974: 44 and Thomas 1969: 71-72).

Another similar occasion celebrated along with the naming ceremony is the dedication of the child. When the *debia* (traditional medicine man) detects some sign which convinces him that a baby is a reincarnation of a former *debia*, such a child must, ipso facto, be dedicated to the medical cult. This rite is confined to boys. The boy lives with his parents until he is about eight years of age, and is then transferred to the care of the *debia*. As he grows up he is gradually initiated into all the mysteries of the profession. This is the manner in which the ranks of the *debia* are recruited.

Besides a supposed resemblance to a departed *debia*, and the consequent dedication to that service, children of either sex may be devoted to the '*alusi*' (idols). This is always the case when a child is born within the precincts of an idol's house. Such birth may occur when the mother is unable to reach home before confinement. The child is claimed by the priest of the *alusi* on its behalf and is consecrated or "married" to it for life. Such children may be named after the *alusi*, for example, *Nwakamanu* - the child of *Kamanu* - the god of thunder, *Nwagwu* - the son of the idol, *Agwu*, or *Nwanyiagwu* - the daughter or wife of *Agwu* (Basden 1921: 60).

Shortly after the naming ceremony and the associated rites, the next thing, where necessary, is an "outing ceremony" for the mother and child, called *ifu ahia* ("exhibition at the market place"). This is an important social event but with little or no religious significance, originally. Today, *ifu ahia* has been replaced by what is called "churching" which, in its reinterpreted form, retains the traditional elements of "showing wealth", feasting and drumming. A religious rite, however, has been added to what was a purely secular affair. The guests make presents of money and receive pieces of meat, the market value of which is not proportional to the money given. The child is here presented to the larger community for the first time and is welcome with cheers and shouts of joy.

Teeth Cutting

The next important phase in the life of the child is teething. The cutting of a baby's first tooth is a source of keen interest to the community and of serious curiosity and anxiety to parents, for upon it hang the issues of life and death for the child. Should it pierce the lower gum, then all is satisfactory, and it is the signal for great rejoicing and mutual congratulation. On the contrary, should it prove to be the upper tooth, the omen is bad and the child's fate will be similar to that of twins. The unfortunate child now a few months old, is thrown into the "bad bush" and is condemned to endure terrible agony before death ensues. This custom is instigated by the Igbo religious beliefs that such children have offended the evil spirits, and the consequent anxiety to avoid offence to the evil spirits by allowing the children to suffer for it themselves (Basden 1921: 61). It may, therefore, mark a turning point in a child's life if he cuts the upper teeth before the lower ones. The first person who notices a child's new tooth gives him a hen but if he or she is not willing to give the hen to the child, the usual thing is to pretend never to have noticed it. This gift of a hen is not an outright present. The increase of this hen is shared equally between the two (the child and the giver) and if it dies, the meat is shared equally too. The gift of the hen establishes a firm friendship which extends to other members of the family. There is no religious ritual whatever to mark the cutting of the first tooth among the Igbo.

Functions of Infancy Rites among the Igbo

The infancy and childhood rites express the high premium the Igbo (and the African as a whole) place on children. As Basden (1921) remarks, "children are priceless possessions, and no man can have too many; the more he has the more will he be respected and envied by the community" (64). To the Igbo:

Children are a great social insurance agency, a protection against dependence in old age. To have a male child is to strengthen both the social and economic status, for it is the male child who inherits the father's property. A woman – and worse still, a man – who has no male child, contemplates old age with particular horror (Uchendu 1965: 57).

Besides this socio-economic importance for which the Igbo esteem children, Igbo children are also accorded with great spiritual significance. Most of them are, in fact, believed to be reincarnations of departed ancestors or of some lineage spirits. Birth and childhood (and in fact all stages of life) are, therefore, both a social and religious process, in which the child is constantly flooded with religious activities and attitudes. As Mbiti puts it:

A child not only continues the physical line of life ... but becomes the intensely religious focus of keeping the parents in their state of personal immortality. The physical aspects of birth and the ceremonies that might accompany pregnancy, birth and childhood, are regarded with religious feeling and experience – that another religious being has been born into a profoundly religious community and religious world (1969: 120).

Being born into a social community, this new “religious being” cannot live in isolation and therefore, is transformed both physiologically and socially and orientated towards the customs and way of life of the social context into which he finds himself so as to live a smooth, successful and fulfilled life. Put succinctly, “Nature brings the child into the world, but society created the child into a social being, a corporate person. For it is the community which must protect the child, feed it, bring it up, educate it and in many other ways incorporate it into the wider community” (Mbiti 1969: 110). In the absence of writing and formal-school education, these rites become the means of summarizing the social philosophy and religious doctrine of the Igbo, and of inculcating them into their children right from infancy. Thus they both internalize and eternalize the socio- religious values and ideals of the Igbo. They equally serve as a means of providing explanation and interpretation of the meaning of life, living and existence for the traditional Igbo. Following from this, they equip the traditional Igbo with practical techniques, in the form of religious rituals, for coping with, adjusting to and dealing with the inevitable life enigmas and contingencies. Basically, therefore, the infancy rites just as religion as a whole, are both a rationalization and ritualization of life in traditional Igbo society.

In addition to these essential functions, the celebration of these rites, as we can observe, brings people together to share, pray, sing, dance, eat, drink and rejoice together as members of one large human and spiritual family. Such social cohesion and solidarity resulting from the ceremonies associated with the infancy rites enhance the communal or community spirit of the Igbo. As Onunwa (1990) points out, these celebrations establish and consolidate mutual trust and enhance peaceful co-existence. They are, therefore, “powerful instruments of ...unity” (10). In keeping with this point of view is the Durkheimian notion re-echoed by Jay (1992) that ‘in ritual action people create and recreate aspects of their own society’ (xxvii). It is in respect with this sociological function of rituals and sacrifices we can fully understand what Jay refers to as the “integrative, communal aspects of sacrifices” as she discusses “how sacrificing identifies, legitimates, and maintains enduring structures of intergenerational continuity” (1992: xxvii).

Along with the ritualization of life by the infancy rites is the dramatization of life since rituals dramatize spiritual realities. Ritualization and dramatization of life make it more fascinating, dynamic, and so more enjoyable. Psychologically, therefore, joy is maximized and tension caused by stresses and vicissitudes of life are released and relieved from through religious rites and rituals. This is especially though the music, dancing and playing which feature during the celebration of these rites. Such maximization of joy is part of the aesthetic function of religion. Besides, leisure and rest implied in the attendance of ceremonies enhance the health of the ever-labouring and restless Igbo men and women. This is the medical and psycho-therapeutic function of these rites.

These rites also have some moral and economic significance. They convey some moral principles especially concerning the organization and systematization of life. They indirectly teach that every part of life and everything in life follows specific processes, procedures, protocols and patterns.

Life is not a haphazard phenomenon, but is divinely and teleological designed. Economically, through the rites, the hungry are fed, professionals like the priests and *debia* are provided with work, traders on fowls and other requisite items for rituals make sales while families are either enriched through presents or impoverished through expenses incurred during the celebration of rituals and ceremonies. In the markets, there are sections for the sale of *uhie* (camwood), *odo* (sulphur), etc often used for such occasions. Without such ceremonies how would they sale?

With the coming of Christianity and Western culture, many of these rites are either lost, given up, forgotten or being increasingly neglected while some are being reinterpreted, partially preserved, and absorbed in or interpolated with Christianity.

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