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Author(s): Edmund Ilogu

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## WORSHIP IN IBO TRADITIONAL RELIGION

BY

EDMUND ILOGU

Nsukka, Nigeria

The Ibo who number about 9½ million people occupy parts of South Eastern Nigeria in the newly created East Central State and parts of the Mid-Western and the Rivers States of the Federation of Nigeria.

The following account was taken from Ihiala and is typical of most areas of the Northern Ibo region. Cross checking from towns like Agukwu Nri, Enugu Ukwu and Onitsha indicate close similarities. With some modifications a fair picture of private and public worship systems of Iboland can be drawn.

*Private Worship.* This is divided into two parts: routine and occasional. Routine private worship includes the daily offerings made by the head of a household to the ancestors at the Ndebunze (ancestral spirit) shrine in kola-nuts, lines of white chalk and prayers for protection, prosperity and wellbeing of the family while holding up the Ọfọ stick. The “Igwo Ọfọ” worship is also a routine done once a year as a prayer privately offered by the head of a household when the Ọfọ stick is ceremoniously cleansed with blood of a chicken sacrificed to the ancestors and wiped off with akọrọ (selagenella) leaves. Occasional private worship is done when ordered by a diviner as a result of his being consulted by the individual concerned. There are also cases of a diviner meeting an unknown person in the street to whom he gives a message received from the gods requiring the unknown stranger to offer some sacrifices. This is however very rare. When the diviner prescribes what is to be done, the individual concerned goes to the priest of the special deity and offers the prescribed sacrifice either of chicken, or eggs and kola-nuts with alligator pepper or goat palm wine and chalk as the case may be. The special intention of such acts of private worship performed for the individual by the priest is usually one or more of such needs as:

- (1) To seek favour from ancestral spirits.

- (2) To seek protection from evil spirits like those of witches or evil minded persons.
- (3) To seek healing from an illness or cleansing from defilement in eating forbidden animal or entry into "bad bush" or contact with menstruating woman.
- (4) To propitiate neglected ancestral spirits or angered gods.
- (5) To seek the gift of children.

*Public Worship.* This is also divided into two kinds: the family or extended family worship and the clan-tribe worship. Both kinds involve annual or biannual celebrations bringing people together to enact aspects of the history of the family, clan or tribe; but more so to celebrate aspects of natural and agricultural manifestations of the local and family gods. This list is taken from Ihiala.

- (1) Ime Obi umuaka (the spirit of children). A white chicken is slaughtered by the head of an extended family at the special shrine to ensure increased fertility and wellbeing of children. Prayers are offered to the ancestral spirits and to Ala goddess while the chicken sacrificed is used in a communal meal followed by ritual dancing around the Ala shrine of the clan or extended family by young maidens alone.
- (2) Ime chi la agu (the propitiation of the spirit of relationship and kindreds). Married daughters take eight pieces of yams, palm wine, fish and sometimes cloth to their mother. Their mother's husband propitiates the woman's chi with the gifts from the daughter and blesses the daughters praying for their wellbeing.

A young wife who has not had a married daughter, provides the sacrificial materials for herself and calls her husband to propitiate her chi for her and her young children. Part of the tribute and sacrificial materials from the women of a clan are given to the oldest woman member who keeps the shrine of Ara la Oma (the collective spirit of all the extended family).

- (3) Ida ji (the collection of yams). Young unmarried women of the village parade with songs to the homes of all the Ozo titled men collecting yams from them in the month of May when yams are so scarce and collecting corns and peers from elderly

women and young men. These are heaped in the home of the leader of these young ladies where after they had been offered to the Ala goddess they become food for the young ladies who must stay together in their leader's home for seven native weeks communally feeding on such yams, corns and pears as they have collected. This is believed to ensure a plenty harvest, communal wellbeing and harmony for the village for the forthcoming harvest year.

- (4) *Ite Nsi*: This is the propitiation of *Ife-jioku*, the god of farming before the new yam is eaten. A cock offered by the wife is sacrificed at the shrine of *Ife-jioku* inside the barn and parts of the animal are distributed to various members of the extended family as prescribed by custom. All the young brothers must take tribute (*Ife-nru*) of eight yams, eight pieces of fire wood and a leg of the sacrificed chicken to their oldest brother who in turn takes the same kind of tribute to the oldest head of the extended family. The new yam is eaten seven native weeks after this public worship.
- (5) *Iro Muo*: This is the biggest of the celebrations. It takes place during the period of agricultural plenty. It literally means "the feast of pleasing the gods". It is a kind of harvest thanksgiving.

All sons and married daughters take tribute (*ife-nru*) of eight yams, and kola-nuts to the oldest surviving son of their father who offers them in sacrifice to the *Ndebunze*, the ancestral spirit, together with the goat which must be provided by the oldest married daughter of the household. Communal eating follows culminating in ritual dance at the village square after the appropriate sacrifices have been offered at the shrine of the clan god by the clan priest. Both the young and the middle aged people take part in this ritual dance. The prayers offered at the shrine of the household ancestral spirit and the one said at the public square to the clan god contain thanksgiving to *Chukwu*, *Ala* and *Ndebunze* for protection, for good harvest and increase in children, deliverance from epidemics like small-pox and from abominations of any kind for which the wrath of both gods and ancestral spirits would have punished "the land".

Occasional public worship includes the sacrifice of atonement. After

epidemics of any kind the diviners are consulted to know what had "spoiled the land". If no particular individual is accused as being responsible, all the village then becomes guilty. Sacrificial animal, sheep and sometimes a yam or a male goat is bought with money collected from adult men. The priest of the clan or a priest of a particular god mentioned by the diviner will tie the four legs of the animal, drag it about around some public places and then sacrifice the animal at the shrine of the clan earth goddess. Its meat is not eaten but rather it is given to the Osu people dedicated to the Ala goddess. Another example of occasional public worship is the *ichuaro* (driving away of an old year). Sacrifice of chickens brought by each family head as well as the breaking of old baskets and pots at the Aho shrine feature in this act of worship together with the saying of incantations and prayers. This in some places is an annual worship while in some places it is ordered occasionally by the diviner after plagues, floods and other calamities. The climax of public worship is the annual propitiation of clan gods. Each clan has its own public shrine dedicated to its own clan protector. I watched the annual propitiation of the clan protector. I watched the annual propitiation of the clan god of Umunwajiobi called Ogwugwu at Ihiala. This was in March before planting of yams. The men collected money to buy goats and the women (wives of the men and not their sisters as in Iro Muo) buy hens. The animals are sacrificed at the shrine of Ogwugwu whose cultus symbols contain a big earth human seated figure with two young children by each side, an earthen pot in front, and outside the hut sheltering the figures stands the *ogirisi* tree in a central position. The eyes of the five figures are particularly open and awe inspiring. The blood of the animals is poured into the earthen pot, the plumes of the chickens are heaped inside the hut by the side of the pot, kola-nuts are broken and placed into the hands of the five human forms; lines of chalk are drawn according to the number of the subfamilies of Umunwajiobi. At this juncture the Okpara begins the first of his prayers <sup>1)</sup> after which the women start cooking the meat of the sacrificed animals and some yams. A big feast is prepared. First of

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1) The "liturgical" long prayer of the ceremony is said at this moment of breaking of kola-nuts and the slaughtering of the animals. There is no set form, the length and expression depend on the oratorical ability of the elder-priest (Okpara) with support from the *Ozo* titled men and elders.

all, that is before people start to eat pieces of appropriate parts of the animals together, lumps of foofoo are thrown into the hut with the prayer that the Ogwugwu god should be pleased to share in the meal offerings of his children and bless them<sup>2</sup>). All eat together out of the meal so prepared. Women bring white chalk and akoro to decorate the hut of the shrine and ritual dance is staged. The clan ballad singer praises the ancestors of the clan, tells the story of the brave deeds of past leaders of the clan and all present respond with warm glee that as their forebears had triumphed in the past so will the present and future generations triumph, Ogwugwu being their god and protector. Children are then particularly enjoined to remember that Ogwugwu, the ancestors and their spirits do frown at deeds which foul human relations. This worship is regarded as an annual covenant making between the members of the clan both the living and the dead with their clan god Ogwugwu. The final act is the pouring of win libation by the Okpara, the clan head and then by all the Ozo titled men while the women take the chalk from the shrine and mark their breasts and abdomens. This done, people begin to go home singing joyously as they go.

*Priests, medicinemen (dibia) and oracles:* The picture of Ibo worship is incomplete without some discussion about priests, dibias and oracles. The Ibo believe in the priesthood of all heads of households, extended families and clans. Also all Ozo titled men are priests in so far as they offer sacrifices and perform ritual functions including praying to Chukwu and to the ancestors. In addition to this there is a class of special priests made up of two categories. One class comes from the Osu (people taken captives and dedicated to special gods). One of them is always chosen to be the special priest of that god and must live near that god's shrine<sup>3</sup>). The other class of priests is made up

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2) Text of such prayer could go like this: Ogwugwu rie nri, Nnaha rienu nri, Obu ihe umu gi wetara; Ekwena ayi nwua, ekwena ayi fu. Eha! (response from the people).

Ogwugwu eat food, Ancestors eat food! It is the offering from your children; Keep us, not to die, keep us no to perish. So let it be (response from the people).

3) At Ihiala the priests from Osu Ulasi Ogboro have now refused to be so styled. They do not continue to perform their priestly functions as described here. The Government of Eastern Nigeria had passed a law that these outcasts should be declared "free men".

of men who become priests through "appointment" by ancestral spirits. Such men behave queerly and are noticed by those already priests who take them in and train them. Such people do sometimes combine three functions: those of medicine men with the knowledge of healing herbs, secondly divination and thirdly sacrificing priests. They also have power at times to exorcise, prepare medicine for warding off evil, for protecting from harm like car accidents and for bringing good fortune in trade or hunting. Such "medicines" are what people sometimes call charms. In each village a priest is known to be specially related to one or more gods. When a diviner prescribes sacrifice he also names the proper priest that should perform the function. In this way priests exercise leadership among the people. In some circumstances there is a class of men greatly gifted in the knowledge of the use of herbs to cure various diseases. These men are commonly known as "dibia" and not priests. They cannot divine but work hand in hand with divinerpriests. In all cases no cure is carried out entirely by the dibia without consulting diviners. Divination in the case of illness nearly always leads to finding out what spirit had been wronged and what human relationship had been strained. Sacrifice and propitiation which in effect are occasional private acts of worship accompany whatever herbal medicine is given to ensure proper cure.

Divination in a simple process is done by any diviner-priests. Major issues are referred to the principal oracles of Iboland of which there are four 4):

- (1) The Chukwu Oracle Ibinukpabi of Arochukwu popularly known as the long juju.
- (2) The Agbala of Awka.
- (3) The Igwe-ka-Ala of Umunoha near Owerri.
- (4) The Onyili Ora near Agu-Ukwu, Nri.

Each of these has its highly organised system of priests and attendants and agents. In the absence of a widely organised political central

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4) S. R. Smith in his study of the Ibo people notes four conditions requisite for the growth of these oracles: (1) Quiet remote place. (2) Some natural features like rocks, caves and steep valleys with running water or groves and dense bush to inspire awe. (3) A system of travelling agents to invite clients to the oracles. (4) An easy and secret method for the disposal of victims "eaten" by the gods of the oracle. See K. O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*, Oxford University Press, London, 1956.

authority in Iboland the oracles had united people from all corners, as people in search of wellbeing and “knowledge of the truth” from the gods go to consult them.

*Holy Days:* These are days which are holy to gods and to most adults in Iboland. There are four market days running in two parallels thereby forming one complete native week of eight days made up as follows: Eke Nta, Orié Nta, Afo Nta, Nkwo Nta, Eke Ukwu, Orié Ukwu, Afo Ukwu and Nkwo Ukwu (Nta means small, Ukwu means great). Certain gods must be worshipped on their holy days, for example Afo and Eke are holy days to Anyanwu and Agbala at Awka. Orié is a holy day to Ogwugwu, clan god of the Umunwajiobi “family” of Ihiala. Most Ọzọ titled men keep Eke Ukwu as a holy day on which day they must not eat any food cooked with palm oil nor come into contact with women nor go to any farm work. The Ọzọ titled man must “meditate” on such a day and keep “quiet time” with the ancestors and offer special prayers to them for the wellbeing of his “family”. Some youngmen who have not taken any title could, through divination, be told which day they should observe as their holy day. Priests dedicated to special gods observe as their own holy day the day that is holy to their gods. At Ihiala Afo Ukwu is the holy day to Ulasi Ogboro when all individual sacrifices ordered by a diviner are offered. Therefore the priest on that day observes the taboos of the god including staying away from farm work so as to attend to the supplicants who might come to the shrine of Ulasi Ogboro.

### *Conclusion*

The question can now be raised, what meaning of the sacred do the various acts of worship we have been describing give and what experience about the being and function of the Object of worship could be suggested? Another question that can be asked is how far do the experiences gained through these various acts of worship give the worshippers a personal apprehension of the living God. A simplistic answer to the last question is to say — “well of course Ibo traditional religion with all its belief and practice which includes aspects of worship described in this essay is primitive religion which mixes religion with magic <sup>5)</sup> and can therefore lead no one to a vision of the sacred and

5) Note the distinction which writers have made between religion and magic since the days of Sir James Frazer whose book “The Golden Bough” first

thence towards a personal apprehension of the living God". With this facile attitude of seeing Ibo traditional worship and religious practices as more by magic stimulating the desire of the worshipper to coerce the deity by placing him under the worshipper's control and then to get the deity to do the worshipper's desire rather than as pure and simple religion in which the worshipper submits himself to the will of the deity in ready obedience to that will, we will miss the significance of worship to an Iboman. Surely there is not fine demarcation in the thought of a simple village Iboman between the phenomenal and the noumenal, between the causal and the caused, between things casual and things prognostic, yet it is through these practical acts of private as well as by public worship that he tries to acknowledge God as the "known" and yet the "unknown", the "mysterium tremendum" that is still "attractive" to make him want to offer the early morning sacrifice of kola-nuts the next day. To put in another way our answer to the second of our two questions is that whether in Ibo traditional worship or in Jewish religion of the Old Testament or even in pre-Reformation as well as in post-Reformation Christian religion man has often worshipped God with a mixture of the "magical" as well as the "religious". The "magical" is that element of the selfish (if we mean that man's seeking for help towards his own wellbeing can be described as the selfish) struggling with God, that wrestling with the divine until He blesses the human. The Iboman would say in a proverb "ka anachu aja ka ikpe nama ndi M $\phi$ " (let us go on sacrificing to the gods and let the guilt be that of the spirits) meaning that the sacrifices do not always bring the desired good and yet such sacrifice is not discontinued. It is not discontinued because human needs will always remain and man no matter the sophistication of his technology will find himself not all sufficient, for if he were he would not die! It is therefore by man's persistence to continue to worship, to offer sacrifice, to wrestle with his God no matter however imperfectly known that faith is forged and with such faith that even the Iboman in his traditional religious worship comes to that level of the knowledge and the personal apprehension of the living God by which he continues to offer his daily sacrifice to the known and yet the unknown Anyanwu n'Eze Enu (the sun and

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appeared in 1890. 'Religion represents a submissive mind, magic an overbearing, self asserting attitude'. Nathan Söderblom as quoted by Stephen Neill in *Christian Faith and Other Faiths*. Oxford Paperbacks, 1970, p. 129.

the King of the Sky). There is always the element of the "magical" in all forms of the human worship of the Divine, be it Christian, Islamic or African traditional form, the difference is only a matter of degree. To say this does not imply that we do not recognise the difference between Christian worship and Ibo traditional religious worship. No one can know God unless God himself reveals and Jesus Christ is the full revelation of God. That fact alone makes all the difference between Christian and non-Christian worship. Having said that, we go ahead and restate what has been said earlier on, that in the continued struggle of the Iboman in his traditional religion to offer his daily sacrifices or his yearly worship at the shrine of Ifejioku (the god of yams) lies the nursery bed through which the greater knowledge of God in Jesus Christ has germinated to grow to a new possibility. To recognise this fact is not to degenerate into the hedious and dreaded syncretism that in some parts of the world has led to the adulterated Christianity that has done more harm than good in the history of man's upward movement towards seeing God through the glass less darkly. On the other hand not to recognise the fact that faith already built in human culture through the traditional worship of the Ibo or any other group of people leads to personal apprehension of God, no matter however feeble, is to deny that God has never left himself without witnesses. But woe betide that undiscerning Iboman who would prefer to stick to that which is in part, now that that, which is perfect has come <sup>6)</sup>!

We can now take the first question which we have posed in this conclusion that is the meaning of the sacred the Ibo have learnt through their traditional worship as well as the experience they have about the being and the function of the Object of their worship. In other words what is the theology the Ibo people have developed to which they give expression through the worship patterns described in this essay. Needless stating that the Ibo did not evolve systematised theology nor philosophy. Insights are rather developed into the nature of Reality, and such other questions discussed by theology and philosophy are expressed through proverbs and practice rather than through dogma and doctrine. Ultimate Reality is to the Iboman "high and lifted up" <sup>7)</sup> and so is to be

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6) See Umunna, V. N., "Nigerian Paganism as a Preparation for the Gospel" in *East and West Review*, no. 5, London, 1939, pp. 139-145.

7) Isaiah chapter 6, verse 1.

approached through the gods and godlings and ancestral spirits. The mediums may differ from one culture to the other but the pattern seems to remain the same namely that one cannot really approach the Sacred that is "mysterium tremendum" face to face and discern his functions so clearly and unequivocally and still remain human? Ibo worship has often been offered to the earth deity, ancestral spirits, community godlings and personifications like Chi, Ifejioku, Amadioha and Ulasi Ogboro<sup>8</sup>), because it would be terrible for anyone to contemplate standing in front of the "majesty on high" face to face and worship. Even to the Christian the feeling in contemplation of the Sacred and his function is to lie prostrate before God's "throne and gaze and gaze upon Thee". The Ibo traditional religious worship has used Ala (earth goddess) and Ifejioku or Chi n'Agu as the throne from where to gaze and gaze upon God. But from wherever the christian and the traditional worshipper has gazed upon God, they both recognise the God that creates and sustains with bounty as well as with the possibilities of scarcity in the lean years or years of pestilence and war. To fail to recognise that both the christian and the traditional worshipper are engaged in a common act of trying to gaze upon God through their various acts of worship, no matter the throne from underneath which they both gaze, is again to deny that before the arrival of Christianity in this land God had not left himself without witnesses.

A GLOSSARY OF IBO WORDS USED IN THIS ESSAY NOT  
ALREADY EXPLAINED IN THE TEXT

- Ala = earth hence earth goddess.  
 Amadioha = god of thunder.  
 Chi = individual's spirit counterpart.  
 dibia = a herbal medicine man who also may act as a diviner.  
 Eke, Orië, Afò, Nkwò = names of four days of one Ibo week.  
 Ifejioku = the god of yams (a tuber which is one of the peoples staple food).  
 Irò Muò = the "delighting" of gods.  
 Ogwugwu = name of a clan god.  
 Òkpara = the oldest member of a family—nuclear, extended or clan.  
 Osu = a slave dedicated to a god or goddess.  
 Ozò (title) = a rank title acquired through expensive social and religious ceremonies  
 Ulasi Ogboro = name of a clan god.

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8) See Glossary of Ibo words used at the end of the essay.