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THE DIVINE UMUNDRI KING

M. D. W. JEFFREYS

THIS paper is based on personal research among the Igbo,¹ and more especially among the Umundri group. It describes the coronation-ceremony of two divine kings who are the spiritual heads of the Umundri. The two divine kings occupy different towns which are in the Awka District, Onitsha Province. This Province is in Southern Nigeria and lies on the left bank of the Niger. Originally there was only Aguku and only one divine king. Dissensions arose and a part of Aguku seceded, to found the town of Oeri with its own divine king.

The descendants of the royal families live in Aguku and claim ancestry from a sky-being called Eri, sent down by Chiuku, a sun-god. These descendants call themselves Umundri, the children of Ndri, the youngest of the four sons of Eri and their first divine king. Though these people speak only Igbo yet they declare that they are not Igbo.

The Umundri legend describes the earth as at first a morass, and that Eri stood on an ant-hill until Chiuku sent—some say one, others say four—blacksmiths, to dry the earth with fire and bellows. Then followed through Chiuku the acquisition of food, of the knowledge of agriculture, of metal-working and of other arts.

The king is chosen from three, originally four, royal families, by the ancestral spirits. The candidate is usually a youngest son and the call must be accompanied by signs and wonders. One such sign is that the earth wall of his compound should fall down in the dry season for no apparent cause. *Dibia* or spirit-seekers are consulted so that assurance through their divination may be secured. The candidate must also make publicly three prophecies which must be fulfilled.

The Umundri coronation-ceremony has the twofold object of transforming a man into a god and of recreating the world. Before he enters on the coronation-ceremony one condition must invariably obtain. Both his parents must be dead. When the members of the royal families are satisfied that he is the chosen of the gods a public meeting is convened where his acceptance is acclaimed. The candidate

¹ 'Igbo' is commonly spelt 'Ibo'. EDITOR.

begins by visiting all the shrines of all the minor gods in the town, making appropriate sacrifices. He then pays certain fees to the Adama, or priestly group, who are both the custodians of the regalia and the masters of ceremonies.

The ceremony opens with a ritual death, burial and resurrection. The titled men attend and the Adama group take charge of the proceedings. An Adama priest, holding an *ofo* stick (a cult object) in his right hand, says, 'You who are about to enter the grave, rise up again with a vivid and shining body. May no sickness or harm befall you. Rise up as previous *eze* Ndri have done. Rule your people with truth and justice. Go to Aguleri, obtain your *odudu*, and may you return safely to rule your people.' A shallow grave, already dug in the candidate's house, is lined with iroko planks. The candidate, prepared for burial in the ordinary way, and wrapped in a mat, is then lowered into the grave. A plank is placed over him and earth is thrown on it. As the body is lowered into the grave the death-wail is started by his wives, who, stripping themselves of their finery, go into mourning. He remains buried for some hours. His tree of life is cut down and the usual sacrifices made.

At sunset Adama men, exhuming the body, carry it out of the compound. A banana-stem replaces the body in the grave, which is then filled in. The candidate has now left his ancestral home for ever. He, placed on cow-hides, is stripped of his cerements and is washed with water from the sacred lake. His body, including the hair of his head, is whitened with clay and water. He thus fulfils the prayer that he should rise with a vivid and shining body. He discards for ever his ordinary clothes and henceforth may wear only white or blue Igala ones. Copper greaves in the form of anklets are put on his legs, but he remains barefooted. He is now regarded as a spirit or god, his person is sacred, and only Adama may touch him and his belongings.

With him, his first wife, or queen, is whitened from head to foot, then she is clad in white Igala cloths with a white cloth round her head. They continue thus whitened and accoutred in the circumambulation which, beginning and ending at Aguku, occupies several months. Part of this circumambulation is called the 'running' for the post. This running or going along a ritual or sacred road occurs in other Umundri ceremonies.

The next day he, his wife, and a dwarf and a large following set out on the clockwise circumambulation of his sphere of influence. The first ceremonial step on this journey is the mounting of a special white-ant hill. He alone mounts this mound and prays to Chiuku and to the ancestral spirits. As he passes through towns he is greeted with rejoicings. He eats his food alone in a palm-leaf booth in the presence of the ancestral spirits. The food is prepared and served by an immature Adama boy.

On reaching Aguleri he, whitened with white clay, accompanied by his dwarf and his retinue, enters the place of public assembly. There he sits on a little heap of stones until all his followers have been accommodated. While thus seated he ceremonially eats white clay. This eating of white clay occurs on several occasions as well as in other ceremonies. It is significant to notice that he eats that which caused his body to appear vivid and shining.

Here he must recreate the world by getting his *odudu* (a lump of white clay) from the river-bed. A spirit-seeker is consulted for the most propitious day to raise the *odudu*. A sacrifice is made on the river-bank, the future divine king points his *ofo* over the waters and prays that all dangers be removed. Whereupon a man plunges in and brings up the *odudu*. Feasting and rejoicing now follow. The candidate has proved his godhead. Henceforth he may never again cross over water.

At this point some confusion appeared in the ceremony. At Aguku the divine king was said to have the power of parting the waters of the river, whereupon a man could walk down into the river-bed and bring up the *odudu*. At Aguleri it was denied that he could perform this miracle, but it was stated that he had the power of calming the waters and of causing all noxious beasts, crocodiles, and hippopotami to depart on the occasion of raising the *odudu*.

The circumambulation now continues until the royal city, Aguku, is reached from which he may never stir again. He does not reside in his predecessor's palace, which falls into ruins; instead he and his wife live for a year in a palm-leaf booth.

An Igbo week after his return he causes the miraculous ripening of a head of fruit on an oil-palm. A sacrifice is made and with his *ofo* stick he prays that the palm may flower, fruit, and the fruit ripen that very day. The oil-palm miraculously obliges. The fruit is gathered

and distributed among those who have attended. From this fruit palm-oil is prepared, and with it sacrifices are made in their towns to increase the yield of crops and of oil-palms.

During the year in the booths the templum and residence of the new king are built. At one end of the templum is an earth mound or throne in which is buried the skull of the preceding divine king. Here he sits on cow-hides and on a special stool when giving audience. When he dies there is buried with him a brass face-mask which, on state occasions, he had worn suspended from his neck. This mask, which is part of the regalia, is dug up when the skull is retrieved for burying in the throne. He thus establishes a double contact with his predecessor.

When the year of living in booths is over, the day for the coronation is fixed. The candidate, whitened all over, clad in white Igala cloths and with his long copper anklets on, sets out to mount his throne for the first time. On the way he is set upon by his queen. He overcomes her and puts her on the ground. She then rises and does the same to him. This step is said to remove any pollutions that would ensue should the king or queen hereafter fall when quarrelling with each other.

The ritual combat follows, the divine king fights first with a young man and then with an old one and vanquishes both.

He then mounts his throne. The Adama priest places on the cow-hides before the king the regalia, namely, the brass face-mask, the sacred spear, the *ofo* and the *odudu* or orb. The priest taking his *ofo* invokes long life and prosperity for the new king; exhorts him to perform wonders similar to those of his predecessors; asks that the ancestral ghosts should abide in and guide him; cautions him to conduct himself as his predecessors have done. The divine king giving his assent, the regalia are handed to him by the Adama priest, who now places on the king's head the cow-hide crown adorned with eight white fish-eagle feathers. The divine king assumes the title of 'the sky'. In the coronation ceremony at Oleri all the nobles are re-nobled at this stage by taking up in the divine king's presence a number of new *ofo* sticks according to their rank.

A wide road is now cleared from his templum to a town road. Over it, near the templum, is erected an archway. At its threshold a slave

in the old days was killed. To-day his place is taken by a cow. The rest of the day is spent in feasting.

The divine king must occupy his throne all day for the next three native weeks. Delegates from other towns come in to offer praise and gifts. A drummer and a trumpeter discourse music during this time.

The divine king used to order a light-skinned slave to be killed before a white-ant mound. This sacrifice ensured flights of locusts, which are said to emerge from the ant-hill as a consequence. Locusts are an article of diet.

The next step is to re-establish the four days. Before the templum, four stakes are driven in line into the ground; each stake, set about six feet from the next, is surrounded by a cylindrical mound of earth; and each stake is connected with the next by white strands made from the young leaves of the oil-palm spathe. In the presence of the divine king a fowl is sacrificed before each stake, which thereupon receives one of the names of the four days of the Igbo week. These names are those of the four quarter gods who in prayers are invited to share the usual communion meal of kola and palm-wine. In Igbo, as in English, the days of the week are named after gods. The week is now established.

Most Igbo culture is derived from that of the Umundri, whose coronation-ceremony has just been described. This ceremony is found to have numerous points of similarity with that of the Jukun, the Igala, the Yoruba and the Bini. So close are these similarities that it is clear they can have had but one source. A few of the points of similarity in culture of these and cognate tribes will now be briefly mentioned.

The Umundri tradition is that they come from the ruling stock of the Igala and are thus connected with the Atah of Idah. Captain Clifford, of the Nigerian Civil Service, has examined the kingship among the Igala and finds that it is of Jukun origin. He states that the aboriginal Yoruba and the aboriginal Igala are of a common stock. To this common stock the present Igbo appear to belong, for the ruling Yoruba families claim to have settled among a people whom they called Igbo. The Umundri, though to-day they speak only Igbo, yet like the Yoruba declare that they are not Igbo but settled amongst a people whom they call Igbo. Thus the Umundri tradition of pene-

tration by a people of a high culture into a people of a lower, i.e. the Igbo, is common to both Yoruba and Igala tradition.

The condition among the Umundri that the divine king may have no parents alive is reported among the Jukun by Dr. Meek,¹ among the Yoruba by Johnson,² while last year at the coronation of the Oba of Benin, the Church Missionary Society's publication, *Western Equatorial Africa*, stated that prior to the commencement of this ceremony, the mother of the Oba died. The Oba when crowned was thus without father or mother.

A dwarf as part of the entourage of a divine king is reported at the courts of kings by Johnson³ among the Yoruba, and by Frobenius⁴ among the Nupe.

The ceremonial use of mounds of sand or of ant-hills is common among the Umundri and is reported by Dr. Meek⁵ among the Jukun and by Johnson⁶ among the Yoruba. Dr. Perry interprets this mounting as a ritual means of attaining the sky or of becoming identified with it. This interpretation fits in with the sky-title assumed by the divine king.

The ability to ripen crops miraculously is reported among the Bini by Ling Roth⁷ and among the Dagomba by Frobenius,⁸ while the erection of new buildings for a new king is also found among the Bini,⁹ the Jukun,¹⁰ the Yoruba¹¹ and the Dahomians.

The use of a brass face-mask as part of the royal regalia is reported among the Bini¹² and the Igala,¹³ while the ritual combat occurs in the coronation of the Oba of Benin.¹⁴

A few words are necessary about the ceremony of recreating the world. The *odudu*, or lump of clay raised from the bed of the Anambra river, is analogous to the orb in other coronation-ceremonies. Thus

¹ Meek, C. K., *A Sudanese Kingdom*, p. 137.

² Johnson, O., *The History of the Yoruba*, p. 63.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁴ Frobenius, L., *The Voice of Africa*, vol. ii, pp. 610, 612.

⁵ Meek, C. K., *op. cit.*, p. 134.

⁶ Johnson, O., *op. cit.*, p. 227.

⁷ Roth, L., *Great Benin*, p. 77.

⁸ Frobenius, L., *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 471.

⁹ Reade, C. H., and Dalton, O. M., *Antiquities from the City of Benin*, p. 9.

¹⁰ Meek, C. K., *op. cit.*, p. 139.

¹¹ Johnson, O., *op. cit.*, pp. 43, 45.

¹² Pitt Rivers, *Antique Works of Art from Benin*.

¹³ Baikie, Dr. W. B., *Narrative of an Exploring Voyage up the Niger and Benue*, p. 59.

¹⁴ Journal Church Missionary Society, *Western Equatorial Africa*, p. 125.

Frobenius¹ states that part of the regalia of the Nupe king is 'a stone sphere . . . eight and a half inches in diameter, held in his right hand'. Frobenius interprets this stone sphere as the orb which in the kingship represents the earth. The Yoruba legend is that the earth was formed from a ball of sand carried by Odudua, who descending from the sky parted the waters and created the earth from this ball of sand.² The Umundri coronation-ceremony has the initial parting of the waters and the raising of a lump of clay. With the Yoruba culture so similar to that of the Umundri it is legitimate to interpret this ritual step as a symbolical re-creation of the earth.

The four-day Umundri week is found among the Bini, the Yoruba and the Igala, and the names of the days of the week among the Bini, the Umundri and the Igala are so similar as to leave no choice but that of a common origin.

The number four and its implication of the four quarter gods is so constant a feature in West African ritual and has hitherto received no notice, so that some remarks about it are necessary. In all sacrifices by the Umundri where the articles are either agricultural produce or cowries the offerings are in fours or in multiples of four. In Yoruba ritual the number four is very significant, thus the protector of towns is the god, Olori Merin, who has four heads and is placed on a mound of sand.³ The connexion between the divine king and the number four is very definite, and further evidence of this connexion appears in Professor Seligman's 1933 Frazer Lecture, but he makes no comment on it. He, showing the relation between the rain-maker, the divine king, and the fertility of the soil, writes, 'A plot of ground is selected, the rain-maker strikes the ground four times with his hoe. . . .' The Professor further quotes a statement that four men precede and four follow a divine king with torches of fire. He also mentions the shooting of arrows to the cardinal points in the Sed festival. In the figure which illustrates the shooting, only three arrows and three town symbols appear. Among the Yoruba the shooting of three arrows by the divine king to three of the cardinal points is recorded by Johnson.⁴

¹ Frobenius, L., *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 608-9.

² Frobenius, L., *op. cit.*, vol. i, pp. 283-4.

³ Farrow, S. S., *Faith, Fancies and Fetish*, pp. 13, 67.

⁴ Johnson, O., *op. cit.*, p. 192.

The presumption is that in each instance the divine king occupies the fourth point. Among the Umundri, when a warrior is buried four arrows are shot to the four points.

These comparisons drawn from the coronation-ceremony are but a few of many cultural affinities that exist between the Umundri and the following culturally interrelated peoples, namely, the Bini, the Yoruba, the Igala and the Jukun. So close is this cultural correspondence in these tribes of different languages, that even in the present imperfect state of our knowledge of West Africa it may safely be asserted that the Umundri culture, based on the institution of a divine king, is the same in essentials as that of the Jukun, the Igala, the Yoruba and the Bini, and the conclusion is that this culture has a common source.

The Umundri coronation-ceremony when compared with that reached by Mr. Hocart in his book, *Kingship*,¹ is a confirmation of his conclusion on the uniformity of the coronation-ritual wherever it occurs. Mr. Hocart enumerates twenty-six steps in the ceremony, and to each he attaches a letter of the alphabet. Six of these steps, namely, Nos. H, K, S, X, Y and Z, are not yet known to occur in the Umundri ceremony. Step K, the anointing of the divine king with oil, is found among the Yoruba.

From the occurrence of steps in the Umundri ceremony, that as visualized by Mr. Hocart appears to require the addition of the following fourteen steps:

1. The king must have no father or mother.
2. The mounting of a mound of earth or sand.
3. The use of a stone seat.
4. The ceremonial use of whiteness as symbolical light, e.g. the use of white clay including its ingestion as a ritual act.
5. The ceremonial control of water.
6. The re-creation of the earth.
7. The running, or a race, along the royal road.
8. The magical increase of the food-supply, e.g. in the miraculous ripening of crops.
9. The living in booths.
10. The building of a new house and palace for the new king.
11. The making of a new road.
12. The erection of an arch and the sacrifice at this arch of a human being.
13. The personal contact, the maintenance of continuity with the past by contact with some part of the predeceased king, e.g. the skull in the throne.
14. The use of a plastron, e.g. the brass face-mask.

¹ Oxford University Press, 1927.

Thus a study of the Umundri coronation-ceremony has yielded three notable results: first, the essential uniformity of culture among the Bini, the Yoruba, the Igala, the Igbo and the Jukun, with the inevitable conclusion that it has a common source; secondly, the constancy of the coronation-ceremony wherever it is found; thirdly, the necessity of increasing the number of ritual steps in the coronation-ceremony, thereby producing a fuller and more complete ritual.

M. D. W. JEFFREYS.

Résumé

LE ROI-DIEU CHEZ LES UMUNDRI

Cet article expose les recherches poursuivies parmi les Igbo et plus particulièrement dans le groupe Umundri. Il décrit le couronnement des deux rois divins qui sont les chefs spirituels des Umundri.

L'étude de cette cérémonie a manifesté: 1° L'uniformité essentielle des cultures chez les Bini, les Yoruba, les Igala, les Igbo et les Jukun, et a amené à conclure qu'elles provenaient d'une source commune; 2° Le caractère constant de la cérémonie du couronnement partout où elle se rencontre; 3° La nécessité d'accroître le nombre des stages rituels dans la cérémonie afin d'avoir des rites plus complets.