

THE BELIEF IN ANCESTORS AS AGENTS OF REINCARNATION AMONG THE IKWERRE OF NIGER DELTA

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Abstract

The belief in the ancestors (ndiche) in Ikwerre ethnic nationality occupies an essential and central place in the traditional religion of Ikwerre of Niger Delta region. The traditional religion of the Ikwerre people in the absence of this belief system remains incomplete. In Nigeria today, especially in the Christian dominated Ikwerre ethnic nationality. War seems to have been declared on ancestral spirits such that every human ills as well as natural calamities are blamed on the ancestral spirits such as (ndiche) ancestors. This therefore, calls for a re-discovery of who the ancestors and the spirits are, their place and roles in the society and their continued relevance. This article sets out to re-assert the importance of the ancestors in reincarnation and the continued belief the people have in them in their daily attitude towards the dead and the living in the area of incarnation. This article brings into bear the totality of all that there are to be known about these beings and their overwhelming relevance in the people's traditional religious ontology. It tries to uphold the fact that this belief system no doubt has permeated inexorably deep into the religious ideals and practices of the people and their rich cultural heritage. However, despite the negative impacts of modern forces of change, this belief system still stands the hope of survival for the future generations. The article adopted the descriptive approach and also ends by recommending that the place of the ancestors should not be relegated to the background in Ikwerre history and traditions.

Keywords: Ancestors, Belief, Agents of Reincarnation, Ikwerre, Niger Delta.

Introduction

Every ethnic group in Nigeria and anywhere in the world has its own distinct cultures with regard to their language, belief systems, thought forms, ritual practices and a general way of life used in identifying their people. From the beginning of time and human civilizations, Ikwerre people of the Niger Delta have always had the consciousness that they have been in existence as an ethnic group and not a sub-group of any known tribe in the world. They have always been confident to handle their own affairs without seeking for assistance from any other tribe. They have always evolved their own distinct cultures, with emphasis on dances, ritual practices and belief systems. One of such is the belief in the ancestors as agents of reincarnation and moral control.

This belief system plays a functional role in the traditional Ikwerre belief system and relationship between the human and the dead loved ones also known as the ancestors or the spirits of the dead. This belief system is still very prominent in the socio-ethnic behavior and control of contemporary Ikwerre people and their existence because the ideas and values which they represent are still valid and relevant to the present day Ikwerre people.

This article centres on the belief in these ancestors as agents of reincarnation in Ikwerre of the Niger Delta. It reflects on the socio-ethical roles and belief in them as agents of moral control and reincarnation. Chinua Achebe (1958:10), while writing in his book “things fall apart” sees the core values the African traditional cultures and religious worships using Okonkwo’s house and shrine where he kept the wooden symbols of his personal gods, “ofor” and his ancestral spirits. He always worshiped then with sacrifices of kolanuts, food and palm wine and also offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his wives and children. In the same vein, the Ikwerre people also pray and libate to the ancestors to affirm their commitment and also confirm certain issues and principles that are in the general interest of the society especially in their extempore prayers to the ancestors to come back and continue with their roles in the families where they once existed as humans.

It is important to note that in Ikwerre worldview, many belief systems and practices have been influenced and affected by human articulations and protuberances. Nature has also affected the Ikwerre people’s worldviews including their actions such that what used to be a pattern of life and an established institution in the past has totally or partially changed. As these changes were not properly checked or looked into, they have left empty vacuums in the history of growth of the Ikwerre man and the society in general. As these changes happen, people naturally find themselves adapting to such changes and developments when these developments occur and people begin to modify them as a way of life and attaching serious values to such developments and ensuring that they become useful to mankind, it becomes what may be seen as civilization. In other words, it is important to note here that a people cannot adopt every new influence in a hurry and survive it as a society.

Brief History of the Ikwerre People

The Ikwerre people who are traditionally known as the *Iwhuruoha* people are one among the many ethnic groups in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and they speak Ikwerre as their major language. The Ikwerre exist in well delineated clans with each clan having its own paramount king or ruler. The Ikwerre do not have an overall paramount ruler or king but designated kings, rulers or leaders mostly approved by their constituents. However, all paramount rulers in Ikwerre are united in what is known as *Ogbakor* Ikwerre which was formed in 1963 as an umbrella socio-cultural organization of the Ikwerre people.

According to modern day history, the Ikwerre people are related to the Ekpeyes and the Ogbas. It is noted that the Ekpeyes and the Ogba people originated from Akalaka from Benin during Oba Ewuare regime in 11th century A.D., the Ekpeye and the Ogba are said to be the direct sons of Akalaka who founded the ancient ancestral home of Obigwe. This simply implies that if the Ikwerre are related to the Ekpeye and Ogba, then the Ikwerre originated from the Ogba empire. However, since there are other accounts of traditions of Ikwerre origin,

it implies that the Ikwerre have multiple origins. In other words, the early history of the Ikwerre indeed portrays a good deal of contacts between them and their neighbouring communities both within Rivers State and the Igbo hinterland. A sample of their oral traditions throws useful light on the subject of the close contact with their neighbours in the pre-colonial period. This tradition points to a good number of places of origin and different waves of migrations and the corresponding links with other groups who are non-Ikwerre. The Ikwerre have traditions which link them with the Ekpeye and Ogbas through the Benin Empire as already stated.

In an article titled "origin of Ikwerre" in Akwa, Sam Woka (1993), stresses that the progenitors of the present day Ekpeye, Ogbas and Ikwerre ethnic groups were one Akalaka and his half brother Ochichi. Akalaka the father of Ekpeye and Ogbas originally settled first at Obigwe and then Omoku-Ekpeye as a result of a misunderstanding, Ogbas fled to Ula Ahoada while Ochichi his uncle crossed the Sombreiro and settled at Elele. It is also said that Wezina, Ochichi's younger brother moved further to establish the settlement which today constitute the Ikwerre communities of Odegu and Ogbakiri. On the accounts of the relationship between the Ikwerre and the Ekpeye people for example, intelligence reports compiled during the periods of colonial rule which are themselves documented accounts of historical and anthropological facts about the people's concerned based on their oral traditions are worthy to note.

Ogoloma (2013) noted that Ikwerre ethnic nationality is the most populous ethnic nationality in Rivers State which is currently playing host to many multinational oil companies and other institutions in Nigeria such as the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), Nigeria Agip Oil Company (NAOC), Port Harcourt International Airport (PHIA), University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT), etc.

Okajile (2009:2), opines that the Ikwerre ethnic nationality constitutes one of the major ethnic groups in Rivers State of Nigeria with an estimated population of about 1.5 million people, and inhabits at present four (4) local government areas namely Emohua, Ikwerre, Obio/Akpor and Port Harcourt, and they are richly blessed with natural resources.

The Belief in Ancestors as Custodians of the Tradition

Who Are the Ancestors?

Literally, interest on the ancestors has been one of both consensus as well as disagreement among scholars. The areas of consensus is based on the fact that most cultures of the world believe that death does not in any way bring to an end the mutual tie between the deceased and his family on earth. There is a firm belief in life after death. The ancestors can be identified by their roles to the living such that the dead ancestors now passed into deity, simply goes on protecting his own and receiving suit and services from them. This general attitude of the living towards the dead expressed either by worshipping the spirit of the dead through sacrifices and or libations could be the origin and reason for ancestorship. It is a living to dead and dead to living relationship. In Ikwerre traditional religious theory, it is not a negative thing, but a positive thing, going back to the beginning, a final graduation into life. On the

disagreement on the ancestors among scholars, these are traceable to concepts and the details of religious practices.

Adams (1995) defines “ancestors” simply as members of a family, morally good or evil, young or elderly, who lived a long time ago. This also restricts the meaning to the family scope. Opoku in his own part seems to have stricken a dividing line instead. A person’s conduct in this world and the manner of his dead determine his entry into the ranks of the revered group of ancestors who form the backbone of our societies (Opoku, 1978:36). According to Igwe, S.N., family or community life of this earth has only become extended into the life beyond in consequence of the death of the ancestors (Igwe, 2002). Megesa provides us with what seems a summary of who the ancestors are, their gender, role, place in nature and origin as he says. It has to be kept in mind that the ancestors consist of the founders of the clan as we have in Ikwerre, they are the pristine men and women who originated the lineage, clan or ethnic group and who provide the people with their names.

From the above, we can point out that the two places necessary for becoming an ancestor are the temporal world and the spiritual world. The Ikwerre people maintain the general belief that to become an ancestor, one must live an exemplary life, lived a ripe old age with children of his or her own. One must also die well as a result of nothing but natural old age. As a matter of fact the dead must be buried traditionally with certain rights of passage as to qualify for ancestorship.

Ancestor Worship in Ikwerre Traditional Religion

The theory which suggests that the cult of the ancestors, is the basis of all human religion is credited to H. Spencer. He arrived at his “summary of the conclusions” by dealing with what is known as the “hero cult”. For him, anything which transcends the ordinary, man would think of as supernatural or divine, the remarkable man among the rest. This remarkable man could be a chief famed for strength or bravery, a medicine man of great reputation or an inventor of something new (Spencer, 27).

In Ikwerre traditional religion, the remarkable man may be a superior being as already mentioned or could be a superior race predominant by conquests, even now more revered after death based on his strength and abilities to event and handle certain situations in his lifetime. In this instance, the ancestor is regarded with increased awe during his life, he is regarded with increased awe after his death, becoming greater than the propitiation of ghosts less feared, develops into an established worship. Indeed, it is plausible that every human religion has some manner of cult of its dead ancestors and of ancestral concepts. Differences may exist as to where a particular belief is located, its associated religious practices and the associated names and concepts. In the traditional religions of the Ikwerre people, particularly in those areas where the hero cult is developed to its highest form, as well as in liberal areas, whatever level of devotions paid to the ancestors are still of superior degree and to that of the communal deities even though they may simply be seen as nature spirits.

For instance, the cults of “*Ali*” the earth goddess of Ikwerre land are of same degree and work hand in hand with that of *ndiche* (the ancestors) since the ancestors are seen as the custodians of the land. Also in line with Spencer, Rangers and Kimambo (1972), record that in Nyakyusa

province, a Tanzanian Uganda border town, the Lwember town was the hero of other towns with spiritual and political pre-eminence, established a divine kingship (of its founding ancestors), that all princes of the lower Nyakyusa valley were his descendants, sacrificed to and recognized the spiritual lordship of his heirs.

In this case, we see that these east and central Africans refer to their ancestors as divine kings or divine heroes with Lwember at the peak of the hierarchal ladder, while their heir (ruling chiefs) queue up for participation in his divinity or immortality and can use them in relating with subjects. Their belief in the continued relevance of their ancestors is expressed in the description of their ancestral rituals.

In Ikwerre traditional religion, their rituals are esoteric, there is no gathering of the entire people of the land, only chiefs, traditional rulers and those with hereditary priesthoods come to it. But on the other hand, everyone knows when a sacrifice or ritual is taking place and in spite of the influence of missions, most people in the ritual community believe in the efficacy of the rituals and sacrifices that are mostly performed at the ancestral cults. It is pertinent to note the believe in ancestorship can be taken to be part of the people's philosophical reflections. It serves to explain many important facts of the people's attitude in life and situations generally.

J.A. Omolafe (1990), opines that the value of this belief system can hardly be underrated for it expresses some important aspects of their human consciousness. This practice is the product of their general belief system which points to facts that are beyond the mere stories they portray. Oladipo (1992) states that "this belief system implies that anything one does is not something done out of freewill, but something done in fulfillment of pre-ordained history. One of the essential elements of the belief in the ancestors theory is the idea of a pre-ordained course of life in the clans which is above and beyond the powers of an individual to change.

The Belief in Ancestors as Agents of Reincarnation

In Ikwerre worldview, the ancestors are fully loaded with both temporal and spiritual heritages which need to be understood for posterity. God had spoken through the ancestors before the coming of Christianity and other religions. There is this widespread conviction that the ancestors had a certain self-understanding, a view of their world and of their place in it, a life style at home, a religious attitude that responded in the immanent. They also possessed a self-contained and independently developed self-integrity that was sufficient for coping with the realities of their world of experience.

The Ikwerre man's idea and belief in fullness of life in ancestorship and cultic practices are evidenced in his natural abilities to blend with the sacred and the secular. The ancestors are upheld as the custodians of their religiosity, whether as God's associates or as servants to the Supreme Being (*Chiokike*).

The Ikwerre man in his religious thought draws analogy between the role of Christ in Christianity and that of the ancestors in traditional religion. Christ died, rose and is now a living activity in the Christian community as the sole mediator between God and man, see (1 Tim, 2:5). For him, he believes that the ancestors are not merely dead people but "living dead". Yet intimately concerned with the social and the religious life of their descendants. This is

evidenced in the life of an Ikwerre man who sees his ancestors playing some intermediary roles between their descendants and the deities such as *Aliezi* (the family ancestral deity). This stresses on the ancestors as the foundations of Christian faith understanding and the relevance of the ancestors, more so to the Ikwerre Christian today.

In conclusion with the above, Ejizu tracing the origin of the *Ofo* from God to man through the *Umunri* mythical lineage ancestor writes:

Ofo is said to have descended directly from *Chukwu*, he gave it to *Eri*, the *Umunri* mythical founding ancestors as a means of communication between man and the spirit world, and as a symbol of truth and justice.

Having adopted this mystical example about *Eri*, Ejizu agrees on the mediatrix of the ancestors between God and man. On the issue of ancestral community or reincarnation in all the Ikwerre traditional worldview, the ancestors (dead) are believed to return on earth in the new born baby. Similarities in colour, structure, voice, or gait is often established between the new born and the living dead. On the other hand, it is often reflected in the names being given to the child such as Nne Ndah, (meaning the father's mother), Adanne (mother's daughter), Ndamzi (my father lives), Nwonne (mother's child) Nhiedulem (I have returned back to life) etc.

Even today, Christians have double names such as baptismal Christian names and the names of those ensouled in them (ancestors). This shows that, the dead relatives who come back to life had enough meaning for them to have assured them of the continuity of life between the new and the ancient generations. In most cases, the doctrine of reincarnation is not easily accepted neither in the clan nor all of the Ikwerre land. Therefore, let us see from the views of two scholars. Idowu (1976) basing his argument on the doctrine of ancestral worship would dismiss the technical use of the word "reincarnation", he says: in African belief, there is no reincarnation in the classical sense of it. One can only think of partial or apparent reincarnation if the word must be used at all. They have their own independent existence. For Idowu, the ancestors do not return in full but partially. Mbiti is of the same opinion and he says "belief in reincarnation is reported among many African societies. This is however, partial reincarnation in the sense that some human features or characteristics of the living dead are said to be reborn in some children (1969:164). Since both camps accept that part of the dead ancestor whether by biology or by behavior, really returns in the new born, one might argue that it is not necessary that the whole dead ancestor be reborn, otherwise he would cease to exist in the spiritual world of the dead.

Another aspect at the Ikwerre believe system where the recognition of the continued role of the ancestors is observed is in the area of elaborate funerals. Even after the dead body had been deposited to mother earth, the major traditional burial follows. However, today, because of possible missionary misunderstanding which branded the situation as second burial and ungodly, coupled with the fact that family economy improves by the days, what used to be "protracted burial can nowadays be "contracted" to start and end the same day. Since what qualities one for ancestorship in this case is the full burial rite, not the length of time, one can conclude that the Ikwerre dead makes it to ancestorship even more quickly today than yester years. By the noise of merry making, the ancestors are alerted of their coming, where the

ceremony is not held, the dead man goes halfway only to come back in visions as ghosts to disturb the living until such a time as they complete the send ceremony.

Conclusion

The sanctity of the families and the community stretches across the borders of life and dead. Every generation and individual is merely a part of never ending claim that stretches backward into the past and forward into the future. This connection with the past places the responsibility for the continuation of the religious traditions and that of the past generation on the shoulders of the current community. Life never ends, so also does the community of the religious heritage know no beginning and no end. The families and communities are bound to the past and the future through some deities such as *Ali* the earth goddess and these ritual practices binds generations together.

Recommendations

1. The Ikwerre Christians today should not forget in a hurry that their traditional culture which embraces both traditional and religious, and specifically ancestorship. Form the launch pad for understanding Christian tenets such as life after death, since the belief existed long before Christianity and represented reward for goodness.
2. While the Ikwerre Christian today may prefer “heaven” to “ancestral world”, “saints” to “ancestors”, “resurrection” to reincarnation, God the ultimate transcendent remains the target and what qualities one to share in his divinity may not be too far from the other.
3. Since the people still uphold the continued relevance of their believe in the social, religious and political life, I therefore recommend that their objectives should always revolve around the study of the traditional concepts of their religious belief systems which still serves them right.
4. Since their religiousity still persist within the people, as shown and their belief in the ancestors as pointers to continue relevance and reverence to the leadership of the various families and communities should always enhance this knowledge by teaching their people the relevance of the worship by organizing seminars and public lectures.
5. The people should be guided by the universal philosophical principles of identity, participation and correlation between modes of being and actions towards the understanding of God as the transcendent, yet eminent in his creations and the ancestors and deities as servants in various capacities.
6. As long as there are chiefs, *Owho* holders and traditional rulers, they should know that the ancestors take solace in them for their continuity.
7. There extempore prayers and songs, including most traditional rituals go along way in bringing back the spirits of the dead, and so the people should maintain the dynamism of the revered ancestors.
8. Names are symbolic and should be given based on the circumstances that lead to such names in Ikwerre worldview.

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