

The Role of the Chief Priest (Ezemmuo) in Igbo Traditional Religion of Nigeria: A Historical Exploration

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Abstract

Igbo traditional religion is rooted in Igbo culture and transmitted orally from one generation to another. The religion is widely diffused among its adherents and deeply coloring their conscience. Though Christianity was introduced to them by early missionaries, many of them still consult native deities when they seek relief from the vicissitudes of life. These native deities are under the custody of special categories of people known as chief priests (Ezemmuo). The chief priests serve as mediators between the people and the deities. The chief priests consciously offer reasonable guidance and assistance to the people in their dealings with the spiritual forces. They provide panacea to problems of their people. Although the influences of modernity portends great threat to their position, the significance of their services and the resilient nature of Igbo traditional religion have made them to persist. This paper explores the roles of the Chief Priest (Ezemmuo) in Igbo Traditional Religion. It also discusses the influence of Christianity, education, urbanization and industrialization on the roles of the Chief Priest (Ezemmuo) in Igbo Traditional Religion. The paper uses qualitative and quantitative methods and is approached thematically and chronologically..

Keywords: Chief Priest, Igbo, Tradition, Religion, Christianity, urbanization, industrialization

Introduction

Igbo traditional involve all the features of world traditional religion, including its beliefs, sacred myths, oral qualities, strong appeal to the hearts of adherents, high degree of ritualization, and possession of numerous participatory personages such as officiating elders, kings, priests, and diviners. The Igbo believe in the Supreme Being, who is the controller of the world and all that are in the world. The Igbo, apart from their belief in the great God conceived as transcendental and incomprehensible, also believe in a pantheon of lesser deities, such as Ala (earth goddess), Ufiejiokū (god of agriculture), Idemili (god of water), Agwū (god of medicine, divination, and possession), and so forth [1]. The activities of these lesser deities are closely associated and interwoven with the daily life of the Igbo people. These deities, they believe, protect them; control their behavior and daily activities. The Igbo Traditional Religion, has no known founder, it is native and indigenous to the Igbo people. It is the belief system which has been handed down from one generation to another.

The Igbo belief system also recognizes and acknowledges special category of people known as chief priests. These are religious personalities who had acquired knowledge and skills. They have derived powers, and are functionaries in the theocratic governance of the world [2]. These functionaries are respected men in the society, who play the key role of assistance providing solutions to problems in the daily life of the people. They have the religious mandate to mediate for the people as they reveal relevant information in the society. Among the Igbo society, the issue of life, its meaning and preservation is very sacrosanct. It calls for wellness and social order. To this end, never is an unpalatable situation allowed to persist without consultation with forces more powerful than man, in order to gain appropriate insight and ritualistic remedies. Thus in such situations, concerted effort is always made with a view to coming up with an

answer or a clearer understanding of the situation from chief priests, so that they can assist, manage or control the situation. They offer pieces of advice on ritual resources; enhance holistic solution techniques, foster socio-cultural, political, economical, psychological and physiological components of the interaction. The chief priests therefore, play significant roles as they share and relate with others in seeking and addressing events and crisis in their lives.

Brief History of the Igbo

The Igbo ethnic group is one of the biggest and most influential ethnic groups in Nigeria. This ethnic group is also very urbanized, their living place is known as Igboland and consists of such cities as Onitsha, Owerri, Nnewi, Okigwe, Aba, Orlu among others. The language of this ethnic group is consists of many dialects [3]. There has been much speculation about the origins of the Igbo people, as it is unknown how exactly the group came to form [4]. Geographically, the Igbo homeland is divided into two unequal sections by the Niger River – an eastern (which is the larger of the two) and a western section [5]. The Igbo people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa. The Igbo language is a part of the Niger-Congo language family. It is divided into numerous regional dialects, and somewhat mutually intelligible with the larger "Igboid" cluster [6]. The Igbo homeland straddles the lower Niger River, east and south of the Edoid and Idomoid groups, and west of the Ibiboid (Cross River) cluster.

In rural Nigeria, Igbo people work mostly as craftsmen, farmers and traders. The most important crop is the yam. Other staple crops include cassava and cocoyam [7]. Before British colonial rule in the 20th century, the Igbo were a politically fragmented group, with a number of centralized chiefdoms such as Nri, Aro Confederacy, Agbor and Onitsha. Frederick Lugard introduced the system of "Warrant Chiefs"[8]. Unaffected by the Fulani War and the resulting spread of Islam in Nigeria in the 19th century, they became overwhelmingly Christian under

colonization. In the wake of decolonisation, the Igbo developed a strong sense of ethnic identity. During the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970 the Igbo territories seceded as the short-lived Republic of Biafra [9]. Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), a sectarian organization formed in 1999 by Mr. Raph Uwazuruike, continues a non-violent struggle for an independent Igbo state. In 2012, Maazi Nnamdi Kanu formed a group known as Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). IPOB agitates for Biafrans freedom from Nigeria. Its main aim is to restore an independent state of Biafra for the people of old Eastern Region of Nigeria through a referendum.

The Place of Chief Priest (Ezemmuo) in Igbo Land

The origin of chief priests in Igboland has been traced down to Eri Igbo and the Nri Tradition in the Igbo worldview. Eri was the apical ancestor and the eponymous father of Umu-Nri. Tradition. Eri was sent down to earth from the sky by Chukwu - the great God and He stood him on an ant-hill surrounded by fertile morass of the Anambra river, a tributary of the River Niger [10]. Thus the Eri kingdom was established and till today it plays important roles in the Igbo worldview. It plays important role in the culture and religion as well as the institutionalization of chief priests. Eri and his descendants were divine messengers who became theocrats and spread their theocratic message in Igboland and beyond. The Eri culture and its principles were handed to him by God. Eri's message from Chukwu was moral and ethical in character. It was through the Eri culture that food was secured for the rest of Igbo people [11]. Through the Eri culture the Igbo got yam, cocoyam seedlings and iron. Eri made food out of his children. His acceptance of God's message gained for him a religious character with accompanying power. The uncommon benevolence of God strengthens and solidifies Eri and Igbo man's appreciation of God's works through natural phenomena, hence the Igbo pragmatic attitude to life. It is worthy to note that myth spines out the outlines of world view.

It is indeed essential to stress that world views are the rational explanations of the order which undergird human life and environments. The pattern of this underlying order could be derived from the myths, taboos, customs and proverbs of a community. Chief priests consist of persons who perform ritual functions, who know how to lead others in religious activities and who serve as link between their fellow human beings on the one hand and the spiritual world on the other hand [12]. Though these people claim that their art comes from divinities, and ancestors they still pass through one form of training or the other. Their training takes place in form of induction and initiation ceremonies by the elders and senior sacred specialists. Chief priests are heads of the households, lineages and clans. Chief priests are made up of two categories; one class comes from the *osu* (people taken captives and dedicated to special gods), which one of them is always chosen to be the special priests of that god's shrine. The other class of chief priests is made up of men who become priests through "appointment" by ancestral spirits. Such men behave queerly and are noticed by those who are chief priests already, who also take them in and train them [13]. Such people sometimes combine three functions: those of medicine men with knowledge of healing herbs, secondly divination and thirdly sacrificing priests. Also they have power at times to exorcise, prepare medicine for warding off evil, or for protecting from harm like car accidents and lucky charms that bring good fortunes in trade and hunting [14]. In each village, a chief priest is known to be specially related to one or more gods. When a diviner prescribes sacrifice he also names the particular chief priest who should perform the function. In this way chief priests exercise leadership among the people. Many towns in Igbo land have their chief priests who are the custodians of their shrines. Such towns include: Ozubulu, Okija, Ogbunike, Nanka, Abatete, Amuri, Udi, Eziagu, Nsukka, Enugu Ezike, Arondizuogu, Isu Njaba, Ahiara, Omuma, Arochukwu, Ohafia Abiriba, Afikpo, Ezza, Ikwo, Umunede among others.



Figure one: The picture of a Chief Priest (Ezemmuo) in Igbo land
Source: Researcher's Field Work

The Roles of Chief Priest (Ezemmuo) in Igbo Land

The chief priest is responsible for the principal shrines/temples in Igbo land. The Igbos have sacred objects and places of worship and designate chief priests to attend to these objects and places of worship. The chief priests are the mystic mediators between the human world and the spirit world and act as healers, scribes, teachers, diviners and advisors of people in the community. They are usually the custodian of the shrines of communities' and major deities in Igbo land. The chief priests are believed to be destined for spiritual work. The chief priest sees the spiritual world at any time and interprets what messages being sent and sees the spiritual problems of living people. They are given the power by the spirit world to identify any deity by name and the possible ways of placating and negotiating with the deity. The chief priests are thought to possess the power over one of three elements namely water (and large bodies of water), fire and vegetation. The chief priest whose elements are vegetation can go on to become herbalists by their supposed instinctual knowledge of the health benefits of certain plants they are instinctually drawn to. Fire element chief priest can handle fire unscathed during their initiation, and water element chief priest does not drown.

The chief priest can partially enter the spirit world and communicate with the spirit beings by rubbing chalk on one half of their face. He cleanses the society when an abomination has been committed or when it is perceived the society is going through a difficult time or somebody or spirits have apparently cast a spell on the town. He also performs divination - as a clairvoyant or uncoverer of the unknown. The chief priest's apparent ability to divine the unknown ascribes to him the role of conflict resolver [15]. If, for example, some valuable goes missing, the chief priest may be consulted to divine the culprit. In the past, the chief priest was an untouchable. That could still be the case, likely to a lesser degree. When people want to make

offerings, interact with the ancestors or the divinities, it is the duty of the priest as they are a link between the people and the spiritual beings who receive the offerings and make intercession on behalf of the people. He is the super natural link between the living and the powerful spirits of dead chiefs and elders. They play prominent roles during coronation of kings and chieftaincy installation. They are involved in the traditional social activities and engaged in non-spiritual matters like hunting and blacksmithing. They are experienced in religious knowledge, in matters of myths, beliefs, traditions, legends, proverbs and the general socio-religious practices of the community.

Influence of Christianity on the Roles of Chief Priest (Ezemmuo)

Christians believe in the life on earth now and then the eschatological kingdom that is yet to come. Christianity was successfully planted on September 24, 1842, in Nigeria by Rev. Thomas Birth Freeman of Methodist missionary [16]. The origins of Christian missionary work in Nigeria antedated the Egba (Abeokuta enterprise). It arrived in Igbo land in 1857. So, with the advent of Christianity in 1857, the traditional religion had a serious rival. At first, the problem which Christianity presented to the traditional religion was not regarded as a serious matter by the people because conversion to Christianity at the initial stage was not an easy task because Christianity was a new religion and something brought to Igbo nation by European missionaries: Rev. Schon and his associates at the shores of the River Niger [17]. The Igbo feared that if they become Christians, their gods would bring disaster on them. Diviners and medicine men reported that the divinities were angry because of the new religion and warned that nobody should join the missionaries. Others refused to embrace the new religion because they thought that the missionaries wanted to destroy their culture.

Despite these reasons and threats, Christianity began to win converts in Igbo land. They had village church-school teachers called church agents. These agents were very active in molding the attitude of the converts, especially the young, toward the traditional society. Most of them, half educated and in many cases utterly misguided, contributed significantly to open disrespect for and disregard of the society's time-honored customs and religious practices. Churches and schools were built and youths and children were made to attend schools. These children were adolescents and they were campaigners for converts. The Christian missionaries were the instruments of education and religious instruction; and converting the younger people into Christianity was easier, since the young were not rooted in the ancestral ideas and practices as their fathers [18]. At different times and places, there were face-to-face encounter with Christians and traditionalists, because the early Christian missionaries behaved like social revolutionaries. They plunged into the condemnation and eradication of traditional religion. Traditional music and song, drama, and dance were totally denounced as bad and immoral. Statues, images, and emblems of remarkable artistic work and aesthetic merit were wantonly destroyed by some of the overzealous converts as idols and works of the devil.

The institution of the chief priests was deeply affected by the wave of Christianity. Most Igbo beliefs and practices that underscored the place and roles of chief priests were challenged. Most of the functions of chief priests were taken over by the Christian Religion. The functions of the chief priests were becoming irrelevant since the Christian Religion have among them those who performed miracles, saw visions and interpreted dreams and more importantly, they also believed in the existence of evil spirits and their negative effect on people which in most cases were cast out through prayers instead of consulting the chief

priests for sacrifice or to prepare medicine or charm to ward off the evil spirit. These without doubt affected the institution of the chief priests in Igbo Land.

Influence of Education on the Roles of Chief Priest (Ezemmuo)

The agents of Western education and civilization in Igboland were the missionaries. Through evangelism they introduced western cultures and values, and the Igbo were made to accept them as a better way of life. They gradually imposed western culture on Igbo traditional culture. “The viable approach adopted by the missionaries was the introduction of school and this certainly radicalized the groundwork of Igbo society. In fact, education in modern historiography has been acclaimed as being responsible for the massive ‘conversion’ to Christianity [19]. The missionaries saw the introduction and acquisition of western education by the Igbo as a means of actualizing their aims in the school system, churches and trades. Education facilitated the process of evangelism as educated personnel mostly graduates of the mission schools constituted the power house of missionary enterprise and the manpower on which the colonial government used to administer Igboland. The European did not border to understand the nature of Igbo traditional value system. Neither Africa nor her culture was really understood [20]. It was furthermore a sobering fact for him (African) to realize that colonial education gave him academic degree but denied him pride in himself, in his culture and in his fellow African. Above all, it did not teach him to be self reliant. The impatience of the Westerners to observe the culture of the Igbo may probably be because “the education that comes along with the foreigners are in some respect higher and more sophisticated than traditional values” [21].

The missionaries have only a negative perception about Igbo traditional religion and culture. Thus the inability of the agents of western education to appreciate the positive elements

of Igbo traditional religion and culture dealt a negative blow on their traditional values. As a result of this influence of western education and values, Igbo cultural heritage became vulnerable. As it were, when they saw the cruel aspects of Igbo cultural practices, they disregarded even the positive aspects of Igbo cultural practices including the institution of the chief priests.

Education influenced greatly the social order of Igbo traditional system. Generally, children who went to school were unable to participate in the activities of their age grades and peers because they were preoccupied with Christian school activities. Thus such socio-cultural activities like training to become a sacred specialist, initiation into the masquerade societies, learning the social and cultic dances and the various acolyte duties associated with the sundry celebrations, sacrifices and the public worship of clan and family gods were consciously denied these children by the missionaries. On the other hand, the emphasis of “the missionaries was on the running of boarding schools in which the children would be socialized in different values and ethos far away from what was obtaining in Igboland”[22]. An incident that took place in Onitsha in 1863. When the King of Onitsha and his first son, the Prince who was also the heir apparent, were sitting by the king’s square as group of pupils from the mission school marched passed through the town. As they drew near, son of the Prince whom Ilogu gave his name as Odita stood up and bowed his head before his father – the Prince and his grandfather the King. This was contrary to their customs; the custom of the king’s subjects. And he (Odita) was asked why he did not do the customary courtesy to the king which was to kneel down bow the head to the ground in front of the king. He replied, that “he had been taught in school that kneeling down was only for prayer and bowing was only to God”. The King and the Prince were greatly surprised by the behaviour of Odita their grandson and son respectively, Taylor was happy

describing it as a result of children acting from higher principles which had been inculcated through the Christian religion.

Those who attended school were taught based on Christian principles as such the hitherto affinity in traditional value system gradually lost hold of Christianity. Little did the Igbo know that by accepting western education, they had indirectly accepted western culture at the expense of their own culture. That is why for anything to be appreciated in Igboland and accorded high prestige, it must be made in foreign country. The educated elite interpret things scientifically instead of consulting the chief priest to see and interpret their problem. Their scientific approach to problems has made the service of chief priests irrelevant. In the case of ill health, people prefer to consult orthodox doctors who will diagnose their ailment scientifically and prescribe appropriate drugs for them thereby making the services of chief priests ineffective. The adverse influence of education on Igbo culture is far reaching.

Influence of Urbanization on the Roles of Chief Priest (Ezemmuo)

Urbanization can be said to be increasing number of people that live in urban areas. It is not merely a modern phenomenon, but a rapid and historic transformation of human social roots on a global scale, whereby predominantly rural culture is being rapidly replaced by predominantly urban culture. Urbanization happens because of the influx of people from rural to urban areas. People move from village or rural areas to cities or urban areas, which most times result to the expansion of the urban area at the detriment of the villages. Many people have been attracted from rural areas to the urban areas (rural-urban migration) [23]. Following the advent of Christianity and colonialism, the Igbo traditional societies that had been predominantly rural for most of its history experienced a rapid and profound reorientation of their societies and a shift of means of survival towards cities and urban centres.

In the olden days, distant travels were hardly known in Igboland. But today, cars, trains, ships, aeroplanes, internet and even mobile phones which are aspects of the culture of the industrialized societies have been introduced into Igbo life and are becoming adaptable to the culture of the Igbo. Thus, the contacts with Christianity, colonialism and by extension western culture have brought tremendous effect on Igbo culture [24]. However, urbanization occurs as a result of economic changes within both rural and urban areas. The concentration of wealth, prestige, political power and religious learning in the cities attracted large number of migrants, both from the neighbouring rural areas and from distant regions. Urban areas offered greater occupational opportunities which rural areas did not have. Such job opportunities enabled workers to earn more money and to send some money back to family members in the rural areas [25].

The Igbo are great travelers and ebullient traders and there is hardly any place in Africa, indeed the entire world where they are not found. The effect of such population migration to everywhere in the world is far-reaching on Igbo traditional life and culture. Urbanization has the most eroding effects on the grip of traditional beliefs of the people [26]. The traditional culture of the Igbo has been adulterated as a result of urbanization. In the urban areas the Igbo live among people of other races and cultures as against an ideal traditional Igbo society. This breeds cross-fertilization of beliefs and cultures which consequently propels the Igbo to adopt a pattern of life that is not in tandem with what is obtainable in their own Igbo villages and communities. Urbanization affected adversely the social and religious order of Igbo traditional society. Those who migrated to urban areas were unable to continue with the practice of Igbo traditional religion [27]. They could not bring their traditional gods with them either because they were too young to set up their own individual shrines or because it was impossible to transport these gods

without breaking some essential taboos. They found themselves living their lives outside the immediate shadows of these gods and their priests and in time started adopting habits which appeared quite popular in the towns [28].

The growth of urbanization within Igboland and the consequent drift from the villages to the cities have led to gradual desegregation of the traditional society, which provided ideal setting for convergence of art and life in which folktales, oral traditions, egwu onwa (moon light dance) and other traditional art and play life find their vibrant form and dynamism. This indeed portend a great danger in Igbo traditional art and oral literature which are means of socialization, inculcating values as they are deeply loaded with a sense of unity of existence. Moreover, it has had far-reaching effects on the institutions of chief priests. Some shrines and deities have been abandoned by those who are supposed to be their priests /priestesses and move to urban areas. Youths who are dedicated to serve deities as chief priests from birth, grow up to reject and disassociate themselves from any such practices. As a result of this, many shrines and deities do not have ministers any longer.

Influence of Industrialization on the Roles of Chief Priest (Ezemmuo)

Industrialization engendered another pattern of change in Igbo traditional society. Industrialization is the art of establishing group of firms that can produce goods and render services. Industries are established in areas especially urban areas where there are availability of infrastructural facilities and other materials that will enable the growth and survival of the industry. It is a means of economic development and empowerment. The beginning of industrialization and the training of the Igbo in western technology closely followed the twin brothers of Christianity and colonization. “The industrial missions run by the C.M.S had as early as 3rd January, 1876 admitted boys at Onitsha to train in technical skills and trade like

brickmaking and bricklaying, carpentry and the like”[29]. Through the various educational skills and facilities provided by the missions, the desire for industrialization and the technological practices of Europe were gradually introduced in Igboland. Not quite long, industrialization within and outside Igboland gave rise to ‘Igbo diaspora’, which created commercial contact with other ethnic groups in Nigeria and beyond.

The influence of industrialization has brought many individuals in Igboland into situations entirely unknown in Igbo traditional life. Some are forced directly or indirectly by economic realities to go and work in the industries mainly located in the cities, leaving their ancestral land, as well as their home kiths and kins. This detachment from the land to which the Igbo is mystically bound have produced deculturated individuals in these industries and cities. Such individuals or industrial workers are cut off from corporate morality, customs and traditional solidarity which are the mark of identity of an ideal Igbo society. The attraction to industrial products has generated immoral desires. Lustful desire and insatiable want of possessions were not part of the Igbo society. Technological advancement and the skillful manipulations of advertisements in media industries inform people on hourly basis innumerable reasons to acquire some modern products. This has obviously multiplied the appetite of the people’s desire and greed. Thus; the influence of modern industrialization and technology have indeed eroded core Igbo values.

Igbo are now civilized, thinking in the scientific way, connecting natural events to Scientific causes through scientific methods of diagnosis, observations, experiments, analysis and interpretations of data among others. This industrial and scientific advancement have undermined such roles of chief priests like fortune telling, divination and mediumship. In the area of medicine, industrial products have affected traditional beliefs and practices. Medical

equipment that are produced in these industries are always available to help in diagnosing the cause of an ailment, unlike the traditional method which places premium on spiritual forces due to the machinations of evil forces. The influence of technology in dealing with tropical diseases has seriously undermined traditional medicine. This has weakened the belief in and the fear of evil forces as the causes of sicknesses. Consequently, people no longer patronize chief priests anymore [30]. Some traditional Igbo cultures of leisure, oral literature, traditional wrestling and even town criers are at the risk of eventual extinction as a result of industrialization. With the modern technological means of leisure, entertainment, instruction and dissemination of information as facilitated through television and radio especially with the wave of digital cable networks such as MYTV, DSTV, HITV and the establishment of many radio stations which their wide reaches penetrated even the remote hamlets, sent dangerous signals to such places which hitherto were grounds and strongholds for traditional leisure and information.

Conclusion

The chief priests are regarded as intermediaries between other humans and specific deities. A chief priest serves a particular god or spirit and watches over the behavior and needs of its adherents. An elder member of a lineage group may be the chief priest of the clan's ancestral sect. The chief priests can serve as both native doctors and as ascertainers of the unknown. They employ magical techniques to determine the causes of misfortune, illness, or death, and they sometimes call on spirits to give them knowledge about a life situation or guidance in the execution of an important office. Their magical techniques often involve the "throwing" of objects such as bones or beads and "reading" a message from the patterns in which they fall. Another form of divination involves killing an animal like; goat, dog, fowl, cow e.t.c and examining its entrails to obtain the information sought. Some chief priests also have extensive

knowledge of herbal remedies, which they use in treating illnesses. However, the influences of Christianity, education, urbanization and industrialization have posed a serious threat to the role of chief priests in particular and Igbo traditional religion in general. Nevertheless, resilient nature of the traditional religion has become more evident. This trait might not be unconnected with the fact that the traditional religion is indigenous and deeply rooted in the Igbo soil, thus, an average Igbo finds it very difficult to jettison it. Though a higher population of Igbo has accepted Christianity, they still reverence Igbo traditional religion. Some of them practice the religion and also seek the services of the chief priests secretly. Above all, no influence whatsoever can absolutely annihilate the institution of chief priests and Igbo traditional religion because they are inseparable with the Igbo existence.

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