

Malthouse

Nigerian Gods



Kome Otobo

NIGERIAN GODS

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Kome Otobo

LLB (King's College London), LLM (Queen Mary, University of London)

m a l t h o u s e 

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DEDICATION

To my dearly beloved family, without whom this book would not have become a reality.

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First and foremost, my unreserved thanks go to the invaluable repository of information that is Journal Storage (JSTOR), without which this book would be less than half of its current length and severely lacking the detail necessary to do each of the ethnic groups full justice. I am similarly indebted to the kindness of various institutions across the world who ensure the online availability of postgraduate students' theses.

I would also like to extend my deep gratitude to the venerable educational institutions that are collectively responsible for my intellectual development: St. Saviour's School Ikoyi, Queens College Lagos, Cheltenham Ladies' College, Cheltenham, King's College London and Queen Mary University of London. Special recognition is due to my Cheltenham Ladies' College A Level History and English teachers, Mrs Hilary Bradley and Mrs Celia de Piro, who were so complimentary about the lucidity and succinctness of my writing that their kind words have stayed with me throughout the years, and were instrumental in my decision to embark on this personal project.

Words cannot express how thankful I am to the legion of regional and international researchers and historians who were sufficiently curious about Nigeria and the inner workings of its residents to take time out of their lives to set their findings to paper. The length and breadth of information available for public reading is a true testament to their dedication to education.

My penultimate words are the exclusive preserve of my family, who stood by me through the highs and lows of bringing this book to life. They listened to my rants about intertribal tensions, to my excited updates as I completed each chapter, and even to my occasional complaints when a particularly fiendish sub-section took its toll on my health and my sanity.

On a final note, my thanks are due to Malthouse Press Limited, for taking a chance on a brand-new author who had nothing more than a concrete book idea and the desire to share it with the world.

FOREWORD

Nigerian Gods, metaphorically and factually, provides the *context* of the admixture and dynamics of crosscutting old and modern traditions that constitute reality for individuals, families, and clans and with which they navigate their way in political setups, such as Nigeria, with multiple ethnic and racial populations.

First, so-called traditional belief systems and practices still form the basic foundation upon which older religious teachings propagated by Judaism, Christianity, and latterly, Islam, rest, rendering it immensely difficult to predict actual behaviour or conduct in differing contexts, a good instance being gut reaction to physical safety threatened by ailments and diseases, recourse to apparently ever-present but invisible ancestors, herbs/herbalists, exorcists from all religious and irreligious denominations, soothsayers, amulets and waistbands routinely reinforcing science-based unconscionably and brutally expensive services of physicians and pharmacists.

Second, historically, such coexistence and proximity of ethnic and racial groups predate the current politico-administrative arrangements, and their internal dynamics were naturally also different. But, current Nigerian State and modern life have been generating new criteria for socio-political stratification, economic mobility and thus rank ordering of social status and in course of which both self-flagellating individuals and emergent pressure groups blatantly “weaponise” ethnic origin and religion - compulsively targeting attendant modes of dressing, appellations and formal education in particular - for political and economic benefits. Ostensible “ethnic balancing” in recruitment and placement by parastatals and in political appointments and award of contracts, projects and their locations and certain social policies are insidiously paraded as being in the “national interest” and “patriotic”. That is, presumptive or imagined ethnic groups’ interests are subsumed by self-obsessed new elites, substantially playing God on behalf of their ethnic and religious groups for mostly private gain, as it turns out, since their villages,

and towns wallowing in poverty, terrorised by freewheeling bandits and kidnappers avoided by law enforcement agents, and with most inhabitants remaining unaware of the existence of these self-branded frontline “warriors” and “protectors”. In competition for distribution of the “national” cake without much contribution to its baking, only one of the multi-billion dollars wastefully located, landscape-decorating iron and steel mills as a result ever functioned for a few years, and all refineries have gone moribund as one of the tenth largest producers of crude oil and gas in the world continues to import refined petroleum products.

Third, all the above suggest that multi-ethnically and multi- racially constituted modern nation-states are likely to face increasing internal, partisan and discriminatory social, economic and political rivalries and practices, worse in those where economic and political power are constitutionally centralised and dominated by a few of them. Decentralisation, the natural order and practice before and during colonial nation-state and in Nigeria’s First Republic, and the Swiss example and, to lesser degree, the United States of America, offer less-conflictual options for more meaningful social existence. In this regard, it is easy to foresee the Northern Ireland crisis and why the Scots and Welsh would prefer looser ties with the English-dominated Parliament in London.

Our author, Kome Otobo, has not spelt out all these my way and need not do so. Her factual and acute description and presentation of the main characteristics of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria – historical background and socio-political structures, demography, traditional religions, differing impacts of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and major occupations and modes of existence – more eloquently do this. Her command and use of the English language and the professionalism of detachment can only but be commended.

It has been a delight reading *Nigerian Gods*. This is a compulsory read, and I suggest that it should serve to sensitize us into a fuller understanding and appreciation of the direction in which a post-Covid-19 world is tending rapidly, ethnically and racially exploited differences jumping to the fore to undermine erstwhile dominant political ideologies and political arrangements based on them. It has been my pleasure to write this Foreword.

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Professor

11 August, 2022

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INTRODUCTION

The concept for this book came to me shortly after I read *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman in 2014, a lengthy thirteen years after it was first published. I have always been interested in the myths and mythologies of cultures around the world, and for this reason, I was captivated by Mr Gaiman's sinuous weaving of fact, fiction and the supernatural into one immersive package.

After living in the United Kingdom for twenty years, I moved back to Nigeria in 2018, which came with several advantages that did not exist in the British environment. The most important one, arguably, was the creation of a healthy amount of mental space to contemplate life and all that it entails, similar to the Greek philosophers of old.

One of the multiple thoughts that crossed my mind was the absence of knowledge within the public space of the traditional religions practised in Nigeria, once one steps away from the twin behemoths of Islam and Christianity. With an estimated 250 ethnic groups and 370 tribes, it was self-evident that there must be a rich history of traditional religions that most people were either superficially aware or completely unaware of.

As with most substantial projects, I sat on the idea for a few years, while trying to convince myself that the concept was not interesting enough to be developed in any meaningful sense. At least, this was the case until a sunny Saturday afternoon in April 2021. A casual conversation was taking place between my father and sister in which they were discussing my sister's book idea. A little voice whispered to me: "Why don't you tell them about *your* book idea?" Since you are sitting here reading the introduction to *Nigerian Gods*, I think it can safely be assumed that their reaction to my pitch was positive. The dream subsequently became a reality.

Before embarking on my research, it was already apparent that my original goal of attempting to capture the entirety of all the traditional religions in Nigeria would be an impossible task. Therefore, I was forced to limit myself, like many others before me, to the major ethnic groups. I did

permit myself the indulgence of including the exploration of traditional religion from my own heritage, being part-Isoko, Itsekiri and Urhobo, in addition to being part-Yoruba, which is a bias that I freely admit.

The absence of local formal and regularly updated census information, and the useful statistics that accompany this crucial exercise, meant that I had to partially rely on reports and analyses compiled by countries other than Nigeria. In an ideal world, Nigeria itself would be the source of the most accurate demographic, economic, and social data on its citizens. The reasons for this national omission remain opaque and fall outside the scope of this work. These are thus working estimates of larger ethnic groups in the Nigerian space covered here:

- Edo-Bini Gods (Less than 1%);
- Fulani Gods (6%);
- Hausa Gods (30%);
- Ibibio-Efik Gods (1.8%);
- Igbo Gods (15.2%);
- Ijò (Ijaw) Gods (1.8%);
- Isoko Gods (Less than 1%);
- Itsekiri Gods (Less than 1%);
- Kanuri Gods (2.4%);
- Nupe Gods (Less than 1%);
- Tiv Gods (2.4%);
- Urhobo Gods (Less than 1%);
- Yoruba Gods (15.5%).

The primary purpose of *Nigerian Gods* is to provide a pool of knowledge about the supernatural beings that guide the steps of the average Nigerian as they navigate their daily lives. Religion is intertwined with every aspect of our existence, whether we choose to acknowledge this fact or not. Even the atheists among us (they exist, I assure you) may find comfort in a hearty ‘Thank God!’ upon the receipt of a welcome piece of news or a well-timed credit alert. Religion performs multiple functions within society, and I hope to demonstrate the manifold ways it does so, in this book.

Chapter 1

HAUSA GODS

[The Hausa people comprise 30% of the Nigerian population according to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, 2018 estimate]

The Hausa people are predominantly found in Northern Nigeria and adjacent southern Niger. They constitute the largest ethnic group in the area, which also contains another large group, the Fulani, perhaps one-half of whom are settled among the Hausa as a ruling class, having adopted the Hausa language and culture. The language belongs to the Chadic group of the Afro-Asiatic (formerly Hamito-Semitic) family and is infused with many Arabic words as a result of Islamic influence, which spread during the latter part of the 14th century from the kingdom of Mali, profoundly influencing Hausa belief and customs. A small minority of Hausa, known as Maguzawa, or Bunjawa, remained pagan.¹

BACKGROUND

Many Nigerians identify the Hausa people* as followers of Islam, and Islam only, which is far from the truth, particularly once we take into account the migration theories that suggest their movement through North African countries like Egypt and even the Horn of Africa via Ethiopia. Their lack of knowledge can be attributed to the paucity of commonly available resources outside of the Internet. The relatively high costs of data also act as a deterrent to the usage of the Internet apart from the usual platforms of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. It is unlikely that the average Nigerian will seek out information about the religious leanings of a tribe that is not their own, unless it is linked to a training course, a higher learning degree or similar.

It is now an established fact that Islam was introduced to Nigeria as far back as in the eleventh century. The religion had already begun to make its

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hausa>

* Estimates range from 66 to 68 million.

way through West Africa as traders sold their wares from country to country. The Kanem-Bornu Empire (c. ninth to nineteenth centuries) spanned the African countries of Chad, Libya, Niger, Nigeria and the Republic of Cameroon, and formed a focal point within Nigeria for the growth of Islam, particularly within the then emirate of Bornu.

As was common on trade routes at that time, Muslim merchants often chose to settle along defined trade routes, which gave their new neighbours a glimpse into their faith, resulting in waves of conversions. The *Mai* [King] of Kanem-Bornu, Umme Jilmi is the earliest documented conversion of a traditional ruler to Islam, believed to have taken place towards the end of the eleventh century during his reign from 1085-1097 under the stewardship of a Muslim scholar called Muhammad ibn Mani:

Mai Umme b. Abdel Jalil (r. 1058-1097) ...died in the land of Masr (Egypt) which prompted Barth to conclude that *Mai* Umme may have intended, or even accomplished a pilgrimage. This seems plausible for the reign of this *Mai* is the accepted date for the conversion of the Saifawa line of Kanem-Bornu to Islam. The document from which this conclusion is derived is a mahram issued by Mai Umme in favour of a certain Muhammed b. Mani. The mahram alleges that Bornu was the first country in the Sudan in which Islam entered, that Ibn Mani was already preaching Islam to Umme's ancestors and that he finally summoned Bornu to Islam by the grace of King Umme.²

A subsequent *Mai* by the name of Idris Alooma (r. 1571 –1603), was instrumental in deepening the entrenchment of Islam in Northern Nigeria. It is reported that he was a learned and brilliant statesman under whom the Kanem-Bornu Empire achieved its greatest heights. He is credited with the introduction of wide-ranging reforms that were heavily influenced by his Islamic faith. His rule gave rise to the creation of many brick mosques, the construction of a hostel in Mecca to be devoted exclusively to pilgrims from his Empire, as well as the development of crucial legislative infrastructure:

² El-Nagar, Raziq, Abdel, Omer, *West Africa and the Muslim Pilgrimage: An Historical Study with Special Reference to the Nineteenth Century*, Thesis presented for the degree of Ph.D., School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London (1969).

He carried out many reforms of the Bornu administrative system and separated the judiciary from the main bureaucracy. He created a court of appeals to review the judgments of lower courts. [He also] enhanced the Islamic judicial system by appointing qualified judges to administer the law.³

From the fourteenth century onwards, Hausaland became a bastion of Islam, taking into account the two main avenues of the ongoing expansion of trade relationships with Muslim West African traders and Islamic conquests. The spread and acculturation of Islam within the seven true Hausa states or *Hausa Bakwai* (Biram, Daura, Gobir, Kano, Katsina, Rano, and Zaria or Zazzau) was both rapid and enduring. The *Hausa Bakwai* formed the basis of the Hausa Kingdoms and according to legend, they were founded by Bàyâjidda who came from Baghdad, Iran:

Bàyâjiddà came first to Borno where he was given one of the *Ma's* daughters as a wife, and then later lived for a while in Hausaland where he married the Queen of Daura, who also gave him a Gwari mistress as a reward for slaying 'Sarki,' said to be a great snake which deprived her people of access to water. By the Queen of Daura, Bàyâjiddà had a son called Bawo, another called Biram by the Borno princess, and yet another son, Karbagari, by his Gwari paramour.

Bawo is said to have succeeded his father and had six sons who became the rulers of Daura, Katsina, Zazzau, Gobir, Kano and Rano. These, together with Biram, which was ruled by the son of Bàyâjiddà and of the Borno princess, formed the "*Hausa Bakwai*" or the "Hausa Seven." However, Karbagari the son of the Gwari mistress had seven sons too who ruled Kebbi, Zamfara, Gwari, Jukun or Kororofa, Ilorin, Nupe and Yauri which are referred to in this tradition as the "*Banza Bakwai*" or "Illegitimate Seven."⁴

Both the *Hausa Bakwai* and the *Banza Bakwai* were tightly enmeshed within a web of Muslim festivals, Islamic political and cultural influences, the addition of Islamic theologians and political theorists to society, and the

³ Fartuwa, ibn, Ahmad, *History of the First Twelve Years of the Reign of Mai Idris, Aloomo of Bornu, 1571-1583*, translated by Palmer, H.R. (London: Cass, 1970).

⁴ Aigbokhai, S.O., *West African History for the Certificate Year* (Great Britain: Allen & Unwin, 1975), p.14.

general Islamisation of Hausa culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the time the nineteenth century rolled around, Islam had become the central tenet of Hausaland due to the emergence of the charismatic ‘Fulani scholar, religious teacher, revolutionary, military leader, writer, and promoter of Sunni Islam,’⁵ Shehu Usman dan Fodio (1754-1817). Dan Fodio was the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate, which came into being in 1804 during the Fulani War jihad, that was administered using Sunni Islam. Sunni Islam is one of the two main branches of Islam, and it is followed by the majority of Muslims across the world. Dan Fodio’s jihad had the effect of igniting the consolidation of Islam throughout Hausaland in the nineteenth century as the region became a part of the Sokoto Caliphate.

The Sokoto Caliphate

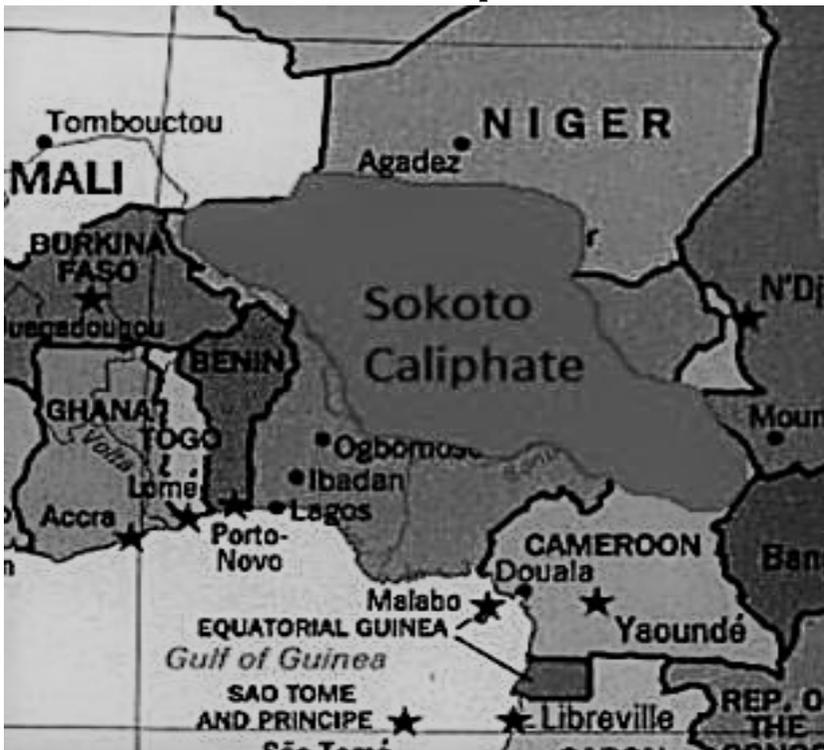


Image source: <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/nigeria/sokoto.htm>

⁵ Sulaiman, Ibraheem, *The African Caliphate: The Life, Works and Teachings of Shaykh Usman Dan Fodio (1757-1817)* (Great Britain: Diwan Press, 2009).

ISLAM

Sunni

Approximately 85% to 90% of the world's Muslims subscribe to the branch of Islam known as Sunni. Considered by most scholars to be moderate and orthodox, it is also the main religion found in Hausaland. The word 'Sunni' dates from the seventeenth century and is said to refer to adherents of the *Sunnah*, that is, Muslims who accept the orthodox tradition and the Qur'an, known in Arabic as the *ahl as-sunnah wa l-jamā'ah* or the people of the *Sunnah* and the community. The word '*Sunnah*' means the behaviour and traditional teachings of Muhammad: 'preserved from his lips by his disciples or founded on his actions.'⁶ The foundation of Sunni Islam is three-fold:

- First and most importantly, the *Qur'ān*, which is the sacred scripture of Islam that was revealed by the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad in the West Arabian towns Mecca and Medina beginning in 610 and ending with Muhammad's death in 632;⁷
- Second, the *Hadith*, which are a record of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, revered and received as a major source of religious law and moral guidance, second only to the authority of the Qur'an;⁸
- Third, the *Ijmā*, which is the historical consensus or agreement of Islamic scholars on points of Islamic law. The consensus can also be justified through sayings from the *Hadith*.⁹

An example of a *Hadith*:

I heard the Messenger of Allah say: Allah the Almighty said: O son of Adam, so long as you call upon Me and ask of Me, I shall forgive you for what you have done, and I shall not mind. O son of Adam, were your sins to reach the clouds of the sky and were you then to ask forgiveness of Me, I would forgive you. O son of Adam, were you to come to Me with sins nearly as great as the earth and were you then to face Me, ascribing no partner to Me, I would bring you forgiveness nearly as great as it. *It was related by at-Tirmidhi (also by Ahmad ibn Hanbal). Its chain of authorities is sound.*

⁶ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/sunni>

⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Quran>

⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hadith>

⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ijma>

قَالَ اللَّهُ: سَمِعْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ، يَقُولُ: عَنْ أَنَسِ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ، قَالَ يَا مِنْكَ وَلَا أَبَايَ يَا ابْنَ آدَمَ، إِنَّكَ مَا دَعَوْتَ بِي وَرَجَوْتَنِي، غَفَرْتُ لَكَ عَلَى مَا كَانَ: تَعَالَى إِنَّكَ لَوْ: يَا ابْنَ آدَمَ. لَوْ بَلَغَتْ ذُنُوبُكَ عَنَانَ السَّمَاءِ ثُمَّ اسْتَغْفَرْتَنِي، غَفَرْتُ لَكَ: ابْنَ آدَمَ هَا مَغْفِرَةً رَوَاهُ التِّرْمِذِيُّ أَنَّثَنِي بِقُرَابِ الْأَرْضِ حَطَايَا ثُمَّ لَقِيْتَنِي لَا تُشْرِكُ بِي شَيْئًا، لَأَتَيْتُكَ بِقُرَابٍ 10 (وكذلك أحمد) وسنده حسن

Shi'a

Approximately 10% to 13% of the world's Muslims subscribe to the branch of Islam known as Shi'a. The word 'Shi'a' dates from the seventeenth century and is said to refer to those who recognise Ali ibn Abi Talib, a cousin, son-in-law and companion of the Prophet Muhammad as his rightful successor, following the Prophet's death. This is in marked contrast to the Sunni, who recognise Abu Bakr Abdullah ibn Uthman, the father-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, as his rightful successor due to his political and administrative powers within the community at the time. In Arabic, the full-length description of this branch of Islam is *Shi'at Ali*, which means 'the party of Ali.'¹¹ There are five key principles within Shi'a Islam, also referred to as the five roots of *Usul ad-Din* [Shi'a Islam]:

- *Tawhid*: This is the belief that God is one, he is almighty and only he is worthy of worship.
- *Adalat* [Divine Justice]: Shi'a Muslims believe that Allah is always right and just. Sometimes Allah may act in ways that are beyond our understanding, but ultimately the world has been created to be fair and just. All Muslims believe there will be a Day of Judgement, when they will have to account for their faith and deeds.
- *Nubuwwah* [The Prophets]: The prophets provide guidance from God and should be respected. This is especially so for Prophet Muhammad, as he was God's final prophet and communicated the Qur'an to human beings.
- *Imamate* [Authority of the Imams]: The Twelve Imams were chosen by God to lead Islam after Muhammad. Shi'a Muslims believe that leaders such as imams protect the religion and help to guide Muslims along the right path.

¹⁰ Hadith 34, 40 Hadith Qudsi, <https://sunnah.com/qudsi40:34>

¹¹ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/shia>

- *Al Ma'ad* [Day of Resurrection]: Muslims will be resurrected and judged by God.¹²

Despite the predominant presence of the Sunni in Hausaland, there remains a healthy number of Shi'a Muslims spread out among the Northern states. It is difficult to estimate their precise percentage due to an absence of formal statistics. It has been argued that Shi'a Islam was introduced to Nigeria in the 1980s by a fiery cleric by the name of Ibrahim Yaqoub El Zakzaky, who founded the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) in the late 1970s:

At birth, originally a Sunni, Ibrahim Yaqub El-Zakzaky was inspired by the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and called for a similar overthrow of the Nigerian government and complete institution of Islamic law. He identified himself as a Shi'a Muslim in one of his many popular cassette sermons that circulated around northern Nigeria in the 1980s and 1990s. He was imprisoned numerous times throughout this period for his seditious speech and calls to revolution.¹³

As a result of the difference between Sunni and Shia Islam, the former has a far greater number of accepted hadiths than the latter. This can clearly be ascribed to the fact that the Shi'a do not recognise the Caliphs, or leaders in the Muslim community, who were established under Sunni. In order to address crucial issues such as prayer and marriage, the Shi'a will often refer to the authority of the Imams.

Sufism

Approximately 5% of the world's Muslims follow Sufism, also known as *tasawwuf* in the Arabic-speaking world. The word 'Sufi' is of Arabic origin and it dates from the mid-seventeenth century. It translates to the phrase 'man of wool' and it is thought to refer to the assumption of holy garments in order to immerse oneself in mysticism.¹⁴

¹² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zmp6pbk/revision/5>

¹³ Muhammad, Sule, Maga and Abdullahi, Maigari, Muhammad, *The Spread of Shi'a and its Activities in Nigeria* in *Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2019).

¹⁴ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/sufi>

Sufism, or in Arabic, *tasawwuf*, is an umbrella term which refers to the inner mystical dimension of Islam. The same linguistic root also generates from the word for wool in Arabic; hence, a Sufi is one who wears a wool, or *suf*, garment. This refers to the practice of some ascetic mystics who would wear a simple wool garment...

Mystics were among the prophet's companions and the earliest Muslims, before Orthodox Islam was established. They supported an inner path which harmonised inner spiritual life while also maintaining religious codes for daily life. For Sufis, the universe, with all of its seemingly complex entities, forms a unified whole, bound together by love. The messages of Sufi thinkers reflect the universal and inclusive nature of Sufism.¹⁵

A famous Sufi mystic and scholar known as Jalāl ad-Dīn Mohammad Rūmī (1207-1273), or more simply Rumi, has occupied a permanent place in the ancient and modern worlds through his works, and more particularly, his intricate poetry. Many fans of his work may be wholly unaware that they have been introduced, through his works, to the Sufi approach to life: 'the universe, with all of its seemingly complex entities, forms a unified whole, bound together by love.'¹⁶

An example of one of Rumi's deceptively simple poems:

Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment

for cleverness is mere opinion and bewilderment is vision.

بخری رانی بفروش و ح ی رکی ز

نظری رانی ظنست و ح ی رکی ز¹⁷

Islamic mysticism is often referred to as the internalisation and intensification of Islamic faith and practice. Sufis strive to constantly be aware of God's presence, stressing contemplation over action, spiritual development over legalism, and cultivation of the soul over social interaction. In contrast to the academic exercises of theology and jurisprudence, which depend on reason, Sufism depends on emotion and imagination in the divine-human relationship. Sufism is unrelated to the Sunni/Shi'a split, schools of

¹⁵ Payind, Alam and McClimans, Melinda, *Keys to Understanding the Middle East* (United States of America: Ohio State University Pressbooks, 2017).

¹⁶ Payind, Alam and McClimans, Melinda, *Ibid.*

¹⁷ <https://blogs.harvard.edu/sulaymanibnqiddees/tag/arabic-sufi-poetry>

jurisprudence, social class, gender, geography, or family connections. It is closely associated with both popular religion and orthodox expressions of Islamic teachings. It has been both opposed and supported by the state.¹⁸

Within Sufism, there are a number of *tariqa*, or Ways for a Muslim to follow to attain a personal religious experience. The word ‘*tariqa*’ can be loosely translated to the English terms ‘order’ or ‘brotherhood’, even though the actual meaning is much broader than this. It can also refer to the infrastructure put in place to support the Ways. Thus, we will find that it is possible to have *tariqa*-Ways without *tariqa*-brotherhoods; but is impossible to have *tariqa*-brotherhoods without *tariqa*-Ways.¹⁹

The number of Sufi brotherhoods is incredibly varied within Islam and across the world. Hausaland is home to two prominent Sufi Brotherhoods, known as the Qādirīyah and Tijaniyya. The Qādirīyah *tariqa* derive their name from Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (c. 1077–1166), a Sufi teacher and founder of a Hanbalī college for Islamic instruction [a *madrassa*] and a religious hostel. The Tijānīyah *tariqa* derive their name from Aḥmad At-Tijānī (1737–1815), an Algerian Berber and Sufi scholar who was educated and died in Fes, Morocco. Both brotherhoods have been in good standing within Northern Nigeria, and remain so:

The widespread respect they have come to command has developed over the past two centuries and is, at least in part, rooted in their links to the Sokoto Caliphate. These ties give the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya a legitimacy that is at once local and international, historic and contemporary, religious and political. For although the Caliphate is now not what it used to be, it still has substance and its leaders, the Sultan and various Emirs, continue to exert enormous influence.²⁰

Salafism

Less than 1% of the world’s Muslims follow Salafism, also known as the Salafiyya movement, which is a conservative branch within Sunni Islam. The word ‘Salafi’ is derived from the Arabic word ‘*salaf*.’ *Salaf* means pious

¹⁸ <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2260>

¹⁹ Vikør, Knut S., *Sufi Brotherhoods in Africa* in Levtzion, Nehemia and Pouwels, Randall L. (eds.), *The History of Islam in Africa* (United States of America: Ohio University Press, 2000).

²⁰ Hill, Jonathan N.C., *Sufism in Northern Nigeria: Force for Counter-Radicalisation* (United States of America: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010).

‘predecessor’ or ‘forefather’ or *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* and it is often equated to the first three generations of Muslims. This reference to three generations is based on a well-known hadith from the Prophet Muhammad:

The Prophet said, "The best people are those of my generation, and then those who will come after them (the next generation), and then those who will come after them (i.e., the next generation), and then after them, there will come people whose witness will precede their oaths, and whose oaths will precede their witness."

نُ، عَنْ أَبِي حَمْزَةَ، عَنِ الْأَعْمَشِ، عَنْ إِبْرَاهِيمَ، عَنْ عُبَيْدَةَ، عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ. رَضِيَ حَدَّثَنَا عَبْدًا
خَيْرُ النَّاسِ قَرْنِي، ثُمَّ الَّذِينَ يَلُونَهُمْ، ثُمَّ الَّذِينَ يَلُونَهُمْ، ثُمَّ " اللَّهُ عَنْهُ. عَنِ النَّبِيِّ ﷺ قَالَ
" مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ قَوْمٌ تَسْبِقُ شَهَادَتُهُمْ أَيْمَانُهُمْ وَأَيْمَانُهُمْ شَهَادَتُهُمْ بِيَعِيءُ " .²¹

This Hadith forms the basis for the understanding that the *salaf*, believed to include Muhammad himself, the *Sahabah* [Companions], the *Tabi'un* [Followers], and the *Tabi'at-Tabi'in* [Followers of the Followers], knew the unadulterated, pure form of Islam. It is the strident belief in this purity that has led to the introduction, rise and entrenchment of Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria, to the dismay of traditional and mainstream Nigerian Salafists, some of whom insist that Boko Haram's specific ideology and actions are not accepted within Sunni Islam:

Internationally, the jihadist sect Boko Haram has become the most famous manifestation of Salafism in Nigeria. Yet Boko Haram is merely a fringe offshoot of a much larger Salafi movement in the northern part of the country. Mainstream Nigerian Salafis often use strident and confrontational rhetoric toward other Muslims and toward Nigerian Christians, but they are not jihadists: mainstream Salafis do not generally engage in violence, they do not advocate the overthrow of the secular state, and they do not reject Western-style educational institutions.²²

²¹ Sahih al-Bukhari 6429, Book 81, Hadith 18, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:6429>

²² Thurston, Alexander, *Salafism in Northern Nigeria: Beyond Boko Haram in Africa in Transition* (January 27, 2017), <https://www.cfr.org/blog/salafism-northern-nigeria-beyond-boko-haram>

It is believed that Salafism found its foothold in Nigeria with the establishment of the University of Medina in 1961, and the enrolment of Nigerian students into the institution, which began in 1980. Medianan students such as Shaikh Mahmud Adam, Sani Umar Rijiyar Lemo, Shaikh Abduawahhab Abdullah, Bashir Aliyu Umar, and a host of others primarily in Kano, Nigeria, had a massive impact on the settlement of the Salafism in Nigeria.²³

Similar to the other branches of Islam, there are sub-branches leading to other sub-branches, resulting in internal and external conflicts within Salafism that are likely to continue. The beauty of Islam is that allows for a diversity of opinions, which tend to be clustered around several immovable tenets.

Ahmadiyya

Approximately 0.62% to 1.25% of the world's Muslims subscribe to the branch of Islam known as Ahmadiyya. The word '*Aḥmadīya*' means 'fellowship or followers of Aḥmad,' which is another name of Muhammad in the Qur'ān. The Ahmadiyya movement was founded by an Indian religious leader by the name of Mirzā Ghulām Ahmad (1835-1908), with essential teachings of sanctity of life, love, peace and justice.

It is commonly held to have begun in Lagos in 1916 but after this, its origin story splinters into several paths. It is officially known as the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at or *al-Jamā'ah al-Islāmīyah al-Aḥmadīyah*. Ahmadi adherents tend to be found in high numbers in Western Nigeria, Lagos in particular, but they also have a strong presence in Hausaland despite a certain amount of controversy surrounding several of their beliefs:

It has been alleged they do not believe in the key doctrine of the Finality of Prophecy, in which the Prophet Muhammad is the last prophet, but they strenuously deny this claim, arguing they share the belief that Muhammad was the last "law-bearing Prophet," but consider their own founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, as a "subordinate prophet" who came after him.

They argue that in this respect they are no different to other Muslims "who are awaiting the coming into the world of the Prophet Jesus." Ahmadiyya Muslims also believe that Ahmad is both the Promised Mahdi

²³ Thurston, Alexander, *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching, Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

in Islam and the Messiah, and that Jesus lived and is buried in Kashmir. Their view on jihad is also very different from Islamists. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad believes that the military use of jihad is no longer needed in the present age and all violent actions do not have justification in the name of jihad.²⁴

Qur'ānism

It is not currently known how many of the world's Muslims identify as Qur'ānists. Also known as *Qurāniyyūn* or *al-Qur'āniyya*, their strict belief is that all Islamic guidance, guidelines and law should flow only from the Qur'ān. This means that other sources of religious authority, such as Hadiths and *Sunnah*, are not recognised as valid because the Qur'ān is all that is required to live one's life as a devout Muslim:

Stories relating the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, known as Hadith in Arabic, have long been esteemed by the vast majority of Muslims as a source of law and guidance second only to the Qur'an in authority. In recent years, an increasingly vocal Muslim opposition to Hadith insists that the Qur'an alone should be the sole source of religious law and guidance in Islam. Rashad Khalifa, Kassim Ahmad, Edip Yuksel, and Ahmad Subhy Mansour are among the most important rejecters of the Hadith, whose arguments influence a wide variety of groups popularly labeled Ahl al-Qur'an, Qur'aniyyun or Qur'anists...

There are two strains of opposition to the authority of the Hadith. The first is opposition to an extra-Qur'anic source of scriptural authority and the second is to the problematic content of some of the Hadith that make the religion an object of ridicule. Authenticity is also a concern, and opponents of the Hadith often argue that the Hadith have nothing to do with the Prophet. However, the overriding concern is about granting scriptural authority to something other than the Qur'an.²⁵

In Hausaland, Qur'ānism has appeared in one form as the Kala Kato movement. The phrase 'Kala Kato' means 'man says' in the Hausa language

²⁴ Huang, William, *Islamic Sects Booming in Africa*, 18 Aug 2020, <https://mercatornet.com/islamic-sects-booming-in-africa/65486/>

²⁵ Musa, Aisha Y., *The Qur'anists in Religion Compass*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2010).

and refers to the sayings and teachings of Prophet Muhammad that are rejected by the adherents to these beliefs:

Following the teachings of Mallam Muhammadu Marwa Maitatsine, Kala-Kato rejects the Hadiths and *Sunna* (sayings and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad), considered by most Muslims to be integral parts of Islamic belief and jurisprudence along with the Qur'an. The Qur'an is the only book Kala-Kato followers are allowed to read. The movement considers everyone who fails to follow their unorthodox beliefs an infidel...

The movement's inspiration is Mallam Muhammadu Marwa 'Maitatsine' [Hausa for 'He who curses others']. A Cameroonian preacher who relocated to Nigeria's Kano State, Maitatsine forbade his followers from using automobiles, bicycles, watches, radios and from possessing any more than the absolute minimum amount of money needed to survive.²⁶

However, not all Qur'anists are members of the Kala Kato movement; some are ordinary Muslims who simply quietly believe that the message contained in the Qur'an is both perfect and complete, and covers all aspects of Islam without needing to consult any supplementary documents. It continues to be a source of contention among Muslim scholars who maintain that Hadiths are essential to give a practical form to the abstract Islamic concepts around which their day-to-day lives are based.

Non-Denominational

Non-denominational Muslims or 'Just Muslims', as they are often colloquially referred to, do not consider themselves to be affiliated with any of the known Islamic branches or schools of thoughts while observing the general rules and requirements of Islam. Due to the nature of the religion, it is not currently known how many Muslims across the world identify as non-denominational, but it is estimated that at least one in five Muslims in at least 22 countries identifies as non-denominational.²⁷

It is even more difficult to attempt to reach an approximate number of Muslims in Hausaland who choose to fall under the non-denominational umbrella. While the stigma may not be the same as a person calling themselves

²⁶ *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 8, Issue 25 (2010), <https://jamestown.org/brief/briefs-146/>

²⁷ https://gyaanipedia.fandom.com/wiki/Non-denominational_Muslim

an atheist, humanist or secularist, it is easy to imagine the reaction of the average Nigerian to a Hausa person living in Hausaland who says they do not see themselves as Sunni, Shi'a or any of the other popular or unpopular movements.

It is understandable why a Muslim would want to avoid the conflict between various movements and branches in order to focus on what they consider to be the purity of the core concepts of Islam by following the established religious texts, observing the five pillars, and living a pious and just life by doing good in their community, family and among friends.

CHRISTIANITY

As of 2020, Christianity remains the largest religion in the world, so it is no surprise that it will have its followers in Islam's heartland. Nigeria has always been a melting pot of ethnicities, tribes and religions, and the tolerance shown to different faiths is a key part of our intracommunal harmony (or disharmony, as the case may be). The introduction of Christianity to Northern Nigeria dates all the way back to seventeenth century:

Missionary interest and propaganda in Northern Nigeria may have begun before the eighteenth century. By 1708, it is recorded, there were not less than 100,000 Christian adherents in the kingdom of Kororofa and a sixty-bed hospital had been built by the Roman Catholic priests. About this time, too, Rome attempted to introduce Christianity into Bornu and one Father Carlo de Genova was appointed Prefect of the projected Mission...

Indeed, in the second half of the nineteenth century, no part of the *Biled es Sudan* received as much attention from the Christian missionary world as Northern Nigeria. In this period not less than seven Christian bodies in Britain, the United States, Canada and Italy expressed a desire to begin work in the territory...²⁸

In present-day Hausaland, Christianity's presence is embedded in the form of churches, missions and organisations such as the Hausa Christians Foundation which focuses on delivering assistance in the five areas of

²⁸ Ayandele, E.A., *The Missionary Factor in Northern Nigeria, 1870-1918* in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1966).

Christian missions, education and empowerment programs, health and human services, advocacy and media.²⁹

The pre-existing challenges connected to data collection rear their ugly heads once again as it is not known how many Hausa Christians reside in Hausaland. Unsurprisingly, there have been tense periodic clashes over the decades between Christians and Muslims, due in part to the eagerness of Muslim politicians to extend Shari'ah law into secular penal codes, under the guise of democracy and federalism. Shari'ah is a religious law that forms part of the Islamic tradition that has been incorporated into the main bodies of civil and criminal law of twelve Northern Nigerian states since 1999. The conflict has stemmed from the strict interpretation of its principles and the harsh penalties for what it considers to be serious and unforgivable crimes:

The reintroduction of Islamic criminal law has contributed to inter-religious tensions in Nigeria, in particular in the early years of adoption. The impact of this expansion of a religious-based legal system on non-Muslims in particular has been a consistent question. In 2000, USCIRF Commissioners wrote to then President Clinton expressing concern over "a wave of violence between Christians and Muslims during recent months fostered by the attempts of several northern Nigerian states to adopt Islamic criminal law and impose it on non-Muslims." Fortunately, this concern has abated over the years, since non-Muslims cannot be taken to Shari'ah courts without their consent...

Shari'ah law has been practised for centuries among the Muslims of northern Nigeria (after independence in 1960, Shari'ah had been limited to personal law). Thus, for many Muslims, the re-introduction of Shari'ah Penal and Criminal Procedure Codes did not mark a grand shift. Rather, it reflected the greater cultural norm. Moreover, it was welcomed by many in the region as an alternative to a conventional court and justice system that is perceived as corrupt, expensive, biased, and inefficient.³⁰

²⁹ <https://www.hacfo.org/hacfo-mandate/>

³⁰ Bourbeau, Heather, Umar, Sani, Muhammad, Dr and Bauman, Peter, *Shari'ah Criminal Law in Northern Nigeria: Implementation of Expanded Shari'ah Penal and Criminal Procedure Codes in Kano, Sokoto, and Zamfara States, 2017-2019* (United States of America: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2019), www.uscirf.gov

Since the twentieth century, Christianity has been embraced in Hausaland due to three significant factors: the institutionalisation of British colonial rule, the establishment of non-Muslim settlements and robust evangelism carried out by multiple Christian missionaries. However, it must be noted that, despite this evangelism, Christianity remains a minority religion in northern Nigeria.³¹

Sample text from the Hausa Bible

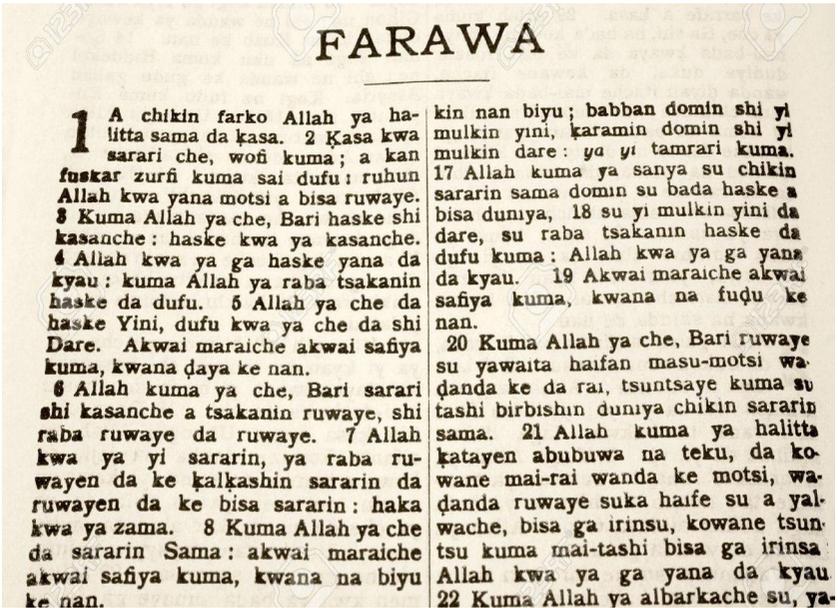


Image source: https://www.123rf.com/photo_939851

TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Maguzanci

Maguzanci is an African traditional religion that pre-dates Islam and has worshippers in certain parts of the world, such as Arabia.³² The estimated number of present-day believers is unknown, particularly as a large proportion converted to Islam following Dan Fodio's jihad in the eighteenth

³¹ Isa, Haruna, Kabiru, *Sunni Literary Responses to the Spread of Shia Ideology in Northern Nigeria in Studies in African Languages and Cultures*, NR 52/2018, ISSN 2545-2134.

³² Umar, Hussaini, *Media and Information Literacy: Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and Film Industry in Nigeria: Kano Case Study*, https://en.unesco.org/gmw2018_hussain_umar

century. The religion can also be identified as Hausa animism due to the integral nature of animals in rituals and celebrations.

The presence of Maguzanci in Hausaland can be traced to a Hausa tribe called the Maguzawa, said to be the original inhabitants of Kano and descendants of Maguji, who was one of the eleven pre-jihadic pagan chiefs who led the clans of Kano. The Maguzawa spirit world is centred around the concept of a Supreme Being called *Ubangiji* [God] who lives in the sky and 'is not an object of direct worship, having no sacrifices, liturgy, priests nor shrines,'³³ alongside the veneration of deities and ancestors. He is also referred to as *Ubangiji Iyayengiji* [Lord of Lords], *Mai Iko Duka* [The Almighty], *Mai Tsarki* [The Holy One] and *Mai Sama* [The Owner of Heaven].³⁴ The word 'Maguzawa' is derived from an interesting mix of the Arabic words for *idolâtre* and *majus* [pagan] and it neatly captures the indigenous nature of their religion:

Pre-Islamic Hausa religion is believed to have survived in some beliefs and practices among groups usually referred to as *azna* in Niger, and as *Maguzawa* in Nigeria...Today these names have acquired derogatory connotations; Hausa speakers rarely self-identify as *azna*, and non-Islamic religious practices and beliefs have been increasingly considered incompatible with Islam. While they have not died out entirely, they are practised discreetly.³⁵

This traditional religion is centred around supernatural forces, spirit possession, spirit worship and magic. Two key aspects of Maguzanci are belief in the existence of *iskoki* [spirits] and *bori* [spirit possession]. Interestingly, both of these concepts have been assimilated into Islam, as a way of making conversion a more attractive prospect to those who have not yet embraced it:

Similarly, in Islam, there is a belief in the spirits world (the Islamic *medan jinn*, in Arabic). This Islamic religious belief corresponds to the *iskoki* or

³³ Danfulani, Dadem, Habila, Umar, *Factors Contributing to the Survival of the Bori Cult in Northern Nigeria* in *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (1999), p.421. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3270434>. Accessed 3 May 2021.

³⁴ Danfulani, Dadem, Habila, Umar, *Ibid.*, p.421.

³⁵ Haour, Anne and Rossi, Benedetta, *Hausa Identity: Language, History and Religion* in Haour, Anne and Rossi, Benedetta (eds.), *Being and Becoming Hausa: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010).

spirits-cult in *maguzci*, providing a point of synthesis for the two separate religious beliefs — the spirit-cult in *maguzanci*, and the *jinn* in Islam. As a result, Islam instead of rejecting the Hausa belief in *iskoki* and *bori* cult embraced it and gave it a different meaning. This further explains how and why the Maguzawa (the indigenous Hausa-speaking tribe of Kano) later began to freely use the Arabic word, *jinn* as a synonym for *iska* (Hausa singular for spirit), and the continued practice among Hausa Muslims of the *bori* cult.³⁶

Bori

Bori is a Hausa common noun, meaning ‘a sacred and occult force which resides in matter.’³⁷ The word itself shares the same roots ‘as the Hausa word *borassa*, which now means distilled spirits, as opposed to the native palm wine and other similar drinks.’³⁸ By allowing themselves to be deliberately possessed by chosen spirits during ritual dances and seasonal festivals, the followers of what is commonly referred to as a cult commune with supernatural forces, leading to positive and negative outcomes:

Among the Maguzawa (Hausa pagans) it is a chief who presides at the dances, and sacrifices to the deities. It is only in the large towns that their cult has got into the hands of professional *bori* men and women, who not only direct the dances but, in many cases, make quite a good income by foretelling the success, or otherwise, of mercantile ventures, aiding in love troubles, etc.³⁹

A few examples of the spirits worshipped by the Hausa include *Dogon Daji* [Tall One of the Forest], *Sarkin Rafi* [Chief of the River], *Kure* [Hyena], and *Gajimare* [God of Rain and Storm].⁴⁰ According to Dr Umar Danfulani, the survival of the *bori* cult is a way of immortalising Maguzanci. In fact, he

³⁶ Abar, Emmanuel M., *Islam, Christianity, Traditional Religions and Power Politics in Northern Nigeria Since Pre-Islamic Period*, Dissertations, 1678 (2019).

³⁷ Palmer, H.R., “*Bori*” Among the Hausas in *Man*, Vol. 14 (1914), p.113. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2787459. Accessed 3 May 2021.

³⁸ Palmer, H.R., *Ibid.*, p.113.

³⁹ Palmer, H.R., *Ibid.*, p.114.

⁴⁰ Bala, Alhaji, Aminu, Dr., *Da'wah Towards Alleviating Spirit Worship and Devil Possession (bori) in Hausaland (Northern Nigeria)* in *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, Vol. 4, Issue 7, July 2015, www.ijhssi.org

regards *bori* as a part of Maguzanci, which survives as an island within the ocean of Islam in Northern Nigeria:

Its survival can be attributed to a number of factors, among them the feminine nature of the cult, its control and domination by women and its provision of freedom for women, unequalled by both Islam and Christianity. Furthermore, *bori* provides an avenue for socio-cultural performance, festivals, and other types of interaction, and offers traditional medical and health care services to the public, factors that have endeared the cult to both members and non-members.⁴¹

Women are honoured and entrusted with a significant amount of power in the *bori* cult. In fact, they 'occupy high ritual and social positions...and most *bori* adherents are women.'⁴² The most important role tends to be held by a woman who becomes known as a *magajiya* [queen], who works closely alongside her male counterpart, known as an *ajingi*, and they both 'perform or delegate all ritual functions, including sacrifices [and preside over] the *sarauniya*, queen, and the *sarkin yan bori* or *andi*, king of *bori* members.'⁴³ *Bori* is an integral part of Maguzanci, from its earliest belief in *babbaku* ['pagan' spirits prone to mischief and evildoing] to the introduction of *farfaru* ['Muslim' spirits who piously follow Islamic rituals and rites under the guidance of Allah], when Islam came to Hausaland accompanied by international and local cultural influences:

Soldier spirits reflect totem spirits, famous hunters and war lords, while Fulani spirits mirror the advent of Fulani contact with the Hausa. The presence of European spirits in the *bori* cult reflects the pre-colonial and colonial epochs, a time when Europeans were in contact with Hausaland.

The introduction of spirits from other ethnic groups in Nigeria into the cult merely mirror the interaction between Hausa and other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Thus, the history of the *bori* cult reveals layers and historical

⁴¹ Danfulani, Dadem, Habila, Umar, Ibid., p.412.

⁴² Danfulani, Dadem, Habila, Umar, Ibid., p.427.

⁴³ Danfulani, Dadem, Habila, Umar, Ibid., p.428.

epochs of Maguzawa contact with other peoples and cultures within their environment.⁴⁴

Thus, it may be seen that prior to the arrival and establishment of Islam, *bori* played, and continues to play, an important part in the daily lives of the Hausa people, particularly through the use of traditional healing practices, divination and the preservation of morals and values. The religion understandably remains untouched in more remote areas of Hausaland, with enthusiasm, outright or otherwise, waning as one approaches the urbanised city centres. It must be mentioned that support for *bori* can often be found among established Muslim leaders such as emirs and noblemen who 'offer money and some presents to *bori* cult members in order to obtain local medications, protective, productive and destructive charms, amulets and talismans, referred to in Hausa as *guru* and *laya*.'⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Danfulani, Dadem, Habila, Umar, Ibid., p.412.

⁴⁵ Danfulani, Dadem, Habila, Umar, Ibid., p.436.

Chapter 2

YORÙBÁ GODS

[The Yorùbá people comprise 15.5% of the Nigerian population according to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, 2018 estimate]

The Yorùbá are one of the three largest ethnic groups of Nigeria, concentrated in the southwestern part of that country. Much smaller, scattered groups live in Benin and northern Togo. The Yorùbá numbered more than 20 million at the turn of the 21st century. They speak a language of the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family. Many Yorùbá are now Christians or Muslims, but aspects of their traditional religion survive. The traditional Yorùbá religion has an elaborate hierarchy of deities, including a supreme creator and some 400 lesser gods and spirits, most of whom are associated with their own cults and priests.¹

BACKGROUND

The Yorùbá people* are an eclectic, vibrant ethnic group known for their love of *owambe* [celebrations and social events], strong family connections and a profound love of religion. Although they are spread out across Nigeria, the States of Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo are considered to be Yorùbá heartland, and there is also a significant Yorùbá presence in Kogi State and Kwara State. The Yorùbá are also known for their elaborate system of deities, each with their own clearly defined functions; the roots of which date back as early as the fourth century and have been associated with Ancient Egypt:

The ethnogenesis of the Yoruba has been a subject of various historical critical arguments in recent scholarship. Local historians and their foreign counterparts have explored different scholarly models to ascertain the origin

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Yoruba>

* Estimates range from 34 to 36 million.

of the Yoruba race. A sizeable number of these accounts usually explore the historical evidence from ancient Egypt.

Although, such historical traditions differ from one school of thought to another, some modern historians of Yoruba descent insist that the Yoruba originated from Egypt...Agai *et al* assert that both the ancient Egyptian and Yoruba cultures recognise the existence of and supremacy of a supreme being/deity but worshipped local deities and ancestors. The peoples regard their kings as divine authorities, certain animals as sacred, and certain forms of festivals involving dancing and singing were practised, magic and the use of amulets were important in the daily lives of /and in the afterlife beliefs of both cultures.²

In addition to Ancient Egypt, other controversial theories regarding the origin of the Yorùbá people include migrations from Mecca and Northeast Africa. Their traditional religion and pantheon of gods serve as a reassuring and immovable backdrop against which Islam and Christianity have been able to flourish, albeit to its detriment. There is a direct link between colonialism and the displacement of Yorùbá traditional religion in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century:

This period also witnessed a direct contact of missionaries with Yoruba traditional religion and its adherents. Before long the missionaries noticed the presence and significance of the *Babaláwo*, the priests diviners of *Ifá*, the Yoruba God of wisdom and also *Èṣù*, god of the gate keeper, the divine policeman and conveyor of sacrifices.

For the missionaries to be successful they had to render implausible not only the structure of Yoruba religious worldview, but indeed, they had to destroy the entire basis for divination and sacrifices.³

By the late 1930s, the majority of the Yorùbás had converted to Islam or Christianity, and by the early 1950s, nearly 90% had released their former allegiance to traditional religion, at least on the surface. Access to the

² Taiwo, Folorunso, Emmanuel and Daniel, Paul, Aghedo, *Revisiting the Yoruba Ethnogenesis: A Religio-Cultural Hermeneutics of Ancient Egyptian Texts* in *OGIRISI: A New Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 11, 2015.

³ Olupona, Jacob K., *The Study of Yoruba Religious Tradition in Historical Perspective* in *Numen*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 1993, p.244., www.jstor.org/stable/3270151. Accessed 11 May 2021.

advantages of association with colonial power, quality education for their children and exposure to a world beyond their immediate local communities all played a part in the rapid rate of conversion.⁴

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity came to Yorubaland in the mid-nineteenth century as a result of the well-documented colonial activities of the Europeans. As previously alluded to earlier in the chapter, the dominance of Christianity could only be established by the systematic undermining of the religion already in place, such as popular songs created to provide an alternative Christian viewpoint and the production of local literature comparing and contrasting ‘superior’ Christianity with ‘inferior’ Yorùbá religion.⁵

These Europeans – the Portuguese, the French, the British and the Germans – each impacted Yorubaland in varying and permanent ways. The Portuguese Roman Catholic priests introduced Latin Christianity in Benin and Warri in the sixteenth century by accompanying traders who specialised in gold, ivory, pepper and slaves;⁶ following an extended period of direct rule in Yorubaland, the French quietly assimilated the parts of Nigeria under its control into French West Africa by identifying and formalising a border under the Anglo-French Convention of 1898;⁷ the British brought a bouquet of options in the early nineteenth century – Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Methodism, Baptists, etc. – their goal was to bring education and civilisation to the ‘barbaric’ Africans;⁸ towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Germans were relatively late to the macabre party known as the Scramble for Africa, and much of their energy was devoted to prising chunks of African territories from the tight grips of the French and British for themselves.⁹

The types of Christianity heavily prevalent in Yorubaland today are as follows:

⁴ Peel, J.D.Y., *Christianity, Islam, and Orisa-Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction* (California: University of California Press, 2016), p.126. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ffjng5.12. Accessed 13 May 2021.

⁵ Olupona, Jacob K., *Ibid.*, p.245.

⁶ Adamolekun, Taiye, *Main Trends in the Church Growth in Nigeria* in *European Scientific Journal*, October Edition, Vol. 8, No. 23 (2012).

⁷ Kehinde, Michael, Olujimi, *Implications of Colonially Determined Boundaries in (West) Africa: the Yoruba of Nigeria and Benin in Perspective* (2010), Durham theses, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/496/>

⁸ Kehinde, Michael, Olujimi, *Ibid.*

⁹ Kehinde, Michael, Olujimi, *Ibid.*

- **Roman Catholicism:** This is one of the three major branches of Christianity that traces its history to its Founder Jesus Christ (c. 4 BC-AD 30 or 33) and the twelve Apostles. The Catholic Church is a sophisticated network of sacred congregations, archdioceses and dioceses, provinces, religious orders and societies, seminaries and colleges, parishes and confraternities headed by the Papacy.¹⁰
- **Protestantism:** This another of the three major branches of Christianity that came into being during the sixteenth-century European Reformation movement, kickstarted by Martin Luther (1483-1546) as a resistance to perceived failings and abuses of power within the Catholic Church. The Protestant organisational structure is more relaxed and centres its beliefs around the uplifting of the Bible as the highest source of authority, over and above church traditions.¹¹
- **Methodism:** An eighteenth-century movement founded by John Wesley (1703-1791) that started out as a plan to reform the Church of England from within but ended as a schism resulting in a completely separate and autonomous church that rests under the Protestant umbrella while retaining its Anglican roots. Methodism espouses missionary work, carrying out works of charity for the less privileged and upholding the musical traditions of hymn-singing.¹² Methodists are so-called 'because of the methodical way in which they carried out their Christian faith.'¹³
- **Baptists:** The Baptist church also shares a foundation with Protestantism but it has an essential requirement for its believers, namely that they must be baptised by full immersion. A common consensus on its origins is lacking but it is agreed that Roger Williams (1603-1683) founded the First Baptist Church in Providence, America in 1638, closely followed by John Clarke (1609-1676) in Rhode Island, America. In the United Kingdom, Thomas Helwys (c. 1575-c. 1616) and John Smyth (c. 1554-c. 1612) jointly co-founded the first Baptist congregation in London.¹⁴

¹⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism>

¹¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Protestantism>

¹² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Methodism>

¹³ https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/methodist_1.shtml

¹⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Baptist>

- **Anglicanism:** Arguably one of the best-known branches of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, it is an intriguing blend of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. The nominal head is the Archbishop of Canterbury, who presides over the Anglican Communion, which is a worldwide family of religious bodies. 'It prizes traditional worship and structure but operates autonomously and flexibly in different locales...Thus, Anglicans see themselves as possessing a cluster of historic pieties and procedural loyalties but few firm rules.'¹⁵ Anglicanism began in the sixth century in England, when Pope Gregory the Great sent St. Augustine to Britain to bring a more disciplined Apostolic succession to the Celtic Christians. The Anglican Church was spread worldwide first by English colonisation and then by English-speaking missionaries.¹⁶

An example of an English hymn translated into Yorùbá:

Arise, Arise, soldiers of Christ
The gospel of the Lord proclaims
Be happy and ever rejoice
With songs of joy the Lord to meet.
Chorus: Rejoice, for the Lord shall soon return [twice]
Rejoice, Rejoice, Christ shall return within the sky.

Omo'gun Kristi, e dide
So f'araiye p'Oluwa mbo
E busayo k'e si ho ye
K'e f'orin pade Oluwa.
Egbe: O mbo, O mbo, O fere de Oluwa mbo l'awonsanma
*O mbo, O mbo, O fere de Oluwa mbo l'awonsanmo.*¹⁷

Christianity has been an enduring and popular presence in Yorubaland since its introduction and acted a vehicle for the transmission of Western values to the Yorùbá people. A historical figure who was a key element of this transmission is Samuel Ajayi Crowther (c. 1809-1891), the first African to be ordained by the Church Mission Society (formerly the Church Missionary Society), which was, and still is, a British mission society that works with Christians around the world.

¹⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Anglicanism>

¹⁶ <http://anglican.org/church/ChurchHistory.html>

¹⁷ <https://cshymns.sogapps.com/hymnBook/hymn/863/English>

Crowther was born in the town of Osogun (now Lanlate, Oyo State) in Yorubaland, in what is now Western Nigeria. He was sold into slavery at the tender age of thirteen and experienced the full horrors of that terrible time, having the misfortune of being sold to new masters six times, before being liberated from a Portuguese slave ship by a British naval squadron in 1822. He was deposited in the Colony of Sierra Leone where he was taken under the care of the Church Missionary Society, learned English, converted to Christianity and was baptised.

This marked a significant change in his destiny as he went on to become a keen student, then a schoolmaster, then an accomplished linguist, after showing an aptitude for Temne, Latin and Greek. Following training as a minister in London, he was ordained by the Bishop of London and returned to Nigeria in 1843 to embark on an illustrious career involving translating the Bible into Yorùbá, leading missions into the Niger territories, producing works in Igbo and Nupe, and eventually becoming the first African bishop of the Anglican Church in 1864. His knowledge of languages and personable character were instrumental in the spread of Christianity in Yorubaland and further afield.¹⁸

Sample text from the Yorùbá Bible

IHINRERE

TI

JOHANNU

LI àtetekoṣe li Ọrọ wà, Ọrọ si wà
 2 Ọrọ pẹlu Ọlọrun, Ọlọrun si li Ọrọ na.
 3 On na li o wà li àtetekoṣe pẹlu
 4 Ọlọrun.
 5 Nipasẹ rẹ li a ti da ohun gbogbo;
 6 lehin rẹ a ko si da ohun kan ninu ohun
 7 ti a da.
 8 Ninu rẹ ni iye wà; iye na si ni
 9 imọle araiye.
 10 Imọle na si nmọle ninu òkunkun;
 11 òkunkun na kò si bori rẹ.
 12 Ọkọnrin kan wà ti a rán lati
 13 ọdọ Ọlọrun wá, orukọ ẹniti nje
 14 Johannu.
 15 On na li a si rán fun ẹri, ki o le ṣe
 16 ẹri fun imọle na, ki gbogbo enia ki o
 17 le gbagbó nipasẹ rẹ.
 18 On ki iṣe Imọle na, ṣugbọn a rán
 19 a wá lati ṣe ẹri fun Imọle na.
 20 Imọle otitọ mbe ti nṣàn mọle fun
 21 olúkúlúku enia ti o wá si aiye.

Image source: http://worldbibles.org/language_detail/eng/yor/Yoruba

¹⁸ Walls, Andrew F., *The Legacy of Samuel Ajayi Crowther in International Bulletin of Mission Research*, January 1992.

ISLAM

Islam found its way into Yorubaland earlier than Christianity, which is unsurprising considering it had been present in Northern Nigeria since the eleventh century. The *alfá* [Muslim clerics] were the main agents of its expansion, being professional men of prayer with a certain degree of learning in Arabic who provided religious services. They also delivered essential functions to the community such as magicospiritual services to both Muslim and non-Muslim, the establishment and management of Qur'anic schools and the performance of public prayers and life-cycle rites.¹⁹ The exact date of introduction is difficult to establish:

It is very difficult to precisely ascertain the actual date of the coming of Islam in south-western Nigerian because it was "unannounced and unplanned." Likewise, the earlier Muslims in the area under study worshipped secretly and privately. (Gbadamosi, 1978). However, it is learnt that Islam had been practiced and a mosque had been erected as far back as 1550 C.E at Oyo-Ile. (Al-Aluri, 1990)...

Al-Aluri (1965) also suggests that the Yoruba knew about Islam during the time of Emperor Mansa Musa of Mali (d. 1337 CE) through the Malian traders and ambassadors who were living in Oyo-Ile, the capital of Old Oyo empire. This is perhaps, a reason why some people call "Islam" as "Esin Imale" i.e., "the religion of Malians" or "the religion that came from Mali."²⁰

The Yorùbá are well-known for their pluralism of religion as evidenced by one of their folksongs:

We met oracle in the world
We met Islam in the world
It was late in the day that Christianity arrived.
Aye laba Ifa, Aye laba Imole
*Osan gangan ni"gbagbo wole de"*²¹

¹⁹ Peel, J.D.Y., *Ibid.*, p.137.

²⁰ Ogunbado, Faosiy, Ahamad, *Impacts of Colonialism on Religions: An Experience of South-western Nigeria in IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 5, Issue 6 (Nov.- Dec. 2012), p.53.

²¹ Ogunbado, Faosiy, Ahamad, *Ibid.*

It is crystal clear that Islam gained more converts in Yorubaland due to a number of similarities with their traditional beliefs:

- the belief in a Supreme Being;
- the acceptance of polygamy;
- the presence of values such as morality and respect;
- the preaching and practice of equality among believers;
- the according of status to Muslim clerics and traditional priests;
- the participation in communal festivals and ceremonies.

The closer a new religion comes to mirroring the religion that is already in place, the greater the chances of its success in displacing it. By asking its potential converts to sacrifice less, the perceived burden of conversion is lighter.

The powerful and venerable Oyo Empire (c. 1300-c. 1896) was a remarkable period in Yorùbá history. Oyo-Ile was the royal seat and capital of the Oyo Empire, within which the *Oba* [king] lived in his palace, surrounded by his warrior chiefs, palace officials, wives and innumerable children. To distinguish the *Oba* of Oyo from other *Obas*, he was also known as the *Alaafin* [Owner of the Palace], a title that has survived and thrives in present-day Oyo. The far-reaching influence of the Empire meant that when it embraced Islam, the knock-on effect on surrounding cities was inevitable; in other words, the importance of Oyo's links as a conductor of Islamic influence²² cannot be overemphasised. By the time the Empire began to disintegrate in the nineteenth century, it had served its purpose:

The empire had a strong army and for a long time was able to exert its dominance over several Yoruba towns and such kingdoms as Dahomey, Nupe, Borgu, and so on. It was not until the late 18th century that it began to face a series of crises that paved the way for its decline. The empire eventually fell in the early 19th century following a full-scale invasion launched on its capital by Fulani jihadists. This invasion led to the widespread dispersal of the inhabitants of Oyo and their resettlement in

²² Peel, J.D.Y., *Ibid.*, p.130.

other parts of Yorubaland such as Ogbomoso, Osogbo, Ibadan, Modakeke, and so on.²³

With the collapse of the Empire and the relocation of its inhabitants, the Muslims among them carried their religion with them to their new homes, thereby propagating the spread of Islam throughout Yorubaland; Ilorin, Lagos, Abeokuta, Ibadan, Ijebu Ode all experienced a wave of conversion to Islam that has held true until this day, which was further exacerbated by the various Yorùbá inter-tribal wars that plagued Yorubaland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The building of mosques, Qur'anic centres and schools also contributed to Islam's proliferation, often replacing traditional shrines and ritual sites.

JUDAISM

Some Yorùbá people believe that their origins lie in Israel as descendants of Ephraim, one of the twelve tribes who subsequently became the race known as Jews. It has been put forward that a certain percentage of this tribe were driven out of Israel by conquering forces and thus forced to migrate into sub-Saharan Africa in order to find new accommodation:

After the Assyrian conquest of Israel in the 8th century BCE, the victors carried away many captives. But the rest of the ten tribes in the Northern Kingdom dispersed to "the four corners of the earth," never to be heard from again. Never? Over the millennia, numerous theories have circulated as to the fate of these Ten Lost Tribes, and at least a dozen communities around the world claim descendance from these ancient Israelites. Whether the Assyrian Jews of Kurdistan, the B'nai Menashe in India, the Beta Israel of Ethiopia or the Kaifeng Jews of China, these groups may indeed be members of the lost tribes. And, why not?

After the Assyrian rout of Israel, one of the directions the refugees headed was southwest. Before there were nation states on the African continent, there were tribes, and it was into several of those tribes, in what is now Nigeria, that some exiled Jews assimilated, marrying and having children. The Yoruba Jews, numbering around 2,000, call themselves B'nai Ephraim

²³ Ogen, Olukoya, *Oyo (Yoruba) Empire* in *The Encyclopaedia of Empire* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2016).

(children of Ephraim), as they believe they are descended from the tribe of that name. And the Annang, Efik, and Ibibio peoples also have ancient religious practices similar to those in the Torah.²⁴

Primarily located in Ondo State since the 1930s, these Yorùbá Jews, similar to other Nigerian tribes that have embraced Judaism, continue to fight to be formally recognised by the relevant authorities in Israel.

TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Yorùbá traditional religion is a uniquely complex ecosystem that rivals the Greek and Roman pantheons of gods and goddesses. It is alive and well in modern day Nigeria, despite the best efforts of colonialism, among other factors, to stamp it out. Its influence on religions in other countries is undeniable, primarily due to the fact that the Yorùbá people were sold into slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean; they carried their beliefs with them, preserved the practices and shared them with their fellow captives. From Santería in Cuba, Candomblé and Umbanda in Brazil, Vodou in Haiti and Orisha in Trinidad, the impact of Yorùbá traditional religion on the world is almost beyond measure:

The Yorùbá religion is generally regarded as the most salient surviving traditional African belief system in the New World. Indeed, the Yorùbá people admirably held on to the spiritual ways of their forebears against all adversities they endured under slavery. The religions of the ancient kingdoms of Ile Ife, Oyo, and Oshogbo – to name just a few – survived successfully, especially in countries with large, transplanted Yorùbá communities such as Cuba and Brazil, but they also left a traceable impact on many regions throughout the African diaspora of the Western Hemisphere, where enslaved Yorùbá workers formed only a small minority of the overall African or African American population.

The resilient Yorùbá spirit grew deep roots in the new environment. It adapted, adjusted, and began to flourish once again in amazing rich cultural ways. *Santería*, the Spanish neo-Yorùbá religion of Cuba, and its Brazilian neo-Yorùbá counterparts *Umbanda* and *Candomblé* are today

²⁴ Kaufman, Goodman, Carol, *Lost? and Found: The Jews of Nigeria*, Jewish Federation of the Berkshires, September 15, 2020; <https://jewishberkshires.org/community-events/berkshire-jewish-voice/berkshire-jewish-voice-highlights/lost-and-found-the-jews-of-nigeria>

part of the national religious mainstream in these countries. Throughout Latin America, Yorùbá traditions blended with Roman Catholicism, the religion of the former colonial rulers from Spain, Portugal, and France.²⁵

Cosmology

In Yorùbá cosmology, the Supreme Being who reigns over all is known in one manifestation as *Olódùmarè* [The Lord God of the Source of Creation], in the second as *Ọlórún* [The Lord God of Heaven], and in the third as *Olofin* ([The Lord God of the Palace, conduit between *Orún* [Heaven] and *Ayé* [Earth]). The underworld is known as *Ile*. *Olódùmarè* is the traditional name but the usage of *Ọlórún* has become more commonly used in recent times, thought to be a consequence of Christian and Muslim influence on Yorùbá life and thought.²⁶

The word ‘*Olódùmarè*’ comes from the Yorùbá compound noun *Odu* and *osumare*. *Odu* means a chief, bigness and vastness or an exalted person and *osumare* means rainbow. The suffix *mare* in *osumare* means splendour, dazzling, shining and glorious. Thus, *Olódùmarè* means ‘the one who has the wholeness of glory and splendour, the one who clothes himself with the glorious light.’²⁷ The word ‘*Ọlórún*’ is used in the adoration of the Supreme Being, but also frequently in ejaculatory prayers: *Ọlórún gba mi o!* [Deliver me O God] or as an indicator of truth in discussions: *Ọlórún n gbo* [God is my witness].²⁸ The word ‘*Olofin*’ means ‘Supreme Ruler,’ and it is often combined with *Orún* or *Ayé* to designate *Olódùmarè* as the sovereign of those planes.²⁹ Traditionally assumed to be gender neutral, *Olódùmarè* is removed yet present, accessible yet remote, firm but kind:

The Yoruba believe that *Olodumare* is real and personal. According to them, *Olodumare* creates acts, sees, blesses and punishes. They also believe in the transcendence of *Olodumare*. Thus, *Olodumare* is eternal, permanent, unchanging, reliable and dependable.

²⁵ Fandrich, Ina J., *Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo* in *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 5, 2007, pp.775–776. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40034365. Accessed 15 May 2021.

²⁶ Ayegboyin, Deji and Olajide, S.K., *Olodumare* in Asante, Kete, Molefi and Mazama, Ama (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of African Religion* (California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009).

²⁷ Adegoke, Blessing, *The Spiritual Heritage of the Yoruba* (Germany: GRIN Verlag, 2018).

²⁸ Ayegboyin, Deji and Olajide, S.K., *Olorun* in Asante, Kete, Molefi and Mazama, Ama (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of African Religion* (California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009).

²⁹ <https://cci.pamm.org/olofi-y-el-mundo/>

In Yoruba theology of creation, *Olodumare* is *Eleda* - the Creator. He is the Prime Mover of all things from whom everything both in heaven and on earth originated. In Yoruba's cosmogony, *Olodumare* assigned and commissioned *Orisa-nla*, the arch-divinity to mould the human being from the soil.³⁰

Olódùmarè presides over a vast number of *Òrìṣas*, who are deities that have been imbued with some of *Olódùmarè's* gifts and capabilities. They may also be considered divinities or lesser gods. The *òrìṣas* serve as intermediaries between God and mere mortals, and they are venerated rather than worshipped, although there is a very fine line between these two concepts, some may say indistinguishable:

Intermediaries are an indispensable aspect of Yoruba religion and indeed African Traditional Religion. The need for a mediator arises out of this unique experience of the Holy. It also arises because the reality that man has to deal with is not a vague abstraction but a reality with the attributes of a person. Therefore, man needs something to mediate between them. This led to the ideas of the divinities which in the Yoruba religion number anywhere from 201 to 1,700.

These divinities...serve the will of *Olodumare* in the creation and theocratic government of the world.³¹

The *òrìṣas* owe their entire existence to *Olódùmarè* and they are not capable of existing without him:

...The existence of *Orisa* is meaningless apart from *Olodumare*, who is their Creator. According to the Yoruba, divinities are the ministers of *Olodumare* and function in the theocratic government of the *Olodumare*. The total number of divinities varies between 201, 401, 600 and 1,700. Divinities emanated from *Olodumare*; they are therefore considered divine beings.

³⁰ Adegoke, Blessing, Ibid.

³¹ Galadima, Bulus, *Evaluation of the Theology of Bolaji Idowu in Africa Journal of Evangelical Theory*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2001).

They are brought into being to serve *Olodumare* in maintenance of orderliness in the universe. They also serve as intermediaries between human beings and *Olodumare*. Each *orisa* has a portfolio of office, sacred place of worship, worshippers and priests or priestesses who lead worship in the shrine. They receive sacrifices and Yoruba pray to *Olodumare* through them.³²

The *òrìṣas* are divided into male and female, although a few are considered to be androgynous, for example, *Olokun* who is the *òrìṣa* of the vast seas of the world and *Osumare* who is the *òrìṣa* of the rainbow. Due to the fact that *òrìṣas* are categorised as powers, spirits, or forces, the projection of gender on to them came about as a result of the inescapable gender conceptions present in society and religion:

The impulse to endow deities with gender follows from wanting to think of them as persons. Any spiritual power which the Yoruba believe directly affects their lives and environment, and with which they therefore need to deal, must in some sense be imagined as a person; for how else is it possible to relate to it, to assuage its manifested anger or to solicit its future goodwill?...

It seems likely that this kind of thinking influenced the gender identification of the major established *orisa*: river deities like *Ọṣun* - and *Yemoja*, being generally regarded as female, for their coolness and fecundity, and fierce or destructive deities like *Ògún* (iron and war), *Ṣọppona* or *Babalúayé* (smallpox), *Èṣù* or *Babaode* (tricks and confusion) and *Ṣàngó* (lightning) as male. The female identity of some *orisa* was further fixed by their being regarded as wives of male *orisas*: as *Ọya* (tornado) is of *Ṣàngó*, or *Yemoja* of *Ògún* or *Ṣàngó*.³³

Human beings have a tendency to humanise the world around them in order to make sense of it, and it can be seen that deities are not exempt from anthropomorphism. Another way in which the *òrìṣas* were given human attributes was the manner in which their powers were described, giving them the appearance of legendary warriors or ancient heroes. Some *òrìṣas* are primordial, dating from Creation, while others are human beings who accomplished great things during their lifetimes, and were venerated by the

³² Adegoke, Blessing, Ibid.

³³ Peel, J.D.Y., *Gender in Yoruba Religious Change* in *Journal of Religion Africa*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2002, pp.139–140, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1581759. Accessed 17 May 2021.

Yorùbá people as a result. The *òrìṣas* overlap with, but are simultaneously distinct from the *irunmole*, who are divine personalities that enter the world of men and assume human identities to enable them to complete *Olódùmarè*'s divinely appointed tasks; heavenly messengers if you will. Many people use the terms '*òrìṣas*' and '*irunmole*' interchangeably, but this is incorrect.

The negative counterparts to the largely positive *òrìṣas* are the *ajogun*, who are best understood as evil supernatural forces that are held responsible for negative events such as death, illnesses, disease, imprisonment, accidents, etc. They closely mirror the concept of demons in Christianity and share the attribute of being capable of possessing a human being, a problem that can usually only be rectified by consulting a *Babaláwo* or *Ifá* priest:

The *Ajogun*, who are totally malevolent in nature, occupy the left side of the universe, while the *Orisa*, who are benevolent in nature, occupy the right half of the universe. In this respect, they form opposing forces against each other (Abimbola, 1994, pp.75-76). Baba Ifa Karade defines the *Ajogun* as "negating forces" (Karade, 1993, p.95). Likewise, Segun Gbadegesin identifies them as "the forces of evil which afflict unprotected human beings" (Gadegesin, 1991, p.102).

According to Awolalu, "because of such beliefs, the Yoruba come to associate mishaps that befall them, the losses they sustain, the pains they experience and the sudden and premature deaths with the machinations of enemies who use their nefarious deeds to harm men and make life uncomfortable" (Awolalu, 1978, pp.137-38). The implication of this is that the Yoruba view the world as a precarious place to live and that living in it requires supernatural intervention for everyday victory.³⁴

Thus, the Yorùbá offer supplication and sacrifices to the *òrìṣas* who are believed to be more powerful than the *ajogun*. The *òrìṣas* are expected to battle the *ajogun* on their behalf and 'either remove or prevent the calamities they may bring.'³⁵

³⁴ Olanrewaju, Adeyinka, Joseph, *The Biblical Concept of Victory over Evil in the Great Controversy Between Good and Evil in Yoruba Context in Asia-African Journal of Mission and Ministry*, Vol. 3. A Publication of Mission and Society Research Institute, Sahmyook University, Republic of Korea. February, 2011, pp.134-135.

³⁵ Olanrewaju, Adeyinka, Joseph, *Ibid.*, p.143.

Ifá

The ancient Yorùbá city of Ilé-Ifẹ̀, now commonly referred to in modern times as Ifẹ̀ and located in present-day Osun State, is believed to be the mythic seat of creation:

When *Olodumare* decided that earth should be created, he commissioned *oriṣa* Obatala to take a chain, a calabash of sand, and a five-toed cock and descend with the aid of the chain to the primordial waters and pour out the sand upon the waters. Then he was to place the cock upon the sand and as the cock scratched the sand, sending it flying, the continents of the earth would take shape.

While on his way to fulfil his commission, Obatala accepted the invitation of some other gods to join them in drinking palm wine. Having overindulged, he fell asleep. Oduduwa knew about *Olodumare's* commission to Obatala and, seeing Obatala asleep, took the calabash of sand, the cock, and the chain and proceeded to fulfil the High God's wishes. The place of creation was Ile-Ife.³⁶

For the part he played in the creation of the world, Odùdùwà became the founder and first divine king of Ilé-Ifẹ̀, and the royal dynasties of all the principal kingdoms in the area were descended from his children.³⁷ His intervention in his elder brother Obàtálá's task meant that Obàtálá, another influential *oriṣa*, had to console himself with being the creator of human beings [made from clay figures and infused with life-giving breath from *Olódùmarè*] and land [mountains, valleys, forests, fields, etc.].

Ilé-Ifẹ̀ is also held to be the place in which *Ifá*, an elaborate and deeply revered system of divination, came into being under the stewardship of Òrúnmilà, a powerful *oriṣa* in the Yorùbá pantheon known for wisdom, intellectual development and divination:

***Orunmila/Ifa*, who established the complex divinatory system, also created in the corpus the aforementioned cosmology, which served as the**

³⁶ Pemberton III, J., *A Cluster of Sacred Symbols: Oriṣa Worship Among the Igbomina Yoruba of Ila-Orangun in History of Religions*, Vol. 17, No. 1, August 1977, pp.8-9.

³⁷ Law, R.C.C., *The Heritage of Oduduwa: Traditional History and Political Propaganda among the Yoruba in The Journal of African History*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1973. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/180445. Accessed 19 May 2021.

genesis for the hierarchical structure which the system attributed to *Olodumare*.³⁸

The *Ifá* divination system is comprised of a significant resource made up of a divinely authorised set of rules and precise mathematical formulas, used to communicate with Yorùbá gods and goddesses. Divination is ‘the act of seeking after knowledge of future or hidden things by inadequate means, which is usually supplemented by some power which is represented all through history as coming from gods. It makes use of signs, omens and coincidences to tell hidden things.’³⁹

Due to the unpredictability and importance of the message that may be revealed to the seeker of knowledge, the process of divination cannot be carried out by just anybody; one must be called to take on the lifetime role of *Babaláwo* (*Ifá* priest) or *Iyanlawa/Iyanifa* (*Ifá* priestess):

Performing *Ifa* divination is called ‘*idafa*’ (or *didaowo* and *ounte ale*). *Idafa* is performed by a *Babalawo* or *Iyanifa* (an initiated priest or priestess). *Babalawo* can be translated as “father of the secrets” while “*Iyanifa*” means “mother that has *ifa*” (i.e. its blessing).

Ifa's universal relevance lies in the fact that, when an individual from any race, colour or creed approaches an *Ifa* Priest for a personal message, *Ifa* may reveal a message of national, continental or even global importance.⁴⁰

A current concern is that the practice is struggling to attract new *Ifá* priests and priestesses due to a combination of factors: a growing intolerance towards traditional divination systems, a lack of interest among young Yorùbá people in joining the profession and an overall decrease in the Yorùbás practising and consulting *Ifá* divination for answers to individual and collective life problems. Efforts are being made in local and international circles to preserve and maintain this complex and valuable way of life, as

³⁸ Ilésanmí, Mákanjúolá, Thomas, *The Traditional Theologians and the Practice of Òrisha Religion in Yorùbáland* in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 1991, p.220. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1580822. Accessed 19 May 2021.

³⁹ Alamu, Femi O., Aworinde, Oluwatobi, Halleluyah and Isharufe, Walter, *A Comparative Study of Ifa Divination and Computer Science* in *International Journal of Innovative Technology and Research (IJITR)*, Vol. 1, No. 6, October-November 2013, p.524.

⁴⁰ Alamu, Femi O., Aworinde, Oluwatobi, Halleluyah and Isharufe, Walter, *Ibid*.

evidenced by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) including the *Ifá* divination system on its list of the ‘Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity’ in 2005.⁴¹

The *Odu Ifá* is a sacred text that consists of 256 chapters subdivided into verses called *ese*, whose exact number is unknown as they are constantly increasing. The current estimate is that there are around 800 *ese* per *odu*. Each of the 256 *odu* has its specific divination signature, which is determined by the *babaláwo* using sacred palm-nuts and a divination chain. The *ese*, considered the most important part of *Ifá* divination, are chanted by the priests in poetic language.⁴²

An example of the first 16 principle *Odu* or 16 *meysis*, which are a component of the *Odu Ifá*

I I II II II II I I Odi Meyi 4	II II I I I I II II Iwori Meyi 3	II II II II II II II II Oyekun Meyi 2	I I I I I I I I Ejiogbe Meyi 1
II II II II II II I I Okana Meyi 8	I I II II II II II II Obara Meyi 7	II II II II I I I I Ojuani Meyi 6	I I I I II II II II Iroso Meyi 5
II II II II I I II II Otrupon Meyi 12	II II I I II II II II Ika Meyi 11	II II I I I I I I Osa Meyi 10	I I I I I I II II Ogunda Meyi 9
II II I I II II I I Ofun Meyi 16	I I II II I I II II Oshe Meyi 15	I I I I II II I I Irete Meyi 14	I I II II I I I I Otura Meyi 13

Image source: <https://ifa-odu.com/odu-ifa>

The 16 principle *Odu* are the first 16 important *Odu Ifá* signs on which the divination process is founded:

⁴¹ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/ifa-divination-system-00146>

⁴² <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/ifa-divination-system-00146>

The training to become a *babalawo* is an intense process. There are in principle 256 chapters in the divination process, called *Odu*, each one contains elaborative narratives of mythic stories related to history, events, ritual practices, etc...Importantly, the *Odu* is an oral tradition, and thus the *babalawo*-in-training must memorise all or most of the 256 *Odu* in order to be qualified to be a *babalawo*.⁴³

Reincarnation

Reincarnation is the belief that an aspect of an individual, primarily the soul, can linger after bodily death and be reborn in another living being.

The Yorùbá subscribe to the belief that a person can die and be reincarnated within their immediate or extended family, also known as *àsèyìnwáyé* or *atunwaye*. This is reflected in the bestowing of first names such as Babatunde or 'Father has returned,' Ìyábò or 'The mother came back' and Babájídé or 'The father reincarnated.' Reincarnation within Yorùbá traditional religion is believed to be possible in three forms:

- *Ipadawaye* [ancestor's rebirth]: The most common and enduring belief in reincarnation among the Yorùbá where the souls of departed good ancestors are reincarnated and reborn as grandchildren in the family for them to continue their existence in the family.
- *Akudaaya* [die and reappear]: The dead person is believed to live in another place different from where he used to live and died. It is usually interpreted in relation to untimely death. It is believed that if the person's *ori* [destiny or purpose] is terminated abruptly without fulfilment, or if he is not properly buried, he will not be qualified to join the ancestors, who are worshipped as sources of power and spiritual intermediaries, but will reincarnate in another body and keep roaming the world.

The existence of the *akudaaya* is usually terminated by the recognition of the dead person by someone who knows him.

⁴³ <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/predictionx/ifa>

- *Abiku* [born to die]: A phenomenon of repeated mortality and birth by the same mother. It is believed that it is the same soul being reborn as the same child many times over.
 “This is based upon the belief that there is a circle of wicked spirits who, of their own volition enter the wombs of pregnant women and are born only to die shortly after” (Awolalu & Dopamu 2005).
 Marks are made on the dead child before it is buried to disfigure it and discourage it from appearing again. However, the fact that these marks reappear on the child that comes after, is strong evidence to show that it is the same child that has appeared and a strong support for the belief in this phenomenon.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Osanyinbi, Oladotun B., and Adedeji, Adebisi G.M., *The Impact of the Yorùbá Traditional Belief in Reincarnation among Yorùbá Christians in Akurẹ* in *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion*, Vol. 15, 2016, p.17.

Chapter 3

IGBO GODS

[The Igbo people comprise 15.2% of the Nigerian population according to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, 2018 estimate]

Igbo, also called Ibo, people living chiefly in south-eastern Nigeria who speak Igbo, a language of the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family. The Igbo may be grouped into the following main cultural divisions: northern, southern, western, eastern or Cross River, and north-eastern. Before European colonisation, the Igbo were not united as a single people but lived in autonomous local communities. By the mid-20th century, however, a sense of ethnic identity was strongly developed, and the Igbo-dominated Eastern region of Nigeria tried to unilaterally secede from Nigeria in 1967 as the independent nation of Biafra. By the turn of the 21st century, the Igbo numbered some 20 million.¹

BACKGROUND

The Igbo people* are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, and indeed Africa, historically and geographically concentrated around the Niger River in the States of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo, with strong representation in Delta State and Rivers State, among many others; Igboland is said to date back to 4500 BC. They are known for their entrepreneurial spirit and deeply rooted religious traditions, the origins of which have been associated with Israel and Ancient Egypt:

There are two main variants of this tradition – the one identifying the Igbo with one of the lost ten 'tribes' of Israel, the other tracing them to ancient Egypt. The claim to Hebrew origin is the one of which we have the earliest mention, and that in the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, an Igbo ex-

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Igbo>

* Estimates range from 34 to 36 million.

slave who wrote in 1789...Then later, probably in the 1950s, one Ike Akwelumo asserted in his pamphlet *The Origin of the Ibos* that the Igbo were a branch of the Jews. According to him the name "Ibo," used for the people during the colonial period, was a contraction of the word "Hebrew." At some intermediate stage, he says, the word had been contracted to Heebo...

In 1926...a certain E.K. Ijeomanta, an Aro man who at the time was a teacher with the Presbyterian mission in Calabar...claimed that the Igbo originally lived in the Nile Valley from where they migrated through the Sudan to their present place of abode...In the 1940s and 1950s M.D.W. Jeffreys gave a measure of academic respectability to this claim by linking the Igbo – in any case the Nri and their culture – with ancient Egypt. A minor variation on this tradition was that favoured and vigorously propagated in the 1920s by Sir Herbert Richmond Palmer, the Lieutenant-Governor of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria (1925-30). Palmer traced the Aro ultimately to the Middle East by regarding them as a colony of the Jukuns, whom he said came from Yamil in Arabia.²

While some historians dispute these claims as a little far-fetched, there is clear evidence that 'by the eighteenth century, trade between Igbo land and the central Sudan had been firmly established for between seven and eight centuries at least.'³ It is well-known that where there is trade, there tends to be an exchange of influences, occasional intermarriage and a marked change in trajectory for both sides. It is commonly held to be more likely that the Igbo people originated from neighbouring states such as the Edo empire of Benin and the Igala kingdom of Idah or have always lived in Igboland but migrated internally from community to community; both theories have been confirmed to a greater extent by the results of archaeological and linguistic research.⁴

The Igbo people are predominantly Christian and have been ever since the advance of colonisation in the mid-nineteenth century. Islam was unable to penetrate Igboland as deeply as Yorubaland but there was enough space for conversions to take place, primarily in the twentieth century. Many Igbo people still practice their traditional religion, which remains the backbone of

² Afigbo, A.E., *Traditions of Igbo Origins: A Comment in History in Africa*, Vol. 10, 1983, p.2. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3171687. Accessed 21 May 2021.

³ Afigbo, A.E., *Ibid.*

⁴ Afigbo, A.E., *Ibid.*, p.4, p.7.

this ethnic group, and somewhat interestingly, there is a small but significant presence of Igbo Jews who strive to be accepted by the mainstream Israeli Jewish community.

CHRISTIANITY

The introduction of colonialism and missionaries to Igboland in the mid-19th century marked a definite change in direction for the Igbo people. They overcame their initial hostility to the new religion as it became apparent that certain advantages accrued to Christian converts:

...The missionaries did not only bring the gospel of Jesus Christ; they also taught the people. They opened schools wherever they established churches where young ones were, and those interested were taught how to read, write, sing hymns, psalms, choruses, recite catechism, pray, and even learnt how to read the scriptures. Some of the notable schools by the mission bodies include the Uzuakoli Methodist College built in 1923, Ihie High School built in 1945, Dennis Memorial Grammar School Onitsha built in 1925, St. Paul College Awka, Bishop Lasbrey College Irete, St. Augustine, and Trinity Theological College, Umuahia.

The missionaries helped in the unification of Igbo language by translating the Bible into an Igbo version called Union Ibo by 1910. Christian missions helped also to preserve the vernacular languages of the people as against the wishes of the colonial administrators who preferred the English language to the vernacular languages.⁵

In other words, by addressing the essential needs of Igbo society through contributions to community development and community mobilisation, Christianity was able to adapt itself to the uniquely Igbo way of life, thereby displacing, to a certain extent, the traditional religion that had reigned supreme until this point.⁶

Unlike Yorubaland, which received visits from a number of European countries, Igboland came firmly under the rule of the British, but not without

⁵ Nmah, P.E. and Nwadiolor, L.K., *Christianity and Community Development in Igboland, 1960-2000: A Reflection in AFRREV IJAH: An International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, Vol. 1, No. 2, May 2012, pp.19-20.

⁶ Nmah, P.E. and Nwadiolor, L.K., *Ibid.*

a decent amount of extended and spirited resistance, which took the form of 'warfare, protests, tax evasion and petition writing.'⁷

The enthusiasm with which Christianity was embraced, with the exception of a few key cultural battlegrounds such as polygamy and human sacrifice, provided a direct contrast to the hostility that met certain aspects of missionary work and the consequences of the imposition of the British system of indirect rule:

Also, because the missionaries were stronger than the Igbo with regard to their advancement in modern day life and education, they had a stronger influence as well as controlling power of Igbo land and the Igbo themselves. The missionaries used a hostile approach in taking over the ruling powers of Igbo land from its natives by using their influence to spread their gospel and at the same time abolishing Igbo traditional customs and beliefs...

[The] Igbo lost most of the values that tied them together as one; social coherence between the individual and society was lost, coupled with their traditional values and way of life. Because of the confused state of mind of [the] Igbo not knowing whether to reject or embrace these changes, it ultimately led to their fall.⁸

Igbo land is considered to be the present-day Christian heartland of Nigeria with significant percentages of practising Roman Catholics and Protestants, the popularity of which dates back to colonial times. It should be noted that the Igbo people have joyously added a number of vibrant variations to the traditional modes of observing Catholic and Protestant rites and rituals, ranging from the charismatic to the unusual. It should also be mentioned that Pentecostalism, which started as a trickle, became a river, and then a great ocean, following a religious awakening partially prompted by the end of the Nigeria-Biafra War, also called the Nigerian Civil War, in 1970. The despondency, hopelessness and insecurity that was rife in Eastern Nigeria after

⁷ Alozie, Bright, *How Igbo Women Activists Influenced British Authorities During the Colonial Rule of Nigeria*, *Quartz Africa*, August 7, 2020. <https://qz.com/africa/1889847/how-nigerias-igbo-women-influenced-british-colonial-rule>

⁸ Kenalemang, Maatla, Lame, *Things Fall Apart: An Analysis of Pre and Post-Colonial Igbo Society*, Karlstads Universitet, January 2013, pp.17-18.

the Civil War proved to be a fallow ground for the Pentecostal wave that engulfed Igbo people who needed a new hope for the future.⁹ Pentecostalism emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as an energetic and dynamic branch of Protestantism that ‘emphasises the work of the Holy Spirit and the direct experience of the presence of God by the believer.’¹⁰

The term Pentecost comes from the Greek Πεντηκοή (Pentēkostē) meaning ‘fiftieth’ because it marks the 50th day from Easter Sunday. The day celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit on to the Apostles and other followers of Jesus Christ while they were visiting Jerusalem for a Christian festival. Key features of Pentecostalism include:

- Conversions by ‘baptism in the Spirit’ i.e. the Holy Spirit who fills the believer with the vim and vigour required to live a truly Christian life.
- A return to pure and simple Christianity as practised in the time of Jesus himself.
- A belief that the Bible is the Word of God and totally without error.
- The ability to speak in tongues, similar to Jesus’ disciples who received the gift of speaking in multiple languages after being immersed in the Holy Spirit.¹¹ This “speaking in tongues” can occur either as *glossalalia* [speech in an unknown language] or *xenoglossy* [speech in a language known to others but not the speaker].

Christianity acted a vehicle for the transmission of Western values to the Igbo people, who enthusiastically embraced a new carrier of spiritual development and societal advancement:

The Igbo are known to have embraced Christianity more than any other single ethnic group in Africa. Two reasons may be given for this situation. In the first place, Christian principles are no different from Igbo principles, and Christian ethics – as distinct from purely Western European ethics – are in many ways similar to the philosophies of the Igbo. In a chapter devoted to this, G.T. Basden has shown how much Levitical law is directly

⁹ Burgess, Richard, *Crisis and Renewal: Civil War Revival and the New Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria's Igboland* in *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, Vol. 24, Issue 2, January 2002, pp.205-206.

¹⁰ https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/pentecostal_1.shtml

¹¹ https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/pentecostal_1.shtml

related to Igbo traditional law, and demonstrated the many traits of pre-Christian Israelites shared by the Igbo...Accepting Christianity for the Igbo, therefore, did not require a tremendous alteration of basic philosophy and doctrine, only a change of style in conveying and conceptualising these.

The second reason is probably more significant. Christianity brought education in the western European sense. Education provided a new stimulus which captured the interest of the achievement-oriented Igbo. Western education, with which goes the ability to read and write, became a pathway to new jobs, a higher income, and hence a higher standard of living, for those who acquired it. Above all, it gave knowledge which is the power that earned leadership for a member of society. As Ottenberg puts it, the Igbo society in its openness provides opportunities for all to achieve leadership...¹²

Sample text from the Igbo Bible

OZI ỌMA DIKA ỌN'

DERE YA N'AKWUKWỌ

1 Na mbu ka Okwu ahu diri, Okwu ahu na Chineke di-kwa-ra, Okwu ahu buru kwa Chineke. 2 Onye ahu na Chineke diri na mbu. 3 Ekere ihe nile site n'aka-Ya; ekègh kwa otù ihe ọ bula nke ekèworo ma Ọ nọgh ya. 4 Nime Ya ka ndu diri; ndu ahu buru kwa Ihe nke madu. 5 Ihe ahu we nāmu n'ochichiri; ochichiri ahu ejidegh kwa ya. 6 Otù nwoke putara, onye ezitere site n'ebe Chineke nọ, aha-ya bu Ọn.

7 Onye ahu biara iya àmà, ka ọ we ọara Ihe ahu àmà, ka madu nile we site n'aka-ya kwere. 8 Ya onwé-ya abugh Ihe ahu, kama ọ biara ka ọ we ọara Ihe ahu àmà. 9 Ezi Ihe ahu diri, Nke nēnye madu ọ bula nke nābia nime uwa Ihe. 10 Ọ nọri n'uwa, ekè-kwa-ra uwa site n'aka-Ya, uwa amagh kwa Ya.

Image source: http://worldbibles.org/language_detail/eng/ibo/Igbo

¹² Ekwueme, Lazarus Nnanyelu, *African Music in Christian Liturgy: The Igbo Experiment in African Music*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1973, p.12. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/30249968. Accessed 25 May 2021.

ISLAM

Islam has been variously been timestamped as penetrating Igboland in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The uncertainty can be attributed to the lively debates surrounding Islam's introductory pathway; some claim the fiery trail blazed by Shehu Usman dan Fodio's jihad in 1804 was at least partially responsible, while others point to the tried-and-true method of trade and commerce leading to religious influence and conversion:

According to Mbah (2015), the spread of Islam in Nigeria through the Sokoto Dan Fodio jihad of 1804 was a trailblazer to the penetration of Islam to other areas previously untouched by Islam. However, the penetration of Islam into Igboland did not follow this practice. Islam penetrated into Igboland through a 'persuasion and absorption process' (2015, 1). Mbah claims that Islam grew and was sustained in Igboland basically through the cultural and colonial state. The religion grew during the colonial period through trade and the colonial state perceived Islam as a ladder to colonising the country...

Uchendu, a great historian, differs from Mbah and Rufai. According to her, three categories of persons were involved in introducing Islam in Igboland: a Muslim of Nupe origin known as Ibrahim Aduku who was adopted into Igboland by the Amufie village in Enugu, the migrant hunters from Hausa land and Yoruba who were invited by the Igbo native farmers to ward off elephants that destroyed their crops and the Northern Nigerian soldiers' presence in Igboland to subdue them to British rule (Uchendu 2010, 210). However, she posits that "the main figure connected with the introduction of Islam into Nsukka Division was Ibrahim Aduku, a horse trader well known by his last name" (2010, 9).

We may conclude that Northerners were not responsible for the spread of Islam in Igboland (as some claim); rather Igbo merchants who came in contact with Muslims through trade, accepted the religion, then returned and introduced it to their community.¹³

The presence of Igbo Muslims will come as a surprise to some, particularly because the Igbo people were, and are, known for being staunchly

¹³ Priest, Felicia, Chinyere, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of the Conversion Motif of the Igbo Christians*, Ph.D. Thesis, Africa International University, Kenya (2018).

Christian. However, their receptiveness to cultural change and openness to enjoying a high standard of living, regardless of whichever religion is prepared to aid this, are significant factors in Islam's presence in Igboland. The same attraction to a viable and prosperous life that resulted in the Igbo people's conversion to Christianity, is no less of an attraction to Islam, which carried socio-economic, intellectual and prestigious appeal.¹⁴

A close investigation of the catalysing of Igbo Muslims reveals that the aftermath of the Nigeria-Biafra War left a gaping hole in the Igbo psyche that was more than adequately filled by Islam:

With some success in Muslim proselytization from the 1930s to the 1990s, Igboland, while still retaining its profile as Nigeria's most populous Christian region, began after the Nigeria-Biafra War (the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970) to manifest tendencies indicative of religious heterogeneity, even though this reality is not widely acknowledged by the majority in Igboland. Notwithstanding, the Nigeria-Biafra War was an important catalyst in the development of an indigenous Muslim community in Igboland, having opened the region to a varied range of external influences including those linked to religion.¹⁵

It is evident that the post-war presence of Muslim soldiers from the Nigerian army in bustling towns such as Mbaise, Enugu, Awgu, Umuahia, Orlu and Awka, also contributed to the spread of Islam in this part of the country.¹⁶ The factors that led to the popularity of the Muslim way of life in a Christian stronghold include:

- the genuine spiritual quest and conviction that Islam is the appropriate way to God;
- the recognition of Islam as a universal religion;
- perceived divine influence through dreams and revelations;
- mixed religious marriages [usually requiring conversion];

¹⁴ Priest, Felicia, Chinyere, Ibid.

¹⁵ Uchendu, Egodi, *Being Igbo and Muslim: The Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria and Conversions to Islam, 1930s to Recent Times* in *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 51, No. 1, 2010, p.64. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40985002. Accessed 27 May 2021.

¹⁶ Uchendu, Egodi, Ibid., p.64.

- the desire for integration within established Muslim financial and political networks, which was heightened by the political and economic marginalisation of the Igbo following the Nigeria-Biafra War;
- dissatisfaction with a previous religious group;
- the results of habituation;
- proselytization among the Igbo by Muslims whose other goal, besides gaining converts, is bringing about political unity in the country;
- the pull of financial and other inducements.¹⁷

The process of conversion to Islam is much the same for the Igbo people as with the rest of the world, with a few cultural tweaks. The first step is for the prospective convert to inform an imam, generally a Muslim religious leader, known to them or their community, of their intention to convert. This can be done directly or through an acquaintance. It is expected that the prospective convert will have carried out research on their new religion and/or discussed their decision with supportive friends and family. Once the imam has been notified, the prospective convert will be invited to the mosque to worship on the next available Friday.¹⁸

The choice of day is noteworthy because the Qur'ān invokes the importance of Friday as a sacred day of worship in the 62nd *sūrah* [chapter] called “Al-Jumu'ah [الجمعة],” meaning the day of congregation, which is also the word for Friday in Arabic. Muslim men are required to attend Friday prayers as long as they not traveling, while women have the option to attend, given their traditional role in the household when Islam was first established.¹⁹

The prospective convert is expected to inform the congregation of their intention to become a Muslim, thereby ensuring a warm welcome and support from their soon-to-be Muslim family. There will follow counselling by the imam, an explanation of the basic observances of Islam, such as avoiding alcohol, maintaining a constant love for all and observing the five daily prayers. If the prospective convert displays a willingness to continue, they will undergo a *Ṭahāra* [ritual and symbolic bath of purification], accompanied by recitations and confessing the *Shahāda* [an affirmation that

¹⁷ Uchendu, Egodi, Ibid., p.67.

¹⁸ Uchendu, Egodi, Ibid., p.68.

¹⁹ <https://theconversation.com/what-is-the-significance-of-friday-prayers-in-islam-113702>

Allah is the only God and Mohammed his Prophet]. This is sometimes referred to as a 'Muslim baptism' by Igbo Muslim leaders and converts, an impression which is further strengthened by the donning of a white robe by the prospective convert for the event. This simultaneously public and private ceremony, for it is witnessed only by the prospective convert's fellow Muslims, is a way of ensuring the new believer is introduced to Islam effectively, and hopefully, permanently. Other features may involve the slaughtering of a ram, the choice of a new Muslim name and the addition of distinguishing facial marks.²⁰

In recent times, socio-cultural organisations such as the South East Muslims Organisation of Nigeria (SEMON) and the Igbo Muslim Forum have been formed to protect the interests of this often-threatened religious group.

JUDAISM

Due to the absence of a recent formal census in Igboland, it is not currently known how many Igbo people identify as Jews but the figure is estimated to be lower than 0.1% of the Igbo people. The existence of Igbo Jews is arguably more high profile outside of Nigeria than it is within it. International news outlets such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the American National Public Radio (NPR) have previously shone a spotlight on this special community. The reactions of Nigerians living in Nigeria who periodically find out about Igbo Jews often range from incredulity to mockery.

As mentioned in the Background section of this chapter, there is a belief in certain circles that the Igbo people could have descended from one of the lost tribes in ancient Israel called Gad [named after the elder of two sons born to Jacob and Zilpah, a maidservant of Jacob's first wife, Leah], and there is a strong feeling within those same circles that their historic suffering mirrors that of the Israeli Jews:

The now widespread Igbo belief in a Jewish ancestry goes back to the 18th century. However, it was during and after the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970), in which at least one million Igbo died in the failed bid for Biafran independence, that Igbo identification with and as Jews concretised. Igbo saw themselves as sufferers of genocide, like the Jews of World War II in

²⁰ Uchendu, Egodi, *Ibid.*, pp.68-69.

Europe, and as inhabitants of a beleaguered plot of land surrounded by hostile forces, similar to the state of Israel.

The civil war and its disastrous consequences initiated a still ongoing period of intense questioning among the Igbo concerning their history, present predicaments, and future prospects. A small number of Igbo began to question why, if they were in fact Jews, they should continue practising Christianity. Their community now numbers between 2,000 and 5,000 people throughout Nigeria. There are three established Nigerian synagogues in Abuja, the federal capital, most of whose members are Igbo.

The significance of Biafra, the centrality of the state of Israel, pride in Jewish ancestry and practice, and questions surrounding the range of Jewish skin colour, predominate in Igbo Jews' discussions of their identity. In contrast to the vast majority of Igbo who, if they maintain a sense of Jewish identity, do so while practising Christianity, Igbo Jews have severed themselves from the now dominant religion.

Understanding themselves to be part of the global Jewish community of the diaspora and the state of Israel, the Igbo practising Judaism in Nigeria are eager for religious and political recognition from world Jewry and the Jewish state. However, self-identifying Jewish groups without documented historical connections to more established Jewish communities face considerable challenges in gaining such recognition, particularly as genealogical Jews.²¹

Igbo Jews practice a form of Judaism that has not been formally recognised by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, which is the supreme religious authority for Judaism in Israel, that has been bestowed with the ability to make binding decisions affecting all those under its jurisdiction.²² There are Chief Rabbinate in every country that has a significant Jewish community but, understandably, it is the one in Israel that wields the most power as the birthplace of the Jewish people. Therefore, it is clear that receiving a stamp of approval from the Israeli Chief Rabbis, the Chief Rabbinate Council and the Supreme Court of Israel would completely legitimise the Igbo Jews. It is their sincere hope that this will happen in the near future, but for now they enjoy

²¹ Afsai, Shai, *Nigeria's Igbo Jews: Jewish Identity and Practice in Abuja* in *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 32, No. 2, April 2016.

²² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/chief-rabbinate>

the consolation prizes of individual solidarity visits and assistance from sympathetic Israeli, American and African-American Jews.

The 12 tribes of Israel



Image source: <https://study.com/academy/lesson/tribe-of-gad-symbol-history-facts.html>

Despite the uncertainty surrounding their status, Igbo Jews have been able to establish synagogues, primarily in the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja, Rivers State and Abia State, with Abuja's Gihon Hebrew Synagogue 'said to be the oldest in Nigeria...founded in the 1980s by Ovadai Avichai and two others who had been raised as Christians.'²³ Igbo Jews also pride themselves on observing the core religious practices of Judaism, many of which already exist in Igbo culture:

- The Igbo perform circumcisions for boys on the eighth day. For them, circumcision is *ibi ugwu* [an ancient tradition]. In Judaism, the male circumcision ceremony is known as a *brit* or *bris milah* and also takes place on the eighth day.

²³ Orjinmo, Nduka, *The Nigerians who want Israel to accept them as Jews*, BBC News, 18 October 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58917825>

- Following a child's birth, an Igbo mother is ceremonially unclean for seven days if she has a boy, and fourteen days if she has a girl. In fact, before celebrating the birth of the child with extended family and a feast, she must immerse herself in a ritual bath, known in Judaism as a *mikveh* or *mikvah*, and it is mandatory for the *tumat yoledet* [the impurity].
- Adolescent Igbo boys and girls are initiated into the secrets of adulthood through a ceremony called *ima mmonwu* for a boy and *iwa akwa* for a girl, which bear striking similarities to the *Bar Mitzvah* and *Bat Mitzvah* in Judaism.
- Marriage to people outside of the Igbo ethnic group is discouraged, similar to Judaism, although the latter tend to focus on the exclusivity for practical, as opposed to religious, purposes.
- Following a death, the Igbo people observe a thirty-day period of mourning that includes a seven-day period to allow close relatives to grieve without having to work. This corresponds strikingly to the Jewish *sh'loshim* [secondary thirty days of mourning] and *shiva* [primary seven days of mourning].
- Native Igbo festivals such as *Oriri Achicha* [Feast of Unleavened Bread], *Igu Aro* [New Year Festival] and *Ima Ntu* [Festival of the Booths] closely mirror traditional Jewish festivals like Passover/*Pesach* and *Sukkot*. Igbo Jews also celebrate the more commonly known Jewish holidays of *Hanukkah*, *Yom Kippur*, *Rosh Hashanah*, the Sabbath, and so on.
- Many Igbo Jews practice the kosher dietary laws that specify the type of animals that can be eaten and proscribes meat and dairy from being consumed at the same time. Some foods are completely forbidden, e.g., pork products and shellfish, while others are considered neutral, e.g., pasta and rice.²⁴

Despite struggling with contemporary issues such as a lack of access to kosher products because they are 'only sold in a few shops owned by Jewish

²⁴ Wellansky, Lopez, Michelle, *Igbos: The Hebrews of West Africa*, Student Thesis, Purchase College, State University of New York, May 2017, pp.13-20.

expatriates [which means] the community generally eats what is produced locally so they can follow kosher rules,²⁵ it may be seen that Igbo Jews have:

...Attempted to piece together their identity in order to unite with one another and to differentiate themselves from other tribes around them, such as the Hausa, Fulani, and Yoruba tribes. Whether their Jewish identity is ancestral or a construction built over the years by a combination of European colonists, comparisons to Jews during the Biafra War, and other factors is irrelevant...what's important is the identity and how it factors into their lives.²⁶

In a fascinating development, over the years, a number of Igbo Jews have moved to Israel and joined a growing community of Igbo people who live there. Moving to the Land of Israel is known as *aliyah* [עלייה], which means 'ascent,' 'elevation' or 'going up.' The right to move to Israel if one is a Jew is sacrosanct:

In 1950 the Knesset (the legislative branch of the government) passed legislation regulating the immigration of the Jews to the State of Israel - legislation which became to be known as the Law of Return. According to the 1950 formulation of this law, 'every Jew has the right to come to this country [Israel] as an *oleh* [somebody who makes *aliyah*, which means immigration of the Jewish people to the State of Israel].' In 1970 the Law of Return was amended to include those who have at least one Jewish grandparent - maternal or paternal - and their spouses.

Regarding the position of converts, according to the Law of Return, any convert to Judaism can become an Israeli citizen too. The Law recognises conversions into all three main denominations of Judaism — Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform — if they are performed abroad.²⁷

Based on this premise, a number of Igbo Jews have converted to Orthodox Judaism as a pre-condition of being accepted within the State of

²⁵ Orjinmo, Nduka, Ibid.

²⁶ Wellansky, Lopez, Michelle, Ibid., p.41.

²⁷ Egorova, Yulia, *Redefining the Converted Jewish Self: Race, Religion and Israel's Bene Menashe in American Anthropologist*, Vol. 117, No. 3 (2015), p.496.

Israel. Perhaps, with time, this group of self-identified Jews will achieve their dream of being legally recognised as modern Jews.

TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Cosmology

Ọdịnani [Igbo traditional religion], which predates the presence of Christianity and Islam in Igboland, is centred around a Supreme Being, *Chukwu*, from whom the universe, all the other Igbo deities and humanity flow. *Chukwu* is considered to be omnipotent and omnipresent, a vital life force responsible for keeping the Earth and its inhabitants in a stable and productive condition. The word ‘*Chukwu*’ is widely agreed to be derived from an amalgamation of *chi* [spiritual being] and *ukwu* [great] and is commonly associated with the sun. *Chukwu* is known by other names, which demonstrate the reverence in which the Creator is held, such as *Chineke* [Creator God], *Chi-Okike* [God who Creates], *Chukwu Abiama* [The God That Reveals Truth], *Agalabaji Igwe* [The Pillar that Holds the Sky] and *Ezechiteoke* [King Spirit That is the Creator].²⁸

The concept of ‘*chi*’ is an uncommon element in Igbo traditional religion, which embraces two distinct meanings. The first is that each human being is assumed to possess a personal god or guardian spirit who serves as link to *Chukwu*:

There are also myriad spirits which include both the good and the bad ones that the Igbo believe in (Ifesieh 1989:38–39). These myriad spirits are equally believed to have the capacity to harm or affect human lives. Among these spirits is the *chi*, the personal god of every Igbo person, which connects him or her with *Chukwu*. *Chi* can be male or female and also controls people’s destinies here on the earth.²⁹

The second is a reference to daylight and it is closely connected to the Igbo people’s overarching belief in *Chukwu* as the source of everything:

²⁸ Ngele, Omaka K., Uwaegbute, Kingsley I., Odo, Damian O. and Agbo, Paulinus O., *Sōteria [Salvation] in Christianity and Ubandu [Wholeness] in Igbo Traditional Religion: Towards a Renewed Understanding in HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies*, Vol. 73, No. 3, 2017, p.3. a4639. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4639>.

²⁹ Ngele, Omaka K., Uwaegbute, Kingsley I., Odo, Damian O. and Agbo, Paulinus O., *Ibid.*, p.4.

The second meaning [of *chi*] is day or daylight but it is most commonly used for those transitional periods between day or night or night and day. Without an understanding of the nature of *chi* one could not begin to make sense of the Igbo world-view. A consideration of the nature and implication of this concept which is so powerful in Igbo religion and thought was that a person's *chi* normally resides with the sun, bringer of daylight, or at least passes through it to visit the world.³⁰

Chi has such a profound impact and is so highly revered by the Igbo people, that it is a mainstay of their way of life and it is resolutely unaffected by the individual's choice of religion. In the first meaning of *chi* explored above, namely a personal spirit, a physical representation is usually kept in the home in a space designated as sacred; this space is often treated as, or called a shrine. The physical object can range from sticks cut from local trees, *Ite* [clay pots] and *Oku* [clay or wooden dishes], or a combination of these elements:

The shrine of *Chi* is usually a clay mound of between two or four feet high on top of which a clay/wooden dish, or at times pieces of stone are stuck. By far, the use of the traditional dish containing small-size sticks of *Okha/Ogilisi/Ububa* tree is the dominant way for symbolising *Chi* in the majority of the subcultural areas. Such is the pattern prevailing in the mid-western, north-western, south-central Igbo culture zones. In these areas the *Oku/Okwa* usually holds four pieces of stick each measuring between four and six inches in length.

Usually for males the *Oku Chi/ Okwa Chi* is planted into the top of the clay mound in order to form the *Chi* altar. Women could equally own such altars. But, oftentimes their *Oku/Okwa Chi* with its contents are stored away safely either in the ceiling of their living rooms or very close to their beds (the head-end).³¹

Chi is a central concept that is interwoven throughout Igbo traditional and life, not just religion, as can be seen in the bestowing of personal names like Chinyelu [*Chi* has given], Chikere [*Chi* has created or apportioned] and Chinedu

³⁰ Project Clue, *An Appraisal of the Concept of Chi in Igbo Religion and Thought*. <https://www.projectclue.com/african-languages/project-topics-materials-for-undergraduate-students/an-appraisal-of-the-concept-of-chi-in-igbo-religion-and-thought>

³¹ Ejizu, Christopher I., *Chi Symbolism as a Potent Mirror of Igbo Indigenous Worldview in Anthropos*, Vol. 87, No. 4/6, 1992, p.380. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40462651. Accessed 2 June 2021.

[*Chi* leads].³² An Igbo person's life revolves around their *Chi*, and the success or failure of their ventures cannot be separated from it:

...*Chi* is the most powerful invisible force which the traditional Igbo believes to be acting on each individual human being. It is primarily a personal guiding spirit being. The individual depends on his/her *Chi*. He prays to *Chi* for favours, for life and good fortune. He/she thanks *Chi* for his/her achievements and successes, as well as blames *Chi* for failures that do befall him/her in spite of all the efforts that were made (Nwoga 1984: 33, 64).³³

Chi is a part of Igbo cosmology but it somehow also transcends it, due to the vital and inescapable role it plays across the board.

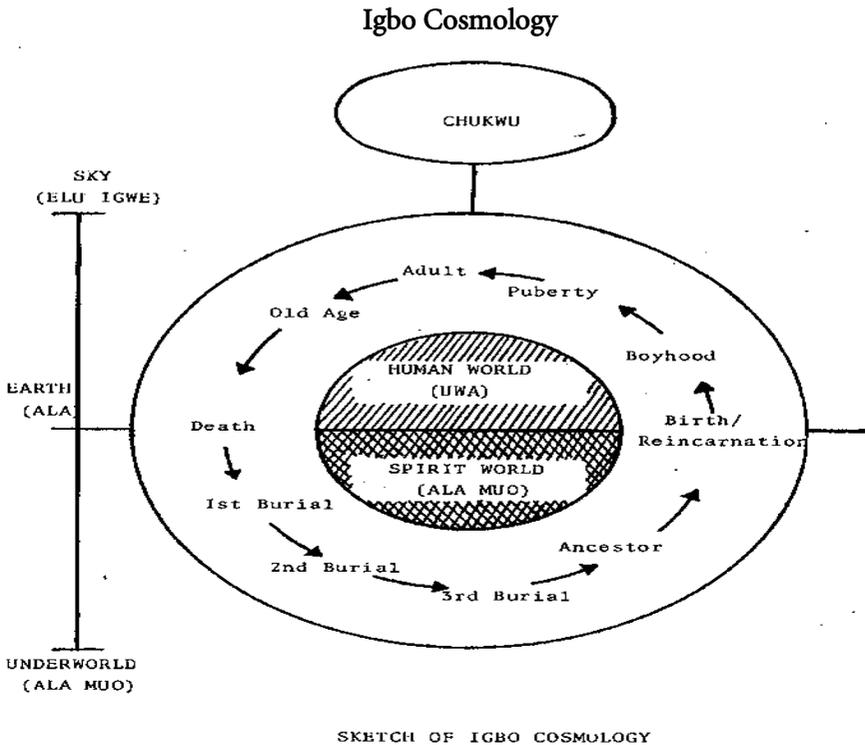


Image source: <https://igboCyberShrine.com/category/mythology>

³² Ejizu, Christopher I., Ibid. p.387.

³³ Ejizu, Christopher I., Ibid, p.388.

In addition to the Supreme Being, another key pillar of Igbo traditional religion is the existence of major and minor divinities or deities, known as *Alusi*. The *alusi* would not exist without *Chukwu* and each serve their own purpose:

Among the divinities, *Ala* [the Earth goddess] stands out because it is regarded as the most powerful divinity. *Ala* is the guardian of Igbo morality and also a very merciful mother because of her provisions and intercession for her children. Other Igbo divinities include *Anyanwu* [sun god], *Amadioha* [god of thunder sky], *Kamalu* [god of Thunder] and so on.³⁴

Alusi are treated as the offspring or messengers of *Chukwu*, who are 'autonomous beings with enormous powers to exercise at their own discretion.'³⁵ The major divinities are worshipped throughout Igboland, although we must take account of variations within different communities:

Writers on Igbo religion have noted the existence of four major divinities as part of the cosmological order. These divinities, which are thought to hold sway throughout Igboland, are as follows: *Anyanwu*, the sun god; *Igwe*, the sky god; *Amadioha*, the god of lightning; and *Ala*, the earth goddess...

But it is mistaken to believe that all these divinities mean the same thing or command the same amount of respect throughout Igboland. In fact, what constitutes a major or a minor god or goddess cannot be determined except within the setting of a given community.³⁶

An unusual similarity to Ancient Egypt can be found in the allocation of human 'slave attendants'³⁷ to many of the divinities such as *Ajala* [another name for *Ala*, the highly revered earth goddess governing morality, fertility and creativity], *Imo* [stream goddess] and *Lolo* [stream goddess]. These human beings, known as *osu*, could either choose to dedicate their lives as an

³⁴ Ngele, Omaka K., Uwaegbute, Kingsley I., Odo, Damian O. and Agbo, Paulinus O. Ibid., p.3.

³⁵ Ubah, C.N., *The Supreme Being, Divinities and Ancestors in Igbo Traditional Religion: Evidence from Otanchara and Otanzu in Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 1982, p.93. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1159143. Accessed 3 June 2021.

³⁶ Ubah, C.N., Ibid, p.94.

³⁷ Ubah, C.N., Ibid, p.97.

act of service to their local community, or be conscripted ‘in response to a definite demand by the deity in question as revealed by a diviner or an oracle.’³⁸ The *osu* led completely separate lives to the community within which they resided, arguably to the point of ostracisation:

The *osu* population also grew by natural increase. Members of the ‘caste’ were free to intermarry, but marriage between them and the freeborn was absolutely forbidden. The residential areas of the *osu* were often to be found in market places close to the shrines of the deities which they served...

Everywhere, the *osu* class looked after the shrines of the deities, and they were also in charge of the animals consecrated to them.³⁹

A much-feared counterpart to *Chukwu* is *Ekwensu* [god of bargains and craftiness] who initially entered the realm of human experience as a trickster god, full of mischief, cunning and violence, but over time has grown in stature to assume the characteristics of Satan himself. This change in perception has been attributed by religious scholars to the influence wielded by Christianity following its introduction, with its accompanying binary concepts of Good versus Evil. Despite this, *Ekwensu* is one of the highest ranked divinities in the Igbo pantheon.

Ancestors

Another essential pillar of Igbo traditional religion is ancestral veneration. When a person dies, their spirit crosses over into *àlā mmúfó* [the spirit world] where it becomes an *Ndebunze* or *Ndichie* [deceased ancestor]. These deceased ancestors remain an integral part of the society they were so recently a part of, and their perceived benevolence is part of this arrangement:

Belief in the willingness and ability of the ancestors to intervene in the day-to-day life and activities of their descendants is the third major foundation of the traditional religious system. The ancestors are still regarded as members of their lineages, with the important difference that they also belong to the spiritual world. And as in the case of divinities,

³⁸ Ubah, C.N., Ibid, p.97.

³⁹ Ubah, C.N., Ibid, p.97.

sacrifices and offerings are the normal channels through which their relations on earth get in touch with them...

...When family heads communicate with their ancestors, they ask for peace, good health, long life, more children, economic prosperity and so on.⁴⁰

The close familial relationships that existed between the recently departed ancestors and their descendants function as a resilient and affectionate link between both sides. The ancestors can intercede on behalf of the human beings with uncooperative divinities and are thought to live among the community as invisible sources of security and support. A lack of supplication or respect to an ancestor could result in misfortune for the offending family member, but this can be rectified through sacrifice and/or promises to do better:

If something goes wrong within the family – for instance if a person is sick or dead, or there is some economic ruin – divination might reveal that it is an expression of resentment on the part of the offended ancestor who dictates through the diviner what should be done to prevent further troubles. As soon as he is appeased or immediately he is given a firm undertaking that his wishes will be met, the ancestor resumes his normal role as the promoter and defender of the essential interests of the family.⁴¹

Afá

Afá is a divination process that can only be performed by specialists known as *dibia* [medicine-men or traditional healers]. The word *dibia* is a compound of the words *di* [‘professional, master, husband’] and *óbjà* [‘doctoring, sciences’].⁴² The *dibia* are ‘mediators between the visible and invisible realms of reality.’⁴³ Traditionally a mostly male career path, although there are prominent female traditional spiritualists, a person must be called, initiated and trained into the *dibia* profession:

⁴⁰ Ubah, C.N., *Ibid*, p.101.

⁴¹ Ubah, C.N., *Ibid*, p.102.

⁴² <https://musicafriawakemedia.wordpress.com/2016/08/17/igbo-traditional-healer-dibia>.

⁴³ Onoyima, Stella, Chinweudo, *The Contributions of Sacred Specialists to Igbo Traditional Religion*, M.A. Dissertation, The Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, February 2011.

The act of divination was not practised by every member of the society. It was rather practised by those who had a special calling either by the spirit of divination (*Agwu*) or by graduating after years of apprenticeship under a renowned diviner. Furthermore, others inherited the profession.

The training for divination involved learning the names and signs of divination, the proverbs and stories associated with it, the practices, rites and cult of divination.⁴⁴

There are various methods of divination, but there are certain elements that are common to the process:

- the display of divining instruments;
- the offer of kola nuts⁴⁵ to the client;
- the payment of the divination fee;
- the invitation of the divination spirit;
- an enquiry about the diviner's life;
- the client's presentation of the problem;
- the client's response;
- the invitation of other spirits;
- the divination itself.⁴⁶

The divination instruments assist with spurring *Agwu*, the *alụsị* of health and divination, into action. These instruments involve such varied items as bells of different sizes, cowries, beads, tortoise shells, gongs, kola nuts and more.

The popularity of *Afá* has remained undiminished over the years, due to the paramount importance of its role in traditional Igbo society. Diviners, whether formally or informally trained, are a source of guidance, comfort and instruction to the clients who seek them out.

⁴⁴ Anedo, Alexander, Alfred, Onukwube, *Afá (Divination): The Mouthpiece of the Unseen*, Ph.D. Thesis, The Department of African and Asian Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, September 2008.

⁴⁵ A caffeine-containing nut that serves as a positive social symbol of hospitality and good will.

⁴⁶ Anedo, Alexander, Alfred, Onukwube, *Ibid*.

Reincarnation

Ilo uwa [reincarnation] is the Igbo belief in life after death, normally within the confines of the immediate and extended families the people were a part of while alive:

Death in Igbo worldview is seen as a distortion in the rhythm of life; a temporary transition from one phase of existence to another and not the end of it. It is believed that an individual engages in a cycle of births and deaths up to seven times, technically referred to as reincarnation, before his final rest in the ancestral world...

Though this basic belief of the people has been rejected by forces of social change as fetish and superstitious, the average Igbo is haunted by practical life experiences which support the reality of the phenomenon.⁴⁷

Names such as Nnamdi [My father is alive], Nnedi [My mother is still living] and Nnenne [My mother's mother] lend credence to the optimism that Igbo people feel when faced with the possibility that a much-loved family member has rejoined the fold. The Igbo 'try to identify the reincarnated ancestor by means of birthmarks, statements a child makes when it becomes able to speak, and behavioural resemblances between the child and the deceased person of whom it is the presumed reincarnation.'⁴⁸

Sadly, not all reincarnated beings are welcomed. The appearance of an *ogbanje* [born to die; evil spirit who plagues the family with misfortune] is perceived as a negative occurrence. *Ogbanje* are born, die before puberty and then reborn into the same family, usually multiple times. This leads to a cycle of grief and anger that takes a heavy toll on an unsuspecting family. The only way to call a halt to this macabre merry-go-round is by unearthing the *ogbanje's iyi-uwa* [an object that binds the spirit of a dead child to the world such as a stone, doll, hair, etc.] and destroying it. The location of the *iyi-uwa* can be divined by a *dibia* who acts as a spiritual go-between on the family's behalf.

⁴⁷ Ibenwa C.N., Okwor, C.O. and Ukeachusim P.C., *Death, Reincarnation and Ancestorhood: Issues in After-Life in Traditional Igbo Religious Context in International Journal Humanities and Social Sciences (IJHSS)*, Vol. 3, Issue 5, September 2014, p.1.

⁴⁸ Stevenson, Ian, *The Belief in Reincarnation Among the Igbo of Nigeria* in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 20, Issue 1-2, January 1985.

Chapter 4

FULANI GODS

[The Fulani people comprise 6% of the Nigerian population according to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, 2018 estimate]

Fulani, also called Peul or Fulbe, a primarily Muslim people scattered throughout many parts of West Africa, from Lake Chad, in the east, to the Atlantic coast. They are concentrated principally in Nigeria, Mali, Guinea, Cameroon, Senegal, and Niger. The Fulani language, known as Fula, is classified within the Atlantic branch of the Niger-Congo language family. The Fulani were originally a pastoral people, and their lives and organisation were dominated by the needs of their herds. The pastoral Fulani today enjoy greater prestige than town and sedentary agricultural Fulani as the most truly representative of Fulani culture. The urban Fulani are the most ardently Muslim; pastoral Fulani are frequently lax and sometimes even non-practising.¹

BACKGROUND

The Fulani people* are an ancient, primarily nomadic ethnic group, that are present in a number of regions across Africa, most notably the Sahel, West Africa and Central Africa. They can also be found in countries as disparate as Liberia, Mali, the Central African Republic and Egypt. They are well-known for their love of herding cattle and the effective establishment of empires, despite their uncertain origin:

There exists in Northern Nigeria – a country dependent on its agriculture – a nomadic, believed to be alien tribe, whose grazing habits present serious problems to the country's agricultural and forestry practices. This tribe is known by the Hausa name Fulani (singular Bafilatani) but they call themselves Fulbe (singular Fullo)...

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fulani>

* Estimates range from 13 to 14 million.

The origin of the Fulani seems to be somewhat obscure. Some writers have endeavoured to assign to them an Egyptian origin while others trace them to Fezzan. M. Delafosse, whose studies in West African languages give special weight to his opinions, holds the view that the Fulani may have owed their origin to the downfall of the Hyksos, or Shepherd Kings, who were driven from Egypt about the year 1630 B.C. He likens the Fulani to the gypsies of Europe.²

The history of the Fulani people in West Africa is estimated to have begun as early as 5 A.D. as they travelled widely across Africa in search of new grazing grounds for their prized cattle. Their introduction to Nigeria specifically came about in the nineteenth century as a result of their waging of jihads [religious wars] to 'resist taxation and military conscription or acquire more grazing land.'³ The emergence of the Sunni Muslim Sokoto Caliphate during the jihad of the Fulani War, which began in 1804 under the leadership of Usman dan Fodio, was a seismic event in the life cycle of Northern Nigeria as we know it today:

...Centuries-old Hausa dynasties were destroyed and in their places new ones came into being. The various Hausa states metamorphosed into emirates paying allegiance to Sokoto, the new capital of the Sokoto Caliphate...

The Jihād wars led to the collapse of the old Oyo empire and the emergence of Ibadan, Ijesha and the incorporation of its northern province of Ilorin into the Sokoto Caliphate. In most of these places the Jihād was continued well into the 1840s...The revivalist movement of Shaykh 'Uthmān ibn Fodiyo left an indelible mark and led to a very strong reawakening of the Muslims of this region.⁴

The Fulani are often conflated with the Hausa but, in reality, they are two distinct ethnic groups. There has been a significant amount of intermarriage

² Ibrahim, Mustafa B., *The Fulani - A Nomadic Tribe in Northern Nigeria* in *African Affairs*, Vol. 65, No. 259, 1966, p.170. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/720512. Accessed 7 June 2021.

³ *The Fulani/Fulbe People*, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2002. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/fula_2

⁴ Maishanu, Hamza, Muhammad, and Maishanu, Isa Muhammad, *The Jihād and the Formation of the Sokoto Caliphate* in *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 1999, pp.128–129. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20837029. Accessed 7 June 2021.

since the fifteenth century, when the Fulani began to migrate into Hausaland. The natural result of this was an intertwining of languages and cultures to the point that many now consider them indistinguishable:

With the onset of British colonialism, the Hausa-Fulani identity deepened in contradistinction to southern Nigerian ethnic identities. Following Nigerian independence, this intensified as regional cultural and religious identities acted as prominent mobilising forces used by politicians advocating for greater regional representation in the central government.

Ahmadu Bello's "One North, One Islam" policy, intended to unify northern Muslims, also resulted in smaller tribes' and communities' decision to identify with Hausa-Fulani, often by assuming Hausa as the predominant language of the village. As such, depending on the context, Hausa-Fulani is an ethnic, a religious, a cultural, and/or a linguistic marker.⁵

Thus, it may be seen that the largely nomadic, sometimes semi-sedentary, and occasionally militaristic Fulani people have played a hugely influential part within the African continent, and they continue to do so until this day.

ISLAM

The Fulani people were early adopters of Islam and have remained heavily Muslim since their initial encounter with the religion. In fact, 'between the 8th and the 14th century, [the] Fulbe-speaking people of Takrur had produced a class of Muslim clerics, the Torodbe, who would take on proselytizing activities across the entire western Sudan.⁶ The famed Usman dan Fodio was himself a Torodbe scholar, as were the majority of the leaders of jihads that took place from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, which shows the level of power and impact wielded by this clerisy who subscribed to Sunni Islam with hints of Sufism and Salafism.

The word 'jihad' is taken from the Arabic jihād, literally 'effort,' 'expressing, in Muslim thought, struggle on behalf of God and Islam; a holy war undertaken by Muslims against unbelievers.'⁷ Several of the jihads led by

⁵ *Hausa-Fulani*, Religion and Public Life, Harvard Divinity School. <https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/faq/hausa-fulani>

⁶ *The Fulani/Fulbe People*, Department of the Arts of Africa, Ibid.

⁷ <https://www.oxfordreference.com>

Fulani leaders in West Africa were influential in reshaping the political landscape as it then was:

- Bondu: Mande rulers reigned supreme in this city until the second half of the seventeenth century when the Fulas assumed control in what is regarded as the first of the Fula jihads in West Africa.
- Futa Jallon: Initially a peaceful region in which traditionalist semi-nomadic Fulbe lived, the arrival of Muslim Fulbe led to an uprising led by Karamokho Alfa (1700-1751) in 1725, after which a theocratic state was established.
- Futa Toro: Inspired by the events that took place in Futa Jallon, a similar uprising led by Sulaymān Bal (died 1775) took place here between 1769-1776, resulting in the overthrowing of the incumbent Denianke dynasty and the initiation of a theocratic state.
- The Massina Empire: In 1818, the Bambara Empire that had been in place and ruled by the Coulibaly dynasty for almost two centuries gave way to the Islamic might of Seku Amadu (1776-1845).
- The Toucouleur Empire: The Toucouleur or Tukulor people were Islamised in the eleventh century and grew to become a formidable military presence in West Africa. Under the steady guidance of political leader and Islamic scholar Omar Saidou Tall (died 1864), the Empire lasted for 29 years and carried out a number of holy wars in the region in the mid-nineteenth century.

Originating from an arid territory located along the middle region of the Senegal River, the Torodbe [Hausa: Toronkawa] were ‘scholars among the people’⁸ who travelled across Africa, settling in new regions and acquiring political roles and influence:

When they settled in a new region to make their living as specialists and teachers of Islam among the pagan inhabitants of rural areas, it was most often in camps and then villages separate from the autochthonous villages. They have not fully integrated into the populations, even today.

On the other hand, these scholarly communities maintained contact with Fulani cattle-herders, whose core values they shared and among whom

⁸ Van Dalen, Dorrit, *There is no Doubt: Muslim Scholarship and Society in 17th-century Central Sudanic Africa*, Dissertation, Universiteit Leiden, April 2015.

they took their wives, even though they were usually non-Muslims. Not all of these specialists of Islam settled. Some kept moving from one village or nomad camp to the next, offering teaching, religious services and amulets to Muslims as well as non-Muslims.⁹

By providing a high quality of Muslim learning to their integrated communities, the Torodbe were able to reposition themselves as ‘the dominant ruling group in several societies of the western Sudan,’ which directly led to spread of Islam in West Africa through peaceful, and not-so-peaceful avenues. The word ‘Torodbe’ is the plural form of ‘Torodo’ and its meaning suggests ‘to implore Allah’ or ‘to ask Allah for a favour.’¹⁰ This points to the humble origins of this group who sustained themselves through a combination of begging and public charity. Their students would have studied at one of the Qur’ānic schools that served as communal linchpins:

In the Qur’ānic schools, Arabic was the language of instruction, and its gradual spread throughout these communities was itself a guarantee that the scholarly life of Islam would grow and prosper. The mosque became the focal point of scholarly and religious activity, and often the central core of political administration...

Importantly, the *imām* of the Muslim community was everywhere recognised as the principal political and religious figure. It was to the *imām* that all believers looked for the maintenance of Islamic traditions, the enforcement of the *Shari’a*, and the wisdom necessary for a sound economic and social policy.¹¹

The aforementioned Usman dan Fodio was born into a Torodbe clan and became a fierce proponent of Torodbe Islam, which was ‘wrenched violently into existence’ and ‘shook the social foundations of the societies in which it burst forth.’¹² Dan Fodio grew up studying the Qur’ān with his father, travelling from teacher to teacher to expand his Islamic knowledge of theology, science and philosophy, while building a substantial following

⁹ Van Dalen, Dorrit, *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Willis, John Ralph, *The Torodbe Clerisy: A Social View in The Journal of African History*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1978, p.196. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/181598. Accessed 10 June 2021.

¹¹ Willis, John Ralph, *Ibid.*, p.206.

¹² Willis, John Ralph, *Ibid.*, p.208.

among the Fulani and those on the outskirts of Hausa society, who looked to him for political and religious inspiration and leadership.

The Caliphate of Usman dan Fodio

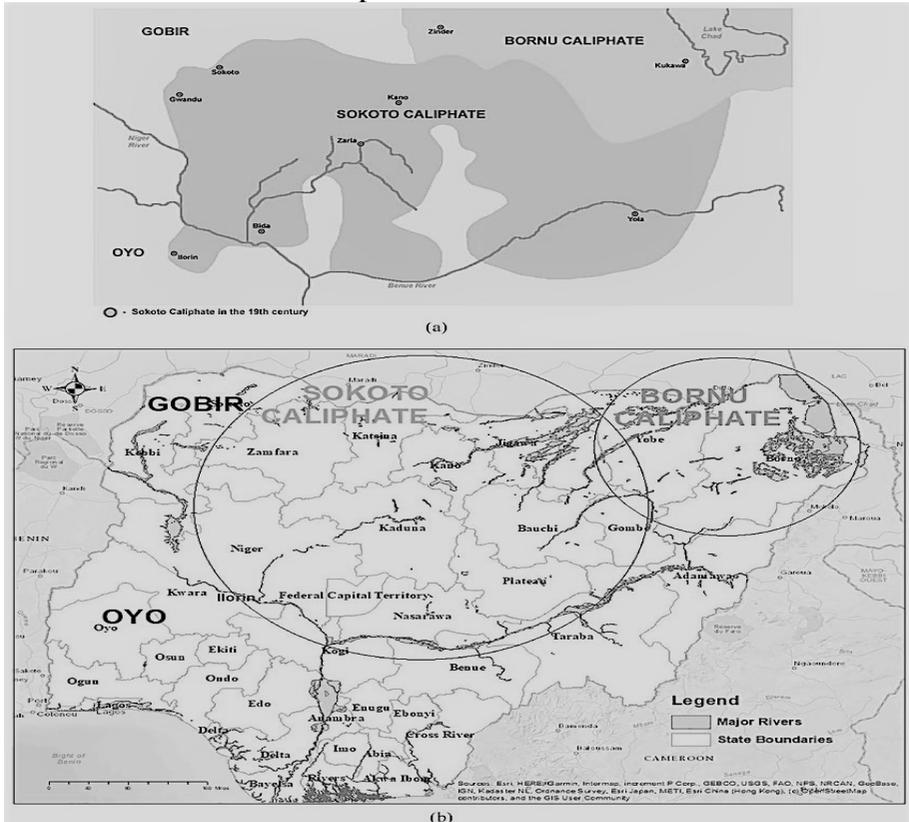


Image source: <https://www.researchgate.net/figure/a-Map-showing-the-spread-of-the-19th-century-Sokoto-Caliphate-comprising-northern-and-southern-Nigeria-fig4-337846769>

In the late eighteenth century, Dan Fodio assumed the title of Shaykh [a leader in a Muslim community or organisation], and permitted the arming of his followers, which solidified his position as a force to be reckoned with and a potential threat to nearby rulers. One such ruler was the Sultan of the town of Degel, located in the then-city state of Gobir where Dan Fodio was living at the time, who became alarmed at the power being amassed in front of his eyes. The eventual and inevitable breakdown of the relationship between Dan Fodio and the ruling dynasty in Gobir resulted in a decision to migrate to Gudu, a

sleepy town in Sokoto State, the establishment of his own Caliphate as *Amir al-Mu'minin* [Commander of the Faithful], and the initiation of multiple successful military expeditions across Hausaland. The primary aim of the so-called Fulani War was to restore law, order and a purity to Islam to communities that he felt was sadly lacking.¹³

By the early nineteenth century, subsequent to his conquering of several of the Hausa kingdoms, Dan Fodio's military and political supremacy was beyond a doubt. As a *mujaddid* [one who brings renewal], he founded the Fulani Empire, its associated emirates, and ensured the unifying spread of Sunni Islam throughout the region, which has persisted in Hausaland to this day.

CHRISTIANITY

Despite being predominantly Muslim, there are pockets of Christianity within the Fulani people, even though this fact may not be widely known or advertised. The almost total absence of Christianity within the Fulani is due, in part, to the repression introduced by the British under colonial rule in the early twentieth century:

To consolidate their rule, the British had to protect the interests of their new allies, the Fulani rulers, who based their claim to legitimacy on their religious authority. As *defensores fidei*, the emirs could not tolerate conversion among their Muslim subjects. So, at the behest of the colonial administration, almost all Islamic regions of northern Nigeria were closed to Christian missionaries...

Only from 1931 onwards were Christians allowed to preach in 'quiet places.' And they could build churches, provided they did not disturb the Muslim population. Yet the majority of Muslims resented having churches in their neighbourhood, so in many northern cities the practice has remained to this day that churches can only be built at the margins of urban areas.¹⁴

¹³ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Usman-dan-Fodio>

¹⁴ Harnischfeger, Johannes, *Islamisation and Ethnic Conversion in Nigeria* in *Anthropos*, Vol. 101, No. 1, 2006, p.43. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40466619. Accessed 11 June 2021.

It will therefore come as no surprise to hear that the Fulani are known to be ‘among the most resistant people in Nigeria to Christianity’ for a multitude of cultural and theological reasons.¹⁵ It is estimated that:

...The first Christian effort to evangelise the Fulani began in 1949, and though a few isolated individuals showed interest and some began to identify themselves as Christians, hardly any were baptised. One man who was baptised in 1963, the speaker said, had died less than a month later, poisoned, it was believed, by his own family.

The threat of being disowned by one's family, of losing one's cattle, of suffering complete social alienation from one's tribe, and possibly even of death was too heavy a price for almost any potential convert to pay.¹⁶

By the 1970s, a combination of famine and the offer of access to basic amenities gave several international Christian missions the opening they needed to engage with formerly reluctant Fulanis. Through the provision of these advantages, as well as living among and learning the language of the Fulani people, western Christian missionaries were rewarded by willing hearts and listening ears, resulting in a steady and healthy flow of small-scale conversions.¹⁷ Today, there are reported to be several thousand Fulani Christians in Nigeria who gather to worship in churches they have built themselves. Due to the Fulani people's passionate adherence to Islam, it is understandable that missionary work within this ethnic group continues to be an uphill journey.¹⁸

The existence of local organisations such as the Fulani Christian Association of Nigeria (FULCAN) and international organisations such as the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), who have taken a specific interest in the Fulani people, has had significant and ongoing impact on the conversion rate despite the pre-existing obstacles:

They fiercely reject anything they perceive as contrary to their lifestyle of roaming with their cattle herds, including education and permanent

¹⁵ Culbertson, Howard, *Case Study from Nigeria: You Must Purify This House!*, an edited excerpt from Neely, Alan, *Christian Mission: A Case Study Approach* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995). <http://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/fulani.htm>

¹⁶ Culbertson, Howard, *Ibid.*

¹⁷ <https://www.sim.org.au/Connect/Blog/August-2018/Focus-on-the-Fulani>

¹⁸ <https://www.missionafrica.org.uk/ministries/fulani-outreach>

homes. As a result of their strong rejection of education, most Fulani are not literate...

Illiteracy among the Fulani is an obstacle for learning about Christ when the gospel is presented in written form. To reach the Fulani people, missionaries seek to assist them in their physical welfare and to build relationships and trust...There is now a Fulfulde translation of the New Testament, so literate Fulani Christ followers can more easily access and study God's Word.¹⁹

The main challenge faced by the missions in the present time is obtaining the funding to enable the translation of worship songs, biblical teachings and scriptural texts into the Fula language using audio and written formats, to enable the widespread dissemination of these materials.

Sample text from the Fula Bible

LINJIILA BANA YUHANNA WINDIRI DUM

Almasiihu, bi'eteedo Wolde

1 Haa fuddam, diga Allah tagaayno duniyaaru tawon, woodi bi'eteedo Wolde. Wolde maajum donno wondi bee Allah, kayre woni Allah. **2**Nde donno wondi bee Allah diga fuddam. **3**Allah tagri koodume fuu bee Wolde man, walaa tagdi koo ngoori laati bilaa maare. **4**Ngeendam iwi haa maare, ngeendam man laatani yimbe annoora. **5**Annoora don yayna nder nyibre, ammaa nyibre waawaay nyifugo ka.

6Allah neli goddo mo innde muudum Yuhanna. **7**O wari ngam haa o sappina yimbe annoora go, ngam haa yimbe nuddina ka. **8**O laataaki annoora kanke bee hoore maako, ammaa o wari seeda-naago annoora. **9**Wolde go woni annoora ngoonduka, ka wari nder duniyaaru, ka don yaynana yimbe fuu.

10Wolde man donno nder duniyaaru, Allah tagri duniyaaru bee maare, ammaa duniyaaru annadaa nde.

Image source: http://worldbibles.org/language_detail/eng/fub/Fula

TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Paganism

Before the flame of Islam engulfed the Fulani people, they practised an ancient version of traditional religion, commonly referred to as paganism. The word 'pagan' is 'derived from the Late Latin *paganus*, which was used at the end of the Roman Empire to name those who practised a religion other than Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. Early Christians often used the term to refer to

¹⁹ <https://www.simusa.org/west-africa/west-africa-missions-office-2>

non-Christians who worshiped multiple deities. In Latin, *paganus* originally meant ‘country dweller’ or ‘civilian’.²⁰ Paganism recognises the inherent spirituality present in Nature and worships the deities that spring from it through a series of elaborate rituals. Fulani traditional religion necessarily had close ties to Maguzanci, as observed by the Hausa people, due to the proximity of their living arrangements. It centred around *Malams* [native learned men] who had the ability to provide medicine, administer cures and perform ‘black’ and ‘white’ magic:

The casting of spells by incantations called *surkulle*, a practice said to have originated with the cattle Fulani, and still largely confined to them, was revealed by ‘white’ Fulani *jinn*, the *jinn* being white because the Fulani are almost entirely Mohammedan.²¹

The white or ‘good’ *jinn* are diametrically opposed to the ‘black’ *jinn* who are considered to be free agents of evil. One of the most revered of the white spirits worshipped by the Maguzawa is known as *Inna*, and she is ‘envisaged as a Fulani milkmaid.’²² Her preferred sacrifice is a white ewe and it is expected that a pagan devotee will first allow a few drops of milk to fall on the ground as an offering, prior to milking their cow. The penalty for offending *Inna* is severe; *šanyan k’afā da hannu* or the drinking up [atrophy] of one’s hand and foot.²³ The Fulani people tend to reserve deeper knowledge of their traditional religion within themselves, although key details have escaped over the decades:

It is difficult to ascertain the real truth as to the religion of the Nomads. They will reveal little, fearing lest their cattle or their guardian spirits should resent such revelations...So far as I can gather, there are three high deities: *Samba*, *Qumba* his wife, and *Yero* their son. The latter is peculiarly the guardian of cattle...Then there is *Fu* or *Nufu*, mentioned above as the ancestor of the race and giver of cattle...

The deities, however, are overshadowed by the spirits of the wild, *jinn*s and other denizens of the half-world, to whom sacrifices are constantly

²⁰ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paganism>

²¹ Greenberg, Joseph H., *Some Aspects of Negro-Mohammedan Culture – Contact Among the Hausa in American Anthropologist*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 1941, p.59.

²² Greenberg, Joseph H., p.61.

²³ Greenberg, Joseph H., p.61.

made and incantations addressed. Such incantations are innumerable, being specially used to ward off dangers in camp or on a journey from malevolent spirits, human enemies, or wild beasts, or as cures for disease among cattle.

The chief benevolent spirit is known as "*Mallam Alhaji*," a name of foreign origin. Another informant gave *Musanga* as head of the spirit world, with his wife *Adama*...The principal female *jinn* is *Zanzanna*, always spoken of *Maimunata*. Her son, *Bi-Zanzanna*, is also much feared. The spirit "*Inna*" (mother) is, I think, really the same as *Qumba*. The trouble is that the nomad will adopt any spirit he hears of, as it is better to propitiate false ones than be overwhelmed as a consequence of neglect to guard against some malevolent influence.

To all spirits occasional sacrifices are made, especially at the time of breaking up the rainy season camp. Usually, I think, the offering is a white bull to benevolent, a black to malevolent, and a black and white to female spirits. Red and white bulls, however, are also sometimes sacrificed. The birth of an animal of sacrificial colour is a matter for rejoicing.²⁴

As nomadic pastoralist cattle-herders, it stands to reason that the Fulani people's primary focus would be their cattle, and the deities they revered would be closely interlinked with their sole source of income. It also makes sense that every herd has a *gose* [queen] whose horns are anointed to increase the herd's prosperity. It is believed that an animal can signal its consent to be sacrificed by either choosing to remain on a bed of leaves spread by the inhabitants of the settlement or by refraining from dislodging a symbolic tamarind branch placed there by an inhabitant; both signifiers are held to be valid if still in place following the animal's night of sleep.²⁵ Other spiritual practices include:

...The use of the forked stick (*suguhi* or *sar-kulli*) and of a cross (*buguwal*) for the protection of encampments is noteworthy. Others bury certain objects at the entrance to the kraal so that the cattle must cross them

²⁴ Webster, G.W., 242. *Customs and Beliefs of the Fulani: Notes Collected During 24 Years' Residence in Northern Nigeria* in *Man*, Vol. 31, 1931, pp.241–242. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2790939. Accessed 15 June 2021.

²⁵ Webster, G.W., p.242.

daily, both going out and returning. These talismans are known as veiling (*viringo*) or binding (*tigge*)...

To ward off the evil eye, the hands are clasped with the arms outstretched, and then the hands pulled apart with an outward and downward motion, palms downwards and fingers pointed widespread at the intruder, while at the same time spitting over the shoulder, or the hands may be kept clasped with fingers straight, making the multiple cross...Spitting takes a prominent part in all spell-weaving. A man will spit when wishing a friend a safe journey, or spit on a stick, stone or rag and give it to him as a talisman.²⁶

An example of a Fulani incantation to protect against dangers when travelling:

I invoke the North, the East, the West, that which spends the day in travel and that which spends the night. I invoke that which first sheltered and that which first showed the way out. Naught can touch me unless I enumerate the moon and sun. They can touch me.

*Mi humi Waila, Mi humi Funange, Mi humi Hirnange, Mi humi ko nyellata yahge, Mi humi ko yammata yahgo, Mi humi ko arta sorago, Mi humi ko banga soratal, Wala ko nemantam-mi se ko mi lasa, Leurue Nange, de memantam-mi.*²⁷

It must be acknowledged that the preceding excerpts are based on one writer's perspective and therefore cannot be held to cover the Fulani people based in Nigeria, let alone the entirety of Fulani traditional religion, but G.W. Webster's insights provide a deeply valuable account of the heavily superstitious manner in which the Fulani people navigated their historically perilous existence.

Animism

Animism is defined as the 'attribution of conscious life to objects in and phenomena of nature or to inanimate objects.'²⁸ Animists believe that both

²⁶ Webster, G.W., pp.242-243.

²⁷ Webster, G.W., p.243.

²⁸ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/animism>

animate and inanimate objects are capable of desires and intentions, and are perceived as spiritual beings with varying levels of sentience. Therefore, plants, animals and natural forces such as the wind, the seas and so on, are on an equal level with human beings, and should be treated with respect and reverence. Spirits play a significant role in the positive and negative directions each day can take.

As previously alluded to, living so closely with their livestock and at the mercy of the elements, it is only natural to expect the nomadic Fulani people to produce their own distinct version of animism, much of which has survived and become incorporated into the lives of those who have converted to Islam or Christianity. The importance placed on cattle is all-encompassing:

To the pastoral Fulani, cattle are more important than anything else. They are a measure of wealth, a unit of account, a treasure, a property and yet not a property. It is difficult for a non-pastoralist to understand what cattle mean to the Fulani.

Everything begins and ends with cattle. The life of their men and women revolve around cattle. All activities, all conversations, and all thoughts centre on cattle. According to C.E. Hopen, Fulani traditional education (*pulaaku*) exposes the young boys and girls to this cattle-centred lifestyle from childhood.²⁹

As a result of the ‘centrality of cattle in the economy, culture and society of the pastoral Fulani,’³⁰ it is unsurprising that much of their traditional religion ascribes heavy importance to the animals and the natural elements that govern their ability to take care of them; the sun, the moon, water, fire, etc.

²⁹ Adebayo, A.G., *Of Man and Cattle: A Reconsideration of the Traditions of Origin of Pastoral Fulani of Nigeria in History in Africa*, Vol. 18, 1991, p.2. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3172050. Accessed 16 June 2021.

³⁰ Adebayo, A.G., *Ibid.*, p.2.

African Animism

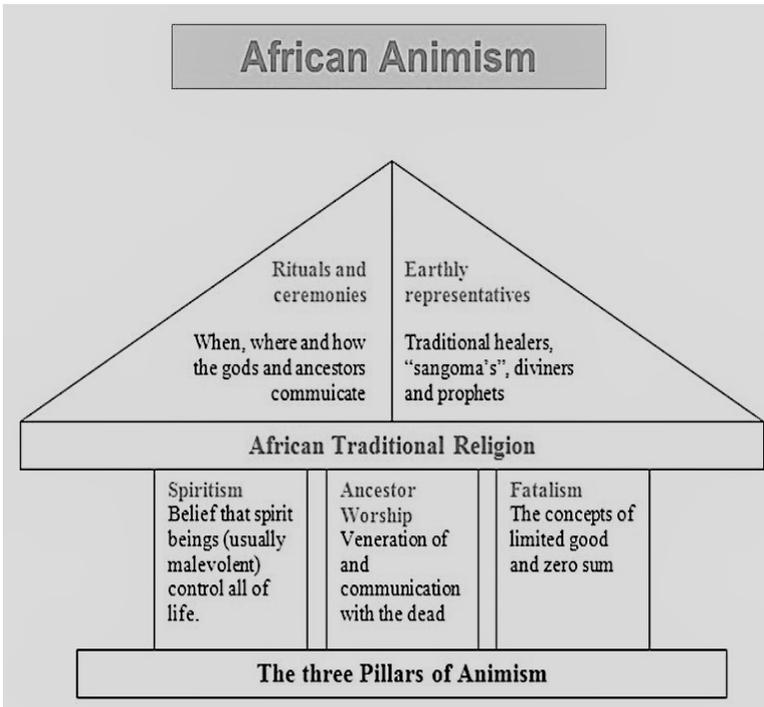


Image source: <https://slideplayer.com/slide/4656852>³¹

Due to the inexorable shift of the remainder of the Fulani people towards Islam over the last few decades, ‘increasingly, the memory of their previous pastoral religion was lost, except in some subgroups such as the Bororo or Wodaabe (i.e., ‘Isolated’), who remained animists and nomads.’³² The word ‘*Wodaabe*’ means ‘people of the taboo’ or ‘those who respect taboos’ in ‘reference to the Wodaabe’s isolation from broader Fulbe culture, and their contention that they retain ‘older’ traditions than their Fulbe neighbours.’³³ Despite many Wodaabe considering themselves separate from the Fulani people, the Fulbe use the terms *Bororo* or *Wodaabe* as blanket descriptions to refer to the most nomadic out of the various sub-groups:

³¹ Greene, Alaina, Traditional African Religious Beliefs, User Presentation. <https://slideplayer.com/user/5444694>.

³² *The Fulani/Fulbe People*, Department of the Arts of Africa, Ibid.

³³ Lóftsdýttir, Kristín, *When Nomads Lose Cattle: Wodaabe Negotiations of Ethnicity in African Sociological Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2004, p.1.

It is difficult to evaluate from where the term *Bororo* originated. Official government text from 1943 claims that “the word Bororodji is not Fulfulde, not Hausa, not Tamachek, not Arabic, not Zerma” (Anonymous 1943: 3). The WoDaaBe among whom I did my research disliked the term, and many believed it to be the application of the name of their cattle, *Bororo Zebu*, to themselves. This is possibly correct, because the term is usually applied to the most nomadic groups of Fulbe, i.e. those most associated with cattle. It is, however, also possible that it is the other way around, that is, that the cattle breed received the *Bororo* part of its name from the designation of the people who commonly herd them.

Adebayo (1991: 2) similarly states that *Bororo* is a Hausa term derived from Bororo-en, which according to him, is a “Fulbe name for a ‘special’ class of Fulbe *ladde* who are essentially animist, highly nomadic and who maintain a close system.”³⁴

Within Nigeria, the distinction between Bororo and Wodaabe confirms the general understanding that this sub-group occupies a unique place within the wider ethnic category:

In present-day Nigeria, the term *Mbororo* (there spelled *M’bororo*) is used for some Fulbe people, and according to Gefu, especially for “any migrant pastoralist who does not pray, does not speak Hausa, and dresses and does his hair like a woman” (said by a Fulbe chief in Gefu 1992: 70). Two characteristics these sources mention are also frequently seen as applying to the WoDaaBe, who are often identified by neighbouring communities as non-Muslims, and whose braided hair is regarded as women’s hair.³⁵

In an interesting departure from some Fulani groups who declare pastoralism as essential to their ethnicity and are unable to separate one from the other, the Wodaabe are comfortable with continuing to identify as such, even after a marked change in their circumstances:

Although contemporary WoDaaBe strongly emphasise cattle as a part of their ethnicity, my ethnographic study among migrant workers in Niger indicated that even when herders had lost all or most of their animals and

³⁴ Lóftsdýttir, Kristín, *Bounded and Multiple Identities: Ethnic Identifications of WoDaaBe and FulBe (Identités Limitées Et Multiples: Identifications Ethniques Des WoDaaBe Et Des FulBe)* in *Cahiers D’Études Africaines*, Vol. 47, No. 185, 2007, p.70. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40930647. Accessed 18 June 2021.

³⁵ Lóftsdýttir, Kristín, *Ibid.*, p.71.

stayed in the city for a long time, they continued identifying themselves as WoDaaBe (even as herders) and were identified by others as no less WoDaaBe than those living in the pastoral area (Loftsdóttir 2000, 2001a).

This is consistent with a point that has long been made by scholars: that the boundaries between agriculture and pastoralism are fluid and constantly changing (Johnston 1967: Swift 1979: 1-2), making it common for groups to shift from one occupation to the other as a response to environmental fluctuations or a changing socio-political environment (Horowitz & Little 1987: 72).³⁶

The advent of British colonial rule was instrumental in assimilating over one hundred distinctive socio-cultural and linguistic groups based in Northern Nigeria under the Hausa-Fulani banner, and redirecting the energy of animism largely to Islam. By presenting Islam as the bringer of civilisation and paganism/animism as the prisons of barbarians, the British and their willing indigenous partners participated in the systematic erasure of an age-old belief system that treated all living beings with reverence and respect.

Pulaaku

Although not a religion, strictly speaking, the Fulani people abide by a strict unwritten code of conduct called *pulaaku* that serves to positively reinforce whichever overarching religion they have chosen to abide by. It is their ‘guiding principle in their dealings with their fellow Fulbe as well as with all other people.’³⁷ The word ‘*pulaaku*’ is formed from the root ‘ful-’ and roughly means ‘the qualities appropriate to a Fulani.’³⁸ These qualities include a ‘series of virtues and personal attributes’³⁹ such as prudence, modesty, self-control, courage, hard work and hospitality. Often colourfully illustrated with proverbs, some of the most valued components of *pulaaku* are:

- *Semteende*: Translated to mean ‘shamefulness’ or ‘shy,’ it is expected that a Fulani should be self-sufficient and avoid asking for help and favours. They should also be reserved and modest in order to avoid bringing shame to

³⁶ Loftsdóttir, Kristín, Ibid., p.82.

³⁷ Leger, Rudolf and Mohammad, Abubakar B., *The Concept of Pulaaku Mirrored in Fulfulde Proverbs of the Gomba Dialect in Berichte des Sonderforschungsbereichs 268*, Band 14, Frankfurt am Main, 2000, p.299.

³⁸ Leger, Rudolf and Mohammad, Abubakar B., Ibid., p.301.

³⁹ Leger, Rudolf and Mohammad, Abubakar B., Ibid., p.301.

themselves and their loved ones. [*Torii heçii maa noye hakko toroo heçaayi?* / To be granted one's request is shameful enough, let alone when the request is turned down];

- *Munya!*: Translated to mean 'patience,' 'tolerance' or 'perseverance,' a Fulani must be able to empathise with others and show understanding of their individual circumstances. [*No ndiyam luggiri fuu woodi njaareendi* / No matter how deep a body of water is, there is fine sand at the bottom];
- *Enãam*: Translated to mean 'kindness' or 'affection' especially to one's own family and community members, a Fulani should be compassionate and loving towards those in their immediate vicinity. [*Ko meemi kine fuu meemii gite* / Whatever affects the nose, affects the eyes also];
- *Ngorgu*: Translated to mean 'manliness' or 'bravery,' a Fulani must show courage in difficult situations and be prepared to weather life's challenges. [*Giãão çokkon colli doole yaaça gi'e* / He who goes after birds' nests must be prepared to tread on thorns];
- *Neããaku*: Translated to mean 'dignity' or 'self-respect,' a Fulani should behave appropriately within their community and uphold the relevant morals and values both privately and publicly. [*Nyaami haaraayi, çiri haaray na?* / If after eating, one is not full, will licking the bowl make one full?].⁴⁰

There are many more components to this intricate system of guidelines for Fulbe behaviour, but for the sake of brevity, those listed above should suffice as examples of the high standards the Fulani people set for themselves. The importance of *pulaaku* exceeds far beyond the governance of day-to-day interactions to the maintenance of a cultural and ethnic identity; therefore, the penalties for breaking the code can be severe:

And because the survival of the Fulbe ethnic group depends on these qualities, they must be acquired through initiation, transition, oral tradition and legends...

⁴⁰ Leger, Rudolf and Mohammad, Abubakar B., *Ibid.*, pp.302-305.

The breaking of “*pulaaku*” code is punished by ostracism because it is a measure of ethic faithfulness. The quality of “*pulaaku*” is associated with certain organs of the body:

Belly – place of secrets, origin of shame

Heart – place of patience and fortitude

Head – repository of care and forethought, courage, attractiveness, hunger, fear, sex, sharp words, revenge, reaction to pain, sorrow and other emotional outbursts.

Serious breaches of this code are believed to cause a reduction in animal and human fertility, milk yield as well as increase in mortality of the herd on which they depend. The young nomad is taught from childhood the significance of “*pulaaku*” through initiation, transition and direct instruction.⁴¹

Thus, it may be seen that ‘the concept of “*pulaaku*” (Fulbeness) covers the entire nomadic Fulbe lifestyle – philosophical, psychological and cultural heritage.’⁴²

⁴¹ Ezeomah, Chimah, *Functional Curriculum Development: A Means of Retaining Nomadic Fulbe Cultural Identity. Contribution of Education to Cultural Development*, Conference Paper Presented at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation International Conference on Education, Geneva, Switzerland, September 14-19, 1992, Forty-third Session.

⁴² Ezeomah, Chimah, *Ibid.*

Chapter 5

KANURI GODS

[The Kanuri people comprise 2.4% of the Nigerian population according to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, 2018 estimate]

Kanuri, African people, the dominant element of the population of Bornu state in north-eastern Nigeria and also found in large numbers in south-eastern Niger. The Kanuri language is classified as belonging to the Saharan branch of the Nilo-Saharan family. The Kanuri developed a powerful state at the Sudanese terminus of the major trans-Saharan trade route through the Bilma oasis to Libya. This empire, called Bornu (or Kanem-Bornu), reached its zenith in the 16th century. The Kanuri have been Muslims since the 11th century and practice the Malikite code of Islamic law.¹

BACKGROUND

The Kanuri people* are an ethnic group that are present in a number of countries in Africa, most notably Nigeria, Niger, Chad and the Republic of Cameroon. They can also be found in small numbers in countries such as Libya, the Republic of Gabon, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Eritrea. They have historically engaged in fishing, farming and general trade, although their occupations have expanded over the years to include construction, commerce, government and public service. They are largely sedentary and live in settlements ranging from developed cities to sleepy hamlets. The Kanuri have an illustrious lineage dating back to the powerful Kanem-Bornu Empire (about ninth to nineteenth centuries):

The Kanuri first emerged from the fusion of the So and the Kanembu migrants who inhabited the old Kanem empire with its capital at Njimi in

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kanuri>

* Estimates range from 5 to 6 million.

the present-day Republic of Chad. It was from the ruins of the Kanem empire that a new empire emerged known as Kanem-Borno with its capital at Ngazargamu. The Kanem-Borno empire was one of the major political entities in pre-colonial Nigeria and Chad.²

The Kanuri people originally lived in quiet harmony until the unceremonious partitioning of Nigeria and Chad initiated by the British and the French in the late nineteenth century. The partition necessarily affected existing Kanuri family and clan groups, as well as their ability to freely exercise their agricultural rights, but a pleasant balance was nevertheless preserved:

The Anglo-French agreement of 1906 put most of the Kanuri in British Nigeria. Others found themselves as inhabitants of the neighbouring French colony of Chad. The lack of natural barriers on the Lake Chad and the provision allowing for fishing rights on both sides of the lake coupled with the enduring sense of common historical origin, culture, and loyalty to Islam have all combined to ensure continuous interaction among the people despite the border.³

Factors such as the decline of the Kanem-Bornu Empire, the domination of the Sokoto Caliphate, the advent of colonialism and the lessening importance of Trans-Saharan trade, led to a restructuring and re-emergence of Kanuri power in the form of the Borno Emirate. The Borno Emirate came into being at the turn of the twentieth century and it is home to the majority of the Kanuri residing in Nigeria. It is located in the bustling metropolitan city of Maiduguri in Borno State, and it is presided over by the *Shehu* [King or Ruler] of Borno, who is traditionally a descendant of the rulers of the Kanem-Bornu Empire. The al-Kânemî dynasty has ruled the Borno Emirate since 1809, when *Shehu* al-Hajj Muhammad al-Amîn ibn Muhammad al-Kânemî (1776-1837) deposed the Saifawa dynasty, the Muslim kings who had been in power for over 800 years, and became the first *Shehu* of Borno:

² Adefuye, Ade, and Adefuye, A.I., *The Kanuri Factor in Nigeria-Chad Relations* in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 12, No. 3/4, 1984, p.122. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/44715373. Accessed 23 June 2021.

³ Adefuye, Ade, and Adefuye, A.I., *Ibid.*, pp.125-126.

...Aside from sheer military expediency, al-Kanemi's right to rule was based upon his status as an Islamic reformer who could match pieties with the lords of Sokoto. His closest followers were men like himself, and the highest court offices under the *Shehus* were newly-created posts held by Kanembu and Shuwa mallams.⁴

The Borno Emirate is considered to be the modern-day incarnation of the ancient Kanuri state and its authority is widely recognised by the millions of Kanuri people residing in the surrounding countries.

ISLAM

The introduction of Islam to Nigeria in the eleventh century is heavily attributable to the support the religion found within the Kanem-Bornu Empire. The conversion of *Mai* Ummu Jilmi during his reign as *Mai* of Kanem-Bornu marked a turning point for the religious journey of the Kanuri people. *Mai* Jilmi was a member of the Saifawa dynasty that would eventually be replaced by the al-Kânemî dynasty. The Kanuri people have remained Muslim to this day, in line with the religious and cultural customs of the Empire, and this assisted with their integration into Hausaland:

The 'Kanem-Bornu axis,' the 'oldest continuous Islamic state in Africa' is not considered as a political minority, due to the fact that they are a seemingly similar cultural group with the Hausa-Fulani by being rooted in Islam and Sharia, long before the advent of the British colonialists. The Kanuri people, known by the Hausa as Beriberi, have adopted the Hausa language and culture.

Despite this, it is interesting to note that the Fulani army led by Uthman Dan Fodio attempted to conquer the former Kanem-Bornu Empire. However, the Jihad had a socio-political effect on the Kanem-Bornu Empire as they both formed an alliance and strong solidarity with the Sokoto Caliphate, based on an overarching trans-ethnic identity provided by Islam.⁵

⁴ Spaulding, Jay, *The Decline and Fall of Bornu in The Journal of African History*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 1974, p.503. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/180680. Accessed 23 June 2021.

⁵ Olomjobi, Yinka, *Assessing Islam in Northern Nigeria*, Social Science Research Network (2008). https://papers.ssrn.com › SSRN_ID2579977_code2372656.

It will come as no surprise that the majority of the Kanuri people living in Northern Nigeria practise Sunni Islam, which we already know to be the most widespread branch of Islam in Hausaland. The Kanem-Bornu *Ulamā* were a body of Muslim religious scholars who were well-versed in Islamic knowledge and produced ‘the religious teachers of the Islamic community - theologians, canon lawyers (*muftis*), judges (*qadis*), professors - and high state religious officials like the *shaykh al-Islām*.’⁶ The *Ulamās* were instrumental in developing and strengthening the tradition of quality Islamic education within the Kanem-Bornu Empire:

Historically, Islamic Scholarship and learning occupied the attention of the (*Mais*) Rulers. The *Ulama* (Mallamwa) were the teachers and scholars of the holy Qur’ān, the Prophetic Hadiths, Sharia, etc. In Kanem Borno, *Ulama* were highly respected by the Rulership, the *Mais*, to encourage them to maintain the culture of Islamic scholarship and knowledge in the society. *Ulama* were granted *Mahram*, a grant in privilege exempting them from the services to the state, purposely for them to concentrate and be preoccupied with teaching of the Qur’ān and other Islamic sciences.

They were generally deemed models of proper social behaviour. Their habits of speech, dress and behaviour are accepted as the ideal by the Muslim *Ummah*. The *Mais* (Rulers) tried to occupy and educate themselves to govern and administer according to Shariah. To achieve that, the *Mais* not only surrounded themselves with influential *Ulamas* but were entirely engaged in scholarship and learning, for the main purpose of acquiring knowledge.⁷

The learned Kanuri *Ulamās* visited and settled in other parts of Africa, including Hausaland, as traders and teachers from the fourteenth century until the nineteenth century, and established a number of Islamic education centres in major Northern Nigeria cities such as Kano, Zazzau [the Zaria Emirate] and Katsina.⁸ Their influence even extended into Yorubaland, with the establishment of Islamic education centres in locations like Ilorin, Ibadan and

⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ulama>

⁷ Gazali, Yusuf, Alkali, Kalli, *The Role of Kanem Borno Ulama in Quranic Education Before the Colonial Rule in Nigeria*, August 2014, p.5. <http://www.buk.edu.ng>

⁸ Gazali, Yusuf, Alkali, Kalli, *Ibid.*, pp.10-11.

Lagos, under the watchful eyes of the *Ulamās* in the seventeenth century.⁹ Thus, it can be seen that the *Ulamās* occupied an enviable position in society that gave them an unprecedented amount of access to the inner circles of power and plum government appointments throughout the parts of Nigeria that followed Islam.

Being predominantly Sunni in practice, it stands to reason that the Kanuri people fall under the Mālikī (مَالِكِي) school, which is one of the four significant *madhhabs* [schools of Islamic jurisprudence] in Sunni Islam:

- The Ḥanafī School: Incorporating the legal opinions of the ancient Iraqī schools of Kūfah, this School was established in the eighth century and founded on the teachings of the revered theologian Imam Abū Ḥanīfah (699-767). Its substance rests on the Qur’ān, the hadiths, *qiyas* [legal analogical reasoning] and *ra’y* [personal systematic reasoning and opinions] as its primary sources of law.¹⁰
- The Ḥanbalī School: One of the strictest and most traditional, this School was established in the eighth century and founded on the teachings of the respected Iraqī scholar Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (780–855). Its substance rests on the Qur’ān, the hadiths and the thoughts of the *Sahabah* [the Prophet Muhammad’s companions] as its primary sources of law. Unlike the Hanafi and Mālikī Schools, it does not accept *qiyas*, *ra’y* and *‘amal* as valid bases of Islamic law.¹¹
- The Mālikī School: Formerly known as the ancient school of Medina, this School was established in the eighth century and founded on the teachings of the great scholar Imam Mālik ibn Anas (711-795). Its substance rests on the Qur’ān, the hadiths and *‘amal* [agreements reached by the local Medinese community] as its primary sources of law.¹²
- The Shāfi’ī School: Extremely popular in the early days of Islam, this school was established in the ninth century and founded on the teachings of Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi’ī (767–820). Its substance rests on the Qur’ān and the hadiths, supplemented by *qiyas* and *ijmā* [consensus of

⁹ Gazali, Yusuf, Alkali, Kalli, Ibid., p.14.

¹⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hanafiyah>

¹¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hanabilah>

¹² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Maliki-school>

Islamic scholars on a point of Islamic law] as its primary sources of law. Like the Ḥanbalī School, it does not accept *amal* as a source of legal precedent.¹³

As followers of the Mālikī School, the Kanuri people look to the Qurʾān and the hadiths to provide their *sharia* [Islamic religious law]. Historically, legal governance was provided by the *alkali* [native courts presided over by emirate], which were present in different locations throughout Northern Nigeria since the colonial era. The *alkali* are ‘expected to dispense justice according Muslim law.’¹⁴ The other types of courts are the Sharia courts that deal with Sharia law cases and the Sharia Court of Appeal, although their powers are naturally curtailed by secular laws of the respective Northern states in which they are applied.

Imam Mālik ibn Anas is famous for being the first to assemble a compilation of hadiths, known as the Al-Muwattā [الموطأ], a seminal work that is widely regarded as an invaluable collection of Islamic juristic opinions and traditions:

It is very difficult indeed, to determine the exact date of the compilation of the Muwaṭṭā. Historians and scholars have differed about it. Syed Sulaymān Nadvī holds that the approximate date is between A.H.¹⁵ 130 and A.H. 140...Umar b. Abd al-Aziz apprehended the danger of the extinction of the learned from the world and wished to collect the scattered legal material.¹⁶

An example of a hadith from the Al-Muwattā concerning sacrificial animals:

¹³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shafiiyah>

¹⁴ Danmole, H.O., *The Alkali Court in Ilorin Emirate During Colonial Rule in Transafrican Journal of History*, Vol. 18, 1989, p.173. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/24328711. Accessed 25 June 2021.

¹⁵ ‘A.H.’ is an abbreviation used in many Western languages for ‘after hegira,’ or its Latin form, ‘Anno Hegirae.’ The hegira refers to a journey that Muslims believe the Prophet Mohammed took from Mecca to Medina in 622 A.D. Just as the Gregorian calendar begins with the birth of Christ, the Islamic calendar begins with this pivotal event. The Islamic calendar, which follows a lunar cycle, begins at year 1 A.H. <https://classroom.synonym.com/what-does-ah-stand-for-in-islam-12087086.html>

¹⁶ Gurāyā, Muḥammad, Yūsuf, *Historical Background of the Muwaṭṭāʾ of Mālik B. Anas in Islamic Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 1968, p.386; p.389. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20832931. Accessed 29 June 2021.

Hadith No: 1

Narrated/Authority of Al-Bara bin Azib

Yahya related to me from Malik from Amr ibn al-Harith from Ubayd ibn Fayruz from al-Bara ibn Azib that the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, was asked what animals should be avoided as sacrifices. He indicated with his hand and said, "Four." Al-Bara pointed with his hand and said, "My hand is shorter than the hand of the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. A lame animal whose lameness is evident, a one-eyed animal which is clearly one-eyed, an animal which is clearly ill, and an emaciated animal with no fat on it."¹⁷

As devotees of the Mālikī School, the Kanuri people's 'law, education, and social organisation are the parts of their culture that have been most affected by Islam.¹⁸ Furthermore, their 'traditional education is in the Qur'ān [and] their social organisation emphasises the importance of the nuclear family and the supreme authority of the father.'¹⁹ Accordingly, it may be concluded that:

Islam is the central ideological force in the daily lives of the Kanuri, affecting the thinking and behaviour of the people in every way. The full ritual calendar of the Muslim year is followed, the fast is faithfully kept by all who are required to do so by traditional laws, and the other pillars of Islam are religiously followed by the great majority.

Despite the strength of this orthodoxy, a few superimposed superstitious practices, such as the wearing of charms and amulets, are considered by most of the populace as acceptably Islamic.²⁰

CHRISTIANITY

Similar to the Fulani people, Christianity has been able to make inroads into this heavily Muslim ethnic group, despite the marked presence of several obstacles. It has been admitted by the International Mission Board, an international Baptist Christian Missionary Society that 'long-standing Christian work among this group, including Bible translations and medical

¹⁷ Imam Malik's Muwaṭṭa, Chapter 23: Sacrificial Animals. <https://ahadith.co.uk/chapter.php?cid=62>

¹⁸ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/kanuri>

¹⁹ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/kanuri>

²⁰ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/kanuri>

work, has produced few results.²¹ Some of the challenges faced by potential missionaries include:

- the inability to access villages, towns and cities populated by the Kanuri people due to Boko Haram-related unrest, and the associated displacement of the people living in the region;
- the physical dangers that could be faced by Christians dwelling in Northern Nigeria who may wish to visit the Kanuri people to speak with them, and potentially convert to Christianity;
- the arguably understandable hostility felt by the Kanuri people towards outsiders, whether local or international, who could be perceived as overstepping carefully drawn boundaries.²²

Additionally, there's a severe lack of Kanuri translations of the Bible and other scriptural materials that normally prove helpful when ministering to the Kanuri people. The difficulty in converting a Kanuri to Christianity is well-known to the international missionary community:

The Kanuri, also known as the Yerwa, are predominantly Muslim. They are considered one of the unreached people groups of West Africa. There is no complete Kanuri Bible, no Kanuri church and very few Kanuri Christians...The Kanuri are friendly and hospitable. They will never turn you away but expect you to respect their culture and traditions. They are very inquisitive but some are suspicious of outsiders...

At the moment, the only programme in the Kanuri language is a Salvation and Evangelism programme, produced by Radio ELWA and aired from our station in Benin. It is a teaching programme with only a partial focus on the oral aspect of the culture. For oral learners, unless the gospel is presented in an oral format, it is unlikely they will be able to understand or remember the message.²³

For instance, for the Duwai-speaking Kanuri people living in the historically peaceful and agricultural Yobe State, engaging with the Word of God comes with its own hazards:

²¹ <https://www.imb.org/55-in-5-resource/manga-kanuri-nigeria>

²² <https://www.imb.org/55-in-5-resource/manga-kanuri-nigeria>

²³ <https://twrafrica.org/see/the-archives/13-0202-bringingbibleto-life>

Abana and her brother Chertzira held the small radio between them and turned the volume down so the rest of the family would not hear. "What are they saying today?" Abana asked. Chertzira whispered, "It's more about Jesus. They are telling a story about Him making food for 5,000 people out of a boy's lunch."

The 13,000 Duwai Kanuri have been Muslim since the 11th century, and they don't accept Christian missionaries. If one of them accepts Christian literature, they might be persecuted. However, Trans World Radio is now beaming a 15-minute broadcast in a Kanuri language every day. Some are listening hungrily, quietly, and privately. There are no known followers of Christ among the Dawai Kanuris, and the few churches in their area speak Hausa.²⁴

There are currently existing and thriving Kanuri Christian communities that enjoy a certain amount of support and protection from the governance frameworks of the states within which they reside, at least in theory. In practice, there are attacks carried out on churches, usually when there is a fresh conversion of a Muslim to Christianity, for example on this sad occasion in 2015:

The Emir of Kano has ordered the rebuilding of a Baptist church and pastor's house in Rogo Local Government Area (LGA), Kano State, and has warned against any further attacks on churches within his emirate. The church and pastor's house had been destroyed in violence that resulted in the death of the pastor's daughter.

Fifteen people have been arrested in connection to the attack on the church and pastor's house in Gidan Maso Village on the evening of 1 April, which claimed the life of the daughter of Reverend Habila Garba. Local Muslim youths set fire to her home and church after failing to locate a Christian man who had briefly converted to Islam before returning to Christianity.

At a press conference in Abuja, General Ishaku Ahmed Dikko (Rtd.), president of Tarayyar Masihiyawan Nijeriya (a Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri Christian organisation) said: "The action of the Emir has really rekindled

²⁴ <http://www.globalprayerdigest.org/issue/day/Duwai-Kanuri-People>

the hope of all oppressed Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri Christians not only in Kano State but in all states where our people reside.”²⁵

The ongoing rancour that has become embedded in Northern Nigeria has contributed significantly to a deterioration in the quality of relationships between neighbours with differing religious beliefs, and it is unlikely that this will change in the near future:

Estimates indicate that as many as 3.6 million Kanuri have yet to be exposed to the Gospel for the first time. Internecine hostilities between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria in recent years have made it difficult for the many Christians in the southern part of the country to effectively communicate the gospel to Muslim peoples such as the Kanuri living in the north.

The great majority of the Kanuri people are Muslim. As one of the official languages of Nigeria, Kanuri is widely spoken and read. Consequently, there is some Christian radio broadcasting in the language.²⁶

Sample text from the Kanuri Bible

BUSHARA MUSKO

YAHAYABE

Yisa Kalma Alabe

1 ¹ Badiyaramlan Kalmaa, Kalmadə rokko Alaben; Kalmadə Ala kəlanzədəma. ² Badiyaramlaman Kalmadə Ala-a rokko kasharwu. ³ Kalmadəmben abi-a abiana-aso mowongono; shimben gənya aləgəbima mowonzənyi. ⁴ Kalmadə shima fərtə robewo, rodə shima nur ambewo. ⁵ Nurdə kəlməskəro wassəgin, yaye kəlməskədəye dunonzəga kəzənyi.

⁶ Alaye kəngayamnə sunotəna mbeji, sunə Yahaya. ⁷ Tagənasro am sammaye nurdəga kasatsaro shada nurdəbero kadio. ⁸ Shi Yahayadə shi gənyi nurdəwo, shi nurdəga sattəgəro kadio. ⁹ Nur jirebe duwonno am dinabe sammaro nur cinmadə dinaro ishin. ¹⁰ Shi suro dinaben, dinadə ye shimben alakkada, adəson dinadəye shiga nozənyi.

Image source: http://worldbibles.org/language_detail/eng/knc/Kanuri

²⁵ <https://www.csw.org.uk/2015/04/30/news/2575/article.htm>

²⁶ Garrison, David V., *Global People Profiles: Tosk Albanians of Albania, Kanuri of Nigeria, and Achenese of Indonesia* in *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, Vol. 8, No. 1, January 1991.

Progress has been made since the above excerpt and Kanuri translations of the Bible are now available in a variety of formats such as apps that can be downloaded to mobile phones, audio recordings to be played in gatherings and, of course, as printed books.

TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Healing Practices

The Kanuri people have been able to preserve elements of their pre-Islamic traditional religion, about which little is known, by incorporating folk beliefs into their practice of Islam. One of these beliefs is the traditional culture of the healing of the sick. These healing methods survived the social changes and global urbanisation due to occupation of Northern Nigeria by the British.²⁷ Some of these methods include:

- *Gau* [Herbalist]: A traditional medicine practitioner who will ‘either utilise various secular or technical approaches in healing’ or ‘claim the ability to mobilise some spiritual or supernatural force for healing purposes’²⁸ by using a wide variety of ‘medicinal plants in various combinations and dosage forms’²⁹ to treat a multitude of health problems;
- *Safima* [Magician]: It is believed that ‘*safima* can give proactive protection to people from being harmed by enemies. Sometimes they make adversaries disappear mysteriously when people are attacked or faced with clear danger. Their magic formulations vary depending on the nature of protection required, but generally involve herbs used for bathing, drinking, or for wearing in *warfi* [amulets], *laya* [necklaces], or *guru* [waistbands].’³⁰

²⁷ Shettima, Abubakar, Alkali, Kasim and Sule, Maga, Mohammed, *Practice of Fetish-Badri in Healing a Possessed Among the People of Kala-Balge Local Government Area, Borno State, Nigeria: An Islamic Perspective* in *Hayula: Indonesian Journal of Multidisciplinary Islamic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, July 2018.

²⁸ Stock, R., *Traditional Healers in Rural Hausaland* in *GeoJournal*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1981. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41142597. Accessed 2 July 2021.

²⁹ Ene A.C., and Atawodi, S.E., *Ethnomedicinal survey of plants used by the Kanuris of North-eastern Nigeria* in *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge*, Vol. 11, No. 4, October 2012.

³⁰ El-Yakub, Kaka, *An Auto-Ethnographical Study of Integration of Kanuri Traditional Health Practices into the Borno State Health Care System*, Ph.D. Thesis, Durham Theses, Durham University, November 2009. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/171>

- *Kaskima* [Soothsayer]: Usually referred to as ‘the god of those who are in a hurry’ (*Ala kam azallataye*), being a *kaskima* ‘generally involves predicting what will happen in the future, particularly regarding topics such as wealth, health, sources of sickness, and prospects for successful marriage.’³¹ A *kaskima* may also participate in consultations regarding medicines for diseases, protection from spiritual and physical attacks, and treatment for those with mental health problems;
- *Ngozoma* [Traditional Birth Attendant]: Also known as *suromuwoma*, this profession tends to be open to women only and training is ‘typically passed from mother to daughter...the traditional birth attendant is expected to provide antenatal care and to attend to deliveries in the community.’³² They can also provide basic gynaecological care to the women in their community, but more serious cases tend to be referred to a traditional healer with specialised experience;
- *Shilashiwoltama* [Traditional Bonesetter]: This is a unisex profession that deals with the setting of bones: ‘Some use incantations coupled with physical manipulation of the bone in the patient, while others perform bone setting without actually being in the presence of the patient. In such instances, the *shilashiwoltama* manipulates a stick, roughly the size of the fractured area, which is used as a proxy and is believed to set the bone immediately.’³³ This vital role provides orthopaedic surgery services to Kanuri people who are unwilling or unable to engage with the healthcare system;
- Qur’ānic Healing: This remedy ranges from ‘Qur’ānic verses written on slates and washed with water to produce a tincture, which is then consumed by the patient’³⁴ to the recitation of Qur’ānic verses, which are expected to produce miraculous healing. This approach is based on the *Ayat Ash-Shifa* [مُؤْمِنِينَ قَوْمِ صُدُورَ وَيَشْفَى], also known as the Six Qur’ānic Verses of Healing. The entire Qur’ān is regarded as a source of healing, but

³¹ El-Yakub, Kaka, Ibid.

³² El-Yakub, Kaka, Ibid.

³³ El-Yakub, Kaka, Ibid.

³⁴ El-Yakub, Kaka, Ibid.

these six verses in particular, when coupled with true belief in the outcome, are held to be a magical cure-all for physical and mental illnesses.

The *Ayat Ash-Shifa*

And [God] shall heal the breast of the believers.

(at-Tawba, 9:14)

مُؤْمِنِينَ قَوْمِ صُدُورٍ وَيَشْفَى

Mankind there has come to you a guidance from your Lord and a healing for (the diseases) in your hearts, and for those who believe a guidance and a mercy.

(Yunus, 10:57)

لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَحْمَةً وَهُدًى الصُّدُورِ فِي لِمَا وَشِفَاءً رَبِّكُمْ مِنْ مَوْعِظَةٍ جَاءَتْكُمْ قَدْ النَّاسُ أَيُّهَا يَا

There issues from within the bodies of the bee a drink of varying colours wherein is healing for mankind.

(an-Nahl, 16:69)

يَتَفَكَّرُونَ لِقَوْمٍ لَآيَةً ذَلِكَ فِي إِنْ ۖ لِلنَّاسِ شِفَاءً فِيهِ أَلْوَانُهُ مُخْتَلِفٌ شَرَابٌ بَطُونِهَا مِنْ يَخْرُجُ

And We sent down in the Qur'an such things that have healing and mercy for the believers

(al-Isra, 17:82)

خَسَارًا إِلَّا الظَّالِمِينَ يَرِيدُ وَلَا ۖ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَرَحْمَةً شِفَاءً هُوَ مَا الْقُرْآنِ مِنْ وَنُزِّلَ

And when I am ill, it is [God] who cures me.

(Ash-Shu'ara (The Poets: 26:80) (A supplication of Prophet Abraham)

يَشْفِينِ فَهُوَ مَرَضْتُ وَإِذَا

And declare (O Muhammad) that [the Quran] is a guidance and healing for the believers.

(al-Fussilat, 41:44)

وَشِفَاءً هُدًى آمَنُوا لِلَّذِينَ هُوَ نَفْ

³⁵ <https://ziyara.org/programs/healing-verses-in-quran>

It must be highlighted that some of these practices trace their origins within Islam, but others existed long before the introduction of organised religion to the Kanuri people in the eleventh century. The integration of traditional and modern healthcare interventions is a work in progress in Borno State that requires investment and innovative thinking.

Charms and Amulets

Although the superstitious belief in the protection of magical objects is strictly speaking, not a stand-alone religion, it feeds into the cat's cradle of traditional practices that bolster Islam within the Kanuri community. These objects can be worn around necks or secreted within parts of clothing to ensure protection:

It is believed in some instances that the power of charms, talisman, and amulets can give maximum protection from being harmed (Kaka, 2009, p.116). Though, their magic formulation depends on the nature of protection required. For example, [an] amulet is worn around the body or neck for protection against a host of afflictions.

[A] charm is used to seek protection against health-related issues and [a] talisman is believed to have magical powers for bringing good (Khalid, 2010, p. 290). This belief in magical power prevailed to the extent that some people cannot do without putting on some superstitious objects for the fear of calamities and to feel protected (Dahiru, 1986, p. 209).³⁶

The understanding of power contained in magical objects ties in with the belief in *sihr* [magic] itself, the concept of which was embraced in early, and to a certain extent, modern Islam:

Islam's doctrine recognises the existence of magic (*sihr*) and according to the Qur'ān, it was the devils and two angels – Hārūt and Mārūt – who taught people magic (Q 2:102). The verse places magic partly in the domain of the devils, but at the same time it is knowledge that is taught by angels who, by definition, are God's faithful servants. The angels taught magic, but at the same time they warned people from blasphemy that would endanger their salvation. This indicates that it was permitted

³⁶ Shettima, Abubakar, Alkali, Kasim and Sule, Maga, Mohammed, Ibid.

to learn about magic, but the danger lay in using it and trusting powers other than God...

The ḥadīth collections and Qur'ān commentaries contain reports that can be connected with magic. The most obvious one is the story about how the Prophet himself was bewitched...According to the ḥadīth reports, the Prophet was bewitched by a man and the witchcraft caused him physical suffering...The acceptance of the efficacy of magic makes people feel exposed to it, which creates a need of protection against the power of magic.³⁷

In essence, the power of amulets and incantations should be considered a 'means of seeking refuge in God' as long as the believer remembers 'that ultimately everything depended on His will.'³⁸ Therefore, it may be seen that even in this aspect of traditional religion, Islam cannot be escaped, which further underlines its all-encompassing effect on the Kanuri people. By mixing and matching non-Islamic and Islamic practices, the Kanuri people have been able to preserve a degree of flexibility that addresses their immediate and practical needs.

The *Mune*

The *Mune* is a sacred object that was shrouded in secrecy for much of its existence. In addition to sharing its name with an ancient pagan tribe, the *Mune* is thought to have reached the height of its mystical powers in the thirteenth century during the Saifawa dynasty's rule over the Kanem Empire, when it was worshipped as a talisman by the people. In practical terms, some researchers have interpreted the *Mune* as functioning as a covenant of sorts; a living constitution that guided the ethical and religious actions of those governing and being governed:

It enjoins Muslims:

- **To worship God only, Him alone, Who has no associate; and to obey Him and not attempt to defy Him;**

³⁷ Perho, Irmeli, University of Helsinki, *Magic in the Hadīths in Orientalia Suecana*, Vol. LXI (2012), Supplement, pp.183-193.

³⁸ Perho, Irmeli, *Ibid.*

- To rule with justice as God and His Messenger gave judgement, by the Book and the Sunna;
- Not to oppress any of the servants of God, as God averts oppression from the two worlds;
- Not to betray God or His Messenger or the faithful;
- Not to cheat except in war, for war is deceit;
- To support the religion and the Jihad in the way of God, but not from caprice;
- Not to desert the line of march in war;
- To hold fast to the rope of God all together, and not to be afraid or disunited;
- To call people to God by means of wisdom and God's advice;
- To do our utmost to be righteous both outwardly and inwardly.³⁹

It must be mentioned that, although the *Mune* was viewed by some as an actual physical document that appealed to the hearts and minds of the Kanuri people, the precise nature of its form remains unclear to this day:

...The *Mune* is a living document. It is not the "dead thing" which historical assessment has condemned it to be; usually said to be..." something wrapped up and concealed..." and "...none of the kings descended from Sayf b. Dhi Yazan would open it..."

...The text of the *Mune* contains the most detailed list we possess of the religio-ethical obligations laid on the Sefuwa rulers, the symbolical expression of these being preserved in the *Mune*.⁴⁰

It is said that the *Mune* was so politically significant that it was 'always carried in front while the national army is engaging in battles'⁴¹ in order to 'remind rulers of their obligations - in war as in peace, so that in the splendour

³⁹ Tijani, Kyari, *The Mune in Pre-Colonial Borno* in *Berichte des Sonderforschungsbereichs 268*, Band 2, Frankfurt am Main, 1993, pp.229-230.

⁴⁰ Tijani, Kyari, *Ibid.*, p.230.

⁴¹ Tijani, Kyari, *Ibid.*, p.230.

of power, they do not transgress their sacredly established bounden limits.⁴² The reverence surrounding this man-made object evidently began to cause feelings of unease in certain quarters, and under the reign of *Mai* Dunama Dabbalemi, matters came to a head. *Mai* Dabbalemi ascended to power as a member of the Saifawa dynasty within the Kanem Empire in the early 13th century and by some accounts, his time on the throne was 'long and energetic.'⁴³

His list of accomplishments is formidable, including the initiation of diplomatic exchanges with North African sultans, the establishment of a hostel in Cairo, Egypt to assist pilgrims journeying to Mecca and leading a jihad against his unsuspecting neighbours with largely successful outcomes.⁴⁴ However, he is also remembered for being the destroyer of the *Mune*, perhaps because of what he considered to be the undue respect given to a pagan symbol of social peace, and possibly in an attempt to further promote Islam:

Few events in the history of Kanem-Borno have left such a great impact on tradition as the destruction of the *Mune* symbol by Dunama Dibbalemi in the first half of the thirteenth century...According to [Ibn Furtū], its elimination was responsible for the outbreak of a seven years' war against the Tubu and, later, for the attacks of the Bulala, which led to the withdrawal of the Sefuwa from Kanem to Borno...

Unfortunately, no precise description of the *Mune* survived. According to the *Dīwān*, a text known for its simple language, the *Mune* was "a thing" which could be cut open. In the opinion of Ibn Furtū it was encased in wrappings and covered up. Dunama Dibbalemi was warned not to open it because, according to common belief, it made the kings invincible for the unbelievers. But when it was broken, its content was set free and flew away.⁴⁵

The impact of the destruction of this nationally loved relic that possessed unknown yet profoundly influential powers was further compounded by the

⁴² Tijani, Kyari, *Ibid.*, p.230.

⁴³ <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-worldcivilization/chapter/bornu-empire>

⁴⁴ <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-worldcivilization/chapter/bornu-empire>

⁴⁵ Lange, Dierk, *The Mune Symbol as the Ark of the Covenant between Duguwa and Sefuwa* in *Borno Museum Society Newsletter: The Quarterly Journal of Borno Museum Society*, Nos. 66 & 67, 2006, pp.15-16.

fact that some of the Kanuri people who unreservedly believed in the *Mune's* abilities 'not only considered [it] to be like the Israelite Ark of the Covenant but [they also] considered it to be identical with the Ark which was once in possession of King Saul.'⁴⁶ By underestimating the effects of his actions, *Mai* Dabbalemi ensured that his legacy was partly one of prolonged civil unrest within the Kanem Empire:

By indicating that the breaking up of the *Mune* precipitated greed and ambition among the great officials of the kingdom [Ibn Furtū] obviously believed that civil war was the most important result of the incident...To destroy it meant to upset a fragile equilibrium based on cultic antagonism and cooperation.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Lange, Dierk, *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁴⁷ Lange, Dierk, *Ibid.*, p.23.

Chapter 6

TIV GODS

[The Tiv people comprise 2.4% of the Nigerian population according to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, 2018 estimate]

Tiv, people living on both sides of the Benue River in Nigeria; they speak a language of the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo family. Some Tiv have converted to Christianity, and a lesser number have adopted Islam; but their traditional religion, based on the manipulation of forces (*akombo*) entrusted to humans by a creator god, remains strong. The *akombo* are manifested in certain symbols or emblems and in diseases that they create. An organisation of elders who have the ability to manipulate these forces meets at night to repair those manifestations of *akombo* (e.g., epidemics) that affect the group; these phenomena require human sacrifice or its metaphorical equivalent. The Tiv numbered about 2,500,000 in the late 20th century. ¹

BACKGROUND

Primarily located in the so-called 'Middle Belt' of Nigeria, the Tiv people* are an ethnic group that have a significant presence in the Republic of Cameroon. Their socio-political strengths lie in kinship, subsistence and prestige with a heavy emphasis on genealogy and patrilineal descent. According to traditional tales, they are believed to have descended from a single, common ancestor who also went by the name of Tiv:

This ancestor had two sons, Chongo and Pusu. A Tiv person is either a member of MbaChongo, descendants of Chongo, or MbaPusu, descendants of Pusu. These descent lines are further divided into several major branches. These branches are often further divided until one has the smallest unit of the lineage called the *ipaven*.²

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tiv>

* Estimates range from 5 to 6 million.

² Asante, Kete, Molefi and Mazama, Ama (eds.), *Tiv in Encyclopaedia of African Religion* (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009).

The Tiv migrated across Africa in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, before eventually settling in the West African area that straddled the border of the Republic of Cameroon and Nigeria, located near the Obudu Mountain region. From this location, they began to spread out and establish villages primarily in the valley of the Benue River and its environs in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This marked the crystallisation of a period in which a previously disparate group of ethnicities identified themselves as unified:

lyo's contention, is that the Tiv legend of a putative ancestor could actually mark the beginning of a constitutional period when the Tiv, having assimilated other groups, began to consciously identify themselves as a unique group and nation with a defined territory that could expand as well as contract given the nature of contact and changes in their relations with their neighbours.

This constitutional phase could likely be traced to the last decades of the fifteenth century when they still inhabited the Cameroonian mountain ranges.³

From the sixteenth century onwards, the Tiv further dispersed and 'came to occupy their present abodes in what are today Benue, Nasarawa and Taraba states of Nigeria.'⁴ Predictably, these areas already contained pre-existing tribes so there followed an expected amount of intermarriage and intermixing between the Tiv and said tribes, which led to 'a civilising era in which the Tiv underwent a transformation by transiting from a hunting and gathering group to an agrarian society.'⁵ By the late eighteenth century, the Tiv had fully settled into their new and permanent home in Tivland in the Middle Belt area, which enabled their agricultural skills to flourish:

By the beginning of colonial rule, the area of Tivland stretched from 6° 30'N to 8° N and from 8° E to 10° E. Tivland was bordered to the East by the *Jukun* and the *Kuteb*, to the North by the *Arago* and the *Gomei*, to the West by the *Idoma* and to the South by a number of ethnic groups of the Obudu plateau. This expansive area was situated almost wholly within the

³ Wuam, Terhembra, *Tiv Origins of Nationhood and Migration into the Benue Valley, c. 1500-1900* in *Journal of Tourism and Heritage Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2013, p.38.

⁴ Wuam, Terhembra, *Ibid.*, p.39.

⁵ Wuam, Terhembra, *Ibid.*, p.41.

savannah vegetation belt of Nigeria where the characteristic prevalence of “coarse grasses and numerous species of trees” admitted an interesting unity in terms of flora.

This situation of Tivland in the Guinea Savannah zone of Nigeria has, over the period given the Tiv people the advantage of producing both root crops and grains. Thus, the production of yam, a root crop described as “the king of crops in the forest belt and a leading crop in the Middle Belt” by the Tiv people, clearly dates back into history.⁶

The advent of colonialism had a profound effect on the Tiv people. Following a relatively pleasant start in the nineteenth century, relations between the Tiv and the British rapidly devolved into discord and, eventually, a number of brutal skirmishes that ended in the occupation and subjugation of Tivland. There was a fundamental clash in cultural personalities, with the British on one hand favouring a centralised hierarchical system of social and political power that relied on authority figures, and the Tiv on the other, with a deeply embedded sense of egalitarianism that drew strength from ‘a highly fragmentary political structure based on kinship ties.’⁷

The Tiv people’s heightened sense of independence and initially vehement resistance to colonial rule meant that the British made little headway with their formerly successful system of indirect rule, until they realised that they would need to create an adapted version of ‘native administration’ specifically for Tivland. This localised adaptation was successfully implemented in the early nineteenth century and remained in place, despite suffering several derailments and setbacks, until Nigeria gained Independence in 1960.

CHRISTIANITY

The advent of Christianity in Tivland heralded a sea change in its social and economic outlook. The Tiv people’s fiery resistance to foreign intervention in one form was less so with regards to the other, due to no fault of their own. The lure of mission-led improvements in education and healthcare were

⁶ Varvar, Ayati, Toryina, *The Impact of the Colonial Economy on Yam Production in Tiv Land, 1900–1960* in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 17, 2007, pp.16–17. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41857143. Accessed 9 July 2021.

⁷ Dorward, Craig, David, *The Development of the British Colonial Administration Among the Tiv, 1900–1949* in *African Affairs*, Vol. 68, Issue 273, October 1969, p.316.

simply too hard to resist. It is widely acknowledged that the first set of missionaries to penetrate Tivland did so in 1911 under the umbrella of the South African-based Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM), which was itself a sub-group of the Sudan United Mission (SUM). The DRCM's entrance into the area was only possible once the Tiv people had reluctantly given permission for missionaries to travel through their land. They were swiftly followed by other Christian denominations: the 'Catholic missions arrived in the 1920s'⁸ and then the 'U.S. Protestants in the 1940s and 1950s,'⁹ leading to wave after wave of conversions:

By the beginning of 1718 most coasts of Nigeria had been influenced by Christianity but the Middle Belt was unreached. In this area, the Catholics were the first to arrive, but in Tiv land the Protestants were the first to proclaim the gospel under the Sudan United Mission through Dr Hermann Karl Wilhelm Kumm, a German...

The Roman Catholics started their missionary work in Tiv land in the middle of 1919...They later moved eastward...to areas where the Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM)...were already established...

[The Protestant] mission strategy was interesting. They started by reaching and converting the elders, then the youths, women and children. All this was done in Tiv language. The Roman Catholic Mission (R.C.M.) also started with the chiefs, youths, women and children, but the Roman Catholic Missionaries used English language. Both opened schools and used the same language in their schools.¹⁰

By introducing, promoting and entrenching a Westernised way of life, the Christian missionaries encouraged many of the Tiv to abandon their traditional religious practices, rites of passage and worldviews, some of which were harmful and some of which were not, such as 'human sacrifice, killing of twins, polygamy, taking of titles, witchcraft, traditional customs like exchange bride in marriage, dances and some modes of dress.'¹¹ Christianity's impact

⁸ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/tiv>

⁹ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/tiv>

¹⁰ Aboh, Magdalyn, Mbawaren, *Technological Change and its Effect on Traditional Religious Beliefs: The Tiv Experience*, Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Jos, October, 2005.

¹¹ Aboh, Magdalyn, Mbawaren, *Ibid.*

on the health and wellbeing of the inhabitants of Tivland cannot be underestimated:

The missionaries introduced the European mode of dress, eating habits like drinking tea, using plates and dishes, use of lamps and living in houses with iron zinc roofs. Many hospitals were established and schools, that by 1969 there were over five hundred of them in Tiv land. So, Christianity brought westernisation, by introducing a new religion, Western culture, medicine and education.¹²

An unexpected side effect that has persisted until the present day is a competitive rivalry that sprung up between the Protestants and the Roman Catholics in their zeal to convert as many Tiv people as possible, mostly without pausing to deeply engage with the pre-existing local culture. The differences between their denominational approach to individual aspects of Tiv life proved to be instrumental in the types of primary, secondary and vocational training schools that were set up from the late 1960s to the late 1980s.

Akiga Sai (1898–1959) was a Tiv man who is famously known for being the first to be baptised as a Christian. In addition to this seminal event, he has left his mark on history for writing an invaluable account of the values, ideas and daily lives of the Tiv people, aptly called *History of the Tiv*.

Akiga Sai witnessed first-hand the incursions of British colonial power into the Tiv-speaking area of Nigeria and began to write down the history, customs, memories and experiences of Tiv communities. He produced an extraordinary document: 380 pages of typescript in the Tiv language. Parts of this were translated by Rupert East, in collaboration with Akiga Sai himself, and published by the International African Institute as *Akiga's Story* in 1939.¹³

For most people, these achievements would have been sufficient for a lifetime, but not for Akiga. He was also the first Tiv man to read and write, to

¹² Aboh, Magdalyn, Mbawaren, Ibid.

¹³ <https://www.soas.ac.uk/cas/events/23apr2018-book-discussion-akiga-sais-history-of-the-tiv.html>

write a letter, to become a parliamentarian and a newspaper editor.¹⁴ By ‘recording things of the past for future generations of Tiv who will otherwise not know about them’ and ‘translating the increasingly salient notion of Tiv custom to missionaries, colonialists and educators,’ his work that took 20 years to research accurately captured a volatile period in Tiv history:

Rather, his writing emanates from a specific early twentieth-century nexus of translational urgencies – between past and future generations, Christians and seekers after occult powers, Tiv and Europeans, his life story and that of his people, and so on – in which Akiga’s complex subjectivity has both been produced and is ensnared...

...What he wrote was a much more complex mixture of autobiographical engagement, family history, oral tradition, eyewitness accounts, contemporary contentions, and much else. The events described continue to resonate in a Nigeria that has been independent for more than half the century since its unification in 1914, and where what is understood to be ‘traditional’ – whether in land rights or cultural prerogatives or chiefship – plays an important part now.¹⁵

Sample text from the Tiv Bible

Terwase u alu sha.

Iteasgh iti you jijigh.

Tar tor wou u va,

kwagh u aseru ishima

ieren sha man ieren shin tar ne kpa.

Na se kwagh yan wase nyian u ayange

a yange man shi de se asorobo ase

er se kpa se deen mba ve eren se akaabo yo.

man dekera zaan avese pe imeen i lu ga kpa yima se sha kwagh bo.

Amen.

Image source: http://worldbibles.org/language_detail/eng/tiv/Tiv

¹⁴ Pine, Atah, quoted in Fardon, Richard, ‘Do You Hear Me? It is Me, Akiga’: Akiga’s Story’ and Akiga Sai’s History in Africa: *Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 85, No. 4, 2015, p.572. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/26157558. Accessed 14 July 2021.

¹⁵ Fardon, Richard, *Ibid.*, p.576; p.595.

ISLAM

In keeping with their pugnacious resistance to outside influences, the Tiv proved to be remarkably averse to any initial attempts to introduce Islam within their borders, which was considered a very different matter to sporadic contact with Muslim traders and merchants for commercial purposes. Through the forceful and repeated repelling of the long arm of the Sokoto Caliphate, Tivland was able to protect itself and its people from its northern neighbours, thereby creating a reputation for themselves as feared opponents:

But perhaps what gave the Tiv a reputation as fighters was the fact that they had to organise themselves for survival in the face of the determined efforts of militant Islam in the Sokoto Caliphate. The failure of the Caliphate to convert the Tiv to Islam must be partly explained by the toughness of the Tiv as fighters.

Success in this regard, however, meant that the Tiv like other non-Muslim groups near the Sokoto Caliphate became liable to slave raids organised by the emirates of the caliphate. The Tiv therefore had also to organise resistance to such raids.

The evidence would suggest that the Tiv succeeded very well not only in keeping muslim influence out of their country but also in standing up to muslim slave raiders. Thus, by the time Lugard began his administration in Northern Nigeria the Tiv had established themselves as dreaded warriors famed for their poisonous arrows.¹⁶

A particularly momentous battle with an invading force led by Shehu Usman dan Fodio took place in 1804, against the beautiful natural backdrop of the Ushongo Hills, located in present-day Benue State. The defeat of the Muslim forces at this crucial time was both symbolic and practical; the all-consuming fire of the jihad met its match in the Tiv people and effectively called a halt to the march of Islamic forces in this particular area of the Middle Belt region. It should be mentioned that the Tiv, as well as their neighbours, were aided in their overall ongoing resistance to jihad-related attacks by the geography of the area:

¹⁶ Ikime, Obaro, *The British 'Pacification' of the Tiv 1900-1908* in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1973, p.103. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41856988. Accessed 15 July 2021.

The Niger and Benue rivers and other tributaries and the general topography (forest, hills, swamp, etc.) served as formidable barriers to Jihad incursions into the core non-Muslim areas. Thus, despite continued Jihad raids for several decades after 1810, most non-Muslim areas were not directly affected, and where this happened, the relationship between the indigenous people and the invading Muslim armies was that of tribute payment and some in cases vassalage.¹⁷

It was also the case that accepting Islam prior to colonialism would have meant the loss of long-cherished and deeply embedded traditional positions, privileges, festivals and rituals, all of which would have been incompatible with the new religion. However, once colonialism reared its ugly head in Tivland, matters took on a different light. The embrace of Christianity made it easier for the Tiv to contemplate engaging with Islam. Some of the factors responsible include:

- the ‘peaceful’ subjugation of the Tiv people by the British, which exposed the Tiv to other belief systems: ‘During the British invasion, conquest and occupation, majority of the rank and file of the occupying forces were Muslims recruited mainly from among the Hausa, Yoruba and Nupe.’;¹⁸
- Inter-marriages: ‘...Inter-marriages between [the Muslim rank and file troops] and the host communities’ led to ‘the evolution of a Muslim tradition and culture such as the mode of dress and the giving of indigene children to foreign mallams for traditional Koranic education and scholarship.’;¹⁹
- the construction of road networks and railway lines: ‘The establishment of communication networks witnessed the influx of a sizeable number of Muslims to non-Muslim areas.’;²⁰
- the establishment of Qur’ānic schools: ‘Both Christians and Muslims in the area saw education as an effective means of indoctrinating the children of

¹⁷Abdulkadir, Sanni, Mohammed, *Islam in the Non-Muslim Areas of Northern Nigeria, c.1600-1960* in *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies (IJOURLS)*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2011, p.13.

¹⁸ Abdulkadir, Sanni, Mohammed, *Ibid.*, p.11.

¹⁹ Abdulkadir, Sanni, Mohammed, *Ibid.*, pp.11-12.

²⁰ Abdulkadir, Sanni, Mohammed, *Ibid.*, p.12.

their converts. Thus, schools were built where their religious doctrines were taught among other subjects.’;²¹

- The observation of Muslim festivals: ‘The administration furthered the interests of the Muslims by giving financial support from the Native Treasuries in terms of grants for the annual repairs or construction of mosques, payment of Central Mosques Imams and support during religious festivals.’;²²
- The imposition of Muslim chiefs: ‘Within the colonial social strata, Islamic political structure dominated the colonial hierarchical structure while Muslims were given better social status and political roles. For example, in Tiv land and specifically in Abinsi Division, a Yoruba Muslim was imposed as the Chief of Makurdi in 1914 and ruled until his death in 1947.’;²³
- The economic depression of the 1930s: ‘In Northern Nigeria, many non-Muslims converted to Islam during this period because professing the religion of Islam and the understanding of the Hausa language appeared to be the only surest way of getting jobs.’;²⁴
- World War II: ‘Many people were recruited into the colonial army from the non-Muslim areas and quartered in Kano. Their association with Muslims in the army and the Muslim population in Kano (a predominantly Muslim city) equally contributed to the acceptance and spread of the Islamic religion.’²⁵

It is generally known that the Tiv who are practising Muslims continues to be modest in number compared to Christian believers. This fact is dramatically underscored by the fact that the current *Tor Tiv V*, His Royal Majesty, Begha u Tiv, Orcivirigh, Professor James Ortese Iorzua Ayatse, who is the paramount ruler in Tivland and presides over its judicial and executive functions, became only the second *Tor Tiv*, after *Tor Tiv III* His Royal Highness Orchivirigh Akperan Orshi, to take the Oath of Office using the

²¹ Abdulkadir, Sanni, Mohammed, Ibid., p.13.

²² Abdulkadir, Sanni, Mohammed, Ibid., p.13.

²³ Abdulkadir, Sanni, Mohammed, Ibid., p.14.

²⁴ Abdulkadir, Sanni, Mohammed, Ibid., p.15.

²⁵ Abdulkadir, Sanni, Mohammed, Ibid., p.15.

Christian Bible. This is a significant departure from the previous *Tor Tivs* who swore by the ancestral *Swem* [the traditional god of the Tiv people].²⁶

It is estimated that the majority of Tiv Muslims follow the moderate Sunni branch of Islam, which may account for their largely peaceful co-existence with the other religions present across the states they inhabit in the Middle Belt. Representatives of additional branches of Islam, such as Shi'a and Ahmadiyya, tend to be found among residents originating from other parts of Nigeria who have moved into a predominantly Tiv state to pursue education, commerce or simply a fresh start in life.²⁷

It would be unfair to say that Muslims are excluded from traditional rulership or positions of political power in Tivland, but the current climate may not always be considered conducive, taking Benue State as an example:

There is no particular traditional rulership stool meant for Muslims in Benue State. However, a Muslim could ascend to the throne if it is his turn to become the chief of any title which is hereditary...

In Benue State, the Tiv people who are predominantly Christians control the politics of the state with fourteen local governments, while other ethnic groups cannot make significant impact with the remaining eight local governments. This situation has blocked the possibility of [an] indigenous Muslim [becoming] a Governor.²⁸

However, this does not mean that Muslims are treated as second-class citizens, far from it, using Benue State as an example once more:

Actually, the Benue State government has not turned against the Muslims in spite of the fact that they are in minority. The government gives due attention to the Muslims by granting requests from the Muslims. For instance, when the central mosques at Makurdi and Gboko needed repairs and maintenance, the state government swiftly went into action by renovating the two mosques.

Other things done for the Muslims are as follows:

²⁶ https://dbpedia.org/page/James_Ayatse

²⁷ Ibrahim, Muhammad, Khalid, Ustaz, *Muslims of Benue State: A Survey*, Nigeria Research Network (NRN) Paper No. 8, Oxford Department of International Development, Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford, January 2021, p.4.

²⁸ Ibrahim, Muhammad, Khalid, Ustaz, *Ibid.*, p.7.

- (a) Grant-aiding some schools and colleges belonging to the Muslims...
- (b) Sponsoring of between 150 and 200 Muslim pilgrims to *hajj* each year since 2001.
- (c) *Eid el-Fitr*, *Eid el-Adha* festivals and *Ramadan* gifts to the Muslims, this includes food items and livestock to Imams and Muslim leaders."²⁹

TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Cosmology

The Tiv believe in the concept of *Aondo* [God] as ‘the creator of the universe and the owner of all living and non-living things.’³⁰ He also created *akombo* [divinities], who perform specialised functions and deal with human needs and problems related to food, water, health, wealth, safety, security, fertility, order, peace, etc.³¹ The *akombo* play a central part in Tiv traditional religion:

They (*akombo*) have rules and regulations governing the practice of the rituals and the general conduct of societal members in all ramifications of life. Violation of the codes attracts punishment from the divine. But obedience brings fertility to women, land, good health and prosperity to the people.

Through this means (by propitiation of the *akombo*), the Tiv people access the Supreme Being for the provision of security to both people and properties, ensure peaceful co-existence of individuals, promote unity and development among others.³²

The *akombo* act as a bridge between *Aondo* and the Tiv in order to facilitate the bestowing of blessings upon them. As the Supreme Being, *Aondo* is all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful, always present and lives in immense and inscrutable majesty in the heavens. The *akombo* are responsible for enforcing the various prohibitions, laws and taboos that were established by *Aondo*, the observance of which ensures an ongoing harmonious relationship

²⁹ Ibrahim, Muhammad, Khalid, Ustaz, Ibid., p.8.

³⁰ Dzurgba, Akpenpuun, *A Theological Reflection on Tiv Religion in Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 37, Issue 1-2, 2005, pp.85-95.

³¹ Dzurgba, Akpenpuun, Ibid.

³² Terhembra, Iorshager and Ways, Tarhom, David, *Akombo in Tiv Traditional Worldview: A Theological Discourse in International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)*, Vol. IV, Issue XI, November 2020, p.138.

between the Supreme Being and His people. The different types of *akombo* are 'the embodiment of the codes with their various penalties attached to them'³³ and they have emblems by which they are identified:

These emblems are made up of material objects which the Tiv use in their everyday life. They are derived from sticks, soil, animal parts, shells, stones and feathers. However, the emblems as believed by the Tiv are not objects of worship but a means through which the invisible Being is accessed for help, thus making the universe a better and happier place to live.³⁴

By employing a classification of the *akombo*, the Tiv are placed in a better position to quickly and correctly identify which entity is responsible for a current bout of misfortune, such as ill health:

If a man does believe that he is ill for such a reason, then he will have recourse to a diviner (*or-u-ishor*), who will indicate to him the nature of his illness, that is, will categorise the particular *akombo* that is believed to be concerned, and will also indicate to the patient which particular kin are involved in this illness. The patient will then return to his compound, call together the relevant kin, and have a discussion with them.

The next stage is to consult a man who is known in the area as being capable of performing the healing ceremony (simply called, in Tiv, *kwaghsoron*, literally 'a setting right of the matter') related to the *akombo* involved. The patient will go through this ceremony in front of kinsfolk, take the medicine, and the sequence is finished. If he does not get better, then the whole sequence may have to be repeated.³⁵

The classifications of the *akombo* related to illness vary from district to district, and even from person to person, but within the Mbara clan, around which D.R. Price-Williams' research study was focused, they gave these examples of the *akombo* that govern certain diseases:

³³ Terhemba, Iorshager and Wayas, Tarhom, David, *Ibid.*, p.139.

³⁴ Terhemba, Iorshager and Wayas, Tarhom, David, *Ibid.*, p.140.

³⁵ Price-Williams, D.R., *A Case Study of Ideas Concerning Disease among the Tiv in Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 1962, p.124. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1158180. Accessed 20 July 2021.

- *Swende*: A cough that can spoil a woman's pregnancy and cause infertility in a man;
- *Twer*: A person becomes unable to walk properly and they begin to walk like a snake. Their body also becomes very heavy and they begin to shake;
- *Dam*: A lethal combination of cough, headache and eye trouble that leads to a person becoming thinner and thinner. Their mouth also becomes increasingly dry and their ability to speak is hampered;
- *Iwa*: A pain felt around the waist that also affects a man's sexual performance. It may be accompanied by pain in the stomach, eye trouble and a downturn in the productivity of the man's farm;
- *Kwambe*: An outbreak of boils and swellings all over a person's body.³⁶

The *azôv* [spirits or fairies] are supernatural beings that are less powerful than the *akombo*, but no less influential within the Tiv cosmology. Their habitat is thought to be in and among nature: 'in the rock, water, woods, hills and mountains.'³⁷ They are known for being good-humoured, generous and rendering assistance, but also for being quick to righteous anger and vengeful until appeased:

Azôv give good things to people: They supply animals for hunting, riches, excellence in given areas and bountiful harvests among others. Hagher describes *azôv* to be the invisible counterparts of mankind that carry out human activities like trading, weaving of clothes and fishing...They have everything in abundance therefore, from their resources, they give generously to the people who are in need...

The favours mentioned above are particularly directed to people who obey their laws, who are hospitable, generous and obedient to societal norms. Those who do not follow their laws and are not well disposed to other individuals are subjected to the wrath of the *azôv* in form of poor harvests, barrenness and blindness just to mention a few...Azôv maltreat individuals and families when offended.³⁸

³⁶ Price-Williams, D.R., *Ibid.*, p.126.

³⁷ Terhemba, Iorshager and Wayas, Tarhom, David, *Ibid.*, p.140.

³⁸ Terhemba, Iorshager and Wayas, Tarhom, David, *Ibid.*, p.140.

A close relation of the *azôv*, who have been known to assume humanlike form, are the *mbaahiliv* [shape-changers]. The Tiv believe that ‘the capacity for changing from human form into that of a bird, animal or snake, is given to a man or woman while he or she is still an embryo.’³⁹ This ability will give the person phenomenal powers from early childhood, for instance, being able to escape from their enemies, assist their families and communities with tasks that may be too treacherous for ordinary citizens, play practical jokes and in negative instances, stealing undetected.⁴⁰ Despite the *azôv* being less than human and the *mbaahiliv* being fully human, they have more attributes in common than differences, not least the key roles they play in Tiv traditional religion:

...Both are associated with the marvellous, with prosperity and danger, with flowing water and the banks of streams, both may appear what they are not, both are like ordinary men and come into close contact with them, both are powerful over nature, respected somewhat fearfully, and are yet non-moral, rather than bad or virtuous.

It seems reasonable to place them in an outer circle where speculation greatly outweighs public ritual activity, but which is significant for the Tiv view of the relation between culture and nature, and of prosperity and misfortune.⁴¹

A strong counterpart to the largely positive supernatural forces of *azôv* and *mbaahiliv* is the largely negative supernatural force of *tsav* [loose translation: witchcraft potential]. *Tsav* is a complex multi-layered concept that includes the evil that can grow on a person’s heart, a mysterious life force that can be used for good or evil, and power, particularly power over other people:

Linked to the notions of *akombo* and disease is the idea of action by witches. A person becomes ill, can die or be harmed in some other way, through the actions of people, collectively called the *mbatsav*, who operate their machinations secretly. The term comes from the central concept *tsav*, which refers basically to witchcraft substance, and is said to

³⁹ Edwards, Campion, Adrian, *Seeing, Believing, Doing: The Tiv Understanding of Power in Anthropos*, Vol. 78, No. 3/4, 1983, p.473. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40460643. Accessed 21 July 2021.

⁴⁰ Edwards, Campion, Adrian, *Ibid.*, p.473.

⁴¹ Edwards, Campion, Adrian, *On the Non-Existence of an Ancestor Cult among the Tiv in Anthropos*, Vol. 79, No. 1/3, 1984, p.94. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40460794. Accessed 21 July 2021.

grow on a person's heart during his lifetime. Bohannan has also characterised *tsav* as meaning power, talent, ability.

Tsav is essentially a neutral power: it can be turned to good ends as well as to bad. In fact, the *mbatsav*, as earlier ethnographers have shown, have the dual role of custodians of the land and its spoilers.⁴²

The distinction between good *tsav* and bad *tsav* is a dichotomy that serves a key function within Tiv traditional religion as a demonstration of the ability of members of society to uplift or cause the downfall of those around them. The *Mbatsav* are 'a cult of men and women with spirit forces that they use to manipulate the physical and spiritual worlds.'⁴³ The good *mbatsav* 'operate on behalf of society, holding society in check and in harmony'⁴⁴ while the bad *mbatsav* 'are malevolent, selfish and destructive and they disrupt the social fabric of the community.'⁴⁵ The widespread and pervasive fear of the *mbatsav* led to a number of anti-witchcraft movements in the first half of the 20th century, which can be directly linked to the decline of Tiv traditional religion and the rise of Christianity:

It was the dread of the *Mbatsav* that led to the *Budeli*, *Ijôv*, *Ivase* and *Haakaa (Namakaa)*. These were social and political movements that interrogated and undermined the power of the malevolent *Mbatsav*. The *Mbatsav* are still a constant presence in Tiv social and cultural life as they are believed to continue to function in the mundane and cosmogonic frontiers.

Even with the firm implantation of Christianity and its increased entrenchment with Pentecostal new religion in present-day Tivland, the fear of the *Mbatsav* is the beginning of wisdom even among the elite.⁴⁶

Swem

The word *Swem* means a number of things to the Tiv people. It is the name of the place in the Republic of Cameroon that the Tiv migrated from to their

⁴² Price-Williams, D.R., *Ibid.*, pp.129-130.

⁴³ Tsaaior, James Tar, *Those Days and These Days: Akiga's Narrativisation of the Tiv Nation in 'History of the Tiv' in Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 85, No. 4, 2015, p.605. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/26157559. Accessed 20 July 2021.

⁴⁴ Tsaaior, James Tar, *Ibid.*, p.605.

⁴⁵ Tsaaior, James Tar, *Ibid.*, p.605.

⁴⁶ Tsaaior, James Tar, *Ibid.*, p.605.

present-day home in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. It is the name of the highest mountain in a range of mountains, also located in the Republic of Cameroon that hosted the Tiv until their population grew and necessitated a move in search of a more spacious abode. Even today, Mount Swem continues to be regarded as a holy place to be visited by only those who are worthy. Its importance has been compared to the biblical Mount Sinai, which is a pivotal sacred place within the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions.

Swem is the name of a great *akombo* of justice used for the taking of serious oaths, that is often physically represented by a symbolic ash-filled pot that may also contain other ingredients such as feathers, camwood and blood. The belief in the divinity *Swem*'s powers is so great that 'in government courts of law in Tivland, adherents of the Tiv religion are provided with *Swem* to swear...*Swem* is also used to sanction policy decisions made by the council of elders.'⁴⁷ An oath sworn by *Swem* carries such weight that it is often the final act of *akombo* rituals and funeral proceedings:

Perhaps the most impressive ritual ending imaginable in a Tiv setting is the breaking of a *swem* pot. The group of men involved will place their hands on a *swem* pot which is hurled down on to the ground and broken. This invokes a conditional curse on whoever has been practising *tsav*.

My Tiv informants did not regard this rite as being intended as a purification of the land as a whole; it would, they insisted, simply affect those taking part in it, by causing illness and death to whoever was guilty.⁴⁸

Thus, it may be seen that the aspects of Tiv traditional religion outlined above are intricately connected with their societal framework, cultural background and overarching belief in their way of life.

BLACKSMITHING

Blacksmithing is a traditional ancient craft that emerged in West Africa in the fifteenth century. A blacksmith is a 'craftsman who fabricates objects out of iron by hot and cold forging on an anvil.'⁴⁹ In both history and folklore,

⁴⁷ Dzurgba, Akpenpuun, *The Ethical Dimension of Tiv Religion in Africana Marburgensia*, Vol. 25, Issue 1-2, 1992, pp.29-43.

⁴⁸ Edwards, Campion, Adrian, *On the Non-Existence of an Ancestor Cult among the Tiv*, *Ibid.*, p.90.

⁴⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/blacksmith>

blacksmiths worldwide have been associated with otherworldly and magical abilities, perhaps due to their ability to create a staggering range of essential everyday items such as nails, screws, cutlasses, axes, hammers, swords, shields, armour, wheel rims, traps and rakes. Their ironworking talents were highly sought after because many communities believed their presence in their town was a talisman of good luck, and that their implements had healing powers. In Tivland, *iwyavaren* [blacksmithing] performs a function in society that extends far beyond metalwork:

The Tiv traditional religion was mixed with traditional technological practices as an aspect of the religion. In the religion, the practitioner was a person who was well initiated (ordained) and skilful (trained) in making weapons, instruments and utensils. He was also a medicine man who handled cases of illness that were alleged to be related to *Iwya* or *Iwa* (the god of iron).

He builds his *Ateiwya* or *Ateiwa* (workshop), which was used for blacksmithing as well as shrine. Consequently, in the workshop and shrine, the practitioner (Tiv believed to possess magical and religious powers) cured some sicknesses by concocting herbs and some part of *Sueiwya* (tuyeres) for medicinal values.⁵⁰

Becoming a Tiv blacksmith and owning an *Ateiwya* was an honour that was bestowed only after the completion of a rigorous apprenticeship scheme, and following an induction into *Iwya* magic. Final approval to pursue the career must come from one's *ityô* [patrilineal lineage] and permission must be obtained from one's *Abeeakaa* [high priest] or *Orgbegba* [professor of Tiv magic] to construct the *Ateiwya* once certain magical competencies have been earned:

It is appropriate and necessary for the intending professional to acquire certain magic or magical powers to enable him carry out his blacksmithing activities successfully. Such magic includes the *Hwer*, which guides against fire outbreaks or hazards, witchcraft and invaders.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Agber, Cuttings, Tim, Udu, Terver T., Fiase, Aôndohemba, Godwin, and Aniho, Titus, Terkimbi, *Tiv Traditional Religion and Its Contribution to the Trade/Educational and Technological Development of the Tiv Society in Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 3, No. 5, 2015, p.215.

⁵¹ Agber, Cuttings, Tim, Udu, Terver T., Fiase, Aôndohemba, Godwin, and Aniho, Titus, Terkimbi, *Ibid.*, p.218.

An example of a collection of a blacksmith's tools

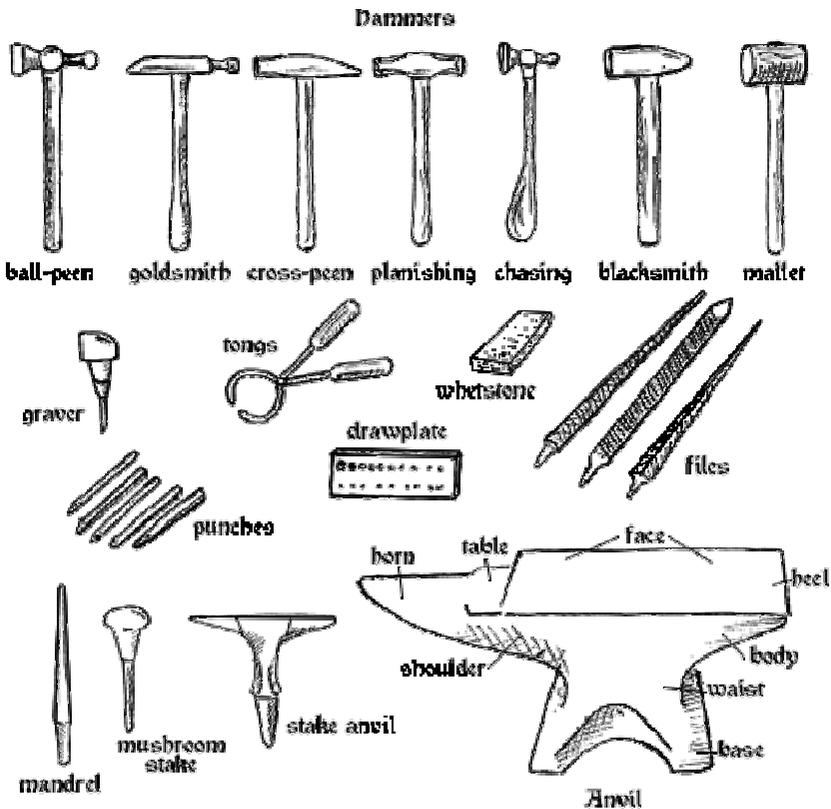


Image source: <https://wrytin.com/shreyasaravind/types-of-forging-machines-and-equipments-j5dcdulr>

The advent of colonialism with its Western technology and tools, and the unfortunate lack of reading and writing among present-day Tiv blacksmiths has led to the marked decline of this crucial trade, but it continues to be a respected career path. They have found a way to remain relevant in the twenty-first century through the production of prestige artistic adzes [heavy hand tools with a steel cutting blade attached at right angles to a wooden handle] used during gatherings and the creation of tools and implements for popular and well-loved theatrical events like the *Kwagh-hir*.

Chapter 7

IBIBIO-EFIK GODS

[The Ibibio-Efik people combined comprise 1.8% of the Nigerian population according to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, 2018 estimate]

Ibibio, people of southeastern Nigeria, mainly in the Cross River state. They speak dialects of Efik-Ibibio, a language now grouped within the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family. The Ibibio comprise the following major divisions: Efik, Northern (Enyong), Southern (Eket), Delta (Andoni-Ibeno), Western (Anang), and Eastern (the Ibibio proper).¹

Efik, people inhabiting the lower Cross River in Cross River State, Nigeria. Their language is the main dialect and language of the Efik-Ibibio group of the Benue-Congo branch of Niger-Congo languages. It is widely spoken as a lingua franca throughout the Cross River region. The Efik, who are culturally and linguistically related to the Ibibio, migrated down the Cross River during the first half of the 17th century (though the date of that migration is contested by some) and founded Creek Town, Duke Town, and other settlements.²

BACKGROUND

The Ibibio and Efik people* are often clustered together because of the similarities they share in dialect and abode. The former are primarily located in the southern Nigerian states of Akwa Ibom and Cross River, while the latter call the southern part of Cross River State home. This state of affairs came about when 'Akwa Ibom was created in 1987 for the Ibibio people from former Cross River State, which had originally accommodated these two

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ibibio>

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Efik>

* Estimates range from 4 to 5 million.

ethnic groups in south-eastern Nigeria.³ Before Nigeria existed as a nation, the Ibibio were self-governed until they were assimilated into the Eastern area during British colonial rule:

The ancestors of the Ibibio people are believed to have occupied the Central Benue valley along with other populations upon their arrival from "further North." While in the region, they evolved the proto-Bantu language and other religious and social institutions, including the conception of God.

From the Central Benue valley, they dispersed to the Usak Edet region [c. 8000 B.C.] on the Nigerian side of the Cameroon Mountain from where they accessed the present-day Ibibio area via the sea. From this point, a section of them migrated and settled at Ibom in present-day Abia State, and established a functional socio-political organisation including the much-revered *Ibritam Inokon* (the Long Juju of Arochukwu).⁴

There are several other ethnic groups in this part of Nigeria that are substantially similar to the Ibibio and Efik, such as the Akamkpa, Annang, Biase, Eket, Ekid, Obolo, Oron, Ibeno and Uruan, all of whom overlap with one or both ethnic groups on points of dialect, tradition and culture.

The Efik possess varying accounts of their origins, including migration from the Sudan to Ghana, and then into the Niger Delta area, before eventually arriving in Ibibioland and settling in Cross River State. Another version has the Efik migrating from Niger to Arochukwu, leaving due to a dispute with the Aros, then settling at Uruan, before moving on to Ibom. Other accounts are broadly similar in concept but with vastly different starting points of migration, namely Palestine and Egypt:

The account by Etubom Ededem Ékpènyong Oku (Ambo group) sees the Efik as an oriental people who came from Palestine and wandered through Ghana to Ututu, Ibom and finally settled at Uruan. At Uruan, the Efik were accused of civil disobedience and were compelled to leave after a brief war.

³ Charles, Joseph O., *Social Relations and the 'Trinity' in Ibibio Kinship: The Case of Ibibio Immigrants in Akpabuyo (Efikland), Nigeria* in *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 61, No. 3, 2005, p.342. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3631323. Accessed 23 July 2021.

⁴ Akpan, Jonah, Uwem, *A History of Ibibio People of Southern Nigeria* in *POLAC Historical Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1, July-December 2019, p.128.

The twelve Efik families, originally residents in Uruan, spread in different directions with the main stream of immigrants at Ikpa Ene, from Ikpa Ene, the Efik moved to Ndodoghi and then to Creek Town [from where the city states of Henshaw Town and Duke Town were founded] ...⁵

The Ibibio-Efik are both coastal peoples with Akwa Ibom State served by the Cross River, the Imoh River and Kwa Ibo River, and Cross River State served by the Cross River, the Kwa Ibo River and the Calabar River. The conditions in both states are ideal for all manner of agricultural activities:

[Akwa Ibom State] has two vegetation types, namely, the tropical rain forest and the deciduous forest. Majority of the [Ibibio] people are farmers and the soil is good mostly for cassava while rice is grown in some areas. In the loamy coastal areas, plantains, yams, maize and other food crops abound...

The main occupations of the people are farming, fishing and trading. Farming is primarily for food production and consumption within and outside the state, and also for export. Palm oil and kernel are produced. Fishing is done mostly by the coastal people.⁶

Originally a fishing community, Old Calabar developed into a major trading centre from the 17th to the 19th century, exporting slaves and later palm oil in return for European goods. European ships had to pay a duty (comey) to Efik chiefs for the privilege of trading.

During the 20th century a large part of the Efik population moved from the towns and settled in farming villages in the forest. The staple foods are yams and cassava, supplemented by taro, corn (maize), fruits and vegetables, and fish.⁷

Akwa Ibom and Cross River are both famed for their beautiful natural scenery, exquisite cuisine and the essential roles their manufacturing sectors play within Nigeria's commercial economy. The Ibibio-Efik tend to be industrious, hardworking, with a strong focus on the traditional family unit.

⁵ Ekpe, Nsa, Bassey, *Cultural Identity and Diversity among the Efik and Qua of Calabar* in *AKSU Journal of History and Global Studies*, Vol. 2, Nos. 3 & 4, 2016, pp.112-114.

⁶ Essien, Okon, Dominus, *The Pre-Colonial Economy of Akwa Ibom* in *Transafrican Journal of History*, Vol. 24, 1995, p.186. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/24328663. Accessed 23 July 2021.

⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Efik>

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is the predominant religion in both Ibibioland and Efikland today, mostly due to the efforts of Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century. For the Ibibio people, the change to life as they knew it came about in the mid-nineteenth century; it was a change that started slowly and then picked up the pace until it became a race between denominations:

The pioneer Christian missions to Ibibioland were the Presbyterian, Qua Iboe, Primitive Methodist and Roman Catholic missions, which came in 1846, 1887, 1893, and 1903 respectively and operated, up to 1905, mostly in coastal communities like Calabar, Ibeno, Oron and Eket. By 1927, when what was termed the Spirit Movement broke out, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Mission (AMEZ), the United Native African Church (UNAC), the Salvation Army and the Anglican Mission...had joined the pioneer missions in pushing Christianity up from the coastal enclaves, to spread the length and breadth of Ibibioland.

All the missions in Ibibioland by 1927, excepting the UNAC which had broken off from the Anglicans, were American- or European-based. Between 1927 and 1950 other foreign-based missions came to Ibibioland, notably the Lutheran and Apostolic churches, and Assemblies of God, which arrived in the 1930s.⁸

The reaction of the Ibibios to the steady onslaught of foreign missionaries proclaiming a new way of thinking was the usual mix of deep suspicion, reluctant acceptance and bitter opposition. Some communities were quicker to embrace Christianity, especially once they realised the advantages that came with it, such as in the fields of education and health. Other communities put up fierce resistance when they correctly deduced that several of their traditional arrangements, such as secret societies and the killing of twins, would be adversely affected by the introduction of Christian practices and beliefs. However, the positivity and persistence of the missionaries, in conjunction with the support of the British colonial administration, proved to be difficult to turn away:

⁸ Abasiattai, Monday B., *The Oberi Okaiame Christian Mission: Towards a History of an Ibibio Independent Church in Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 59, No. 4, 1989, p.497. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1159944. Accessed 28 July 2021.

By 1935 however, almost every village in Ibibioland had at least one church, and most villages had between two and six different churches with large numbers of Christians. It became apparent therefore that Christianity's relentless advance could not be halted or reversed. Hence non-converts who continued to practice Ibibio traditional religion could not but tolerate the new faith, which helped to diminish, but not eradicate, conflict.

In many instances the main conflict came to be between the Christian denominations themselves as they competed to control particular areas, villages or schools in Ibibioland.⁹

An unexpected reaction to the overrepresentation of missions in Ibibioland took place in the late 1920s, after it became apparent that the leadership of the various churches was being monopolised by the European missionaries, and that Christian doctrine made little to no allowance for the daily supernatural anxieties that plagued the Ibibio people; how were they meant to deal with the witches, evil spirits and negative forces constantly working to destroy their good fortune? The growing discontent found its voice with the assistance of the Qua Iboe Church [now known as the United Evangelical Church], which was founded in 1887 by an Irish missionary by the name of Samuel Alexander Bill (1864-1942).

Samuel Bill served under the Qua Iboe Mission [now known as Mission Africa], and along with the Church, they are named after the beachy location near the Qua Iboe River [also spelled Kwa Ibo] where the Mission started its work in Ibibioland. This lively and outspoken missionary and his equally lively and outspoken Church teachers encouraged the birth of the Spirit Movement among the Ibibio, which promoted public confessions of sins, long and emotional church services and becoming 'possessed by the spirit,'¹⁰ among other things. The revival services facilitated by the Qua Iboe Church led to the establishment of a uniquely Ibibio-led church:

By December 1927, the movement had spread from Uyo district...to Ikot Ekpene district...and then to Itu district...and had attracted adherents

⁹ Abasiattai, Monday B., *Ibid.*, p.498.

¹⁰ Abasiattai, Monday B., *Ibid.*, p.500.

from virtually all the Protestant denominations and, to a lesser extent, from the Roman Catholics...

By this stage the movement was virtually out of the control of its Qua Iboe originators. It became the first mass religious movement and, as far as ascertained, the first independent church in Ibibioland. The church was known as Spirit Movement Church till 1936 when the name changed to Oberi Okaime.¹¹

This may be considered the breaking of a dam, of sorts, because this was followed by the emergence and proliferation of 'independent' churches, in other words, African Independent Churches that chose to break away from the Western-led denominations and introduce a new kind of Christianity; one that did not exclude the traditional Ibibio way of life and understood that the Ibibio people needed more flexibility than was being offered by the Christian missionaries at the time. An example of an African-initiated spiritualist church is the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star (BCS), which was founded in 1956 by Leader Olumba Olumba Obu (1918-2003) in Calabar, Cross River State. This galvanising change in direction necessarily had inadvertent socio-political implications in Ibibioland, which affected the extent and effectiveness of British colonial administration; it became a deep-rooted problem which reared its head time and time again under various guises until the eventual collapse of indirect rule in southeastern Nigeria in the mid-1950s.

In Efikland, the journey to conversion began under the auspices of the Church of Scotland Mission in 1846. The Church of Scotland falls under the mantle of Presbyterianism, which is a Reformed Protestant denomination that was founded in the sixteenth century. The word 'presbyter' means 'an elder in a church'¹² and it refers to the main characteristic of Presbyterian churches, that is, they are governed by elders as opposed to bishops:

The church name comes from the system of government the religion uses. Representative assemblies of elders, which are called presbyteries, govern the church. In comparison, bishops govern the Episcopal Church and congregational church is government by congregations...

¹¹ Abasiattai, Monday B., *Ibid.*, p.501.

¹² <https://www.etymonline.com/word/presbyterian>

In the Presbyterian church, teaching elders and ruling elders, or ministers, are ordained and responsible for their local congregation. Other business duties of the church, such as finance and buildings, are responsibilities given to deacons.¹³

Led by the ‘accomplished diplomatist and tactician’¹⁴ Hope Masterton Waddell (1804-1895), the Mission touched down in Efikland in the mid-nineteenth century where it quickly made powerful Efik allies, albeit with the occasional conflict making itself known:

When [Hope Waddell] arrived in Calabar in 1846 he had the good fortune to be matched by the astute Efik king Eyo Nsa II of Creek Town, a man keen to educate his people to adapt to the changing nature of international commerce. For years, the Efik had been entrepreneurs in the lucrative slave trade. With that trade suppressed, Eyo was eager to share in the benefits of an industrialised England that needed his palm oil...

A presbytery had been formed at Calabar in 1858, only twelve years after the mission’s arrival. Its minutes tell of the perpetual struggle between the conservatives – both expatriate and Nigerian – always keen to consolidate, and the impatient radicals who wanted to expand and hasten the transfer from ‘foreign mission’ to ‘Nigerian church.’¹⁵

The schools that were built by the Mission often also served medical and religious facilities to the local communities, which demonstrates the obvious advantages that led to the widespread acceptance of Christianity throughout Efikland. Education, in particular, was promoted as a key feature because it enabled prospective and new converts to engage with reading the Bible in communal settings and on their own, because ‘preaching to the Efik was important, but giving the Efik personal access to the Word on which the preaching was based was even more important.’¹⁶ Due to this enhanced focus on reading and writing, the Efik language received a degree of attention that it

¹³<https://www.christianity.com/church/denominations/presbyterians-10-things-to-know-about-this-historic-denomination.html>

¹⁴ Taylor, William H., *The Presbyterian Educational Impact in Eastern Nigeria* in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1983, p.224. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1594916. Accessed 29 July 2021.

¹⁵ Taylor, William H., *Ibid.*, pp.224-225.

¹⁶ Taylor, William H., *Ibid.*, p.226.

would otherwise not have experienced, which resulted in an elevation far beyond the relatively small number of Efik people in Nigeria:

The consequence of this was a determination by the missionaries (a) to master the vernacular and (b) to produce local reading materials for their schools. The original [Mission] band included [Samuel] Edgerley, a printer; his skills and machines gave the Calabar mission an importance beyond its numerical strength, since for many decades his was the area's sole printing press...

Thanks to the work of the mission, the Efik language was systematically studied and set out in a written form for the time. As a result, the Scottish scholars added to the political and commercial importance of the Efik tongue, an importance due to its extensive oral use in commercial transactions between the hinterland and the ocean-going traders.

Efik remains an important Nigerian language though the Efik people constitute less than 1% of Nigeria's population.¹⁷

Another influential missionary figure was Mary Slessor (1848-1915), a redhaired blue-eyed Scottish Presbyterian woman with a passion for education. Following her arrival in Nigeria in 1876, she lived among the Efik people for several years, learning their language, eating their food, teaching their children and providing basic medical care to their communities. She became a treasured and much-loved presence in Efikland, and as a result, she won their trust and was able to further the progress of sweeping changes to traditional Efik cultural practices, in conjunction with sympathetic and highly placed members of Efik society, and other Christian missionaries who understood the scale of the issues at hand:

Missionaries to Calabar faced a strong culture of superstitions and beliefs that were held and enforced in local tribes and communities. Life was governed by fear of curses and punishments...

One of the most harrowing customs that Mary encountered in this particular part of Africa was in relation to the birth of twins. It was considered that when twins were born, one of them was the child of the devil and as it wasn't known which twin this was, they both had to be

¹⁷ Taylor, William H., *Ibid.*, p.226.

killed. The mothers were then ostracised and banished from their community with no means of support. The rescuing, protection and raising of surviving and abandoned twins and their mothers became one of Mary's key roles in her work in Africa as well as working to change the culture and beliefs that were held in relation to twins.

Mary adopted some of the abandoned twins as her own...Part of the role of a missionary was to look after the local children and teach them reading and writing to enable them to learn bible stories, however they were not encouraged by the mission societies who employed them to adopt them into their own family. Mary, always following her instincts, ignored this rule and is known to have adopted nine rescued children. They became her family and helped her in her work as she gradually worked as the only missionary in more remote parts of Calabar.¹⁸

Due to the strong presence of the Scottish Mission in Efikland, there was very little room left for other Christian denominations to make significant impact during that period of time, but it can safely be concluded that:

With its teaching programmes, incorporation of indigenous spiritual thought within their mission message and with the successes in providing a safer environment by outlawing human sacrifice, the Presbyterian church laid the foundation for later Christian movements.

Not only for those missions from Britain that found their way to Calabar during colonial times, like the Roman Catholic Mission in 1908 or the Methodist Mission in 1914 (Hackett, 1989: 78-79), but also for later local Christian movements that form the basis of current-day Pentecostalism in town.¹⁹

The Efik people were certainly not immune to the wave of the Spirit Movement that proved to be extremely popular among the Ibibio people. The space provided within the concept of Christianity as viewed through an Efik lens gave the people room to 'incorporate ideas from more traditional

¹⁸ <http://maryslessor.org/category/about-mary/africa-years>

¹⁹ Ligtvoet, Inge, *Fear and Faith: Uncertainty, Misfortune and Spiritual Insecurity in Calabar, Nigeria*, MA Thesis, The African Studies Centre Leiden (ASCL), Leiden University, August 2011, p.27.

religious thought into their discourse,²⁰ which eventually led to the establishment of ‘indigenous Pentecostal-like movements.’²¹

Thus, it may be seen that the Ibibio-Efik people possess a deeply embedded Christian culture that has been uniquely sculpted to fit their lifestyles.

Sample text from the Efik Bible

edibene Enye. Ebəŋ akam ntem 9
 ndien, ete,
 Ete nnyin emi odude ke heaven :
 Yak ikpono enyiŋ Fo,
 Yak Ubəŋ Fo edi ; 10
 Yak inam uduak Fo ;
 Nte enamde ke heaven, yak inam
 ke isəŋ kpasuk ntre ;
 Nə nnyin udia eke ekemde nnyin 11
 ke usen mfin ;
 Nyuŋ dahado ke isən eke ikamade 12
 Fi, nte emi nnyin ikadahadedo
 inə mmə emi ekamade nnyin
 isən ;
 13 Kunyuŋ uda nnyin usin ke idomo ;
 Edi sio nnyin ke ubək andidiək.

Image source: http://worldbibles.org/language_detail/eng/ef/Efik

ISLAM

Despite being a Christian stronghold, the homeland of the Ibibio-Efik also found room for the introduction of Islam, although on a lesser scale. Because of the region’s proximity to the Atlantic Ocean, the inhabitants of coastal communities were regularly exposed to a melting pot of nationalities and ethnicities, including Muslim migrants from Northern and Western Nigeria, some of whom ended up settling in Calabar. The impact of this religious expansion was unmistakable, according to the recollections of a Primitive Methodist missionary in 1901:

A military station established at Ediba, a town beyond Ungwana, where a small detachment of Hausa soldiers under an English officer was stationed, greatly promoted the pacification of the river...The Hausa soldiers brought a new religion, Mohammedanism, before the eyes of the

²⁰ Ligtvoet, Inge, *Ibid.*, p.28.

²¹ Ligtvoet, Inge, *Ibid.*, p.28.

people, and it was not long before Mohammedan traders from the Niger swarmed into Duke Town, and even up the river. The erection of a mosque has given a concrete form to the new influence.²²

The process of awareness, curiosity and conversion was no different in this part of Nigeria than elsewhere in the country, especially when coupled with the fact that Muslim migrants came from all walks of life, such as traders, hunters, government employees and artisans; this contributed to the perception that converting to Islam would result in an elevation of one's status and career path. It has been asserted that 'the first known case of conversion to Islam outside Igboland was of Ahmed Eyo Bassey of Creek Town, Calabar, whose conversion occurred in London in 1951 through a Pakistani Muslim preacher.'²³ Bassey was a Efik man, and the next high profile Efik convert to Islam was a man called Hamza in 1967. Like dominoes, Islam began to knock over long-standing traditions, one by one:

In addition to the Efik, other ethnic groups in the Cross River area have produced their own Muslim converts. In 1969, the first Ibibio, aged nineteen, took Islam from a migrant cattle dealer; and, in 1984, the first Annang, aged sixteen, took Islam from the Sarikin Hausa (leader of migrant Hausa settlement) of Ikot Ekpene. Two non-Igbo, an Efik and an Ibibio, recanted during the war, but reconverted many years afterwards.²⁴

Sporadic cases of intermarriage between Muslim migrant men and Ibibio-Efik women also took place, leading to further conversions, although they were few and far between, due to the pronounced differences between the Northern and Eastern Nigerian cultures. The number of Muslims living in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States has remained low but consistent, perhaps as a result of state protection and support, particularly as Islam continues to be held in high regard by its believers.

Islam came to the Ibibio-Efik people in a relatively gentle manner, without the need for jihads or violent military action. They may have been

²² Goldie, H., *Calabar and its Mission* (Edinburgh: Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier, 1901) quoted in Uchendu, Egodi, *Islam, Stability and Security in Eastern Nigeria*, January 2016, p.4. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.1.3149.6563.

²³ Uchendu, Egodi, *Ibid.*, p.4.

²⁴ Uchendu, Egodi, *Ibid.*, p.8.

affected by other seismic societal events like slavery, cruel rituals and an abrupt adjustment to Western technology but the Sokoto Caliphate left this region entirely untouched.

JUDAISM

Within the Ibibio-Efik, there resides a belief that certain sub-groups ‘claim Jewish origins,’²⁵ distinct from the generally accepted migration theories:

The knowledge that the Ibibio including Annang, Efik, Oron, Eket, Andoni and Ibeno sub-groups originated from Israel, the stock of Abraham is inherent in all well-informed citizens of the old Calabar Province of the Eastern region of Nigeria.²⁶

Naturally, this belief has been contested and debated across all sections of Ibibio-Efik society, and the indigenous followers of Judaism have faced derision, disbelief and outright hostility, similar to the other Nigerian tribes who also look to Israel for validation of their religious beliefs. However, the Efik, for example, point to obvious similarities between some of their sociocultural and religious practices and those of the Jews as evidence of a shared history:

The Efik people had always acknowledged the wealthiest among them as king. Eyo Honesty II in 1847 admitted that if he did not work hard, he would be poor, and nobody would recognise him as a ruler. As he put it: “the man that has most money will always be king.” The Jews believed in this also, and in the Book of Isaiah (3:7) we have it that “in my house is neither bread nor clothing; make me not a ruler of the people.”

Like the Jews, the Efik circumcise their children [after] the eighth day of birth.²⁷

²⁵ Parfitt, Tudor, *Black Jews in Africa and the Americas* (Cambridge, United States of America: Harvard University Press, 2013), p.117.

²⁶ Umoh-Faithmann, Meleki, Nabi, *Ibibio Jews of Nigeria* (Uyo, Nigeria: Menorah Publishing Commission, 1999), p.vii.

²⁷ Inyang, Nyong, Emmanuel and Edem, Joseph, Victoria, *Social Media and the Diffusion of Efik Customs and Traditions in CRUTECH Journal of Communication*, Vol. 2, No. 2, December 2020, p.144.

The Ibibio-Efik Jews are not alone in their attempts to shelter under the umbrella of Judaism; within Nigeria and outside its borders, there are multiple ethnic groups who have made their aspirations clear during the preceding decades:

“Emerging” Jewish communities cover a wide spectrum. They include groups that claim descent from the so-called “lost tribes of Israel,” such as the Bene Menashe from Manipur and Mizoram in northeastern India whom you see often enough in the streets of Israel’s cities or the Bene Ephraim of Andhra Pradesh in central India. There are groups like the House of Israel of Ghana, the Diaspora Jiosy Gasy (Malagasy Jewish Diaspora) of Madagascar, the Beth Yeshourun (House of the Righteous) of Cameroon, the Lemba of southern Africa and a number of communities from among the Igbo of Nigeria, some of them of great numeric significance, who also trace their origins to some remote, less defined but ancient Israelite population, all of which groups have been the object of recent scholarly investigation.

Others are converts like the Abayudaya of Uganda whose warrior ancestors adopted a kind of Judaism around a hundred years ago. Other African groups with some form in the matter of being considered Jews include the Ashanti, Yoruba, Tutsi, Zulu, Xhosa, Masai, Bassa, Ibibio, Fula, Banyankole, Baluba, Khoikhoi, Shona, Makalanga, Esan, Efik, Amazigh (Berber), Baluba, Fon, Fulani, Meru, Nga, Soninke, Tiv, Yibir among others. Most but not all of the claims of such groups are dormant but new groups keep springing up and there are some recent ones numerically significant which are gathering momentum.²⁸

As active practitioners of Judaism with firmly established synagogues, coupled with a determination to eventually win formal recognition from the State of Israel, Ibibio-Efik Jews can only hope that their efforts will bear fruit in due course.

²⁸ Parfitt, Tudor and Fisher, Netanel (eds.), *Becoming Jewish: New Jews and Emerging Jewish Communities in a Globalised World* (Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), pp.3-4.

TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Cosmology

The Ibibio subscribe to a complex monotheistic traditional religion centred around *Abasi Ibom* [Supreme Being] who created the world and everything that lives within it. Names such as *Uduak-Abasi* [Gods' Will], *Iniabasi* [God's Time] and *Utibe-Abasi* [Wonderful God] reflect the high estimation placed on *Abasi* in Ibibio and Efik society. *Abasi* originally lived among the people he brought to life, but when they became too many and began to abuse the beautiful surroundings He provided for them, He became angry and retreated to Heaven. He took the Sun with him, establishing it in its new location in the sky. *Abasi* also created lesser divinities or spirits to carry out his work and supervise the human race in His absence:

The Ibibio believe that there is a high God (*Abasi*) who created all things including the gods (*ndem*) to whom He also gives charge of the different aspects of human affairs. Thus, there is *ndem isong* (fertility goddess) to look after land fertility, *ndem udua* (market god) to protect the interests of those who buy and sell in the market, etc.

Below the gods are unincarnated spirits like *eka abasi*, the spirit mother who looks after young children. Then there are spirits of the dead who may be good like the ancestors, or bad like the spirits of wicked people. All sacrifices are directed to one or other of these invisible beings and are officiated at by the clan head, village head, household head or the medicine man depending on the occasion.²⁹

The belief in these divinities and spirits are a core element of Ibibio traditional religion because they are believed to be manifestations of *Abasi*, and therefore deserving of respect, obedience and prayers. By appointing specific divinities to specific tasks such as water, land, war, prosperity, productivity and so on, *Abasi* ensured that the Ibibio possessed a strong emotional connection to these deities:

They believed that the divinities varied from society to society. The divinities could be male or female, good or bad; they could reside on land,

²⁹ Ukpong, Justin S., *Sacrificial Worship in Ibibio Traditional Religion* in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1982, p.162. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1581435. Accessed 3 Aug. 2021.

in water, trees, forests, hills or rocks. Some of the divinities were clan or tribal deities and were named according to different ethnic groups in pre-colonial Akwa Ibom. Individual families or particular villages worshipped some of the divinities. As such, the divinities served as a rallying point and a cohesive element in pre-colonial Akwa Ibom community.³⁰

In addition to the Supreme Being and the divinities, a number of sacred institutions played integral roles in the maintenance of law, order and morality among the Ibibio people:

- *Ekpo* cult: Based on the belief that their ancestors lived on as spirits, this cult was open to both men and women and its foundation is the belief in life after death. The *ekpo* [ancestral spirits] cult served as a physical representation and mirror of the spirit world government that was presumed to exist in the afterlife. As an organisation, the *ekpo* cult 'was based on division of functions for sound discipline and efficient administration' under the '*obong ekpo* or the chief priest who took charge of *ekpo* shrine and the smooth running of the society.'³¹
- *Idiong* cult: Based on the belief in superhuman powers, this cult attracted those who wished to acquire said powers and see into the future in order to improve their lives. Open to men and women, young and old, members could either join the *idiong ibok* grade, which covered divination, medicine, prophecy, curses and more, or the *idiong mfa* grade, who were 'highly respected by the society because of their spiritual knowledge and personal reputation.' The latter group was more difficult to join but carried more prestige than the former, so their skills as diviners and fortune-tellers were highly prized;³²
- *Inam* cult: Based on the belief in the need for an intercessory priesthood, this cult served as a source of traditional priests who presided over 'purification rites offered for atonement of guilt and preservation of life

³⁰ Essien, Okon, Dominus, *The Traditional Religion of Pre-Colonial Akwa Ibom and its Impact in Transafrican Journal of History*, Vol. 23, 1994, p.35. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/24520268. Accessed 3 Aug. 2021.

³¹ Essien, Okon, Dominus, *Ibid.*, pp.36-37.

³² Essien, Okon, Dominus, *Ibid.*, p.37.

and property.’ Both men and women were welcome but they had to be mature and ideally around or over 50 years of age. The *oku inam* [chief priest] was responsible for weighty religious duties within the community, for example, offering daily prayers to *Abasi* and carrying out rituals when needed.³³

The Efik similarly subscribe to the multifaceted concepts of an omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent *Abasi* as the Supreme Being, his treasured wife *Atai* [goddess of creation and death] and the *ndem* [marine deities] who aid the Supreme Being by carrying out assigned social, religious and economic tasks, and are mostly symbolised by aquatic animals. The *ndem* are an ancient and highly prized part of Efik traditional religion:

Most writers on the history of Calabar agree the *Ndem* Efik is one of the earliest, if not the earliest, forms of Efik religion...The worship of the *ndem* (primarily river gods and goddesses) has had great religious and political significance for the Efik. *Ndem Efik* proved to be an important integrating force during the period of early settlement at Creek Town and Duke Town...

***Ndem* are primarily associated with water and more commonly conceived and manifested in female terms. The association with water is appropriate to the traditional Efik occupation of fishing...*Ndem* are always prayed to for blessings, fertility and forgiveness and for the special protection which they are believed to extend to the people of Calabar.**³⁴

The word ‘*ndem*’ is itself fluid and it can be used to refer to ‘an abstract divine reality, or life-force’ as well as ‘the hosts of smaller, unnamed spirits believed to inhabit the earth and the water.’³⁵ In essence, the flexibility of the *ndem* is representative of the ‘unity and diversity of the Efik, serving as both an accessible personal deity for the individual or ward, and an identity-giving...’family of cults’ for the Efik as a whole.³⁶ Some of the well-known *ndem* include *Udom Inyang* [goddess of divination], *Anansa* [goddess of

³³ Essien, Okon, Dominus, Ibid., p.38.

³⁴ Hackett, Rosalind I.J., *Religion in Calabar: The Religious Life and History of a Nigerian Town* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988), pp.28-29.

³⁵ Hackett, Rosalind I.J., Ibid., p.31.

³⁶ Hackett, Rosalind I.J., Ibid., p.31.

fertility], *Ekanem Abasi* [god of truth] and *Ekpenyong Abasi* [god of courage].³⁷

Another key element of Efik traditional religion is the libation rituals which are ‘a means of talking to and consulting the ancestors on delicate matters.’³⁸ Like the Ibibio, the Efik believe their ancestors continue to protect them after they are gone and mediate with the higher powers on their behalf through the symbolic act of libation:

It is a mark of piety and devotion to the gods and ancestors in an attempt to define a meaningful moment of communion, to honour the ancestors, and to chart a new form of consciousness as required by customs. Libation expresses the relationship between the Supreme Being and the ancestors on the one hand, and the ancestors and man on the other. According to Opukuwaa (2005), this evidence shows that libation as a form of ritual transcends both spiritual and material worlds...

Armah (2006) sees libation as a propitiatory custom found everywhere in the African continent, which involves the pouring of alcohol or other drinks as offerings to the ancestors or divinities.³⁹

It should be noted that the libation rituals are not as informal as one may expect, especially because they carry such weight and are often invoked at important events such as weddings and funerals. The rituals should be initiated by a person who ‘exhibits great oratorical skills, cultural competence, and historical knowledge’ and ‘possesses the spiritual force to open the way to spiritual communication.’⁴⁰ The process of the rituals usually follow a specific stylised format that employs ‘the use of devices such as proverbs, idioms and metaphors in addition to material symbolisms [e.g. fresh palm fronds and alligator pepper].’⁴¹ Additionally, addressing the ancestors can be both verbal and non-verbal using language that tends to be polite, ‘highly fixed and deeply symbolic.’⁴²

³⁷ Affiah, Uwem and Owan, Jayne, *A Dramatic Analysis and Interpretation of the Ekombi Dance of the Efik People of Nigeria* in *International Journal of English Research*, Vol. 4, Issue 2, March 2018, p.26.

³⁸ Affiah, Uwem and Owan, Jayne, *Ibid.*, p.26.

³⁹ Mensah, Eyo and Silva, Ekawan, *The Language of Libation Rituals Among the Efik in Anthropological Notebooks*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2016, p.60.

⁴⁰ Mensah, Eyo and Silva, Ekawan, *Ibid.*, p.64.

⁴¹ Mensah, Eyo and Silva, Ekawan, *Ibid.*, p.74.

⁴² Mensah, Eyo and Silva, Ekawan, *Ibid.*, p.74.

The *Ekpe* [Leopard] fraternity played a role in Efik society that closely mirrors that of the *Ekpò*, *Idiong* and *Inam* cults in Ibibio society. The word ‘*ekpe*’ means ‘leopard’ in Efik and ‘is said to have been a mysterious and invisible being inhabiting the forest, and which could not be seen by the uninitiated.’⁴³ The *ekpe* would be ‘captured’ from time to time and ‘brought into town for traditional ceremonies, on which occasions its fearful roar could be heard by everyone, while only the initiates knew the exact source of the sound.’⁴⁴ Estimated to have been founded in the mid-eighteenth century, the *Ekpe* was originally a religious cult that transitioned over time into a form of centralised male-dominated government. By relying on a potent combination of fear, ritualistic fervour, assumed authority and appeal to tribal unity, the *Ekpe* presided over law and order, debt collection and the regulation of punishments in Efikland, until the majority of its powers were gradually superseded by the State.

Magic and Witchcraft

The Ibibio and the Efik have a healthy respect for the concepts of *eti* [good] and *idiok* [evil]. Some of the dark forces include magic and *ifot* [witchcraft and sorcery] and it is a commonly held belief that one’s individual gods, powerful charms and other personal protective forces are the best defence against them. There is a distinction between *afia ifot* [white witchcraft] and *obubit* [black witchcraft], the former used for ‘protective and positive purposes’ and the latter used to ‘cause harm and destruction to others.’⁴⁵ *Ifot* holds a great fascination for the Ibibio-Efik, and it is often held to be indistinguishable from sorcery:

...The Ibibio are not only obsessed with witchcraft, but...such beliefs are central to their cosmology. They tend to attribute to witchcraft almost every social evil; political and social backwardness and even personal failures are regularly explained in the idiom and logic of witchcraft. Barren women, people whose children die at birth or in succession, women with irregular menstrual flow, most accident victims, traders who suffer losses, office workers who fail to get promotions, a political candidate who fails to

⁴³ Hackett, Rosalind I.J., *Ibid.*, p.35.

⁴⁴ Hackett, Rosalind I.J., *Ibid.*, p.35.

⁴⁵ Hackett, Rosalind I.J., *Ibid.*, p.36.

get elected, a student who fails examinations, a person who notices scratches on his or her body, and so on, all suspect witches as the cause.

Even those who are most successful in their business or profession constantly fear being bewitched by envious relatives or friends.⁴⁶

Witches are taken very seriously in Ibibio-Efik society because they pose a threat to the health and wellbeing of their communities. By choosing to harm or destroy their fellow human beings with their supernatural powers, witches are participating in wicked acts, which is abhorrent to the honour and dignity with which the Ibibio-Efik people conduct their affairs:

Witchcraft...is the psychic act through which socially disapproved supernatural techniques influence events...They conceive of witchcraft as unequivocally evil, as destroying life (primarily through mysterious wasting diseases), and as eating the soul of their victim, thereby causing that person's death. Witches are active at night and cannot be seen or discovered by the uninitiated.⁴⁷

Naturally, the widespread belief in witches comes with the equally widespread practice of witch accusations, often wielded as a political weapon and a way of dousing social tensions, which have happened in self-destructive waves dating back to the eighteenth century. The accusation of being a witch normally resulted in a visit to an *abia ebok* [medicine man] for assistance with the divination of 'the cause of an unfortunate event, the verity of an allegation, the guilt or innocence of an individual, or the perpetrator of a heinous deed.'⁴⁸ The divination process, using a number of mystical and spiritual elements, including the ingestion of items such as the *esere* [Calabar bean] or the *mbiam* [magical liquid with the power to kill those who swear false oaths in its name], could be relied upon to judge the accused as either guilty or innocent and even revoke the curse that has been placed on the accuser.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Offiong, Daniel A., *Social Relations and Witch Beliefs among the Ibibio of Nigeria in Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 1983, p.82. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3629817. Accessed 5 Aug. 2021.

⁴⁷ Offiong, Daniel A., *Ibid.*, p.82.

⁴⁸ Simmons, Donald C., *Efik Divination, Ordeals, and Omens in Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1956, p.223. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3629116. Accessed 5 Aug. 2021.

⁴⁹ Simmons, Donald C., *Ibid.*, pp.225-226.

Chapter 8

IJỌ [IJAW] GODS

[The Ijaw people comprise 1.8% of the Nigerian population according to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, 2018 estimate]

Ijo, also called Ijaw, people of the forests of the Niger River delta in Nigeria comprising a large number of formerly autonomous groups. They speak languages of the Ijoid branch of the Niger-Congo language family. West of the main Niger outlets, each group occupies a cluster of villages linked by loose ties of cooperation, mainly against outsiders. Its members claim descent from a common ancestor. At group and village levels government is by assemblies of elders, often presided over by priests. The economy is based on fishing, palm oil collecting, and floodland agriculture.¹

BACKGROUND

The Ijaw people* are inhabitants of the Niger Delta area, which falls under the Nigerian geopolitical zone known as the South-South. The Niger Delta region consists of nine states: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Rivers and Ondo, all of which are located in ‘one of the World’s ten most important wetland and coastal marine ecosystems.’² The Ijaw are concentrated in the states of Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers and are thought to be one of the oldest ethnic groups indigenous to the Niger Delta:

There seems to be a general consensus with [Dr P.A.] Talbot amongst modern experts of Niger Delta studies that the present Ijo peoples are the descendants of the earliest and oldest settlers in the Niger Delta.

The 7,000 years separating the Ijo peoples from their immediate neighbour appear to concord with the geological age of the Niger Delta, and that

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ijo>

* Estimates range from 4 to 5 million.

² Ajodo-Adebanjoko, Angela, *Towards Ending Conflict and Insecurity in the Niger Delta Region: A Collective Non-Violent Approach* in *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2017.

consideration, amongst other archaeological evidences seem to compel the eminent scholar, E.J. Alagoa to suggest that, 'the Ijo people have grown up, not only within the Niger Delta but with the Niger Delta.'³

There are wildly differing perspectives regarding where the Ijaw may have originated from before coming to the Niger Delta, some of which include theories that the Ijaw began their very existence in Nigeria and they merely moved from one area of the delta to the other in the fifteenth century, that they came from Palestine based on the existence of an ancient city in that region called Ijon, and even that they used to live in a historic centre of civilisation such as Benin, Ife and Egypt, from which they migrated to the delta.⁴

As may be expected of people living near a multitude of rivers and creeks, the Ijaw people's precolonial economic activities involved fishing and farming, which led to the establishment of thriving and lucrative business relationships with nearby communities, and also with European traders once contact was made in the sixteenth century. Their commercial activities initially covered innocuous items like salt, palm oil and timber but eventually expanded to the sinister slave trade. When the trade in human beings ended in the late nineteenth century, this gave the Ijaw an opportunity to transition back into 'legitimate' commercial transactions:

Before the commencement of the Atlantic slave trade in the late 15th century, the Ijaw people survived on the sale of dried fish and sea salt to the hinterland communities. From the 16th century onwards, however, the overseas trade in slaves dominated Ijaw economic activity. Most Ijaw trading houses had representatives who served as middlemen on the coast who facilitated the trade between European slave traders and those of the Aros and hinterland. Slaves were exported from the Ijaw ports of Bonny, Okrika and New Kalabari to Europe and the Americas...

The British ban on the slave trade in 1807 ushered in massive changes for West Africa in general and the Niger Delta in particular. Cash crop production in palm oil became the main thrust of the British trading

³ Banigo, Youpele, *Ijo Ultimate Autochthony: Still an Unanswered Question?* in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 16, 2005, p.31. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41857129. Accessed 10 Aug. 2021.

⁴ Banigo, Youpele, pp.31-34.

activities with the Ijaws, who thus viewed it as a legitimate trade...Resistance of the Ijaw slave merchants to the changeover to palm oil exports was linked to the status many had attained in the slave trade.⁵

A noted and notable personality who emerged from the ashes of the slave trade was Jubo Jubogha (1821–1891), more commonly known as King Jaja of Opobo. Born in present-day Imo State, a heartland Igbo area, he was kidnapped by slave raiders at the tender age of twelve and spirited away to Bonny Island in Rivers State. Here, he was sold from master to master and began to learn the ways of the Ijaw people. Armed with intelligence and ambition, Jubo began to work his way up and eventually earned his way out of slavery. Following many years of hard work and making the right connections, he went on to become the head of the influential Anna Pepple House of Bonny, which was ‘one of the two houses of the royal family (the other being the Manilla Pepple House).’⁶

A ‘House’ was a significant factor in the socioeconomic lives of the coastal Ijaw during these times. Essentially, it was a dynastic unit that measured its importance ‘by the number of breeding females in it, by the wealth of its members, and by the fighting and working males it could muster.’⁷ As such, being a member of a powerful House, or one that aspired to be so, almost guaranteed one’s entry into the new social elite that was being facilitated by the presence of the Europeans.

Jubo’s financial success in the palm oil trade, political success with the Anna Pepple House, and the rise of petty in-fighting among the royal Houses gave him the confidence to break away from Bonny, and to form the city-state of Opobo in 1870. ‘Named after Opubu the Great, the illustrious king of Bonny and founder of Anna House who had died in 1830,’⁸ this clever move was a masterstroke that cemented Jubo’s ascension as King Jaja to the newly formed throne under the supportive eye of the British in 1873. It also saw the emergence of Opobo as a major and prosperous trading centre for almost two decades:

⁵ Abejide, Samuel T., *Oil and the Ijaw People of the Niger Delta States: 1956 to 1998*, Ph.D. Thesis, Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg, November 2012, pp.56-57, 59-60. Accessed 10 Aug. 2021.

⁶ <https://biography.yourdictionary.com/ja-ja-of-opobo>

⁷ Okpewho, Isidore, *Poetry and Pattern: Structural Analysis of an Ijo Creation Myth in The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 92, No. 365, 1979, p.318. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/539417. Accessed 18 Aug. 2021.

⁸ <https://biography.yourdictionary.com/ja-ja-of-opobo>

For 18 years, Ja Ja ruled his kingdom with firmness and remarkable sagacity. He strengthened his relations with the hinterland palm-oil producers through judicious marriages and blood covenants which bound the parties into ritual kingship. He armed his traders with modern weapons for their own defence and that of the state. He thus monopolised trade with the palm-oil producers and punished severely any community that tried to trade directly with the European supercargoes.

In 1873, the British recognised him as king of independent Opobo, and Ja Ja reciprocated by sending a contingent of his soldiers to help the British in their war against the Ashanti kingdom in the Gold Coast (now Ghana). Queen Victoria expressed her gratitude in 1875 by awarding him a sword of honour.⁹

The Transatlantic Slave Trade Routes

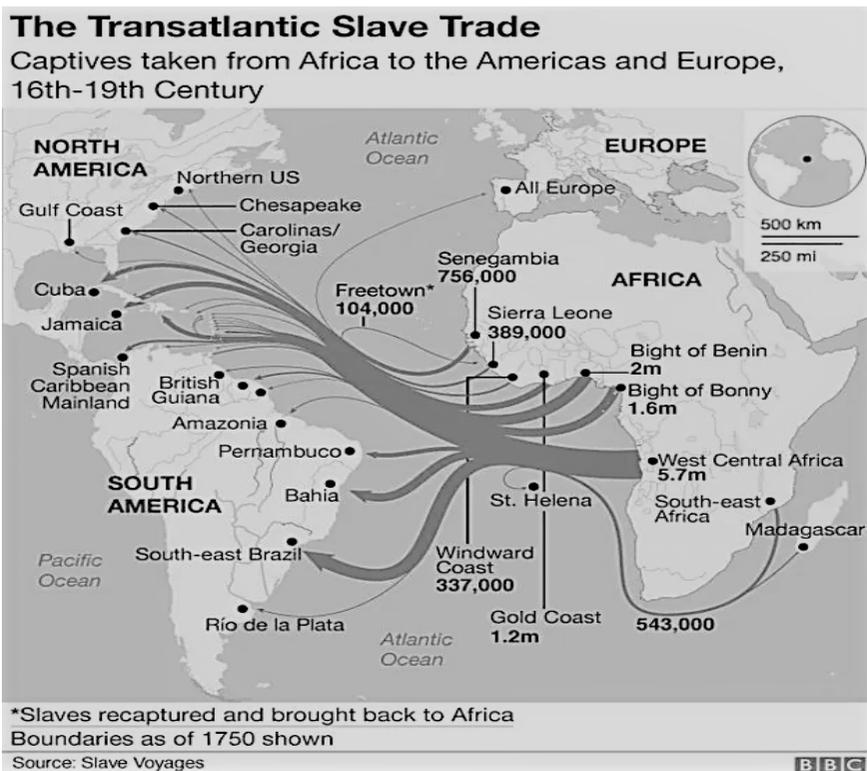


Image source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53444752>

⁹ <https://biography.yourdictionary.com/ja-ja-of-opobo>

CHRISTIANITY

The majority of the Ijaw people today identify as Christians due to the sustained efforts of the European missionaries in the nineteenth century, who were successful in not only converting a significant percentage of the population to Christianity, but also in inspiring many Ijaws to become missionaries themselves.¹⁰ The arrival of the missionaries did not happen in a vacuum, but rather as a result of the efforts of a number of influential individuals:

It is on record that Christianity reached Grand Bonny, the seat of the Niger Delta Diocese, in 1824. In that year, a Church bell was presented to King Opooboo Foobra of Bonny by a British industrialist, William Dobson, who owned the Downham Firms in Norfolk. Local history stated that it was for the commencement of the Christian religion.

But this intention was not realised until the arrival of Reverend Hope Masterton Waddell, Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther and the conversion of King William Dappa Pepple of Bonny to Christianity in 1850.¹¹

King William Dappa Pepple, in particular, was so taken with the new religion that he personally invited the missionaries to build a mission in Bonny. The King of Bonny had undergone his own conversion while in exile in the United Kingdom in the mid-nineteenth century, and was therefore instrumental in the introduction of the Anglican denomination upon his return. With the support and agreement of Bishop Crowther, who by this time had spread the evangelical word far and wide, King Pepple oversaw the commission and construction of a church and a school. St. Stephen's Church, now St. Stephen's Cathedral, Bonny, 'became the first Cathedral in Nigeria and the second Cathedral in West Africa.'¹² Based on this strong, groundbreaking foundation and using Bonny as a starting point, Christianity began to spread throughout Ijawland:

¹⁰ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/ijo>

¹¹ Enemugwem, John H., *A History of the Niger Delta Diocese, 1952-2012* in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 25, 2016, p.120. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/45184796. Accessed 12 Aug. 2021.

¹² <http://bonnyhistoricalsociety.com/about-bonny-kingdom>

St. Stephen's Church Bonny, which was designed by his first son, Samuel Crowther Jnr, metamorphosed into a Cathedral...Apart from Holy Cross Catholic Cathedral in Lagos, sponsored by all the people of Lagos, irrespective of denomination, and opened in September 1881, the most ancient Anglican Cathedral in Nigeria, indigenously designed and dedicated by an African bishop, is St. Stephen's Bonny. Crowther is the first Nigerian bishop in Christendom.

Other direct consequences of [Crowther's] work in the Niger Delta Region include the Anglican Church at Brass (1868), Andoni (1870), Opobo (1873), Kalabari (1874) and Okrika (1878). Yet, he was also in the Niger Delta hinterland in the Ndoki towns of Azumini, Akwete, Ohambele, Urata...¹³

The building of churches went hand-in-hand with the building of Christian missionary schools. The most effective way to ensure total and complete conversion was for the missionaries to remove the middlemen of interpreters and learn the local languages. The Ijaw people and their children were the recipients of 'primers, lesson books, grammars, vocabularies and dictionaries; and translated prayer books, portions of the Bible and other religious literature.'¹⁴ In addition to this, 'adult education was undertaken through Sunday schools and week-day classes for their inquirers and aspirants.'¹⁵ The Church Missionary Society (CMS), 'founded in London in 1799 as the Society for Missions in Africa and the East, by evangelical clergy of the Church of England,'¹⁶ was instrumental in the provision of basic Western primary school education, and also served as a source of inspiration for state governments and local communities, for example, in Bayelsa State:

The reasons for the establishment of these primary schools were to provide basic education and to convert the people to Christianity. Most of these schools were housed either in the church or within the church premises (Dienye and Kosemani, 1989). The first primary school in Bayelsa State was established by the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) in Twon-Brass in 1868.

¹³ Enemugwem, John H., *Ibid.*, p.124.

¹⁴ Nwadiolor, Louis, Kanayo, *Christian Missionaries and Civilisation in Southern Nigeria, 1841-1960: Implications for Contemporary Christians in UJAH: Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2013, p.184.

¹⁵ Nwadiolor, Louis, Kanayo, *Ibid.*, p.184.

¹⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Church-Missionary-Society>

The Catholic Mission took a cue from the CMS and established primary schools also. In 1916, the government had also opened schools in most of the towns. The communities also followed and established primary schools to take care of their individual educational needs.¹⁷

The eventual emergence of African Independent Churches, once the schism between European missionaries and Nigerian converts occurred in the 1920s, necessarily led to the founding of their own separate churches and schools in Ijawland for several valid reasons:

- **Religious:** For newly formed spiritual entities such as the Cherubim and Seraphim Church of Zion, it stood to reason that African-initiated churches would want to preserve their unique blend of Christianity and traditional beliefs by detaching their institutions from the abandoned status quo;
- **Proximity:** Some children lived in remote villages that were located far away from the main towns that normally hosted the orthodox missionary schools. It therefore became a matter of common sense to set up institutions closer to home;
- **Socio-political:** During the ascendance of Christianity, it had become apparent to all that education was now an acceptable means of upward social mobility for the Ijaw people. In order to ensure that their particular brand of indigenous Christianity would attract the same measure of respect and influence as orthodox Christianity, it would be necessary to create the kind of institutions that produced Ijaws capable of holding their own;
- **Economic:** Establishing a pipeline of educated Ijaw people who were well-versed in the spiritual and practical aspects of African-initiated churches and schools would be essential to their future ability to participate in the lucrative sectors of trade, banking, finance and other areas of commerce.¹⁸

The Ibani tribe of the Ijaw people, a corruption of which supposedly led to the word 'Bonny,' hold Bonny Town as their tribal seat due to their

¹⁷ Amasuomo, Morto, Oweikeye, Japo, *Zion Brand Cherubim and Seraphim Churches in the Establishment of Primary Schools in Bayelsa State, Nigeria* in *African Research Review: An International Multidisciplinary Journal*, Ethiopia, Vol. 8, No. 1, Serial No. 32, January 2014, p.54.

¹⁸ Amasuomo, Morto, Oweikeye, Japo, *Ibid.*, pp.56-57.

ancestry as the indigenous settlers of the area, and they were one of the first to display an acceptance of Christianity in the nineteenth century through the medium of the names bestowed upon their children. The people of Bonny ‘began to give English names to their children to show the extent of their involvement in the new religion.’¹⁹ Even on the business front, the merchant ships’ staff members ‘started identifying their Opobo trading partners with English names,’²⁰ such as Finebone, Finecountry, Allison, Dublin Green, Wilcox and Cookey Gam.

In addition to Protestantism, Anglicanism and the African Independent Churches, Roman Catholicism and Pentecostalism were also able to make inroads into Ijawland, albeit with a more limited degree of success.

The Bible has not yet been completely translated into any of the major Ijaw languages like Izon and Kalabari at this point in time, but portions of the Bible have been translated in written text, as well as ‘short audio Bible stories and evangelistic messages that explain salvation and give basic Christian teaching.’²¹

ISLAM

There are a small but significant number of Muslims in the Niger Delta area. The origin of their presence came about in the nineteenth century partly as a result of the migration of Nigerians from North to South, primarily for economic reasons, and partly as result of the ‘massive movements of colonial troops into the [Niger Delta] area, precisely to the central delta, now Bayelsa and Rivers States.’²² These migrants and a percentage of the troops were followers of Islam and through prolonged contact with the Ijaw, a crossover of religions was inevitable, particularly as they had already been exposed to the ease of conversion through the Christian missionaries:

Unlike Yoruba migrants, the Hausa continued to spread out in the non-riverine parts of the study area until Hausa settlements dotted a lot of urban and semi-urban areas...

¹⁹ Adagogo-Brown, Edna and Eze, Tuonimi, Oko-Jaja, *King Jaja and Christianity in Opobo Kingdom of the Eastern Niger Delta* in *International Journal of History and Philosophical Research*, Vol. 8, No. 2, August 2020, p.22.

²⁰ Adagogo-Brown, Edna and Eze, Tuonimi, Oko-Jaja, *Ibid.*, p.22.

²¹ <https://globalrecordings.net/en/language/ijc>

²² Uchendu, Egodi, *Islam in the Niger Delta: 1890-2017: A Synthesis of the Accounts of Indigenes and Migrants* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag GmbH, 2018), p.60.

The 1921 census reflected the increase in persons of Northern Nigeria origin in the Niger Delta. They numbered 2,657 persons and were found in the following locations Obudu/Ogoja (1,638), Calabar (589), Port Harcourt/Elele (333), Opobo (41), Forcados (39) and Itu (18).²³

One of the attractive economic advantages for the Hausa migrants was the cattle business, which continued to be dominated by them even outside Northern Nigeria. In fact, 'a 1965 study by Cohen shows that both the sale of cattle and control of all cattle markets throughout Southern Nigeria were monopolised entirely by the Hausa.'²⁴ This single factor was a major reason for the increase in Hausa settlements and conversions to Islam in the Niger Delta area in the 1960s and the 1970s, although they experienced serious but temporary destabilisation in the outbreak and aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War. These Hausa settlements also functioned as 'sites for the transfer of Islamic religious views,'²⁵ leading to what amounted to a peaceful spread of Islam in parts of Ijawland:

Indigenes began to convert to Islam in 1960, starting with Alhaji Tamuno Okiri, an Ijaw from Okrika...Very few indigenes were Muslims in Bayelsa State before it was carved out of Rivers State in 1996. One of these was Alhaji Abdurrahman Eneware from Trofani who converted to Islam in Port Harcourt. The other two, Mohammed Aggrey and Barnabas Ciroma, facilitated the establishment of an indigenous Muslim community in the state immediately after its creation in 1996...

State creation saw the return to Bayelsa of indigenes living in other locations outside the new state. Particularly noticeable was the migration of Hausa traders alongside other non-Ijaw.²⁶

In addition to trade and migration, Islam has also been propagated in the Niger Delta area through marriage, a form of *da'awah* [calling or inviting non-Muslims to embrace Islam], the occurrence of which is believed to have started in the early nineteenth century. The practice has taken hold to a

²³ Uchendu, Egodi, *Ibid.*, p.81.

²⁴ Uchendu, Egodi, *Ibid.*, p.100.

²⁵ Uchendu, Egodi, *Ibid.*, p.103.

²⁶ Uchendu, Egodi, *Ibid.*, pp.104; 141; 143.

limited extent in Ijawland and it has been found that the female Muslims present in the area tend to be from other ethnic groups, such as Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. Female Muslim converts are heavily outnumbered by their male counterparts as they tend to come to Islam fundamentally because of marriage to a Muslim man, for largely positive reasons:

- to have a sense of belonging;
- to cope with the demands of life - singleness or widowhood;
- shallow knowledge of their original faith;
- admiration for aspects of Muslim religious culture;
- a desire to emulate a Muslim acquaintance;
- emotional ties with Muslim men;
- a need for marriage, and following marriage, to have religious harmony in the home;
- at their husbands' insistence.²⁷

With the support of the Nigerian State and Federal governments and organisations like the Ijaw Muslims Brotherhood and the State Chapters of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), the presence of indigenous and migrant Muslims in Ijawland remains protected, despite the ethno-religious tensions that flare up from time to time, and this will continue to be the case as long as the Ijaw people observe their respective rights to practice the religions of their choosing:

At less than four thousand indigenous Muslims present in the four states of the study area vis-à-vis an overall population of over sixteen million inhabitants, the rate of growth of Islam in the Niger Delta is poor and owes largely to a much stronger cultural resistance to Islam.

The great disproportion in the number of Christians and Muslims in the study area has ensured the continued peaceful co-existence of members of both religious communities in the study area. Far outnumbered by Christians, Muslims are careful of antagonising the former.²⁸

²⁷ Uchendu, Egodi, *Ibid.*, p.176.

²⁸ Uchendu, Egodi, *Ibid.*, p.300.

TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Cosmology

In a startling departure from the usual masculine Supreme Being, the Ijaw people believe in a feminine God, which is undoubtedly heavily influenced by the widespread matrilineal lineage system, although this co-exists alongside the traditional patrilineal inheritance process. The Ijaw believe that ‘the physical and spiritual worlds owe their existence, order and well-being to the Supreme Creatress,²⁹ who possesses different names to address the different aspects of Her nature:

The classical example of this feminine concept of God in Africa is found among the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta of Nigeria, who speak of God strictly in feminine terms. All their names and attributes for God are strictly feminine, and they apply to Her alone.

They have four principal names for the Supreme Being, namely, *Temearau*, meaning literally, “The Creatress or Creatix,” She Who is the Moulder of the Universe. *Tamuno* is the Kalabari variant of *Temearau*. The second name is *Ayebaarau* or more laconically *Ayeba*, “the Foundress of the Universe,” *Woyengi* or *Oyin*, “Our Mother” and *Oginarau*, “She Who Dwells in the Heavens...”

Some of her most frequent appellations among others are: *Pere Bau* – “The Sovereign Queen,” *Ogborogbo* – “The Irresistible Mighty Wind,” *Gburugburuarau* - “Great, Mighty and Formidable Mother.”³⁰

The Ijaw creation story credits *Woyengi* with moulding human beings out of earth with the aid of a table, a chair, and a mystical Creating Stone. These beings came into existence without gender and were given the opportunity to choose whether to be a man or a woman, the kind of life they wanted for themselves and the type of death that would lead them back to Her. To each of their requests, *Woyengi* replied ‘So be it.’³¹ Even the names

²⁹ Azorbo, Gordon, Tam and Ufford-Azorbo, Ifure, *Interrogating the Feminine Conception of the ‘Supreme Being’ as a Religio-Cultural Practice Among the Ijaw People of the Niger Delta in African Research Review: An International Multidisciplinary Journal*, Ethiopia, Vol. 13, No. 2, Serial No. 54, April 2019, p.141.

³⁰ Dime, Ajueyitsi, Christopher, *God: Male, Female or Asexual?: An Inaugural Lecture*, delivered at Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Nigeria, on Friday 28th May, 2004, quoted in Azorbo, Gordon, Tam and Ufford-Azorbo, Ifure, *Ibid.*, p.141.

³¹ Okara, Gabriel, *Ogboinba: The Ijaw Creation Myth* in Alagoa, E.J., Tamuno, T.N., and Clark,

given to children in Ijaw society often reflect the central importance given to the Divine Feminine:

Her supreme qualities and attributes are reflected in some common names given to children. These include: "Teme arau agono emi" (God is above), "Teme arau Preye" (God's gift), "Ayibanuaghan" (Thanks to God), "Oginarau-Ebi" (God's kindness), "Oyingi-Ogula" (God's judgement).³²

Under the protection and jurisdiction of the Supreme Creatress who brings them into being, and serving as intermediaries between God and Her people, each sub-group tended to have their own *ibe* [national god] due to the sheer number of ethnic sub-groups and dialects housed under the Ijaw umbrella:

This [national] god was usually associated, as stated earlier, with the founding ancestor, and in many of these Ijo sub-groups, the national god was an *Egbesu* or war god (Alagoa, 2005). Below this god, comes a number of divinities and primal forces such as *Beni-otu* (water people or deities), *Bou-otu* (forest people or deities), *Amatemesuo* and so on (Okaba and Appah, 1999; Alagoa, 2005).³³

Some of these divinities and primal forces are nationally recognised and worshipped, while many others are localised to a particular tribe or area. For example, the Ibani tribe's foremost deities are *Ibani Nyana Simingi*, who 'was the principal tutelary deity of the Ibani people inherited from the indigenous Inyong Okpon Community, during the reign of King Amakiri of Bonny,' *Ikuba*, who 'was the war deity of Bonny,' and *Tolofari*, who was 'a very powerful god of the Kalaibama-Bonny Community, whose totem was a precious stone.'³⁴ The priests of these gods were 'highly respected, and were

J.P. (eds.), *The Izon of the Niger Delta* (Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, 2009), pp.135-146, quoted in Azorbo, Gordon, Tam and Ufford-Azorbo, Ifure, *Ibid.*, p.141.

³² Okaba B.O., *Religious Beliefs and Practices in Alagoa*, E.J. (ed.), *The Land and People of Bayelsa State: Central Niger Delta* (Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, 1999), pp.149-160, quoted in Azorbo, Gordon, Tam and Ufford-Azorbo, Ifure, *Ibid.*, p.142.

³³ Erezene, Henchard B., *Ijo-Itsekiri Relations before the Colonial Period in Nigeria in International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Serial No 16, January, 2016, p.105.

³⁴ Jaja, M. Jones, *Ibani (Niger Delta) Traditional Religion and Social Morality in AFRREV IJAH: An International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Serial No. 6, May 2013, p.41.

often consulted on state matters,³⁵ so there was a certain amount of reverence surrounding their posts:

In fact, priests played very important roles in the cultural, economic and social lives of the people then, to the extent that priests of deities were consulted before the Ibani people went to war with any other state. Sometimes, to arrive at a decision the priest had the last say in the communities' affairs; even in a matter of life or death. There was a general belief that priests were the physical representatives of their ancestors and their deities, hence the total obedience to the words and instructions of the priests.

Priests were chosen by deities and were supposed to be individuals with unblemished character, transparent, honest, meek and slow to anger, and above all, must be willing to serve the god and the people.³⁶

Naturally, many local communities opted to have priestesses as a way of paying further respect to the existence of a Mother God. Among certain tribes, it was thought that women were the best channels for the gods and goddesses to interact with their believers. For example, the Kalabari people had women who became possessed by the *Oru* [guest-spirits] in order to facilitate communication. These women were known as *Orukoro ereme* or *Owudogi ereme*. In addition, 'some popular communal cults in Kalabari have women as their chief priestesses.'³⁷ The unusually elevated status accorded to women in religion in Ijawland has filtered through to their socioeconomic and political standing in their communities, as reflected in the power they hold over traditionally patriarchal institutions such as marriages, funerals, inheritance, serving as custodians of their families' histories, masquerade societies, trade and holding political office.³⁸

Owuamapu [water spirits] play a huge role in Ijaw cosmology, which will come as no surprise considering the riverine nature of their environment. The *owuamapu* are believed to live in 'fabulous towns of their own under the

³⁵ Erezene, Henchard B., *Ibid.*, p.105.

³⁶ Jaja, M. Jones, *Ibid.*, p.43.

³⁷ Uzobo, Endurance, Ogbanga, Mina, Margaret, and Jack, Jackson, T.C.B., *The Implications of the Feminisation of God Among the Ijaw People of Nigeria in African Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2014, p.104.

³⁸ Uzobo, Endurance, Ogbanga, Mina, Margaret, and Jack, Jackson, T.C.B., *Ibid.*, pp.104-105.

An example of an Ijaw water spirit mask

Image source: <https://www.tribalart.de/en/open-sale/object/water-spirit-mask-3041062>

water, where everyone walks decked in coral, gold, and the rarest of cloths.³⁹ Additionally, it is known that ‘originally all the water people came from the sea; and at certain times of every year, they are said to return there to get new

³⁹ Horton, Robin, *The Kalabari World-View: An Outline and Interpretation in Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 1962, p.201. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1157540. Accessed 19 Aug. 2021.

strength from *owu iyingi* – Mother of the Water People.⁴⁰ There are also key characteristics unique to the *owuamapu*.

...The water people are identified not with particular human groups, but with particular tracts of creek, swamp, and mudflat...the [shrines] of the water people are generally perched on raised lumps of mud beside their creek domains. The water people are supposed to have actually made the various delta waterways; and when the ends of rainbows are seen disappearing into the mangrove forests, people sometimes say they are at work making new creeks.

Their activity is supposed to keep the waterways open; and if they should leave their domains these will silt up and eventually dry out. Most important of all, the water people control the weather and the abundance of fish in their creeks.⁴¹

Ancestor Veneration and Divination

These two concepts go hand-in-hand as a means of helping the Ijaw people decipher the true meaning of events happening around them, whether positive or negative. A physical death in this world is not the end, but the start of a new life in the cosmic realm:

Ancestors are in fact the spirits of once-living people that have parted from their bodies at death, and they are thought of as pursuing desires and values similar to those they pursued in life. They look after the welfare of their lineage descendants, and in return expect to be looked after themselves. They reward those who enhance the strength of the lineage by observing kinship norms, and they punish those who spoil the lineage by infringing such norms.

The deceased heads of a lineage are of particular importance in this context. They are said to be in a very intimate relation with the living lineage head, who presides over the lineage 'in their name' and 'with their strength.' In so far as the living head acts well, it is with their guidance. In

⁴⁰ Horton, Robin, *Ibid.*, p.201.

⁴¹ Horton, Robin, *Ibid.*, p.201.

so far as he acts badly, they have separated themselves from him and sooner or later will punish him.⁴²

These beliefs are particularly prevalent among the Kalabari tribe who deify their ancestors and honour their spirits with a series of elaborate rituals. In Ijawland, the status of a person is thrown into relief once they pass away; their age at the time of death and the number of descendants associated with them determines the sophistication and duration of the funeral rites that will follow. Through the process of divination, it is possible for an interested party to consult a diviner as a way of contacting an ancestor, in order to obtain answers to pressing questions, such as the cause of a death under mysterious circumstances. Most Ijaw believe that the diviner communicates with the *teme* [soul] of the ancestor using certain sacred objects, which vary from region to region. For example, the Epie-Atissa tribe have been known to use an *aganaga* [ladder] or *ugbolo* [staff] for their communal divination:

The first is restricted specifically for post-mortem divination, which determines how the dead is buried, that is, if he or she died practising 'witchcraft,' *ida* or not. This is ascertained through *Utoken*, 'the Earth goddess,' to the 'ancestors,' *inibudu*.

The second, *ugbolo* divination is used in connection with other crisis-related catastrophes, such as sickness, etc., except death. Both are restricted to communal 'shrines,' *ugula* under the *idiomu* [deities], operated by men only.⁴³

The Epie-Atissa also practice individual or private divinations 'which are open to both men and women *onyobu* [diviners or herbalists or priests] who make use of various instruments, under an elaborate, ritualistic system.'⁴⁴ Through these supernatural systems, the Epie-Atissa are able to deal with past, present and future events with the expert assistance of the *onyobu* in their local communities, who are well-equipped to 'divine as a means of diagnosing and ascertaining the cause or causes of the problem. A cure is then prescribed

⁴² Horton, Robin, *Ibid.*, p.200.

⁴³ Fefegha, Alawei, Sunday, *Divination in the Niger Delta with Reference to Epie-Atissa Community*, Ph.D. Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, June 1988, p2.

⁴⁴ Fefegha, Alawei, Sunday, *Ibid.*, p.2.

and performed, and relevant sacrifices offered for the purpose of appeasement, wherever necessary.⁴⁵

Thus, it can be seen that the paying of constant tributes to ancestors is intricately bound up with the Ijaws' ability to communicate with them beyond the grave, thereby ensuring the continuation of their traditions and lineage.

Reincarnation

The belief in ancestors who continue to participate in community life after they have moved on to the next world is supported by the belief in reincarnation. Those who die will return to Earth and be reborn but there are strict restrictions surrounding how and when this can happen:

The Ijaw believe that a soul may be reincarnated about a month after death, and not usually more than three years after...Witches and evil men who have not received proper burial honours, cannot be reborn on earth and so enter into animals, and particularly into the monkeys which live near cemeteries and which are never killed.⁴⁶

The differing destinations of good souls and bad souls stems largely from the horror associated with *pou-arau* [witches] and *pou-owei* [wizards] and the evil deeds that they are held responsible for in Ijawland, which can be anything from unemployment to barrenness to natural disasters. An unfortunate event or run of bad luck is generally attributed to someone practising *pou* [witchcraft].⁴⁷ The bodies of people revealed as sorcerers through divination are usually 'buried in the bank of the river away from the village'⁴⁸ to safeguard the local community. For others who died 'bad' or unusual deaths, for example through an untimely accident or in childbirth, they are 'buried in a "bad" portion of the forest especially reserved for this

⁴⁵ Fefegha, Alawei, Sunday, *Ibid.*, p.27.

⁴⁶ Parrinder, Geoffrey, *West African Psychology: A Comparative Study of Psychological and Religious Thought* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2002), pp.125;139.

⁴⁷ Armstrong, Imomotimi, *Of Barrenness and Witchcraft: The Songs of the Legi Women's Association in Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics*, Vol. 15, No. 1, June 2021, p.54.

⁴⁸ Leis, Philip E., 'Collective Sentiments' as Represented in Ijaw Divination in *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1964, p.174. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3813901. Accessed 20 Aug. 2021.

purpose.⁴⁹ Conversely, ‘good deaths’ receive good burials and their souls return to Earth ready for another positive journey through life.

The belief in reincarnation is further upheld by the existence of the *Saisaibeinmo-arau* or *Saibeinmo-arau*, a ferry woman who travels between the land of the living and the spirit world:

The *Saibeinmo-arau* is a female spirit being who rows the spirits of the dead in her canoe or ferry from the water-front, across to the supposed land of the spirit world where they stay until the time they return to the world in whichever form. In the process of ferrying, she protects the soul from any harmful spirit or river goddess that may distract or prevent her passengers from reaching their destinations peacefully.

Her work of ferrying the souls across is continuous in the sense that at the point of delivering a soul, she also ferries back any available spirit who may be returning to the world. The *Saibeinmo-arau* (ferry woman) plays the feminine role of caring, protecting and delivering the spirits of the dead safely, to the different worlds. This feminine role is consistent with the fact of the Supernatural God being a female who creates, cares for, and protects her children.⁵⁰

It is interesting to note that, once again, a woman is responsible for an essential rite of passage; she is present at the beginning of life and, by design, she is also a key player at the end of it.

⁴⁹ Leis, Philip E., *Ibid.*, p.174.

⁵⁰ Azorbo, Gordon, Tam and Ufford-Azorbo, Ifure, *Ibid.*, p.143.

Chapter 9

EDO-BINI GODS

[The Edo-Bini people comprise less than 1% of the Nigerian population according to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, 2018 estimate]

Edo, also called Bini, people of southern Nigeria who speak a language of the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family. The Edo numbered about 3.8 million at the turn of the 21st century. Their territory is west of the Niger River and extends from hilly country in the north to swamps in the Niger Delta. Edo is also the vernacular name for Benin City, the centre of the Benin kingdom, which flourished from the 14th to the 17th century.¹

BACKGROUND

The Edo-Bini people*, more commonly and simply known as the Edo people, are primarily located in Edo State, which is part of the Niger Delta area in southern Nigeria. They are directly descended from the historical and highly developed Kingdom of Benin, which flourished from the time of its inception in the eleventh century until its annexation by the British Empire in the late nineteenth century. The thriving capital of the Kingdom used to be called Edo, and it is now referred to as Benin City in Edo State, with centuries of history underpinning its majesty:

Of all the West African societies, the Kingdom of Benin is the one most mentioned in contemporary European literature. Since the end of the 15th century, a great deal of material about Benin has been supplied by sailors, traders, etc. returning to Europe.

However, information on the Edo people before this date is very difficult to obtain, as there was no written record and the oral record is at best rather fragmentary. Thus, there is a shortage of information on the early

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Edo-people>

* Estimates range from 3 to 4 million.

days of the migration and settling down of the Edo in their present-day home.²

There are several different accounts concerning the origin of the Edo people, including claims that they came from ‘a place north of the Niger originally,’ or that they came from Egypt via Sudan, Nupeland and Ilé-Ifè in the seventh and eighth centuries seeking ‘a more secure shelter.’ Alternatively, based on archaeological and linguistic analyses, there’s strong support for the theory that the Edo have lived in their present location for thousands of years as part of the ancestral and forest-based Kwa ethnic group that comprised ‘languages of the Yorùbá, Edo, Igbo, Igala, Idoma, Nupe...’³

Benin City was ‘discovered’ by the Portuguese in 1485, who were astonished by the sophistication and advanced technology on display, at a time when Africa was thought to be a primitive and undeveloped continent. It was one of the first cities to possess something approaching modern street lighting with the use of ‘huge metal lamps, many feet high,’⁴ which were strategically placed around the city, particularly around the King’s palace. The lamps used palm oil as fuel, lighting the night sky ‘to provide illumination for traffic to and from the palace.’⁵ The Portuguese were so impressed by the city that their reports back to their home country were full of praise:

...They were stunned to find this vast kingdom made of hundreds of interlocked cities and villages in the middle of the African jungle. They called it the “Great City of Benin,” at a time when there were hardly any other places in Africa the Europeans acknowledged as a city. Indeed, they classified Benin City as one of the most beautiful and best planned cities in the world.

In 1691, the Portuguese ship captain Lourenco Pinto observed: “Great Benin, where the king resides, is larger than Lisbon; all the streets run straight and as far as the eye can see. The houses are large, especially that of the king, which is richly decorated and has fine columns. The city is

² Bondarenko, Dmitri M., and Roese, Peter M., *Benin Prehistory: The Origin and Settling Down of the Edo* in *Anthropos*, Vol. 94, No. 4/6, 1999, p.542. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40465021. Accessed 24 Aug. 2021.

³ Bondarenko, Dmitri M., and Roese, Peter M., *Ibid.*, pp.542; 544.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/mar/18/story-of-cities-5-benin-city-edo-nigeria-mighty-medieval-capital-lost-without-trace>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/mar/18/story-of-cities-5-benin-city-edo-nigeria-mighty-medieval-capital-lost-without-trace>

wealthy and industrious. It is so well governed that theft is unknown and the people live in such security that they have no doors to their houses.”⁶

The Kingdom reached its zenith under the tutelage of *Oba* [Ruler] Ewuare the Great (also known as Ewuare I) who reigned from 1440-1473. *Oba* Ewuare was the first in a line of ‘warrior kings’ and with the aid of his administrative team, ‘he is alleged to have effected an expansion of the kingdom, which consequently became the predominant military and political power in southern Nigeria for many centuries.’⁷ In addition, he presided over a number of ‘important political, ritual, and artistic innovations’⁸ that are attributed to him.

As inhabitants of a forested region, the Edo people are heavily agricultural in nature:

Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy. Yams, cassava (manioc), oil palm produce, rice, and corn (maize) are the major subsistence crops, while rubber, timber, and palm oil and kernels are cash crops. Mineral resources include limestone and lignite. Industries produce pharmaceuticals, rubber, plywood, beer, sawn wood, and furniture. A network of trunk roads in the state and an airport at Benin City facilitate transportation.⁹

Along with the production of mineral resources such as marble, gold and limestone, and ever-lucrative crude oil, the Edo are also celebrated for their extensive contributions to the world of art, for example, the world-famous Benin Bronzes, and their strong focus on kinship and lineage.

CHRISTIANITY

The Portuguese brought Christianity to Edoland during their travels throughout West Africa from the fifteenth century onwards. They were consumed with discovering the West African Coast for three reasons: ‘the

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/mar/18/story-of-cities-5-benin-city-edo-nigeria-mighty-medieval-capital-lost-without-trace>

⁷ Eisenhofer, Stefan, and Egharevba, Jacob, *The Origins of the Benin Kingship in the Works of Jacob Egharevba in History in Africa*, Vol. 22, 1995, p.156. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3171912. Accessed 24 Aug. 2021.

⁸ Eisenhofer, Stefan, and Egharevba, Jacob, *Ibid.*, p.156.

⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Edo-state-Nigeria>

commercial motive, the crusading spirit and the scientific enquiry.¹⁰ In addition to these incentives, there was also the desire to ‘spread the Christian message to the peoples of West Africa and if possible, find allies in the struggle with the Muslim powers,’¹¹ which they initiated by taking Roman Catholic priests on their travels. The creation of lucrative trading relationships with Arguin, Cape Verde, Ghana and São Tomé and Príncipe, eventually led to an introduction to the Kingdom of Benin in 1485:

...The Portuguese went to Benin with two commodities: commerce and Christianity. The Portuguese had much to hope for in Benin. They believed that such a great empire must have rich economic potentials. Furthermore, they were excited by the *pimenta del rabo*, pungent Benin pepper, considered to be superior to that found anywhere on the West Coast.

Apart from slaves and pepper, there was also promise of ivory and native cloth in exchange for cotton goods, cowries and copper (manilla) used as currency.¹²

However, despite an encouraging beginning on the business front and the warm welcome from the ruling *Oba* at the time, Ozolua the Conqueror, who was the third son of Ewuare I, the missionary work in the Kingdom of Benin was not quite as successful as in other parts of West Africa. *Oba* Ozolua, and the *Obas* that followed him, had astutely calculated that, in order to get around the Portuguese restriction on selling weapons only to Christian allies, they would need to show a willingness to consider conversion to this new religion to obtain arms that would assist greatly with their military plans:

The Portuguese discovered in course of time that the various *Oba* (Kings) were rather interested in the importation of European goods, particularly firearms and ammunition, whose export to non-Christian states was forbidden at the time. It is true that *Oba* Esigie [son of *Oba* Ozolua] sent his son and those of his chiefs to be baptised and indeed in 1514 he sent two envoys to Portugal for missionaries.

¹⁰ Ijoma, J.O., *Portuguese Activities in West Africa Before 1600: The Consequences in Transafrican Journal of History*, Vol. 11, 1982, p.136. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/24328537. Accessed 25 Aug. 2021.

¹¹ Ijoma, J.O., *Ibid.*, p.136.

¹² Ijoma, J.O., *Ibid.*, p.140.

De Barros commenting on this gesture says that the *Oba* "sought the priests rather to make himself powerful against his neighbours with our favour than from a desire for baptism."¹³

The suspicions of the Portuguese were subsequently confirmed when it became apparent that *Oba* Esigie and his chiefs had no intention of abandoning Benin traditional religion, as it formed the very basis of the Benin monarchy's divine right to rule. By resisting the introduction of Christianity at this point in time, which had not been the case with many other Nigerian ethnic groups, the Edo 'resisted cultural disintegration of their society which might have resulted from large scale introduction and growth of Western civilisation in the wake of Portuguese missionary activity.'¹⁴ In fact, by the end of the seventeenth century, many of the newly built churches had been converted to *Aruosa* [shrines] by former Christian converts and their *Ohensa* [indigenous Reverend Fathers], who had also turned their backs on Christianity in favour of the religion they grew up with.

Once it became clear that the Edo people were effectively closed to missionaries, work on this front ceased while commercial trade continued with the Dutch, Portuguese and the British. The Dutch, especially, enjoyed a fruitful trading relationship with the Kingdom of Benin. It was not until the nineteenth century that a renewed effort to bring Christianity to Edoland took shape alongside Britain's determination to weaken the Kingdom of Benin's control of commercial trade in the region. The British first made contact with the Kingdom in the mid-sixteenth century essentially to kickstart mutually beneficial trade in items such as elephant teeth, native cloth, rubber, timber, pepper, gold, ivory and palm oil. The sale of palm oil largely replaced the slave trade following its abolition by the British Empire in the early eighteenth century. By now, Christianity had already taken root in other areas of the Niger Delta area and a formidable infrastructure was in place:

By the end of 1892, eight Christian missions were already operating in different parts of Southern Nigeria. Out of these missions, the Church Missionary Society was the largest. It monopolised the Niger Delta region. In a way, Benin was affected because it belonged to the western part of the Niger Delta.

¹³ Ijoma, J.O., Ibid., p.144.

¹⁴ Ijoma, J.O., Ibid., p.144.

Ehianu (2017) opines that with the combined efforts of the white missionaries, catechists, evangelists and commercial agents who were already entrenched in Asaba, Benin City was reached with the gospel by the Roman Catholic Church (Ehianu, 2017).¹⁵

In the wake of a breakdown in the diplomatic and economic relationships between the British and the ruling *Ọba* at the time, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, political manoeuvring by the British resulted in a punitive expedition in 1897, ostensibly to restore order and structure, but in reality, to take the Kingdom, depose the *Ọba* and ransack the city. The success in this venture led to missionaries being 'encouraged to settle in Benin because of security provided by British occupation of the area.'¹⁶ From this point on, there was little to no resistance from the demoralised Edo people who had witnessed the fall of the glorious Kingdom of Benin; Christianity was finally able to flourish and various denominations began to introduce their versions of Western education:

The spread of the Pentecostal mission in the twentieth century also affected Benin City. By 1900, the Church Mission Society (C.M.S.) was already very active in Benin...It was said that Chief Agho Obaseki, who was the *Iyasẹ* [Chief Adviser to the *Ọba*] of Benin between 1914 and 1920 became a Christian and attended the services in St. Matthew's C.M.S. Church regularly (Ogbonmwan, 2005)...The C.M.S. also promoted education in Benin by establishing a number of primary and secondary schools, prominent among which are Eghosa Grammar School, Benin, and Anglican Girls' Secondary School, Benin, established in 1957...Holy Cross Cathedral was established in 1926 and St. Joseph's Catholic Church came into existence in 1970...

The Catholic Missions in Benin established primary and secondary schools to promote education in the area. The celebrated Edo College was established by Roman Catholics in 1937...The Roman Catholics also established St. Maria Goretti [Girls' Grammar School] and Immaculate Conception College (ICC)...Other missions like the Baptist Mission,

¹⁵ Aremu, Olaosebikan, Johnson, and Ediagbonya, Michael, *Trade and Religion in British-Benin Relations, 1553-1897* in *Global Journal of Social Sciences Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2018, p.86.

¹⁶ Aremu, Olaosebikan, Johnson, and Ediagbonya, Michael, *Ibid.*, p.87.

Methodist Mission, and other denominations also extended their influence on Benin in the 20th century.¹⁷

Today, Christianity is the dominant religion in Edoland with Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism attracting the most followers. There is also a strong African Independent Church presence that grew out of the need to break away from the restrictions of European-centred Christianity, for example, the Church of God Mission International founded by Archbishop Benson Idahosa (1938-1998), which began in Benin City and still has its headquarters in this location.

Sample text from the Edo Bible

IYEN NE O MAAN OGHE JON

Emwe Arroo

1 ¹Vbe a te do yi agbon na, Emwe ne a guan rroo ne, ren keghi deba Osanobua gha rroo, emwi ne Osanobua khin ore iren vbe gha khin. ²Ke omuhen gha dee, ore emwe ne a guan ke gu Osanobua gha rroo. ³Obọ ere Osanobua la yi emwi hia. Vbe uwu emwi ne a yi hia, okpa ne a la iyeke ere yi, e i rroo. ⁴Nene emwe ne a guan keghi mwe arroo vbe uwu iren, arroo na ore o rhie uwanmwe gie emwa ne agbon. ⁵Uwanmwe na kegha baa vbe uwu ebiebi, ebiebi ma he setin do ere yo.

6 Osanobua keghi gie ukọ ere, omwa ne a tie ere Jon. ⁷Ne o do ta emwe uwanmwe nii na emwa ne agbon. Ren rre do ta ma iran, ne emwa hia mien ehe na hon uhunmwu ne a gie ne iran yayi. ⁸Ren tobọ ere i re nene uwanmwe, emwe uwanmwe ni ore iren re do ta. ⁹Onona orore uwanmwe ne uwanmwe, uwanmwe ne o rrie agbon do wan mu emwa hia.

10 Oni no we, nene Emwe keghi rre agbon, obọ ere ore Osanobua la yi agbon, levba sevba, agbon ma ren onren.

Image source: http://worldbibles.org/language_detail/eng/bin/Edo

¹⁷ Aremu, Olaosebikan, Johnson, and Ediagbonya, Michael, *Ibid.*, p.87.

ISLAM

Agbede, a town located in a region populated by the Etsako ethnic group, is customarily thought to have been the entry point for Islam into Edoland due to three key factors:

- In the late nineteenth century, Muslim Hausa and Nupe traders came to the area from Bida, Niger State in search of trade opportunities and seized the chance to share their faith with business partners who expressed an interest;
- *Oba* Momodu I, who ruled over Agbede from 1891-1910, was the first *Oba* to embrace conversion to Islam in Edo State. His passion for the new religion was so strong that he did everything within his power to spread its message beyond his town through intermarriage, convincing royal families to permit their eldest sons (and therefore future kings) to convert, the establishment of strong links with the nearby Bida Emirate, ‘the use of foreign Nupe and Hausa mercenaries in the destruction of traditional worship and practices,’ and the introduction of Islamic scholars, Qur’ānic schools and mosques. His efforts were so successful that Islam was embraced in Agbede, then Esan, followed by Ewu, Idoa, Uzea, and Ukhun, before penetrating the remainder of Edoland;
- The invasion in the late nineteenth century of parts of Edoland by the Nupe, a predominantly Muslim ethnic group based in the Middle Belt of Nigeria, for mostly militaristic and commercial reasons, including slavery. The extensive Islamisation of these communities, with the town of Auchi famously being one of the first to fall, happened as an unavoidable consequence of their temporary subjugation, but it is clear that Edo Muslims exist today as a result of their ancestors’ decision to continue following the Islamic faith even after their freedom was regained.¹⁸

The impact of the *Ulamās* [Islamic teachers and scholars] in the propagation of Islam amongst the Edo people must be emphasised. Their influence truly came into full effect under the leadership of Sir Abubakar

¹⁸ Egbefo, Omolumen, Dawood, *The Nupe Invasion of Esanland: An Assessment of its Socio-Political Impact on the People, 1885-1897* in *Haskenmu*, Vol. 1, 2007-2008, Faculty of Education and Arts Seminar Series, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University Lapai, Niger State, Nigeria.

Siddiq III (1903–1988), when he became the Sultan of Sokoto and *Sarkin Musulmi* or *Amir al-Mu'minin* [Commander of the Faithful] in 1938. A direct descendant of Shehu Usman dan Fodio, the Sultan's formidable statesman skills and profound understanding of the complexities of religious leadership ensure he was well-liked and well-respected in Edoland:

Sultan Abubakar Siddiq's era (1938-1988) marks the period of gradual spread of Islam in Edo State after its initial introduction into the area towards the end of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the Sultan was popular and widely known in Edo State. In the early 1970s he was appointed the Chancellor of the University of Benin, Benin City, and an honorary doctorate degree in law was conferred upon him by the university when he visited Benin.

Out of their love and respect for the 'King of Muslims,' the Edo Muslims invited him to lead the *Jumu'ah* service at the Central Mosque near Oba Market, Benin City, which he politely declined on the ground that he was a traveller on whom *Jumu'ah* service was not even compulsory. The real motive behind this invitation was that, since there was division among Edo Muslims, i.e. the Binis and the Afenmais who did not relate together in harmony, the Sultan by leading the prayers would bring the two groups under his *imamship*.¹⁹

Under the Sultan, Muslims in Edo State 'saw themselves as part of the great *ummah* [Muslim community],'²⁰ which led to a wholehearted acceptance of the *Ulamās* despite occasional tensions between those who favoured the traditional way and those who favoured the modern:

The '*ulamā*' have been the Islamic torchbearers in the area. They teach, preach, lead as 'imams,' engage in optional devotional services and a few have contributed to Arabic and Islamitic literature through their original writings...

[However, there are also] problems confronting the '*ulamā*' in the state. These include paucity of numbers, disunity among both Muslims and

¹⁹ Oseni, Zakariyau I., *The Traditional and Modern 'Ulamā in Edo State of Nigeria: Achievements and Problems* in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1999, p.223.

²⁰ Oseni, Zakariyau I., *Ibid.*, p.223.

'*ulamā*,' greed and inordinate ambition to acquire wealth, and marginalisation of some of the best scholars for selfish reasons. Though these problems are not peculiar to Edo State, that is no excuse for belittling their devastating effects on the rank and file of the '*ulamā*' in that State.²¹

Thus far, Islam has coexisted relatively peacefully with the other religions present in Edoland, with the support of entities such as the Edo State Chapter of the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) and individuals such as the Chief Imam of Benin, who maintain cordial relationships with key political and economic allies.

TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Cosmology

Utilising an interesting blend of monotheism and polytheism, the Edo-Bini believe in *Osanobua*, a Supreme Creator who rules over all the realms that He created, spiritual and physical. Often shortened to *Osa*, it is a popular feature of Edo names, for example, Esosa [God's goodness or gift], Eghosa [God's time] and Efosa [God's blessings or wealth]. *Osanobua* resides at the highest point of the hierarchy as a remote and unknowable force, and under him there are a host of deities and the human beings He breathed life into:

The Edo world is bipartite. *Osanobua* is believed to be the founder of the divinity-order (*erimwin*) and the creator of the world of man and nature (*agbon*). All of the divinities live in *erimwin* and communicate with man who lives in *agbon*.

The Edo cosmology is hierarchically structured. The status and role of the divinities is believed to have been set by *Osanobua* who has created all things. He has delegated varying degrees of power to the divinities, giving them particular spheres of influence in *agbon*.²²

²¹ Oseni, Zakariyau I., Ibid., excerpt from article's abstract. <https://www.africabib.org/rec.php?RID=19309875X>

²² Welton, Robert, Michael, *Belief and Ritual in the Edo Traditional Religion*, M.A. Thesis, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, The University of British Columbia, September 1969, pp.67-68.

The different types of deity in the Edo cosmology can be broadly categorised under four headings:

- Those who have never been incarnated as human beings: Under this category falls the Creator and powerful deities, some of who are His children and collectively form the pantheon of Edo gods; *Olokun* [god(dess) of the sea and wealth], *Ògún* [god of iron and war], *Ogiuwu* [god of death], *Obiemwen* [goddess of farming and childbirth], *Ọṣun* [god of magic and medicine] and *Èṣù* [god of construction and destruction], among others. *Olokun* and *Ògún* are two of the most valued deities and are said to be the only ones capable of possessing their *Ohen* [priests];²³
- Those who are spirits of the departed: Under this category falls the *edion* [collective ancestors] and the *erha* [individual ancestors]. The former can be associated with a group, ward, extended family, past worshippers of a particular deity, a particular palace and, lastly, all of the Edo-Bini in general;²⁴
- Those who are hero-divinities linked to the environment: Under this category falls mythical or semi-mythical human beings who displayed supernatural characteristics while alive, who are then transformed after their death;²⁵
- Those who are personal spirits and powers: Under this category falls parts of the human body, which are thought to have *ehi* [spiritual counterparts] imbued with individual spirits and/or powers. This is based on the idea that each person has a living element in *agbon* and a spiritual element in *erimwin*. For example, sacrifices can be offered to *ehi*, *uhumwun* [the head, i.e., the seat of judgement] and *obọ* [the arm, i.e., the seat of the power of accomplishing things] as a means of attempting to positively influence the outcome of one's life and decisions. It is thought that the relevant deity in *ehimwin* who is responsible for that body part will receive the sacrifice and intercede on the person's behalf before *Osanobua*.²⁶

²³ Welton, Robert, Michael, *Ibid.*, p.68.

²⁴ Welton, Robert, Michael, *Ibid.*, p.70.

²⁵ Welton, Robert, Michael, *Ibid.*, p.70.

²⁶ Welton, Robert, Michael, *Ibid.*, pp.71-72.

The *Ogiso* and the *Obas*

The semi-mythical *Ogiso* dynasty is said to be the origin of the monarchy in Ancient Benin and the earliest rulers of the Kingdom of Benin. The title '*Ogiso*' means 'the king from the sky' or 'the king of the sky,' in reference to their initial abode in a 'timeless semi-mythical space.'²⁷ Due to an absence of hard evidence, it is approximated that the first *Ogiso* dynasty assumed power over Igodomigodo, now called the Kingdom of Benin, anywhere from either 40 BC to the early tenth century and remained in place until the twelfth century. According to Edo mythology, the Kingdom was created by *Osanobua's* youngest son shortly after being sent to live in *agbon*. This divine link meant that the *Ogisos* were regarded as godlike by the Edo-Bini people and treated with great reverence at all times. There are varying estimates, based on oral traditions, regarding the number of known *Ogisos*:

It is generally accepted by Benin native historians that altogether 31 *Ogiso* "kings" ruled but this figure, of course, may be conventional, hardly more. Above all, the *Ogiso* lists made by different native historians are not completely identical in terms of the length of the *Ogiso* period, the rulers' names and the order of their appearance on the throne.

There is but little known of the coming to power and reign of the first *Ogiso*, Igodo. Maybe he is a purely mythological figure. The most prominent native historian, Jacob U. Egharevba, relates on this point: "... one of the prominent leaders, Igodo, was made *Ogiso* or king." The version of the oral tradition offered by politically engaged local historians further tells that he lived long and had a great number of descendants.²⁸

Under the firm hand of *Ogiso* Igodo, the concept of a monarchy took shape and became so entrenched in the minds of the Edo-Bini that, by the time of his death, the natural next step was the appointment of a new *Ogiso* named Ere, who continued in the same vein during his time on the throne by elevating the economic status of the Kingdom, and by association, the King's position as a benevolent and wise ruler. This state of affairs continued in an

²⁷ Bondarenko, Dmitri M. and Roese, Peter M., *Ancient Benin: Where did the First Monarchs Come From?* in *Asian and African Studies (Bratislava)*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2001, p.185.

²⁸ Bondarenko, Dmitri M. and Roese, Peter M., *Ibid.*, p.186.

uninterrupted fashion until the twelfth century when a series of upheavals resulted in the removal of the last *Ogiso*:

For some years after the banishment of Owodo, the last *Ogiso*, there was an interregnum and the following leaders of the people, Evian and his son Ogiamwen, administered the government successively. Evian had been one of the most important men in Benin in the reign of Owodo, the last *Ogiso* (Egharevba 1960:5) ...

Owodo was banished for misrule by the angry people, who then appointed Evian as administrator of the government of the country because of his past services to the people (Egharevba 1960:6).²⁹

In the wake of this flirtation with republicanism, a dispute over who would succeed Evian upon his death resulted in a leadership vacuum because, as a non-*Ogiso*, he did not have the divine authority to name one of his sons a king. The desire for a new god-king led to a plea being sent by messenger to the ancient Yoruba city of Ilé-Ifè for the return of the only son of *Ogiso* Owodo, formerly called Prince Ekaladerhan, who had been driven away from the Kingdom of Benin due to royal in-fighting. In the years that had passed since his forced exile, Ekaladerhan had changed his name to Izoduwa, amended by the Yoruba to Odùdùwà, and become the Ọ̀ṣ̀ni [traditional ruler and spiritual head of the Yoruba people] of Ilé-Ifè. Understandably, he initially politely declined the Edo people's request to walk away from the new life he had built for himself. However, following repeated and sustained pleading, he eventually relented and agreed to send his son, Prince Ọ̀ranmiyan, in his place. Ọ̀ranmiyan accordingly 'ascended the Benin throne' and was well placed to do so 'as the most aggressive of all of Odùdùwà's offspring.'³⁰ It is generally agreed that Ọ̀ranmiyan became the first *Ọ̀ba* of Benin in the thirteenth century, thereby giving rise to the beginning of the *Ọ̀ba* dynasty and the placement of the *Ọ̀ba* at the centre of Edo traditional religion:

²⁹ Bondarenko, Dmitri M., and Roese, Peter M., *Between the Ogiso and Oba Dynasties: An Interpretation of Interregnum in the Benin Kingdom in History in Africa*, Vol. 31, 2004, p.104. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4128520. Accessed 1 Sept. 2021.

³⁰ Bondarenko, Dmitri M., and Roese, Peter M., *Ibid.*, p.112.

On the initiative of Oliha, an *Edionevbo* (Benin City “kingmakers” council) member a delegation was sent to Oduduwa, the ruler of the Yoruba city of Ife (which Bini call Uhe) with a request to order one of his sons to go to Benin to found a new legitimate dynasty. Oduduwa considered the suggestion for a long time and finally agreed to satisfy the request only after receiving guarantees of security for his offspring. He chose Oranmiyan and the Ife Prince went to Benin accompanied by his retinue...

Under Oranmiyan the country received its new name: Ile-Ibinu (“Land of Troubles”). Another novelty traditionally associated with Oranmiyan’s arrival from Ife is the appearance of the first horses in Biniland.³¹

Ile-Ibinu later became Ibini, and the word was eventually supposedly corrupted to Benin by the Portuguese. Oranmiyan’s son, Eweka I, succeeded him as the first true *Oba* of Benin, who changed the name of the Kingdom to Edo. “The authority of Oranmiyan and his descendants was to be perceived as the legal “continuation” of that of the First dynasty rulers,³² thus, they have remained in the seat of power until present-day as the traditional rulers and custodians of Edo-Bini culture.

***Azen* [Witches]**

Azen are greatly feared in Edoland as the source of much personal misfortune, such as illness, infertility and death before one’s appointed time. These spiritual beings have the unique ability to straddle alternate realities and take on a human appearance to enable them to cause maximum harm:

Their special power lies in their ability to move from *agbon* to *erimwin* without being permanently resident in one or the other. Of all the beings in the Edo pantheon, the *azen* are the only beings capable of moving between the *agbon* and *erimwin* realms. Even the ancestors who once resided in *agbon* are permanent members of *erimwin* after the proper burial.

As social beings the *azen* are able to gain an intimate knowledge of their fellows which helps them to work evil against them. Thus, their

³¹ Bondarenko, Dmitri M., *Advent of the Second (Oba) Dynasty: Another Assessment of a Benin History Key-Point in History in Africa*, Vol. 30, 2003, p.66. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3172082. Accessed 1 Sept. 2021.

³² Bondarenko, Dmitri M., *Ibid.*, p.80.

observations during the day are utilised in their nefarious activities after dark.³³

Most of the *azɛn* in Edoland are female and even though *oso* [male witches] exist, they are supposedly ‘less common and have less power.’³⁴ The Edo-Bini believe that *azɛn* operate at night, as befits the nature of their wicked actions. It is possible to become a witch through initiation, and it is also widely accepted that the power of witchcraft can be inherited as ‘the children of witches are quite likely to be witches also.’³⁵ There are myriads of rules governing interactions with *azɛn*, most of which surround precautionary steps that should be taken in order to avoid upsetting them, lest they visit their anger on an unsuspecting and undeserving victim. For example, it is wise to refrain from causing arguments or fights at night so that a witch will not be tempted to involve herself and amplify the negativity. Additionally, it is prudent to agree to seemingly random requests for assistance, money or time because the person asking may be a witch, and if you refuse, their eventual vengeance could cause unimaginable distress for you and your loved ones.

The *azɛn* do not operate haphazardly and individually, but as part of a well-organised network with local and regional connections:

Immediately upon leaving the body, they fly away to a meeting of the witches [*ikeniwarenason*]. The witches’ society is hierarchically structured. Citing Bradbury, he states that ‘the witches are said to be organised along lines parallel to the territorial divisions of the Benin kingdom. Each village has its tree in which the witches of the village are said to meet at night. There are larger meetings for the more powerful witches of the major geographical areas of the kingdom and finally a central meeting which is attended only by the most powerful witches from the Benin kingdom’ (1957: 60).

This hierarchy is in no way related to social status on the *agbon* level. ‘A small man in *agbon* may be a big man in *erimwin*.’³⁶

³³ Welton, Robert, Michael, *Ibid.*, p.205.

³⁴ Welton, Robert, Michael, *Ibid.*, p.207.

³⁵ Welton, Robert, Michael, *Ibid.*, p.208.

³⁶ Welton, Robert, Michael, *Ibid.*, p.209.

Accusations of witchcraft often lead to the accuser or accused taking an oath at a temple specifically designed for this purpose. Oath taking is ‘a predominant mechanism in the native justice system and is believed to be a particularly reliable means to ensuring law and order in Edo traditional religion.’³⁷ These temples ‘are dedicated to various deities and are presided over by a chief priest, who is a mediator between humans and spirits.’³⁸ Some temples, such as Ekhonorhue Temple in Benin City, were established, usually by the *Ọba* of Benin, solely for witchcraft trials. In general, the accused would need to swear an oath of innocence by proclaiming themselves to be falsely accused:

The rituals of oath of innocence from false accusation of a crime or witchcraft are almost the same; the accused is meant to undress and tie just a piece of cloth around his/her chest while holding the specified items in hand. The animal (goat) used for the ritual is slaughtered and its blood sprinkled on the altar of the deity, after which the accused is made to take either a kneeling or a standing position to express the words declaring innocence of the accused crime.

An oath could be taken by saying the following words: “*I (oath taker will mention his/her name), I have come to take an oath before Ọgún, I am not a witch and I have never done any harm to my children, my husband, nor his family, nor to anyone in my community. I declare that I am innocent of this charge and if I do, or have done anything against my husband and children, let Ọgún kill me.*”³⁹

Witchcraft accusation and/or the repeated occurrence of unsettling events could also lead to a visit to the local diviner for reasons of absolution or prevention.

Divination

The *Iha Ominigbon* [indigenous Edo divination system], is thought to have been brought to the Kingdom by a prophet called Ominigbon, which is also

³⁷ IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series, No. 55, *Oath Taking in Edo: Usages and Misappropriations of the Native Justice System*, March 2019, p.2.

³⁸ IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series, *Ibid.*, p.2.

³⁹ IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series, *Ibid.*, p.9.

the name of the Edo deity of divination. As explored in previous chapters, divination is a means by which to discover the desires or decisions of supernatural forces through a spiritually powerful and knowledgeable intermediary, such as a medicine man, a priest or a professional diviner. It is said that there are two types of divination in Edoland: ‘one that uses material objects for divination and the one that uses no objects.’⁴⁰ Each type requires a person to seek out the intermediary for assistance in the first instance:

Divination without the use of oracular objects is known as *Obo-Iro*. In this system, the diviner listens to the problem brought by the client and then meditates on what has been said while gazing at the sky with intense concentration. After this exercise, the diviner proffers advice and/or solutions and makes prescriptions. This meditative sky-gazing system of divination is also practiced in *Olokun* cult by the *Olokun* priest or priestess. But not all *Obo-Iro* are attached to or dependent on religious and/or cult ownership.

The divination system that uses oracular objects is known as *Obo-Iha*. There are many types such as the *Ewawa* which uses sculpted objects, *Akhuekuehi* which uses *Akhuehuehi* seeds tied in a string, *Akpele* which uses various objects that are thrown in a straw tray, *Evbe* uses cotyledons of four or eight kolanuts, while *Olokun* uses combination of cowries, coins, shells, and keys which are thrown in a straw tray filled with white chalk powder, *Ifá Orunmila* (uses string pods and is of Yoruba origin, and *Ominigbon* or *Oguega* uses sixteen halved *Oguega* seed pods which are stringed in fours). Not all the *Obo-Iha* are attached or dependent on religious or cult worship.⁴¹

The interpretation of the patterns that emerge from the use of objects is ‘usually read from top to bottom and then from right to left in order to know the code and accompanying folktale or verses, which is then interpreted to the client. It is on the basis of the code and interpretation, that the solution and rituals are prescribed.’⁴² Interestingly, *Oguega* is the deity of wisdom and divination, thought to work alongside another powerful divination deity,

⁴⁰ Usuanlele, Uyilawa, *Tracing the African Origins of Obeah (Obia): Some Conjectures and Inferences from the History of Benin Kingdom* in *West Bohemian Historical Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2016, p.177.

⁴¹ Usuanlele, Uyilawa, *Ibid.*, p.177.

⁴² Usuanlele, Uyilawa, *Ibid.*, p.178.

Òrúnmìlà, who plays a corresponding role in Yoruba traditional religion as the *òrìṣà* of wisdom, intellectual development and divination, and is the caretaker of the *Ifá* divination system. The importance of divination in Edoland cannot be overstated as it performs a vital social function:

Apart from its use in fortune-telling and in finding solutions to personal problems, it is also used for judicial purposes, especially in detection of crimes or causes for misfortunes such as death or sickness or pestilence. Hence, divination can be said to have played (and still plays) a very important role in the life of the Edo people and their society.⁴³

An example of Oguega seed pods used in divination

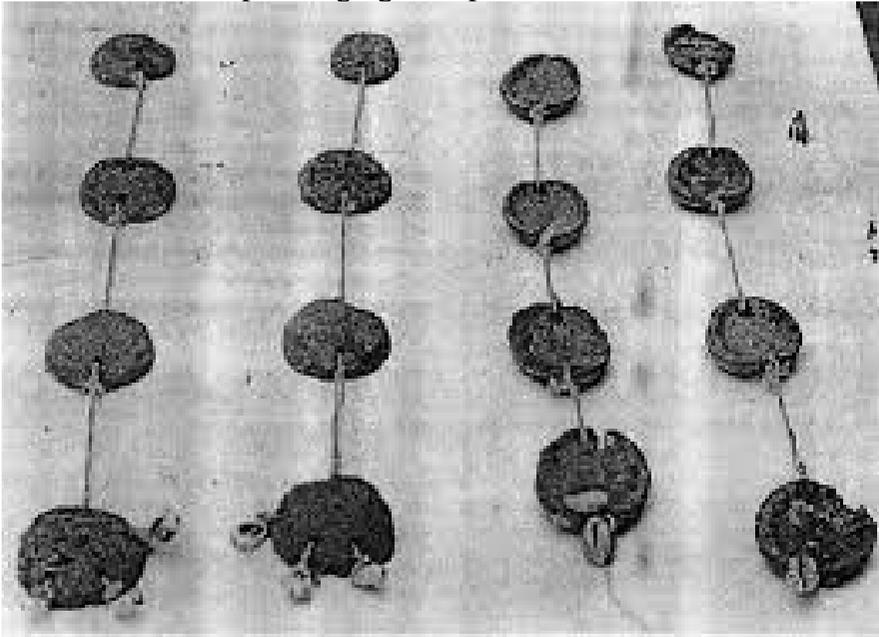


Image source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/IHAOGUEGA>

⁴³ Usuanlele, Uyilawa, *Ibid.*, p.178.

Chapter 10

NUPE GODS

[The Nupe people comprise less than 1% of the Nigerian population according to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, 2018 estimate]

Nupe, people living near the confluence of the Niger and Kaduna rivers in west-central Nigeria. They speak a language of the Nupoid group in the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family. The Nupe are organised into a number of closely related territorial groups, of which the Beni, Zam, Batache (Bataci), and Kede (Kyedye) are the most important. Men do most of the farming, while women prepare and market the crops.¹

BACKGROUND

The Nupe people* are located in the 'Middle Belt' of Nigeria and they are the main inhabitants of Niger State, with smaller but significant representation in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Kogi State and Kwara State. It is conventional wisdom, at times disputed, that the Nupe Kingdom and its dynasty was created in the fifteenth century by a semi-mythical cultural hero by the name of Tsoede:

The Nupe kingdom was founded by Tsoede, alias Edegi who was born in 1465. The early Nupe history recognised Tsoede and his fundamental contributions to the building of Nupe dynasty. Tsoede was the son of a Nupe mother and an Igala father who was raised at the Igala court in Idah but later returned to his natal home in Nupeland. He returned with magical and symbolic regalia bequeathed to him by his father, the Igala king.

On his return to his maternal home, he gained control over the vast area of Nupeland and extended his kingdom by conquering the lands of neighbours as well. The people conquered were the Yoruba in the south

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nupe>

* Estimates range from 3 to 4 million.

and the Kamberi and Kamuku in the north. He founded Nupeko as his administrative capital and from there asserted his political might and authority in the entire Nupe kingdom.²

Tsoede was the first *Etsu Nupe* [King of Nupe] and he presided over a period of military and cultural ascendancy until he 'passed away in 1591 in one of his military expansionist missions, north of the Nupe kingdom.'³ The unification of multiple semi-autonomous Nupe sub-tribes under Tsoede's leadership was the culmination and formalisation of centuries of harmonious co-existence on the banks of three rivers:

In central Nigeria...lies Nupe-land. Two rivers form its boundaries, the Niger to the south and west, the Kontagora River to the north. Another river marks its central axis: the Kaduna. The boundary to the east is formed by the gradually rising land, which eventually reaches the hills of Gwari country. It is a low, open, fertile country, covering roughly 7,000 sq. m., inhabited by a population who were known from the ancient days, and all over Nigeria, as an industrious and able people...

A great deal of migration seems to have taken place among the Nupe, small groups detaching themselves frequently from their own sub-tribe, and moving into the territory of another sub-tribe – hunters in search of game, or farmers seeking better farming-grounds...The sections, or sub-tribes, are above all territorial and cultural units. They speak the same dialect, and are often united by kinship ties and the consciousness of common descent.⁴

The capital of the Nupe Kingdom was originally Nupeko, after which it moved to Gbara, then it became something of a moving target, alighting at cities such as Jima and Tafyan, before finding a permanent *de facto* home at Bida (formerly Raba) in the late nineteenth century, in the heart of the traditional Bida Emirate in Niger State where it remains to this day.

² Yahaya, Kuta, Mohammed, *The Nupe People of Nigeria* in *Studies of Tribes and Tribals*, Vol. 1, Issue 2, 2003, p.95.

³ Yahaya, Kuta, Mohammed, *Ibid.*, p.95.

⁴ Nadel, S.F., *Nupe State and Community in Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 1935, pp.257–258. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3180414. Accessed 7 Sept. 2021.

The Nupe family unit is distinctive in its cohesiveness and the high regard in which it is held in Nupe society, particularly for the influential role familial connections play in their cultural and political structures. Key decisions such as choice of marital partners, professional employment, and even the next head of the family are matters for extended and generally good-tempered group discussion:

The unit of the family means more than mere household co-operation. It is an influence that covers almost every activity of its members. The individual enters into social activities in the wider field of the village or the tribe only via the family unit, and in virtue of his membership of the family unit.

This is valid for religion: its age-old cults and rituals are performed for, and invoked by, the village community as a whole; and family groups, led, or represented, by the elders, form its priesthood and congregation.⁵

The honouring of their familial ancestors, who are generally believed to be benevolent, forms an essential element of Nupe culture because an ancestor's *kuci* [soul] is believed to return to the Supreme Being upon death. The Nupe believe that each person has two souls: one that remains with the Supreme Being, and one that can return to Earth as a reincarnation. Nupeland's economy is immensely invested in agriculture, as befits a people who have generally lived in an environment suited to these pursuits. With the advent of time, their occupations have spread beyond farming and fishing to embrace white-collar work such as education and the civil service:

Nupe land is made up of an agrarian population, where the economy and social life revolve round agriculture. The people are active farmers. Major crops grown are rice, sorghum, sugar cane, millet, melon, vegetables, yam, homestead livestock management and fishing. Food processing is entirely done by women. Also, marketing of farm produce is in the hands of women.

However, many people are civil servants, employed in government establishments only. There are very few industries and private companies

⁵ Nadel, S.F., *Ibid.*, p.265.

that employ the services of people. Despite the unique history of the Nupes, they have not had fair sharing in national development. The commonest occupation in Nupe land is teaching. Most of the schools in various zones are predominantly handled by teachers of Nupe origin. Those around the riverside areas are predominantly fishermen and their wives are actively engaged in processing and selling of fish.⁶

ISLAM

The Nupe people are predominantly Muslim today as a result of the conversion to Islam of *Etsu* Jibril in approximately 1770. Prior to this date, perhaps as early as the fifteenth century, elements of Islamic influence arrived in Nupeland 'not through any systematic or formally organised method, but through emigrants, merchants and missionaries from already Islamised states.'⁷ Via the now-familiar delivery methods of commerce and trade, it is likely that the Nupe came into extensive contact with Arab traders who, along with their goods and services, also offered invitations to engage with their religion. It is on this assumed basis that the Nupe people's 'reception, accommodation and liberality may have accounted for the involvement of Muslim scholars and clerics in the administration of local kings.'⁸

In addition to these regional connections, strong local relationships were formed with Hausaland and the Kanem-Bornu Empire, which naturally led to a deeper penetration of Islam within Nupeland:

The long-established political and economic inter-group relations between Nupeland and Hausaland and Borno had significantly facilitated the pace of Islamisation in Nupeland long before the 19th century Jihad movements. It has been suggested that between the 14th and 15th centuries, Islam had become well-established in Kano and the process of extending it to other places had begun.

Regarding Kano as a melting pot, Mahadi shows the longstanding trade, commercial and inter-group relations between Nupe, Kano and Borno, in which exchange of trading goods took place, as well as settlement of Nupe

⁶ Yahaya, Kuta, Mohammed, *Ibid.*, p.103.

⁷ Sidi, Sheshi T., *The Beginnings of Islam in Nupeland in North Central Area of Nigeria*, Proceedings of ADVED15 International Conference on Advances in Education and Social Sciences, 12-14 October, 2015, Istanbul, Turkey, p.175.

⁸ Sidi, Sheshi T., *Ibid.*, p.177.

traders and skilled workers in many parts of Kano and its environs. Another account relates that by the 1450s Kano had begun to import slaves and Kolanuts from Nupeland in return for horses and potash.⁹

The gentle encroachment of Islam continued during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries until the tipping point of *Etsu* Jibril's conversion, widely agreed to be the decisively consequential move towards Islam at the royal level, although conflicting accounts exist, which claim that previous *Etsu* had become Muslims since the mid-seventeenth century. In any event, there is a consensus that *Etsu* Jibril was 'the first pious and Islamic *Etsu*-reformer in Nupeland,'¹⁰ who went on to wage a number of religious wars in opposition to pre-Islamic traditional religious rituals. His enthusiasm, in the end, led to his downfall due to the resistance he faced from the ruling elite and his subjects who were taken aback by his attempts to entrench the new religion throughout Nupeland:

Etsu (King) Jibril, who ruled around the middle of the [eighteenth] century, pursued the interests of the reforming party so assiduously that he was deposed for his pains. His fame nonetheless spread far and has endured long;

Muhammad Bello, for instance, wrote of him: "At one time there ruled over them [the Nupe] the just Sultan Jibril and Islam spread because of him. And they hated him because of his great firmness in the matter of religion. They deposed him and installed one who agreed with them in their folly and shamelessness."¹¹

Following the earlier-than-anticipated removal of *Etsu* Jibril, and the reign of another, more popular, Islamic *mujāhid* [a Muslim engaged in jihad]¹² by the name of Sheikh Abdulrahman Ibn. Muhammad Sharif, the next seismic shift came in the form of the Fulani War jihad, led by Shehu

⁹ Sidi, Sheshi T., *Ibid.*, p.177.

¹⁰ Sidi, Sheshi T., *Ibid.*, p.180.

¹¹ Mason, Michael, *The Antecedents of Nineteenth-Century Islamic Government in Nupe in The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1977, p.65. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/216891>. Accessed 8 Sept. 2021.

¹² Mason, Michael, *Ibid.*, p.75.

Usman dan Fodio. The invasion and subsequent domination of the Nupe by Shehu dan Fodio's armies meant the end of the Nupe Kingdom in its original form and its rebirth as the Nupe Emirate under the firm hand of the Sokoto Caliphate in the nineteenth century. These events took place against the backdrop of the outbreak of the Nupe Wars (c. 1810-1857) due to political instability, which more or less came to an end once the Fulani entered the fray:

The struggle for political control of Nupe kingdom between two princes of the Nupe ruling dynasty, Majiya and Jimada, assumed a greater dimension from 1810 with the involvement of a third party – the Fulani group. By the second half of the 19th century, this group had eclipsed the Nupe ruling dynasty and partitioned the kingdom into emirates under its control...

...The enthronement of a Fulani group as new rulers of Nupeland in place of the indigenous ruling dynasty...was made possible by the moral and military support given by Ilorin to Mallam Dendo who was the leader of the Nupe-based Fulani group.¹³

Mallam Dendo (1760-1833), was a Fulani Qur'ānic teacher and military leader who occupied Nupe's capital, Raba, accompanied by his forces and with the support of the Sokoto Caliphate, 'the entire central Nupeland and perhaps the most economically prosperous was left to Dendo and his children,'¹⁴ who collectively established a new Nupe ruling dynasty that has lasted until the present-day. Under Mallam Dendo, a deeply knowledgeable Sunni Islamic scholar, the Nupe Emirate witnessed the introduction and expansion of mainly Sunni Islamic infrastructure that paved the way for the proliferation of centres of Islamic education, Islamic courts and mosques in Nupeland today.

By the time the British colonial forces conquered and occupied the Sokoto Caliphate in the late nineteenth century, the Nupe Emirate had been reduced to a partitioned vassal state sending regular contributions to the Fulani Empire. However, several powerful traditional rulers remained in place, such as Emir Masaba (r. 1859-1873), who presided over the construction of three royal palaces, the night market and the central mosque

¹³ Idress, Aliyu A., *Ilorin Factor in the 19th Century Nupe Politics: A Study in the Inter-Emirate Relations Within Sokoto Caliphate, Nigeria* in *Transafrican Journal of History*, Vol. 20, 1991, pp.181-182. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24520309>. Accessed 9 Sept. 2021.

¹⁴ Idress, Aliyu A., *Ibid.*, p.184.

in Bida, which had become the new capital of the Emirate under Emir Usman Zaki (1790–1859). Despite the prior establishment of trade relations with the British Royal Niger Company in 1871, admittedly pockmarked by ‘disputes over both trade and slave dealing,’¹⁵ the Nupe Emirate was one of the earliest regions to fall under British rule:

The Sokoto Caliphate was occupied in stages. First, Nupe and Ilorin were conquered by the army of the Royal Niger Company in 1897. The Royal Niger Constabulary was raised in 1886 to enable the Royal Niger Company, which had obtained a Royal Charter that same year, to assert its authority in those parts of the Niger Territories to which it had laid claim.¹⁶

The subjugation of the Sokoto Caliphate was ‘undeniably bloody and brutal’¹⁷ and ultimately ‘under British rule, Nupe emirate became known as Bida emirate; and in 1908 it was incorporated into the newly created Niger province.’¹⁸ From this point on, the Bida Emirate was ‘governed as part of the British colony of Nigeria until 1960, when Nigeria gained Independence.’¹⁹ Subsequent to Independence, Niger State was created in 1976 and the city of Minna was named as the capital, ‘although Bida remains the largest predominantly Nupe town.’²⁰

Today, Islam is deeply embedded in Nupeland as reflected in their culture, such as the inclusion of Islamic elements in the marriages of non-Muslim Nupe citizens due to tradition, and their literature, such as the existence and acceptance of *Ajami* [non-Arab Nupe writings transcribed into Arabic symbols and letters primarily used by Muslim communities]. Every facet of the Nupe people’s lives has been impacted by their practice of Islam and it is a matter of common knowledge that their Islamic education system is unrivalled in its excellence.

¹⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bida>

¹⁶ Ubah, Chinedu N., *The British Occupation of the Sokoto Caliphate: The Military Dimension, 1897-1906* in *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde*, Bd. 40, *The Sokoto Caliphate and the European Powers 1890-1907*, 1994, p.81. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40341677>. Accessed 9 Sept. 2021.

¹⁷ Ubah, Chinedu N., *Ibid.*, p.97.

¹⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bida>

¹⁹ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/africa/nigeria-political-geography/nupe>

²⁰ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/africa/nigeria-political-geography/nupe>

An example of a Nupe *Ajami* poem called 'Yekpe Farila' by Alhassan b. Usman b. Ahmadu Zuruku (c.1890-1956), also known as Malam Mama

"YEKPE FARILA" ("KNOWLEDGE OF THE OBLIGATION")

وکی سونونو زیی بو قوم سنڤو	یکبی فریضا آلولا واجب دونا
ایو غفیترو مقیمز دونا	یکبی فریضا آلولا مدیح دو تکبا
غبانجین ووکیوی اتن بو قوم سنڤو	فریضا آلولا غتوابا اتن بو
غبانجین ووکیوی اتن بو قوم سنڤو	نیلا پی نی فریضا دونا
غبانجین ووکیوی اتن بو قوم سنڤو	تنا غاتغین لو غواکیوا فریضا دونا

Transliteration

Yekpe farila a lolaa wajibi da-o na
 Wokpe sunoni zhi ye bo fomi sun bo
 Yekpe farila alolaa madihu da u tukpa
 Ebo ga gbinci zhio muqimi zhi da-o na
 Farila alolaa gutwaba atun ye-o
 Gba nyadzun wo kpiu ye a cin ebo fomi sun bo
 Niyanla be ye nae farila da-o na
 Gba nyadzun wokpiu ye acin ebo fomi sun bo
 Nina gwacigban lo gwakpa farila da-o na
 Gba nyadzun wo kpiu ye acin ebo fomi sun bo

Translation

Knowing the obligatory acts of ablution is compulsory
 To know its Sunna acts for the sake of the Hereafter
 Obligatory acts of ablution, *Madihu* listen!
 For the benefit of seekers, keepers of prayer
 The obligatory acts of ablution are said to be seven
 Strive to know them for the sake of the Hereafter
 Intention and washing the face are obligatory
 Stories you should strive to know for the sake of the Hereafter
 Washing the hands up to the elbows is obligatory
 Strive to know it for the sake of the Hereafter

Image source: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42636168>²¹

CHRISTIANITY

Despite being a predominantly Muslim region, there are pockets of Christianity throughout Nupeland, which are largely attributable to the evangelical efforts of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther's Niger expeditions that took place in 1841, 1854 and 1857. His early attempts to preach the Gospel in the Nupe area of the Middle Belt were met with wary scepticism:

Crowther's path in Middle Nigeria was not a smooth one. From 1857 to 1859, when he attempted to found a mission station at Raba, then the capital of Nupe, Masaba, the *Etsu*, had become suspicious of missionaries

²¹ Ndagi, Umaru, Muhammad, *A Thematic Exposition of the Nupe Ajami Manuscript Heritage of Northern Nigeria in Islamic Africa*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring 2011, p.23. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42636168>. Accessed 9 Sept. 2021.

and their propaganda. Some Yoruba elements, including Madam Tinubu and some Èpès, who had witnessed the close connection between the Bible and the sword in the British occupation of Lagos, warned Masaba that missionaries were pathfinders of British imperialism.

Moreover, the *Etsu* did not find palatable the egalitarian teaching of the missionaries and their opposition to slavery and the slave trade. However, since he needed white people for mutually beneficial commerce and ammunition with which he hoped to consolidate his position in his kingdom, he asked Baikie and the missionaries to withdraw further down the river. This was the origin of the British Consulate ultimately established at Lokoja.²²

However, as time passed, Crowther and his team showed themselves to be adept at the political, social and economic manoeuvring required to navigate the delicate landscape. He went to great lengths to cultivate warm and friendly relationships with *Etsu* Masaba and the Emir of Bida, which began to bear fruit between 1870 to 1888:

Having gained the confidence of the Emir of Bida, the latter became disposed to consider Crowther's missionary programme for the Nupe kingdom. The Bishop selected focal caravan points for mission stations...In 1878 the Emir wrote letters to the Emirs of Nassarawa and Yola, advising them to allow the Bishop to begin missionary work in their territories. In the same year Umoru, Emir from 1873 to 1883...later assented to the establishment of a Mission station in Bida, an offer Bishop Crowther advised the Church Missionary Society to accept without ostentation...

Also, before 1880 the Sultan of Sokoto and the Emirs of Ilq̄rin, Gwandu and Bida accepted, gratefully, leatherbound Arabic Bibles from Salisbury Square, and invitations to set up mission stations reached the Bishop from Ilq̄rin, Egga, Loko and Yimaha.²³

With the power of hindsight, it can be seen that the Christian missionaries were fully encouraged to venture into Nupeland and its neighbouring regions, although they met with extremely limited success due to the tight grip of Islam, which proved to be unexpectedly durable. From

²² Ayandele, E.A., *The Missionary Factor in Northern Nigeria, 1870-1918* in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 3, No. 3, December 1966, p.505.

²³ Ayandele, E.A., *Ibid.*, p.506.

1888 onwards, it became apparent to the missionaries that they had underestimated the 'extent and intensity of Islam'²⁴ across the length and breadth of Nupeland, as well as Northern Nigeria. Predictably, the eventual dismemberment of the Sokoto Caliphate by the British was welcomed by the missionaries as it led to the timely removal of the Fulani impediment to widespread conversion:

In the Nupe country, where the Nupe had little love for their Fulani masters, the missionaries were welcomed as deliverers from the Fulani yoke...

In 1903 the Emir of Bida welcomed the C.M.S. and the Toronto Industrial Mission, encouraging both to cultivate sugar and providing cheap labour for the erection of the C.M.S. mission houses. By 1906 there were thirty-one pupils, most of whom were children of chiefs, in the C.M.S. schools in Bida.²⁵

The Bible was translated into Nupe in 1927 by the Reverend A.W. Banfield, a member of the Mennonite Mission, as part of a wider body of work that included the publication of varied and detailed works, including an 800-page dictionary in two volumes, on the nuances of the Nupe language:

- Nupe nouns and adjectives have no genders;
- Nupe language has few adjectives and myriad adverbs;
- Nupe vowels are comparable to those in Yoruba and Italian;
- the euphonic changes and structural relations of the Nupe language are comparable to Yoruba and Gbari.²⁶

Known colloquially as *Zabokun* Nupe [The White Nupe],²⁷ Reverend Banfield was also responsible for establishing the first printing press in Nigeria in 1906, the Niger Press, specifically in the Nupe town of Tsonga, Kwara State. This feat enabled the production of many key portions of the Bible and other written scriptural items, which has had a profound effect on Christianity's ability to survive through the decades.

²⁴ Ayandele, E.A., *Ibid.*, p.508.

²⁵ Ayandele, E.A., *Ibid.*, p.510; 518.

²⁶ Ayandele, E.A., *Ibid.*, p.522.

²⁷ Ayandele, E.A., *Ibid.*, p.522.

Today, Christianity remains a minority religion in Nupeland, even after the migration of Christians from other parts of Nigeria to the area, and despite continuous efforts on several fronts by a number of Christian denominations. With the support of organisations such as the Nupe Christian Fellowship and the Islamic Education Trust (IET), which has its national headquarters in Minna and organises 'inter-faith dialogues and workshops with a view to building bridges of understanding between Muslims and followers of other revealed religions,'²⁸ the work to ensure the peaceful co-existence of Christianity alongside Islam in the region is ongoing.

Sample text from the Nupe Bible

LABARI WANGI KENDONA JOHN KA U NA

Ega nya Rayi

I 1 Bedzo Soko ci jin yize, Ega ga da bo ani; Ega ga da be Soko nyi, Ega ga nini u yi be Soko nyi o. 2 Daga mafari mafari o Ega ga da be Soko nyi. 3 Be egwa u nyi Soko jin enyazi kpata o; a de ka enya nini kete na a jin nimi enya jinjincizi o kpata, e be egwa u nyi a na a. 4 Ega wuncin ga yi gbere nya rayi o, rayi nana ga ma la bayetin be ya eza wangizi o. 5 Bayetin enana nimi baziko o, baziko ma la kara nu u ya wo le a.

6 Soko tun tunci u tun, bagi ndoci na a yi John na, 7 wunga be na wun a ta ega nya bayetin ga ya ezazi na o. U be ta ega ga ya a ebo eza kpata a de 'ba a wo a ci a yakpe. 8 Wuntso yi bayetin ga a; u be na wun a ta labari nya bayetin ga na. 9 Nana ga yi bayetin nya gasikiya o, bayetin na be yize ci enana kpe eza wangizi kpata na.

10 Ega ga da nimi yize o, Soko ma jin yize be egwa Ega ga nyi, tun acin ma yize kpe u ye a.

Image source: http://worldbibles.org/language_detail/eng/nup/Nupe

TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Cosmology

Nupe traditional religion follows the customary pattern of 'god, spirit, medicine, soul, divination, ritual, and witchcraft.'²⁹ Nupe cosmology is

²⁸ Ndagi, Umaru, Muhammad, *Muslims of Niger State: A Survey*, NRN Background Paper No. 6, January 2012, Nigeria Research Network (NRN), Oxford Department of International Development, Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford, p.10.

²⁹ Miner, H., 1956, Review of Nadel, S.F., *Nupe Religion* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1954), <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1525/aa.1956.58.2.02a00300>. Accessed 14 Sept. 2021.

focused around *Sokó* [sky god], the Creator of the world who lives in Heaven but nevertheless remains close to His people on Earth:

The Nupe people believe the universe consists solely of God, the World, the sky and the earth. Natural phenomenon is said to be “*nya Soko*,” or ‘of God.’ God is referred to as “*Soko*,” or “*Tsaci*” [Lord], and is “*lokpa*,” ‘far away.’ *Soko* is omnipresent, and appealed to in the language of their daily lives. Although always near, they do not know exactly where *Soko* is or what he looks like.

Soko is omnipotent, omniscient, the only God, creator of all things, good and evil. They believe all life comes from him, and when not incarnate, exists in the sky with him. *Soko* brings about that which is desired to come. Conception, birth, and ritual ceremony are his gifts. To seek further understanding of him is moot, because there is no further knowledge to be learned.³⁰

The Nupe are philosophical regarding the presence of evil in the world; since *Sokó* is the source of all things, then ‘evil and all its sources – misfortune, disease, and malevolent spirits, were moulded alongside all other creation.’³¹ In essence, *Sokó* designed and implemented a perfect world but He did it as a removed Supreme Being, therefore, leaving it to its own devices will necessarily lead to imperfection. By adopting this pragmatic approach, the Nupe people have neatly avoided the problem of evil that has derailed many other traditional and mainstream religions:

Although people question why God does not intervene and protect them from various afflictions, such conditions are an accepted norm in their society. Unlike most religions, evil does not account for wrongdoings, nor did God create Satan as a counterpart. Rather he was created as an ambiguous entity. In this culture, there is no devil but many evil spirits.³²

Sokó is approached through divinities as intermediaries using *kúfí* [loosely translated as spirit-led magico-religious rites and rituals and the sacred objects used in them]. In fact, it is ‘a widely held-belief that the Nupecizi, before Islam, were worshipers of traditional masquerade

³⁰ Asante, Kete, Molefi and Nwadiora, Emeka, *Spear Masters: An Introduction to African Religion* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007), p.13.

³¹ Asante, Kete, Molefi and Nwadiora, Emeka, *Ibid.*, p.13.

³² Asante, Kete, Molefi and Nwadiora, Emeka, *Ibid.*, p.13.

divinities.³³ To this day, highly ranked Nupe families in Nupe-speaking communities throughout Nigeria are ‘identified as custodians of these deities,³⁴ for example, *Egungun* and *Igunnu*. Based on Nupe oral tradition, it is thought that the adoption of masquerades became part of their religious pantheon as a result of Nupe men attempting to ensure the protection of their family and friends:

...Long before the inception of the Nupecizi on earth, the menfolk decided to plan strategies that would ensure security for the people and properties in the community. They wanted their strategies kept secret and therefore decided to meet at night. They kept women and children out of the meeting believing that they could easily leak out their plans. However, each time a particular woman fought with her husband, she made a jest of him referring boldly to his submissions at the menfolk’s secret deliberations. The news soon spread among the menfolk and they decided to find out how the woman got her information.

The oracle told them that this woman changed into a cat and always attended their meetings. True enough, the cat appeared during the following three meetings, and all their efforts to kill it were abortive. Each time they attempted to capture the cat, it disappeared into thin air. The men changed their meeting schedule to once weekly. The day before the meeting, some men put on masques and covered themselves with dark (sometimes red or pink) clothes. They scared women and children away, some holding canes. Some of the men were tall, and some were short. This developed into what now is a religious tradition of tall and short masqueraders among the Nupecizi.³⁵

The recurrent worship of these traditional masquerade divinities fits the classic definition of a religious cult, but it must be mentioned that ‘a comparatively large number are practised by sections of the populations only...They are limited to village groups, or to that section of the tribe which is perhaps best termed subtribe.’³⁶ Within Nupe culture, there are ‘only a few

³³ Na’Allah, Abdul-Rasheed, *The Origin of Egungun: A Critical Literary Appraisal in African Study Monographs*, Vol. 17, No. 2, October 1996, p.60.

³⁴ Na’Allah, Abdul-Rasheed, *Ibid.*, p.60.

³⁵ Na’Allah, Abdul-Rasheed, *Ibid.*, p.61.

³⁶ Nadel, S.F., *Gunnu, a Fertility Cult of the Nupe in Northern Nigeria* in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 67, 1937, p.91. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2844173>. Accessed 15 Sept. 2021.

cults, rituals and beliefs common to the tribe as a whole,³⁷ and that can be considered all-inclusive:

...There are cults and rituals in Nupe which are invoked and enacted only when – roughly speaking – the need arises; and there are other cults which have their fixed place in the...calendar, and which have been performed and enacted regularly, from time immemorial, at that particular time of the year...

The calendar of the Nupe is essentially a naturalist's calendar. Though based on astronomical facts (i.e., moon months), it means...primarily a framework for those climatic phenomena and seasonal changes which are vital for people living in so close a dependence on environmental conditions: dry season, rains, cold and hot season.³⁸

The *Igunnu* or *Gunnu* fertility cult is highly valued within the Nupe community as a means of celebrating harvests and the end³⁹ of the dry season, as well as honouring the Earth as a manifestation of *Sokó's* power. The timing of the rituals varies from local community to local community, but overall, the meaning behind it remains the same as can be seen through the words of a Nupe in response to the question, "Why do you perform *gunnu*?" "Because our ancestors have always celebrated *gunnu*...The *gunnu* makes our crops grow, it gives us rain and food, and makes our wives have children; *ù lá kîn kpátá de láfiyá*" – "it makes the whole country thrive."³⁹ The *gunnukó* [*gunnu* priest] or *ndazo* [the Rare Man] is an essential element of the success of each seasonal celebration, which normally involves three stages:

- The *ndazo* leads the boys and young men into the *dǎ kùso* [uninhabited and uncultivated bush] on the eve of the *gunnu* sacrifice for a nocturnal ceremony. The ceremony must happen under moonlight and be completed before the sun rises. There is a short version, known as the 'black *gunnu*,' and a full-length version, known as the 'white *gunnu*.'
- The *gunnu* sacrifice, a communal meal and a short dance of the men take place during the day. The dance is performed in the *gunnubà* [sacred *gunnu* grove].

³⁷ Nadel, S.F., *Ibid.*, p.91.

³⁸ Nadel, S.F., *Ibid.*, pp.91-92.

³⁹ Nadel, S.F., *Ibid.*, p.95.

- A general dance for men and women in an open village space follows, and it lasts ‘as long as there is beer and food left,’⁴⁰ and it is, understandably, the part that the Nupe people look forward to the most.

Using the formerly Nupe village of Jebba Island as a reference, other typical seasonal rituals include *Mammá*, to celebrate the end of the rains and to protect against smallpox and evil influences in the village; *Dzako*, to celebrate the start of the guinea-corn harvest and to secure prosperity and wellbeing for the village; *Ndakógboyá*, a ceremony against witchcraft; and *Ndáduma*, a sacrifice to the River Niger, similar to a guardian deity of the village, also to ensure peace and prosperity.⁴¹

Egá [Witchcraft]

It has been reported that the knowledge of witchcraft in Nupeland surpasses their neighbouring tribes and has made the Nupe greatly feared throughout the Middle Belt and Northern Nigeria. The strength of the Nupe people’s belief in witchcraft is clearly defined as ‘the idea of some specific supernatural power which man can become possessed of, and which is used exclusively for evil and anti-social purposes.’⁴² It occupies a very specific position in the hierarchy of Nupe traditional religion:

Witchcraft is separated very distinctly from the general system of magic and magico-religious rites (*kuti*), it has nothing to do with the religious belief in the High god *Soko*, it is distinguished from the general beliefs in spirits (*jenu*) and ghosts (*fara*), and finally it is also distinguished from the mere application of a magical substance or ‘medicine’ (*cigbe*) which brings about immediately, as it were, a certain desired effect. Yet, as we shall see, a specific type of spirit beliefs, and a specific type of ‘medicine,’ are incorporated in the Nupe ideas on witchcraft.⁴³

Both men and women practise *egá* but it is a strongly held opinion among the Nupe that the *gǎcizi* [female witches] are more powerful with elaborate powers, while the *éshèci* [male witches] are ‘much weaker, much less

⁴⁰ Nadel, S.F., *Ibid.*, p.102.

⁴¹ Nadel, S.F., *Ibid.*, p.93.

⁴² Nadel, S.F., *Witchcraft and Anti-Witchcraft in Nupe Society in Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 1935, p.424. Published online by Cambridge University Press, 21 August 2012, DOI:10.2307/3180591.

⁴³ Nadel, S.F., *Ibid.*, p.424.

specific, compared with the “real” witchcraft of the women.⁴⁴ Their work is carried out at night and cannot be detected during the day, even though it affects the spiritual and human worlds. For the women, their main occupation appears to be the eating of souls and congregating outside the village to plot and scheme, while for the men, it is the protection of their property and cursing of their enemies through magic. Nupe men are also thought to engage with a specialised form of witchcraft that has a positive effect on their careers:

Professional magic is very highly developed among the Nupe. Woodcutters and well-diggers, farmers and blacksmiths, and of course also hunters, have their special professional magic which is unknown to outsiders and the tradition of which is carried on in certain families. But hunters are, on the whole, more mysterious people...

The hunters have their special taboos, and elaborate magical rites before and after the hunt. But above all, the idea of making oneself invisible must be closely associated with this profession, with the hunter's unnoticed stealing upon the beasts of the bush.⁴⁵

An entirely expected response to the pernicious problem of witchcraft was the establishment of an anti-witchcraft cult or secret society of witchfinders called the *ndakógbòyá*, who wielded witchcraft accusations as weapons against perceived problem-makers, thereby functioning as a sort of police force ‘meant to maintain the moral values of the village community.’⁴⁶ In possession of their own magic, occult rituals and ceremonies, practitioners of *ndakógbòyá*, requested the assistance of spirits to assist with the identification and conviction of a suspected *gǎci* or *èshè*. The punishment was usually death, the sentence carried out away from the village, in a suitably quiet section of the bush. However, following conviction, it was possible to buy one's freedom at a hefty price, with the amount rising depending on the person's age. This arrangement was ripe for abuse and, in fact, this is what happened, leading to a semi-permanent ban in the twentieth century:

The use of the *ndakó gbòyá* as an economic and political weapon came to an end in 1921, when the administration of Nupe Province had to forbid the *ndakó gbòyá* altogether. For these ceremonies which after the war had

⁴⁴ Nadel, S.F., *Ibid.*, p.424.

⁴⁵ Nadel, S.F., *Ibid.*, p.428.

⁴⁶ Kohnert, Dirk, *On the Articulation of Witchcraft and Modes of Production among the Nupe, Northern Nigeria*, Munich Personal RePEc Archive (MPRA) Paper No. 6962, December 2007, Institute of African Affairs, GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg, Germany, p.59.

reached a tremendous scale became a ruthless regular exploitation of the people.

The secret society in co-operation with the Emir of Nupe (a Mohammedan Emir) 'discovered' so many witches and 'delivered' so many villages that the economic situation of the whole country was upset, and that there was practically no money left for taxes.⁴⁷

Despite the ban, *ndakógbòyá*, continued to be practised to a limited extent because the Nupe did not want to left without any defence against witchcraft. Today, it survives as a lighter version of its previous dark self 'and the cult is now even referred to as a "festival" by a tourist guide,⁴⁸ used for entertainment purposes and stripped of its original significance. However, it is very much the case that the 'belief in black magic is still ingrained in members of the ruling class in Bida, the capital of Nupeland, and the peasants in the countryside.'⁴⁹

Divination

One of the most important Nupe cultural practices that existed before the introduction of Islam is divination, with the first type serving as an outlet for *Eba* [an ancient and chiefly positive form of Nupe spiritualism] that bears a striking resemblance to the Yoruba *Ifá* divination system. The *Eba* divination rituals are known as *Ebasan* and they are carried out by *Ebasanci* [priests]. The *Ebasanci* profession is open to both men and women who make use of objects, usually cowries, in intricate ceremonies designed to tease out answers about the future from supernatural powers:

The diviner has about twenty strings of cowrie shells, with some twenty shells on each string. He has also a number of pieces of calabash marked with dots in various patterns, rather like dominoes. The dots are known by the Nupe word *ati* (Arabic *khatt* 'writing'). Each pattern has a separate name, such as *maku* (Arabic *manqūs* 'diminished'). The cowries are thrown and the patterns are arranged according to the fall of the cowries.

There are sixteen possible positions in which each of the calabash pieces can be placed in relation to the rest, and each of these positions is known as a 'house.' Upon the final arrangement of the calabash pieces divination

⁴⁷ Nadel, S.F., *Ibid.*, p.428.

⁴⁸ Kohnert, Dirk, *Ibid.*, p.67.

⁴⁹ Kohnert, Dirk, *Ibid.*, p.68.

depends. By another method, separate cowrie shells are thrown, and divination depends upon how many fall with the 'mouth' of the shell uppermost.⁵⁰

Hati [sand divination] is the second type of divination popular among the Nupe people; it 'is of Mohammedan origin and involves drawing mystic patterns in the sand.'⁵¹ Based on the Arabic concept of *ilm al-raml* [the science of the sand], generally speaking, a smooth area of sand will be prepared by the diviner at a spiritually significant time of day linked to the information being requested by the client. The client draws shapes in the sand, as does the diviner who creates four 'Mother' figures, with the end result being a geomantic figure, which eventually multiplies into a spread of figures with accompanying interpretative rules, until a positive or negative outcome is indicated.⁵² Intriguingly, this process closely resembles the divination process of sand cutting among the Yoruba people, which they call *hati ramli* or *yanrin títẹ̀* [sand pressing].

The Nupe divination system is 'taught, learned, and handed on in a purely practical and often fortuitous fashion, with none of the sacred or ritual sanctions which would make for strict adherence to given rules.'⁵³ It is a point of note that 'the rules of divination are far from static, having been successfully adapted even to recent conditions and to political problems only some forty years old,'⁵⁴ in keeping with the syncretism of modern Nupe traditional religion.

⁵⁰ Hiskett, M., *The 'Song of Bagauda': A Hausa King List and Homily in Verse – II* in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 1965, pp.112-135, DOI:10.1017/S0041977X00056792, Footnote 152.

⁵¹ Nadel, S.F., *Nupe Religion* (London: Routledge, 1954), excerpt from abstract.

⁵² Skinner, Stephen, *Terrestrial Astrology: Divination by Geomancy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), pp.46-49.

⁵³ Nadel, S.F., *Nupe Religion* (London: Routledge, 1954), *Ibid.*, excerpt from abstract.

⁵⁴ Nadel, S.F., *Nupe Religion* (London: Routledge, 1954), *Ibid.*, excerpt from abstract.

Chapter 11

URHOB0 GODS

[The Urhobo people comprise less than 1% of the Nigerian population according to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, 2018 estimate]

Urhobo, a people of the north-western part of the Niger River delta in extreme southern Nigeria. They speak a language of the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family. The term Sobo is used by ethnographers as a cover term for both the Urhobo and their neighbours, the Isoko, but the two groups remain distinct from each other. Their local communities are different in economy, social organisation, dialect, and origins.¹

BACKGROUND

The Urhobo people* are one of the major ethnic groups who live in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria and they can be found largely within Delta State and Bayelsa State in the South-South geopolitical zone. Linguistically and culturally, the Urhobo are so similar to a neighbouring tribe, known as the Isoko, that they were initially classed together as one ethnic group, the Sobo, by presumptuous colonialists. It is broadly accepted that some of the Urhobo are indigenous to the area, while some migrated from other locations:

The current population includes both aboriginal peoples and those who migrated from Egypt/Sudan, Ife, and Benin. While exact dates of these migrations into the Niger Delta region are not known, it is speculated that segments of the Urhobo may have been in the region for about 2,000 years. A glottochronology of the Niger Delta by Kay Williamson supports this speculation.

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Urhobo>

* Estimates range from 3 million to 4 million.

Urhobo traditional culture and social ideologies (modes of thinking, acting, and feeling) were determined largely by their history and geographical environment until about the fifteenth century, when external influences from neighbouring power centres, like the Benin Kingdom and later, influences from Europe - started impacting these local ideologies. In spite of these influences, as well as the disparate sources of Urhobo migration, social stability has remained a dominant feature of their society.²

It is thought that different sub-groups came into the Niger Delta region at various points in time, with imprecise estimates ranging from the tenth century to the fourteenth century. For example, the Agbon and Ughelli clans 'identify Benin territory as the primary source of migration, with Ijo territory as a secondary source.'³ Similarly, the Ughievwen clan's memories 'refers to direct migration from Benin territory to their present location,'⁴ while the Eghwu trace their origins to the Ijaw tribe called Mein,⁵ who themselves came from Benin City. The migration patterns that led to the creation of Urhoboland as we know it today can be summarised thus:

We assume that there was, first, a primary migration into Urhoboland, sometime during the clan-based *Ogiso* era in the lands that are now called Benin. This wave of migration consolidated the foundation of Urhobo language and culture. Second, there were secondary instances of immigration from other regions whose migrants were absorbed into an existing Urhobo language and culture.

Third, there was a considerable amount of internal migration inside Urhobo country that helped to spread Urhobo culture and language and that helped to conquer and develop the difficult lands and waters of the Western Niger Delta.⁶

² Diakparomre, Mac, Abel, *Artifacts as Social Conflict Resolution Mechanism in Traditional Urhobo Society of Nigeria's Niger Delta* in *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 2009, p.1.

³ Diakparomre, Mac, Abel, *Ibid.*, p.2.

⁴ Diakparomre, Mac, Abel, *Ibid.*, p.2.

⁵ Diakparomre, Mac, Abel, *Ibid.*, p.2.

⁶ Ekeh, Peter P., *History of the Urhobo People of Niger Delta* (Buffalo, New York & Lagos, Nigeria: Urhobo Historical Society, 2007), p.14.

The Urhobo people's ancient cultural units have, in recent times, come to be identified as 'kingdoms,' although this is arguably a political construction with the potential to cause more confusion than it dispels. Setting this aside, these cultural units share certain unique characteristics that may be taken as evidence of 'the weight of Urhobo culture and its political organisation,'⁷ and as essential markers of Urhobo history:

- **Territory with Boundaries and Integrity:** Each cultural unit 'has a territory that has boundaries with other sub-cultures and occasionally with non-Urhobo cultural entities, such as the Isoko, Ijaw, and Ukwuani...[in most instances they]...were the first to occupy their own portions in the hinterland of the rainforests of Western Niger Delta.'⁸
- **Sub-Cultural Headquarters and Eponymous Ancestral Shrines:** Each cultural unit 'has its own headquarters. It is usually located in the first place in which the founding ancestors settled. These headquarters have eponymous ancestral shrines, venerating the spirits of the founding ancestors whose names are associated with the entire subculture.'⁹
- **Endowment of Individual's Identity as an Urhobo Person:** Each Urhobo person can only claim to be so 'through his or her membership of a subculture or subcultures as their father's or mother's birth right. No one can claim to be Urhobo directly, without belonging to a subculture or subcultures of Urhobo.'¹⁰
- **Totems and Taboos of Sub-Cultures:** Each cultural unit has 'for the sake of maintaining the spiritual welfare of its members...instituted their own set of totems and taboos whose observance will be binding on their communities.'¹¹
- **Sub-Cultural Control of Urhobo's Linguistic Dialects:** Each cultural unit has 'its own dialect of the Urhobo language. Native speakers of the Urhobo

⁷ Ekeh, Peter P., *On the Matter of Clans and Kingdoms in Urhobo History and Culture*. Presented as a lecture at an assembly of Urhobo Community in Abuja, Nigeria on Saturday 26 April, 2008, p.8.

⁸ Ekeh, Peter P., *ibid.*, p.8.

⁹ Ekeh, Peter P., *ibid.*, p.9.

¹⁰ Ekeh, Peter P., *ibid.*, p.9.

¹¹ Ekeh, Peter P., *ibid.*, p.9.

language can easily tell from what sub-culture a speaker of the Urhobo language hails.¹²

- **Urhobo Sub-cultures and the Institution of King (*Ovie*):** Each cultural unit has ‘[or had] at its disposal...the institution of kingship. Called *Ovie* [plural: *Ivie*] throughout Urhobo culture, an Urhobo king exists only at the sub-cultural level. Each subculture controls the rules that govern the ascension to the subculture’s throne. More importantly, each subculture could decide to exercise its right to have a king or not to have one.’¹³
- **An Axiom of Co-Equality among Urhobo Sub-Cultures:** Each cultural unit has the belief that they are equal, ‘for instance, although Okpe and Agbon are each many times larger in land and population than most of the Urhobo subcultures of the southeast, they cannot claim to be culturally superior to the much smaller sub-cultural units of southeast Urhoboland, such as Okparebe and Arhavwarien.’¹⁴

The Urhobo live in a vibrant ‘green rain forest belt descending from Benin City [that] meets the alluvial plains of the delta proper, in an area encompassing some 5,000 square kilometres.’¹⁵ Their climate is hot, humid and subject to high amounts of rainfall, which profoundly affects the economy and living standards within the territory:

As with the rest of the Niger delta, the climate of Urhoboland is humid subequatorial with a long wet season lasting from March to October that alternates with a shorter dry season that lasts from November to February...

The climate is influenced by two prevailing air masses namely (1) the S.W. monsoon wind and (2) the N.E. trade wind. The former prevails during the wet season and the latter during the dry season. The S.W. monsoon winds originate from the Atlantic Ocean and they are associated with the wet season, being warm and moisture-laden. In contrast, the N.E. trade winds

¹² Ekeh, Peter P., *ibid.*, p.10.

¹³ Ekeh, Peter P., *ibid.*, p.10.

¹⁴ Ekeh, Peter P., *ibid.*, p.11.

¹⁵ Foss, Perkins, *Where Gods and Mortals Meet: Continuity and Renewal in Urhobo Art in African Arts*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Winter, 2003), p.12. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3337976>. Accessed 19 Oct. 2021.

originate from the Sahara Desert and their prevalence is associated with the dry season.

The natural vegetation of Urhoboland is rain forest with swamp forest occurring in flat-floored valleys and adjoining low-lying areas that are seasonally or permanently waterlogged...Today, much of the countryside is dominated by secondary regrowth vegetation with oil palms (*Elaeis guineensis*) and *Chromolaena odorata*, farmland, rubber "plantations" and patches of swamp forest along rivers.¹⁶

The occupations of the Urhobo reflect the realities of their environment, with farming, fishing, commercial trading, mining and palm wine tapping serving as the main sources of income. Farming, in particular, is the 'mainstay of the rural economy and most people in the rural area engage in farming which is mainly subsistence in nature.'¹⁷ Fishing comes a close second, due to the abundance of saltwater and freshwater spaces, although this has been negatively impacted over the years by environmental disasters related to crude oil exploration:

Fishing is important in the main streams and rivers, especially, the Ethiope, Kiagbodo and Warri. Nets and other fishing gears are used for fishing. Traps are also widely employed. The catch consists mainly of tilapia (*Tilapia spp.*) and catfish (*Clarias spp.*).

As a result of pollution of streams and rivers by crude oil during oil spills, mainly resulting from lapses by oil-producing companies, the fishery resources of many rivers have been decimated. This has rendered fishermen jobless and they have to migrate to cities such as Warri and Sapele in search of jobs, thereby worsening social problems in the towns.¹⁸

The initial discovery of oil in the small town of Oloibiri, Bayelsa State in 1956, and in subsequent years in neighbouring areas, has had a life-changing effect on the lives of residents of Urhoboland, and indeed, on the Niger Delta region overall. It is a little-known fact that 'Ughelli town was the second

¹⁶ <http://www.waado.org/geography/urhobogeography-aweto.htm>

¹⁷ <http://www.waado.org/geography/urhobogeography-aweto.htm>

¹⁸ <http://www.waado.org/geography/urhobogeography-aweto.htm>

location where crude oil was discovered in large and commercial quantity by Shell...after Oloibiri in 1956.¹⁹ The exceptionally lucrative international oil market and its stakeholders have simultaneously been responsible for the creation of great wealth, great social injustice and environmental disasters in oil-producing communities, who rarely enjoy the fruits of their land's labours:

Analyses of soils and waters in postspill studies of some Urhobo sites show increased levels of chromium, mercury, copper, cobalt, cadmium, nickel, vanadium and lead...There is abundant evidence that the disease patterns of the Urhobo population have changed from the traditional malaria and pneumonia to diseases of the respiratory tract, central nervous system (brain and spinal cord), blood system with the result that Urhobo people now suffer from cancer of the various organs of the body...

...Analyses of river waters in Urhobo oil producing areas around flare sites show increased water temperatures. Increases in water temperatures as high as 10°C have been recorded in some water bodies. In such waters, high temperatures cause the death of many algae present in water. Since these algae are the base of the food chain, organisms that feed on them die, eventually leading to the starvation and consequent death of shell fish and fish.

At any rate, fishes can avoid unpleasant environments and move away to safer environments. The poor fish yield is a combined result of annihilation in a poisoned environment and avoidance movement. (Urhobo Communities 1994: 7-8).²⁰

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity has been overwhelmingly popular in Urhoboland since its discovery in the fifteenth century by inquisitive Europeans, and 'the first attempt to Christianise the Urhobo took place in 1470 by Portuguese missionaries.'²¹ Unfortunately, their initial efforts to establish Roman

¹⁹ Omoweh, Daniel A., *Shell, Environmental Pollution, Culture and Health in Nigeria: The Sad Plight of Ughelli Oil Communities in Africa Spectrum*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1995, p.116. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40174568>. Accessed 19 Oct. 2021.

²⁰ Ejobowah, Boye, John, *Who Owns the Oil? The Politics of Ethnicity in the Niger Delta of Nigeria in Africa Today*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Winter 2000), p.39. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4187306>. Accessed 19 Oct. 2021.

²¹ Enuwosa, J., *Kirimomo: A Hermeneutical Approach in Gospel Proclamation among the Urhobo of the Niger Delta in Alternation*, Special Edition 2, 2005, p.147.

Catholicism amongst the Urhobo were unsuccessful due to a unique blend of 'inadequate finance, manpower and the unfavourable climate.'²² Thereafter, a substantial break in proselytising took place until another denomination was able to break through using the combined efforts of international and local evangelists:

Towards the middle of the 19th century, Christianity came to Urhoboland from three fronts: Sapele, Urhuovie and Warri. The Church Missionary Society first appeared in Urhoboland in 1854 at Okwagbe, 1864 in Warri and 1892 in Sapele and Urhuovie (Ajayi 1981; Eriwo 1973: 34).

These missionary attempts derive from the efforts of Samuel Ajayi Crowther and some ex-slaves in Sapele. The church spread and established stations in the Urhobo hinterland. It came to be known as the Niger Delta Pastorate under Bishop James Johnson (Ayandele 1970: 88; Ryder 1960: 1). It has become the Anglican Dioceses of Warri, Ughelli and Oleh. The fourth diocese, Sapele diocese comes from the old Warri diocese.²³

A significant element of this turning point was the introduction of the Europeans to the Urhobo people for reasons of commercial trade. Prior to the nineteenth century, traders had predominantly communicated with the Niger Delta tribes who lived near or on the coast, and contact with those in the hinterland was practically non-existent. This separation of the traders from the oil-producing communities was a deliberate ploy by the Niger Delta tribes who served as middlemen, usually to protect their own interests and to ensure enrichment, albeit at the expense of nearby ethnic groups. However, this state of events was materially affected once other Christian denominations came forward to stake their claim:

The Roman Catholic Mission later came to Urhoboland. Coming in a big way with both human and material resources, parishes were established in Warri in 1919 by Rev. Fr. Cavegenaire and Fr. Olier, Aragba in Orogun clan in 1920 by Rev. Fr. George and Eku in 1921 by Rev. Fr. Kelly. By 1924, the church had come to Ovu, Okurekpo, Okpara, Kokori, Ughelli, Ovwo, Ekuigbo, Ewvreni, Olomu and Arhavwarien.

²² Enuwosa, J., *Ibid.*, p.147.

²³ Enuwosa, J., *Ibid.*, p.147.

The Baptist Mission came to Urhoboland in 1920. The charismatic activities of A. Omotosola in 1921 and Jove Aganbi in 1926 contributed to the spread of the Baptist Church in Sapele and Eku. From these two places, the mission came to Abraka, Okpe, Idjerhe, Agbon, Ughelli and Orogun. Makpa Mojami brought the Baptist Church to Oginibo near Ughelli in 1922. Oginibo became an important centre of the Baptist Church among the riverine Urhobo (Atanda 1988: 246).²⁴

Thus, in the first three decades of the twentieth century, Christianity in its various forms had penetrated Urhoboland through key towns and cities such as Sapele, Ughelli and Warri. Sapele was, and still is, a strategically placed location 'belonging to the people of Okpe in Urhobo country.'²⁵ The original Okpe name of the town is *Urhiapele/Urhuapele* [river or stream of the *Apele*, with *Urhia/Urho* meaning 'river or stream' and *Apele* being the name of a Juju of the Okpe], which was supposedly Anglicised by the Europeans to the easier-to-pronounce Sapele, Sapeli and even Sapoli. It is noted that 'the hinterland Urhobo call it *Isapele* and the Itsekiri people generally call it *Usapele*, both obviously after the European rendering.'²⁶ With regards to the success of Christianity within Urhoboland, 'by 1935, the entire land was dotted with mission houses, schools and hospitals.'²⁷ The various missionary groups relied on these infrastructural facilities as the cornerstones of the advancement of their activities:

First, they established missionary schools at both primary and secondary levels and admission was limited to the children of converts. The theme of the Christian message was "peace and brotherhood;" and indigenes who were disposed to it served in the colonial regime. The Bible was the sacred book and its scriptures were taught in their schools and churches. For instance, the various divinities were described as devils and the people were forced to stop the taboos observed for them.

The second approach was the establishment of mission hospitals. Admission of students for their nursing programme was restricted to converts. Furthermore, the missionary doctors played two roles: *ij* they

²⁴ Enuwosa, J., *Ibid.*, pp.147-148.

²⁵ Salubi, Adogbeji, *The Origins of Sapele Township in Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1960, p.115. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41970824>. Accessed 19 Oct. 2021.

²⁶ Salubi, Adogbeji, *Ibid.*, p.115.

²⁷ Enuwosa, J., *Ibid.*, p.148.

preached for the immediate discontinuation of the traditional medical systems; and they trained nurses on western medicine. In the churches, sermons by the missionary priests preached against worshipping “idols,” the revered gods or divinities of the people.²⁸

Bishop James Johnson (c. 1836–1917), an African nationalist with ideas light years ahead of his time, was instrumental in the spread of Christianity within Urhoboland. Of Sierra Leonean, British and Nigerian origin, he came to Nigeria under the auspices of the Church Missionary Society and quickly found a welcoming audience within the Niger Delta region. He travelled extensively through the area, bringing structure and stability with him as he did so:

In July 1901 James Johnson, after his consecration as an assistant bishop the previous year, visited Warri, Sapele and Benin. In the first two places the bishop reported that he met worshipping communities which he then undertook to organise. Thereafter he paid yearly episcopal visits to this region until 1917 when he died...

Furthermore, Bishop Johnson who had a life-long dream of an independent African Church in full communion with the Church of England, employed African agents, who were usually Yoruba or Saro, to work in the Niger Delta Pastorate (N.D.P.) Churches. His hope was that before long the N.D.P. would be constituted into an autonomous Diocese with James Johnson himself as the Diocesan...

Many of those who embraced Christianity did so because of a desire to be free to eat food they could not eat before conversion. It was for this reason that Christianity in Urhoboland was initially known as *Orugbegwa* - that which defies tabu.²⁹

Bishop Johnson’s dreams of a ‘Native Pastorate’ to be run by Nigerians for Nigerians were largely influenced by his childhood memories of growing up in Freetown as a member of the African Methodist Church, ‘which had seceded from the Wesleyan Mission in 1821,³⁰ and his mentorship under the

²⁸ Omoweh, Daniel A., *Ibid.*, p.124.

²⁹ Erivwo, Samuel U., *A History of Christianity in Nigeria: The Urhobo, the Isoko, and the Itsekiri* (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1979), Chapter Two. Reproduced on <http://www.waado.org> with the permission of the author, 1979.

³⁰ Ayandele, E.A., *An Assessment of James Johnson and His Place in Nigerian History, 1874-1917: Part I, 1874-1890* in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 1963, p.491. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41856675>. Accessed 21 Oct. 2021.

similarly liberal-minded Reverend Henry Venn (1796-1873) who 'urged Africans to be prepared to assume the leadership of their countries.'³¹ Unsurprisingly, these radical notions of independent Nigerian churches, responsible for their own finances and governance, were vehemently opposed by European missionaries and British administrators alike, who were thoroughly alarmed at the prospect of being excluded from their painstakingly assembled colonial structures.

By the late nineteenth century, Bishop Johnson had succeeded in founding a uniquely indigenous Pastorate, including the prestigious Breadfruit Church (now known as St. Paul's Breadfruit Church), with the support of black missionaries, indigenous evangelists and educated Africans and Nigerians; it was accompanied by the emergence of a nationalist movement that marked 'the beginnings of the displacement of white dominance from Church affairs.'³²

Sample text from the Urhobo Bible

Iyẹnre Esiri ri

JON

1 I Notorhe oye Ota na vwọ herọ, Ota na ve Ọghẹnẹ gba herọ, Ota ye he Ọghẹnẹ. **2** Oye ovo ve Ọghẹnẹ gba herọ notorhe; **3** oma rọye a wan mama imu na ejobi, ọ gbe dia oye-e emu ọvuovo ra mare na a gbe mama-a. **4** Oma rọye arhọ epha, arhọ na kọye he urhukpe re ihwo. **5** Urhukpe re lo vwe evun re ebri, ebri na sa dje elo-o.

6 Ohwo ovo herọ re Ọghẹnẹ ji rhe, ode rọye Jon. **7** O rhere kerẹ oseri, rere o vwo se oseri ke urhukpe na, rere ihwo ejobi vwọ wan oma rọye segbuyota. **8** O dia oye he urhukpe na-a, ekẹvuovo o rhere rhi se oseri ke urhukpe na.

Image source: http://worldbibles.org/language_detail/eng/urh/Urhobo

³¹ Ayandele, E.A., *Ibid.*, p.492.

³² Ayandele, E.A., *Ibid.*, p.505.

In present-day Urhoboland, Christianity has become the dominant religion, displacing many of the social norms and values that existed in its traditional society. With the aid of translated texts such as the Bible and other religious tracts, the Christian message has ensured the ongoing acceptance and expansion of the Good Word amidst the Urhobo people.

ISLAM

Along with most of the Niger Delta region, Urhoboland was spared the attention of the Sokoto Caliphate during its famous jihad of the Fulani War that commenced in the early nineteenth century. The enduring popularity of Christianity left very little room for the penetration of Islam to the same degree as evidenced in other parts of Nigeria. The Nigerian census carried out in 1952 listed the presence of Muslims in Delta State at 1.1%, and by the 1963 census, the figure had fallen to 0.6%, in contrast to Christianity, which had risen from 21.1% to 51.2% and traditional religion, which suffered heavy losses, falling from 77.8% to 48.3% in the same censuses.³³ It is clear from these figures that ‘the two missionary religions, Islam and Christianity, were both trying to win converts from the Traditionalists, and both were succeeding, to different extents in different places.’³⁴ The number of Urhobo Muslims may have been low but they remained a consistent presence in subsequent decades due to the usual factors of intermarriage, internal migration and enquiring minds.

The presence of central mosques built in well-known locations such as Ughelli and Ekakpamre, and Hausa quarters in lively towns such as Sapele, has ensured the continued protection of Muslims living in Urhoboland, although conflict does occasionally arise as a result of ethnic and religious tensions. However, with the ongoing support of the Federal Government that is ‘deeply involved in Pilgrims Welfare Boards, provision of special transportation and accommodation arrangements, and special foreign exchange allocation,’³⁵ Urhobo Muslims can be certain that their choice of faith will remain safe and secure under the government’s protective umbrella.

³³ Ostien, Philip, *Percentages by Religion of the 1952 and 1963 Populations of Nigeria's Present 36 States*, NRN Background Paper No. 1, Nigeria Research Network (NRN), Oxford Department of International Development, Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford, January 2012, p.4.

³⁴ Ostien, Philip, *Ibid.*, p.4.

³⁵ Ekeh, Peter P., *Ibid.*, p.561.

TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Cosmology

The Urhobo people place their faith in the Supreme Being known as *Oghene*, a descriptor that is shared with one of their adjoining Niger Delta tribes, the Isoko. Urhobo names are well-known for their incorporation of God into their meanings, especially with children being highly prized in their society. Names such as Ejiroghene [Praise God], Oghenerukevwe [God did this for me] and Oghenetega [God is worthy to be worshipped]³⁶ are clear indicators of the extent to which a child's name is used both as a blessing and prayer to the Creator who gifted them to their parents. *Oghene* is the Creator of the world and all the living things that exist within it, and He is believed to be all-seeing, all-knowing and all-powerful:

The [Urhobo] people are very religious, believing in and placing high confidence on the supernatural being, often expressed as *Oghene*, meaning God. Their conception of the Supreme Being is that, it is the overall owner and controller of the whole universe, that is *Oro vw'akpo* [Supreme Deity]. He [Supreme God] is predominantly worshipped both directly and indirectly.

The direct mode of worship is either done on personal request to God or through the head of the family, the man. For instance, the head of the family, whether confronted with danger or not, worships the Supreme Being every morning with a quantity of *Orhen* native white chalk, which he keeps in his left hand and breaks into powder form with his thumb. While doing this, he addresses *Oghene* in his generic names such as *Oghene Osonobruwen*, and makes his heart desire to Him while looking up into the sky

The indirect mode of worship on the other hand, is done through *Edjo* and *Erhan* [divinities] accepted by the people as their ancestors and ancestresses whose power is derived from the Supreme Being.³⁷

The nature divinities *Edjo* and *Erhan*, who are two of many messengers, are also *Oghene's* creations and they serve as individualised manifestations of his powers, designed to implement law and order among the human race. The

³⁶ <https://maternitynest.com/nigerian-baby-names-urhobo-names-boys>

³⁷ Omoweh, Daniel A., Ibid., p.119.

Urhobo subscribe to the belief that ‘individual and collective spiritual forces exist in nature: water, trees, plants, land and air,’³⁸ and these universal spirits are collectively known as *edjo*.

The *edjo*, who contain an ancestral element, are commonly represented in the form of male and female wooden figures, masks and staffs as a way of honouring the founders of their communities; they are ‘enshrined in special buildings and maintained by an elaborate hierarchy of titled priests and priestesses who serve as the spiritual leaders of their communities.’³⁹ The *edjo* are venerated on a weekly basis, and they also enjoy annual festivals dedicated to ‘dances, masquerade performances and lavish feasts.’⁴⁰

Conversely, the *erhan* [singular: *orhan*] are personal gods who tend to be represented by ‘personal images in personal shrines,’⁴¹ and they provide an individualised mode of worship, principally in the physical form of clay vessels containing sacred objects and buried in secret locations. Examples of *erhan* include *obɔ* [hand] for wealth, *iphri* [to control aggression] and *urhievbe* [destiny].⁴² Another important divinity governs the compound, which is a collection of households arranged according to their patrilineal lineage:

The *Oghene-Egodo*, god of the compound, is symbolised by the *Oghriki* (New-bouldia) tree, which serves as the medium through which the Supreme Being is communicated with. The choice of *Oghriki* tree, a tropical plant is because it attracts various spiritual forces.

As the god of the compound, it serves as a shrine or altar where the head of the family worships with palm wine, white kolanut, white cockerel, whether he is making a prayer request or not. The white elements for sacrifice symbolise that God is pure and also manifests the people’s mind at worship.⁴³

The divinities fulfil a vital sociological role within Urhobo traditional religion by acting as moral restraints on the communities that worship them,

³⁸ https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/two_sculp/htm/urhobo.htm

³⁹ https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/two_sculp/htm/urhobo.htm

⁴⁰ https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/two_sculp/htm/urhobo.htm

⁴¹ Ajagbe, Temioda, Samson O., *The Dilemma of an Urhobo Baptist Regarding Funeral Rites: An Appraisal*, Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Theology, Philosophy and Religious Studies, Deanery of Arts and Humanities, Liverpool Hope University, August 2012, p.119.

⁴² Ajagbe, Temioda, Samson O., *Ibid.*, p.119.

⁴³ Omoweh, Daniel A., *Ibid.*, p.119.

and through guardianship ‘in questions of war, fertility and for ethical purposes.’⁴⁴ They also preside over the enforcement of numerous taboos, without which the stability of Urhobo culture would be in jeopardy.

Ancestor Worship

The Urhobo people believe in two realms: *Akpo*, the tangible world of the living and *Eriwwin*, the intangible world of the supernatural. *Eriwwin* is home to a host of spiritual forces with mastery over the affairs of human beings, such as divinities, gods and ancestors, including the *ese-emọ ikpori* [fathers who have passed on] and the *ini-emọ ikpori* [mothers who have passed on]. Through supplication and sacrifice to the residents of *Eriwwin*, the residents of *Akpo* attempt to attract positive events and outcomes to their lives. When a person’s *Ugboma* [physical body] dies, this is not the end of their existence because their *Erhi* [spiritual body] is expected to continue ‘keeping watch on the living to avert evils and punish evil doers in order to bring about harmony in society’⁴⁵ while in *Eriwwin*. In return, the ancestors can look forward to receiving markers of gratitude through praise, thanksgiving, special festivals and daily homage. For example, Urhobo traditional culture has a four-day week with meanings assigned to each day:

***Edewo* and *Eduhre* are believed to be sacred days for serving the divinities and ancestors. It is traditionally believed by the people that on those days, the spirits of the ancestors converge, and it is therefore an abomination for the living to see them physically. Rituals to appease these divinities are also performed on such days.**

***Ediruo* and *Edebi* are working days. The four-day week and the two major seasons, dry and rainy, are of traditional significance for fixing planting, harvesting and festivals. For instance, the rituals for the divinity of prosperity are performed towards the dry season, believed to take place once the rivers, creeks and streams have receded with the various divine forces.**⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Omoweh, Daniel A., *Ibid.*, p.119.

⁴⁵ Omoweh, Daniel A., *Ibid.*, p.120.

⁴⁶ Omoweh, Daniel A., *Ibid.*, p.120.

However, there are barriers to becoming an ancestor, particularly if the person in question is revealed to have been an evildoer during their lifetime - perhaps a witch or a criminal - or they experienced a suspicious and/or unnatural death. In these cases, their bodies are disposed of without the observance of the appropriate funeral ceremonies, which has grave consequences:

Nevertheless, the major priority of life is to become an ancestor after death. This is the reason why every dead person is accorded a proper funeral rite in Urhobo culture. The Urhobos believe that, when this is not done, the spirit of such a dead person wanders round the community, and poses a danger to those still alive.

In essence, proper burial rites are [more of an] assurance of protection for the living than securing a safe passage for the dying; and it is also believed that the dead are more powerful than the living.⁴⁷

It therefore follows that a failure to meet the requirements to become an ancestor, or dying before one's appointed time, could result in the person's spirit being reincarnated, typically in a new location, thereby giving one another chance to complete the business of life and go home to 'take his place among the ancestors.'⁴⁸ The ancestors also have a part to play when ill health rears its ugly head, in the context of traditional medicine:

To the people, a disease is an ailment; however, it must have a cause similar to the "germ theory" of the orthodox medical practice, but different in diagnosis and treatment. The cause of a disease is first and foremost understood in the context of either the patient's violation of the norms of society or else an abomination has been committed that angered the ancestors and he/she is therefore struck down or bewitched...

...The actual diagnosis starts with an enquiry into the divinities, ancestors and spirits in order to establish first of all its actual cause(s). Should any of the ancestors have been found to be angered by the patient, then he/she

⁴⁷ Anthony, Oghenevwoke, Agbegbedia, *An Evaluation of the Urhobo Cultural Conception of Death* in *OGIRISI: A New Journal of African Studies*, Vol 11, 2015, p.46.

⁴⁸ Anthony, Oghenevwoke, Agbegbedia, *Ibid.*, p.61.

must be appeased through sacrifice before the real treatment of the disease can begin.⁴⁹

Divination

The *Epha* [also known as *Eywa*] system of divination, which shares a link to Yoruba *Ifá*, is highly valued in Urhoboland as a means of communicating with the supernatural world in order to gain hidden information about the past, present and future. Human beings have little control over naturally occurring events, so ‘through divination, social tensions and anxiety over seemingly unpreventable disasters are deflected away from the group by attributing the danger to supernatural agents.’⁵⁰ For the Urhobo, divination also assists with the identification of witchcraft, the making of decisions and the ability of the client to ‘determine the wishes of the spiritual forces which have powers over his fate.’⁵¹ The *oboepha* or *obuepha* [diviner or priest] is a central feature of the divination process:

Throughout the length and breadth of Urhoboland, my investigation shows that the Urhobo have no tutelary divinity unlike the Yoruba who have *Orunmila* for divination purposes. Consequently, among the Urhobo people, the *Oboepha* (diviner) literally is a doctor of *epha* which means he is a doctor or expert in divination and thus able to communicate through a process with the unseen and super sensible world. He is able to transmit messages from the living-dead, the spirits and divinities to his clients on earth. He is not only able to foretell the future, but is able to unravel the mystery of the past and proffer possible solutions...

As a result of these roles, an *Oboepha* occupies a very important position in the village or community where he dwells. It is also of importance that although the act of divination is associated mostly with men, in Urhoboland there are instances where women also perform these roles.⁵²

⁴⁹ Omoweh, Daniel A., *Ibid.*, p.121.

⁵⁰ Akpomuvie, Orhioghene, Benedict, *Oracular Divination as a Mode of Existential Information Gathering in Urhoboland in Delta State*, Nigeria in *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology*, Vol. 18, No. 8, 2021, p.220.

⁵¹ Akpomuvie, Orhioghene, Benedict, *Ibid.*, p.221.

⁵² Agberia, J.T., *Cosmology and Symbolisation in Urhoboland* in Onibere, S.G.A. and Adogbo, Michael P. (eds.), *Selected Themes in The Study of Religions in Nigeria* (Lagos: Malthouse Press, 2010), p.135.

By consulting the *oboepha* before starting a new course of action, an Urhobo person seeks to know ‘whether the time is propitious or whether the ancestors are in favour and whether or not the entire project can be insulated from the reach of evildoers who constitute themselves into veritable negative threat to success.’⁵³ These ‘projects’ can be events as wide-ranging as the choice of a spouse, planning a journey and planting a new type of crop. In cases of ill health or disasters, ‘a multiplicity of sacrifices may be recommended and offered, to such entities as ancestors, the witches, *erivwi* and *edjo*.’⁵⁴ However, it is important to note that ‘not all consultations of the *epha* priest necessitate subsequent sacrifice...[if]...the relevant problem has been predestined...[and]...its course is inevitable therefore the victim should accept his fate calmly.’⁵⁵ Alongside requiring the confession of any misdeeds and the prescription of herbs, a cleansing ritual may also be prescribed, which could involve ‘bathing in a particular stream, or a special exorcising ritual in a specific cult in which the client is a member, or some special incision of some kind.’⁵⁶ The *oboepha*’s methods of divination are variable:

These include divining with cowries, kola nuts, wine, coins of the same denominations, alligator pepper, a mirror, birds and *Agbragha*. *Agbragha*, which is an apparatus made up of four divining chains, each of which contains four shells of the supposedly sacred *Agbragha* tree, is the most important and reliable. It is also called *Epha*. Its revelations are delivered in a language puzzling even to those who are native speakers of Urhobo...

Cowries and a special white kola nut of four lobes are also used by some diviners. (Divining with kola nuts is also found among the Yoruba). In using this form of divination, the diviner uses native white chalk to make a circle on the floor into which he tosses either the cowries or the lobes of kola nut. He looks at them deciphering the message they carry. The diviner looks at the divination elements as if a spiritual being is communicating with him...It is when he emerges out of that mood of meditation that he communicates his findings to his client.⁵⁷

⁵³ Agberia, J.T., *Ibid.*, p.135.

⁵⁴ Agberia, J.T., *Ibid.*, p.135.

⁵⁵ Nabofa, M.Y. and Elugbe, Ben O., *EPHA: An Urhobo System of Divination and Its Esoteric Language*. Originally published in *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 1, June 1981, pp.3-19.

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⁵⁶ Nabofa, M.Y. and Elugbe, Ben O., *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Nabofa, M.Y. and Elugbe, Ben O., *Ibid.*

The essential work of the *oboepha* is mirrored by the clairvoyant work of the *omraro* [medium] who also acts as a go-between for the human and spiritual worlds. An Urhobo person may choose to meet with an *omraro* [plural: *emraro*], rather than an *oboepha*, if they wish to communicate with the spirits in a more direct fashion. This is because mediums are only able to operate once they have been possessed by a spirit as opposed to diviners who 'depend on the manipulation of magical objects [and] may not be possessed.'⁵⁸ Mediums can either be men or women, although it is 'generally believed among the Urhobo that women are particularly adapted to the trance state than men,⁵⁹ due to their temperament. Mediums are popular throughout Urhoboland and seem to have a particular association with the *Igbe* cult, which owns a significant number of dedicated houses in key locations such as Ughelli Township, in which 'over two hundred and fifty *Igbe* houses were counted.'⁶⁰

An example of an *Epha* divination apparatus made from sixteen half-shells of the *agbragha* fruit

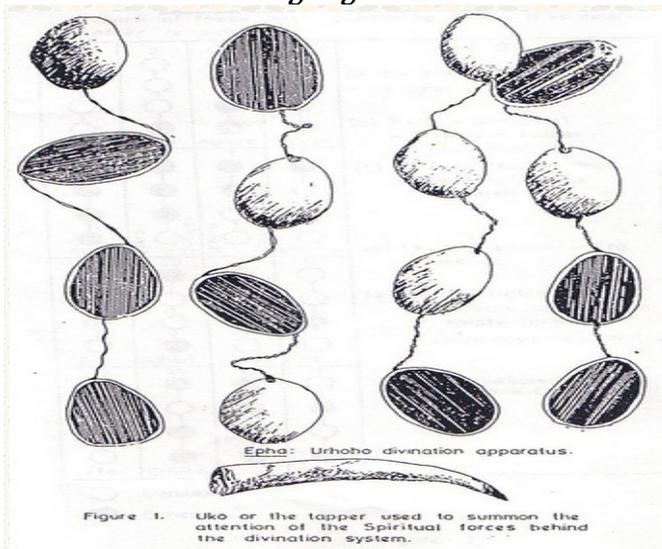


Image source:

<http://www.waado.org/urhoboculture/religion/nabofa/divination/epha.html>

⁵⁸ Adogbo, M.P., *Clairvoyance in Urhobo Traditional Religion* in Onibere, S.G.A. and Adogbo, Michael P. (eds.), *Ibid.*, p.140.

⁵⁹ Adogbo, M.P., *Ibid.*, p.140.

⁶⁰ Adogbo, M.P., *Ibid.*, p.140.

Therefore, it may be concluded that the Urhobo place great importance on the people who devote their lives to acting as bridges between the spiritual and earthly realms.

The *Igbe* Cult

Commonly referred to as a cult, it is more accurate to describe *Igbe* as a religion in its own right. Thought to have been founded in the mid-19th century by an Urhobo man called Ubiesha Etakpor [also spelled Ubiecha Etarakpo] who lived in Kokori [also spelled Ukuokori], *Igbe* spread like wildfire through Urhoboland and beyond. At the heart of its attraction was the monotheistic belief in *Oghene* [also referred to as *Oweya*], who was already a comfortingly familiar otherworldly presence to the Urhobo people. Additionally, *Igbe* bore other hallmarks associated with established religions:

It is based on, among others: purity of mind, well defined ethics which are in consonance with the will of God and its sound principles on the doctrine of the ever present and ever active natural laws of retribution, which remind her adherents constantly to search their conscience.

The other pillar on which its foundation is laid is the spiritual development and power of the various grades of priests which enable them to minister to its members successfully in the areas of healing of the body and soul, and thus protect them from the clutches of evil forces, such as witchcraft, sorcery, and all manners of misfortunes.⁶¹

The charismatic Ubiesha is said to have witnessed the appearance of two divine beings, although alternative versions of the story refer to a mystic man, who bestowed upon him the power to ‘heal people, see visions, speak in tongues and prophesy in a state of frenzy.’⁶² He also employed the use of *orhe* [indigenous white chalk or kaolin] as a sacred object, the donning of white garments and the incorporation of *il’igbe* [dancing] and *il’esuo* [singing]. The white chalk is seen as ‘the revealed divine power of God as well as His invisible symbol of Holiness or sanctity,’⁶³ and it is consumed by the devotees and

⁶¹ Nabofa, Michael Y., *Igbe Ubiesha: An Indigenous Charismatic Movement of the Urhobo People* in Ekeh, Peter P. (ed.), *Studies in Urhobo Culture* (Buffalo, New York & Lagos, Nigeria: Urhobo Historical Society, 2005), pp.305-306.

⁶² Akama, E.S., *The Igbe Cult in Isokoland and Missionary and Government Reactions, 1915-1930* in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1985, p.31. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1581320>. Accessed 27 Oct. 2021.

⁶³ Akama, E.S., *Ibid.*, p.33.

those suspected of witchcraft. In the former, it induces ecstasy and, in the latter, despair and death in the absence of repentance and/or confession. The chalk is consecrated by the *Uku-Igbe* [*Igbe* Chief High Priest], after which it can be used for healing and protection purposes. *Igbe* membership is voluntary and worshippers tend to gather in a designated house to sing, dance, pray, receive healing and socialise:

A typical *Igbe* house is an open *ogwan* [hall] with houses at both sides for the devotees, as well as sick people. There is an altar at one end of the *ogwan*. It is clearly demarcated and decorated with white clothes...Before the altar is a mound or *orhe* [kaolin], on which a candle continually burns. This is a common practice among *Igbe-orhen* adherents...Small benches or stools are arranged at both sides of the hall, leaving sufficient space in the middle for dancing....

At the middle of the compound or the threshold of the *Igbe* house is an *orise* [the symbol of God's presence]. A platform of stick or mound of mud covered with *orhe* is made at the foot of the *orise*. Occasionally, a candle is made to burn all the night at the foot of the *orise*. Minerals [soft drinks], biscuits and coconuts may be deposited on the top of the *orise*. This is a common feature during the annual festivals of the *Igbe* devotees.⁶⁴

The influence of *Igbe* was felt in Isokoland, Itsekiriland, Benin and Kwale, which is a testament to its seductive combination of the attributes of an oracle with regards to soothsaying and witchcraft detection, the centring of *Oghene* in His rightful place, the promise of reincarnation and the joyous appeal of coming together in enthusiastic worship. The advent of Christianity in the nineteenth century resulted in a temporary suppression of *Igbe* as Urhobo people flocked to the new religion, which resembled its traditional counterpart and seemed to offer a fresh and exciting outlook on life. However, over time, there has been a return to this part of traditional religion as people 'felt that the church was unable to solve most of their spiritual and material problems, such as protecting them from witchcraft and sorcery.'⁶⁵ Today, *Igbe* has splintered into a number of factions but it continues to peacefully co-exist alongside the older religions that were unable to displace it.

⁶⁴ Onibere, S.G.A. and Adogbo, Michael P. (eds.), *Ibid.*, p.141.

⁶⁵ Nabofa, Michael Y., in Ekeh, Peter P. (ed.), *Ibid.*, p.367.

Chapter 12

ISOKO GODS

[The Isoko people comprise less than 1% of the Nigerian population according to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, 2018 estimate]

Isoko, people of the north-western part of the Niger delta in Nigeria, speaking a language of the Kwa branch of the Niger-Congo family. The term Sobo is used by ethnographers as a cover term for both the Isoko and their neighbours the Urhobo, but the two groups remain distinct from one another. The Isoko economy is based on farming, fishing, and the production of palm oil and kernels. The main food crops are yams and cassava, supplemented by corn (maize), beans, peppers, and peanuts (groundnuts). There are petroleum-producing fields in the area inhabited by the Isoko.¹

BACKGROUND

The Isoko people* inhabit the Niger Delta area of Nigeria and they are concentrated within Delta State and Bayelsa State in the South-South geopolitical zone. The overlap between the Isoko and a neighbouring tribe, the Urhobo, was so remarkable that they were treated as one ethnic group, called the Sobo, for a long time until external forces eventually realised they were not the same. The Isoko are largely indigenous to the Niger Delta region, although a certain amount of internal migration did take place:

...The Isoko people have a mixed origin from essentially Igboland, east of the Niger, and secondary migration from neighbouring Benin and Ijaw. There is also evidence of bi-directional migration and settlements from the Isoko area to people other areas, including Benin and Igboland, west of the Niger.

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Isoko>

* Estimates range from 1 million to 2 million.

The bulk of the Isoko clans have traditions of origin, which claim that they came from mainly Benin and a few from Igboland. Two exceptions to this claim exist. These are Olomoro, which has a tradition of origin linking it to Urhoboland (Ikime) and Erowha, which has always claimed autochthony to the Niger Delta, hence other Isoko clans recognise her as the oldest of the Isoko clans. In other words, the nineteen Isoko clans subscribe largely to Benin or Igbo origins or a mixture of both.²

It is thought that the migrations occurred in 'isolated little units over a period of some hundreds of years,³ during the fourteenth century to the seventeenth century. The movement of the Isoko is conceded to have come mainly from the Kingdom of Benin and its surroundings based on conclusions drawn by Western researchers, but this is a matter that continues to be debated to this day. The clan system is integral to the manner in which the Isoko people organise and identify themselves:

The clan here referred to in some cases may consist of a number of villages. As Hubbard (9) notes, "This clan organisation is reminiscent of the Scottish clan, the members all belong to one great family descended in the male line from a common ancestor who lived in the remote past."

Thus, within the context of the Isoko people, a clan may be defined as a socio-political unit made up of persons who claim descent through a known line to a common ancestor who is the founder of the clan and who sometimes gives his name to it.⁴

The origin of the word 'Isoko' is indistinct but it is said that the people of the Kingdom of Benin used it to describe 'those who inhabited the outskirts of the city,⁵ which leads us to the understanding that 'the Bini recognised the Isoko as their neighbours who lived on the outskirts of the Benin kingdom or empire and not within as it were.'⁶ In character with a tropical and forested

² Okpevra, Benjamin, Uwomano, *Origins of the Isoko People of South-Central Nigeria Reconsidered in University of Uyo Journal of Humanities (UUJH)*, Vols. 16 & 17, No. 1, February 2011-December 2013, p.132.

³ Okpevra, Benjamin, Uwomano, *Ibid.*, p.133.

⁴ Okpevra, Benjamin, Uwomano, *Ibid.*, p.135.

⁵ Okpevra, Benjamin, Uwomano, *Ibid.*, p.146.

⁶ Okpevra, Benjamin, Uwomano, *Ibid.*, p.146.

region, Isokoland is at the mercy of Nature's elements, which heavily influence the ways the Isoko people interact with their environment:

The territory extends westward from the river to a depth of from 15 to 30 miles, and is interspersed by two great belts of swamp, which in the wet season become waterways. Being part of the Delta, Isoko land is simply sand and silt, with a surface covering of soil, and this profoundly affects farming and building.

Unhappily for the Isoko, the wet season with a rainfall of over 100 inches, coincides with the rise of the Niger, which is never less than 25 feet; in the rainy season therefore half the land is under water, and most of the bush paths – there are no permanent roads – have to be travelled by canoe.⁷

The moistness of the environment is also a determining factor in the agricultural economy, with choices limited to activities that can co-exist with the ecological restrictions, as well as the toxicity of heavy metals caused by the subsequent refining of crude oil. The rainy season often lasts from April to December each year, with a temporary break in August:

...The rise and fall of the water accounts for the methods used in catching fish, most of these being trapped at the end of the wet season by wicker barricades and baskets placed in position at flood time. On the highest ground in Isoko, it is just possible to secure a double crop of yams in the year, but for the greater part of Isoko, farming has to be carried on during the dry season only, and a very heavy wet season may spell famine for the people.

Yams and cassava are the chief agricultural products, the men doing the work of preparing the bush for the yam farm, and of harvesting, the women looking after the care of the growing yams, and being entirely responsible for the growing of cassava. Fruit is scarce, the oil-palm plentiful, and the valuable iroko and iron-wood trees are common.⁸

⁷ Welch, James W., *The Isoko Tribe in Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1934, p.162. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1155529>. Accessed 17 Sept. 2021.

⁸ Welch, James W., *Ibid.*, p.162.

The frequent rainfall and consequent proximity to stagnant water also means exposure to an insect that has plagued Isokoland, and indeed countless other tropical regions, for centuries: the mosquito. Small in size but unparalleled in the overwhelmingly negative effect it has had on the health of human beings due to the transmission of multiple diseases, the characteristic whine of a hovering mosquito is familiar to all who have encountered it:

All the usual tropical insects are abundant; none call for special reference except the mosquito. Mosquitoes abound in all parts of the country, especially where the bush is dense...In many places it is necessary after nightfall not only to wear mosquito boots but to wrap thick towels round knees and shoulders and other parts of the body to avoid being bitten. So much is this the case that it is a relief to get to bed under a mosquito net; even then however no rest is possible until any mosquitoes that have found their way inside have been killed.

[The Isoko] protect themselves either with a net, of which a cheap variety is obtainable in markets, or, failing a net, a party of four or five will sleep in a small hut with the door shut and a smoky wood fire burning in the middle of the hut; the smoke effectively keeping away mosquitoes.⁹

CHRISTIANITY

The Isoko people are overwhelmingly Christian even though they were almost completely untouched by the early regional efforts of Portuguese Christian missionaries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Due to the size of the Isoko, compared to their tribal neighbours, it took some time for the Western traders and missionaries to realise that there was an unreached ethnic group who had not heard the Word of God. The British, the French and the Germans all engaged in trade and politicking in Isokoland until the British took steps to protect its interests following the definitive Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, during which 'the major European powers negotiated and formalised claims to territory in Africa.'¹⁰

Prior to the advent of formal British rule, the Anglican Church had made its presence known in the Niger Delta area through its Niger Expeditions in

⁹ Hubbard, John W., *The Isoko Country, Southern Nigeria* in *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 77, No. 2, 1931, p.114. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1784387>. Accessed 17 Sept. 2021.

¹⁰<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195337709.001.0001/acref-9780195337709-e-0467>

1841, 1854, 1857 and the subsequent creation of ‘mission posts with primary or secondary schools attached to them.’¹¹ The spread of the Gospel from established cities such as Warri and Sapele to the Isoko hinterland was aided, and in most cases initiated, by the energetic contributions of local evangelists who wanted to share their passion for the new faith:

The spread of the new faith in Itsekiri, Urhobo, and Isoko lands in the early years was due to the evangelistic fervour of Omatsola, Aganbi, Omofoye Emuakpo, Ogugun, Denedo, Ewwaire, Madam Birbrina, and Rev. J.D. Aitken, among others...

From Ogbovwan in Ughelli, Christianity was carried to many other parts of Urhobo and Isokoland. The evangelists included Udori, who took the faith to Agbarha clan; Isikpen who introduced it to Ewvreni. Avwarecha took it to Olomu, and Udu to Uwhereu. From Isoko those who heard of Ewwaire’s new faith came, enlisted, and spread the faith among their people. Thus, Agbro of Emevor introduced the faith there, as Ikogho of Uwhere, who first heard it from Isikpen, did at Enwhe.¹²

Unusually, a number of indigenous women were responsible for the dissemination of Christianity within remote regions of Isokoland, which was particularly important as internal divisions within the hitherto dominant Church Missionary Society (CMS) had led to its withdrawal from the area. Following the death of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther in 1891, a schism occurred resulting in the establishment of the Niger Delta Pastorate (NDP) in 1892, under Bishop Crowther’s son Archdeacon Dandeson Coates Crowther (1844-1938), although reunification took place later, ‘after many years of acrimony and bickering.’¹³ The relative flexibility of the NDP allowed the Gospel to be communicated to others in a uniquely African way:

...It was a woman who in 1911 introduced Christianity to some other parts of the Isoko country. She is Bibrina by name, a native of Patani. Bibrina was one of the early converts to Christianity in Patani. When she had twins

¹¹ Johnson, Israel, Ndu, *The Church and Politics in the Niger Delta* in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 26, 2017, p.99. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48562080>. Accessed 22 Sept. 2021.

¹² Eriwwo, Samuel U., *A History of Christianity in Nigeria: The Urhobo, the Isoko, and the Itsekiri* (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1979), Chapter Two. Reproduced on <http://www.waado.org> with the permission of the author, 1979.

¹³ Johnson, Israel, Ndu, *Ibid.*, p.99.

and was required by custom to destroy them, she refused because of her new faith. Accordingly, she was banished to an island opposite Patani. It was here that an Igbide man called Ibiegbe met her and helped her. He later married her and brought her to Igbide, where Bibrina undertook the evangelisation of the people. Through her efforts Christianity spread to many other parts of Isokoland.

...It was also a woman who brought Christianity to Illue-Ologbo. She is Madam Emadu, who in the course of her travels embraced Christianity in Obiaruku. Thus, through the work of Evwaire, Utuedon, Emadu and Bibrina, Christianity spread rapidly in Isokoland before 1914.¹⁴

In the early twentieth century, Isoko people travelled from inner Isokoland to centres of Christianity like Ughelli and Patani in order to learn how to be Christians. Conversion efforts met with such success that in 1913, the Reverend J. D. Aitken, who was jointly responsible along with the Reverend Henry Proctor for introducing Christianity to Oleh [an Isoko town that doubles as Isokoland's headquarters], reportedly said that many Isoko were 'visiting Patani and buying either the Bible in English or an Ijo translation of one of the Gospels...these they kept under their pillows as a witness that they have left heathenism and have joined God's company.'¹⁵

The first half of the twentieth century saw the construction of CMS churches and clinics, the introduction of Roman Catholicism with its associated primary and secondary schools, the arrival of Baptism as a further disruption to the status quo, and the eventual emergence of the United African Church as an indigenous response to the existing European-centred denominations:

A further attraction of the United African Church was its acceptance of polygamy as a facet of African culture not biblically proven to be unchristian. Here, it was like the early Baptist Church. Another, perhaps most potent, attraction was the expression 'African Church.' The words were sufficiently inviting to draw many away from other denominations where the leadership had been in the hands of the white missionaries.

¹⁴ Eriwwo, Samuel U., *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Eriwwo, Samuel U., *Ibid.*

It drew many away too from the Niger Delta Pastorate, especially since the realisation of Bishop Johnson's dream of an independent indigenous church in full communion with the Church of England was becoming more and more remote.¹⁶

Unfortunately, the United African Church was rife with in-fighting, breakaway divisions, conversions to other Christian denominations, and less than ideal conditions for the primary schools it set up. However, it functioned as a gateway for the establishment of more spiritual versions of Christianity such as Pentecostalism, Revivalism and the Charismatic Movement. In addition to dealing with the rapid disintegration and reintegration of their churches, another serious issue faced by Isoko Christians was the very real threat of persecution by unbelievers:

Evidently, by 1916, Christianity had already made so much impact on the Urhobo and Itsekiri that the adherents of the indigenous religion (Christianity) on the pre-Christian way of life, particularly on ancestral worship, embarked on a ruthless persecution of the Christians. The persecutions were more severe in Isoko which was then grouped under Urhobo, than they were among the Urhobo new converts...

Admittedly, these persecutions were partly invited by the new converts as a result of their attitude towards the indigenous religion. In many cases, the Christians not only vocalised their disrespect for and derision of the indigenous religion in songs, dances and their preaching, but also actually carried out iconoclastic activities.¹⁷

The restrictions placed on the Isoko traditional way of life, such as forbidding polygamy, ancestor worship, pagan celebrations and female circumcision were initially difficult for the new converts to accept, but with the passage of time, 'the religion grew as a mustard seed and waxed stronger against all odds.'¹⁸ Once the British assumed political and administrative control of Isokoland in 1900-1901, to the delight of the Western missionaries, it was clear that the Christian faith and its 'civilising' influence had become a

¹⁶ Eriwwo, Samuel U., *Ibid.*, Chapter Six.

¹⁷ Arhawho, Orhuerakpo, Robinson, *Crisis in Warri Diocese of the Anglican Communion, 1975-1980*, Ph.D. Thesis, The Postgraduate College, University of Ibadan, July 2013, p.56.

¹⁸ Arhawho, Orhuerakpo, Robinson, *Ibid.*, p.57.

permanent feature of Isoko culture, and indeed it remained so until Nigeria gained its independence in 1960. Today, Christianity is a strong and stable factor in Isokoland. It is 'firmly rooted in all facets of the people's lives; be it social, political, cultural, religious, economic and even traditional life.'¹⁹

Sample text from the Isoko Bible

Fikiere wha lẹ epa onana:
 Oṣẹ mai nọ ọ rọ obọ odhiwu,
 Oḍẹ ra ojọ ọrẹri.
 Uvie ra oze,
 Epanọ a rọ obọ odhiwu ru orọ eva ra,
 ru re a jọ akpọ na ru ere re.
 Rehọ emu inẹnẹ kẹ omai nẹnẹ;
 Rehọ osoriọ mai vrẹ omai,
 wọhọ epanọ ma rọ vrẹ eriosa mai;
 Who su omai ruọ ẹdawọ họ,
 Rekọ si omai no eyoma.

Image source: http://worldbibles.org/language_detail/eng/iso/Isoko8

ISLAM

Despite the inundation of Christianity within the Niger Delta region, it still left room for the penetration of Islam, admittedly as a minority religion. Initially, the South-South Muslim faithful were mostly located in the area of Delta State that 'was indirectly part of the Sokoto Caliphate in the latter half of the nineteenth century.'²⁰ This area, which encompassed places like Agbede, Auchi and Warrake in Edo State, was 'raided and conquered by the Nupe who were themselves operating under Gwandu in the Caliphate.'²¹

From these modest beginnings, Niger Delta Muslims were sent to modern Islamic and Arabic educational institutions in Northern Nigeria and Yorubaland between the 1940s to the 1980s, which resulted in the eventual establishment of similar centres in the former Bendel State in the 1960s. Once Bendel State was divided into Delta State and Edo State in 1991, the strong foundation laid earlier in the century ensured that Islam had a firm footing within the Niger Delta region, which saw the introduction of Islamic and

¹⁹ Arhawho, Orhuerakpo, Robinson, Ibid., p.58.

²⁰ Oseni, Z.I., *Modern Arabic and Islamic Studies in Bendel State of Nigeria* in *Journal Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 1, January 1987, p.183.

²¹ Oseni, Z.I., Ibid.

Arabic Studies to their public schools.²² By embedding Islamic education in the school system, this guaranteed a certain amount of exposure to Islam:

Whilst the career prospects associated with Western education compelled some Muslim parents (especially in Southern Nigeria) to send their children to mission schools, others exclusively sent their children to Qur'anic schools for the fear of exposing them to Christian proselytisation...

Children...attending these [Muslim] schools undertook compulsory, confessional Islamic Religious Knowledge (IRK), and attended compulsory School Assemblies. These featured Muslim prayers and recital of Qur'anic passages. Such pupils were also obligated to attend the Jumaat service (i.e. Friday Prayers) in the community mosque(s).²³

It is thought that the number of Isoko Muslims is extremely low, but with the support of organisations such as the Delta State Muslim Pilgrims Welfare Board, the Delta State Muslims Council (DSMC), the Delta State Council for Islamic Affairs (DSCIA) and the Delta State chapter of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, there are ongoing efforts to:

- collaborate with all Islamic groups within Delta State;
- continually foster the growth of Islam within Delta State, within Nigeria and outside Nigeria;
- ensure the improved wellbeing of Delta State Muslims;
- ensure a harmonious co-existence with non-Muslims.²⁴

TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Cosmology

Isoko traditional religion begins with *Qghene* [God], the Supreme Being who brought the world to life, including all the people dwelling in it, not just the

²² Oseni, Zakariyau I., Ibid., excerpt from article's abstract. <https://www.africabib.org/rec.php?RID=119529033>

²³ Jawoniyi, Oduntan, *Rethinking the Religious Education Curricula in Nigerian Schools* in *Journal for the Study of Religion*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2009, pp.66–67. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24764319>. Accessed 24 Sept. 2021.

²⁴ Delta State Council for Islamic Affairs (DSCIA) Facebook group; <https://www.facebook.com/groups/245694533850900/about>

Isoko. He is a solitary and remote entity, believed to live in the skies and to be the ultimate controller of Nature and its elements:

[*Oghene*] lives in the sky which is a part of him, sends rain and sunshine, and shows his anger through thunder. *Oghene* is entirely beyond human comprehension, has never been seen, is sexless, and is only known by his actions, which have led men to speak of *Oghene* as 'him,' because he is thought of as the creator and therefore father of all the Isokos.

He is spoken of as Our Father (*O se Mare*) never as My Father. *Oghene* always punishes evil and rewards good, a belief that leads the Isokos to blame witchcraft for any evil which may happen to a good man.²⁵

Unlike many traditional religions, *Oghene* does not have priests or temples, he does not require sacrifices or prayers and he did not create a host of deities to serve as intermediaries between him and his people. Instead, there are a number of 'messengers,' the most prominent of which is the *oyise*, also known as the *uko Oghene* [messenger of *Oghene*]. The *oyise* is 'a pole about 8 feet long made from the *oyise* tree, erected after a seven-fold offering to *Oghene*, in the compound of the oldest member of the family, and only in his.'²⁶ Every morning, the family *Okpaho* [elder] sends prayers up to *Oghene* for their family and local community. The *oyise* is treated as a direct link to *Oghene* that 'can be invoked in case of calamity or need,'²⁷ and some Isoko clans celebrate it annually, for example, the Owhe clan and their Oyise-Owhe Festival. The Isoko also believe in the presence of guardian spirits, to protect and guide each person as they navigate their life path:

Each individual has also two guardian spirits sent by *Oghene*, which are *Oma* and *Ezi*. *Oma* comes from the Isoko verb *emema* to create; as *Oghene* is the creator of all, so *Oma* is the creator of one person and one person only. *Oma* is present when *Oghene* creates each individual and assists, but the chief function of *Oma* is to lead the person to earth and to watch over him there...A carved wooden representation of a man is the visible symbol

²⁵ Welch, James W., *The Isoko Tribe in Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1934, p.163. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1155529>. Accessed 28 Sept. 2021.

²⁶ Welch, James W., *Ibid.*, p.163.

²⁷ Welch, James W., *Ibid.*, p.163.

of *Oma*, and is worshipped when its owner is sick, or in time of calamity and need.

Ezi means life-bringer, and is a person's soul, and without him life is impossible; at death *Ezi* is said to have gone home to *Oghene*...Sickness, if serious, is taken as a sign that *Ezi* has left a person, and steps must at once be taken to secure its return...*Ezi* may be worshipped at will but neglect is very dangerous.²⁸

Many Isoko names reflect the importance of the Supreme Being and these guardian spirits, such as *Ogheneovo* [God only], *Uzezi* [Good head or good luck] and *Ufuoma* [Peace].²⁹ *Esemo* [ancestor] worship and clan founder worship play crucial roles in Isoko traditional religion, both of which are utilised as a means of binding families closer together and encouraging good behaviour while one is alive. The *esemo* live in *eríwí* [the spirit world] where they jealously defend 'the good name of their family and clan.'³⁰ Clan founder worship is 'an extension of the family ancestor worship, for the clan is thought of as one large family descended from one father.'³¹ Similar to the *esemo*, the clan founder resides in *eríwí* to watch over his clan that lives on earth. It is believed that most, if not all, of the Isoko clans possess their own gods such as the Owhe clan, which has nine gods: *Aghaluwe*, *Oworu*, *Ovo*, *Otor*, *Orietor*, *Oturohogbo*, *Gbator*, *Ogbelueh* and *Oyise-Owhe*, with *Owhe* being most senior of the gods.³²

Water spirits are a prominent element of Isoko traditional religion, as expected of a people whose lives are so affected by rain and rivers. The fragility of their wellbeing coupled with the volatility of the rainy season naturally led to the belief that spirits in the waters could be appealed and sacrificed to, in the hope of a positive outcome. A well-known example is the *Eni* of the *Uzere* clan, the *edjorame* [water spirit] companion of *Uzee*, one of the clan's founders. The spirit's exploits became apparent sometime in the sixteenth century when it accompanied *Uzee* during travels from Benin to his eventual

²⁸ Welch, James W., *Ibid.*, p.163-164.

²⁹ <https://bochnewsng.com/2020/09/07/names-meaning-of-isoko-ethnic-nationality>

³⁰ Welch, James W., *Ibid.*, p.164.

³¹ Welch, James W., *Ibid.*, p.165.

³² https://www.nigeriagallery.com/Nigeria/States_Nigeria/Delta/History-of-Isoko-Kingdom-in-Delta-State.html

settlement in Isokoland and was instrumental in influencing the present-day location of the Uzere clan:

For Uzee, *Eni* served as a type of guiding spirit. After a time, Uzee settled among the Igbo of Isele-Uku. The tradition maintains that, because there was not sufficient water in which *Eni* could live, the spirit urged Uzee to move on...Because of *Eni's* wish, it seems that from then on travel and settlement had to be by or near water. Moving east from Isele-Uku, the groups soon reached Ase Creek or the Niger...

Continuing south, they came a junction with another creek. Here Uzee encountered the Erowha and requested that he and his followers be allowed to travel up a nearby stream. Due to other recent settlements a little farther south, the Erowha initially refused. Later Uzee and Egbrabra, the Erowha leader, became friends, and the travellers were allowed to settle at a place known as Oruhe, along the banks of the Niger. Satisfied that they were finally settled, Uzee decided to legitimise his claim to the land by taking title to it in the traditional manner.³³

Due to subsequent tribal warfare, the Uzere clan were forced to move further into the Isokoland interior, where they live today in the Isoko South Local Government Area of Delta State. Following their permanent settlement, *Eni* continued to assist 'those who founded and developed the Uzere clan.'³⁴ *Eni* was so worshipped and elevated by the clan, that by the 19th century, it had become a highly venerated oracle.

Oracles and Witchcraft

The use of oracles was closely tied to the Isoko belief in witches and witchcraft, and centred around the theory that a formalised method of exposing these evils would carry more weight than individual accusations. Accordingly, *Eni* was one of many oracles that 'had begun to serve the new and vital function of detecting witches, or *oreida*, not only for the people of Uzere, but for a much wider area.'³⁵ As a marker of the importance attached to a supernatural witch detector, *Eni* the oracle was consulted by Isoko, Urhobo and Ijaw clans who

³³ Foster, Whitney P., *Pre-Twentieth-Century Isoko: Its Foundation and Later Growth in African Historical Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1969, pp.296–297. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/216360>. Accessed 29 Sept. 2021.

³⁴ Foster, Whitney P., *Ibid.*, p.302.

³⁵ Foster, Whitney P., *Ibid.*, p.302.

came from far and wide seeking assistance, usually accompanied by a resident of Uzere. Typically, a member of the Uzere clan would be present in each of the major clan towns, in possession of ‘a staff which indicated that he was the messenger for *Eni* and whose duty it was to lead the accused and the accusers to Uzere for their judgement by the oracle.’³⁶ The Isoko people were extremely fearful of witchcraft as a cause of unexplained death and misfortune, and therefore all manner of spiritual and physical defences were employed against it:

Because of the Isoko belief that witchcraft is a phenomenon having much to do with the spirits of the witch and of the person bewitched, methods of approach were primarily spiritual. Traditional concoctions, as well as religious symbols believed to protect a person assailed by witches or to cure those suffering from witchcraft acts, were generally used by the people.

Traditional medicine-men (*ebo*), diviners (*ebueva*), veteran witches and wizards (*igbebulu*) and even the traditional priest (*izere*) of the privately owned spirit cults were approached for help in this regard. Such consultations often led to one or another type of ritual offering by the inquirer...Such medicines are often found tied round the necks of their users or worn as rings on their fingers, or placed at the gates of their houses or sleeping rooms.³⁷

The use of these personalised protections served as a complement to the use of oracles as ‘communally employed devices...that are...avenging divinities and spirits with the power to deal ruthlessly with the witches for the sake of social welfare.’³⁸ The popularity of the *Eni* oracle, in particular, gave rise to the emergence of a cult centred around the water spirit that became known throughout the Niger Delta region. The process of witchcraft accusation, trial and punishment was often arduous and dehumanising for all parties involved and it remained so until the introduction of European checks and balances:

³⁶ Foster, Whitney P., *Ibid.*, p.302.

³⁷ Akama, E.S., *The Igbe Cult in Isokoland and Missionary and Government Reactions, 1915-1930* in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1985, pp.26-27. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/11581320>. Accessed 30 Sept. 2021.

³⁸ Akama, E.S., *Ibid.*, p.27.

Before the advent of British colonial government and Christian missionary enterprise in the territory, any Isoko person accused of either witchcraft or wizardry was first tried locally by the community and made to undergo certain ordeals. If the accused was found guilty, he or she might be made to suffer public disgrace, sold as a slave or banished from the community and even at times buried alive. In such cases the treatment meted out depended on the gravity of the witchcraft act believed to have been perpetrated by the accused.

It is evident that in some doubtful cases the accused was taken to the Uzere *Eni* water spirit cult for witchcraft trial and detection. Such *Eni* trials were banned by force in 1903 by the British colonial government, which regarded the cult as outrageously fraudulent. Its operation (via an oracle) was finally declared illegal and forbidden in 1905 by the same government.³⁹

As a result of dismantling the main methods of witchcraft identification and subsequent justice by the British, and with no viable alternative provided by Christianity, a vacuum of despair and insecurity was created in Isokoland, that was eventually filled by 'different types of neo-primal and syncretistic spirit-possession cults dedicated primarily to healing, protection against evils and aggressive witchcraft detection and control,'⁴⁰ predominantly from neighbouring Urhoboland:

- *Ugo* [Eagle] cult: This was a spirit-possession cult with a white-painted carving of an eagle as a symbolic representation of the cult's spirit. The spirit was thought to be pure and holy as evidenced by the use of the colour white. Highly popular among the Isoko people for a limited period of time, their worship sessions would 'end in prophesying, the seeing of visions and the confession of witchcraft acts and other sins by the member believed to be possessed by the Ugo spirit.'⁴¹
- *Enuwaha* [Almighty One] cult: This was also a spirit-possession cult that featured elements of Christianity coupled with pagan worship. Its members claimed they had to the power to heal the sick, protects its believers from evil spirits and identify those doing wicked deeds, including witches. The

³⁹ Akama, E.S., *Ibid.*, pp.27-28.

⁴⁰ Akama, E.S., *Ibid.*, p.29.

⁴¹ Akama, E.S., *Ibid.*, p.29.

cult's support within Isokoland was enthusiastic but limited in terms of duration as 'for some reasons unaccounted for, this cult soon died out, like the *Ugo* cult.'⁴²

- ***Igbe*** [New Dance] cult: This is one of the most popular and long-lasting cults due to the central placement and worship of *Oghene* and the consecration of *ore* [indigenous white chalk, also known as kaolin], the taste of which is thought to force confessions of witchcraft from the lips of the taster. Over time, this cult's influence spread beyond its origins in Urhoboland to Isokoland, Benin and Itsekiriland, thereby cementing its position as the official replacement of the *Eni* oracle, and its inherent powers of healing and protection. Its longevity can be attributed to 'the cult's seemingly distinct conception of Deity as supreme, and its monotheistic beliefs and liturgy,' which included *il'igbe* [dancing] and *il'esuo* [singing].⁴³

Other cults such as the *Olerugberu*, *Edeme*, *Owhawho* and *Abasiumor*, came and went, depending on their ability to cater to the needs of the Isoko people at the time of their inception, dedicated variously to anti-witchcraft, 'anti-wickedness and avenging spirits.'⁴⁴ It can therefore be concluded that the Isoko have a healthy respect for witchcraft and the infrastructure that surrounds it, chiefly because it is regarded as a very real threat to the fabric and wellbeing of Isoko society.

Divination

The process of Isoko divination is carried out by the vital figure of the *obueva* [diviner or charm doctor], derived from the words 'obo' for doctor and 'eva' for charm. The person who becomes an *obueva* either inherits the position or is undeniably marked out as someone who should take it up as a profession:

A priest is chosen either by the hereditary nature of the office, or because a man is constantly the victim of calamity which is taken to be a sign that he must be a priest, or through possession by a spirit during a frenzy brought on by dancing;

⁴² Akama, E.S., *Ibid.*, p.30.

⁴³ Akama, E.S., *Ibid.*, p.32.

⁴⁴ Akama, E.S., *Ibid.*, p.44.

An *obueva* however has to serve an apprenticeship of not less than a year. The *obueva* is always consulted in cases of doubt or calamity and his advice is always accepted in any branch of religion.⁴⁵

The *obueva*'s device of choice tends to be the *eva*, which 'consists of 16 half shells tied on four pieces of string.'⁴⁶ Once the client communicates their request for assistance, the diviner will follow a defined sequence of actions culminating in an appeal to *Oghene* to confirm his reading of the situation. The divination system has also been known to employ a specialised *eva* language as a means of interpreting the movement of the shells that have been thrown to the ground during the sequence:

There are 16 possible combinations, and thus 16 words, but by themselves these are meaningless; joined together, however, they give *eva* words, which, put into a sentence, give the answer to the request of the inquirer.

The *obueva* himself believes implicitly in his instrument as do the people, and in many ways the *obueva* is the most important man in the community, as his advice is always sought and always accepted. There is usually an *obueva* to every village.⁴⁷

Isoko *eva* diviners: Eture Egbedi, left, and his assistant in Oleh, Nigeria



Image source: Photograph by Philip M. Peek (1971); <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/the-silent-voices-of-african-divination>

⁴⁵ Welch, James W., Ibid., p.165.

⁴⁶ Welch, James W., Ibid., p.165.

⁴⁷ Welch, James W., Ibid., p.166.

The *obueva* also plays an important role as an intermediary with Isoko ancestors, by seeking their counsel when requested by a living member of their family, advising whether offence has been caused and recommending the relevant remedy such as sacrifice. Alongside the *Ovie* [king], the *edion* [regulatory chiefs, headed by the esteemed *Odion Ologbo*] and other respected elders, the *obueva* is essentially responsible for maintaining the care and wellbeing of their assigned Isoko clan.

The *eva* divination system is ‘related to the *opele* (divining chain) of the Yorùbá that is incorporated into their major system of *Ifá*.’⁴⁸ Some diviners choose to work in pairs, with both throwing their chains of shells on to the ground and reading each other’s casts ‘using the esoteric *eva* language while the other rapidly translates into standard Isoko.’⁴⁹ It is thought that the outcome of this ‘twinning’ arrangement is more powerful with increased accuracy. This twinning does not only apply to diviner and diviner, and diviner and spirit; it also applies to diviner and client. In fact, ‘not only do complex relations develop around the psychological dynamics between diviners and clients, but there is often a literal, physical bonding of the two to ensure a successful divination session,’⁵⁰ such as choosing to join hands.

Masquerades

Masquerades and their associated festivals are an important element within Isoko traditional religion, and within the wider context of Isoko culture. A masquerade performs a number of sociocultural functions, such as the communal police, much feared by the local community, an intermediary between the ancestors and their descendants, and more simply, as a source of drama and entertainment during periods of celebration. For example, the *Mmonwu* masquerade, found among a limited number of the Isoko clans, serves as ‘a bridge between the living, dead, and even the unborn...[and]...mainly for entertainment and preservation of African culture and traditions.’⁵¹ This specific masquerade also serves as a connection point

⁴⁸ Peek, Philip M., *The Silent Voices of African Divination* in Religion in Africa and the Diaspora, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Summer/Autumn 2013. <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/the-silent-voices-of-african-divination>

⁴⁹ Peek, Philip M., *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Peek, Philip M., *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Okpevra, Benjamin, Uwomano, *The Mmonwu Masquerade of the Isoko and Ukwuani People: A Religio-Ritual Factor of Contact in the Western Niger Delta of Nigeria* in *International Review of Humanities Studies*, Vol.2, No.1, January 2017, p.23.

between the Isoko and other tribes, some of whom are indigenous to the Western Niger Delta area:

The *Mmonwu* masquerade (with its variant spelling as *Mmanwu*) is popular among the Ibos, Aboh, Ukwuani, and some clans in Isoko. The Isoko-Ukwuani *Mmonwu* places emphasis on Ancestral worship and it is said to be the worship of a deity, (Uyeri, 2014) and a social group with some level of secrecy...

The *Mmonwu* masquerade has been one of the modes of promoting Isoko-Ukwuani relations. Despite the linguistic and some other differences, the *Mmonwu* masquerade and masqueraders in both Isoko and Ukwuani speaks the same language in their incantations and communications (Igbologe, 2010). Again, both the Isoko and Ukwuani *Mmonwu* have the similar masks and instruments, even the names of the masquerade and their titles are the same.⁵²

To some extent, the introduction of Christianity dampened the enthusiasm for the *Mmonwu* masquerade, and many others, due to the negative connotations ascribed to their rites and rituals, which appeared to be in direct opposition to Westernised religion and education. However, the Isoko people treasure tradition and their loyalty to their traditional deities, spirits and ancestors, which pre-date Christianity and Islam, remains unwavering. This can be seen in the celebration of the Oworu festival by the Isoko clans who venerate Oworu, considered to be a god and/or a water spirit. The Oworu festival takes pride in its artistic masquerades, unique musical productions and providing a protected duration of rest and relaxation for its people.

Masquerades are a distinctive form of visual art that is enhanced by the symbolic donning of a mask and costume, and function as a means of incorporating music, dance, fear and wonder into the richly complex and multilayered nature of Isoko traditional religion.

⁵² Okpevra, Benjamin, Uwomano, Ibid., p.23.

Chapter 13

ITSEKIRI GODS

[The Itsekiri people comprise less than 1% of the Nigerian population according to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, 2018 estimate]

Itsekiri, also called Jekri, Isekiri, or Ishekiri, ethnic group inhabiting the westernmost part of the Niger River delta of extreme southern Nigeria. The Itsekiri make up an appreciable proportion of the modern towns of Sapele, Warri, Burutu, and Forcados. They speak a Yoruboid language of the Benue-Congo branch of Niger-Congo languages and share elements of culture with the Yoruba, Edo, Urhobo, and Ijo through a variety of contacts.

The Itsekiri live on the coast in an area of extensive mangrove swamps and freshwater wetlands. They are primarily fishermen and have employed traps, fences, and nets, as well as rod-and-line techniques. Women make mats and baskets from reeds and palm materials. Silversmithing has died out, and blacksmithing has declined.¹

BACKGROUND

The Itsekiri people* are prominent inhabitants of the Niger Delta area of Nigeria and they are largely located in Delta State, with high numbers found in Edo State and Ondo State, as well as major cities throughout the country. The earliest Itsekiri settlements that sprung up were surrounded by interconnected rivers, sand dunes, steamy mangrove swamps and deep creeks, through which ‘a fully manned canoe can travel as fast as a galloping horse, carrying a larger cargo or heavier arms.’² Based on a complex mix of Itsekiri oral tradition and ethnographic reports, it is thought that Itsekiriland came into being following

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Itsekiri>

* Estimates range from 750,000 to 1 million.

² Lloyd, P.C., *The Itsekiri in the Nineteenth Century; An Outline Social History in The Journal of African History*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1963, p.209. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/179535>. Accessed 5 Oct. 2021.

the internal migration of a key historical figure who was the eldest son of *Oba* Oluwa (r. 1473-c.1481) of the Kingdom of Benin:

Itsekiri and Benin legends tell of the flight of *Ginuwa*, a Benin prince, with a retinue of nobles c.1475. He settled first on the sea shore, near to Forcados, and his successors travelled inland to found Ode Itsekiri or Warri, the capital of the new kingdom. Ryder believes that the early Portuguese met the Itsekiri in lower Forcados estuary and that the capital was not founded until the mid-sixteenth century.

The development of the new kingdom in the ensuing two centuries and its independence from Benin must certainly owe much to the Portuguese influence, for all mission activity was centred here when Benin itself seemed to be a fruitless soil for proselytising. Portuguese mission and trading interests were, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries closely intertwined...³

Ginuwa I became the first *Olu* [King] of the Itsekiri, ruled from 1480 to 1510, and was responsible for the amalgamation of formerly disparate Itsekiri communities into one kingdom. He was succeeded by his son, *Olu* Ijjen (r. 1510-1538), who successfully led the Itsekiri to their new capital of Ode Itsekiri or Ale Iwere [now known as Big Warri]. *Olu* *Ginuwa* I died and was buried in Ijala, which subsequently became host to the Royal Cemetery as the official final resting place for all *Olus*, in the modern-day Warri South Local Government Area of Delta State. The *Olu* is bestowed with another traditional title – *Ogiame* [King of the River] – in recognition of his rule over all of Itsekiriland. Warri, known to the Itsekiri by its traditional name of Iwere, serves as a hub that encompasses the Kingdom and its three Local Government Areas, with a long history of indigenous and foreign rule and a longstanding ongoing dispute with other indigenous tribes such as the Ijaw, the Urhobo and the Okere, regarding its true ownership:

Warri Kingdom, a 1520 sq. miles of land area, comprising the three Warri Local Government Areas of Warri South, Warri North and Warri Southwest, was an independent and sovereign state prior to the British-Benin River Expedition (Nanna War) of 1894. The area is also known as

³ Lloyd, P.C., *Ibid*, pp.209–210.

Itsekiri country. The various Itsekiri communities such as Omadino, Irigbo, Ureju, Inorin, Ugborodo, etc., had occupied this area from time immemorial before a Bini Prince named Ginuwa and his chiefs set out to establish a kingdom here towards the end of the fifteenth century.

The Warri metropolis, a comparatively recent development, is usually referred to as New Warri in deference to Big Warri, the other name for Ode-Itsekiri, the capital of the kingdom. History is replete with accounts and documentation of Warri as Itsekiri homeland or country.

With the advent of British rule, provinces were created. Warri Province was administered from Warri as one judicial, administrative and political unit. Quite understandably, the other ethnic groups protested being part of a singular administrative unit. Following researches into ethnic and clan system by administrative officers - Intelligence Reports and Court decisions - the unified structure was dismantled and separate Native Administrations were established based on homeland concept.

A Warri Division (later Warri Local Government Area) was established in the Itsekiri homeland which, for historical reasons, also contained some settler enclaves inhabited mostly by Ijaws and Urhobos. The homeland concept led to the emergence of Divisional Councils in 1952. (1) The presence of Ijaw and Urhobo in Warri Division has been clearly described as that of settlers.⁴

The coastal environment of Itsekiriland necessarily led to early trading contact with the Portuguese, the Spanish and the Dutch in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, particularly at Ode Itsekiri, which was further enhanced by the establishment of settlements 'strategically located at the mouths of the rivers.'⁵ Despite occasional clashes with commercial rivals such as the Ijaw and overly acquisitive international merchants, by the nineteenth century tightly controlled business dealings with the Europeans resulted in an obvious upturn in the affluence of the Itsekiri people:

⁴ Urhobo Historical Society, *Itsekiri Delegation to Peace Summit: The Title of the Itsekiri Monarchy And the Ownership of Warri Are Indisputable*, Washington, DC, Peace Summit on Warri Crisis, 1999. <http://www.waado.org/organizations/uhs/warripeacecongress/BackgroundPapers/ItsekiriBackgroundPaper.html>

⁵ Erezene, Henchard B., *European Influence in Ijo-Itsekiri Relations in Nigeria* in *African Research Review: An International Multidisciplinary Journal*, Ethiopia, Vol. 10, Issue 1, No. 40, January 2016, p.106.

The Itsekiri acting as the most influential middlemen, especially in the era of the legitimate trade in agricultural products, procured palm-oil and other commodities from the Urhobo, Isoko and other upland groups and sold them directly to the Europeans at the coast.

The pattern of trade was that the Itsekiri merchants collected goods such as cloth, guns, gun powder, glass wares, mirrors, rugs, spirits, beads, plates and so on from the Europeans on trust, and distributed them to credit-worthy persons in the Benin River settlements who would mobilise big canoes to go to the hinterland markets. The trust goods were further distributed, in the markets, to local producers who supplied the commodities the Europeans needed (Sagay, n.d.).⁶

Prior to the introduction of medium to large-scale international commerce, the Itsekiri occupied themselves with the production of salt, crayfish, salt, canoes and rushes; the latter were heavily used in the weaving of mats. The collection of rushes was a lucrative economic activity that took place during the dry season and as a result ‘compliments well the river and creek fisheries most Itsekiri are engaged in as rushes can be collected during the off-seasons in fishing.’⁷ The Benin River, the Escravos River and the Forcados River, all of which cut through the Kingdom of Warri, feed a veritable web of creeks and tributaries that supported fishing as the main source of income:

The aim of any economic enterprise is to derive some benefit in form of economic return. For a fisherman, the product of his labour is the fish. When the fishermen return with the fish, they sell it in most cases to their wives. Sometimes, they sell the fish directly to fish traders called fishmongers or fish mummies.

Fish is marketed in two main forms...either as fresh (wet) or smoked (dried)... The general traditional way of smoking is to spread the fish on wire gauze suspended by four sticks (poles). Firewood is arranged under the gauze and set on fire for the heat and smoke generated to dry the fish.

⁶ Erezene, Henchard B., *Ibid.*, p.106.

⁷ Okpanefe, M.O., Abiodun A., Haakonsen, J.M., *The Fishing Communities of the Benin River Estuary Area: Results from a Village Survey in Bendel State, Nigeria*, Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, January 1991, p.32.

In the case of crayfish, the product is spread on mats, woven from raffia palm, and turned at intervals to ensure uniform distribution of heat...

Smoke-drying of fish is an activity reserved for women, hence it is normally the wives of the fishermen who smoke the catches of their husbands along with theirs... In almost all the villages, fish was being sold either within each village, that is, collected by outside traders or carried to other centres for sale by the fishermen's wives.⁸

Itsekiriland has been provided with monetary and in-kind support over the years by the Nigerian Federal Government, designed to boost commercial fishing within this small but influential community. It is plain that with the regular provision of infrastructural items such as training, development, fishing boats and fishing nets, genuine strides can be made to give Itsekiri fishermen the opportunity to make an impact in the regional, and international fisheries and aquaculture sector.

CHRISTIANITY

The Itsekiri people were exposed to the Christian faith in the sixteenth century, courtesy of the Portuguese who 'scored a considerable success in establishing in Warri a Christian tradition that was to continue into the nineteenth century.'⁹ The first mission was initiated by the Augustinian bishop of the heavily Roman Catholic Central African island São Tomé, Gaspar Cão, who 'sent a company of Augustinian monks to Warri where they founded a Christian settlement which they named Santo Agostinho.'¹⁰

A major achievement of the missionaries was at the hand of a Father Francisco a Mater Dei, when he baptised the *Olu's* son, giving him the Christian name of Sebastian in honour of the reigning King Sebastian of Portugal. This momentous event meant that the 6th *Olu*, originally named Atorongboye, subsequently became the first Christian King of Warri, although this came with its own set of challenges:

⁸ Okpanefe, M.O., Abiodun A., Haakonsen, J.M., Ibid., pp.13-14.

⁹ Ryder, A.F.C., *Missionary Activity in the Kingdom of Warri to the Early Nineteenth Century* in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1960, p.1. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41970817>. Accessed 7 Oct. 2021.

¹⁰ Ryder, A.F.C., Ibid., p.2.

Certainly Sebastian, who became *Olu* before 1597, persevered in his new faith in face of great difficulties, the chief of which was lack of priests to instruct converts and administer the sacraments. Among a newly converted people this was obviously an extremely serious shortcoming which was to result in the periodic collapse of Christianity among the Itsekiri, for it was never satisfactorily overcome...

These twin difficulties of financing the mission and finding priests ready to brave the mosquitoes were destined to destroy all hopes of a true conversion and to undo much of the achievement of missions which at long intervals overcame them. Sometimes as much as ten years passed and no priest visited Warri. As a later missionary exclaimed: "The morals of Rome are bad enough; can you imagine what they would be like if left for ten years without a single priest."¹¹

The issue of long absences was partially solved by the attachment of priests to trading voyages from São Tomé to Warri, substantially engaged in the buying and selling of ivory with the permission of the Catholic King of Spain, Philip II. In order to make this arrangement lucrative to the Spanish and Portuguese, and to a lesser extent the Dutch, an unfortunate side effect was the introduction of the slave trade because 'the *Olu* of Warri was too poor to maintain the priests from his own revenues.'¹² The continued presence of the Europeans further led to the baptism of *Olu* Sebastian's son, originally Atuwatse I, who assumed the Christian name of Dom Domingos, and became one of the earliest known recipients of an international education:

...Domingos was sent to Portugal in 1600 bearing a letter from his father to King Philip III. In the letter Sebastian expressed his desire that his son should be educated and instructed in European ways, so that he might help his father in the conversion of the Itsekiris and with the government of his kingdom...Altogether his studies lasted some eight years and were ended by letters from his father recalling him...

...On the return of Domingos, his father proclaimed him heir to the throne, in the hope, according to the Bishop of São Tomé, that his instruction in the Catholic faith would enable him to maintain and develop Christianity in Warri.¹³

¹¹ Ryder, A.F.C., *Ibid.*, p.3.

¹² Ryder, A.F.C., *Ibid.*, p.4.

¹³ Ryder, A.F.C., *Ibid.*, pp.5-6.

Consequently, Dom Domingos became the 7th *Olu* and the second Christian King of Warri, setting in motion a chain of Christian and Catholic *Olus* that lasted until 1848, when a dynastic crisis created a temporary kingship vacuum that permitted the emergence of Protestantism, Anglicanism and Baptism, until the 17th *Olu*, Ginuwa II (born Emiko Ikengbuwa) was appointed in 1936. Special mention must be given to *Olu* Erejuwa I (c. 1720-1800), also known as Dom Sebastião Manuel Octobia, a good and just king who presided over the expansion of the Warri Kingdom and a marked improvement in its fortunes. By the mid-nineteenth century, Christianity had largely become the preserve of the *Olu* and the residents of the palace, with little to no impact being made in the surrounding rural areas. The arrival of the British in the mid-nineteenth century, lured by the prospects of profitable trade, brought the formalisation of their colonial power within Itsekiriland:

- The British had their sights firmly set on taking economic and political control of the Itsekiri, and every step they took was designed to replace the interests of other European countries with their own, starting with the appointment of an Itsekiri man, Chief Idiare, to the newly created position of the Governor of Benin River in 1851. In line with their expectations, Chief Idiare ‘led the Itsekiri to sign a trade treaty with the British, allowing British imperial agents a foothold in Itsekiri affairs from the middle of the nineteenth century.’;¹⁴
- A treaty was signed in 1884 that defined the full extent of Itsekiri territories and attempted to enshrine the right of Christian missionaries to ‘reside and exercise their calling within the territories of the aforesaid Kings and Chiefs...[and exercise] all forms of religious worship and religious ordinances...’;¹⁵
- A second treaty was signed in 1894 that was very similar to the first, and was, in fact, deployed as a weapon against a powerful and wealthy Itsekiri chief from the prominent Ologbotsere family, Nana Olomu, who had

¹⁴ Ekeh, Peter P., *Editor’s Introduction, The Contents and Character of British Colonial Treaties of 1884 and 1894 with the Itsekiri of Nigeria’s Western Niger Delta*, Urhobo Historical Society; <http://waado.org/urhobohistory/NigerDelta/ColonialTreaties/ItsekiriTreaties/EditorsIntroduction.html>

¹⁵ Ekeh, Peter P., *Ibid.*

become a thorn in the side of the British after 'Itsekiri relations with the British began to sour shortly after the Berlin Conference.'¹⁶

Nana Olomu (1852-1916), also known as Eriomala, was 'an influential Itsekiri Chief active in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century, and a figure who is popularly perceived as a pioneer of Nigerian nationalist struggles because of his resistance to British rule.'¹⁷ With the decline of slavery and rise of legitimate trade in goods such as oil, palm kernels and rubber, 'the balance of power as equal trading partners began to shift to that of British domination with the beginnings of colonialism.'¹⁸ Following his appointment to the coveted Governor of Benin River role and the formal declaration of the Niger Delta region as a Protectorate of the British Empire in 1884, Nana quickly established economic dominance, sometimes at the expense of neighbouring tribes and in direct opposition to Britain's imperial interests:

By 1894 Nana had won a near monopoly of all trade. He is said to have controlled an area of 6,000 square miles or more, including most of Urhobo country and especially the hinterlands of the Ethiopie and Jamieson rivers...Neville, who probably overestimates in his flattering account of Nana, says that he had 20,000 'war boys,' a force of 100 war canoes each manned with 36 paddlers and nearly 40-armed crew, and well over 200 trade canoes each pulled by 16 or 20 paddlers and capable of carrying from five to ten tons of oil...

This monopoly was built up moreover at a period when the terms of trade were averse to the Urhobo producers...In the 1880s the price of oil in Liverpool fell by half. The consequences of this are not clear: possibly the Urhobo grew more reluctant to sell their oil – they certainly attributed the falling prices to Nana's monopoly; the European merchants were possibly even more submissive to Nana in their attempts to win most of his custom.¹⁹

Eventually, exasperated British colonial officials, envious Itsekiri rivals and long-suffering merchants who repeatedly fell foul of Nana's restrictive and at times dictatorial trade practices, lost their patience. Open war commenced

¹⁶ Ekeh, Peter P., *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Ayida, Allegra, *Nigerian Cultural Heritage Abroad: The Case of an Itsekiri Chief* as part of the 'Writing Race' blog series, Royal Historical Society, June 2021. <https://blog.royalhistsoc.org>

¹⁸ Ayida, Allegra, *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Lloyd, P.C., *Ibid.*, p.225.

in 1894 under the name of the Ebrohimi expedition, culminating in the flight of Nana to Lagos, and his eventual surrender and conviction on the charges of 'making war on the British, of acting in opposition to the consuls and of causing a breach of the peace in the Benin river.'²⁰ His fall from grace was as dramatic as his ascension, and he spent an extended period of time in exile, first in Calabar, and later in Accra, Ghana. Nana was permitted to return to Itsekiriland in 1906, once he was no longer deemed a threat to the stability of the region, where he met his end, leaving behind over 60 children and countless grandchildren.

Against this backdrop of sociopolitical upheaval, Christian missionaries from various denominations continued their work from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. A few, like the Church Missionary Society (CMS), struggled to make much of an impact due to internal schisms, the unfavourable climate and ego-driven priests. It was not until the early twentieth century that the tireless efforts of international missionaries like Bishop James Johnson and local missionaries like Aghoghin Omatsola, began to truly evangelise Warri and its surroundings, accompanied by the well-established usual advantages and disadvantages.

Sample text from the Itsekiri Bible

Iyẹn Rire ni ubara Jisọs Kraist

ti **JỌN** ya

Ọfọ uyè

1 ¹ Tẹrẹn di a re da eye, Ọfọ winọrọn kọkọ rẹn, biri Orişẹ gha wẹrẹ wón gha. ² Ti alẹbalẹ wa Ọfọ we gba biri Orişẹ winọrọn. ³ Ọfọ owun Orişẹ gba da urun dede; e nẹ urun ti a dá ti e şe ọfọ owun a gba da a. ⁴ Ọfọ we nẹ uyè ni inọ ro wun, uyè we re mu utukpa gbẹ irẹye. ⁵ Utukpa we ran ni inọ okunkun. okunken e nemi bo o ma alẹ.

⁶ Orişẹ ka ran ukọ ro wun, ọnọkẹrẹn ti a kpe wun Jọn. ⁷ ọnẹ ti o wa fọ ọfọ Utukpa we gbẹ irẹye. O wa gba fọ ọfọ we gbẹ aghan, di aghan gba gbọ uşẹ wé, gba kpe wun ọrọnfọ.

⁸ Ọlara ro e şe Utukpa we, di o wa gbaa fọ ni ubara Utukpa

Image source: http://worldbibles.org/language_detail/eng/its/Itsekiri

²⁰ Lloyd, P.C., Ibid, p.230.

ISLAM

The inexorable march of Islam made its way towards Itsekiriland by way of the Kingdom of Benin, which experienced multiple invasions by the predominantly Muslim Nupe people, who themselves succumbed to Usman dan Fodio's Fulani War jihad. In a true demonstration of the interconnectedness of Nigeria's economy at that time, 'the jihad upset the Nupe trade at the same time as it set the Nupe invading parts of the Benin empire.'²¹ The Itsekiri people would have been exposed to the concept of Islam as a result of their extensive commercial dealings with the Edo-Bini, albeit to a limited extent and with minimal impact.

It is also the case that Itsekiri migrant settlers, in search of improved economic prospects, found their way to Hausaland and made their homes in bustling economic hubs such as Kano. Traditionally, they would not have made their homes within the parts of the city reserved for Kano residents, but rather within designated sections specifically for non-indigenes and foreigners, known as *Sabon Gari* [strangers' quarters]:

Apart from the Igbo and Yoruba, there are other settlers in Sabon Gari, including several southern ethnic groups, notably the Edo, Urhobo, Efik, Ijaw, and Itsekiri. The diversity of settlers is reflected, to some extent, in the naming of streets in Sabon Gari after towns and ethnic groups from which the majority of the inhabitants of the street originally came from...

Politics at the time involved relations among settler groups on the one hand, and between them and the host community/colonial authorities. At both levels, the bases of involvement were the various ethnic unions and other pan-ethnic and trans-ethnic associations. The main ethnic unions included the Yoruba Welfare Central Association, Igbo Central Union, Benin Union, Ijaw Tribal Union, Urhobo Progressive Union, Itsekiri National Society, and the countrywide Gold Coast League.²²

It may be surmised that these Itsekiri migrants would occasionally return to their places of origin, carrying with them information about the differing lifestyles they had witnessed, which would naturally include the main religion of the people whose land they were living on, that is, Islam. It is well

²¹ Ikime, Obaro, *Colonial Conquest and Resistance in Southern Nigeria* in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 1972, p.268, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41856956>. Accessed 12 Oct. 2021.

²² Osaghae, Eghosa E., *Trends in Migrant Political Organisation in Nigeria: The Igbo in Kano* (Ibadan: IFRA-Nigeria, 1994).

established that Itsekiri Muslims exist and practice their faith peacefully, where possible. In addition to the Warri Central *masjid* [mosque], there are other central mosques located in easily accessible locations, such as Effurun and Ekured Itsekiri, in order to facilitate the needs of the local Muslim community. A member of the current Itsekiri royal family, Prince Alhaji Bilamin Bernard Emiko, is a practising Muslim and considered a pillar to Islam in Itsekiriland.

It is estimated that the number of Itsekiri Muslims is extremely low, but with the support of organisations such as the Delta State League of Imams, and the Warri chapter of the Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN), there are ongoing efforts to ensure the conflict-free coexistence of Islam and other religions among the Itsekiri people.

TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Cosmology

The traditional religion of the Itsekiri is centred around the Supreme Being known as *Oritse* [God], the Creator of the world who 'ruled over the affairs of all peoples in the world.'²³ He is not specifically named in prayers and there are few ceremonies explicitly attached to him. The symbols representing *Oritse* have changed over time, in keeping with the evolution of its people:

The symbol of his altar was a long plain bamboo staff painted white with chalk, and a yam (also plastered white) in a forked furrow at the top, with a string of cowries and a white piece of cloth (baft) or a white chicken tied to it (National Commission for Museums and Monuments, 1981). On the yam was thrust the red tail feather of a parrot. Sacrifices before this altar were made with nothing other than "pure natural water or coconut juice" (Sagay, p. 64).

The present-day symbol of *Oritse* is a wooden cross loosely covered with white cloth (National Commission for Museums and Monuments, 1981).²⁴

To assist with his management of the physical and spiritual realms, *Oritse* created lesser deities to act as intermediaries between himself and human

²³ Ezeze, Henchard B., *Ijo-Itsekiri Relations before the Colonial Period in Nigeria* in *International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)*, Ethiopia, Vol. 5, Issue 1, No. 16, January 2016, p.104.

²⁴ Ezeze, Henchard B., *Ibid*, pp.103-104.

beings. *Umale Okun* [spirit of the sea] was arguably the most important deity due to the riverine nature of Itsekiriland, and as such, he assumed the importance of a national god:

Below *Oritse* was *Umale Okun (Umaleokun)*, the god of the sea, which was believed to control the fate of all Itsekiri people, and was responsible for wealth and fertility. *Ogheye*, an Itsekiri settlement at the mouth of the Benin River, was the main centre of worship of this god. The *Olu* (paramount ruler of the Itsekiri) assisted by his Chief Adviser, *Ologbotsere*, presided over the ceremonies associated with the worship of *Umale Okun*.²⁵

The worship of *Umale Okun* was further localised by each community paying obeisance to their own *Umale*, usually at shrines dedicated to this particular deity. The *umale* are reported as being an earlier sub-human species who lived in Itsekiriland before the arrival of *Ginuwa I* and his associates. With the single exception of the *umale* named *Itsekiri* who joined the new Kingdom of *Warri*, they disappeared over time 'and have come to be deified by the Itsekiri, standing in the Itsekiri cosmology between the supreme deity and the ancestors named in their genealogies.'²⁶ The *umale* were of unusual appearance and were described as semi-mythical:

According to the myths these creatures are said to have possessed the secret of immortality, often gained by rubbing their bodies with chalk, which enabled them to disappear into the creek and return later. The blue coral beads belonged to them, and rather than submit to the *Olu* and pay a tribute of the blue beads, they are said to have thrown their chalk into the water, destroyed the 'coral tree,' entered their canoes and sunk into the creek never to return and leaving no descendants.

In some cases, the *umale* are said to have fled north and the 'digging' of the major creeks is attributed to them.²⁷

Another powerful deity was *Ada* [god of war], thought to be the chief of the war gods who required blood sacrifices as a testament to the importance of his supernatural presence on the battlefield. Interestingly, the presence of

²⁵ Erezene, Henchard B., *Ibid*, p.104.

²⁶ Lloyd, P.C., *The Itsekiri* in Bradbury, R.E., *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria* in Forde, Daryll (ed.), *Ethnographic Survey of Africa* (London: International African Institute, 1957), p.178.

²⁷ Lloyd P.C. in Bradbury, R.E., *Ibid*., p.178

Ògún [Yorùbá god of iron and war] is honoured among the Itsekiri pantheon of gods, which is treated as one of many pieces of evidence of the strong connection between the Yorùbá and the Itsekiri. In some quarters, there is strong support for the idea that the Itsekiri were once part of Yorùbáland, and indeed, the Itsekiri and Yorùbá languages share similarities in syntax, grammar and lexicon.

Alongside these deities and an army of lesser spirits believed to live in the creeks as protectors, the Itsekiri also indulged in *ebura* [ancestor worship], as ‘a clear indication that the people believed in life-after-death, or life beyond the grave.’²⁸ The ancestors are honoured annually and at other important occasions, facilitated by the traditional *okpanran* [priest] who oversees a complicated sequence of rituals designed to ensure the health and safety of the descendants. The ancestors are invoked ‘whenever the lineage or descent-group is wronged, as when incest is committed, food taboos not observed, or when children do not acknowledge the patrilineage into which they were born.’²⁹ It is common for each local community to have a chief priest, who is responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of their local community, as well as the impartial carrying out of specialised ministrations:

The priest must be above factions and therefore consults his deities and oracles for decisions in contentious cases. He also performs personal services for members of the village, such as divining the cause of sickness. In the oldest Itsekiri settlements the priest is usually the president at all meetings, the duties of the village head being confined to matters affecting his family; this is especially so in towns such as Orugbo and Orere. There, too, the priests, who do not often meet the *Olu*, rank themselves as his equals in status. The priest of Gborodo is in a similar position. In these villages, the names of all past priests are often known and correspond to a king-list.³⁰

The *okpanran* were often involved in political decisions and their guidance on matters of state was taken as sacrosanct. Today, the priests’ place in the socio-political structure of Itsekiriland remains intact and protected by

²⁸ Erezene, Henchard B., *Ibid*, p.104.

²⁹ Lloyd P.C. in Bradbury, R.E., *Ibid*, p.202.

³⁰ Lloyd P.C. in Bradbury, R.E., *Ibid*, p.194

organisations such as the Association of Traditional Priests of Warri Kingdom, due to their linkage to the founding ancestors of their villages:

[The] Itsekiri system of governance is gerontocracy, but priests are highly reverend at every occasion. For instance, Gborodo, Ureju and Okere leadership is paternal, not necessarily by age. They are allowed to preside over every meeting that involves discussion of the deities because their existence is claimed to be controlled by ancestors and spiritual forces, particularly those from the seas.³¹

Itsekiri names are deeply spiritual and often serve as mini-prayers to the Supreme Being and reminders to others of his omnipotence and benevolence, such as Anirejuoritse [You can't be wiser than God], Oritsetsolaye [God is the granter of favour] and Toritseju [God's Will is supreme].³²

Oracles and Witchcraft

Similar to neighbouring tribes, the Itsekiri made use of oracles for purposes of divination, witchcraft detection and in the settlement of disputes. There are many forms of divination, but the most prominent oracle is that of *Ifé*, said to 'have been brought by Idibien, a magician who led Ginuwa to Ijala,' and which shares many of the characteristics of the Yorùbá *Ifá* oracle. The *Ifé* oracle utilises a 256-chapter literary corpus with themes, *esen* [verses] and its own unique language, which is 'metaphoric, symbolic, figurative and analogical in nature.'³³ *Bife* is the process of discovering information through the oracle, while *ife bibi* is the actual act of consulting it:

Pa Metsese [a self-avowed traditionalist at Ajamimogha, Warri] explains that *ife bibi* is not unique to the Itsekiris, because when a person dies in some other ethnic groups, especially in controversial circumstances, family members of the deceased might insist on finding out through oracle the cause of the death. "It could be found out that the person was killed through witchcraft or other evil means, or he has died from his past evil or wicked deeds," Pa Metsese says, adding that such oracles are just for the

³¹ Ireyefoju, Omasanjuwa, Jackson, and Ireyefoju, Ejuoghanmakelesan, Florence, *Ifé Oracle in Itsekiri Social System of Nigeria* in *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, Vol. 21, 2014, p.65. DOI: 10.18052/www.scipress.com/ILSHS.21.62

³² <https://ngr.ng/itsekiri-names>

³³ Ireyefoju, Ejuoghanran, Florence, *Education and Significance of Ife Oracle Literature in Character Development in Nigeria* in *Multidisciplinary Journal of Research Development*, Vol. 26, No 1, April 2017, p.5.

sake of revelation as nothing is done to either the killer of the deceased nor the deceased if he had died from his past evil deeds.

"Itsekiris do not allow that," he declares. "In our own case, if it is found out that the dead person was a witch, he is not buried on our soil inside town. His corpse is thrown into *igbele*, the evil forest, across the river." But if the oracle reveals that the person has died from the evil deeds of another person, *ife bibi* awaits the culprit. "That is what makes our own oracle casting for the dead unique," he enthuses.³⁴

The *obi ife* [oracle priest] communes with the spirits to obtain the answers sought by the client, and some of them are so proficient in their calling that they amass a loyal following. It is even possible for a highly trained *obi ife* to unearth an astonishing amount of detail surrounding a questionable death, such as whether the perpetrator of the crime is 'a family member of the deceased: a parent, sibling, uncle, or aunt,'³⁵ as long as the right questions are brought before the *Ifè* oracle. By determining the cause of the person's untimely demise, the opportunity for vengeance is afforded to their spirit and the spirits of their ancestors. *Ifè bibi* can also determine the presence of witchcraft in living beings, to enable the removal of evildoers from unsuspecting communities:

The Itsekiri believe strongly in evil done by witches who are said to form societies into which one may be initiated at any age. The members meet secretly, almost always for the purpose of doing harm. The punishment for witchcraft was death.

Witches were detected by the *agbadi* ritual, by the sasswood ordeal, and by confession. It is believed that if a witch died and met his ancestors with his actions unconfessed, he would be severely punished; a witch should therefore make a full confession on the deathbed, even though this means that the corpse will be thrown into the bush and the name of the person blotted out from memory.³⁶

The sasswood is a 'tropical African tree (*Erythrophleum suaveolens*) in the pea family, having bark that yields a poison and wood that is used for

³⁴<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/07/igbele-evil-forest-where-itsekiris-dump-corpse-of-witches-wizards>

³⁵<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/07/igbele-evil-forest-where-itsekiris-dump-corpse-of-witches-wizards>

³⁶ Lloyd P.C. in Bradbury, R.E., *Ibid.*, p.202.

construction.³⁷ Another method of detecting witchcraft involved either the extraction of liquid from the sasswood or the creation of a paste using its bark, which would then be ingested by the accused. Their reaction to the substance, such as vomiting or choking to death, was held to be a determination of their innocence or guilt, although it has been prosaically suggested that ‘the differences in the immune system of the human body could have aided or worsened the efficacy of sasswood extracted liquid.’³⁸ Witchcraft accusations were taken very seriously in Itsekiriland because they impugned the characters of the individual’s family, their community and their ancestors, therefore, the Itsekiri went to great lengths to confirm or deny its presence.

Festivals

Festivals are a time of celebration, communal bonding and the honouring of Itsekiri history. They are a crucial element of the Itsekiri way of life: ‘a culmination of ritual and art, a restatement of their values, traditions and world view, and a rite of passage ensuring a continuity between the past, present and future.’³⁹ One of the most popular festivals is the annual rain *Okere Juju* Festival, also known as the *Umale Okere* or *Awankere* Festival, celebrated by the Itsekiri people who settled in Okere, which is historically Urhobo land located on the periphery of Warri as it was in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s:

The annual *Awan’kere* festival of Okere (popularly known as *Okere Juju*), is one of the most popular festivals in Warri metropolis and its environs today. Its origin dates back to the latter part of the 15th century when Ekpen, the chief-warrior founder of Okere, introduced it. The festival is celebrated in honour of the deity *Okioro*, who is believed to be the sovereign of all other deities (*umale*) that inhabit the rivers, sea, and ocean.

Awan’kere is celebrated for three lunar months between June and August annually except in any year when the bigger *Eleghe* festival is celebrated. The *Eleghe* festival usually incorporates the *Awan’kere* festival and is celebrated once every twenty years.

³⁷ <https://www.yourdictionary.com/sasswood>

³⁸ Oghi, Felix E., *Abolition of Trial by Ordeal at Eni-Lake, Uzere, Delta State of Nigeria, 1903: A Reconsideration* in *AFRREV IJAH: An International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Ethiopia, Vol. 2, Issue 1, No. 5, February 2013, p.138.

³⁹ Amah, S., *Okere Juju: Itsekiri Religious Ritual Festival* in *Nigeria Magazine*, Vol. 54, Issue 4, 1986. <https://www.africabib.org/rec.php?RID=119528207>

The *Awan'kere* is a fertility festival and purification. The community is purified, and sacrifices are made to appease and thank the deity for all the blessings of the preceding festival year prior to the commencement of the ceremonies. Such rites as *ajafifa* (purification of the community), *ibiribi* (night masquerade), *ode gbigba* (sweeping the arena) and *awerewere* (cleansing ceremony), precede the main event.⁴⁰

The *Okere Juju* Festival is a dizzying whirl of singing, laughter, 'the fore-festival, the opening day, masquerades, the salutation of the shrines, dances, ritual rounds through the streets and compounds, satiric drama, women's performances, confessions, and the departure of the visiting spirits.'⁴¹

An example of masquerades from the Okere Juju festival



Image source: <https://warripeople.com/warri-festivals>

Another highly spiritual festival is the *Okposo* Festival, which venerates the goddess of the same name, and it is celebrated by the Itsekiri residents of Ugbuwangue, a quiet town in Warri South:

The *Okposo* festival is a decennial festival of the Ugbuwangue people that holds during the festive period in December. The *Okposo* is a water-

⁴⁰ <https://warripeople.com/warri-festivals>

⁴¹ Amah, S., Ibid.

goddess that has power to influence commerce, fertility and maintenance of moral order. In the course of preparation, a series of rituals for public and private participation takes place, to cleanse the land, appease deities, ancestors, gods and invitation of the masquerades from the *Umaleokun* kingdom because they don't dwell with men. The *opkaran umale* (chief priest) is the one that coordinates all ceremonies and talks to the gods on behalf of the people.

The ceremony for public participation takes place at the altars of all deities in the village square and in front of the shrine, while that of private participation happens in the big shrine and very late in the night by the initiated and *Ojo-Orun* (night masquerade). Preparation for the *Okposo* festival starts at the beginning of the year with "Awerewere," which has to do with the cleansing of the land by chasing out evil spirits from the community.⁴²

The *Okposo* Festival takes place every ten years and lasts for seven days, and features the introduction of the young and uninitiated to the mysteries of their cultural heritage, through 'aesthetic realisation, the complete elements of modern theatre such as dance, song, ritual, costume, chants, and imitation.'⁴³ Accordingly, it may be seen through these examples, and other valued events such as the Itsekiri Regatta Festival, that they occupy a special place in the hearts of the Itsekiri people:

Entertainment through various acts of performance is a central part of everyday life in Africa. At the village squares, under the moonlight nights, around the fire place, during intercommunity wrestling contests, at annual festivals and different religious observances, various cultural pieces such as dance, songs, tales, and ritual performances are re-enacted to initiate efforts at relating to their ancestors and events of time past.

[A] Festival is one sure means through which the people relate to their past and interact with the present as well as the future. During festivals, various dramatic and artistic feats are re-enacted to satisfy the aesthetic yearnings of spectators/audiences.⁴⁴

⁴² Ovie-Jack, Eyituyo, Matilda, *The Artistic and Dramatic Values of the Okposo Festival of the Itsekiri People of Ugbuwangue* in *KIU Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 6, Issue 1, 2020, p.339.

⁴³ Ovie-Jack, Eyituyo, Matilda, *Ibid.*, p.337.

⁴⁴ Omoko, Emuejevoke, Peter, *The Dramatic and Poetic Contents of the Idju Festival of the Agbarha-Ame People of Warri* in *Nokoko: Institute of African Studies Journal*, Canada, Vol. 5, 2016, p.93.

CONCLUSION

During the course of writing this book, several things became startlingly apparent.

First, and perhaps most importantly, my work is not intended to be an exhaustive exploration of the restricted number of ethnic groups detailed within it. It is best suited to the role of a starting point for deeper discussions and further research on the part of the reader.

It is clear that the impact of the Fulani War jihad had a monumental impact on what came to be known as northern Nigeria, extending far beyond the borders of the Sokoto Caliphate, and changing the course of history for even those parts of the country that escaped direct conquest. Similarly, once we take note of the extensive regional and internal migration that led to the present-day configuration of Nigeria, we can begin to understand the historical motivations of actions that affect the lives of the average Nigerian in the 21st century.

One cannot help but wonder what Nigeria would have looked like without the intervention of the European powers who so eagerly imposed foreign languages and frameworks on its unsuspecting populace. Would we have flourished, untouched, like the uncontacted Amazon tribes who live in blissful ignorance of the world in turmoil? Considering the sheer wealth of natural resources contained within our borders, this seems unlikely. Is it possible that there could have been a more positive outcome beyond the exploitation and subjugation of countless indigenous populations? Considering the manner in which other African nations were brought to heel by their conquerors, in pursuit of unimaginable wealth, glory and power, this seems even less likely.

It is also of note that the pervasive presence of witchcraft across most Nigerian ethnic groups has functioned as a scapegoat and an outlet for frustrations with societal issues that seemingly have no resolution. It has also

served as a means of keeping women fearful and subjugated, lest they be accused of being witches by those experiencing negative emotions such as envy or powerlessness. The primal need within the human race to demonise the 'Other,' the 'Foreigner,' emerges under various guises and witchcraft is merely one of its faces. The power it holds lies in the believer's conviction that it exists.

Finally, discovering the documented presence of Judaism in a few of the major Nigeria tribes was an unexpected occurrence that further reinforced the point that the human race possesses more similarities than it does differences. If a space can be created halfway across the world for a religion traditionally held to be the exclusive preserve of the residents of today's Israel, what else can be peacefully accommodated? It is of interest that we note the deliberate choice of a number of Nigerian ethnic groups to identify with the Jewish community, who have traditionally seen themselves as one of the most persecuted races in the world. Perhaps, these ethnic groups see something of themselves in the pain-filled history of the Jews and their contemporary struggle to retain control of the State of Israel at any cost.

The wealth of history, art, culture and knowledge that lies within Nigeria's boundaries is one of the most important elements of our country's heritage. It is hoped that this book has provided a snapshot into the truly astonishing collection of oral and mythical traditions that have been handed down from generation to generation over the course of centuries.

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Nigerian Gods is an enlightening and sobering review of the impact of the introduction of the three main Abrahamic religions on Nigeria's traditional religions, culture and way of life, viewed through the prism of its eleven largest and two of the smallest ethnic groups.

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- Edo-Bini Gods
 - Fulani Gods
 - Hausa Gods
 - Ibibio-Efik Gods
 - Igbo Gods
 - Ijo (Ijaw) Gods
 - Isoko Gods
 - Itsekiri Gods
 - Kanuri Gods
 - Nupe Gods
 - Tiv Gods
 - Urhobo Gods
 - Yoruba Gods

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