

## **RELIGION AT ORBA – NSUKKA**

**BY**

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The idea that the African worships a supreme Deity has been the subject of heated controversy among writers of various shades of opinion. Some writers accept the attributes which the African accords the High God, but stress that he is not usually directly worshipped: he has no priests and no shrines are dedicated to him. But it is also argued that among the Dogon people of the Sudan, “we have one of the clearest examples of regular worship”. Among the Ashanti, every compound has an alter to the sky-god, in the form of forked branch-Nyame Dua.

In analyzing my findings in this excursion, I will first of all state that among the Orba people, the concept of the sky-god is rampant, that there are alters for the same sky-god, and that he is being worshipped.

Whether they understand the objects of their worship or not is a debatable questions; but suffice it to say at this juncture, that among the objects of their devotions, we found also, “an alter” dedicated “to the unknown god”.

Dr. Edwin Smith had declared that the Christian missionaries in Africa were giving the Africans the ‘saving knowledge of the “Living, present, loving God.” Ludwig was puzzled at the notion that the untutored African can conceive God. It should be noted however, that the supreme God as worshipped by the Orba people is not an ‘abstract, intellectual concept.’ It is the deity of an original religion based on human experience.

In Ehalumona, Ohebeorba, and Akwali, the High God is called Ezechitoke, or Ekwensu and is represented by the Ihu-Anyanwu shrine. The High God is also called Anyanwu which is the sky-god.

The Atama of Ohebeorba believes that Ezechitoke is withdrawn (Deus Otiosus) and does not worry anybody. Rather, it appears it is people who worry him. He has other minor deities under him such as Amanyi of Ohebeorba, and the Igbogbo of Akwali. This is attested to by the statement made by the Atama that Ezechitoke created Amanyi. At Ohebeorba, Amanyi, has lesser divinities under her: such divinities are Ugwu, Isi-Ugwu, Ohebe, Aja, Ahuru and others which I shall discuss later when I come to treat other minor divinities. One thing, however, is obvious – that in Orba Theogony and cosmogony, the High-God –Chineke – created the earth, and withdraw, leaving the minor divinities with a quasi – governmental authority to punish those who break taboos, or for ritual offences, while he judges man’s character. No wonder why the Atama of Ohebeorba holds the view that Ezechitoke does not worry anybody.

Like the Yourba when the minor deities fail, the Orba people appeal to the High God.

He is the creator, King (Ezechitoke) all-knowing judge, and immortal. The mere fact that he is called Chukwu, Ezechitoke, Ekwensu and so forth, does not make him one more than one. In fact this could be explained in terms of ‘theocrasia – Fusion or identification. ‘There might be many local names but one divinity.’<sup>1</sup>

We did not ascertain from what evidences the people deduced the existence of the supreme deity. But from the nature of their worship, it may, like the Egyptian Isis, be based on experience.

## **THE CULT**

The cult of the High God is not a peculiarity among the Orba people. Like the Ashanti, every household has an alter dedicated to Anyanwu (the sky-god). The Ihu-Anyanwu cult consists of a mound with an iron at the top. There is an “ogilist” plant beside it, and a pot of water claimed by the Atama, to be medicinal, half-buried in the ground. One of these alters in Ehalumona is plastered with cement. This may be regarded as an influence of Western culture, and stands as a contrast to that at Ohebeorba, which remains natural even though it is being gradually worn away by erosion.

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1. Bouquet, A.C: Comparative Religion, Penguin Books, London 1954, Page 63, shows that another way of explaining the plurality of deities was that of theocrastia.....

There is an annual festival called “Olili Chukwu or Olili Ezechitoke”<sup>ii</sup>

This feast is celebrating the fest of God. There is still another festival called ‘Akalu’. This also is an annual festival. The existence of an annual festival does not prevent them from having occasional festivals. In fact, Anyanwu receives sacrifices any time an occasion occurs, such as when there is a serious illness. At Ehalumona, traces of recent slaughter of fowl were conspicuous on the shrine, and at Ohebeorba, the Atama offers kola nut regularly at the Ihu-Anyanwu shrine.

One feature however stands out very prominently, and that is that among the Orba, the cult of the supreme deity is represented by a mound. This as a contrast to what obtains in Onitsha Division where statues (not of the supreme deity) are rampant, and among the Yoruba. This may be adduced from the level of their cultural attainment - that they are proficient neither at carving like the Ife people and the Awka people nor at molding like the people in Aniocha District of Asaba Division. So that their best representation of Anaynwu is a conical mound with a flattened top.

At Akwali, the priest confused the relation between Anaynwu and Ezechitoke. According to him, Anaynwu is the son of Ezechitoke. This seem to be a departure from the general pattern of our information in which Anaynwu is regarded as the same as Ezechitoke. But one can see some elements of logic in his apparent confusion. If Ezechitoke created the world, and the sky, he surely must have created the seky-god –Anaynwu.

Another feature is that the Anaynwu mound stands in the open, in from of the house. It may sound reasonable to say that Anaynwu, being a sky-god, cannot be accommodated in the room.

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- ii. Note here the combination of these attributes of God. Eze (King) – Chi (the spiritual guardian) and by elision, we have oke or okike (the creator). So that what we really have is “Eze-Chi-Okike”.

## **MINOR DEITIES**

Just as among the Yoruba, Olodumare is the supreme deity, with other divinities serving his will in the creation and theocratic government of the world, so also among the Orba people, Anyanwu seems to have left the government machinery with the lesser divinities. Some of these lesser divinities are also categorized or stratified in terms of their relations with Amanyi, among these minor divinities Amanyi occupies the apex.<sup>iii</sup>

Under Amanyi come such divinities as:

- (a) Ideny – amanyi – Princess
- (b) Ugwu – amanyi –
- (c) Iyaja – amanyi – Prince

Other lesser deities include Isi –ugwu, Aja and Ahuru. But their functions were not defined.

Since Amanyi is a female goddess it may not be wrong to assume that next in rank to her is the Princess goddess – Idenyi – amanyi; then comes the Prince, Iyaja Amanyi.

The obvious distinction I could gather from the Atama, between Anyanwu and Amanyi is that the former is a male god while the later is female.

We were not able to visit most of the minor divinities. But we did visit Eze-ugwu Olie of Ehalumona. iv. At Ehalumona, we found a goddess – Idenyi Edemili which was a separate shrine from Anyanwu. There were also some other demotic divinities like the ‘Udele’ and shrine set aside for their masquerades. At Akwali, the Igbogbo is another very important divinity, which like the Amanyi of Ohebeorba, is a goddess.

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- iii. The Atama could not draw an intelligent distinction between the Amanyi and Anyanwu.
  - iv. We did not meet the priest so we went into the village where we had an interview with an elder, probably the head of a household, who had an Anyanwu shrine in front of his house. We did also take photographs of Eze-Ugwu-Olie.

When in difficulty, this head of the house-hold propitiates Idenyi-Edemili, and as a least resort, he appeals to Anyawu. At Akwali, the earth cult is divinity against which certain sins must not be committed. Such sins include theft, murder, adultery and revealing secrets. The first three sins are in consonance with the practices everywhere in Iboland. But it does not follow that all kinds of stealing are sins against the Earth cult. If one steals three shillings from his father, this cannot be regarded as theft against the Earth cult.

But such major sins as stealing yams could carry death penalty as the most suitable sanction. Further, the priest did not say under what circumstances revealing a secret is a sin against the Earth.<sup>v</sup>

## **SHRINES**

I have given a short description of the shrines of Anyawu. We could neither enter nor see the shrine of either the Amanyi of Ohebeorba or the Igbogbo of Akwali. In either case, we were shown only the chambers. The buildings for these two shrines are each divided into two by a wall of mats and old dirty, almost tattered pieces of cloth sewn together. But having seen the morphology of other shrines, one may be tempted to conclude that both the Amanyi and Igbogbo may predominantly contain pots of various sizes, some pieces of sticks, no statues and there may be some boulders smeared with oil and blood.

It does appear that the number of pots signify the importance of the divinity. At Ohebeorba, there is a small divinity with very few pots and a cylindrical wood in the shape of a blacksmith's anvil but without the iron. This is situated near the cherry tree in front of the Atama's house. At Ehalumona 'Udele', also a small shrine is characterized by the usual collection of pots.

The Eze-Ugwu-Oli was the only one we could have a closer view of, probably because the priest was not in. However, some important parts of the shrine were in a room which we could not enter.

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v. Perhaps, we may find a parallel here with the practice among the Iiah people of Asaba Division where revealing the secrets of masqueraders is regarded as a grievous sin against the community. But is it doubtful if such sins have ever been regarded as against the Earth cult. The shrine here contains some awkward figures and unartistic decorations. At one corner of the building were some drums.

The abundance of the pots which characterize these shrines may be explained in terms of the needs of the people. Orba for many years had suffered from scarcity of water, and what would psychologically strike their minds first would be something that can contain water. According to the priest at Ehalumona, these pots are brought by those who come to worship at the shrines. Or it could be explained that in the absence of plates, the devotees bring offerings to the divinity in pots which they are obliged to leave behind.

The Igbogbo of Akwali would strike one as unique not because of her shrines, but because of the apparent devotion of the worshippers, and the seclusion of the area, almost amounting to a hermitage. It is situated in a valley, remote and separated from other buildings except those of the Atama and his attendants, and this gives the shrine a halo of divinity.

### **THE ATAMA AND HIS ATTENDANTS, HIS DWELLING, ETC.**

The Atama of Ohebeorba is one Chief Cyprian Mba Odoh. He was formerly a Catholic by religion, but became the Atama consequent on the death of his father. He is a young man of about between 30 and 40 years, with a large family. Even though the Atamaship is hereditary, some features of electiveness are evident. The present Atama had to go through legal contests before he finally won the throne. He is also the king of the Orba people; and like all heads of lineages and clans, he does little or no work. In fact, he has no visible means of subsistence except the precarious contributions of his subjects, and the crops reaped for him by the members of the community. The villagers clear his farm, and all he does is to stay in his throne waiting anybody who would come to appease the gods. These objects of sacrifice to the Amanyi form the irregular means of his substance.

Every Atama has an Ofo and to this is tied the hereditary bell. It should be noted that the Ofo is not hereditary. Every Ofo belongs to individual Atama, and at the death of the Atama, this Ofo is buried.

The Chief responsibility of the Atama is the worship of his goddess. Every morning, he offers kola nut to the Amanyi. Since Amanyi is a goddess, it becomes necessary that the Atama should depict the sex of the goddess. Thus he had ear-rings. But at the time of our visit, one of the ear-rings was missing from his ears. As a result of this notion of sex, there is a taboo against males sitting with him on the throne. A lady can sit with him but men are not allowed. The Atama at Ohebeorba seems to have gathered around him flatterers who cheer him and clap their hands, chanting “Agu, Agu, A-gu .....” when he drinks or eats. But on a closer analysis, one finds that it is a mark of devotion quite in conformity with tradition, even though the mere fact that the Atama had to remind them that they should clap harder makes one feel that the devotion is only apparent.

His dwelling comparatively is the best. It is divided into three segments. The first segment which they call the ‘Onu-Nna’ is the audience chamber. It is here that the Atama receives his visitors, and settles family or domestic disputes; it is here he stays for the greater part of the day. There is a small shrine beside him for his regular worship. On the ceiling is hung a drum for ceremonial occasions. Next to this is the adjoining chamber. This seems to be of no ritual significance, but there is evidence of some domestic animals being tied there. The third apartment is his sleeping room. This is a separate hut roofed with iron sheets. In front of this is the Anyanwu shrine.

At Akwali, we could not go to the dwelling of the Atama, but what applies to the Atama of Ohebeorba may also apply to the Atama there. Each of them is surrounded by women, children and men who come from the

neighbouring houses to spend some time with him. The Atama of Amanyi is served by his chief wife, while the Atama of Igbogbo is served by his 'Obinoko' whose relationship with the Atama is still a mystery.

One can only conjecture that perhaps she is married to the goddess. But as the Igbogbo is a goddess this proposition sounds illogical. Or she is married to the Atama. But the range between their ages makes this untenable. One can therefore conclude that she was married to the later father of the present Atama, and like the woman at Ohebeorba was dedicated to the service of the Atama. On the death of the husband, she stayed back to serve the goddess, so that subsequent Atama inherited her services.

It may be necessary to note before ending this chapter that unlike the priests of Ifa Oracle, not all the Atama are fortune tellers. While the Atama of Ohebeorba is, the Atama of Akwali is not a fortune teller or a diviner.

### **ANCESTOR CULT**

In the few places we visited, we could only get an incomplete picture of the role of ancestral spirits among the Orba people. There were some references to the authority of the lineal ancestors, but the ways respects for this authority were manifested differed between the people at Ohebeorba and Akwali. At Ohebeorba, there is ancestor worship, but there is no shrine dedicated to it. Even the Ofo of the ancestors have no ritual significance to them. The ancestor only receives homage and respects in form of libations pured out in his honour.

At Akwali, while the Atama is in charge of the Igbogbo shrine, the eldest in the community there is incharge of the ancestor worship. It may therefore not be incorrect to believe that there is a cult here dedicated to the ancestor.

Existing simultaneously with the ancestor worship is the notion of the 'Ofo'. We did not ascertain whether the Ofo is exclusive to the Atamaship, or whether an individual could hold his own, as it's done at Ibagwa and some other places in Iboland. We did however learn that the Atama has his personal Ofo, which has a great influence on his life. Since the Ofo is a personal cult, it has no bearing with the ancestor worship. In fact, after the death of the Atama, his Ofo is thrown away or buried. To the Atama, the Ofo is of great significance, and he cannot tell a lie as long as he holds the Ofo. It does appear that every household has a collective Ofo under the custody of head of the household.

Like in all Ibolands, libations and poor food could be thrown outside the building for the ancestral spirits who are supposed to be hungry, and they are regularly called upon to protect the living members of the family. It is thus evident that even though they have no shrines for the ancestors, especially in Ohebeorba, the ancestors are never forgotten; but an accurate description of their role besides taking care of their children, is yet to be given, and sometimes, their influence is too pervasive to be easily isolable for analysis.

## **TABOOS**

The taboos here are comparatively few, but significant among them are:

- (a) the taboo against males sitting with the Atama on his throne
- (b) the taboo against male visitors from sitting on a small mound near the Atama's throne.
- (c) The taboo against people entering the Amanyi shrine, as well as the Igbogbo shrine.

The first case is understandable as being based on the belief that the Amanyi is a goddess, and should have special preference for people of her sex. The same reason may be applicable to the second taboo. But the third taboo could be interpreted to be a positive attempt to prevent people from committing sacrilege inside the shrine. Also the chief wife of the Atama at Ohebeorba breaks kola-nut only on Afor day. On either she is forbidden to break kola-nuts.

### **GENERAL IMPRESSION**

While expressing satisfaction at our findings, and the hospitality of the people, it may be necessary to point out that most of the beliefs of the people are founded on faith. At Ehalumona, the man we interviewed seems to know little about what the worships. His belief is based on what he gathered from his father, and there has been no effort made to verify most of these oral traditions, which, no doubt must have witnessed systematic distortions.

On the ancestor worship, it is difficult to describe it as secular. J.H Drinerg has stated that the ancestor – reverence is ‘purely secular’.

He maintained that no African prays to his dead grandfather any more than he prays to his living father. In the ‘narrow’ sense that the Orba people have no ancestor – shrines, this may be true. But Drinerg may not may not (if he knew that at Akwali there is an elder whose duty is the worship of the ancestors), hold tenaciously to this view. In fact, this view was even attacked by Dr. Edwin Smith who feels that “only on a narrow definition of religion can the ancestral cult be dismissed as ‘purely secular’. He goes further to argue that “if the essence of religion is a sense of dependence upon supersensible powers, who are able and willing to help, then we are in the

presence of religion when the African commune with their kinsmen in the unseen world...”<sup>vi</sup>

It is in this latter sense, and prompted by the fear and respect for the dead ancestors that the Orba people pay homage to the memory of the departed ones.

Their minor deities appear to be personification of natural forces such as hills – Eze-Ugwu-Olie etc.

The Atama appears worried about the insecurity of his prestige in the face of modern changes in the society. No doubt, he is finding the maintenance of his large family an inescapable burden; he wants money to maintain himself, he wants job even if this has to take him out of his home, and away from his shrine. This view is also shared by the Atama of Igbogbo who added that the “Igbogbo agbaghi oso. Nje cham bata enyegu mea ihe ocho”. This means that the “Igbogbo does not run. When I come back, I will offer what she wants.”

From the look of the Atama’s attendants, one could see conspicuous signs of suffering and malnutrition. But one has also to recognize the forces of the fear of the supernatural. Even though these people understand the indigent condition of the Atama, their loyalty remains unshaken, they having accepted his lot as an imposition from the praeter-natural forces. This is attested to by the story told by the Atama of Igbogbo who said that he was selected by the Igbogbo herself. To him, the atamanship was imposed. He was warned by the goddess that if he did not return to serve her, she would make him lame. He stressed that he is the only choice from their large family.

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vi. cf. Parrinder, *Religion in an African City*, O.U.P. 1953, p. 41.

## **Reincarnation**

The next controversial issue is the question of reincarnation. It could not be shown that it does exist in its classical sense. The general notion appears to be that a man could reincarnate without dying. Perhaps, this is what Dr. Bolaji Idowu calls ‘partial reincarnation.’ To the Orba people, the fathers reincarnate in their sons, and the mothers in the daughters. I would agree with Dr. Idowu that this only establishes the “belief in the concrete fact that there are certain dominant characteristics which keep recurring through births and thus ensuring the continuity of the vital existence of the family or clan”.<sup>vii</sup>

This view also finds expression among the Bantu where “Every man, every individual, forms a link, active, and passive, joined from above to the ascending line of his ancestry and sustaining below him the line of his descendants.”<sup>viii</sup>

Finally, it will not be presumptuous to say that with the systematic impact of Western civilization, the fate of these gods and goddess might be like that of the long Juju of Arochukwu.

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vii. Idowu, Bolaji, Dr. Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief, Longmans 1962, p. 195

viii. Tempels Placide, Rev: Bantu Philosophy, 1959, p. 72.