

Article

Beyond the Colonial Gaze: The Enduring Significance of Odo and Iyiocha Deities in South-east Nigeria

Uchenna Henrietta Obieluem¹, C. P. Okpalaekeli², Cyriacus Chijioke Oji³, Kenechukwu Chidiogo Daniel⁴

Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Correspondence: Cyriacus Chijioke Oji, cyriacus.oji@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

This study interrogates the conceptual essence and enduring significance of deities within the Igbo cosmological framework, drawing critical evidence from the Odo and Iyiocha deities in Amaokpala, Anambra State, South-east Nigeria. A prevailing consensus among numerous scholars holds that the incursion of foreign religions – particularly Christianity – into Igboland dealt a devastating blow to Indigenous African religious worship and spirituality, systematically eroding this foundational dimension of the people's ancestral heritage. Contrary to this narrative of erasure, this study demonstrates conclusively that African Traditional Religious worship and spirituality – firmly rooted in the worship and veneration of deities – remains profoundly relevant and formidably potent in the 21st Century, as resilient and commanding as it was in the pre-colonial era, before the imposition of Western religions and values sought to supplant it. To accomplish this objective, the study adopted a rigorous qualitative research design and methodology. Data collection employed in-depth interviews and sustained observational fieldwork, drawing on both primary and secondary sources to ensure a rich, multi-layered analysis.

Keywords: Deity, Odo and Iyiocha, Igbo Worldview, African traditional religion and spirituality

Introduction

The concept of deities and their existence links the beliefs and aspirations of people who perceive it as an emblem of religion and culture. Deities are gods who share aspects of divine status and are often believed to have emanated from the supreme deity (God) (Ugwu 1999). Deities as gods or goddesses are housed in particular autonomous agents because they are intermediaries between God in the invisible world. It is believed that God allotted powers to them to enable them to govern a portion of the universe. The deities are held to be superior to man, yet are subordinate to the Supreme Being God, which is universal and total.

Africa is rich in culture, of which, despite so much hindrance, has survived into the twenty-first century. All African societies have practiced a certain religion in the past. The presence of gods and goddesses features prominently in all African religious societies. One cannot separate religion from the African people. When dealing with deities and religion in the African setting, it is entirely different from what is obtained in the Western world.

Deities are known to have a way over everybody and individual that pays homage to them. Whether the person is a Muslim, Christian, or traditionalist within and outside the community. The people who still worship and believe in these deities own their entire integrity, as well as their entire life activities, which are centered on the influence of the deities. It serves as a social center, pulling together some segment clans of the community.

It could be said with certainty that ritual brings together the group of traditional worshipers for common renewal of their religious loyalties, as in Igbo and African societies. Parrinder

(1965) opines that Africans see these deities and their ritual observances as the supreme safeguard of the basic needs of their existence and of basic relations that make up their social order, health of the family, the clan, and the state. The mystical values reflect the general import of the basic elements of existence. The above statements confirm the fact that the religious beliefs enshrine the attitude of men to their daily needs and the way in which their satisfaction is safeguarded.

We often hear what sounds like a fairy tale about the power deities possess. Some of them are said to have the power to inflict serious hardship on anybody who does evil within a given geographical area where they are located. These perceptions and ideas give room for concern, and many questions are called to mind to give more insight into it.

The Amaokpala community has many forms and types of deities which Odo and Iyiocha is part and major of them all. These deities have their own spiritual, myth and legendary stories attached to each of them. But for this project work, the problem to be handled is to unravel the myths and stories attached to the two deities (Odo and Iyiocha) being studied. Deities and rituals are of immense value not only to Amaokpala but also to archaeologists and tourists. The idea is to examine the concept and significance of Odo and Iyiocha deities. What are the roles/ socio-political, cultural, religious, and economic significance of Odo and Iyiocha deities to the community? And what are the positive and negative impacts of the deity on the people of the Amaokpala community? Specifically, this study seeks to understand the real myth and stories attached to the existence of these deities, the relationship of the people with the deities. Rituals involved with the deities and their significance to the Amaokpala people.

Literature Review

The word deity is derived from the Latin word "Deus," meaning God. According to Mbiti (1970), a deity can be defined as anything that possesses a divine quality as well as exhibiting an invisible nature, which nobody has ever seen. Objects that symbolize this deity can be seen in Igbo land. Deities are classified into major and minor deities. The Igbo believe in the existence of those beings (deities). Some of these have their abode in the sky and are believed to be near to God, for example, such is Amadioha (the god of thunder). The deities are often conceived with reference to the service they render to man. God, who created them, assigned them specific functions, for instance, the sky and thunder gods. Deities are regarded as intermediaries between God and man. Prayers, sacrifices, and offerings made to them are taken to be ultimately made to God since their efficacy depends on the final blessings and sanctions of God.

Every community in Igbo land has deities and has different ways of worshiping them. So, to provide an enlightening background for this project, relevant and related works of other researchers, particularly from Igbo land, will be reviewed to give a detailed analysis and useful information for the study.

According to Forde and Jones (1950), there is a belief in a supreme spirit, Chukwu (great god/spirit), also called Chineke in the southern area of Nigeria. Chukwu (God) sends rain, controls fertility and creation, and is the source from which they derive their Chi or soul. They pointed out that there are no shrine or cult symbols for Chukwu, who rarely receives direct sacrifice, but is generally regarded as the ultimate recipient of offerings to lesser gods, who may be explicitly referred to as intermediaries. They talked on Ali (Ala "Land"), the

earth spirit, who is the most prominent deity and is regarded as the queen of the underworld and the owner of men, whether dead or alive.

Idowu (1973) is optimistic in his view of the future (prospects) of the traditional religion and deities. He argues that the attitudes of Africans to their religion in public life are still unfashionable, notwithstanding that most Africans “are at heart still attached to their own indigenous beliefs and worships”.

Agbede (2007) said that deity is anything (human, non-human, object, etc) that is held in high esteem within a particular society, while spirit is the disembodied soul of the dead person, animal, or inanimate object. In Enugu-Ezike, the idea of a supreme God is conceived. He is usually referred to as EzeChitoke (the king who creates). It is believed that God was the creator of all things, but he has withdrawn to that remoteness, which is part of his greatness. Like the mightiest of kings, he is rarely approached. As a result, the deities act as intermediaries between them and the superior God. The deities are god’s representatives on earth, and sacrifices and prayers are offered to God through them.

Arinze (1970) observes that “God is the supreme spirit, the creator of everything----- but this supreme spirit has made many inferior spirits who are nearer to man and through whom man normally offers his worship to Him”. As regards the spirits, it is believed that they are of many different types populating the Universe. These include nature spirits, ancestral spirits, and wicked spirits. The subordinates of the supreme deity are equally believed to be spirits.

Mbiti (1969) argues that “the spirits in general belong to the ontological mode of existence between God and man. Parrinder (1954) believes that two categories of spiritual beings are recognizable: those that were created as such, and those that were once human beings. Spirits, as Parrinder argues, are, in the main, the ancestors and the faces of nature: the powers behind the storm, rain, river, seas, lakes, wells, hills, rocks, etc. As regards the relationship between the deities and spirits, Parrinder notes that such a relationship is aptly represented by a triangle. At the apex is the sky, which symbolizes the supreme power from whom all life flows and to whom all return, while the base is the earth spirit, which sometimes is personified as a goddess.

Ugwu (1991) studied some aspects of Adoro deities. Hence, he argued that Adoreo deities in any other parts of Igbo land, and this is an intuitional force that cannot be brushed aside. He notes that it is a common belief among the people that the deities find and protect them from their detractors and seek vengeance for the oppressed. There are so many belief systems that are attached to these deities, e.g., reincarnation, funeral customs, masquerade, and ancestral cult, etc. Ekwunife (1990) states that the majority of these deities in Igbo land occupy a tangible position, and several of their functions are characteristic in nature. These deities may include Oyimoyi, Ani, Amodu, Onmba, Nwazigbo, Onamodo, Ngene ofia, etc. They serve affirmative duties that are to determine the truth in the case of argument or allegation; to give them protection in all ramifications as long as they keep to their rules, offer a child to the barren, cure their sicknesses, and solve many problems facing life. Also, ceremonies associated with these deities pull people outside the home back and foster solidarity and good relationships.

Also, according to Ekwunife, in his book *Consecration to Igbo traditional religion*, the study of these deities is influenced by the choice of the Europeans example, the work of early

missionaries, travelers, and traders was characterized by obnoxious ritual practices. They never understand the way it really works or are appreciated by people and worshippers.

Spirits

According to African traditional views, the universe is composed of visible elements. It is believed that between God and human beings, other beings equally exist, which populate the universe. These are called spirits.

Arinze (1970) contends that 'the Igbo have a strong belief in the existence of non-human spirits. There are spirits of rivers, hills, farms, and lightning. The four days of the Igbo week are also personified. Arinze goes ahead to classify spirits into eight kinds. They include water, Ani, Chi, Amadioha, Ifejioku, Ikenga, Ofo, Ancestors, Human soul, and spirit.

Mbiti (1975) classifies spirits into two: Nature spirits (Sky and earth spirits), and human spirits (long dead ghosts). Like Arinze, Mbiti believes that 'Nature spirits are largely personifications of natural objects and forces, while human spirits are those that were once ordinary men, women, and children'.

Parrinder (1974) stresses that "to us the idea of ancestral priority has no meaning but to these old African men and women in the black land villages, life from day to day has no meaning at all, apart from the ancestral presence and power". As a result, each kinsman has one person among them as the eldest man. He is considered to be nearer to their ancestors and, therefore, is the chief priest of the deified spirits of the ancestors owned by the kinsmen (Umunna).

Arinze (1970) observes, "most Igbo believe that each individual has a spirit, a genius or spiritual double, his Chi, which is given to him at conception by Chukwu and which accompanies this individual from cradle to the grave. In the Agulu community, anybody who practices Igbo traditional religion has his "Onuchi," where he gives his Chi food, wine, and kola nut.

Methodology

The research methodology adopted in this study is a qualitative descriptive research design. Consequently, the ethnographic method of observation and in-depth interviews was used to elicit information needed for the study. Field visits to the shrine of Odo and Iyiocha in Amaokpala, Anambra State, were carried out between December 2016 and June, 2017. During these visits, primary data were collected through oral tradition from the knowledgeable people in the community, in addition to the field observations. Such people interviewed include chief priests of the deities, chieftains or titled men, and some selected knowledgeable people or elders.

The authors also consulted and reviewed the literature considered to be of utmost importance to the current study.

Findings and Discussion

Tradition of Origin of Odo and Iyiocha Deities

Odo deity is said to be a female goddess, who never had her origin in Amaokpala town. But has the biggest space and occupies a large expanse of land in the community compared to the place it originated. The Odo deity is said to have its origin in Ogbu town, a town

relatively very close to Amaokpala town. The Odo deity is said to have crossed several towns and rivers to empty itself into the famous river Niger in Onitsha. Odo deity cut across towns like Ogbu, Aguluezechukwu, Nanka, Amaokpala, Ndiike, and Omor communities, all in Anambra state. Odo, the deity /river, always takes over territories it wishes through erosion and earthquakes, thereby destroying farmlands along its routes. It came to Amaokpala without any form of consultation or appeal for land. Rather, it came as a flood and erosion and took over the community farm lands, and from there flowed down to Ndiike town, where the same habit was also exhibited, but took little land space compared to Amaokpala. Initially, the Odo deity was occupying a small portion of farmland in Amaokpala town, but as the days turned to months and years, the deity settled more comfortably and increased her land use. Amaokpala town, being an accommodating people, accepted their faith and conveniently lived with these deities, but were still very careful about their presence in the community. Due to the continuous expansion of territory in Amaokpala, the elders sat and discussed the issue and a possible way of consulting the deity to resolve the issue of taking over all their farmlands. Mazi Ichie Ukamma Nwafor, a known and powerful traditionalist, was assigned to consult with the deity. Upon consultation with the deity in the middle of the night, when the whole community was asleep, Ichie Ukamma came back to inform the elders of what transpired between him and the goddess. First, the deity requested a male cow and other traditional items, which are unknown to the public. After all the requested items had been brought forward and given to Ichie Ukamma Nwafor for the appeasement of the goddess, he took the items to the deity in the middle of the night for appeasement and after due incantations and consultations. The deity promised never to expand beyond what she has occupied already, and will not destroy farmlands, and also not to drown any Amaokpala indigene.

The Odo deity also gave the community the privilege and opportunity to excavate white sands from the river as a kind of compensation for taking over their land. The cow, which was offered to the Odo deity, was seen hovering around the O deity's territory until after six days, when the cow was seen no more in the area. Worthy of note is that, among all the communities the Odo deity passed through, it is only Amaokpala that she offered white sand as a source of compensation. Other communities were not compensated even the source of the river in the Ogbu community was left with no compensation. According to my Informant, it is because of the love she has for the Amaokpala people for their hospitality and non-disturbance to her.



Plate 1- The point of linkage between the Odo River and Iyiocha lake/deities
(Source: field work, 2017)

Iyiocha, on the other hand, is said to be a male deity, and it covers a large part of the Umuikenta land. The origin has it that when the god of Iyiocha was looking for a convenient place to locate his homestead after being chased away by the people of Oko, a close neighbour to Amaokpala town, it was said that the Oko people chased it away from their land because the deity was drowning their people routinely, and they chased it away by pouring all forms of dirt into the lake. This prompted it to look for another location in which the Amaokpala community was favored, and legend has it that to date, anybody from Oko does not swim in the lake, else it swallows the individual or anybody who comes to the lake and shouts Oko will be captured by the deity and drowned. The deity came to Amaokpala in the form of a heavily bearded old man. He met different family units in Amaokpala, requesting locations which, on inspection, he rejected for not being suitable for his purpose. When he finally met Okafor Ikenta for the same purpose, Okafor directed him (i.e., the god of Iyiocha) to inspect a valley that lay within the land areas of Umuikenta, adjacent to 'Offia Ajagu' (evil forest). When he inspected the area, he found that it was suitable for him. He informed Okafor Ikenta that after two or three days, he (Okafor) would see what would happen there. In appreciation of the gift of land, the god of Iyiocha promised Okafor that he Iyiocha would ever be friendly and peaceful with him and his offspring, that none of his offspring who comes to him for any purpose would be harmed and that he (Okafor) and his offspring would act as an intermediary between him (i.e the god of Iyiocha) and those who might in any way have problem with him. This promise is the so-called 'covenant' between Iyiocha and Umuikenta.



Plate 2- Overview of Iyiocha lake/deity
(Source: Field work, 2017)

According to a popular belief, it was the observance of this covenant that made Umuikenta masters over matters relating to and concerning Iyiocha Lake. Umuikenta have up till date in Amaokpala the prerogative of diving into the lake and recovering the body of any person drowned in Iyiocha. No other person from any other kindred/ group in Amaokpala had done so, nor can do so without getting into trouble. This claim by the Umuikenta seems to have been authenticated by history. On January 13 1970, precisely, during the funeral ceremony of late Nkwoemezie Nwankwo of Umuikenta, a little granddaughter of the family who came to assist in the ceremony was reported drowned in Iyiocha lake when she went to fetch some water. When the news reached the Umuikenta, their grown-up swimmers and divers raced down to the lake to rescue the girl in a firm belief that no offspring of

Umuikenta had ever been known to have been drowned in the lake. After about one hour of intensive search at the bottom of the lake, the little girl was seen tucked into an obscure corner of the deep lake with her eyes wide open. When she was pulled out of the water, she was very much alive, and it was discovered that no single drop of water entered her stomach, and she was not harmed in any way. The girl in question is still very much alive and even happily married with children. Many people were known to have drowned in Iyiocha Lake, but those whose names could easily be remembered include: Ojiako from Amakor, Ofoegbu Nwankwo from Umudim, a boy from Ndiowu who was a student of the Federal Polytechnic, Oko, and recently one of the sons of Cyril Egwuonwu of Amaokwe in Amaokpala. The bodies of these people were recovered from the lake by members of the Umuikenta family only, in accordance with the terms of the covenant existing between them and Iyiocha god. The Umuikenta also claim that there are other aspects of the covenant that they cannot disclose to the public.

The Significance of the Odo deity and its Relationship with the people of Amaokpala

The position of these deities is very significant in the life of the Amaokpala people. These deities in the olden days played different roles, such as the spirit of fertility. It is on record that it has offered fruit of the womb to several women and families in the past. One of the women is by name Nne Unegbu Nwafor, the wife of Ichie Unegbu Nwafor from Amawa village. It has also aided the people during farming seasons by offering them bumper and good harvests. According to my informant, the Odo deity serves as a link between the living and the dead. The people of Amaokpala always avoid direct contact with the spirit of the Odo deity to safeguard themselves against imminent doom. Rather, for any consultation to be made, it has to be through the head of traditional society in Amaokpala, Ichie Aguigwo Onwurah from Amaokwe village. If there is a contact with any such with the deity without proper consultation, the after effect will be in the form of sickness, especially stroke or death. According to my informant, it is said that the spirit of the Odo deity does call people's names at night. This calling of names has both positive and negative sides to it. The positive is blessings or that new things is about to happen to the family through Odo deity, while on the negative side is when the individual has violated the rule of the deity and the call can mean strong illness or instant death.



Plate 3- Part of the Odo river/deity were sacrifices are made
(Source: field work, 2017)

The Odo deity is very important to the Amaokpala people, not just for the economic gain (white sand) but also for other spiritual matters. Those closely associated with the Odo deity honor it first before humans. For example, when a kolanut is presented for breakage, thanks and prayer will be said first in honor of the deity, and then the seed will be thrown out to the Odo deity in the form of appreciation. Due to the influence and spiritual powers of the Odo deity, the people see it as their lord. Some individuals who still appreciate its efficacy still consult the deity before embarking on any meaningful project, for instance, in farming periods, business ventures, marriage, and burial arrangements. When those who still believe in its powers are faced with huge problems such as epidemics, drought, famine, etc., they approach the Odo deity for a possible solution and remedy.



Plate 4- The boundary of the Odo River/deity with Ndiok Town
(Source: field work, 2017)

The relationship of Odo deity with the people of the Amaokpala community is very smooth, cordial to date, because everyone in the community knows her powers and rules, including the Christians. So, in view of that, everyone respects her presence in the town. And those excavating white sands for building constructions and other things from the river, do pay homage to the deity through Ichie Aguigwo Onwurah, the traditional society head of the community.

Significance of Iyiocha Deity and its Relationship with the people of Amaokpala

The significance of the Iyiocha deity is beyond its economic value, which is fishing from the lake and a source of water. The Amaokpala people are said to be closer to the Iyiocha deity than to the Odo deity. According to Mr Shedrack Okeke, the son of the late priest of Iyiocha deity Chief Boniface Okeke, the deity has provided the Amaokpala people with wealth and riches after due sacrifices and pleas are made to the deity. In the early period of the 1990s, the Amaokpala people, especially those living around the lake, made good harvests after the farming seasons because they cultivated in close confinement of the deity. And those not living close to the lake, do go to offer some sacrifices with a white fowl to the Iyiocha deity for good harvest, and fetch water from the lake to sprinkle around their farms for good yields and harvest. It is believed that when this water from the lake is sprinkled on the farm, it also protects the farm products from any form of attack from humans and animals.



Plate 5- The entrance of Iyiocha deity/lake
(Source: field work, 2017)

According to one of the informants, the Iyiocha deity does visit some families in the form of a human being, and on his visit, he always comes with good news and good fortunes, which include fertility, prosperity, and many more. But his visits to families are selective and are dependent on those who often honor and sacrifice for it, and these visits are normally to the elderly ones in the family, especially when they are alone at home. The relationship between Iyiocha and the people of Amaokpala is so cordial, that the people of Amaokpala swim in the lake without fear of drowning or attack from the deity having mastered the rules of the deity and any Amaokpala indigene who come with open and pure heart to ask for a favor from the deity coupled with the sacrifices, the deity answers and replies them as fast as the individual wishes. The deity (Iyiocha) does not attack, except for a serious intrusion or swimming through the lake over to the other part of the land.

Ritual Practices and Mode of Consultation for the Odo deity

The Odo deity is so effective that people who wish and want to consult with the deity take a minister of the deity for proper intervention. The ritual aspect of the Odo deity deals with the continuous renewal of the sacred nature of the deity by those who honor the deity. Practices and rituals associated with the Odo deity are manifested only through the rites which express them, and those involve doing these rites repeatedly, so that their faith is reinforced. This ritual practice is seen through the celebration of the feast in honor of the Odo deity (Iyi Odo). Rituals in honour of Odo, the deity/river, include the killing of a fowl and sprinkling of the blood around the entrance of the Odo river, wearing of special clothing, pouring libations, chanting prayers, praise singing, sacrifices of animals, and the answering of prayers by the deity (Odo) when the sacrifices and rituals are done. For the worshipers in Amaokpala, the ritual is not secular but sacred. Without constant sacrifices and worship, the Odo deity would have been a long-forgotten issue.

To consult the Odo deity, a kola nut is offered by the priest; he places his Ofo stick on the ground and makes four marks on the ground with a white chalk (Nzu) with his legs spread out. He makes incantations, and the caller would state his mission. In consultation with the Odo deity, people come from different places to pay a visit. Some for land disputes, personal problems, or other related complaints for a solution from the deity. Covenants (Igbandu) also take place in the confines of the Odo deity. During the Igbandu rites, the priest leads the persons to the deity. The caller will bring palm wine, a fowl, and

kola nuts. A charm prepared by the priest will be brought forward, and the caller will say all they wish. The charm will be tied together with a palm leaf (Omu Nkwu) and thrown into the moving river of Odo. Dues are paid to the priest in the form of naira notes, depending on what was agreed initially with the caller, and after the ritual and consultation have been concluded, anybody who goes against the oath faces instant death. Sacrifices to Odo, the deity, include fowls, cattle, and kola nuts. Any bull offered to the deity has its ear cut off and thrown into the moving river. Once that is done, only the initiated traditionalist in Amaokwe village is allowed to partake in cooking and eating the remaining parts of the bull. On the issue of swearing and land dispute, the exercise begins with the offering of two fowls to the deity. On the actual day of swearing, the priest makes certain incantations. Both the accuser and the accused would then swear, after which any harm that befalls any of the parties would be attributed to the activities of the goddess (Odo deity). Odo's client comes from all the neighbouring towns that the Odo river passes through, because it is believed that the Odo deity has stronger/ powers and affluence in Amaokpala town.

Ritual Practices and Mode of Consultation in the Iyiocha deity

Ritual practices in the Iyiocha deity do not involve rigorous practices like those of the Odo deity. The mode of the ritual practices done in Iyiocha lake confinement is usually individualistic, except for arguments or allegations. For example, if someone is suspected of a certain offence, he could absolve himself through an oath to the deity by saying openly to the deities confirming his or her innocence in the presence of other parties involved in the matter. Normally, the suspect will be given a limited time in which he or she lives by the Iyiocha deity, but if the person is innocent of the accusations levied upon him or her, the person is free entirely from any consequence. The consultation with the Iyiocha deity does not involve going through any traditionalists or priests for incantations or divinations. Rather, individuals go directly to the deity without fear but with an open and pure heart to consult with the deity. Items of sacrifice to the deity are dropped at the left side of the entrance of the lake. According to my informant, Mr Shedrack Okeke, Iyiocha deity deals directly with the people of Amaokpala because the deity has an open heart and is not tough like his neighbour deity, Odo. The only event that warrants the services of a priest in consulting the deity is during the Awa Iyiocha ceremony. A ceremony dedicated to the deity. That is the only ritual practice that requires a priest or a traditionalist to perform some incantations.

Ceremony Associated with Odo Deity

Iyi Odo is the ceremony celebrated in honor of the Odo deity, and it is normally celebrated in the month of November. This ceremony is celebrated and headed by Ichie Aguigwo Onwurah, the traditional head of the traditional society in Amaokpala town. According to Ichie Onwurah, the calculation of the calendar circle is done by the traditional college of elders and the spiritual office holders of Amaokwe village, as the head village of Amaokpala town, as soon as the Odo moon is sighted each year, according to my informant. The moon is declared the Odo deity day, and that is said to be the first day of the Amaokpala new year by the traditionalists in the town. After that, the traditional head (Ichie Aguigwo Onwurah) will enter his house and be there for three days without anybody sighting him. Within those three days, he is to slaughter a one-year-old goat and eat the goat meat alone, and the remaining part of the meat is buried at the boundary where the Odo River flows to another community, Ndiike. The period is devoted to

prayers to the Odo deity on behalf of the traditionalist and the entire community. During the burial of the remaining goat meat, other traditionalists and elderly, titled men interested in the event may join in the incantations at the boundary of the two communities. Within this period of the ceremony to Odo deity, no burial rites are performed in the town until after the ceremony, which is on the third day, called 'Oso obu-odo'.



Plate 6- The chief priest of Ajani and head of traditional society
(Source: field work, 2017)

After these sacrifices at the boundary of the Odo river, the chief priest moves to the village square, and he normally ties an immaculate white cloth around his waist, with his staff of office and a horn trumpet in his left hand. And if by accident the white robe unties and falls from his waist to the floor, the implication spells doom and disaster in the community, so the priest is always careful with the white robe on his waist. Throughout the duration of this festival, those interested exchange gifts with each other, ranging from food items to other choices of gifts. Masquerades in Amaokwe village that have been consecrated and devoted to the Odo deity will be parading the whole community, entertaining everyone.

Worthy of note is that this Iyi Odo is not for everybody and does not affect anybody who is not interested or associated with the deity. People go about their normal routine activities without any hindrance from the Odo deity.

Ceremonies associated with and in honor of the Iyiocha deity.

Though this ceremony is gradually dying down, the ceremony/festival is held sometime in July or August of every year. The exact date of the feast is fixed a month before the proper ceremony for adequate preparations. On the main festivity date, a cow is provided by the Umuikenta village, that is the village in Amaokpala that harbored the deity, and the priest Chief Boniface Okeke (late) will make the sacrifices to the Iyiocha deity. Any cow offered to the deity has its ear cut off to signify Iyiocha's ownership. A gong is played or beaten two days before and after the feast. The date of the feast is fixed by the Umuikenta village. The ceremony is called Awa Iyiocha. Another ceremony in honor of the Iyiocha deity is called Isi-ite. This involves throwing a white fowl into the lake; this may involve a group of people or individuals. At a time based on information, people who are not indigenes of Amaokpala who come to the lake started stealing the sacrifices made to the

Iyiocha deity. This angered the deity, and he started swallowing and drowning people randomly.

The Myth behind the Disappearance and Re-appearance of Iyiocha Deity

It was said and believed by the people of Amaokpala that on August 6, 2006, during the community's yam festival that Iyiocha deity left his base in Amaokpala town. According to my informant, on the day the deity was leaving, he was making a loud noise in the middle of the night. The noise emanating from the lake was so loud that it attracted the attention of all the neighbouring towns. The people were afraid that the Iyiocha deity was coming out of his base to attack the good people of Amaokpala. After some hours, the loud noise stopped, and the weather calmed its nerves. Early next morning, villagers rushed to the lake to find out what had happened at the lake. To their greatest surprise, the very long lake has disappeared, leaving a small portion of water in the middle, abandoned in the lake, and all sizes of fish on the floor of the lake without water. The people of Amaokpala were in deep shock over such an incident and wanted to know the real course of what they saw and witnessed. So a congregation of traditionalists in the town led by the late chief priest of the Ajani god, Ichie Utukpo Ezeugo, was called upon to unravel the mystery of the sudden event. After several incantations and sacrifices, the reason was revealed, and it states that the Iyiocha deity left for Umugwo in a faraway land and will return after the Umugwo. The people of Amaokpala waited patiently for the return of their loved Iyiocha deity until after 14 days. The day he returned, he came back with another strange loud noise, and the next morning, the people went to the base of the deity to witness the return and the full presence of the Iyiocha deity, the way it used to be before it left.

Before his return, another neighbouring deity from Nanka town, by name Attama Nanka, came and settled at Iyiocha's base. Upon Attama deity's stay at Iyiocha's spot, he swallowed and drowned two Umuikenta indigenes in Amaokpala, which is unlikely for Iyiocha deity and against the ancient covenant between Iyiocha deity and Umuikenta village. According to my informant, Chief Udegbunam Festus Odo, the Iyiocha deity was not happy about this on his return. Iyiocha deity retaliated by blocking the channel that connects both lakes together with very strong mud sands. Attama deity from Nanka had no choice but to look for another channel towards Mmiri Ntoko in Agulu town.

The relationship between Odo and Iyiocha deities

The relationship between the two deities (Odo and Iyiocha) is said to be one of war and battle for supremacy. According to Ichie Aguogwo Onwurah, the two deities have been fighting each other for a very long time. Odo deity wants to finish Iyiocha deity and close it down in order to capture all the spaces in Iyiocha's possession. The Odo deity will move a large chunk of sand to the channel where Iyiocha flows to join other water flowing through the Odo river, thereby forcing Iyiocha lake to climb up the mountain more and more to settle, i.e., the lake continued to increase towards the mountain instead of flowing out. The overwhelming increase and encroachment of the Iyiocha deity/lake was so scary to the Amaopkpala people, so they went for a solution to solve the impending danger and problem. Ichie Aguigwo Onwurah was called upon to unravel the emanating problem. He went to three different points between Odo and Iyiocha deities to do some incantations in order to understand what the real cause might be, but he returned with no good answers to the problem. After much deliberation and consultation, a powerful traditionalist was invited from Obodo aha by name Ezio Anofuchi to ascertain the cause of the problem. The traditionalist (Dibia) went for consultations and came back with answers and possible

solutions to the problem. He said that Odo deity has been disturbing Iyiocha deity to bring (drown) somebody for them, but Iyiocha refused and insisted on not doing such evil bidding with Odo deity, on the belief that the Amaokpala people have not done anything bad to him, and for that reason, he will not take anybody's life. The Odo deity has been too powerful, is trying to force the Iyiocha deity out of Amaokpala town because of Iyiocha's refusal, by trying to force him (Iyiocha deity/lake) up to the mountain, and when Odo succeeds with that attempt, Odo deity will have the chance to move straight to the source of Iyiocha lake to stop the flowing of water down to the lake. Rituals and sacrifices commenced, and items such as Nkwenu (up wine), roasted yam, etc were brought forward and given to them by the traditionalist Ezi Anofuchi from Obodo Aha.

After all this had been done and the rift had settled between the two deities, Odo deity agreed to leave Iyiocha deity in peace. Worthy of note is that during this period of rift between these two deities, Iyiocha was able to find a very small channel through which it flows out. But along the channel, there is a strong demarcation between the two deities that Iyiocha lake does not mix up with Odo river when on transit, rather it flows on its own small portion and empties itself into Otaru river in Ndi.

Taboo associated with these Deities

Odo deity

Those excavating white sands from the river do not excavate from the sides of the river. It is believed that the sides of the river are so sacred, and all sacrifices to the deity normally take place on the side of the Odo River.

No stranger, i.e non Amaokpala indigene, excavates white sands from the river, because it was part of the covenant between the deity and the people of Amaokpala.

No direct consultations or sacrifices to the deity; it should go through a priest or a traditionalist. Nobody puts or pours any dirty materials or substances into the river, because it desacralizes the deity and its powers and potency. Washing clothes and the processing of breadfruit (Ukwa) in the Odo River is prohibited. Women do not get involved in the process of excavating sand from the river or anything that has to do with the deity.

No sacrifices or rituals are made at the point where Iyiocha and Odo deities meet or join each other. No one fetches water from the Odo River for any reason.



Plate 7- The section where sand can be excavated from Odo river.
(Source: field work, 2017)

Any woman in her menstrual cycle or period should not come closer to Iyiocha Lake, or else the consequences will be very grievous. Anyone who wants to process breadfruit (Ukwa) should not do it at the extreme of the lake; it can be done at the sides of the lake or at the end of the lake. No sacrifices of killed animals are made to the deity; all sacrifices should be alive and dropped at the entrance of the lake. Depositing of dead bodies or murdered persons inside the lake is highly prohibited. No pouring of dirt or unwanted toxic materials into the lake. Nobody leaves or abandons ashes from firewood close to the lake. Nobody swims in Odo Lake by 12 noon every day. Based on popular believe it was said that at that time the lake always went out for market. Normally, when it goes out for market, the middle of the lake will turn around to signal danger and a warning to intending swimmers not to do so. On any Eke market day, people have no business to go near Iyiocha lake. Based on information, it is believed that every Eke market day, the deity has a meeting with his fellow spirits, and for that, no disturbance is allowed.



Plate 8- 12 noon when nobody swims at Iyiocha deity/lake
(Source: field work, 2017)

Influence/Impact of Christianity on the Deities

There were early signs of conflicts between Christianity and traditional religion when the former was introduced into Igboland to co-exist with the latter. Achebe (1958) in his book “Things Fall Apart” described the fundamental factors of conflict between the traditionalists and the Christians. In his opinion, overzealousness, which is known in religious parlance as fanaticism, was at the base of such early signs of conflicts. He argues that there were fanatics on both sides who, through their activities, brought the two faiths into serious conflicts. Furthermore, he observes that both sides have contemptible attitudes toward each other. He captures the attitude of the early missionaries thus:” But on one occasion, the missionaries had tried to overstep the bounds. Three converts had gone into the village and boasted openly that all the gods were dead and impotent and that they were prepared to defy them by burning all their shrines (p.124). Achebe remarks that the two sides eventually clashed when one of the converts unmasked an ‘*egwugwu*’. The traditionalists reacted by reducing the young church to rubble. He demonstrates that Christianity was resisted at its earliest stage of introduction in Igboland. The scenario continues in another of Achebe’s works, “Arrow of God” (Achebe, 1964), which observes that Christianity, through its teachings, has condemned everything in traditional beliefs as superstitious and encouraged its members to regard them as such. Oduche, a son of the priest of *Ulu*, was the first to take a bold step in this direction by capturing and imprisoning the sacred python in his school box. This action widened the rift between *Eze ulu* and *Eze idemili*, whose deity is the custodian of the sacred python. Hence, it is the

opinion of Achebe that Christianity brought internal conflict within the traditional religion and deities to survive. The conflict between Christians and adherents of traditional religion in Amaokpala orumba north local government area of Anambra state is one of the recent clashes between traditionalists and Christians. The Christians, tired of the demands of 'Odo' deity and inhuman practices connected with it, invaded the shrine of 'Odo' and unveiled the secrets of the deity through prayers and crusades concerning rendering it impotent. Menankiti Onyekwelu (2002), an indigene of Amaokpala, chronicled the activities of the deity that led the Christians to invade its shrine, including the continuous drowning of people and taking over farm lands in the case of the Odo deity. Deities constituted the greatest challenge to the missionaries in their efforts to evangelize the Igbo land. On account of this, the destruction of deities was one of the objectives of Christianity at its early stage of introduction.

The expected death of deities in particular and traditional values as a result of the influence of Christianity never took place. Rather, what was experienced was a 'mutual' co-existence and interaction between the two systems. In this vein, Onunwa (1990) observed thus: "The traditional religious heritage has shown remarkable versatility in its history and development; for despite the onslaught of several external change-agents as well as internal factors, it has survived up to the present time and is assuming new forms (p.136). Christianity had a proselytizing influence on the adherents of the traditional religion, and this has been considered its major achievement in Igboland. Before its introduction, the entire Igboland professed belief in the traditional religion and deities. There is no doubt that Christianity converted many from the worship of deities, and today, only very few are bold enough to declare publicly that they are adherents of traditional religion. Not minding their limited number, the population of those who adhere to the traditional religion continues to decline daily as Christianity takes its toll on their membership. The effect of this has led to some deities becoming extinct, with only the very powerful ones left with few votaries. In its drive to liberate the people from the shackles of the deities, Christianity has often adopted a confrontational approach. The Christians, in their overzealousness, overstep their bounds to physically assault and demolish the shrines of deities. According to Ekechi (1972), "The converts in turn become quite fanatical and throw caution to the wind. Induced no doubt by their teachers, the Christians began to cut down the trees in the various groves and the religious shrines as a test of their earnestness in religious commitment (p.36)."

The implication of such attacks on the deities is far-reaching; firstly, it widens the gap between the Christians and the adherents of traditional religion and worship in their already soured relationship. Secondly, the burnt objects are costly materials and take a lot of money to replace, which the adherents, who are poor village people, cannot afford. The priest of Odo and head of traditionalists in Amaokpala informed me that it took the intervention of the late traditional ruler of Amaokpala, Udodimma 11, to quash the plans of Christian fanatics to chase Odo and Iyiocha deities out of their lands. Hence, physical attack on deities leads to economic waste as votaries are bent on reconstituting them after they have been destroyed. From the foregoing, it is obvious that Christianity has had a great deal of impact on the deities, starting from liberating people from their worship, to sacking some and taking the position of deities in practical issues of life involving deities.

Influence/ Effect of Modernity and Urbanization

According to Ilogu (1974), education was one of the most effective tools used in Europeanizing the Igbo society and the abolition of traditional worship and the relevance

of deities in the society. Established alongside churches, schools were used as a bait to parents who had to release their children to learn the ways of the Whiteman (Achebe, 1958). Christianity was firmly resisted in Igbo land, but education was used to break such resistance. No child was allowed to enroll in the school without becoming a member of the church (Kalu, 2003). Not long before, this strategy began to produce its desired effects. The missionaries maximized this prospect to their own advantage. Through indoctrination, they were taught not only to see everything African as fetish, superstitious, and evil, but also to openly challenge it. Hence, the attitude of the early educated Igbo to the traditional way of life was first condemnation, followed by rejection. They refused to partake of food sacrificed to idols and to participate in farm work on Sundays. They equally refused to participate in the traditional festivals. It became fashionable to abstain from the traditional way of life as a mark of civilization. The deities of Igboland were constituted within the traditional cultural milieu, which recognized communal interests over and against individual considerations. The preservation of the community was uppermost in their scale of preference. The worship of deities was communally organized, and it was the responsibility of the entire community to take care of the shrines of the deities just as deities served their interests. Deities were the only sources of knowledge for the understanding and interpretation of some occurrences.

The scenario has changed considerably today. Some of these services offered by deities have been taken over by Science and Technology through empirical research. Science does not stop at explanation; it also provides solutions to the multifarious problems confronting man in the universe. For instance, it has provided a solution to the poor yield of crops through the application of fertilizers, which, in the past, people consulted with the deities to get results and a good harvest. A deity (*Iyiocha*) was relied upon for bumper harvests in the past. The feast of *Iyiocha*, which celebrated the benevolence of the god of agriculture, is no longer observed. Related to this is the service which meteorological agencies render in explaining the vagaries of weather.

Farmers, instead of patronizing rain makers or sacrificing to any deity for rain, now rely on weather reports. In the same vein, outbreaks of natural disasters were attributed to the manifestations of angry gods in the traditional society. But today, with modern scientific equipment, these phenomena have been explained. It is not only that these natural disasters can be explained, but they can be predicted and forestalled before they occur, or adequate arrangement made to evacuate people living in the area where they cannot be checked. Healing is another function that science has also taken over from deities. Consequently, the effect of urbanization cuts across all the communities and affects the traditional ways of life. Ilogu (1994:68) captures the scenario thus: "traditional patterns of social control through customs, prohibitions and the use of religious systems of oath and authority of ancestors... do not operate in urban areas." Hence, urbanization has provided opportunities for people to break the neat patterns of traditional life. The first noticeable effect is on the traditional extended family system, where ancestors exercised their authority through the *okpara* (literally, the first son of the family), many of whom now reside outside their ancestral land and occasionally visit home and areas to the cities, and this has taken its toll on the neat pattern and organized life of the traditional society to which the people were used to. The rural-urban drift has concentrated people from different localities into urban or semi-urban areas. Amaokpala town has, since the establishment of the Federal Polytechnic Oko, a close neighbour to Amaokpala, grown into an urban settlement.

The drift from rural to urban areas has drastically reduced the number of able-bodied young men in the villages has drastically reduced. This has affected the communal labour, which usually takes place during the festival in honour of the ancestors and some of these deities. Village paths and streets, which were cleared, are now overgrown with bushes for lack of capable hands. Urbanization has left only old and weak men at home.

Conclusion

Deities who were originally consecrated as gods of war and guardians of morality now assume additional roles. The scope and objective of the work are located in chapter four, which deals with the significance of deities in practical Amaokpala life. It revealed that deities that governed virtually all aspects of life in the primal Igbo society are still relevant in some aspects of life today. The entire work is designed to deepen awareness of the need for serious reflections on the topic against the backdrop of the popular opinion that deities in Igboland, specifically Amaokpala town, have become impotent in the encounter with change agents.

From the foregoing, it must be seen that Africans are very dedicated to their traditional religion, the worship of idols and deities. It has also been shown that their implicit belief in them is judged from the cases of Odo and Iyiocha deities as part of their indigenous idols based on the time they came to stay in the community.

At the very beginning, the set objectives of the research were clearly delineated. The work is an inquiry into the concept and significance, and possibly reasons for the continued survival of deities in a society that embraced Christianity and civilization more than one and a half centuries ago. In the face of concrete human problems, because there was no established relationship with the traditional system, the people either abandoned the faith completely or saw themselves serving two masters at the same time. A dichotomy between the faith professed and the life lived ensued. Things stood, as they should be, with the African man and his religion until the coming of the European missionaries with their foreign religion. Thus, what we see today is a shadow of what was obtainable in the past. The search has stopped at the shrines of deities where solutions to life's problems are guaranteed, and people have turned their attentions to the church and other scientific methods. Therefore, it can be concluded that deities will continue to be relevant in society as long as they meet the felt needs of the people who still approach them for possible solutions.

References

- Achebe, C. (1958). *Things Fall Apart*. Essex: Pearson Education Ltd (2008 Edition).
- Achebe, C. (1964). *Arrow of God*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Agbedo, G (2007). *Igbo issue: Values, Chi, Akalaka, Ikenga, Magic and manipulation of deities*. Onitsha: Mid-field
- Aquinas, B (1911). *Enquiries into African Religion and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann
- Arinze, F. N. (1970). *Sacrifices in Igbo Religion*. Ibadan: Ibadan London Press.
- Bouquet, N.S. (1973). *God and the Gods in West Africa*. African Religious New York: Nok
- Chenoweth, T. N. O. (1996). *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: African Universities Press.
- Chest Chad (1967). *The people of southern Nigeria*. London: Frank Cass
- Durkheim, E. (1893). *History and theory in Sociology*. Cambridge: CUP

-
- Durkheim, E. (1965). *The Elementary forms of Religious life*. London: George Allens Unwin
- Echiegbu, P. C. (1993). *Nature of Religions*. London: Hodder and Stoughton
- Ekechi, F. K. (1972). *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igbo-land 1857 -1914*. London: Frank Cass.
- Ekwunife, A.N.O (1990). *Consecration in Igbo traditional Religion*. Enugu: Sharp press
- Forde, M and Jones, B. (1950). *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Onobonoje press
- Herbert Spencer (1898). *Theories of society: Foundations of modern sociological theory*. Free Press, New York.
- Huitton, W. (2001). *Humanism and Open Education*. Educational psychology interactive. Valdosta, G.A: Valdosta State University
- Ifesieh, H.E.I (1989). *Religion at the grass roots (studies on Igbo Religion)*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension.
- Ifesieh, H.E.I.(1976). *African Traditional Religion. A definition*, London: SCM Press
- Illogu, E. (1972). *The Ibo People and The Europeans*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Iwuagwu, A. O. (1998). *African Traditional Religion: A Student Handbook*.
- Iyidiobi, E. (1998). *African cultural systems. A definition*, London: SCM Press
- Kalu, O. U. (2003). *The Embattled Gods. Christianization of Igboland, 1841-1991*. Lagos: Minaj.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African Religious and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann
- Mbiti, J. S. (1970). *Deities and African Traditional Religion*, (3rd ed). London: Shadon Press.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1975). *The meanings of Religious conversion in Africa: The case of Igbo, Nigeria*. Aldershot: Averbury.
- Metuh, E. I. (1981). *God and Man in African Religion*. London: Cassell Ltd
- Nwaezeigwe, N. (2007). *Ontology in Igbo culture*. Convocation lecture, Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu. Enugu: Snap press
- Okwueze, M. I. (2003). *Ethics, Religion and society: Biblical, Traditional and contemporary perspectives*. Nsukka Press.
- Onunwa, J. (1990). *Comparative Religion: Christianity and Other World Religions in Dialogue*. Ikeja: Joja Press.
- Onwuanibe, I. O. (1995). *A history and culture of the Igbo people*. London: Macmillan.
- Parrinder F. G. (1965) *African Traditional Religion*, London: Sheldon Press.
- Parrinder, E. G. (1954). *African Traditional Religion*. London: Sheldon Press.
- Roger, S.C., and Fredrick, H. P. (1994). *Freedom to learn* (3rd ed). New York: Macmillan.
- Tylor, E. (1958). *Making a Church that is truly African, its meaning and importance*. Kampala: St Paul.