

Shrine as the Tribunal of Justice in Igboland

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Abstract

The basic idea in this paper is that the shrine is very significant and a special institution in the life of traditional Igbo society. The paper is aimed at solving the problem of the misgiving of the place of the shrine in contemporary Igboland and Nigeria in general. This misgiving has been propagated by external influence such that the Igbo now see the shrine as being irrelevant in contemporary times. This work seeks to debunk this kind of misunderstanding and misinformation about the place of the shrine in Igboland. To correct this problem, this paper argues that the shrine is indispensable in contemporary Igbo society just as it was in traditional Igbo society. It alludes to the significance of the shrine as an agent of justice in traditional Igbo society to substantiate its claims.

Key words: Shrine in Igboland, Traditional Religion, Shrine as a tribunal of justice

INTRODUCTION

The practice of Igbo Traditional Religion is intrinsically linked to the existence of shrine. This does not imply that without shrine there can be no Traditional Religion. The reverse is the case, in that shrine becomes relevant because there is the practice of African Traditional Religion. African Traditional Religion is that religious belief and practices that gives the shrine its meaning and significance. Thus, the shrine occupies a significant place in African Traditional Religion. This is because shrine is a place where humans communion with the divine or deities. It also plays the role of giving humans in the traditional Igbo society a sense of security.

This paper becomes relevant because it seeks to explain the role of shrine as a place of security. It takes it into another realm as it sees shrine as an agency of providing social justice which is lacking in today's society. The work will make allusion to the how shrine has wade off injustice and bring

justice in traditional Igbo society. This paper will begin by look at the meaning of shrine.

SHRINE: ITS MEANING, NATURE AND PURPOSE

The word shrine rings a lot of meanings to the minds of different persons. For some, it has negative connotation. That is to say, it is a place for evil and fetish activities or a place for the practice of witchcraft or wizardry in order to harm other humans. Also, for others, shrine denotes a positive place. In this context, it is first and foremost regarded in Africa as a sacred place. It is "a place set aside for religious purposes and, therefore, held sacred" (Ezekwugo 48). It is a "place of communal religious gathering" (Ezekwugo 48). This is to say that a shrine is a place of worship. This is in line with the thought of Magnus Aniago, who avers that "the presence of God, gods, goddesses, spirits and the need to always consult with them, offer sacrifices, appease them etc. necessitated the need for permanent places to perform these functions. This was the

foundation of the shrines”(2183). It is a place where Africans congregate to worship the divine (the Supreme Being – Chukwu) and to associate with other minor divinities (intermediaries). Hence, shrines can be said to be a sacred place where Chukwu is worshipped directly or indirectly through intermediaries that are believed to be closer to Chukwu. The reason why Chukwu is believed to be worshiped indirectly through the lesser deity is because of the belief that Chukwu has no shrine (Metuh, *African Religions* 47) or worship place dedicated to the Supreme God. Although in most cases, Chukwu is communed with through intermediaries, it is good to note that there are times when Chukwu is communed with directly. Hence, there are shrines dedicated solely to Chukwu for this purpose. Emeffie Ikenga-Metuh makes this point clear as he notes that “the Igbo of Nigeria have alters, shrines and direct sacrifices to God, even though some earlier writers on the Igbo had denied this” (*Comparative Studies* 137). C. C. Okereke and C. Iloanya give an elaborate discourse on this as they opine that

Some scholars have argued that in ATR, there are no shrines, alters or temples and feast days specifically dedicated to God which has led casual observers to believe that God is not worshipped in Africa. But this work begs to disagree with people with such views. In ATR there are places where there are altars of God or shrines which is mound like. It is called Mkpui Chukwu i.e. mound of God. In some other African nations such as: Ghana among the Ashantis, Akan, Mali, etc. there exist an altar of God... In Africa such altars and shrines that are dedicated to the Supreme Deity are mostly seen in palaces. (32)

These shrines of Chukwu are usually the “village communal shrines called *Onu Chukwu* (place of God, literary mouth of God)” (Metuh, *African Religions* 51). Closely related to this is the assertion of John Mbiti which reads: “the Yoruba people regard shrines as the ‘face’ of the divinity concerned” (*African Religions* 73). For short, this shrine can be called the village shrine (Achebe 72). There are cases where Chukwu is communed with directly through any shrine dedicated to any of the lower deities. It is a place where the Supreme Being is communicated with freely by human being.

It is in line with the above thought that A. B. Jacob notes that shrine is a fixed place, specific and appropriate place of worship. He also gives some characteristics of this place with the following words:

[There] may be worship wherever there is a sense of life and power and mystery, where a rearing spring gushes forth from rock, where the mountain-peaks soar into the clouds, where a mysterious cave emerges from the ground, where a thick forest creates silence and awe. In such places, people feel the presence of divine power or numinous. (141-142)

Based on the above assertion, a shrine serves as a place of worship and is characterized by awe, mystery and tremendous presence of the divine, with whom humans commune with. It is due to the presence of the divine that shrine is seen as a sacred place that has nothing profane within it. Thus, without the presence of the divine that creates the sense of awe, it is nothing other than a profane place and will be unworthy for worship. But in as much as the divine is present the place is not only transformed from profane to

sacred, the human worshipper is also part of that honour since the person is transformed into the sacred mode of being. This is what Joseph Ekarika and Rosemary Edet have in mind when they asserted that,

a place is sacred because it is the dwelling of the divine. The sacred places have great significance because there are objects of divine power and are endowed by a god or closely connected with a god, or the divine. More especially it is in sacred places that the divine manifest itself and enters into communion and communication with man and the world. By opening communication between the divine and man it becomes possible for man to pass from one mode of being (profane) to another (that of the sacred). This break with the profane also creates a centre by means of which communication with divine is established. Thus the sacred place becomes for the religious man the centre of the world. (47)

Worthy of note is the question of the location of shrine(s). It is good to state here that shrines could be located anywhere, but it is usually located at the centre of, or beside, a market square. There are also some shrines that are located at the heart of some forests. It can be sited within a cave or at the corner of a tree. There are those found “at road junctions, at the entrance to the towns or village, by the riverside..., or on a hill” (Awolalu 115). These are shrines that are exposed and not shielded from rain and sun. There are also shrines that are protected from rain and sun. It is these shrines that Awolalu describes as follows:

Shrines ... are architecturally simple. They are sometimes accommodated in one of the rooms in a house, or situated in a screened-off portion of the rooms in a house, or situated in a screened-off portion of the sitting room, or in a corridor. In some cases separate houses or hut are erected. They are usually simple, rectangular thatch roof buildings with mud walls. They have open courtyards where spectators and supplicants can stay; there is also a portion for drummers and singers. But the room containing the symbol of worship is usually cut off from the public eye, and it is so small that it is the officiating priest alone who can conveniently go in... In some cases, the pillars supporting the shrine have some carvings and decorations, and the walls have drawings which, to an outsider, often look crude and meaningless. (114-115)

There are also some families' shrines that are situated within the family compound which are used only by members of the family. The family shrine is different from the community shrine that is usually situated in public places where all (members of the community) can gain access to when they need one thing or the other or when in trouble. Ikenga-Metuh gives a picture of how these shrines, that is, communal and family (home) shrines are administered with respect to the Supreme Being as he writes that “Chukwu has no special priests dedicated to his exclusive service or attached to his shrine. At the home shrines, the paterfamilias presides. At the sacrifices at the communal shrines, the eldest member of the community ‘Ikenye’ presides” (*Comparative Studies* 138). The implication

of this is that the way a shrine is administered or consulted may not be the same way another shrine is done. Thus, the mode of worship and liturgy varies from shrine to shrine; from family to family and from one community to another.

It is germane to note here that although the mode of worship varies from shrine to shrine, a particular deity may have more than one shrine dedicated to its worship. This brings one to the conclusion that there are multiplicity of shrines within Igboland and Africa as a whole. This is because there are divers divinities that are consulted and worshipped by the Igbo and Africans. This is substantiated by Awolalu as follows:

There are numerous shrines... in (Igboland) – indeed there are as many shrines as there are divinities. There may be two, three or more shrines... dedicated to one divinity in the same town or village. This multiplicity of shrines stresses the fact that a shrine is not a permanent or only abode of a divinity; he can be invoked in one shrine just as in another. When he is invoked, it is believed that he will be present to meet with the worshippers, to receive their prayers and offerings and to bless them. (114)

It is true that a shrine is usually a place where libation is poured in the time of worship. This is exactly the view of Raphael Arinze who notes that “during worship, libation is poured on the ground before the shrine” (119). It is a place where sacrifices are done to sacred realities or beings. Hence, it is the place where offerings are placed for spirit beings (Mbiti, *African Religions* 83). But outside of these functions, the shrine has

other functions such as acting as a tribunal of justice, which is the focus of next section.

SHRINE: THE TRIBUNAL OF JUSTICE IN IGBO SOCIETY

Before going into the topic proper, it is here germane to look at the meaning of justice since one has given an exposition on the concept of shrine. This is to say, justice is a concept that needs to be understood if one must talk about tribunal of justice. The term justice is one that has bearing with equal treatment towards all members of a society. It is that which places all humans at equal plane, with no one, regardless of position, affluence or social standing, being treated differently. According to Joseph Omoregbe,

It (justice) is giving everybody his due, or treating equals equally. The foundation of justice is the fundamental equality of all men. The equality in question here is ontological equality not social equality or any kind of equality. We know that all men are not equal socially, educationally, financially, in height, in size, in weight etc. but ontologically (ie – as human beings) all men are equal, and this is the basis of the concept of justice. (236)

What Omeregbe is saying is that all humans are to be treated equally because they are ontologically equal. It is only when all humans are treated equally because of their ontological status that one can say that there is justice.

At this point, justice is not equal to that which is given to the mighty and strong of the society. For, if it is so, then, it is injustice. It is rather that which is for both the strong and weak of the society. Justice is that which brings about peaceful co-

existence in the society that is the product of harmonious relationship among members of the society. This is Plato's understanding of justice. According to Plato, justice is when the parts of the soul or society function harmoniously. Thus, harmony in the society is nothing but justice or the product of justice. What this means is that without harmony in the society there can be no justice. Harmony is therefore the manifestation of justice. Justice in this sense is that which gives members of a society a sense of belonging as well as an enabling environment to function effectively and efficiently in that society. The reason is that justice places all in the society at par.

Justice is that which brings about liberty, republic, wealth and peace. Hence, without justice there is no liberty, nor republic, no property and no peace (Herbert 43). What this implies is that if there is no justice the society will become an anarchic society, where there is no law and order. Such a society will be a lawless society. Thus, justice is an organizer of the society since it is "the foundation of peace among men" (Iwe 235). It is therefore a value or virtue which is "the constant and perpetual will to render to everyone what is due to him" (Glenn 222). Thus, justice demands that anyone who deserve to be rewarded should be rewarded and anyone who deserve punishment, punished. In other words, it gives to everyone what the person deserves.

The above analysis brings out the fact that justice is that which is administered to all humans. It is that which is served to all within a given society. This is called 'administration of justice'. The concept 'administration of justice' has strong affinity with 'administration of law'. The administration of justice or law connotes that justice is done to all without fear, affection or ill-will (Chukwurah 100-145). According to Uduigwomen,

This is done through proper administration of its laws. In such a climate of justice, no one suffers unjustly. Any person who suffers the sanction of a law or decree knows that he is receiving a just recompense of his deed. For instance, a person who is made to face the bullets for committing armed robbery or any capital offence knows that he is receiving a just recompense of his deed. He is fully aware of the gravity of the offence and is not ignorant of what the law says about the offence. (84)

It is good to mention here that the place where justice is pronounced is the law court and this is also known as the 'tribunal of justice'. A tribunal is a place where justice is administered to all. It is in and before the tribunal that all members of the society seek for justice. And in the traditional Igbo society, the highest tribunal of justice is the shrine.

Hence, the shrine has come to be very significant in traditional Igbo society. The reason for this is because shrines "serve unique functions and purposes in traditional African society which include protection, provision, guidance, revelation, etc. These unique functions have attracted much audience and veneration to these shrines" (Nwankwo and Agboeze 86). The significance of shrine in Igboland is that which one cannot deny. The shrine has and occupies a special place in Igbo traditional society such that whenever an Igbo hears the word shrine mentioned the person feels awe. This is due to the fact that the shrine itself as stated above is a place of awe. It is a place of awe because the divine is believed to reside there. It is because of this aura of awe which goes with the shrine that makes no one dare to commit any form of ill or evil

there. What is implied here is that it is a place that lack profanity and nothing profane is believed to be found or performed there. In other words, since, it is a place dedicated to the Supreme Being, deities or the divine; it is set apart from any profane use or activities. It is dedicated for sacred purposes only, such as the worship of the divine. In this holy and consecrated ground no profane act is condoned or carried out. It is in this light that Ekarika and Edet note that in it “religious man behaves differently from what he does in ordinary or profane places” (47).

In the shrine abominable acts cannot be heard of or found. The reason for this is that it is a place of purity and sacredness. It is a place of divine manifestation. And with divine manifestation is justice and fairness, thus in the shrine there can be no injustice. It is with this belief that oppressed people come to the shrine to appeal for justice from their adversaries. It is believed in traditional Igbo society that the shrine is a place where they can get justice of all kinds. The reason for this is that the Igbo believe that the shrine is the dwelling place of the divine (the Supreme Being), divinities and other spirit beings that are concerned with ensuring that justice is given to whoever deserves it.

It is also in the shrine that dispute over ownership of land and other properties are settled. The shrine acts as the final court of appeal where every case that cannot be settled by human courts or councils of elders is brought to. It is a place where the Supreme Being and other divinities are called upon to act justly for those who are engaged in a struggle over any property or issue of interest. Ekeopara substantiates this point as he writes that:

*The shrine under the watchful
sees of the unseen dwellers*

(divinities and ancestors) and the guidance of priests and elders served as tribunal of justice in the traditional society. In any dispute involving rival claims to land, money or other property, or even accusations of theft and wrong doing, the parties were required to appear in the shrine where they swore to an oath before the shrine and its divinity in support of their claims or allegations. The priest of the divinity or any elder appointed to act for the occasion administered such oaths. The claimants were made to swear holding a cultic instrument of the divinity who was regarded as the invisible witness to the oath. (114-115)

Ekeopara further asserts that people come to confess before shrines their offenses and crimes as well as the false allegation that they have leveled against others, this is due to the fear of the unseen dwellers in the shrine. In his words,

Members of the traditional society knew the implications of swearing falsely before the shrine of a divinity. Thieves, false claimants, and other evildoers were known to have confessed their claims or false claims in shrines for fear of punishment from unseen occupants of shrine. (115)

This brings out the fact that shrines are meant to enforce justice since they “guarantee harmonious leaving and understanding between the spirits and humans, ensures safety of heritage resources, discourages false claims and maintains orderliness” (Nwankwo and Agboeze 87).

Mazi Uwakwe in an oral interview gives a closely related explanation in support of Ekeopara's view. According to him, when once anyone who has falsely accused another person is told that the case is to be taken to the shrine the person immediately confesses that he had lied against the accused and will ask that the case be withdrawn from the shrine and promises that he/she will do whatever the community demands of him/her. He adds that the fear of the shrine is so strong that anyone who has committed any offense will willfully confess and own up to his/her crime without any delay at the mention of the shrine. In this way, the shrine is held to be the final arbiter for the people in Igbo society. For instance, the shrine of the earth divinity in Ihiagwa, Owerri is no respecter of persons; it can disgrace or kill anyone who dares to come before it and lie or bear false witness against another person. The Ala (Earth divinity) shrine does not hesitate to deal with the guilty and vindicate the just. It is well revered and held in high esteem in the Owerri traditional society.

Chike Ekeopara drives his point home on shrine as a tribunal of justice as he argues that it is also an agent of maintenance of ethical and social order in traditional Igbo society. According to him,

In summary, the shrine was a great factor of ethical order and ethical stability in traditional society. As a traditional institution, it was a factor for the legitimization of communal norms, laws, customs, taboos and an agent of socialization. The shrine served as the final court of appeal in the settlement of disputes when all human effects had failed in the Owerri traditional society. It vindicated the just and established the

innocence of the falsely accused.
(116)

The heart of this is that without shrines in traditional Igboland to act as an arbiter the society could have been a chaotic society, with no form of order or stability. But with the present of shrines traditional society the society is well organized and administered. This is because the fear of the shrine led people to act morally and live by right conduct. It is good to note here that if there were no shrines even laws and customs of the land would have been regarded as nothing since it have no spiritual backing or foundation. Hence, it is in the shrine that all laws and customs of the land were and are given spiritual footing. It is in the shrine that the laws and taboos are given their sacred rite and made to be efficacious. This is to say that shrines made everyone in traditional Igbo society to behave them in an orderly manner. It can said that because shrines are no longer given their rightful place like in the traditional Igboland that is why there is high rate of crimes and injustice(s). Also, laws and moral codes of conduct are no longer taken seriously or obeyed since it has no sacred backing like in traditional Igbo society.

Even as an institution of justice, shrines also provide protection for those who seek refuge within it. It is believed that the *Osus* (outcasts) in Igboland are part of those who have sought refuge in shrines and are not to be harmed or touched by anyone. In other words, they were not to be harmed by anyone because they were believed to be under the protection of shrine and the divinity of the shrine. In the same vein, anyone who seeks protection within any shrine is sure of his/her security both physically and spiritually. What is implied here is that no harm can come to anyone who is under the protection of a shrine. Mazi

Joel Ekeopara brings out this point in his response to an oral interview. He asserts that

During the Nigerian civil war, a group of Biafran soldiers who were pursued by federal troops ran into the shrine of Nwanyie a female local divinity in Ihiagwa Owerri and sought her protection. The federal soldier pursued them into the sacred grove with the intention to kill them. The divinity appeared in the form of a big python and killed six of the federal soldiers and the rest fled in great amazement because the python defiled their gunshots and could not be killed.

What this connotes is that shrines do not only bring about legal justice, it also brings with it social and protective justice. It protects all who seek refuge in it from all kinds of harm anyone regardless of the person's background or orientation. This is closely related to the justice system in contemporary Nigeria where people seek protection from their adversaries in the court of justice or law. In the traditional Igbo society, the shrine serves as the court of justice for protection. As an agent of protection, the shrine protects the innocent and punishes his/her adversaries or enemies (the guilty).

CONCLUSION

It is germane at this point to note that it is the fear of the shrine that motivates people to seek for justice there. This is apparent in the example given about the Ala (Earth divinity). Most members of Ihiagwa in Owerri usually come to the shrine to seek for justice from their adversaries and oppressors. They also come to the shrine in order to get effective arbitration that is lacking in the contemporary law court. The

shrine is today seen as the final court of justice for the Ihiagwa people and other Igbo people who have such shrines.

The submission of this paper is that in spite of the number of court of justice found in contemporary Igboland, injustices still abound everywhere. It is with this that this work calls for the return to the use of the shrine to settle cases that the modern day courts are perceived to have misjudged. The belief is that if a case that has been misjudged by the judge is brought before a shrine, both the corrupt judge and the offender or false accuser will be brought under the wrath of the Supreme Being, the deities and the ancestors who are concerned with the issues of morality and justice. These supernatural beings are so concerned with justice and therefore will not allow the unjust or unjust acts go unpunished. Thus, there is the need to marry our today's justice system with the traditional Igbo justice system where the shrine featured prominently as a court of justice for all and sundry.

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