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## THE MOTHER EARTH IN IGBO RELIGION

African humanism is not individualistic, it is a communal humanism because the African finds his fulfilment not as a separate individual but as a participant in a family and a community. But although the human community is primary, the African is also related to the physical environment, especially to the land from which comes nourishment for life and in which the deceased members of the community are buried. In the words of Robert Parsons:

African society is not only an organization of human relationships, but. . . includes also the relationships of people with the earth as a whole, with their own land, and with the unseen world of constructive forces and beings in which they believe.<sup>1</sup>

This paper highlights the traditional Igbo balance between the spiritual and the pragmatic, the moral and the material. The Igbo African finds himself in the middle of his universe and endeavours to live in harmony with all the powers that affect his life, family and work. One of such powers is attributed to the Mother Earth.

The religious, social and political life of the Igbo is highly influenced by a pantheon of supernatural powers which operate within the human sphere in various ways and to various degrees. The supernatural powers are grouped into two broad categories – those which occupy and control the heavens under the leadership of the Sky God, *Chineke*; and those that occupy and control the earth under the general superior supervision of the Earth goddess, *Ala* or *Ani*. The heavens and the earth, therefore, provide the stage where the human drama is played out. Men lift up their eyes to the sky and naturally regard its spirit as transcendent and mighty. But they live on the earth, plant seeds on it, derive food from it and in its depth the dead are buried.<sup>2</sup> Consequently Mother Earth is nearest to man and is linked with them by many bonds. This closeness endears her to the people. Commenting

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1. Robert Parsons, *Religion in an African Society*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964, p. 177.  
2. G. Parrinder, *Africa's Three Religions*, London: Sheldon Press, 1969, p. 53.

on this idea, Morton-Williams says: "She (the Earth goddess) is conceptually the counterpart of the Sky God, since Earth and Sky are coeval . . . in her rites she is addressed as Mother."<sup>3</sup> And although the Igbo regard the Sky God as omnipotent and omnipresent, comparatively speaking, they would rate the Mother Earth as even more powerful when it comes to the actual direct intervention into the affairs of men. She is often called the Great Mother Spirit, the Queen of the Underworld, the Owner of men-dead or alive, the Source and Custodian of public morality and the Dispenser of justice.

### **The Cult of Ala**

There are numerous temples of *Ala* scattered all over Igbo-land. The importance of this deity is noticeable in the amount of worship and sacrifice accorded her. In the traditional morning prayers, *Ala* is mentioned second after *Chukwu*. The prayer begins thus:

*Chukwu* (God), come and eat kolanut

*Ala* (Earth) come and eat kolanut  
Ancestors (Ndichie), come  
and eat kolanut

Because of her importance and reputation in ensuring health, agricultural fortune, hunting successes and so forth, she receives the public worship of various communities as well as the seasonal celebrations which relate to the various seasons of the year.<sup>4</sup> Farmers take permission from her before they till the ground, and at the first fruit and full harvests, sacrifices are offered to *Ala* who owns the land and who gives special permission for the use of the land. Because the land belongs primarily to the Earth goddess and the ancestors, sale of land is unpopular. Infact in the olden days, it was impossible. The Igbo disliked and still dislike selling land because of their reverence for *Ala*, and they appease her if it has to be done.<sup>5</sup>

The Mother Earth is very prominent in all the rites of passage. At betrothal and marriage, sacrifices have to be offered to the ancestors and the Earth goddess.<sup>6</sup> After marriage it is important for the couple

3. Morton-Williams, "An Outline" p. 245 cited by N. S. Booth (ed), *African Religions - A Symposium* (New York: Nok publishers Ltd. , 1977), p. 164.

4. E. C. Ilogu, *Christian Ethics in an African Background*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974, p.35.

5. G. Parrinder: Op. cit, p. 35.

6. J. Spornli, "Marriage Customs Among the Ibos" in *Anthropos*, 37-40, (1942-45), pp: 113-114.

to have children and although the people know that children come ultimately from God, they would rather follow the "right procedure" by appealing first to the fertility deity, *A/a*. And when a woman becomes pregnant, before the public knows it, the husband would offer a fowl at the shrine of the Earth goddess asking for her protection over the woman. The woman may wear a special cloth, preferably white, as mark of union with Mother-Earth who is always clad in white. This is done in the belief that it wards off evil spirits.<sup>7</sup> Before the pregnant woman goes into confinement, she would offer sacrifices to the Earth goddess asking for her help during labour.<sup>8</sup> And among some Igbo, the baby is 'washed' with loose earth to depict its connection with *A/a* and to announce to the ancestors that the baby has arrived safely.<sup>9</sup> *A/a* is also invoked during the initiation ceremonies. And even during burials, sacrifices are offered to her and other spirits asking them to clear the way for the dead man and to forgive him any debts he might have owed them.<sup>10</sup>

The Earth goddess is served by the *Ezeala*, the priest of the *A/a* deity. It is he who declares abominations as well as cleanses them. Occasionally he conducts the communal eating of the kolanut *ita oji a/a*, by all the adults at the local shrine of *A/a* as an affirmation of their faith or as an act of absolution when an abomination has been committed and the culprit is not easy to detect.

### The Socio-Political Significance of Ala

To the Igbo, *A/a* is the nearest and dearest of all the divinities and She is the most important in Igbo public and private cults. She is looked upon as a kind mother who helps her children if and when they are troubled by other deities. She sends the dead back again in rebirth. As the goddess of fertility, she is often represented in her many temples especially in the famous Mbari houses by beautiful paintings and statues depicting a woman carrying a child in her arms or on her knees.<sup>11</sup> Women pray to her

7. J. O. Awolalu & P. A. Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Onibonjo Press, 1979, p. 184.

8. E. C. Ilogu: *Op cit.*, p. 43.

9. J. O. Awolalu & P.A. Dopamu: *Op cit.*

10. F. A. Arinze: *Sacrifice in Igbo Religion*. Ibadan: University Press, 1970, p. 87.

11. For the picture of the statue of Ala see P. A. Talbot, *Some Nigerian Fertility Cults*. Oxford, 1927, p. 12.

for children while men solicit her favours in their business. But if people offend her and disregard repeated warnings, she will punish them and a hardened evil doer may receive the final humiliation – denial of burial in the bowels of the earth. Such a victim is thrown into the *ajo ofia*, bad bush.

*Ala* is the most important deity in Igbo social life. All other deities which are personifications of the facts and features of nature and of daily life for example, *Ifejoku*, god of the farm, *Agwu* god of divination and herbal medicine, *Ndichie* the deified spirits of dead ancestors, and *Ikenga* the god of adventure in hunting and business – work together with *Ala* in protecting the community from harm and calamity. Metu is of the opinion that the cult of *Ala* is one of the most powerful integrating forces in Igboland especially when the societies "are characterized by the absence of a centralized political authority".<sup>12</sup> This is made up by the existence of communal *Ala* shrine in every Igbo village administered by the *Ezeala*, the priest of *Ala*. The communal shrine is very important in fostering social unity. In addition, each family has its own shrine presided over by the head of the family. Indeed no group is complete without a shrine of *Ala* because she is "the invisible President of the Community."<sup>13</sup> The people also believe that their ancestors founded the "face of the earth", *ihu ala*. This spot became sacred for the people as a rallying point and serves as the place where major decisions concerning warfare and ritual oaths were made and strictly respected.<sup>14</sup>

### The Religious Significance of Ala

The word used in describing the religious system of the Igbo to make it understandable to those who like definitions is *Omenala*, what happens on the land. The same word can be translated as tradition, custom, law, constitution, politics and even as etiquette. Infact there is no separate word for religion.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, *aru* abomination or *nso-ala* taboos or what the land abhors, refers to contraventions against approved social and religious norms.

12. E. Ikenga-Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion*. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1981, p. 67.

13. J.O. Awolalu & P. A. Dopamu: Op cit. , p. 92.

14. G. Parrinder: Op cit. , p. 54.

15. A. LeRoy, *La Religion des Primitifs*, p. 272 and M. Briault. *Polytheisme et Fetichisme*, p. 84.

Thus customs that pertain to morality and those that are purely legal, social and cultural are unalterably interdependent. They are nearly always in the forms of prohibitions sanctioned by the Earth goddess and communicated from her by the *Ndichie*, ancestors.<sup>16</sup> As Mazi Mbonu Ojike put it, "religion establishes the social reason for an ideal while law or government regulates how the ideal can be attained".<sup>17</sup> And in the words of Meek: "Among the Igbos, religion and law are so closely interwoven that many of the most powerful legal sanctions are derived directly from the gods"<sup>18</sup> especially *A/a* who is the source and the guardian of morality. It is she who works in conjunction with the dead ancestors to order the prohibitions and the ritual avoidances. Many social offences become *aru* or *nso a/a* simply because they infringe the laws of the Earth-goddess.<sup>19</sup> And such crimes have to be obviated by communal cleansing through sacrifices or specified rituals. This, therefore, is an area where cosmology has relevance to rituals and religious worship in Igbo traditional society.

The crimes regarded as the taboos of Earth deity are many and varied. But they could be categorized into three groups:

- (i) Crimes which defile the land – These include patricide, incest, adultery, stealing of yams or sheep, bestiality, wilful abortion, pregnancy within a year of husband's death, suicide by hanging, killing of totem animals, and giving improper burials to priests and titled persons.
- (ii) Things which are regarded as abnormal or unnatural. They include *imu ejima* giving birth to twins, *ikpu iru* a person dying without any one attending to him, *isu odu nani* pounding the pestle on the ground (even by mistake) instead of in the mortar while pounding *fou-fou*, a woman climbing the palm tree, abnormal presentation in the birth of a baby or unnatural birth, a child cutting the upper teeth first, fighting a masquerade and altering land boundaries secretly.

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16. E. C. Ilogu, *Op cit.*, p. 22.

17. M. Ojike, *My Africa*. London, 1955, p. 150.

18. C. Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe*. London, 1937, p. 20. See also "The Religions of Nigeria" in *Africa* 14, 1943, p. 115.

19. E. C. Ilogu, *Op cit.*, p. 35.

- (iii). Abnormal behaviour on the part of animals. For instance, if a dog or fowl crosses a corpse, if a dog brings forth only one whelp or a fowl lays only one egg, or if a goat gives birth to its young while the rope is still around her neck.

In all these cases an expiatory sacrifice called *Ikpu aru*, removing of abomination or *ikpocha ife*, cleansing, is necessary. There is no question of hiding such a crime or trying to omit the sacrifice because of the firm belief that if such abominations are not atoned for, even when they are most secretly committed, the penalty is sure to descend on the culprit's head or on his relations and descendants. It could also simply disintegrate the entire society. In the case involving animals, the owners of the animal would offer the appropriate sacrifice.

However, there is a clear distinction between abominations due to human responsibility and those that are otherwise. For instance, if a man, Okolo, commits adultery, the Igbo would say *Okolo mere aru*, Okolo committed an abomination. But if Okolo's hen lays only one egg, they would say '*aru mere na be Okolo*,' abomination happened in Okolo's house.

Once an abomination occurs or is identified, the Earth goddess holds the entire community collectively culpable and dispenses her judgement indiscriminately, just as she scatters her blessings indiscriminately when the community maintained the purity of the land. One peculiar thing about abomination sanction is that there is no room for excuses or defences. Consequently, relatives and clansmen, no matter how powerful and well-placed, are powerless to help anybody who commits an abomination for the sanctions bind alike king and subjects, rich and poor, men and women, adults as well as children. If the culprit pleads innocence of the offence, the *Amala* Council of elders, may direct that he swears by *A/a*.<sup>20</sup> Otherwise, the community has to dissociate herself from the guilt by publicly disowning the culprit in order to be free from the wrath of *A/a*.<sup>21</sup> He is cut off from social communication, ostracised from the market, and should he die, he would be given no burial. But if he dies after offering the prescribed sacrifices, he is regarded as cleansed and the death would be given a different interpretation. Thus *A/a* the Mother Earth is no respecter of persons or status.

20. Ibid., p. 15.

21. L. C. Aluah, "The Cosmology of the Igbo People" in *The Academic Star*, Vol. 2 No. 4, June 1977, p. 93.

This is clearly illustrated in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where among the four crimes that doomed Okonkwo, the hero of his people, three were committed against the Mother Earth. They are: breaking the week of peace by beating his wife Ojiugo, shooting his junior wife and accidental killing of his kinsman. This last offence resulted in Okonkwo's fleeing for homicide, *igba oso ochu* for the stipulated period of seven years before becoming eligible to return to his people. He had to atone for his sin to ensure the harmony of the cosmos represented by the Earth goddess before he could rejoin his clansmen. And even upon all his achievements and his sacrifices to his people, Okonkwo died unwept and unmourned because by hanging himself, he committed *aru* against the Mother Earth, and this denied him a descent burial.

Again, in the classical Igbo novel, *Omenuko* by Pita Nwana, the chief character who happens to be Omenuko himself, committed an offence against the land by selling his brothers into slavery. This abomination was described by Omenuko's immediate brother as *nwanwa tota O to kwuru*, a sin that will affect even one's children's children. In that novel one can see how the placating of the Earth goddess when offended forms an integral and important aspect of Igbo cosmology.

### Conclusion

From what has been said about the role and function of the Mother Earth, *A/a* in the traditional society of the Igbo of Nigeria, it is clear that *A/a* indeed occupies a prominent position in the cosmology of the people. The Igbo hold sacred the Earth on which they tread and from which they draw vital resources of life and materials. Therefore, the worship of *A/a*, to them, is not just one of those cultural phenomena that are found amongst them but the one phenomenon that governs both thought and action in many ways.

For instance, they understand that certain human actions could pollute the land and offend the Mother Earth whose reaction would come in the form of famine, pestilence, defeat in inter-communal feuds, sudden deaths and reduced productivity. And since human conduct affects fertility and productivity, the Igbo endeavour at all times to be in the right with *A/a* so that the ground may yield a good harvest and men may increase. Hence they always act decisively to restore

the ontological balance between man and nature in order to enjoy total peace. Sometimes the offender may be required to confess aloud his abomination before the shrine and to smear his body with ashes showing true repentance. In all this, the *Ezeala* in his vital role as the mouth-piece of Ala performs important social and political functions which ultimately ensure preservation of solidarity, value systems and continuity of the community.<sup>22</sup>

But today the effects of missionary work have disrupted the culture of the people. Infact decay in the Igbo moral code started when christianity preached directly against some Igbo beliefs and practices including belief in the Earth goddess, *Ala* and her sanctity around which a good deal in that moral code was built. Therefore, there is need to interpret the christian faith through the Igbo life experience in order to establish a new cultural vitality which would once more integrate the Igbo society towards a more meaningful experience than what obtains now in the absence of any such effective norm.

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22: M.S.O. Olisa, "Political Culture and Political Stability in Traditional Igbo Society" in *The Conch*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Sept. 1977, p. 21.