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## PRIESTHOOD IN THE TRADITIONAL RELIGION OF THE IGBOS OF NIGERIA

To a casual observer or even a curious investigator, the traditional priest among the Igbos<sup>1</sup> is "that individual one suddenly meets on the road wearing old rags and carrying a dirty bag, with chalk paintings around his eyes and feathers on his head." Immediately one concludes the fellow is a witch doctor, a medicine man, a juju priest etc. Before we proceed, it is necessary to establish the distinctions between these terminologies and assess how wrong or right they are and how they relate to one another since there is a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding over the words used for these cultic functionaries.

### (i) *Witch doctor*

The name means exactly what the word says: a doctor who hunts out witches and cures those who are bewitched.<sup>2</sup> Meek says that the great ally of people against witchcraft is a *dibia* or diviner and medicine man.<sup>3</sup> However, Meek is correct, not because a *dibia* is always a witch doctor but because a witch doctor is always a *dibia*, diviner, since he must detect a witch by consulting oracles.

### (ii) *Medicineman*

This man, otherwise called a herbalist, is concerned with *ogwu*, potions or medicine for healing the sick and with preparing magical remedies. Apart from the general practitioners there are specialists for the treatment of sores, fevers, jaundice and bone fractures. However, the Igbos do not regard any disease as being merely physical. No,

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1. *Igbo* is synonymous with *Ibo* and can be used for either the people or their language. But *Igbo* is more wide-spread among the people themselves while *Ibo* was adopted by foreigners because of the difficulty in pronouncing the *gb*.
  2. Jacobs, A.B. *A Textbook on West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Aromolaran Pub. Com. Ltd., 1977) p. 186.
  3. Meek, C. *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 82.

there must be the spiritual dimension and so even the simple cures are surrounded with religious, superstitious and even magical observances. There are also some herbalists who prepare charms including *ajo ogwu*, bad medicine, for harming others. However, the makers of bad medicine are usually referred to as sorcerers while herbalists are said to prepare only good medicines.<sup>4</sup> In most cases, the functions of the herbalist are discharged by a *dibia*<sup>5</sup> because there are some simple doctors who may not qualify for a *dibia* at all.

### (iii) *Juju Priest*

This is the term that many writers, including some educated Igbos wrongly use in describing the *dibia*.<sup>6</sup> But the *dibia* is simply a person who foretells the future, a diviner. He deals mainly with oracles and so is always consulted before sacrifices are performed. He could combine this with the office of a herbalist or a witch doctor as the case may be. In fact, the diviner and the herbalist are both called by the same name – *dibia* – in Igbo language. This is because the office of a herbalist is often filled by a diviner who is traditionally a *dibia*.<sup>7</sup> Again, many priests can also be diviners but not all diviners are priests because many diviners are not qualified to officiate in the temple though they may offer minor sacrifices – the type that anybody at all can offer – at the cross roads, on behalf of their clients.

It is this combination of two or more distinct functions by the same individual that has puzzled many casual observers and foreign investigators and resulted in some misinterpretations which could mislead.

### Igbo Priesthood

The Igbos attach great importance to the correct performance of acts of worship. This importance necessitates the establishment of several types of priests who have been trained to serve as intermediaries between the gods and men.<sup>8</sup> The people have three main categories

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4. Parrinder, G. *African Traditional Religion* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1970) p. 117.
  5. Leen, E. "Christianity in Pagan Nigeria." *The Irish Eccle. Record* 20 (1922) p. 19.
  6. Leonard, A.G. *The Lower Niger and Its Tribes* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1906) pp. 393-4.
  7. Jacobs, A.B. *Op. cit.*, p. 185.
  8. Lucas, J.O. *The Religion of the Yorubas* (Lagos: C.M.S. Bookshops, 1948), p. 179.

of priests – the family priest, the priests of the various divinities generally called *Eze-mmuo* and the Nri priests. There is, however, a fourth sacred personality, the *dibia* without whose contribution the *Eze-mmuo* may not function in most cases.

### The Family Priest

The Igbo society is organized on the lineage system. According to Horton: "The Igbo idea of lineage is an intimate complex of its present members, its ancestors and its future progeny. The fact that the senior *amadi* (freeborn) of the lineage always holds the *Ofo*<sup>9</sup> and ministers at the shrine of the lineage ancestor would seem to emphasize the need for the maintenance of close continuity between all three elements involved"<sup>10</sup> – the living, the dead and the yet-to-be-born.

The *Okpala*, first-born son, as the senior living descendant of the lineage's agnatic ancestor is the lineage head and the bearer of the *Ofo*. Earlier, he had helped his father to run the family socially, economically and religiously.<sup>11</sup> He had also occupied even during his father's lifetime the position of an officiating priest. It is on account of this sacred position that he was always called upon to "break the kolanut and distribute them to the guests and for the same reason, pour out the tombo or palm wine to all visitors."<sup>12</sup> So in the absence or death of his father, the responsibility of offering family sacrifices falls on him without any dispute whatsoever.<sup>13</sup> Besides, he alone knows those mysteries unknown to others by virtue of his nearness to his father who told him the words of the ancestors.<sup>14</sup> He needs no further training.

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9. *Ofo* is the symbol of ancestral authority. The bearer of this symbol exercises some socio-political powers e.g. he is in charge of the family land and allocates the same to members. He also settles disputes among the members of the lineage and could with the *Ofo* interdict any recalcitrant member who would flout the traditions received from the ancestors.

10. Horton W. "The Ohu System of slavery in a Northern Ibo Village Group" *Africa* 24, 1954, p. 322.

11. Basden, G.T. *Niger Ibos* (London: Frank Cass, 1938) pp. 65–66. See also Leonard, A.G. *Op. cit.*, pp. 395–6 and Orakwue J: *Onitsha Custom of Title-taking* pp. 34–35, 40, 74.

12. Leonard, A.G. *Op. cit.*, p. 395.

13. Arinze, F.A. *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion*. (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970), p. 78.

14. Middleton, J. *Lugbara Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 13.

The *Okpala* has very many socio-political duties, but his ritual duties assume priority because of his lineal proximity to the dead.<sup>15</sup> On behalf of his dependents, he both consults oracles and with his *Ofo* offers regular rituals at the lineage ancestral shrine. If his father was an *eze-mmuo* of a particular public shrine, then the *Okpala* inherits the two offices. So the public priesthood does not conflict with or eliminate the family priesthood. Talbot rightly points out: "Almost without exception, every family and sometimes each member of it, possesses a shrine for household worship, and, though special priests are appointed for the principal lodges or temples and often also for the town shrines, as well as for those of chiefs of importance; yet as a rule, it is the oldest man in a family... who performs the ceremony."<sup>16</sup>

Family priesthood does not necessarily descend from father to son, but from the most senior person in the family to the next in rank. Therefore, in a compound made up of several households, it is the head of the senior branch who holds the *Ofo* and acts accordingly.

### Priests of Divinities

The second category of priests include all priests who serve particular divinities with established shrines and organized cult. Each divinity goes by the common name *alusi* or *mmuo* meaning spirit or divinity. So the priest is variously called *Eze-alusi* or *Eze-mmuo*, king or chief of a spirit; *Onye-isi-mmuo*, chief man of the spirit, *Onye-nehu-aja*, a sacrificer. He is the mediator between God or divinity and man. He knows the divinity, hears him and speaks to him for himself and other worshippers. He is the embodiment of the presence of the deity among the people. To avoid any confusion in this paper, I will stick to only one name, *Eze-mmuo* – Chief of a spirit.

In every Igbo town, there are several of such priests each of whom is attached to one public shrine of a deity worshipped in the town.<sup>18</sup> The

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15. Ikenga-Metuh, E. *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions* (Onitsha: Imicco Publishers, 1987) p. 214.
  16. Talbot, P.A. *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria* (London: Macmillan and Company Ltd., 1923), p. 28.
  17. Forde, D. and Jones, G. *The Ibo and Ibibio speaking Peoples of South East Nigeria* (London: 1950), pp. 15 & 60.
  18. Arinze, F.A. *Op. cit.*, p. 78.

priest of the deity *Udo* is called *Eze-Udo*, that of *Ala* is called *Eze-Ala* etc. If a devotee wants to make a good-will offering, he goes to the priest of the divinity of his choice. But if he has any doubt as to which divinity he should go or if he has misfortunes and does not know why, then he goes to the *dibia* who, through divination, prescribes sacrifices to certain determined spirits specifying also the victims to be used. The client then pays the *dibia*, collects the prescribed items and goes to the priest of the divinity in question. However, if the *dibia* prescribed a joyless sacrifice to an evil spirit, then it is the *dibia* himself or another *dibia* who performs the rite, not the *Eze-mmuo* for he never offers *aja*, sacrifice to evil spirits unless he is also a *dibia*.

### Moral Requisites of the Eze-mmuo

The *Eze-mmuo* must be transparently honest. He must not be a thief nor must he commit any *alu*, abomination. Serious breaches of these rules might attract quick chastisement from his divinity. He must also be honourably married for the idea of a celibate life does not appeal to the traditional Igbos.<sup>19</sup> However, he is sometimes bound to practise abstinence but for short periods.

Women are wholly excluded from being *Eze-mmuo*, not even for a female deity.<sup>20</sup> In fact they are not even allowed to enter the innermost part of the shrines and are forbidden to touch certain idols. But they can be diviners and herbalists. However, there are some exceptions – elderly women past the age of menopause could sacrifice directly to their personal *Chi* behind their *mkpuke*, hut. This is a private and personal cult but they are not allowed to officiate in a public cult. And even in this private cult, the normal practice is for the husband or the first-born son to kill the fowl for the woman even if it means telling a small boy what to do and say. However, at Onitsha, the *ada*, first-born daughter, can perform some minor religious sacrifices.<sup>21</sup>

19. Basden, G. *Op. cit.*, p. 213.

20. Referring to *Ajala*, the Earth and Fertility Spirit at Nneato, Leith-Ross says "Although *Ajala* is a woman, she has no priestess, yet it is thought by the men that women are closer to her and can obtain a quicker hearing being women together." See *African Women* (London, 1939), p. 117.

21. Orakwue. J. *Op. cit.*, p. 40.

### The Eze-mmuo's Insignia of Office

The *Eze-mmuo* has no distinguishing dress except where he combines his office with other titles or positions. He dresses like any other person and although he is highly respected in the society, he carries on with his private occupations like any other person – he is not a holy figure set apart from daily life. But the *dibia* does not dress elegantly. They are rather wierd-looking in order to impress on the people their capacity to "see" the spirits and probably also instil fear into others, especially children. Of the *dibia's* appearance, the Igbos say: "*Ebude dibia bu nzu n'anya, edo n'iru na nkirika okpu*" – the splendour of a *dibia* is chalk painting around the eyes, yellow paint on the face and a tattered hat.<sup>22</sup>

### Duties and Functions of the Eze-mmuo

It is the duty of the *Eze-mmuo* to mediate to his divinity on behalf of anybody who comes to him to give offerings or make sacrifice to, or to seek the protection or the vengeance of a particular deity whether the person came on his own or was directed by a *dibia*. But there are certain conditions under which the *Eze-mmuo* may refuse to act :

- i) when the victim is unfit for the sacrifice due to any reason at all. It must be whole and unblemished
- ii) when the petitioner or his immediate relation has committed an *alu*, abomination, not yet atoned for by an expiatory sacrifice, *ikpu-alu* and
- iii) when the petitioner has an undefined reason for wanting to offer the sacrifice. Apart from these, the priest is bound to comply with the request since he would expect some punishment from his *alusi* if he refused to sacrifice because of wrong assumptions or if he offered the wrong thing or if he goes against the major ritual laws of his divinity.

The *Eze-mmuo* has also the duty of helping to fix the great annual feasts of his spirit and insisting that the celebrations be solemn.<sup>23</sup> And as

22. Arinze, F.A. *Op. cit.*, p. 76.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

the custodian of religion and the keeper of religious treasures and knowledge, he looks after the *nkwu*, emblem, image or symbol of the divinity and sees that they are reverently kept. His duties also include the cleaning of the shrine and the temple and furnishing them with necessary materials, especially meals and drinks – after all is he not one who “feeds” the gods? He also takes care of the dedicated animals, if any, and offers prayers, kola nuts and libations to his *alusi* every morning.

Sometimes, the *Eze-mmuo* has other socio-political functions. In Igboland, the deity *A/a* is the invisible president of the whole community and the most important divinity. Crimes such as adultery, stealing of yams, murder, giving birth to twins or to abnormal children were regarded as offences against *A/a*. An abomination, *alu* is also called *nso-ala* implying “what *A/a* does not want,” and tradition. *Omenala* simply means “what happens on the land.” Thus the *Eze-ala* presides over public meetings and people come to him for advice. He settles quarrels. In fact, the most sensitive disputes are settled by oaths sworn at the shrine or by the emblems of the *A/a* deity and this judgement is believed to be inviolable. The *Eze-ala* presides during Yam-festivals and the communal worship of the town – he is regarded as the high priest in each town<sup>24</sup> and so has a very special place in the exposition of law, morality and custom.

### **Selection and Commissioning of Priests**

Priests are generally trained and commissioned. Since they are in for divine service, they must receive a form of initiation and training for it but this training takes different forms depending on the nature of the priesthood.<sup>25</sup>

### **Recruitment**

In Igboland, priesthood is never contested for – it is hereditary. A person becomes the priest of a deity because his father served that same deity and such a family is known as *umu-alusi*, children of ‘alusi’, and it is always the son who succeeds his father although succession

24. Ikenga-Metuh, E. *Op. cit.*, p. 215.

25. Awolalu, J & Dopamu, P., *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonoje Press, 1979), p. 142.

has been known to pass on to the next senior male member of the deceased priests' family – whether he be a brother or another son. Where the line of succession has become extinct or where some doubts have arisen, the *dibia* must be consulted.

There are instances when a priest is specially chosen by the divinity either by spirit-possession, through dreams and visions or by the oracle. There are also cases where a priest could be chosen because of some extra-ordinary events interpreted as manifestations of the wishes of a particular deity. For instance, the invasion of a man's house by animals sacred to a particular deity, for example, python – *eke-ogba*, tortoise *mbe*. This could also be indicated by an extra-ordinary increase in animals like cows, goats, sheep etc. in a man's house. One could also be called to priesthood through an extra-ordinary religious experience. Once a person has been called to priesthood, he submits himself to the service of the divinity. "It is natural" says Westermann, "that when a person has been summoned by a deity so directly he should feel personally and forever bound to it and such an experience may be a turning point in his life."<sup>26</sup>

### Training

Among the Igbos, there is nothing like highly developed 'convent' or 'seminary' training that we find among the Fon of Dahomey.<sup>27</sup> But since the office of the traditional priest in Igboland is predominantly hereditary, the training is usually simple. It is acquired by observation. The future priest has to watch his father or the incumbent priest perform sacrifices and learn from him while he helps him in his duties. He is usually called *nje-ozì*, messenger. Before the death of the father the future priest will have gathered most of the priestly sayings and practices and acquired expertise in all things connected with his cult.<sup>28</sup> He may occasionally be delegated to perform priestly functions as part of his training.<sup>29</sup> If he runs into any problem after assuming office, he could consult priests of other divinities and some elders, or just continue to learn from experience. In

26. Westermann, D. *The African Today and Tomorrow* (London, 1949) p. 91. See also Green, M. *Ibo Village Affairs* (London, 1947) p. 53 and Leith Ross: *African Women* (London, 1939) p. 118.

27. Parrinder, G. *West African Traditional Religion* (London: Epworth Press, 1949) pp. 87-107.

28. Jacobs, A.B. *Op. cit.*, p. 189.

29. Awolalu, J. & Dopamu, P. *Op. cit.*, p. 142.

any case, it is believed that the deity cannot but choose one who is competent to do the job.

### Initiation

At the death of a priest, the *alusi* remains without a minister for about a month, sometimes even for a year. When the succeeding priest has acquired enough money to throw an elaborate feast, he invites all the other priests in the town – the *Nze* and *Ozo* titled men and perhaps all the *umuokpu*, daughters of the village married elsewhere, to the celebration which varies in solemnity according to the importance and influence of the *alusi* involved.

The shrine is swept with branches of special thorny shrubs like *uke*, *agamevu* and *akoro*. The new priest then uses the sacred wooden cup to pour libations to the spirit. Fowls are sacrificed, and then all retire to the priest's house for a lavish entertainment. In this brief ceremony, there is no rite by which the new priest is installed by older priests; but the new priest cannot assume duties or presume to 'feed' the *alusi* without doing what has been described above.<sup>30</sup> However, the initiation of the high priest, the *Eze-ala*, involves elaborate ceremonies similar to those of the *Eze Nri*, king of *Nri* town.<sup>31</sup>

### Conclusion

From this thesis, we realize that only four persons can exercise priestly functions in the traditional religion of the Igbos. The most important is the *Eze-mmuo* who ministers to a particular divinity with a shrine and organized cult. The *dibia* must be consulted before sacrifices in all cases of doubt, and it is he alone offers the joyless sacrifice to the *ajo mmuo*, evil spirit. Then we have the family priest who is responsible for the lineage ancestral cult and, finally the priests from *Nri* and *Oreri* who belong to a class by themselves and who exercise priority throughout *Igboland* in performing expiatory sacrifices.

No one dare take up the priestly office when he is not the next rightful successor in the priestly family or is not specially chosen

30. Arinze, F.A. *Op. cit.*, p. 70.

31. Ikenga-Metuh, E. *Op. cit.*, p. 216.

otherwise. The office is not obtained by wealth or bribery. To grab it by force implies imminent death for the impostor. If the office falls on a person who, being a Christian, refuses to accept it, the next in order of age could take it up while a minor could delegate his powers till he comes of age. However, many weak Christians have been precipitated into accepting the office by threats and pressures from their non-Christian relations in order to avoid the "long chain of misfortunes" if they turned down their call.

Finally, the Igbos have firm convictions about priesthood. They believe that their priests are genuine mediators between them and the divinities and ancestors; that the efficacy of the priest derives from the office rather than the merits of the minister as a private individual – he is a priest by virtue of his call, not because of his own virtue, or wealth, or status. Hence poverty does not come in the way of exercising his authority.