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## EGWU-ONICHA : A RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL IN AFRICAN TRADITION

The study of African Traditional Religions which started some decades ago has generated a considerable amount of interest among scholars. Much has been done in highlighting the religious beliefs and practices and other elements of these religions. However, much remain to be unearthed for the fact that Africa is vast and her religious practices, beliefs and ceremonies are complex and various. There are many religious practices in many communities that are not known, nor thought of, and yet they are worth knowing. I think this may be more in the area of religious festivals and the gods whose honour warrant such merry making occasions. For a good knowledge of diverse religious festivals in African Tradition Religion there is the imperative need to get down to the study of festivals of each autonomous community. This article is an attempt in this direction. It discusses one of the important religious festivals of Onicha Ezinihitte<sup>1</sup> known among the people as *Egwu-Onicha*.

### The People of Onicha

The historic town Onicha, an Imo State community in Nigeria is about 43 kilometers away from Owerri the capital city. The people are in the main peasant farmers as they have come to occupy a fertile rolling plane. They are naturally religious and strongly believe in the existence of the Supreme Being, The Creator. It is also their belief that after the creation of the world by *Chukwu*, the Supreme God, he departmentalised the universe and appointed different divinities to superintend them. There are also deities specially appointed to look after various communities, to

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1. In Igbo land there are many communities diversely located known by the common name *Onicha*. They include *Onicha Uboma* in Okigwi Division, *Onicha Ngwa* in Ngwa Division, *Onicha Ohaozara* and *Onicha Ezinihitte* in Mbaise Division. The people are believed to be of a common origin and had migrated in groups from their original home in Okigwe to different directions to find a more suitable place of habitation. The suffix indicates the division each group later settled permanently.

protect the people as well as punish offenders. So there is clear evidence that the people ardently believe in the Supreme Being attributively referred to as *Chi-ukwu* or *Obasi-bi-n'elu* as their Creator and final arbiter who has appointed three different divinities – *Umumiri*,<sup>2</sup> *Ala*,<sup>3</sup> and *Amadioha*<sup>4</sup> to be in charge of their community. These three divinities are worshipped by their adherents and have priests who look after their shrines.

### Origin of Egwu-Onicha

*Egwu-Onicha* had its origin in time immemorial when the people of Onicha first settled around the area now known as Onicha Ezinihitte – in commemoration of their victory over their enemies. There they first built a central shrine for their goddess *Umumiri* and a section, *Umuaghara* built another shrine for their god *Amadioha*. Traditional history has it that the original home of the people was a vast undulating area in Okigwe division known in our present day as Onicha Uboma. Due to adverse geographical condition people migrate to look for a more conducive area for habitation. On reaching their present area of occupation, they apparently saw it as no man's land. Eventually they occupied the extensive area which has a stream. Not long after neighbouring towns made deliberate efforts to drive them out and therefore often engaged them in battle. In fighting this war of survival they appealed to their god – the god of thunder and goddess *Umumiri* – for assistance. In one of the occasions of the constant harassment and raids, there was a sudden drizzling rain accompanied by lightening and thunder which struck dead the outstanding leaders as well as other people of the invading towns. The most astonishing thing was that many houses were instantaneously set on fire by the lightening in the opponent's villages. Thenceforth the harassing attack ceased as the event had put the enemies in confusion and fear. They believed it was the work of the people's god of thunder as the people of

2. *Umumiri* is a goddess believed to be inhabiting a stream in the area. She is attributively referred to as "kind mother" who protects her children.
3. *Ala* is Earth-goddess held to be in-charge of morality and fertility. Any offence against her is viewed seriously as it is believed that such an act may upset the well being of the community.
4. *Amadioha* is a thunder-god. He is attributively referred to as a "god of justice" and as a "wait-and-take god" because he does not tolerate even a least offence and punishes with immediate death. Even the priest serves it with awe and dread. He is seen to be the agent of the goddess *Umumiri* for avenging any wrong done to her children.

Onicha asserted it. The enemies receded and even abandoned part of their own section where the ravages of the lightning was more. The day of this incident was a local market day of the people of Onicha known as Afo Onicha, the first day of eight-days local week. This day was marked as a day of great and astonishing event in their history wrought by their god and goddess of protection. Later the victorious inhabitants opted the market day and made elaborate sacrificial feast in honour of the gods for assisting them to ward off their enemy. This feast in honour of the gods came to be known as Egwu-Onicha which ever since then became an annual religious festival of the people. The feast may be compared with the Jewish feast of passover.<sup>5</sup>

### Celebration of the Feast

The feast is usually celebrated annually after final harvest of all farm crops and the chief crops yam and cocoyam have been stored in barn. This period is a work-free period and gives every member of the community the chance to prepare and participate in the feast fully. Normally the feast comes up in the month of April. The day of the month depends on the local calendar of the people. It follows last after all the other cultural festivals—*Ngba*<sup>6</sup>, *Ikpe Okahia*<sup>7</sup>, and *Ika ala*<sup>8</sup> have been celebrated. Egwu-Onicha is finally celebrated to crown all as it marks the end of the traditional year and the beginning of a new one.

Its celebration is announced the night before the day of the feast by the Chief Priest with ten booming canon shots symbolizing the participation of the ten villages that make up Onicha. This is repeated at dawn

5. Passover is the first of three annual Jewish festivals at which all the men must appear at the sanctuary (Exod 12:43, 13:3-10, Deut. 16:1) and one of the feasts in memory of past events, the other being the feast of tabernacles. It is usually held Fourteenth day of first month of the sacred year (April 14).

6. *Ngba* – This is a wrestling festival. The strength and endurance of the youths are tested. The festival reminds the people how they strongly resisted and finally overthrew their opponents.

7. *Ikpe Okahia* literally means justice in the jungle. During this festival all criminals are brought to note. Outstanding quarrels are settled. Those who had broken the taboos are judged and fined to bring items for sacrifice to appease ancestors and gods of the land.

8. *Ika Ala* – literally means rehearse the taboos of the land for younger generation and to make peace with the Earth goddess – the guardian of morality. 6-8 are Oral Information by Nze V. Njoku.

of the day of the festival to announce the beginning of the ceremony to neighbouring communities. At about 8.00 a.m. a time known to the people as 'when wine tappers have returned from tapping' the chief priest, and all other classes of religious officials including the Community Traditional ruler and representative elders of all the villages troop to their central shrine which is located at the market square to offer annual sacrifice. They go with a pig to offer to goddess *Umumiri* and her lieutenant *Amadioha* in commemoration and expression of thanks to the gods for their victory in their war of survival. At the shrine, oblation takes place. This is collectively done by the priest and the representatives of the people. This helps to focus the attention of the worshippers on the object of worship.

The priest proceeds to dedicate the victim and this creates the psychological atmosphere of identification. The community is identified with the divinity. The goddess is invoked in her attributive name '*Nne Onicha*' (the mother of Onicha people) to accept the sacrifice. Prayer for the well-being of the community is made. At the end of the prayer immolation of the pig follows. The animal is held and raised over the shrine by strong men in such a way that the blood is spread to all parts of the shrine especially its front. The remains of the animal is later shared among the ten villages of Onicha.

### **Communal Feast**

The second part of the celebration takes place in the afternoon. Egwu-Onicha day is noted as a day of merriment, happiness and conviviality. People from the surrounding towns far and near are usually invited and from noon visitors are seen trooping in hundreds to Onicha, some carrying calabashes of wine to their hosts. Every type of food is served to the guest. In the past, all types of domestic animals were slaughtered in different homes and given either raw or cooked to the happy guests. But the most highly valued animal usually killed was pig which was regarded as the animal whose meat was the sweetest. Wealthy people would buy each his own pig while the middle class would buy in groups so that visitors would eat as much pork as they desired and carry part to their families.

Later in the afternoon after guests have been entertained by their various hosts, the celebration shifts to the square prepared for the feast.

It must always be very near the central community shrine. The community and her traditional and religious leaders converge at the square. The venue is usually crowded, completely swamped by joyous crowd of not only Onicha citizens but also people from neighbouring towns as well as well-wishers who come to see for themselves the much talked about *Egwu-Onicha*.

The arrival of the traditional ruler and his entourage – chiefs, Nzes and priests at the square is heralded by a ten canon gun salute. The celebration opens with presentation, breaking and sharing of kola nuts – symbol of unity, and pouring of libation thereby renewing old covenants with the unseen ancestors who are believed to be present, gods of the land and the Supreme Being. Each of the ten villages is called upon to come and collect her own share of the sacrificial meat with a stipulated amount. This is a symbolic way by which the people re-enact their unity and identify themselves with the unseen guardians of the community.

The history of Onicha and her religious taboos are rehearsed by the traditional ruler or by his appointee. These preambles over, the scene bursts open into entertainments of various kinds. There is a parade of masquerades and pulsating cultural music and dances. The most outstanding of the native dances is usually the one displayed by 'the virgins of the community.' The dancers are believed to be the virgins of the community who have lived to the moral standard and requirement of the goddess. They are dressed in native fashion. In their show they weave intricate dance steps to the accompaniment of their pulsating drum music to enter the square. They entertain people with their masterful dancing steps as well as with their vibrant and unrestrained body movement, to the applause of the crowd. In the past this very dance used to be displayed by divinely selected married women from the different villages of Onicha. They were called *Ndom Uhen Oji*. They got this name from a special locally made cosmetic, reddish in colour, with which they used to smear over their whole body to appear distinct from other women. The complexion of their skin is exactly like the colour of a kola nut which is purely red. They were regarded as the maidens of the goddess. But in recent times adolescents assumed to be virgins have taken their place. The reason being that there is no woman who has not joined one christian group or the other. Consequently the unmarried girls of the community are used to fill the gap.

At the end visitors are centrally entertained. Donations from well-wishers are received and the festival comes to an end.

### **Religious Significance**

The festival is held firstly to commemorate their deliverance from their enemies in their fight for survival and to seek for a continued protection from the supernatural power that upholds the community. It also serves as an expression of thanks for past blessings and protection. The central community shrine which is apparently neglected is reactivated. During the celebration the younger generation is taught the do's and don'ts of the society and the divinity's taboos which provide the guide lines of the community's morality.

The sacrificial meat which is shared by the community and the breaking and sharing of kola nuts symbolize and create in the people the sense of togetherness and oneness. One peculiarity of kola is that various components of each unit is held mutually together by a very simple adhesive system. The villages therefore, in this celebration and breaking of kola demonstrate their unity by sharing in the good life which kola stands for. A common adage among the people being 'he who brings kola brings life and unity.'

The festival is used for time keeping and during this period covenants between the divinities of the land and the people are renewed. New ones may be entered into and promises already made are fulfilled in order to ensure a continued survival, unity and progress of the community.

### **Social Significance**

The festival always attracts members of the community living far and near. It is always a 'long-time-no-see period' when old friends reunite and new friendships are made. Kiths and kins are brought together. The younger ones use this opportunity for betrothals, making their choice from the bevy of young ladies who purposely come out to advertise themselves during their display of traditional dances in their native outfit.

The feast has of recent become a mark of identity for Onicha people. This has necessitated an innovation in the time of celebrating the feast. The citizens have decided to be celebrating it each year on Easter Saturday because of the Easter public holiday which will enable all to attend the feast. Long-standing quarrels between extended family

members, friends, members of the community or between neighbouring villages are usually settled during this period. Such a situation is taken care of during the period preceeding the cultural festival *Ikpe Okahia*. Eating and drinking together during the festival symbolize reconciliation of all quarrelling parties who had one kind of misunderstanding or the other.

Onicha is feast establishing links through marriage with many towns in Nigeria, so the feast is no longer attended by only people from the surrounding towns but also by people from other states outside Imo. Some of these visitors have eventually married from Onicha.

The educated elites and philanthropist in the area use the occasion to invite their very wealthy friends to witness or participate in the festival which has in the recent times become popular for launching some development projects like rural electrification, supply of pipe borne water etc.

There is generally an economic boom in the community as citizens who have come home from all walks of life normally embark on one kind of capital project or the other.

### Conclusion

The festival makes a very important impact in the life of the people and helps to renew their religious life and the ontological relationship between the community and the Unseen Powers. It usually marks the beginning of the traditional year for after the feast, planting season begins with which the agricultural cycle in the community starts in earnest.

Important events of the community are always associated with the festival. It is strongly held that no good citizen of Onicha ever dies during the period of Egwu-Onicha. Any death during the period is seriously regarded as bad death. It is taken to be a punishment to the deceased and an exposure of the victim as a bad citizen by the goddess of the community. A funny aspect is that the relations of the deceased must make sacrifice to appease the goddess of the land. The property of the deceased must be redeemed while some must be packed to the central shrine because the deceased had, as it were, 'broken the pot of the goddess.'<sup>9</sup>

9. Oral Information by Akalegbere Anyanwu, the priest of *Umumiri*.