

The Relevance of Ali (Earth Deity): Ritual Forms And Processes in the 21st Century Ikwerre of North Eastern Niger Delta

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Abstract

The language of religion is often colored with rites and symbols. Man the “homoreligiosus” has in every age and culture, in his horizontal and vertical relationship with the sacred and the humans, evolved means of communicating and expressing his sentiments and belief patterns. Patent and evocative as they may be, rituals in symbolic forms have remained a rhythm of significance in man’s response to the sacred and his experience within the ecosystem. Configured in icons and expressed in metaphors, religious rituals and symbols convey a people’s religious consciousness, thought-logic and world view. This study generally focuses on the relevance of Ali ritual forms and processes among the Ikwerre ethnic nationality located in the North Eastern Niger Delta of Nigeria. The study supports the view of earlier scholars that Ali is Ikwerre’s principal deity and the watch dog of Ikwerre moral ethos and has various manifestations of rituals associated with it in order to maintain social order in Ikwerre. Most importantly, this study negates the erroneous impression by some foreign scholars, that Africans were not objective in handling the issue of morality. Our finding shows that in the last one hundred years or so, there have been tremendous changes on beliefs and practices relating to Ali deity in her ritual forms and processes. However, the story of the impact of Christianity and other agents of modern change on Ali deity is one in which at the instant of these agents of modern

change, some features of the belief system elapsed while others remain resolute.

Keyword: Ali, Deity, Rituals, Niger Delta, Change.

Introduction

The importance of ritual as greatly felt by scholars can not be over emphasized. Since all through the globe, ritual has been considered as indispensable phenomenon of religious and socio-cultural activities. As a matter of fact, this point is buttressed by different ritualistic scholarship, its efficacious roles and central position occupied by rituals in the two societies of man – religious and secular societies. No wonder Protus O. Nkemdirin (1997:116) observes, “rituals and symbols are the core elements of religion. The paramount concern of this paper is not any further attempt to define or redefine ritual as an apt or precise term that will meet a universally acceptable requirement, since such rigorous efforts have proven abortive over the years. What then is this great subject all about?

It is the systematic presentation of ritual with special reference to its:

- (1) Etymology and definitions
- (2) Ritual typology and interplay with symbols in religion.
- (3) Its roles and positive impacts on the religious, socio-cultural and overall life of man (humanism) in the light of the theory of Benjamin C. Ray

It is said that ritual is the observance or performance of religious ceremony. Down through the ages, scholars have been trying to define ritual in a way that a generally universal accepted definition of the subject matter to get a consensus, but unfortunately all such rigorous efforts have proved abortive, due to different scholarly approach and as such, one tries to present a framework definition according to the

influence of his background or school of thought. On this note, it can be said that ritual means different things to different people as can be seen in the various definitions by different scholarship and authorities.

Etymology/Definition(s)

- (a) Etymologically, the term ritual is a derivative of the Latin word “*Rituas*” and has reference to rites. In its original Greek rendition, it is translated to mean sacrifice. Ipsofato, it denotes that ritual in its Greek denoting a sense of sacrifice. It follows that sacrifice was the central and ritual rites of the Greek religion from earliest times. It involved the slaughter of animals, followed by the division of the carcass between men and gods and feastings. The slaughter was preceded by a procession to the altar, music, songs, ritual-hand washing, sprinkling of barley goats on the victim and the altar, prayers and libations. It was also followed by burnt offerings to the gods. However, recipients and occasion determined the type of victim.
- (b) Definition(s)
Furthermore, the “rites” as seen here is a noun and has reference to a religious or solemn ceremony or observance and the action(s) required in it.
While ritual is an ‘adjective’ or ‘adjectival’ form of the noun ‘rites’ and has reference to the performance of rites or ritual acts or prescribed order for performing a religious service.

Victor W. Turner, (1969) defines ritual as “prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mythical beings and powers”. He expressed this well in another definition: ritual is a

stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actor's goals and interests. *Ipsofacto*, Turner's definition of ritual here has reference to performances involving manipulation of symbols that refer to religious beliefs. He further defines ritual in several other ways which could not be included here due to time and space constraints.

Ritual is defined by Beattie as a language of saying things which are not susceptible to statement in scientific terms. Plavot J. C. refers to ritual as any sequence of customary symbolic actions which are standardized through repetition in social interactions. Clothey F. W. notes that ritual is a paradigm and dramatization of the intent of religion itself by using symbols, both visual and aural which along with intellectual and sensual images provide participants with a sense of identity. Barbara Hargrove's definition of ritual implies repeated symbolic behavior. Roger Schmidt in his definition of ritual, avers that it is holy rites formalized and symbolic actions which direct people towards an experience of the sacred whether or not the sacred is conceived as a personal being(s) or impersonal creative process. Mircea Eliade's definition denotes "a re-enactment of sacred prototypes the repetition of the action of divine beings or mythical ancestors," a definition which seems to highlight the function and significance of rituals in the dominant religious of the world-Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

According to E. S. Akama, ritual is said to mean "the acceptable manner of behavior or action by which people live their religious or social life". Levis-Strauss (1981) defines ritual as "words tittered, gestures performed and objects manipulated (of which) gestures, objects are in loco verb; they are a substitute for words is not a reaction to life, it is a reaction to what thought has made of life.

Ritual Typology and its Interplay with Symbols in Religion

Here, we shall be concerned with types of rituals and how rituals interplay or maintain a close connection with symbols in religious ceremonies.

Types of Ritual

Definitely there are great varieties of rituals in almost all religions and culture. Each of the ritual type is said to be responsible for the controlling, governing or guiding the different modes of worship, celebrations and living of the worshippers. It is worthy of note that ritual classification has always proven some what difficult due to an overlap in the intent and meaning between all ritual types. However, ritual can be classified or distinguished thus:

- (i) **Healing Ritual:** This is specially put in place in order to emancipate man from all manner of sickness and evil spirit. In order to effect this, the specialist uses various techniques such as application of anointing (Holy) oil, water, laying on of hands and the invocation of the sacred forces believed to be present and especially potent at such instances of the invocation. This is both used for special persons and community because of its efficacy and value.
- (ii) **Wholistic or Personal Ritual:** This type of ritual has reference to corporate domestic or personal. This implies that it is identified with the community, so it is actually performed in the public at specially designated places (e.g. church and shrine).
- (iii) **Festive Rituals:** This type is performed during special occasions of celebrations which may include Christmas, Easter, or New Yam Festival, other referred to as love feast: zia *Wereloo* – Ogoni, *Azajoku* – Igbo, Ikwerre *Egelege* – New Yam Festival and Wrestling

and *Arungungu*fishing festival – Yoruba, respectively to mention a few.

It is worthy to note that during and of such special occasions, which kicks off usually very early in the day, the formal opening is done by the chief priest in which case he is expected to perform the opening rites, at the specially designated place.

- (iv) **Ritual (Rites) of Passage:** Rites or ritual of passage is a term invented and employed by the social anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep to mean “promotion and insurance of the period of change in a person’s life time”. This type of ritual is very important especially as it marks the turning point in man’s life namely, birth, puberty, childhood, adulthood, marriages and death or funeral.

The roles and positive impacts of rituals can not in anyway be over emphasized since it is a potent form of action. Infact, it is religion in action. Looking at the positive impacts of rituals in the light of Benjamin C. Ray’s theory: “ritual is a way of communicating with the divine for the purpose of changing human situation”, it could be said that his ritual definition is synonymous (synchronizes) with that of Beattie as the definitions of these two eminent scholars stress so much on the two important dimension of ritual that is, what it says and what it does. Now, talking about the roles and positive impacts of ritual as can be seen, ritual has to a large extent impacted positively on the religious, socio-cultural and overall lives of mankind. Now, again, the facts of its roles and positive impacts in terms of what it says and what it does as realized in the definitions of the two eminent scholars of shared perspectives are as follows:

- i. Though astronomers and surveyors have been interpreting stone age since the mid 1960s, as solar and

- lunar observatory designed to mark the extreme point of the solar and lunar cycles for calendrical purposes, archaeologists have in their own capacity challenged these speculations, insisted that the monument was primarily ritual and magical in nature.
- ii. In religious matters, everybody and Africans in particular exist and search for meaning as well as the resolution of conflict. They undertake such searches as they are ritualistically and actually involved with changing and moving concerns of life.
For the African, the cosmos is the place where a special quality or sacred power influences everything. Through sacrifice, divination or the intensity of the dance, the consciousness of a devotee can be so transformed that the boundary between the ordinary and the extra ordinary worlds become blurred. For example, with the rhythm of drums, persons can literally dance in order to tap divine power; that is, persons can “dance out their desires” until they are “mounted by a god” into possession of a special identity, power or consciousness. Dance among Africans is sometimes a ritual technique used to discern the will or intention of a god, a technique employed to ensure that order is maintained or a fundamental conflict is resolved.
- iii. Rituals help to ease tensed situation in human lives.
- iv. Rituals play a vital role when at loss or in a state of hopelessness. For it gives man consolation and encouragement to the lost and hopelessness. For example, ashes for ashes at funerals in Africa.
- v. Human problems or predicaments such as barenness, poverty, diseases and the like can be overcome by rituals.

- vi. Ritual helps to make life emotionally meaningful especially as it frees man from existing in a more seemingly abstract and drab environment.
 - vii. Infact, ritual helps in the promotion and enhancement of religious and social solidarity and integration of Christianity, Judaism and Islam respectively. Rituals, therefore, are looked upon as mechanisms that ensured and enhanced societal unity especially as it sustains a society's equilibrium and secure solidarity among its members.
 - viii. Ritual as a symbolic dramatization of fundamental needs, often conveys the sense of a procedure or plan whereby certain benefits are derived from a ritual or symbolic undertaking.
- (c) Through the symbolic orritual dramatization of a problem, the power of a deity (God/god) can be cast off and the sufferer is relieved of his burden and begins his healing or restoration.

These are some views some scholars have proposed on rituals, nowlet us look at some specific ritual manifestations of *Ali* Deity in Ikwerre.

The Various Manifestations of *Ali* Deity in Ikwerre

In Ikwerre theology, the concept of *Ali* deity is complex and mirrors Ikwerre socio-political organization. Many Ikwerre village groups are characterized by several levels of socio-political organizations. Thus, several different extended families make up a lineage, several lineages make up a village; and several villages make up the village group. Each of these levels of socio-political unit has its own *Ali* deity. Thus *Ali* is thought of sometimes as one and at other times as having multiplicity of aspects and manifestations. Thus as *Ali* Ikwerre, she is thought of as one. However, there is the multitude of *Ali ezi*, protectors of the numerous extended family households, the *Ali* of the various lineages, the *Ali* of

the various villages and finally the multitude of *Ali ibi*, the *Ali* of the various farm lands. In which of these guises she is thought of and addressed, depends on the social and occupational context, Wali Mene (2011) our informant, avers.

Since the distribution of *Ali* deity mirrors the socio-political organization of the Ikwerre people, it is not surprising, therefore, to note that as yet there is no single shrine priesthood dedicated to *Ali* Ikwerre rather a multiplicity of shrines designated in each of the village group. In Ikwerre socio-political life, the priest of *Ali* is usually the head of the socio-political unit, combining both religious and political functions. Since the Ikwerre have never been politically unified, it therefore, follows that there is no shrine and priest dedicated to *Ali* Ikwerre. The Ikwerre themselves often talk of and invoke *Ali* Ikwerre, especially as a means of protection and a source of ethnic pride when they are spiritually troubled by persons of other ethnic groups and when suddenly confronted with danger, even when they are fully aware that such a deity has never been established in Ikwerre land. Thus *Ali* Ikwerre deity exists only in the minds of the Ikwerre, it cannot be located in space, and thus has no shrine and priest.

There is also ambiguity surrounding the nature and person of *Ali* deity. Most often *Ali* deity is conceived in feminine terms. As the overall guarantor of agricultural fertility, the Ikwerre believe that it is from her ‘womb’ she brings forth farm yield. It is also pertinent to note that in some parts of Ikwerre, it is very essential that the child’s navel string be buried in his home earth and a plantain tree referred to as *okinimaini* (plantain of the navel string) planted on it. No matter where the child is born, it is considered necessary that the navel string be brought home and be buried in the home earth. It is generally believed that the navel string which hitherto connected the child to the mother in the womb now connects it to the ‘mother earth’. Moreover, in Ikwerre, when

a child suddenly slips from its mother and falls to the ground, the mother quickly reaches for the child. She takes a little of the earth and rubs on the child's head as she addresses the earth deity: 'Mother earth, do not kill, it is your child'! Even *Nye na kwa Ali*, the priest of the earth deity, who usually must be a male, often sees his relationship with the deity as that between husband and wife, the priest being the husband of his wife, *Ali* deity (Tasie, 2007 : 24).

In spite of this general notion among the Ikwerre that *Ali* deity is feminine, the people still perceive and address it in masculine terms. For the ordinary and majority of the Ikwerre when confronted with sudden danger, the first instinct is to exclaim: *Ali Ikwerre ndam ikweoo!* Ikwerre earth deity, my father forbids! This and many other similar expressions clearly depicts *Ali* as among the Ikwerre as masculine. *Ali*, as the arch deity of the Ikwerre, with all its feminine qualities, in a largely patrilineal and male dominated society, clearly depicts how powerful and dominant the deity is.

Construction and Symbolism of *Ali* Shrine

As we noted above, there are different manifestations of *Ali* deity following Ikwerre socio-political organizations. Thus there is *Ali* deity at the extended family group level known as *Aliezi* and *Ali* deity at the village group. There is also the multitude of *Ali* of the various farm lands known as *Ali ibi*. A new *Ali* shrine for the village group is usually established at the foundation of the village group. The choice of the village to enshrine the deity is usually the decision of the village group founder or preferably that of his eldest son. When decision is reached to establish *Ali* deity, message is passed round to all bonafide sons of the village group. Each of the village making up the village group is expected to participate effectively by contributing cash with which to purchase items required for the ritual and to offset general cost

of establishing the shrine. The cost of the task is generally borne by the male members of the village group. Some of the important items required are *owhor* (staff of authority), earthen pot, *ekperi* (basket), *aro* (spear), *ikeni* tree, hen, she goat, a card of female fish, white native chalk, yellow native chalk, kola nut, alligator pepper, bitter kola, locally distilled gin, palm wine and other sundry items.

When all the necessary items required for the establishment of *Ali* deity have been assembled medicine man cum diviner, who should preferably hail from among the people and knowledgeable in the people's custom and tradition begins the ritual of enshrining *Ali* deity. First, he has to determine through divination the most appropriate site to establish the shrine. For the shrine must not be established in a place considered to be evil forest or a burial ground or generally a place that has been desecrated in one way or the other in the past. The spirits will lead the diviner to a location considered to be the choice of *Ali*. Most often the choice is found situated somewhere in the village square or close to the village main market. When the site has been determined and cleared then begins the rites of enshrining *Ali*. The kolanut is broken and shared out along with alligator pepper and bitter kola. The *owhor* holders representing each of the villages making up the village group as a mark of respect and complete submission to *Ali* deposit their ancestral staff and cap which are the symbols of their office at the spot where *Ali* is to be enshrined. The medicine man pours a little of the local distilled gin and palm wine into a receptacle and then begins the ritual by libating to the ancestors and other patron deities of the village group. As he calls each of the deities by name he pours libation interspersed with incantations. When he is certain that all the deities have been invoked, the *ikeni* tree is pinned to the ground at the spot where *Ali* is to be enshrined. The earthen pot is half buried before the *ikeni*. The *ekperi*

(basket) is placed beside the *ikeni*; the *aro* (spear) and *owhor* (staff of authority) are deposited inside the basket. The hen and the she goat are slaughtered and their blood allowed dripping on the emblems. A fish is collected from the card by the medicine man which he crushes into pieces and scattered before the emblems. A piece of the *oro* (white native chalk) is collected by the medicine man which he crushes in his palm and the residue blown at the ritual emblems. Also, a little of the *odo* (yellow native chalk) is crushed and the residue blown at the ritual emblems. At this stage this assemblage of *Ali* shrine is not yet imbued with spiritual powers.

The *Ali* shrine thus constituted needs to be activated for the people to enjoy its full potentials. The ritual of inviting *Ali* to dwell in its shrine is performed at the spot where the shrine is located. The medicine man once more pours libation before the assemblage of emblems inviting the ancestors and every known deity within the people's cosmos to witness the ceremony. At the invitation of each deity libation is poured and some incantations muttered. Afterwards, the medicine man solemnly addresses the shrine in the full glare of everybody gathered thus:

This is the *Ali* deity of (he mentions the village group in whose honour the deity is being established). Today, we have come to enshrine you. As custodian of morality, justice and uprightness, anyone who does evil, kills a kinsman, either through sorcery or through any other means, do not hesitate to expose him. Anyone who engages in sexual intercourse in the farm or in the bush or has carnal knowledge of a relation, *Ali* deity exposes such a person. Anyone who commits evil and denies, he swears before your shrine, may you kill him. Let the sky bear witness, let the ancestors and

other patron deities bear witness. Let the people here gathered bear witness.

The people will respond:

Owee! So be it.

Afterwards, another hen and a she goat are slaughtered and their blood is sprinkled on the shrine. As the medicine man performs this ritual he intermittently mutters some incantations and invocations; inviting the spirit of *Ali* to come and dwell in the emblems. When this rite is completed the sacrificial animals are cooked and eaten by those present. A little of the fat is used to rub on the emblems and some little particles of the meat are scattered before the emblems, signifying the ritual consumption of the sacrificial victims by *Ali* deity.

The ritual of establishment and activation of the shrine concluded, the medicine man will proceed to perform the ritual of handing over the custodianship of the deity to the priest. The priest as earlier pointed out is selected from among the people. In nearly all cases, he is selected from among the family of the descendants of the village group founder. It may not necessarily be the eldest but one among the male adults who is the choice of *Ali*. The would-be-priest is presented before the people gathered by the medicine man. As a mark of respect and acknowledgement of his superiority, the other village heads present remove their chieftaincy caps and drop their *owhor* (staff of office) before *Ali* shrine while the would-be-priest still wears his own cap. After admonishing him on the importance of his office; for his office is one that requires decorum and moral probity, the medicine man performs a purificatory ritual on the would-be-priest. The essence of this ritual is to remove all impurities and make the would-be-priest ritually pure for the task ahead. Having completed this cleansing ritual, then looking at the proposed priest, the medicine man addresses him thus: "Today the priesthood of

Ali has fallen into your hands. Keep your hands clean; if not let *Ali* kill you. Let sky and the departed ancestors bear witness. Let all who are here gathered bear witness". The medicine man hands over to the priest three important ritual items namely: *owhorAli* (the symbol of *Ali* deity), *oji* (rattle staff) and a specially made three legged chair. The priest receives *owhorAli* (the symbol of *Ali* deity) with both hands. Receiving the *owhor* with both hands is an important convention which must not be violated. There is a saying among the Ikwerre that no matter how small the *owhor* is; it is carried with both hands. The *owhor* now received by the priest marks the end of the installation ritual.

In addition to the *Ali* deity of the village group which oversees the collective morality and spiritual well being of the village group, there is *Aliezi*, the *Ali* deity of the numerous extended family units. The installation of *Ali* is similar in many respects with the installation of *Ali* deity of the village group. The major variation, however, lies in the paraphernalia of the shrine. The *Aliezi* shrine is a simple collection of *aja* tree pinned to the earth, placed before it is an earthen pot half buried into the ground and filled with water. Its custodian is usually the eldest bona fide son of the extended family, who also doubles as the *owhor* holder of the extended family. It is enshrined at a corner of the homestead, preferably at the main entrance to the homestead. The *owhor* holder combines the duty of caring for the ancestral cult with that of *Aliezi*. Finally, there is also the installation of *Aliibi*, the *Ali* of the numerous farm lands. *Aliibi* deity is usually enshrined at the main entrance into the farm land or tucked away at a corner of the farm. Not every farmer enshrines *Aliibi*; the choice is often at the discretion of the farmer. But most often accomplished farmers find it necessary to install this deity along side *Ajokwuji*, the god of yam, for bountiful yield. While *Ajokwuji*

is primarily concerned with bountiful yam yield, *Aliibi* guarantees overall bountiful yields of all the farm crops.

The make up of the shrine of *Aliibi* is the replica of *Aliezi*, which we have earlier described, the major variation, as we are to see later, is only in the ritual items required and mode of worship. Moreover, in the case of *Aliibi*, the farmer is the priest offering sacrifices and rituals at the appropriate season.

The items used in the construction and installation of *Ali* deity are highly symbolic. The *owhor* used in this ritual is usually referred to as *owhorAli*. It is *Ali's* instrument of justice. The *oji* (rattle staff) carried by the priest of *Ali* wherever he goes on official duty is used to announce the arrival and presence of the deity. The *aroibe* (sacred spear) represents the wrath of *Ali*, a symbolic instrument *Ali* uses to mete out punishment to those who flout his moral code. The *ikeni* tree, pinned to the earth, which is expected to grow into a giant tree and remains among the people for years to come is a constant reminder to the people of the ever presence of *Ali*. It is also a symbol of strength signifying that *Ali* is a deity to be reckoned with. The clay pot half buried into the earth acts as the drinking vessel of the deity. The *odo* (native yellow chalk) is expected to provide the right unobtrusiveness required for the ritual. *Oro* (native white chalk) is a symbol of ritual purity, the *ekperi* (basket) is the receptacle for the sacred emblems and other sacred ritual items of *Ali*.

Names Associated with *Ali* Earth Goddess

To show the uniqueness of *Ali* (the earth) and how powerful and strong their faith is in the divinity, certain names are associated with *Ali* such as:

- a) NwoAliorWali: this means the child of *Ali*, the earth deity.
- b) NneAli – meaning, the mother of the earth
- c) *Ali Buru Oma*– meaning, the earth is good

- d) *AliOma* – meaning, the good earth
- e) *AliWhuo* – the earth does not vanish etc.
- f) *Nneali* – this means mother of the earth
- g) *Aliburuoma* – this means earth is good
- h) *Alikaru* – this means the earth has spoken
- i) *Amadiali* – meaning, free born son of *Ali* earth.
- j) *Wamadiali* – meaning, the earth will protect me or see me through
- k) *Alikornwo* – meaning, the earth cannot stay without a child, more or less children are from the earth.
- l) *Diali* – meaning, bona-fide born of the earth
- m) *Okniali* - meaning, old community created by *Ali*
- n) *Alimini* – meaning, earth community cohabiting with water
- o) *Elimgbu* – meaning, community that *Ali* integrates
- p) *Eliohani* – meaning, earth community watched by the Ancestors
- q) *Alimene*– this means the earth has done well
- r) *Oroabali* – meaning, community that the earth watches, etc

Coming down to the subject under discuss, rites relating to *Ali* could be described under three sub-headings, namely: calendrical, transitional and occasional.

Rites of Transition

One important rite of transition that has direct relationship with *Ali* deity is marriage. Among the Ikwerre, marriage is an important instrument in perpetuating the family and the lineage, for it is through it that legitimate children are born who will carry on the family or lineage name as the case may be. That is why before marriage is contracted, adequate information on the background of the bride must be obtained. For instance, people have to inquire whether there is history of

insanity, abominable diseases and such likes in the family of the bride. If the findings are positive, the family of the would-be-groom goes ahead to contract the marriage.

Before the actual marriage is contracted, the ancestors and *Ali*, especially *Aliezi* are invoked to bless the union with long life and fruits of the womb, and libation poured out to them. This may not necessarily be performed in the shrine of *Aliezi* but in the house of the suitor when he brings his fiancée home to seek his father's consent. If he approves of the bride, the eldest man in the family, who invariably is the priest of *Aliezi*, is called upon to libate to the ancestors and *Aliezi* and implore them to bless the union with long life and children. Before the marriage itself is contracted, the suitor sends some drinks to the patrilineal kinsmen of his bride, sending it directly to the *owhor* holder, who, as we earlier noted, also doubles as *Aliezi* priest; who inturn sends for his kinsmen. When they are gathered in the homestead of the priest, he presents the drinks, telling the kinsmen of its purpose: namely that one of their own female members of the lineage is about to be married off. Some of the drinks are poured out by the priest in libation. As he libates, he prays to *Aliezi* and the ancestors thus:

Aliezi and our ancestors, this is the drink which our in-law has brought to marry one of your daughters. You all should partake of this drink. Drink and bless them abundantly. Give them long life and fruits of the womb.

The remaining drink is shared out to all the kinsmen present.

Another very important rite of transition relating to *Ali* deity bothers on digging of grave for the burial of deceased village or lineage members. When the news of death has

formally been made public, the priest of the lineage or village head where the death has occurred is sent for to ritually mark the spot where the grave will be dug if the earth is to receive the corpse. The Ikwerre believe that there is a mystical union between the priest and the earth deity, and that the former acts as the physical manifestation of the latter; hence the need to seek his approval. To carry out this task, the priest is presented on arrival with a knife (which custom prescribes that he should take home or which may be redeemable with a sum of money) and drinks such as, a bottle of local distilled gin and a jar of palm wine. Other items that are offered to the priest include a sum of money and a plate of fried fish or meat. With the knife, the priest marks a spot already chosen by the family of the deceased, and then pours out drinks in libation to the earth deity and the ancestors, begging them to receive one of their own.

Occasional Rites

There are many occasions, such as to seek favour, to seek protection against evil spirits, witches and other evil minded persons, to seek healing, to seek for long life and prosperity from *Ali*. Most frequent and important, is dearth of children in which the help of *Ali* is solicited. One important attribute of *Ali*, is her ability to give children to barren couples. As mother goddess, her fecundity is highly revered and barren women in search of the fruit of the womb often throng to her shrine. Thus a couple in search of children may approach the priest of *Ali*, with kolanut and a bottle of local distilled gin. The priest takes the couple to the shrine of *Ali*. Here the kolanut is broken and a lobe of it is served *Ali* by throwing it before the shrine. Also a little of the drink is poured in a drinking gourd and poured out in libation to *Ali*. As the priest pours the libation, he presents the request of the couple before *Ali* and prays that they should be met.

Afterwards, the couple may make a vow of a goat or fowl as their means may permit. If their request is eventually met, the couple returns to the priest to fulfill their vow. The animal is brought to the *owhor* holder, who takes it to the shrine of *Ali*. Here standing before the shrine, he libates and addresses *Ali*, telling her that the request of the couple has been met and that they have come to fulfill their vow. The animal is dispatched by slitting its throat and its blood smeared on the emblem of *Ali*. The meat is then cooked and eaten by all present.

Children born out of the benevolence of *Ali* are often named to reflect the kind-heartedness of *Ali*. Such names among the Ikwerre include Wali, Amadiali, Alioma and so on. There are other numerous occasions such as when a man has achieved a rare feat like building a house, killing a prized animal, a woman delivering successfully without mishap, etc. that gratitude of thanks giving has to be shown to *Ali*. In any of these cases, the devotee goes to the priest of *Ali*, with whatever his means may permit ranging from fowl, ram to goat to thank her. This ritual of thanksgiving is performed by the priest on behalf of the devotee. As the devotee presents the gift to the priest; the priest will in-turn present the gift to the deity after he has blessed the devotee. Prayer is also said to *Ali*, thanking her for protecting and guiding the devotee to success. *Ali* is also implored to continue to bring success to the way of the devotee. At the end of the prayer, the sacrificial animal is slaughtered, the blood is allowed to drip on the emblems of *Ali*, and the flesh of the sacrificial victim is cooked and eaten by all present.

Outside these merry making occasional rites relating to *Ali*, there are innumerable rites bothering on the infringements of moral code in which the help of *Ali* is solicited to restore the moral order. *Ali* is the guardian of Ikwerre moral code and it is vexed by actions which infringe on this moral order. As

the guardian of morality, *Ali* punishes offenders with ailments. Notable among such ailments are *nziza*, generalized oedema, *ibi*, elephantiasis of the scrotum and *nchicha*, leprosy. Even certain deaths are believed to have been caused by *Ali* because the victim might have defiled *Ali* in one way or the other. Such deaths include women dying in pregnancy, those who committed suicide, death resulting from fall from a tree, those who died in the bush, those who died in the seventh native month, considered to be a holy month and those who died with their face bowed to the ground. These categories of death are considered evil and are believed to have emanated from *Ali*. When they occur, special propitiatory rituals are performed to placate *Ali*, if the earth must receive them and before necessary burial rites are accorded the deceased.

For those who died with their face bowed to the ground, those who died of elephantiasis of the scrotum and those died of leprosy, elaborate purificatory rites are performed to cleanse the corpse of impurities before they are buried. The purificatory items may include sheep, tortoise, white native chalk, yellow native kolanut, alligator pepper, a jar of palm wine, a bottle of local distilled gin, four tubers of yam, a special breed of fowl whose feathers are always at erect, a special breed of fowl whose neck resembles that of vulture, a cock, a card of dried female fish and mudskipper. On the day of the propitiatory ritual, the priest of the earth, where the death occurred comes to the bereaved family, in whose compound a shallow grave is dug. The ritual items are brought forward and the priest standing before the hole breaks the kolanut and prays. As he prays, he libates to the earth deity and the ancestors, after the purificatory prayer, the sheep, the tortoise, cock and the two special breed of fowls are slaughtered and their blood are allowed to drain into the hole and then covered with earth. With this ritual, the earth has now been cleansed. The remains of the sacrificial animals are

cooked along with the four tubers of yam and eaten by all present. It is only then that the earth can receive the corpse. However, for those who died of elephantiasis of the scrotum, in addition to this purificatory ritual, a special medicine man is called upon, who operates upon the deceased before he is buried.

For the category of those who died of generalized oedema, the Ikwerre consider the victim to have committed some serious offence against *Ali*. Since the victim died as a result of offence against the earth, the latter must not receive the body. The corpse is left above the ground in the evil forest to rot away. When it is obvious that the victim of generalized oedema is about to die, he is removed from the homestead and kept at the back of the compound, but far removed from the homestead. When the victim finally dies, an elevated platform is built, and the corpse placed upon it. A fire is lit beneath the platform and several medicinal herbs are thrown in. This produces a thick cloud of smoke which it is hoped will help reduce the corpse to its normal size. This is known as *orha kor nye zaru aza* (drying the victim of generalized oedema). If the corpse is reduced after one or two days, it is brought back to the homestead and accorded the necessary burial rites. But should it not be reduced, the purificatory ritual, which we earlier described, is performed and the corpse is brought down and sent to the evil forest. In the evil forest, the corpse is not interred, but left above the ground to rot.

On the other hand, those who died in pregnancy or child birth, the purificatory rite, we described earlier, is performed before the corpse is buried. More especially for those who died in pregnancy, the foetus is not buried along with the corpse. A medicine man is called upon who operates upon the corpse and removes the foetus. Afterward, the deceased and the dead foetus are buried in separate graves in

the homestead. The deceased woman may be accorded full burial rite befitting her status.

One who dies in the bush is buried at the spot where death occurred. Similarly, in the case of one who falls from a tree, the tree is cut down and the victim is buried at its base. Likewise one who is crushed by a falling tree is buried at the spot where death occurred. However, the earth must have been cleansed through the purificatory rituals, earlier described.

Conclusion

Modernity and Christianity have brought in new forms of culture into Ikwerre land. Consequently, many Ikwerre people especially Christians no longer participate in worship and practices related to *Alicult* since they are considered to be “primitive”, “heathen”, “fetish” and belonging to an uncultured way of life. They are now demonized as practices that have to be exorcised by Jesus power and the Holy Spirit. Hence, an intrusive religion like Christianity with a revolutionary ethic has become the guiding principle of the present generation of Ikwerre youth. The people are in danger of losing their own identity, and Ikwerre people with a distinct culture. And no society can accept changes uncritically without committing cultural suicide (Nduka, 1977). Even though the people are on the verge of facing serious identity crisis in course of time, due to Christianity and globalization, there is the possibility of maintaining their age old cultural identity as witnessed in the new religious movements that source, derive and mine their idiom from the interior of African world view (Kalu, 2008).

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