

The Ogoni *Amanikpo* secret society: Towards the search for secret knowledge, powers, and esoteric tradition

Deezia, Burabari Sunday, M.A., Ph.D. candidate

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Humanities

Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

email: burabari.deezia@iaue.edu.ng

Tel: +2347068015113

Abstract

Human quest for esoteric knowledge of the transcendental and mundane worlds, as well as the struggle towards acquiring them through membership in secret societies has become a worldwide phenomenon. The *Amanikpo* secret society in Nigeria, being one of the most influential cults within the Ogoni socio-religious milieu, reenacts both political and cosmological order in Ogoni communities. However, in recent years, those noble ideas of *Amanikpo* have not only been misinterpreted by the emerging trends of other secret societies, but threatened by modernization and its agents. Premised on the above, this paper examines the religious-philosophical foundation, and functions of *Amanikpo* in the Ogoni traditional society. Using the ethnographic method, the study discovers that despite their cryptic activities, *Amanikpo* had (and possibly still has) a significance beyond mere entertainment, as its relevance in indigenous education, spiritual development and the preservation of Ogoni spiritual and cultural values still holds sway.

Keywords: *Amanikpo*, *Naabiradee*, Ogoni, secret society

Received: 26.February.2024

Accepted: 25.April.2024

doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/aa.v22i2.2>

Introduction

Humans have always been interested in their own existence and reason for being on this earth. They continue to make efforts to keep control over their surroundings and its resources as well as to link the visible world with the invisible and unknowable. Some join secret societies with the idea that real practical power is not only exercised via politics but also through esoteric means with transcendental significance. They do this in search of power and esoteric understanding of the mundane and transcendental realms (Aderibigbe and Oguntola-Laguda, 2015).

Secret societies are a long-standing cultural tradition in West Africa. They can be generally divided into two types: totemic secret societies associated with kinship connections and religious secret societies linked to deities or ancestors. They could also be classified into imported secret societies, which have a Western or Asian orientation, and indigenous secret societies, which have a traditional origin and are supported by spiritual and mystical powers present in the people's traditional religion (Aderibigbe and Oguntola-Laguda, 2015). There are also "refined" versions of aboriginal groups that have undergone reformation. Like the Ogoni *N-kwo* secret society in Nigeria, this is a polished version of *Amanikpo*. Because of this, portrayals of West African political relations, social structure, economics, warfare, arts, and cosmologies are always tinged with the idea of secret societies.

Several Natural Rulers were renowned secret society leaders during the pre-colonial era, encircling themselves with a web of ceremonial sanctions and using their power to guard their region, turn settlers and captives of war into obedient subjects (Bledsoe, 1984). As such, secret societies were viewed as an organized manifestation of local religion and were compared to a concealed government that exercised power with supernatural authorization. The missionary-ethnologist Diedrick Wester Mann observed among the Epelle of Liberia in 1921 that "the tribesmen's religious activities

are entirely cult ceremonies." It was in this view that, Schwab prefaced his detailed account of the Poro and Sande by saying the following:

We will start with cults since they are where the religious life of the tribesmen is nurtured, developed, and given the chance to express itself fully (Schwab and Harley, 1947, p. 55).

Secret societies played a significant role in the religious and social lives of Africans, and as a result, they had a great deal of influence in their communities. There are around a hundred traditional societies among the Ogoni natives in Nigeria. While some are open, others are secret, but the bulk of them participate in the numerous feasts and rites connected to the Ogoni deities and ancestors. *Amanikpo*, being the top secret society in Ogoni had significant positive effects and helped community members adhere to the society's conventions and principles. The leaders of the *Amanikpo* secret society were custodians of ancient wisdom who taught their initiates the virtues of love, humility, responsibility, and respect for the gods. Their operations are however the matter of conjecture because the *Amanikpo* secret society has restricted and tight membership requirements. While many people believe that *Amanikpo*'s initiatives have a favorable impact on Ogoni's growth and development. Some argue that *Amanikpo* society was purposefully constructed for nefarious purposes, and hence connotes evil. Others claimed that *Amanikpo*'s lofty principles and functions had been tainted by other secret societies' rising trends, as well as modernity and its agents (Kpone-Tonwe, 2021). This study is organized to examine the socio-religious and philosophical underpinnings, historical traditions, and functions of the *Amanikpo* secret society, as well as the continuity and discontinuity in its practices.

Defining secret societies

Some people associate the concept of *secret society* with an exclusive cabal that meets behind smoke-filled doors to discuss world dominance and manipulative strategies.

Others imagine solitary men (and occasionally women) gathering in exotic attire to carry out colorful rituals, communicate secret information, and confer ornate but illegible titles upon one another (Aderibigbe and Oguntola-Laguda, 2015). A secret society is a group or organization whose operations are veiled in mystery and secrecy. Secret societies, according to a social science dictionary, are organizations in which hidden rituals, symbols, signs, medicines, and other material accessories are fundamental to the purposes of secret societies, which derive psychological value from keeping them concealed (Gould and Kolb, 1964). Similar to this, Hammond notes that only a small portion of the eligible population can become a member of a secret society; members fiercely guard the secrecy surrounding their rituals, which are thought to enhance members' supernatural abilities; and non-initiates are typically only allowed to learn enough about them to be intimidated, impressed, and subsequently persuaded to join (Hammond, 1971). In other words, these groups make pacts to stick together through good times and bad to accomplish their objectives and make sure that no members betray one another. The tenets and ethical rules of these societies control the social life of its members (Idowu, 1996).

The Ogoni as a people: Towards their origin and migration

The majority of Nigeria's Niger Delta historians concur that the area was at various points populated by waves of migrant people from different parts of Africa. On the other hand, there is much disagreement among academics over the origins and migration of the Ogoni indigenous people. As a result, ethnologists disagree over the Ogoni people's exact origins. This is attributed to the near absence of written sources that serve as the foundation for conventional history and the near absence of reliable oral traditions that could shed light on the origins and migration of the Ogoni (Deezia, 2020). Consequently, each author's perspective on the source of migration for the Ogoni stock would be different because there has not been a thorough archaeological examination that would pinpoint a particular source of migration for the Ogoni.

Modern research indicates that Ogoni was founded between the 12th and the 15th centuries (Yirakina, 2010). According to the linguistic studies by Kay Williamson, the Ogoni are one of Nigeria's earliest immigrants, having arrived in the Niger Delta in 15 BC (Williamson, 1985). The Ogoni indigenous people had lived in this location for a long time as farmers and fishermen before the colonial invasion in 1901 and had established a highly organized socio-political organization.

According to current studies and oblique allusions research works, the Ogoni were among the first settlers in the region that is now known as the Niger Delta region. The origins of the Ogoni have been the subject of various theories. Several people proclaimed the Aboriginal theory, according to which the Ogoni people sprung from divine beings. It asserts that the Ogoni were the first to be created by Kawaa-Bari (The Supreme Being), and that they did not just arise out of thin air. Professor M. D. W. Jeffrey, who conducted an oral investigation with the locals in 1957 and was the first to propose this notion, provided support for it with contemporary archeological results. Unfortunately, there is no proof to support this claim (Deezia, 2024).

The Ghana/Namma Theory holds that the Ogoni may have come from Ghana by chance during the bustling slave trade (Loolo, 1981). According to this theory, the ancient Ghana Empire—which disintegrated around 1240 A.D.—was the Ogoni people's original home. The Methodist Mission's Rev. Paul Kingston, who was based at Kono in the 1920s, was the major proponent of this viewpoint. According to another story, a group of families departed ancient Ghana at the same time (1240 A.D.) in large canoes in search of a place to live on the coast (Igbara, 1982; Kpone-Tonwe, 1987; Kpone-Tonwe, 2021). Oral tradition claims that the Ogoni people stopped in Bonny and stayed there for about 200 years. According to oral history, they were compelled to live in their riverine towns of Namma and Kugba when their boats berthed on the Eastern Niger Delta's coasts, and from there they dispersed to where they are now. However, modern Ghana was, until 1957 known and called Gold Coast. The alleged

similarity between the words "Khana" and "Ghana" must have existed before Kwame Nkrumah's campaign for Gold Coast independence. Consequently, any assertion that contemporary Ghana is the ancient homeland of the Ogoni is thus false. The Ogoni are claimed to have fled to the Eastern Delta in the 14th century as a result of Ghanaian (people from the Gold Coast) feuds. Even Southern Ghana's history was relatively peaceful during this time. So, it is imperative to treat the Ghana fiasco with the utmost care.

Several African and European researchers investigated the various linguistic groups in West Africa from an anthropological perspective, and they proposed the idea of an Eastern origin. C. Ifemesia is one of these academics. She states that "the Ogoni, Andoni, Ogbia, and others who speak languages related to those of the Cross Rivers area are in the Eastern Niger Delta" (Ifemesia, 1978). These languages are categorized as belonging to the Benue-Congo subgroup of the Niger-Congo language family. This theory was supported by E. J. Alagoa, who contended that the Ogoni and other South-Eastern people are an outgrowth of Benue-Congo speakers who border both Igbo and Ijo (Alagoa, 1972). He regrettably found that many people no longer recall East-to-West migration traditions, despite linguistic evidence to the contrary. Some of the intellectuals of the Ogoni people believed that they could simply attribute any direction as a site of migration, even when there was no proof.

Oral tradition holds that the region's first settlers most likely came from an unidentified location through the Cross-River region, where Efik speakers presently reside (Ikoro, 1996). Williamson uses linguistic evidence to support his assertion that the Ogoni people may have coexisted and shared a language with speakers of the modern Efik, Ibibio, and Obolo, languages in the area of the Benue-Congo confluence, the purported ancestral homeland of present-day Benue-Congo speakers (Williamson and Kiyoshi, 1968). The Obolo (Andoni) history in relation to the Ogoni history shows that the two tribes share a shared ancestral origin, according to Ejituwu, a well-known Professor of history in Nigeria, who made this determination to support the

aforementioned argument (Ejituwu, 1977). This suggests that the Ogoni and the Efik, sometimes known as Ibibio, originated from the same source. Many of Ogoni's masquerade and secret societies have their origins in Efik and Ibibio. Examples include the notorious *Ikpong* Masquerade of Kpean Community in Ken-Khana Kingdom, and the *Amanikpo* Secret Society, which functioned similarly to the *Ekong* Masquerade of Ibiono-Ibom in Akwa-Ibom State. The similarities in their languages support this particular viewpoint even more.

The Ogoni indigenous people, who now occupy the Easter part of Niger Delta upland as a distinct ethnic group within Nigeria's Southern region, are said to have settled in the six kingdoms of Babbe, Eleme, Gokana, Ken-Khana, Nyor-Khana, Tai, and Oyii-gbo, as well as Ban-goi (special unit). Her territory is located between latitudes 4^o. 05 and 4^o. 31 north of the equator, and longitudes 7^o. 10 and 7^o. 30 east of the equator. The Ogoni people occupy about 404 square miles of the coastal plains in the Niger Delta (Ogoni Bill of Rights, 1991), with a population of about 500,000 (National Population Commission, 2006), and over a million in 2006 census in Nigeria; their current population is over five million, based on their voting strength in Nigeria's 2019 general election.

***Amanikpo* secret society: The historical background**

The *Amanikpo* secret society, sometimes referred to as *zim bibi* (Ibibio cult), is the most powerful and esteemed cult ever connected to Ogoni traditional religion and culture. As a result, nobody is certain exactly when *Amanikpo* was founded. According to oral tradition, *Amanikpo* entered Ogoniland through a woman who had traveled to Akparakpe in Ibibio land to sell clay pots, which was the sole respectable trade at the time. She mistakenly wandered into a gathering of women performing the *Ekpe*, also known as "the *Akparikpo* secret society," a name that may have given rise to *Amanikpo*, as the cult was later known in Ogoni (Nwideede 2019, oral interview).

By the same female trader, *Amanikpo* first reached a village in the Ken-Khana kingdom called Eweh, from which point it spread to all of Babbe's communities. According to oral tradition, *Amanikpo* was initially established in Luawii (the traditional headquarter of Babbe kingdom), and Bo-ue before spreading to other villages in the Babbe kingdom and Nyor-Khana kingdom in Ogoniland. Subsequently, it was introduced in the Tai kingdom to Gbam and then Kpite. The oral history claims that the daughter of bari-Gokana, named *Naabiradee*, was detained in Kpite Town for breaking the rules of society's concealment (Bakor, 2000, oral interview). *Naabiradee* was forced to send for her father because she was unable to pay the cost assessed to her. When her father received the information, he arrived with money and all the required items. *Naabiradee* and her father consequently joined *Amanikpo*.

In Gokana, *Amanikpo* was first brought to Gio-koo, from where it spread to other villages of Gokana, and was thereafter kept under the control of bari-Gokana (a powerful deity known to have forged for socio-religious unity especially in Gokana kingdom). As a result, the *Amanikpo* secret society in Gokana operated more effectively than in other kingdoms in Ogoniland. Being a nocturnal society, *Amanikpo* pays annual honor to *Naabiradee*, the goddess of the night. Her feast is celebrated in April, which is known as En-*Naabiradee* as an annual ritual in the Ogoni calendar. Members of every village, notably those from Gokana, are anticipated to visit her shrine in Mogho prior to the festival, which will last for Eneseh (one week) on the Ogoni five-day weekly calendar. *Amanikpo* as the oldest and most ancient secret society in Ogoni, began with the founding of several communities, and its leaders are the natural rulers of each village (Apere, 2022, oral interview). The *Amanikpo* secret society functioned as a link between the living and their forefathers and mothers. As a result, every community in Ogoni has one or two *Amanikpo* houses, known as *torgim*, which are normally built in the town square and contain the accoutrements of the society's masquerade for outing.



Fig. 1. The Ogoni *Amanikpo* Marionettes (Source: Google)

Membership

The *Amanikpo* secret society is only open to select types of individuals in the community, such as titled elders, kingmakers, nobles, and law enforcers with a good reputation. According to Apere, *Amanikpo* membership was limited to the ruling families and ruling class, members of traditional ruling families, and households that could produce *Ka-baari* (elder's statesmen) (Apere, 2022, oral interview). This suggests that *Amanikpo* was an Ogoni training center for the skills of monarchy and leadership. It was open to influential people such as excellent farmers, traders, artisans, and herbalists. Adoption and registration are used to obtain these members.

Today, membership of *Amanikpo* now includes people from all walks of life in Ogoni society. Particularly to reputed and married men in the countryside, who have demonstrated the ability of maintaining absolute secrecy and silence regarding clandestine issues. In most kingdoms of Ogoni, women were not allowed to view most of these sections; however, they have recently been allowed to join; nonetheless, only women of high social standing are allowed to attend, provided they follow the norms and regulations (Tanen, 2005). Membership is also hereditary, while children were never permitted to join due to its mystery of secrecy. Only initiates can watch the *Amanikpo* processions at ceremonies, and its festivals are strictly for members. It's

worth noting that members of the *Amanikpo* secret society keep their faith alive in a variety of ways. Apart from periodic ceremonies, most of them wear bright colors, and their lives are encircled by taboos on food, drink, and sexual practices, particularly during the holy month of *Naabiradee* festival. Some of the attributes demanded of an initiate are personal cleanliness through ablutions, uprightness in character, and transparency in justice.

After paying an enrolling fee, which can range from cash to goats, cocks, liquor, and other in-kind products, initiation begins with an oath of silence and a warning of dire repercussions if it is ever broken. An initiated member who violates the *Amanikpo* secret vow is said to bring evil misfortune on himself and his family. Apart from the colossal quantities of money that such a member will be obliged to pay as a fine, the individual will be required to make certain ceremonial sacrifices in order to ward off bad enchantments from his home. If the money is not easily available, a respondent noted that the victim will mortgage his property to the society in lieu of payment, which might be fishing canoes, farmland, or other valuable economic resources (Nwideede 2019, oral interview).

Candidates seeking initiation may face a variety of trials behind the *Amanikpo*'s well-guarded doors. These tests are designed to educate and elevate their consciousness by taking them from belief to knowledge to experience. True initiation has always sought to teach rather than indoctrinate. Candidates gradually learn to let go of fear and embrace courage, to balance opposites, and to lead others down the light path.

The metaphor of the serpent under the sacred canopy of *Amanikpo*, explains the uneasy, scary, and cryptic but fascinating and attractive nature of *Amanikpo*. Every time *Amanikpo* and their horrific practices are recounted, a startling feeling of being overtaken by evil arises. Maintaining ritual connections with the sacred is essential for

both individual and community well-being because the manifestation of *Amanikpo* sacred energies in the case of defaulters (both initiates and non-initiates) typically takes place in the setting of inflicting disease or death on the victim. Consequently, initiates engage in ritual sacrifices and communion with potentially dangerous spiritual entities. Sacrifice here is seen as the permanent transfer of anything from the human sphere to the divine/supernatural (sacred) realm. It involves giving something up and is typically associated with bloodshed, violence, and death. As such, initiates must be armed with courage, love, and a strong will in order to delve into the sometimes forbidden, and unseen spiritual world.

Philosophical foundation of *Amanikpo* secret society

The philosophical foundation of the *Amanikpo* secret society is based on the Ogoni religious philosophy and worldview, which is co-natural, communal, mythical, and anthropocentric (human-centered). The Ogoni people saw reality as a stark contrast between spirit and matter, believing that the universe is populated by both good and bad spiritual forces. These either strengthen or inhabit the search for the sacred that marked *Amanikpo*'s ideology and practices, particularly the occultism ceremonies through which initiates (members) obtained powers and esoteric knowledge. In other words, for the Ogoni, there are essentially two worlds: the world of humans and the world of spirits, ancestors, and forces. These spirits and forces have an impact on humans and can be appeased by offering sacrifices. As a result, the traditional Ogoni worldview resembles a pyramid. The Kawaa-Bari (God or Supreme Being) is at the top, thought to be the mother and source of all beings, with the capital letter 'B' for Bari. The deities and goddesses in the center are also known as 'bari,' but with a small letter 'b'. They are agents of Kawaa-Bari. Below the deities and goddesses are humans, also known as 'bari' (small letter 'b'), and other creatures live at the base of the pyramid.

This is in acknowledgement of their servitude to Kawaa-Bari (The Supreme Being). The word 'bari,' as used in this context, denoted 'life,' as in 'life from Kawaa-Bari (God)' or the presence of Kawaa-Bari (God). It is also known as 'beyond soul' or 'above soul.' As such, 'bari' is a metaphysical causation that unites or connects all beings to Kawaa-Bari (God). To put it another way, Kawaa-Bari is the source of all creatures, and the word 'bari' refers to Her presence in all other created or emanated beings. Thus the Ogoni people have 'bari' as in deities/goddesses (e.g. the bari-aayor deity of Luawii, or the bari-Gokana deity); 'bari' as in ancestors/ancestress (eg. *de-bari* festival in celebration of the ancestors/ancestress); and 'bari' as in personal god or guardian angel: "*O bari le zege*" meaning 'your personal god or guardian angel is young'. This statement compares the strength of a guardian angel to that of a young bright and diligent youth (Deezia, 2024). In other words, the Ogoni anthropomorphism (core traditional Ogoni religion centered on the beliefs that God can manifest in human and animal forms, gods and goddesses; and that totemic animals and objects possess the same feelings and qualities as human beings), which is based on the *Amanikpo* secret society, was and is still prevalent in their contemporary practices.

This is not exclusive to the Ogoni; several philosophers have proposed the possibility of extraterrestrials. Anaxagoras, for example, claimed that there were bodies and creatures other than humans in Greek antiquity. "Below the heavenly bodies are those bodies, invisible to human, that are carried about with the sun and moon" (Waterfield, 2000). Even Aristotle acknowledged that Anaxagoras and Democritus held some heavenly bodies and objects to be real in his analysis of their beliefs (Aristotle, 1939). Christian thinkers and theologians never questioned the existence of extraterrestrial beings. St. Augustine's exposition of pagan deities, devils, and Christian angels makes it clear (St. Augustine, 1998). The medieval philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas contends that there exist powerful entities (positive or negative). Wellington O. Wotogbe-Weneka, a professor of African and comparative religion

established the belief in the existence of spiritual creatures as part of the reality in the world of humans in his book *Owumeni: Beliefs and Practices of Aquatic Spirit among the Ikwerre People of Niger Delta* (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2020). He asserts that some of these spiritual entities are thought to be capable of inhabiting a certain location and influencing specific spheres of human settings and items from which they interact with and influence humans in various ways (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2020). It is possible that spiritual beings' invisibility, which makes them mysterious phenomena, has driven humans to hypothesize on what they think their nature and activity should be. Wotogbe-Weneka adds that one of the Ikwerre's common beliefs about spiritual beings is that they have the ability to possess and inspire human beings, during which time the illumined unconsciously acts out what the spiritual elements in him/her dictate and direct rather than his/her own conscious voluntary actions (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2020). On this basis, it is believed that legions of *Owumini* (Aquatic spirits) dwell in the Niger Delta's oceans, seas, rivers, lakes, creeks, and streams.

In a similar vein, the Ogoni in their religious philosophy accept that certain beings in the world are powerful, and that humans can obtain access to using the 'Supernatural' power bestowed by other beings to influence and govern the universe. Thus, membership into the *Amanikpo* secret society is thought to guarantee access to the power and wisdom that these 'other entities' possess, as well as the opportunity to profit from their hidden treasures of knowledge that are beyond human comprehension.

The *Amanikpo* religious philosophy is also founded on Ogoni symbolism and aesthetics. In Ogoni philosophy, every natural or cultural object can be given a symbolic meaning that emphasizes its inherent qualities in a way that allows for spiritual interpretation. As a result of the intrinsic social and psychological interpretations that prevail, any study of the spirituality linked with the divinatory ritual artifacts and imagery of the *Amanikpo* secret society inevitably displays symbolic

aspects. Images and other objects used in *Amanikpo* for ritual and cultic purposes not only represent an objective reality, but also convey the subjective feelings of initiates. Because of this aspect, almost all of the cultic symbols and materials used in *Amanikpo* are spiritually symbolic.

In *Amanikpo*, the material denotes the immaterial, the visible denotes the invisible, and the touchable denotes that which the senses cannot hold or grasp. Their symbols are anthropomorphic images of Ogoni gods and goddesses, as well as a symbol of mutual understanding, kinship, or link between the living and their ancestors or ancestress. Some of the symbolic ritual artifacts represent authority and protection, government structures and hierarchical leadership patterns, colors, and staffs, among other things. While philosophers use language to try to discover the truth of reality, the *Amanikpo* artist achieves it via expression in a medium developed through craft and expertise. In their view of reality, the artist sees what ordinary people do not see. As a result, the *Amanikpo* artistic expression gives a tool for learning more about the truth that humans are unable to see. It enables people to call up from the perceptions they choose to ignore, that links their past, the deities and goddesses, ancestors and ancestress with their present into one sense of duration. This perception, which they gain through a series of rituals and sacrifices, can lead to an entirely new way of looking at life and interpersonal interactions. This is the core to *Amanikpo* religious-philosophical values.

The theatrical features of *Amanikpo* secret society

The *Amanikpo* lodge is divided into two sections: *tem* (inner room), and *kentor* (outer room, or pallor). The inner room, also known as the secret part, houses *Amanikpo*'s religious aspects, which are kept hidden and only revealed to members who have met all of the membership requirements. The pallor section applies to all members. It might also be regarded as *Amanikpo*'s social component, which consists of the puppet

theater for public consumption. In any outing, they employ an erected tent as a stage with adjoining open space of a stretched out land, which is encircled by spectators. Typically, the tent is erected exactly in front of the *tor-zim* (*Amanikpo* house), obscuring the structure's front view from left to right. The puppet tent is built of dark long pieces of clothing known as '*Turu-Zim*' or '*Kaen*,' which are wonderfully embellished with varied wrappers ranging from George wraps to Hollandaise, English Wax to Hi-target (Mbube, 2018), among others. Mbube went on to say that the keepers of the ancient drama are required to wear uniforms while on outing (Mbube, 2018). They put on their traditional headgear (*tun*) and tie George wrappers around their waists. Except for the goat hide sacks on their backs, their torsos are normally bare. They walk barefooted and brandish various colors of cow tails, known as *Zaga* in the traditional setting, while they walk or sit in front of the puppet tent.

The puppets are made up of carved representations of humans, animals, and birds that may be found throughout the Ogoni environment. The images are carved to reflect numerous skills or occupations in Ogoni, such as hunting, fishing, palm-fruit cutting, palm wine tapping, tree climbing, canoe paddling, and so on. The masks are twelve in number during a formal outing, such as a festival or a member's burial ritual. A puppeteer controls each mask from within the tent. It is therefore more practical to say that there are twelve characters in the *Amanikpo* performers at *Naabiradee* festivals or at a member's funeral ceremony. Each character is given a symbolic name that defines the role they play during performance. From left to right on the tent, they are Saro Gbara (Kasi Zim), Nnwaka (Kerebium), Awoolo (Chief Vocalist), Agbarator (Choir Master), Tuagere, Baagere, Saalili, Taagere, Yiangere, Mmaekae (last born), Kadume (back bencher). Some of the characters appear to be round, while others appear to be absolutely flat. For example, the puppeteer would always chant: *koo koo pee oh, koo koo pee oh*. This role of the Saalili mask makes it a flat character. The Yiangere mask is another flat figure to watch (Apere, 2022, oral interview). This is because the puppeteer imitates colonial forces by acting as the police. Aside from the

aforementioned characters, there are others who are round and can occasionally surprise the audience with their performance act.

Each mask has its own distinctive embellishment in terms of the positioning of the feathers. On the sides of the mask head, some feathers are sparingly fastened, while others are weedily affixed (Mbube, 2018). For instance, the Awoolo mask holds a tiny cow tail in his right hand as a mark of distinction. The *Saalili* mask also wears the traditional headgear (*tun*), which has a few feathers arranged on the side, and wields a machete that has been intricately carved in his right hand. It is vital to mention that *Amanikpo's* presentation would be incomplete without the inclusion of traditional music and dance. Songs are used to create a connection between the living and the dead. Deaths of loved ones are expressed in some. Others are used to praise the ancestors for their heroic deeds. This implies that the Ogoni beliefs, philosophy and perception to life are embedded in their songs for any situation. These songs are recognized as a major activity in which people express their joy or sadness, or reverence and devotion in the case of religious events. Joy, peace, love, and memorial are all expressed through puppetry theatrical dance. It has two functions: entertainment and communication. In *Naabiradee* events, the dance step is ritualistic. The initiates are in charge of this. When possessed, they dance by chanting the acts of prominent deities of the land and, in most cases, miming the dancing moves of some notable priest of numerous deities.

Consequently, among all the traditional Ogoni festivals, *Naabiradee* (*Amanikpo* festival) has the most unusual audience participation. They do not have a participation audience; instead, they have a spectator audience. Those who perform the dancing are cult initiates. While the crowd observes, they dance within the space in front of the tent. Singing and dancing are also combined in the puppet masks. The puppet and the initiates are frequently propelled forward by the rhythmic beats of the *gira* (gongs). Several ritual enactments are seen at various stages of their performance. Some of the

activities are carried out within the tent, while others are carried out outside or behind the tent. The puppet masks are thought to be emblems of the Ogoni ancestors or ancestress in most situations since they symbolize a certain ancestral father or mother.



Fig. 2. The Outing/Performance of *Amanikpo* Puppet Theatre (Source: Field Work at Luawii and Boue in Ogoni 2023)

Functions of *Amanikpo* secret society

The functions of the *Amanikpo* secret society and their importance to Ogoni sociopolitical, religious, economic, and cultural life cannot be overemphasized. *Amanikpo* secret society upholds both political and cosmological order in communities, where authority has usually been attributed to age, but is ultimately located in the spiritual world. It is in the first duty of protecting community interests and guaranteeing order that make *Amanikpo* secret society important for local governance, and conflict resolutions. Other functions include:

Religious functions

Because it links its objectives to religion, the *Amanikpo* secret society stands out from other organizations. This indicates that it has a lot of influence based on religious ideas and traditions. In addition to protecting the Ogoni cultural heritage, *Amanikpo* promotes and honors the spirit of the ancestors and the gods of the land by carrying out ritual sacrifices during festivals, feasts, and other religious rites. At the resolution of disputes, disputing parties are compelled to swear in the name of the *Amanikpo* cult.

Amanikpo's religious component makes it into a valuable instrument for social control and a potent crime deterrent.

Sequel to this, each initiate is said to have had a series of life-changing religious encounters with the gods, and they are believed to be possessed by their ancestors. Because of this, the initiate can gain and/or divulge more in-depth knowledge about the history of the society, the community, or any threats that could affect any individual member or the group as a whole. The *Amanikpo* secret society's ability to foster spiritual development and the acquisition of magical power(s) has also contributed to membership growth (Mbube, 2018). The results show that members are also adept in magic and healing techniques. They make effective use of their knowledge by guiding new initiates and introducing them to the craft. This generates a certain type of employment opportunity, especially when the value of conventional medicine, including herbal and complementary therapies, rises. They claim to be capable of preparing some protective charms; those that could be placed anywhere on the body for job interviews, as well as some form of liquids prepared and offered to the client to lick in order to make the client's remarks more potent and ensure that the addressed responds as desired. Moreover, charms for businesswomen and men are prepared to improve exceptional results in deal closing or commerce flow. Although obtaining empirical evidence to support these claims may be difficult, the sheer number of people who do so and then join voluntarily attests to the practices' visibility and acceptance. In other words, once initiates begin traveling the mystical path, they start to acquire particular abilities or spiritual heights. These are religious gifts that show others they are heading in the right direction. Invisibility, flight, shape-shifting, the ability to control and communicate with wild animals, among other things, are a few of these powers. Others include the capacity to communicate with spiritual intelligence, the ability to acquire familiar spirits, traditional medical knowledge, and healing power (Dae-Kpobu, 2019, oral interview).

Political functions

In terms of politics, the *Amanikpo* cult is renowned for upholding all rulings made by the Gbene-Mene (Natural Rulers of the various kingdoms of Ogoni) and their council of chiefs, as well as the assumption and protection of indigenous institutions; safeguarding the sanctity of their forefathers' religion; deciding on ritual behavior and regulating social attitudes, and becoming constituted authority. *Amanikpo* promotes political unification not just among members but also among the numerous village and kingdom administrations because the majority of members grow into political titans and officials in the government. Simion Ottenberg expresses this viewpoint in his writing:

The secret societies... symbolize the village as a cohesive whole, pulling men (and women) from domestic routine to meet with non-relations in a wider social world with its own sense of history, ceremony and ritual (Ottenberg, 1977, p. 87).

At the individual level, membership of *Amanikpo* boosts the psychological wellbeing of initiates. Being a member increases socio-political status and value of members. *Amanikpo* is viewed as elitist and might be utilized to curry favor with the government in relation to contract, political appointment/position and financial gain. It continues to be the most effective cult that the village administration uses to influence its policies as the "police" or an agent of law enforcement.

Judicial functions

Amanikpo's political and judicial responsibilities are inseparably intertwined. In the Ogoni traditional society, summoning someone or consulting the *Amanikpo* cult was the highest form of legal procedure. Serious dispute which community Chiefs could not settle were likely to be taken to *Amanikpo*. This was particularly evident in land disputes, in property and inheritance and disagreements, and in settling persistent warfare. The *Amanikpo* secret society received complaints about, among other things,

witchcraft, sorcery, murder, and theft, which were occasionally challenging to resolve appropriately. As a result, it acts as a final court and supernatural judicial power as well as a mediator between individuals and factions.

Social and ethical functions

Amanikpo performs social function such as the supervision of community works and services, and ensures that everybody takes part. This may include the village clean-up campaigns like the clearing of major bush paths leading to public streams, water fronts and farm lands, the payment of community levy by citizens or the provision of free labor for the execution of certain projects in the community. If a defendant refuses to pay a fine for terrible offenses like manslaughter, adultery, theft, murder, incest, and so on, the *Amanikpo* is called upon.

Ogoni ethics is intensely personal, communal and religious. As such, the *Amanikpo* society encourages social compassion, group life, bravery, and marriage obligations. The women are initiated into the "fattening room," which is a private space just for them. Economically, the cult in pre-colonial days was used by the village governments in Ogoni to control market prices of goods and collect tolls. You can trust *Amanikpo* to keep particular goods or items of personal property safe from intruders.

Continuity and discontinuity

The false presumption that the concept of "Social Change" is only pertinent to and for social scientists is criticized by Wotogbe-Weneka (2020). This assumption is founded on the observation that social scientists, in their attempt to understand social reality in relation to given variables, appear to have over-articulated the idea as being responsible for the dynamic of all social institutions. There is never a time when a religion exists in isolation within a given community. In a similar spirit, every modernisation that has an impact on human society as a whole must have an impact on any religion that operates within a certain social context.

The fundamental religious needs and purposes of people, however, have not changed. The core Philosophy or worldview of the Ogoni people serves as the foundation for this unalterable aspect of the Ogoni religion, and in particular the *Amanikpo* secret society. This notion has allowed *Amanikpo* to thrive despite the fact that certain of its practices seem to have changed as a result of exposure to external factors. This study therefore agreed with the views of Robin Horton (Horton 1975), that in the mainly unelaborated conception of the Supreme Being, the traditional religions and the gods have great adaptive potential. He saw that people do not reject their traditional cosmology but rather adapt it to the new conditions when faced with societal change, including changes in science and technology, trade, education, and Christianity.

Recently, Christians have viewed *Amanikpo's* actions with suspicion and mistrust. They claimed *Amanikpo* was a vicious satanic cult that oppressed and persecuted outsiders while pretending to uphold law and order, and that its members were using it as a front to seize uncontrolled power. Asserting that some of the *Amanikpo* secret society's practices, such as execution, disinheritance, banishment, renunciation, and needlessly restricting freedom of religion and movement during their nocturnal displays, particularly during the *Amanikpo's Naabiradee* festival, are no longer acceptable in contemporary Ogoni society, they also accused the group of engaging in anti-social activities. As a result of this circumstance, Christians and members of the *Amanikpo* secret society have been the targets of several reports of religious violence.

Apart from the fact that nuclear families are growing in popularity among urban professional classes and that many *Amanikpo* members are increasingly seeking solace in more charismatic and ecumenical Christian organizations. It is also important to note how other secret societies' rising tendencies have distorted the noble ideals and goals of the *Amanikpo* secret society. Because of this, cultism in modern-day Ogoni has turned into a blood bath, with little to no concern for property or human life.

Cultism has changed from a cultural practice to a tool for political witch-hunting of perceived opponents with the rise of several cult organizations in Ogoni, especially *Dey-bam* and *Dey-well* (youth-based cult groups). In contemporary Ogoni society (in communities, on campuses, in the streets, and in neighborhoods), cults hold everyone hostage and engage rivals, governments, and law-abiding citizens in attribution wars over dominance of socio-economic and political resources and areas that are advantageous to them. Consequently, people are being killed almost on the daily bases, communities sacked, and properties destroyed. At this point, one wonders' what is the missing link between the traditional *Amanikpo* secret society, and the contemporary cult activities in Ogoni today? This paper, therefore, advocates for value re-orientation in the practice of cultism in Ogoni. It further called on the government and security agencies to put to check the activities of secret societies in Ogoni.

Concluding remarks

To search for secret knowledge is to journey into the soul of humanity, for there is nothing more profoundly buried or obscured than humanity's own core. As such, on the road to enlightenment, one is certain to encounter some fascinating spiritual beings that can either guide or hinder people in their quest for the wisdom palaces. This study therefore established that apart from social, religious, political and economic motives for wanting to be initiated into *Amanikpo* secret society, initiates also wish to obtain powers with esoteric values.

However, in recent times, the popular image of *Amanikpo* has distracted many from the central reasons for, and tenet of, the initiated secret tradition that in many ways has not changed, despite the influence of modernization and its agents. The significance of this historical voyage, therefore, is the clear demonstration that the *Amanikpo* society engendered the Ogoni indigenous and spiritual development as well as the sustenance of their cultural and spiritual values.

References

- Aderibigbe, I. S. and Oguntola-Laguda, D. (2015). Power, secret knowledge, and secret societies. In David Ogungbile (ed). *African indigenous religious traditions in local and global context: Perspective on Nigeria*. (PP 137-146). Lagos: Matthouse Press Limited
- Alagoa, E. J. (1972). *A history of the Niger Delta*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Apere, U. (2022). Oral interview, 70 years old, Civil Servant. Port Harcourt.
- Aristotle, (1939). *On the heavens*. Translated by W. K. C. Guthrie, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bakor, M. (2000). Oral interview, 75 years old, Amanikpo member. Luawii.
- Bledsoe, C. (1984). The political use of Sande ideology and symbolism. *American Ethnologist* vol 11 (3), pp 455-472
- Dae-Kporbu (2019). Oral interview, 85 years old, Member of *Amanikpo*. Luawii-Ogoni
- Deezia, B. S. (2024). Mothers but not wives: Towards the *Biakē* custom and its implications on the Ogoni contemporary society. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions*. Vol. 13. No. 1, pp. 46-60. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v13i1.4>
- Deezia, B. S. (2020). Gborsi: The canons of destiny, and destiny renegotiation in Ogoni traditional religious philosophy. *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 6, No 4, pp 105-118
- Ejituwu, N. C. (1977). *The Obolo (Andoni) of the Easter Niger Delta*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Lagos, Nigeria.
- Gould, J. and Kolb W. (1964). Eds. *A dictionary of the social sciences*. New York: the Free Press of Glencoe
- Hammond, P. B. (1971). *An introduction to cultural and social anthropology*. New York: the Macmillan Company.
- Horton, R. (1975). African conversion. *Africa*. Vol, 41, No. 2 pp 55-65
- Idowu, B. (1996). *Olodumare: God in Yoruba belief*. Revised edition. Lagos: Longman
- Ifemesia, C. C. (1978). *South-Eastern Nigeria in the nineteenth century: An introductory analysis*. New York: NOK Publishers.
- Igbara, P. I. (1982). *A history of Nortem-Bori: A historical survey of Ogoni heartland*. A Thesis at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
- Ikoro, S.M. (1996). *The Khana language*. Leiden: CNWS
- Kpone-Tonwe, S. (1987). *The historical tradition of Ogoni, Nigeria*. A PhD Thesis University of London.
- Kpone-Tonwe, S. (2021). *The Ogoni of the Eastern Niger Delta: An economic, political and cultural analysis from settlement to the present*. Nigeria: Safari Books
- Loolo, G. N. (1981). *A history of the Ogoni*. Port Harcourt: Ken's Press
- Mbube, N. M. (2018). Ogoni puppetry tradition: A study of the theatrical elements in *Naabiradee (Amanikpo)* play. *International Journal of Innovative Language, Literature & Art Studies*, 6 (1): 1-9

- National Population Commission (NPC) (2006). Nigerian national census: Population distribution by sex, state, LGAs and senatorial district. <http://www.population.gov.ng/index.php/publication/140-popn-distri-by-sex-state-jgas-and-senatorial-distr-2006>
- Nwideede, L. N. (2019). Oral interview, 70 years old, clergy. Port Harcourt.
- Ogoni Bill of Rights (1991). Presented to the government and people of Nigeria, with an appeal to the international community. Port Harcourt: Saros International Publishers
- Ottenberg, S. (1977). Leadership and authority in African societies: Afikpo village group. *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria*, vol. 9, No 1, pp 81-91
- Schwab, G and Harley, G. W. (1947). *Tribes of the Liberian Hinterland*. Cambridge: Peabody Museum
- St. Augustine, (1998). *The city of God*, translated by Gerald G. Walsh, Demetrius B. Zema et al. New York: Image Books
- Tanen, P.D. (2005). *Bodo: A perspective of Ogoni history*. Gokana: NyimaleLezor Int'l Book Shop and Press
- Waterfield, R. (2000). Trans. *The first philosophers: The pre Socrates and the sophists*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Williamson, K. and Kiyoshi S. (1968). Eds. *Benue-Congo comparative wordlist: Volume 1*. Ibadan: West African Linguistic Society.
- Williamson, K. (1985). How to become a kwa-lanugauge. In *Linguistics and philosophy: Essays in Honour of Ruben, S. Wells*, in A Makkai and A Melby *Current issues in Linguistic Theory*, 42 Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Wotogbe-Weneka, W. O. (2020). *Owumini: Beliefs and practices of aquatic spirit among the Ikwerre people of Niger Delta*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press Ltd.
- Yirakina, N.C. (2010): *The role of cultural and traditional institutions of Ogoni*, Kaduna: Ahmadu Bello University Press.