

Igbo man's Belief in Prayer for the Betterment of Life
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Abstract

The Igbo man believes in *Chukwu* strongly. The Igbo man expects all he needs for the betterment of his life from *Chukwu*. He worships *Chukwu* traditionally. His religion, the African Traditional Religion, was existing before the white man came to the Igbo land of Nigeria with his Christianity. The Igbo man believes that he achieves a lot by praying to *Chukwu*. It is by prayer that he asks for the good things of life. He believes that prayer has enough efficacy to elicit mercy from *Chukwu*. This paper shows that the Igbo man, to a large extent, believes that his prayer contributes in making life better for him. It also makes it clear that he says different kinds of prayer that are spontaneous or planned, private or public.

Introduction

Since the Igbo man believes in *Chukwu (God)*, he cannot help worshipping him because he has to relate with the great Being that made him. He has to sanctify himself in order to find favour in *Chukwu*. He has to obey the laws of his land. He keeps off from blood. He must not spill blood otherwise he cannot stand before *Chukwu* to ask for favour and succeed. In spite of that it can cause him some ill health as the Igbo people say that those whose hands are bloody are under curses which affect their destinies.

The Igboman purifies himself by avoiding sins that will bring about abominations on the land. Such sins include stealing yams, sleeping over a widow who still performs the funeral rites of her husband, uprooting planted yams and other crops, a man sleeping over his daughter or a man sleeping over his mother or any two relatives of opposite sex sleeping over themselves etc. Orji (1999) sees abomination as something that is incompatible with natural life which no doubt is unacceptable to *Chukwu* for it lacks purity:

There were many things which the Igbo termed 'aru' (abomination) whenever such things happened or when they were committed by any person. Somebody could commit an abomination intentionally or unintentionally. Abomination in those days, was an abomination, whether it was premeditated, done in ignorance or by an accident. Abominations were those conducts which the Igbo people felt were contrary and objectionable to the order of nature (p.145).

The Igbo people believe that there is efficacy in prayer. That is why they pray. They believe their prayers contribute to the successes they have achieved. This is why they pray. Christopher Okafor observes this in his statement. He said "Ekpere nwere ire" meaning that prayer has efficacy. He also said that without prayer and sacrifices, medicine cannot be effective (Okafor personal communication, August 31, 2008). The Igboman uses various things in praying. Since prayer is beseeching, the Igboman uses various things in thanking his gods and ancestors for all the achievements he made as well as appeal for the solutions to his problems. The most known is the kolanut. He prays from time to time to *Chukwu* and the ancestors of his land with kolanuts. He also uses some other things. He immolates the cocks, goats or cows as he sacrifices. He also pours palm wine to the glory of *Chukwu*, his ancestors and other forces he believes guide him in the course of making libations. He as well offers food to them before he eats his share.

The Igboman sees prayer as a general issue. Nobody is disallowed to pray. Everybody, whether a man or a woman, a child or an adult has the right

to pray. But in a gathering, the person to lead in the prayer would be chosen. When the gathering is before a shrine the chief priest in charge would lead all the people there in the prayer. Everybody partakes. When the leader forgets important points, people around would remind him to include them. When the leader finishes saying the prayer, everybody present would concur by saying 'ise' 'ofọ' or 'amị' just like Christians say 'amen'.

The prayer of the Igbo man has a lot of advantages for which he would never stop praying to his Maker, gods and ancestors. He prays because it is through prayer that he appeals for the goodwill of *Chukwu* and other supernatural forces from whom he receives benevolence. When he achieves any success, he thanks them and further beseeches them for solving fresh problems facing him. Mbiti (1975) sums up the importance of prayer:

Thus, praying strengthens the links between man and God and man and his fellow man. Prayers help to remove personal and communal anxieties, fears, frustrations and warrior. They also help to cultivate man's dependence on God and increase his spiritual outreach. (p.57).

Prayer is an important practice in the life of the Igboman. Given his belief in *Chukwu* there is no doubt that he appears to him in the manner peculiar to his religion. His strong belief that prayer contributes immensely to the betterment of his life is a clear indication of his regard for prayer.

Kinds of Prayer: There are different ways by which the Igboman prays. He does it by ordinary prayer without using any item. The prayer is either private or public. Onyesoh (2000) states that the Igbo people of Nri have religious ministers that are capable of praying for private and public needs in order to pacify the gods:

Both considered themselves as heralds of god/goddess, as priests and prophets of immortal god... Nri priest and the Druids knew how to temper the fury of the gods. Thus both performed sacrifices private and public purified abomination and interceded on behalf of the sick and those in danger. They purified polluted land to ensure that the burning anger of the gods did not provoke a return to chaos (p.70)

(1) Private Prayer Private prayer is the one said by oneself in private without anybody being aware. It may be said by someone for somebody else in his private chamber.

(a) Spontaneous Prayer: This kind of prayer is always spontaneous. It is not prepared. It is prayed without presenting anything to *Chukwu* or any other being to which he feels has power over him. He can beseech any of the supernatural powers for the solution to his problems. He can as well thank them on hearing good news like the safe delivery of a baby by his wife or any of his relatives Mbiti (1975) is aware of this type when he said: "Anybody can prayer to God at any time in any place"(p.55).

(b) Morning Prayer: In the morning of everyday, the Igboman, as a matter of routine has to pray with a lobe of kolanut. He can do it before his shrine or not. He tries to do it before leaving his home stead. He believes danger could be lurking anywhere he goes at any moment of the day. If he has visitors, the visitors will join him in the prayers. He has to bless and break the kolanut, even if his father-in-law is on visit because the Igbo people say: "A naghị akarị mmadụ na be ya'--. Nobody is greater than one in one's house. That is no protocol of selecting the person to bless and break the kolanut is allowed. However, the owner of the house can authorisze someone else after his

morning prayer. Nwadinigwe (2000) in the same vein states that kolanut is ritualistic as a result of which there is always a ceremony over it, whereas other items that are not considered for the same blessing are eaten without protocols. Orji (1999) states an example of such a prayer with kolanut:

God the Creator of human beings, the King on high, come and eat kolanut. Our mother earth come and eat kolanut. All the spirits and all the juju-gods in our land please come and eat kolanut. We are asking for long life and good health. Another thing we are begging for is continuous human reproduction. But we do not want them to be coming in twos and threes. They are to come one at a time in one pregnancy till the house is full of children. God the Creator, King on high, please look after and protect us and our families. Any person, who says we shall not live, let him go to bed before the fowls go into their pens to sleep. We are also asking for wealth. Live and let live, let the kite perch and let the eagle perch. Anyone that refuses the other to perch let its wings get dislocated. The next thing we are asking for is long life for men and women. Long life for the seas and long life for the fishes. Any good omen that comes to one should also come to the other. We are begging the Almighty God on high to make this day a very happy one" (p. 31-2).

The people present responded: "Amen. Let it be as it has been prayed". Mbiti (1975) acknowledges this type of prayer in African culture and states "Within the family, praying is normally done by the head of the family" (p.55).

Diviner's Prayer: The diviner always has clients whose problems are how to cure them of different illnesses they are suffering from. The diviners are always consulted in private. In the course of searching for the cures they are forced to pray for the sick clients. They beseech Chukwu, spirits and ancestors to help by making the curative systems of their patients clear so that they will be glorified and man would meet joy on earth.

Herbalist's Prayer: Another private type of prayer is that of the herbalist for the speedy recovery of his patient. He prepares medicine which could be herbs or roots which the patient would boil up herbal infusion. He has to pray upon it before giving it to the patient. He invigorates curative power into it by praying. His purpose is to add efficacy to the drug so that his patient would recover fast.

(e) Laying of Curses: The laying of curses on people is a case of praying although it is negative. The laying of curses on people involves begging evil forces to deal with one person or the other. It is not done in the hearing of other people. It is a secret matter. One could do it in his house or in a distant forest in the night. This is normally done by imploring devilish spirits to attack people. Mbiti (1975) has been holding the same view. "There are some societies however, in which it is believed that certain spirits are wholly", responsible for some of the evils that people experience in the world (p.74).

(f) Sacrifice: This is one way the herbalist orders demons to leave his patients. He exchanges the head of the patient with the sacrificial animal which he would slaughter before his idol and sprinkles its blood on the idol. He would ask the patient to use various items he might have prescribed to respectively encircle his head four times before putting them in the small pot with which the sacrifice would be carried onto the road. The African traditional medicine, especially Igbo native medicine, uses this method to lose the grips of evil spirits on patients. It is after doing this that the patient would begin to respond to treatment.

(2)Public Prayer: This is the one said in the public on different occasions or ceremonies. Mbiti (1975) clearly remarks it. "Other prayers are made communally at public meetings and for public needs"(p.55). The occasion determines the contents of the prayers to a large extent. The Igbo man would say "Gonye iru ya". This means include the peculiar idea or issue about someone in the prayer. It is of two main types. They are as follow:

(a) Kolanut Prayers: The public always pray for one thing or the other. When people gather they always bless and break kolanuts. The occasion determines the contents of the prayers.

Meetings are a kind of occasion on which the public prays. The people present start their gathering with prayer. The patron or chairman has to present kolanuts to the people. The chairman has to notify the people of the gift of kolanuts. He will then ask the provost to pass the kolanuts round. The people will acknowledge the gift and thank the provider. The selected person will bless and break the kolanuts. He will normally thank *Chukwu* for keeping all the members alive since the last meeting they held. He will thank *Chukwu* and their gods and spirits for bringing them together once more. He will then ask them to guide the people in deliberating effectively well at their meeting in such manners that people will think out good ideas and would also have the spirits of accepting nice ideas of others so that they would achieve the aims and objectives of the meeting. Everybody would then concur by saying 'ise' (Ukaegbu 2002). Opata (1998) makes us to understand that "the presentation of the *oji* as well as the breaking and sharing of it signals the formal beginning of the meeting" (p.103).

If the people gather at the shrine to worship *Chukwu*, they pray with kolanuts for the glory of *Chukwu* and other supernatural forces of their religion. The priest has to lead the people in prayer. He would bless and break the kolanut by saying that *Chukwu* and other forces of their religion have been benevolent to them. He will also ask *Chukwu* to guide them till the next time they would worship there. He will glorify *Chukwu*, the gods of the land and their ancestors. Sometimes the people would gather to worship at the instance of somebody who is in need. Some people worship one idol or the other when they suffer from certain problems like sicknesses, childlessness, frequent involvements in accidents, frequent deaths of relatives etc. The person in need might have been asked to worship the idol by a diviner. In this case, the chief priest must have told the person the items of worship which must include kolanuts. He has to intercede for the well being of the person while praying with the kolanuts. In the same manner, he would offer palm wine to the gods by pouring some at the idols. He would also offer the food cooked with meat of the cock or the goat immolated on the idol before eating his share. All the offerings are made with the view of praying for the help of the idol in solving the problem of the worshipper who is in need. When the problem is solved he would come to give thanks with different things including kolanuts by which prayer would be said.

At the traditional wedding ceremony, the person blessing the kolanut would thank *Chukwu* and other supernatural forces for making the day a reality. He would pray for the successful marriage of the bride and the suitor. He would call on *Chukwu* to bless them with the fruits of the womb. He must likely say the number of children they are wished. He would normally ask for nine children whose births will be single and not twins. He would pray for safe deliveries of

the children and their afterbirths without problems. Orji (1999) states it clearly thus:

Before he breaks the kolanut he prayed to the gods, for good health, long life and prosperity. He further prayed that the venture on which both parties were about to embark upon would be a success (p.88).

In case of the naming ceremony of a child, the family head lifts up the child and looks at him in the face before giving him a name. He would simply tell the people to call him a particular name on his behalf. He will then pray for the well being of the child Orji (1999) states that the next thing is that the head of the family would then pray:

... the elderly man would then carry the 'ọfọ', hit it on the ground and pray to the gods and the dead forefathers to look after, guide and protect the child and help it to grow a useful citizen. The man then took the kolanut and prayed at length for the good health, long life and prosperity of the child and everybody around (p.104).

(b) Offering: A village or a family may suffer from one problem or the other which if divined might necessitate the offering of a goat or a cow to the gods. The problem, which can be frequent deaths or any other thing might have been caused by kidnapping of people, burying people alive or any other abomination against the land. The gods that were angered by the abomination are besought to stop visiting the people with wrath. They will beseech with the offering. In some cases the gods take the offering and get appeased. This is one good way by which the Igboman prays.

From different ways of worshipping in the African Traditional Religion, we can see that Igbo people of Nigeria pray. They pray because they enjoy the advantage of prayer.

Conclusion

From all indications, we are not in doubt as to whether the Igboman has the culture of worshipping *Chukwu*. Given this background, he worships *Chukwu* a lot because it is in His hands that his fate lies.

Chukwu, the maker of the universe controls it. The Igboman has a lot of things at stake. He has his life, the fruits of the wombs, the provisions of food given good weather for the vegetation, safe deliveries of children etc in the hands of *Chukwu*. He prays in order to beseech *Chukwu*, spirits and the gods to make his face meet good things of life. He highly believes that his prayer contributes to the achievements he has made.

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