
A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF IGBE-AME RELIGION: THE CULT OF THE WATER DIVINITY IN URHOBOLAND

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Abstract

Religion is a vital aspect of man's life and this has given rise to various new religious movement springing up every day from both the indigenous traditional religion and the orthodox or foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam. The word Igbe is a general name used in classifying all religious sects that use white attire as their costumes in Urhobo land. These religious sects appeared on the historical scene in the 19th century when there was a wide spread of indigenous religious revival in Nigeria. Thus there are, Igbe-Orhen or Igbe Ubiesha, Igbe –Uku or Oghene-Uku and Igbe- Ame. The objective of this paper is to establish the claim that Igbe Ame like all religions sprang out of encounter with the Numinous. This study is anchored on the Revelation theory by Rudolf Otto which says that all religions start with experience and expression. Various scholars have written on origin of Igbe religious sects, but no study has been carried out on the historical origin of Igbe-Ame, as revitalization indigenous religious movement within Urhobo Traditional Religion. The work is a qualitative, narrative, descriptive and contextual research on Igbe-Ame, a religious sect founded in Urhobo land based on the experience and expression of the founder.

Introduction

Igbe is an Urhobo word which means "dance". Whenever a group of Urhobo people meet in communal worship, like many other Africans, they resort to singing and dancing. In such a situation, they like to sing, clap their hands and dance, overtly expressing their inner religious feelings, joy and faithfulness to the God of their hearts, the God of their realization and to any other spiritual beings they may acknowledge. Even in some cases when an Urhobo is engaged in private worship, like charging his charm or offering sacrifices and pouring libations to his private object of worship in his inner chamber, there is some form of dance or the other, however, informal and restricted such private it may be. It is through music, singing and dancing that the Urhobo mostly expresses their inner religious experiences and feelings. This is their most favourable media for communing with the divine. To them, dance is not a luxury, it is a necessity because it is the physical manifestations of their mystical experience, inner conviction and religion requires that they should commune with and attempt to control through ritual drama, those forces over which they have no actual control. Dancing is thus one of the most effective avenues through which they can be in communion with those spiritual forces which they believe in. (Nabofa 1986: 1)

The Urhobo word for "dance" is *Egha*, which connotes play. In strict religious sense dance is known as *Igbe* which springs out of the verb *gbe*, which means "shake" or quiver or rock and row. The process of dancing is known as *Egha egha*, which can

be translated as quivering or shaking in response to dance. Thus the sense behind the Urhobo word Igbe, that is, quivering, or shaking or rocking and rowing is very operative and significant in describing religious dance because it is believed that when the divine enters man and take full possession of him he would start to gbe, that is vibrate, shake, quiver and or- rock and row.

It is significant that different religious groups or sects of Urhobo traditional religion have come to be known as Igbe,. For example, there are Igbe Ubiesha, Igbe-Ame, Igbe Everhe, Igbe Olokun, Igbe Ogheneku. In fact when Christianity was first introduced into some parts of Urhobo, it was initially referred to as Igbe Ijesu or Igbe Ishoshi that is dance in the worship or honour of Jesus. In the same way Muslims were described as those who are members of Igbe Alfa. Thus Igbe which could be translate as dance also carries the meaning of worship and religion. Thus dance which is a very prominent feature in Urhobo indigenous way of worship springs from the worshipper's experience of joy welling out of their religious experience. Such prominence arises from the common observation by Lincoln Kirstein:

Under the stress of joy, man makes words. These words are not enough; he prolongs them. The prolonged words are not enough; he modulates them. The modulated words are not enough, and without perceiving it, his hands make gestures and his feet stare to move. (Lincoln Kirstein. 1970:1)

Ame -"Water" and Its Mysteries

The Urhobo believe in the mysterious power that inheres water. Most streams are believed to be the abode of spiritual forces, mostly benevolent ones. These spiritual beings are believed to be guardians of wealth and all forms of good fortune. The people's general idea is that if one is able to attracted any of these aquatic spiritual forces, he or she could be infused with great spiritual power and through such power, the person would be able to perform wonders: such as, divination, healing, vision and freeing people from their various ailments and problems; provided the terms of covenant is kept by both parties.

The importance of water to mankind cannot be underestimated. It is used as a source of life; a good natured and kind. Hence, person who is believed to have come from the water, are usually refer to as Owhe r'ame meaning "a person from water". Water is so gentle in nature that the Urhobo would say "Ame da evv-u", that is "water does not ache the stomach or intoxicate one like alcoholic drinks". Without water, all creatures would die. It is regarded as the sperm of God (Qghene) from above, which fertilizes the earth and enables her to act in her fecundity. Water is also used for cooking, bathing, washing, drinking; in short for all purposes of daily life. Its solvent nature cleanses, purifies and cools man. Hence when one is angry, water is offered to him to calm his anger. Also it is used to revive a dying or fainting person back to life. It also serves as a means of transport, most especially among those living around the riverine area. In short water could be said to be all purposeful and all powerful. Hence the Urhobo would say "Ame sivwi owo, Ame Je whe pwho" — "Water kills and at the same time water saves life".

Historical Origin of Igbe-Ame:

The religion Igbe-Ame means literally "Dance of the Water" is found in Urhobo Land. In Urhobo land, the cult of the water divinities is known as Igbe-Ame, and from investigation the origin of the religion is shroud in secrecy, because it was

originally confused and grouped among all other religious sects whose costume are similarly in white apparels and was popularly known by the then District Officer as the white-chalk juju".(Nabofa1997:3). While some cross section of the Urhobo people believe that the idea and religion originated from Edo (Binis) and tried to link its origin with the cult of Olukun since historically, the Urhobo are generally believed to have migrated from Bini. (Otite,1982:48). However, the Urhobo uphold the idea that every portion of water be it lake, pond, river, sea or ocean constitutes an abode of mysterious powers. The larger a portion or mass of water is, the more and more powerful the powers that dwell in it. Each lake or portion of water is thought to be under the control of a particular divinity and when it pleases it, it will release fishes, and if it is not pleased, it will lock them up. Hence fishermen operating in a particular lake usually establish a shrine by the water where the divine forces around could be invoked and worshipped. (Philomina Otite, 1987:23) There are various stories, myths and legends surrounding this belief system and witnesses are bound to whom edjo ame or "Mami-wota" had appeared to and with whom contacts have been established. Most of them exhibit abundance of wealth from the submarine visitor. Once such relationship has been established between the mortal and the divine, both of them become espoused to each other and thus a kind of covenant relationship is establish, which is obligatory and also Suzerainty in nature. Similarly according to Awolalu, (1976:87) the Ijebu and the Ilaje people who dwell along the rivers, and the Ijo, firmly believe that there are divine creatures living under water and that they have wonderful towns of their own, such creatures are believed to be light in complexion and gorgeously attired in coral beads and costly garments and they refer to them as mammi wota.

The Urhobo firmly believe that as there are cities, towns and villages on the surface of the earth for human beings, so there are cities, towns, and villages under the water for spiritual beings. Their abodes are said to be more beautiful than those of the mortals. Arising from the above belief there are lots of cultic activities or shrines in every rivers and streams in Urhobo Land. For example among the Idjerhe people, there is a myth surrounding the origin of Okunovu - The "cult of a water divinity." Oral tradition has it that the cult was founded by Erhiekevwe and Onovwo who are the progenitors of Idjerhe clan. (Otite.1982:48). Erhiekevwe saw a small white pot floating on the river, somehow he became fascinated by the appearance of the white pot which he took home and kept it in Onovwo's house, because he was the eldest person in the community, little did he know that the white pot has mysterious powers. At night, the pot started talking in a language intelligible to Onovwo and Onovwo went and called his partner Erhiekevwe, both of them became bewildered and dumbfounded by the mystery of the pot. They could not withstand their experience so they went to call their neighbour Qbasuyi, a Benin hunter, who was sojourning among them at that time. It was he who disclosed to them that the pot was the residence of a water divinity called Qkunovu. They prevailed upon Qbasuyi to help offer sacrifices to this divine force. This he did and from there, cultic activities and worship became. Okunovu" later became an important cult and divinity among the primordial divinities of all Idjerhe people and virtually everybody takes active part in its annual festival. Up to date, the descendants of Qbasuyi constitute the priestly family of Okunovu and it is from among them that the cultic functionaries of the divinity known as Orhere are selected. The first Orhere, (Qbasuyi) is believed to have slipped into the river on the first annual festival, during a courtesy call to Qkunovu, after seven days, he

reappeared holding an adjudju (leather fan) and Orhen (white-chalk). It is important to state here that Professor Erivwo referred to "this divinity as Olokun" instead of Qkunovu which depicts a Bini word and influence. Members of Igbe-Ame believe that the origin of the religion is as old a man himself. To them the religion has been there since the time of creation and this is expressed in one of their ritual lyrics:

Qke ovo ro wan re
E'Oghene vwo tu ma akpo nanu
O de reyo ame vwo ghwo
Koye ode se mammi wota ta ne
Me vwo akpo na ko wen, gbe sunu
Otu ri ruen imuemu eyi ghwo
Ihwo re'vwe enwen kpoho mammi wota
Ayi gbe Jiro
Foko ridie mammi wota oye ho
O kpako r'Akpo na eje.

Meaning:

Once upon a time
When God had created the world
He used water to destroy it
He later called water-goddess saying:
I have given you authority to govern the world
Only sinner should die
Those who believe in water divinity let them praise and worship her
Because the water-goddess is the most senior creature in the world.

Adherents of every cults of worship tell the story of how their religious founders started, which is traceable to direct contact with the divine. The name they bear, depict an attribute of the divinities. It always results from divine-self-disclosure and response to such experienced. Hence E.B. Idowu defines religion as...:

.... results from man's spontaneous awareness of and spontaneous to his immediate awareness of a living power, wholly other and infinitely greater than himself, a power mysterious, because unseen. Yet a present and urgent reality seeking to bring men into communion with himself. This awareness includes that of something reaching out from the depth of man's being for close communion with, and vital relationship to his power as a source of real life (1973; 75)

In short, religion is something that has to deal with personal encounter or personal relationship between man and the power that transcend him on the vertical line and between man and man on the horizontal plane. This idea is true in Igbe religious movement. It is believed that there is a personal contact between the divinity and the founder before such religion springs up. Each divinity selects its priest and when it mounts on such a person, it will use her/him to heal and save people and also it will act as guardian and protector to the chosen one: warning him against dangers, thieves, witches and other principalities.

There is no single theory as regards the historical origin of Igbe Ame. The general believe among the Urhobo is that when a person is confronted by any of the benevolent aquatic beings, they become friends or espoused to each other and entered into a covenant relationship. This experience is related to a confrontation which Rudolf Otto calls the "Numinous or the Unnamed something, which is inexpressible or ineffable or too great or elusive for words to describe". Rudolf Otto, 1973: 5). The experience of the 'Numinous' in Otto's observation leads one to a kind of self-evaluation, which evokes in him a feeling of self-abasement and dependence. The expression of such experience, which is religion, is what Alfred North Whitehead describes as: The outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, This primary expression mainly of action and word but party in art (1974:127). Hence the person with such experience would express it by establishing a cult for such divine companion. Once the divinity has revealed itself, an altar is raised and an artist is contacted to carve or sculpt the images needed for the altar based on the revelation and interpretation from the diviner. As human beings select their own friends, so the water divinities look for suitable human friends to move with and the establishment of such friendship is a continuous exercise. So in discussing the origin of Igbe-Ame, it referred to a particular time, when an individual got espoused to his or her spiritual friend and started by expressing his or her experience through cultic activities. As Alfred North White head has observed:

Direct experience is infallible what have been experience, you have experienced. But symbolism is very fallible in the sense that it may induce in actions, feelings emotions and beliefs about things, which are mere notions without explication in the world, which the symbolism leads us to presuppose. (1978:6)

Thus there are as many origins of Igbe-Ame as there are many sects of it. Most of the leaders of Igbe-Ame are women and they are representatives of an attributes of the water divinity. Moreover, the religion or post is not heredity. The death of the founder means the end of that religious sect.

Doctrines and Beliefs

Every Igbe-Ame founders claim to have direct revelation from the water goddess. The proofs are given as follows – the present of the direct gift of the white-chalk (*Orhen*) which is the traditional symbol of God's revelation and power found at the bank of the river and the ability to perform miracles, speak in tongues and even prophesy. (Eriwvo. 19 2). Most of the founders claimed that these signs are proofs to assure members of the public that their religious experiences and visions are God's inspired and that they have been commissioned by Him through the hands of the water divinities to establish these religious sects for the benefit and protection of mankind. They also claim to be agents of the water-divinities, who are believed to be ministers of God. According to them all aspects of their human endeavour are catered for by the water divinities, who are not all-powerful on their own. Their powers are believed to have come from *Oghene*, who brought them into being. Hence Awolalu and Dopamu say:

Thus in maintaining the society, God has brought the divinities into being. They act both as His ministers in the theocratic government of the world, and as intermediaries between Him and man. Through these functionaries,

God gives society coherence and persistence. (Awolalu & Dopamu 1979:72)

Members profess absolute faith and trust in "*mami—wota*", and this is fully expressed in the following lyric:

Oni me r'me
Me vwe o gwa oko
Oche vweio odo
Uvi me na
Ohwo r'akpo se mie vwe e
Akpo me an
Ohwo akpo se mie vwe-e-
Foke ridie owen ochuko me.

Meaning:
My mother in the water,
I am like a paddle
That fell into the water
But my paddle, no one can take it
My life, no one can take it
Because, you are my helper, saviour and redeemer

Every initiate is prohibited from worshipping other traditional divinities or swear by their names. All oaths or pacts must be made between the members and the water divinity through the priestess. The use of medicine, charms, amulets and the practice of divination are strictly forbidden. Healing is by faith or the application of dedicated emblems to exorcise evil spirits. Healing is mainly carried out with consecrated powder, water, scents and *orhen*. Symbolically the powder is used for purification, the scent "to drive of evil forces, while the Orhen that is eaten controls internal cures and protection. Thus with these principal cultic objects, members are healed and protected from within and outside. Another form of healing may be penance or corporal punishment in which the exquisitely obsessed priestess beats the patient's body with *adjudju* to extract impurities from the worshipper. This may involve confession of sins such as witchcraft, adultery, theft and so on. This might sometimes lead to undergo ceremonial cleansing or ritual bathing in the river as a means of purification or spirit exorcism. People so cleansed rub white powder profusely. (Okolugbo. 1972:352)

Apart from divine call, membership could be from one who is heal from affliction or whose requests are granted, the first requirement from such person is life membership of that sect of Igbe-Ame, in order to ensure effective, permanent cure and continuous protection. This could be one main reasons why the religious sect commands large followership in Urhobo land. People also become members to protect and insure their lives and shield themselves from the onslaught of Witchcraft. Just like most spiritual Christian churches, members of Igbe-Ame religion believe more in the power of vision and prophecies. As Jules-Rosette researches has revealed:

Members of the apostolic church are trained to prophesy by saying "Imeni Imeni. (Amen, Amen). A prophesy may be prompted by hearing a little buzzing sound, like that of a mosquito or by seeing a vision or by hearing a voice, or when an apostle feels knocking in his heart. (1975:41)

Leaders of *Igbe-Ame* religious sects affirm to the same feelings. Prophecies are used to examine the spiritual state of the mind, past, present and future of each members. It starts with inspiration by the water-divinities leading to visionary experience and ecstatic communication. Leaders also diagnose illness and resolve disputes through dreams and visions. Prophecies and prophetic examination may occur during public worship or at any informal meeting of members or with the leader alone and they often contain special spiritual messages or advices and warnings for members' personal interest and necessary actions. They also believed that before a member does any job, or go anywhere, he/ she may have had an approval from the water divinity through dreams or visions. Finally, purity of the mind is one of the watch-word of *Igbe-Ame* religious sects, The members believe that the religion is built on revelation unlike the other *Igbe* sects such as *Igbe-IJBiesha* which is a syncretistic movement, *Igbe-Ame* is purely an African traditional religion both in form, contextual and beliefs. (Okolugbo. 1972:1ff) Members believe in one God called *Oghene*; whom they claimed is the creator and sustainer of the universe, "That out of His overflowing love, He sent and gave control of the earth or world to the water divinities". This belief is common, and manifested in all their doings, hence direct ritualistic worship is not given to Him. This belief can be found in most of their lyrics such as this one:

Akerho - o - kerho (2ce)
 Oghene vwo m'akpo na ve ame nu
 Qda vwo Ogaga vwo ke ame
 Gbe ru obo roje we
 Foke r'otioye na gba kpevwwe
 oghene

Wo ne orhovwo ke mamiwota
 Otu re mattiwota chuko
 Foke rg ogaga t'Oghgne

Meaning:

Hard! Hark!! Harki!! (2ce)
 When God had created the world and water
 He gave authority to the water divinity
 To do whatever it likes
 So always give thanks to God
 But pray to the water divinity for your needs
 Those that the water divinity helped
 Have the approval of God.

The above song explain the Omnipresent and omnipotent nature of God and also as the creator of all things; however, the power to control everything in the world had been delegated to the water divinity and as such all devotees should direct their prayers to the water divinities whenever they are in need of anything. It also reminds the devotees that whatever request they receive from the water divinity was made possible because *Oghene* sanctioned it. It means that although the water divinity has authority over the control of the world his power is limited because without *Oghene's* approval, the water divinity cannot approve any request.

Although they believe in *Oghene*, members of *Igbe-Ame* deal more directly with the aquatic divinities. In their thinking, they feel that since *Oghene* has given powers to the water divinities to do whatever they like, which

should also be in accordance with God's will, there is nothing wrong in dealing with them directly. Just as Jesus instructed his disciples saying: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the father, and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you until the end of the age"(Mathew

The Cult of Igbe-Ame - Ogwa

A shrine according to Idowu "is primarily the face of the divinity. Here the divinity is represented by its emblems which are regarded as sufficient reminders of his attributes". (1966:45). In Urhobo traditional religion, places used for worship of any kind is called Ogwa (shrine). For example we have Ogwa-Esemo - Ancestral shrine, Ogwa Igbe - the temple of Igbe and every divinity in Urhobo Land has its own Ogwa. In some cases a place where divinities are worshipped is known as Uwevwi-Orhan meaning the "abode or temple of a divinity".

An Ogwa is not usually a magnificent building as compared to the foreign religions. The Urhobo believe that magnificent temple is not a guarantee of the devotee's piety but their state of mind. So places of worship are just erected merely to serve as convenient meeting points between the worshipper and the divine objects he believes in and reveres. It is a place where the divine is invoked and summoned to come to commune, communicate and also listen to its devotee's request. The size of an Ogwa depends mostly upon the number of people who go there to worship. While some are big halls, others are moderately small. Every Ogwa-Igbe-Ame has an altar or holy of holies which is strategically situated at one end of the Ogwa, placed directly opposite the only main entrance into the temple. The cultic functionaries sit near this Shekinah facing this main entrance, so that they could easily see anyone coming in or going out of it. It is usually a very simple structure.

The altar of Igbe-Ame is usually made of a wooden table of moderate size covered with a piece of white cloth. Items placed on such altar vary from one cult to the other; depending upon the instructions the chief priestess received from the divinity. Two individuals could receive the same divine experience but when they want to overtly express their experience they do so by using different symbolic items, which are the ones found on the altars. All the same, there are some common items found among all of them.

In the olden days, Igbe-Ame altars were erected at the banks of rivers which were believed to be the abodes of the aquatic spiritual beings. Such altars were decorated with palm fronds and with table containing cups of powder, scents, native white chalk and coconut fruits. During worship only the priest and one or two acolytes enter the arena enclosed by the palm-fronds. It is because the place is so small that it could not accommodate more than one or two worshippers. Apart from that, there might be some sacred emblems which only those specially consecrated persons are allowed to see.

Nowadays, an Ogwa is built with concrete blocks and iron sheets. The inside of every Ogwa-Igbe-Ame is quite plain. It is an open hall with the altar at the far end, as earlier mentioned. The most prominent common items found inside Ogwa Igbe-Ame are, a table containing cups of white powder, vial of scents, candles, a small white dish, lumps of native white chalk and a small mirror. All these items make the altar looks attractive. The walls of the Ogwa especially the one very close to the table are decorated with a large mirror, some leather fans (adjudju), drawings, paintings and pictures of some aquatic creatures such as snakes and crocodiles. Also found on the walls are images of beautiful ladies. Most striking of all the wall decorations is a mural Painting of a beautiful female looking monster, whose trunk upwards looks like a mortal while the lower part has a fish tail. All these awe striking

pictures are used to demonstrate and invoke in the mind of the devotees the mysteries of their object of worship.

Directly in front of the altar are candle stands, containing six branches each with candles on them. In front of this we have a basin of water placed on the ground. Right from under the table to where the basin of water stands is scattered white cowries. These cowries symbolize the wealth that the divinity is supposed to bring from the sea and bestow on her worshippers. Beside the altar stands a seat for the priestess; no other Igbe member sits on this sacred and royal stool apart from her. There is another seat for a man known as Ose-Igbe, that is the father of Igbe; Ose-Igbe who in most cases is the husband of the chief priestess, if she is married, if otherwise, the post, remain vacant or does not exist.

The other section of the Ogwa is the hall where all member may move or sit freely. Very often, however, each member has his or her own marked position or seat and no one trespass into another person's seat. The seats are arranged in such a way to give enough room for dancing and other cultic activities. There is an extension altar outside the Ogwa with all the same items mentioned above. Entering the Ogwa-Igbe Ame with shoes is prohibited.

Symbolic Meaning

According to Carl Gustav Jung,

What we call a symbol is a term, a name or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown or hidden from us. Thus a word, or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider "unconscious" aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it. As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason (Jung 1979:20)

This is true of the items found in the altars of the Ogwa Igbe-Ame. The cups of powder placed on the table are not for fun, they represent the number of initiates into the cult and have pledged their lives to the water goddess' protection. As long as the person keeps up his / her membership by paying his or her dues and comes to the Ogwa regularly to worship, he or she is believed to be protected, by the water goddess. Once a person ceases to come or denounced his or her membership his or her cup would be removed. The scent is also provided by members to drive off evil forces. It is important to note that not all types of perfume is used; only those with the picture of a snake and a lady called either six flower, or Diamond. The native-chalk is believed traditionally, a symbol of God's revelation and power. It also symbolizes ritual purity. Mirror is used for divination. It is into this the priestess gazes at like a crystal ball when she wants to go into trance, meditation mood and communicate with her object of worship.

Other aquatic mural paintings such as snakes and crocodile, represent the bodyguards of the *mami-wota* down at the bed of the river, where the divine has its abode. They believed to be the agents usually sent to reprimand those who have defaulted in one way or the other. They could also be sent to protect members against enemies. Thus they serve as police and protectors.

The candle shows the presence of God, just as the Christian faith believe. The candle could be six or three or even one in number. It depends upon what was revealed to the chief priestess. The basin of water is necessary because, since most ogwa are far from the river,

the water symbolizes the presence of the water divinity and to draw the attention of the devotee to their object of worship. Members who are possessed or troubled usually use the water to wash their faces, or hands or pray into it for their needs. It is used also for purification and for restoring those possessed into normalcy. The extension altar outside becomes necessary when the inner altar turns out to be too congested. Those new numbers and those who are back-sliding, their cups of power are kept outside to give room for more initiates items to be accommodated in the altar. Arising from what has been discussed above, the symbolic importance of the objects found in the altar, tend to agree with O.J Otiye observation that: "Symbols are agents, which are impregnated with messages and with invitation to conform and to act. When decoded in their social and cultural context, they are found to have both cognitive and emotional meanings". (1997:33)

The Cult of Igbe-Ame- Cultic Functionaries

Strictly speaking priests are religious servants associated with temples; but in the African situation the word is used to cover everyone who performs religious duties whether in temples, shrines, sacred groves or elsewhere. In connection with the activities of worship of the divinities in Urhoboland, there are very highly developed priestly tradition. It is the duty of the priest, who has received special training to serve as an intermediary between the divinity and the devotees and he is often called upon to perform rituals and ceremonies. His function, however, is not restricted to religious matters alone for almost every aspect of human life is the concern of his and this practice is in conformity with G. Parrinder's observation about West- African when he says:

“The tradition of priest is stronger in West Africa than in other parts of the continent. Priests and devotees, mediums devoted to the gods, are set apart for divine, serve and receive some kind of initiation and training for it. There are different methods of training from very simple to highly elaborate, but the priesthood as a class is distinct and developed”. (1963:185)

In Agbe-Ame, priesthood is a highly respected office and only women are mostly called to hold this position. It is worthy of note that while the priesthood in the other traditional cults in Urhobo is dominated by men, hardly could you find a male chief priest in the cults of Igbe-Ame. Even in very few cases, we heard of male chief priests of that cult the core of the spiritual power of such cult is usually concentrated in the hands of some of his female assistants and priestesses. There is no special training for those called into the priesthood. A priest is called by the divinity itself, by possessing the person. The candidate may be struck by a strange illness which would necessitate her being taken to an *Obupha* (diviner) or to any Igbe-shrine for treatment, where the particular divinity will then reveal himself or herself and indicates its intention. Also the divinity could appear to the person in dreams and vision. When such a percipient of divine experience gets worrisome, a diviner (*obo*) or a native doctor (*obopha*) is consulted, both are experts in traditional psychiatric treatment. The length of-time, the state or period the illness would last, depends upon how sinful the person possessed must have been. Since such divine affliction is intended to purify the body of the priestess in the making. Also, such spiritual purification and renewal is meant to make the body a worthy abode of the divine companion. The period of affliction depends upon how soon these causes were diagnosed and ascertained by either by an *Obuepha* or *obo* and also the individual wiliness to accept the divine call. There have been instances of such afflictions being in the form of lunacy lasting for weeks. Once it has been known that the person is being tormented by a particular water divinity, steps

would, be taken to placate it, at the end of which the woman in question becomes a priestess. It is believed that refusal to obey the call could result to either permanent insanity or death for the recalcitrant candidate. (Nabofa. 1979).

However, the parents and relatives of the possessed person could plead with the divinity through another priestess, most especially, if the person is too young to take up such responsibilities, to release her of such obligations. If the divinity accepts their plea, the girl would be released and the parents and relatives are shown how to appease the water-divinity. The divinity can also refuse the plea, in which case the person's relatives would have to give up their plea for fear of the obvious consequences.

There are no special training for Igbe-Ame priestess. However, after receiving the call the priestess performs some initiation rites by herself and these have to be done in accordance with the divinity's instructions. There are cases where some other older priestess could assist the new entrant in initiating her into the priesthood. In such a situation the new priestess, could attach herself temporarily to such already established cult, until she would be in a good position, both financially and maturity, to establish her own cult. Initiation rites into priesthood vary from persons to person and this depends upon the personal contact between the divinity and the devotee. But all the same, it involves a sort of rituals of covenant relationship between the person and the divinity. This type of initiation ceremony is called *Igue Eche*, which means "kneeling down" (or oath taking) before the divine to pledge your loyalty.

This a ritual ceremony which involves taking certain sacrificial items to the river and disposed of them ceremonially. Such exercise indicates the candidate's acceptance and willingness to assume responsibilities to be the devotee of the divine, thanking it for choosing her as mediators and also willingness to serve as an intermediaries between the divinity and other people who may need help. Items used for such initiation varied from person to person and also depends on the wishes of the water divinity. But most common items are cups of powder, vials of scents, biscuits, packets of candle, bottles of soft drinks, kolanut, white fowl, and white piece of cloth (Ukpoyibo), combs, paddle, and eggs and oil – Emale

On the appointed day of the initiation which is usually called *Ede Ekroghwa kpu rhie*, (day of carrying sacrificial things to the River), involved the whole village or the sector of the town that has known about it. All roads lead to the river side. Nearly everybody in the community goes to see what would happen to the person. The youths are mostly excited and occupy every available space and very much ready to dive into the water and retrieve some of the sacrificial items.

The appropriate time for any initiation is in the evening, when the sun is just setting, this is when the water goddess comes out to the bank to rest and listen to the problems of the world. The initiate who is now well dressed gorgeously in white attires move, as if in trance or one being possessed or under a spell, towards the river holding a cup of powder. This she sprinkles along her way in order to dispel all evil forces that may attempt to block her way to all good things. As we had earlier said, power to devotees is a sign of purification and it is to wade off evil forces.

Immediately she gets to the bank of the river, she is held or else she would slip into the river and stays permanently in the beautiful abode of the aquatic beings. At the bank, she would kneel down facing the river and declares formally to accept water divinity as her personal saviour and lord and her willingness to serve and accept her as a divine mentor. She would then drink water from the river with her two hands. It is taken for granted that the divinity

accepts such self-dedication, and in appreciation for having been accepted by the divinity she would offer all the sacrificial items to the divinity by throwing all of them into the river. She goes home with one stick of the sacrificial candles, powder, scent, white-native-chalk and it is with these items, she starts her *Ogwa-Igbe*. This ceremony is very delicate and interesting. It is delicate because, if the initiate is not held firmly, she might slipped into the river, which will mean the end of her life; although the devotees will interpret it to mean that she had been called by her divinity. Hence hefty men are used to guard her and hold her when she is getting close to the river.

Expansion and Future of Igbe-Ame

The belief in Igbe-Ame is spreading fast in Urhobo-land and more and more people are patronizing them due to many vicissitudes of life such as fear of evil forces, witchcraft, childlessness, sickness, failures and success in business ventures, powers, happiness and peace.

These problems have given room to more and more sects being established here and there and many of their leaders have many clients. Since there is no religious headquarter for this sect like its counterpart *Igbe Ubiesha* which originated from Kokori, one finds it very difficult to give an estimate of the population of its members. However, there are mushroom cults of *Igbe-Ame* everywhere in Urhoboland. Also it is important to note that each sects of Igbe-Ame, is autonomous and without a branch elsewhere, they belief that there are several divinities in the river and each human being has his or her own paternity divinity or guardian divinity known as Uko-Edjo, which acts as his or her divine instructor in matters of solving human problems. The members believed that the power to see vision in each cult of Igbe-Ame is vested on the priestess who is the direct representative of the divinity here on earth. Since vision and prophesy are the major characteristic features of the weekly worship, establishing other branches will be useless. Hence during Igbe worship, members far and near travelled to the major shrine to worship.

Conclusion

The study of Igbe-Ame religion has thrown considerable light on the belief that the religion sprang out of the experience of the divinity and the expression of religion, is as practice by the Urhobo people. Igbe-Ame is purely an indigenous traditional religious sect which shared almost all Urhobo belief system and practices. The religion pays homage to Oghene and worships Him, which is the traditional religion of the people.

Moreover, they adopted the traditional God's emblem of white-chalk. White chalk is a sign of divine presence and a symbol of purity of heart. In the traditional religion, it is used to invoke the divinities during divine worship or sacrifices. After worship it is used to seal and ensure continual blessing and presence of the divinities with their worshippers by rubbing it on the forehead and chest of each members. It acts as an outward sign of covenant between the divinity (who is ever ready to protect the worshippers) and the worshipper, (who promises to be loyal to the religious sanctions of the divinity. It also acts as a binding force for all those who jointly received the white chalk of the divinity, in effect, it becomes synonymous with the divinity because no divinity can be served without it. Thus when Igbe-Ame founder claims to have experienced God's revelation

and produces white chalk as evidence of God's authority or commission they would definitely be using an indigenous cultic object to revive the traditional concepts of God. It follows naturally that Igbe-Ame employs this white colour which is the traditional symbols of God's holiness and purity. Hence its members dress in white and offer-mainly white articles to their divinity.

Apart from the above, the main doctrine, theology and rules of piety of Igbe-Ame seem to have derived very heavily its modes of worship or liturgy from those of the traditional cults. There is a well-organized system of worship aimed, at meeting the cultic aspirations of the Urhobo. Devotees engage in regular morning and weekly worship involving ritual dance and special homage to the divinity. These services are marked by payment of vows, narrating and interpreting prophetic experiences and prescription of sacrifices by spirit-possessed leader to the members. Also they observe the traditional sacred days which are *Edewor* and *Eduherie*. These are the days they mostly carry their worship of *Esemo* and *Iniem* during their annual festivals. Although Igbe-Ame prohibits its members from practicing divination, these prophetic prescriptions and visions surely stem from traditional mode of divination. Witch-smelling features very prominently in the traditional religion and one of the reasons for pact-making is to ensure honest relationship and faithful dealings with one another. While Igbe-Ame rejects the worship of traditional divinities, it promotes oath-taking not only amongst its membership but also outside it. In fact many Igbe-Ame shrines have now become witch-finding institutions, pointing accusing fingers not only at suspected members but also outsiders. Like the traditional religion, peace, and preventive meal offerings feature very much in the cult. Igbe-Ame priestesses prescribe variety of sacrifices for their members in order to ward off disaster caused by evil men and women. Sometimes meal-offering involving blood victims are prescribed. Preventive sacrifices take the form of spirit exorcising and ritual bathing at the river and also making of sacrifices at road junction.

Igbe-Ame songs are composed and sang according to the spiritual and the temperament of the devotees. These songs are usually accompanied by indigenous music lyres and musical instruments, such as drums, gongs, rattles, beating of *adjudju* and clapping of hands. These musical instruments create an inspiring atmosphere for the worshippers and move them into spontaneous dancing resulting in frenzied moods, spirit-possession and seeing of visions. All founders of Igbe-Ame cults like most traditional priests and priestess are very secretive and above all, they do not reveal their source of power and inspiration to anyone, not to their own children or closest associates. The cult caters for the spiritual well-being not only of their members but also of the various communities and relatives who believes. Apart from spiritual, the cult, also act as a judge or adviser by settling disputes, revealing of criminal acts and even warning distant relatives of pending danger and how to ward them off. They also believe strongly in ancestral worship

However, with the introduction of Christianity into Urhobo land, most founders of Igbe-Ame religious sect have incorporated some elements of this new faith into their practices, perhaps so as to give more credence to their own religion. In reviving the concept of monotheism, Igbe-Ame cult theoretically enjoined its members not to worship nor swear by the name

of any other traditional divinity, but direct all worship to "mami wota". It also forbids its members from using charms nor practice divination which places the power of absolute belief in one God on the members, which is patterned after the Christian belief of monotheism.

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- Note: 1. Most of the experiences cited in this work are based on my M.A field work in 1987.
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