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The Living Dead: Anthropological Interpretation of Rites of Passage in Umuahia and Emure Ekiti

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INTRODUCTION

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things; that is, to things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community.¹

In his anthropological approach to the study of religion, Durkheim² stressed that social and communal functions are the heart of religious practices. Durkheim³ was of the opinion that societies required a kind of religion to bind them together.

It is upon this analysis that Malinowski, through his functionalist theory, envisaged customs and practices as the basis through which people of any society can be understood. He clearly stated:

Society was to be seen as a functioning whole: all customs and practices should be understood in their full context and explained in terms of the function they fulfilled for the people of that society.⁴

This suggests that beliefs and practices cum custom and practices are most essential in the stratification of any group in society. The view of the anthropologist is that a society or a group cannot exist in isolation. There must be unified systems of beliefs and practices that either naturally or by chance emanated from customs. This, in some regards, serves as an emblem of identification that permeates peaceful co-existence within groups.

The agenda of custom in the structural functionalist view has its basis and foundation on religion; because religion is seen as the cement of society through which social structure of groups within society are maintained.⁵ Since the goal of modern anthropology is the idea that social practices must be investigated in context and seen as essentially connected to others within the society in question, this study will examine the anthropological interpretation of the rite of passage in Nigerian communities of Umuahia in Abia State and Emure in Ekiti State.

Afterlife in Igbo and Yoruba Settings

Igbo beliefs about afterlife reflect an understanding of the connection between biology (birth, reproduction, and death / which is nature) and culture. There are some actions that are culturally created but transformed into natural phenomenon. The structure of afterlife in Igbo community settings was built upon the structure of rites of passage articulated by Arnold Van Gennep, who discerned a fundamental tripartite form of separation, transition, and incorporation.⁶ This view involves a conglomeration of rituals that establish the focus of such passage. It has been argued that ritual does not always have a religious implication, but in this case it serves a necessary purpose.

Following Yoruba belief, afterlife as represented in *egúngún* masquerades and *Orò* is a means of demonstrating, in a still more concrete way, the belief that those who depart from this earth continue in existence elsewhere and are actively in touch with those who remain.⁷ The belief among the Yoruba is that death is only a transition, a channel of crossing from the carnal world to

¹ David Gellner, "Anthropological Approaches" in *Approaches to the Study of Religion* ed Peter Connolly (London and New York: Cassell 1999) 13.

² Gellner, "Anthropological Approaches," 1999, 16.

³ Gellner, "Anthropological Approaches," 1999, 16.

⁴ Gellner, "Anthropological Approaches," 1999, 16.

⁵ Gellner, "Anthropological Approaches," 1999, 17.

⁶ Barbara Myerhoff et al, "Rite of Passage, An Overview" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Lindsay Jones, ed. (New York: Thompson Gale, 2005), 7796-7800.

⁷ Mercy Oduyoye, *Yoruba Religious Discourse* (Ibadan; Sefer, 2008), 104.

⁸ Edmund Ologu, "Igbo Burial Customs" in *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, ed Ade Adegbola (Ibadan: Sefer,

the world of the spirit. This belief is also dominant among the Igbo. Igbo and Yoruba beliefs about afterlife are showcased in displays at funeral ceremonies for every adult that dies a good death. The ceremony is in two phases: the physical burial ceremony and the transitional ceremony⁸

The burial ceremony depends on the social and religious status of the children of the deceased. The burial of elite members of the society, for example, involves fanfare and loud applause, and essential materials are needed for the burial rites. The head of the extended family sacrifices a chicken to announce the death of a deceased man, and loud cries and the firing of guns accompany this ritual.⁹

On the day of burial, other ceremonies are performed, and music is played while the corpse lies in state. Various age groups are represented, and they deliver ovations through the deceased to the ancestors in the spirit world. These ovations indicate that the spirit of the dead man is in transition. This ceremony also involves eating and drinking. After the burial, rituals and ceremonies are usually performed to propitiate the gods.

The transitional ceremony can be described as a kind of intercession medium, allowing the spirit of the deceased to secure a permanent place in the company of the ancestors. This day of performance is not specific, but it must not be evaded to ensure peace for the family that is involved and to allow the deceased to enjoy the benefits of the dead while on transition.

The children are responsible for performing the ceremony, and they must prepare a great feast and celebrate the occasion with singing, drumming, dancing and merriment. People from far and near always grace the occasion. The ceremony is concluded at a fixed period during the week after which a special ritual is performed in the market place or any public environment.

The characteristics imbedded in this ceremony are a yardstick used by families within Igbo and Yoruba settings. In some cases, there may be variations from one group to the next, depending on the mythical history of the society involved. In this regard, the incantations or creeds may take on different dimensions. Also, semantic meaning ascribed to the rite of passage in the area of language usage may vary. In line with the above analysis, the interpretation of *Okuku* as the rite of passage in Umuahia and *Yan o lomo se ni* Emure takes on this dimension.

The Rite of *Okuku* in Umuahia

Umuahia is the capital city of Nigeria's Abia State. It belongs to the southeast geo-political zone of Nigeria. The city shares her boarder with Bende and Umunneochi on the north, Imo State on the east and Isiala Ngwa on the south.

Okuku (pronounced *Okwukwu*) in Umuahia tradition serves the purpose of ritual ceremonies ascribed to the veneration of the dead and aiding in their transition into the spirit world. It is a rite of passage performed for deceased Okonkwo members. The rite is referred to as *Ikwa pu akwukwa* i.e. giving him the right.

The Okonkwo society is a highly expected adult male society, the members of which are endowed with a peculiar integrity. It was instituted to influence the spheres of political, economic, religious, and socio - cultural life. The society performed the rite of *Okuku* for the following reasons:

- (a) To allow the spirit of their dead members to have an uninterrupted transition from the land of the living to that of the dead;
- (b) To facilitate the settlement of the dead fellows among the ancestors;
- (c) To allow the dead to participate in activities of the afterlife;

⁸ Edmund Ologu, "Igbo Burial Customs" in *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, ed Ade Adegbola (Ibadan: Sefer, 1998) 109-111.

⁹ Omosade Awolalu and Adelumo Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Nigeria, Macmillan, 2000), 301-302.

- (d) To influence the rank of the dead spirit to a higher level among the ancestors, so that he will be able to perform a protective function among the living; and
- (e) To allow his children or family members to share his properties.¹⁰

The Ceremony¹¹

The *Okuku* rite is a transitional ceremony. It is either done immediately after the burial or later and thus it is a second burial ceremony that must be observed as a rite of passage. The earlier this is done the sooner the deceased can settle among the ancestors and the sooner the living relatives can achieve a state of peace.

The intention of the family members who are preparing for this ceremony is made known at a kindred meeting. During the meeting, a palm frond leave (*omu*) must be hoisted in the presence of those assembled. This indicates that members who have not performed the same function for their dead relatives of the Okonkwo clan should leave, since the meeting is meant only for the Okonkwo society. The consent of the Okonkwo opens the celebration of the rite. The clan members take another step by informing the maternal relatives in a meeting that will hold twice before the final approval is given. During the visit to the deceased's maternal side of the family, the Okonkwo member must be part of the entourage.

The following items are presented at the opening meeting: yam tubers, palm wine jars, hot drinks, kolanuts, and goat. If the deceased was old enough, the number of items may be multiplied by sixteen, with the exception of the goat, but pleading and compromise may reduce the items to seven. The second meeting would then be held with the deceased's maternal family members, where deliberation on the previous meetings will take place. The group will then declare the date on which the rite will take place, the market day of that community.

It is usually thought to be abominable for the relatives to perform the rite before the society's deliberations and performance of the ceremonies for their dead fellow. If there is any backlog of such, a valedictory ceremony will be held, where the dead fellows whose names are listed would be honored. This is important for the deceased members' recognition in the spiritual world, where they would be acknowledged and any danger over the heads of the first sons or other family members would be cleared away.¹²

The Process

The public celebration begins with an impressive display on Eke market day and continues through the night until the following morning. Eke day is a special day and sacred to Igbo people. This day is dearly observed for the meeting of the venerated ancestors and sacrifices are made on this day to recognize their presence and to appease them. It is also the belief that Eke day is the day upon which the spirit of the late member will be ushered into the realm of the ancestors and will likewise be received by them. The sacrificial animal to be offered on that day is graded according to the age of the deceased:

- (a) A goat is offered for a 72-year-old.
- (b) A goat and a dog are offered for those between 72 and 79 years of age.

¹⁰ Ukandu Victor, "Okuku: The Rite of Passage in Umuahia" *The Guardian*, April 11, 2009, 27.

¹¹ Dorcas Ngwu (36 yrs), Oral Interview, Igbo Teacher at Police Secondary School, Akure, June 6, 2009.

¹² Ngwu, 2009.

- (c) A goat, a dog, and a ram are offered for a man who was at least 80 years old, and this points to the fact that, the man died at a prosperous age (*O'Laru Ebule*).¹³

At this point, fellow members of the family who had no acquaintance with the dead before his death must not participate in the ritual. Required activities on the the next morning include the ringing of a huge bell and the beating of drums known as *Nkwa issi*, a set of six drums. An Okonkwo member will then visit the maternal side of the deceased, and that Okonkwo member will be accompanied by a dark sack masquerade known as *Itiri miri*. Taking a cock that is hung around his neck, the masquerade would then sacrifice the animal at the home of a maternal family member.

The next stage involves the feasting and merriment at the market place, where all the items demanded, with the exception of the sacrificial animals, would be presented to those in attendance. The market display takes the form of members of the family (including women) queuing up behind the first son and bearing a tuber of yam on the left, with the first daughter also displaying the portrait of the father.

Seven masquerades including the *itiri miri* will be on display, and they will help to keep the crowd at bay. Gunshots will be heard following displays by each of the masquerades. The festivities end with a collective masquerade display, which also signals the end of the market outing.

To show that the rite was performed for an aged man and to indicate the veneration of such man into the status of an ancestor, a huge bamboo figure—about 10 meters tall and decorated with immaculate white cloth and a skull-like object adorned with a rainbow cap at the top—would be erected. A live cock would hung around its neck, as it was done for *itiri-miri*. The figure would then be displayed for eight market days. This symbol is known as *okara* in Igbo settings.¹⁴

Rites of Passage in Emure

Emure is situated in Ekiti State in the western region of Nigeria. The city emerged from Emure Ile a town within the Owo suburb in Ondo State. Traditional accounts suggest that, while moving from Emure Ile, the people took along plenty of leaves known as *EMU*. As they approached their present abode they were greeted with the statement *Emu mu re* (meaning “Here are plenty of leaves.”) The contraction of the statement later became Emure.

The Ceremony¹⁵

The rite of burial among Emure people emphasizes the stage and status of the deceased in terms of age. The approved age for any burial ceremony begins at age 60. Any age below 60 is thus considered to be a premature death. When an individual's death is recorded, the bereaved family will make an urgent announcement, sending messages to both paternal and maternal relatives of the deceased. This announcement is referred to as *itufo*, death announcement. After *itufo*, the public announcement is made for every member of the society. This is done by firing a gun into the sky three times, an act that is repeated at every abode of the deceased's family members.

The children of the deceased, who accompany the group's announcer, were required, as a matter of tradition, to hold a black horsehair to signify their status as children of the deceased. Instead of the horsehair that was used in an earlier era, the children, who are at the head of he entourage, will now carry a photograph of the deceased.

¹³ Ngwu, 2009.

¹⁴ Ngwu, 2009.

¹⁵ Olabisi Adewumi (49yrs), Oral Interview, Primary School Teacher, Ile-Ife, March 9, 2010. She has performed the same rite for her parent at her native Emure.

The Process

The preparation for burial proper starts with the bathing of the father's corpse by the immediate younger male relatives. After the bath, the corpse is then laid on the bed while relatives will be presenting gifts of cloth that will be spread on the bed where the corpse is laid. The value of the gift items indicate the importance of the deceased among the kith and kins before his death. The gifts are offered to the corpse to express the belief that the corpse will surely re-incarnate to make use of the materials in heaven. The mood at this stage shows celebration with dancing to the *àgè"rè"* traditional drum, eating of *àkàrà* (Yoruba bean cake), and a lot of fun and fanfare to express the well spent life of the deceased. The following is one of the traditional songs chanted for this occasion:

Mo rí ye, mo rí ye ò
Àyèyè, yèye
Kí mo rí nísìsìyí o,
O ló dàbí è"pa róbótó¹⁶

Meaning

The neighbor once
 Acquainted with now
 Reference with awe

On the burial day, the second stage of gift presentation to the corpse will occur. This time the presentation is done by all and sundry. After the ritual prayer for the corpse, a fellow will descend into the grave with the corpse to place all the material gifts on the casket of the corpse. This is done with the understanding that the deceased, after receiving the gift, will continue his role of safeguarding, guiding, and advising the people as when he/she was still physically present on earth. It is also the belief that the departed will serve as a point of contact to the former ancestor that had passed on. After the seventh day of the burial, *àkàrà* (bean cake) will be prepared and eaten at an official meeting of the relatives. The date is regarded as the day for the society's celebration.

Three days before the society's celebration, the traditional rite of *Yà'n O"lò"mo" S"e* ("parental celebration") must precede all other activities. The meaning of this celebration is couched in the following statements:

- (a) *Wá wo ohun tí eni tí ó bí omo ríse*
 Meaning
 Come and witness the end of a good mother or father.
- (b) *'Wá wo Ìgbè"hin e"ni tí ó bímo¹⁷*
 Meaning
 Come and see the reward of good parent.

The display during the celebration shows women in men's attire and vice-versa, performing traditional horsehair choruses of the family eulogy. The fundamental reason for these activities is that the deceased may not have a complete or comfortable transition to the world beyond—and hence may not have a blissful rest—if this is not done. In this regard, the occasion is used to witness

¹⁶ Adewumi, 2010.

¹⁷ Adewumi, 2010.

the presence of the departed ancestors / the dead relatives with all enthusiasm. The ancestors continued to pray for the living family that they will live to be remembered the same way.

Final celebrations for the departed soul are done according to the rules guiding the traditional rites of the family. Utmost attention is given to the religious affiliation of the family. These include *Orò*, *O"de"* (hunters), *Ifá* (herbalist) and *àgbáà* (the masquerades). Each of these affiliations is being celebrated in a particular way and must be acknowledged and observed accordingly. For *O"de"* families there must be *Ìsípà*, while *Orò* families must reference *Orò* traditional displays for the deceased. The *àgbáà* family must bury the masquerade regalia with the corpse. Masquerade displays are included in the celebration to facilitate easy transition for the deceased.¹⁸

In the belief of the people, if the activities are not carried out or done accordingly there will be serious outbreak of disease and sickness, along with severe calamities befalling the household of the family concerned. After the completion of the rites, the family then converges to arrange how the will (property statement) of the deceased will be executed among the children. This is known as *Ogún pín pín* (inheritance sharing)

The Importance

The Hereafter is an important concept among Traditional Africans. It is part of their idea that the living-dead will never sever relationships with the relatives that are left behind. In this regard, the ancestors among the Africans are the dead members of a family, a clan, or a tribe. They are linked to them and form part of the life of a community.¹⁹

John Mbiti states that ancestors are recognized as the "living dead." A major difference exists between ancestors who are still personally remembered by someone still alive and those who are no longer remembered. Those remembered by a living fellow either for three to five decades of descendants is considered to be in a state of "personal immortality" i.e. *Sasa*. But when he ceases to be remembered or, peradventure, the last person who knows him ceases to exist, such ancestors disappear totally into *Zamani*, i.e. collective immortality. The main point is that Africans immortalize their dead parents.²⁰

In another vein, Mbiti looks at the African eschatology from the perspective of time in African belief. In Mbiti's view, time is the key to the interpretation and understanding of African religions and philosophy.²¹ He focuses on the encounter of Christian eschatology with African concepts and finds the notion of future time crucial for eschatology.²² The impression shows that Christian beliefs about resurrection, last judgment, and the end of the world may be difficult to understand in African contexts. Here, Mbiti's analysis would be true of certain sections of Africa where he looks at the tradition of the people as a matter of the past and not the future. In contrast, the African cultures in Umuahia and Emure are opposed to this feeling. The discussion of this paper entails the feelings of the people towards their future expectations and fulfillments.

Eschatological understanding as related to the veneration of ancestors in African settings from Sankey's perspective could be compared to Christian eschatology, because in his feelings it

¹⁸ Adewumi, 2010.

¹⁹ Yusuf Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religious and Worldview* (Nairobi: International Bible Society, Africa, 2001), 131.

²⁰ Lois Fuller, *African Traditional Religion* (Kaduna, Baraka press, 2001) 59.

²¹ Frans J. Verstraelen Review of "Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti," eds. Jacob Olupona and Nyang Sulayman in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 28, FACS 2 (1998) 247-250. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1581722> accessed 18/05/2010.

²² Wesley Johnson, Review of "New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts by John S. Mbiti" in the *American Historical Review*, 78, No 2 (1973) 469. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1861253> accessed 18/05/2010.

shows that “Life is in expectations, in hope (tumaini) and that “time cannot move” backwards for Africa and forward for other continents that have the focus of a different eschatological belief. Time moves forward for everyone.”²⁴

The ancestors, therefore, are the most powerful, basic and primary components of African settings. An African setting is a place where death and life co-exist communally and interdependently in solidarity. Religion, culture, customs, life and meaning are all mediated, moderated, and sanctioned by the community of the ancestors, and this belief is associated with the idea of “the cult of the ancestors” or “ancestor worship / veneration.”²⁵

In light of the above discussion, the rite of *Okuku* is a religious expression through which the experience of afterlife is explained both in factor and in action. It is part of the belief of the Africans that is encased in African Indigenous Religions. It also has a deep religious meaning and spiritual essence for the society, because it provides opportunities for spiritual fulfillment, drama, entertainment, and traditional education.

Though women are not allowed at a point in the ceremony, the ceremony cannot hold if the maternal kinsmen of the deceased refuse to give approval. This shows that gender equity is incorporated into the traditional celebration of *Okuku*, since the wishes of the maternal relatives women’s are given preference.

It also shows that the ancestors in African Indigenous Religions play a role similar to that of saints in other religions (e.g. Christianity). It also indicates that the family unit in African culture is so strong that even death cannot break it up. The celebration gives the impression that there are rewards for good work and good lives led by the dead while on earth. The dead in this class are believed to be in heaven with God while also remaining close to their families. They are also venerated and prayed to as they have received a special, divine status—in the Roman Catholic Church, for example, as human priests who led a good life while they were on earth.²⁷

The transitional rite in Emure Ekiti also shows that the ancestors are venerated with sacrifices and offerings, and that the religious ceremony surrounding the ancestors is strictly a private family affair. The household, clan or tribes of the deceased family are those involved. The elaborate burial ceremony and ritual held in honor of the deceased take place to facilitate the onward journey to the city of the dead. The ceremony is known to protect the living from harm, and from the anger of the spirit of the deceased.

The parenthood of ancestors in this case is a fundamental religious tenet and concept. The ceremonies and proper burials after the death are appropriate, given the lives that the individuals lived. Ancestors are thereby qualified to be venerated from time to time, by the offering of liberations at his tomb or other fixed places when descendants are seeking blessings or petitioning for something.

Many societies in Africa do not believe much in rewards and punishments after death, but the Yoruba and others believe in a judgment by God after death. They believe that the good ancestors will go to *orun rere* (good heaven) while the bad ones will go to *orun apaadi* (hell). The ancestors also need to have the family clan and tribe preserved so that they will not be forgotten. So they either come back to the family through new children who are born and that is why many children are given names that recognize dead parents, such as *Babátúndé*, *Ìyábò"dé*, *Yétúndé* and *Yéwándé*. This shows that there is a belief in partial re-incarnation among the people. The wicked ones, according to Yoruba belief, may be returned to be created as trees or any other objects.

²⁴ Verstraelen, 1998; 2001, 132.

²⁵ Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religious and Worldview*, 132.

²⁷ Joseph Omoregbe, *Comparative Religion: Christianity and Other World Religions in Dialogue* (Lagos, Jerp, 2006) 66.

Conclusion

It is not a gainsaying to remark that African Indigenous Religions shared important features in the act of worship as done in other religions sect. Certain features in traditional worship can be held side by side with those of Christianity and Islam as indicated in this paper.

Saints/Ancestors are common features used in both Christianity and African Indigenous religion. The honoring of ancestors allows societies to show respect to its dead members. They are prayed to and invoked for help, since they are venerated into this status. In Christianity they are called 'saints' while in African Religion they are called 'ancestors'.²⁸

Apart from this, priesthood and sacrifice are other related features. The priest in African Traditional Religion acts as intermediary between God and the people and also leads them in worship as done in other religion (i.e. Christianity). In African Traditional Religion, sacrifice is offered on behalf of the people, which is a replica of Holy Mass in certain Christian settings.²⁹

Finally, the creed of traditional religion (as indicated in this passage), compared to that of Islam and Christianity, indicates that life after death is imminent. The three religions also believe that punishment and reward must be given by God for the type of life lived. A funeral rite is also applicable to the three religions, as this will help the dead to find rest in the spiritual world.³⁰ So it can then be said that funeral rites hold a very significant meaning among African traditionalists, as it complements beliefs that have to do with cult of the dead, life after death, and transmigration.³¹

It is then pertinent to note that this paper has emphasized the phenomenon of rites of passage with the ambition to fulfill the notion of ontological and phenomenological appraisal of African Religions that Mbiti raises in *African Religions and Philosophy*. Apart from this, his view that the use of scientific tools and methodology, empirical study, and fieldwork will support the in-depth analysis and unlimited access to information about African people is clearly shown in this paper.³²

²⁸ Omoregbe, *Comparative Religion: Christianity and Other World Religions in Dialogue*, 72.

²⁹ Omoregbe, *Comparative Religion: Christianity and Other World Religions in Dialogue*, 72.

³⁰ Omoregbe, *Comparative Religion: Christianity and Other World Religions in Dialogue*, 73.

³¹ Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Chaucer, 1982), 129.

³² John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heineman, 1982), 6-14.