

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Religion and Justice: Studies in Afi Obio Traditional Shrine in Oron, Nigeria

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Abstract: Religion and culture are interwoven and this can be seen among the Oron people in their use of the shrine as a socio-cultural and ethical institution. The shrine is an embodiment and the symbol of the very traditional religion of the people. As such, the shrine serves as a medium through which the norms, values, ethics, taboos, and morals are taught and enforced. There is also a great relationship between religion and justice as the shrine (Afi/Obio) as an ethical institution serves as a tribunal of justice by the deities, divinities, and ancestors under the guidance and administration of the priest in tackling and resolving criminal activities, disputes as well as restoring social order and justice in Oron traditional society. The Oron Afi/Obio (Shrine) method of administering justice is beyond the Empirical application of the modern judiciary system that relies on physical facts and shreds of evidence, while the shrine, also, uses spiritual methods that involve Oath taking, incantation and necromancy. Globalization rather than modifying the lapses and loopholes of this system in the parlance of morality, ethics, and health has led to its abolition and break down. This work adopts the qualitative method. This work as primary research uses the conflict theory, phenomenological and Historical method. It identifies globalization as a threat to the traditional justice system and recommends that the shrine is a multi-faceted institution whose function can be adopted and applied to the Nigerian legal system where there is no or little evidence and oath swearing for politicians in our contemporary society.

Keywords: Religion, Oron, Afi/Obio shrine, justice.

INTRODUCTION

Among the Oron people the shrine serves many purposes which range from the sacred place of worship and contact with the gods, deities, ancestors; place for ritual; court for justice; in some cases place or altar of sacrifice; and in Oron, the shrine was also a place of social gathering. In Oron there is a close relationship between religion and administration of justice as religion is also a veritable instrument of social

regulation, as this was done in the Afi (shrine) where the Ekpo ancestors were kept. The Ekpo carvings were the monument of the dead that occupied the spirits of the ancestors they represent. The Ekpo oro that were kept in the shrine as judges were not just symbols of the ancestors rather they were temporary adjuncts of the ancestors soul which ensures that the dead elder is remembered until the vacation of his position in the group has taken place in a properly slow and ritual manner, until which he acts as an intermediary between the gods and the living he left behind.

There is a deep sense of justice in Oron. Morality and justice are rooted in religious sanctions in that religion sacralized the normative values of the society and imposed penalties on abnormal behaviors (Bassey, 2019, 35). The deviant was never allowed to go unpunished. To the Oron people "justice delayed" is "justice denied". Cases were given hearing through traditional machines that are, religion was the ground of Oron justice. The Ekpo ancestral cult was in charge of the tribunal of justice in Oron. This place was also known as "Obio".

In Oron, the purpose of Art (Ekpo) is religion, justice, prestige, and festivities. The Ekpo was a vehicle for bringing down the spirit to the level of the worshipers and communion together. The distinctive purpose of Ekpo art is culture, the enrichment of the spirit as religion penetrates every activity and this work will look at the justice system in Oron traditional society which was beyond the empirical application of modern judiciary system that relies only on physical facts and pieces of evidence while the Ekpo ancestral shrine added spiritual dimension of necromancy, incantation, oath-taking and invocation of ancestors and the gods to bring justice.

MEANING OF JUSTICE AND SHRINE

Justice according to the Oxford Dictionary of law is "a moral ideal that the law seeks to uphold in the protection of rights and punishment of wrongs". Justice is not synonymous with law. A law can be called unjust. However, English law closely identifies justice with the law and the word is frequently used in the legal system to refer to fairness, equity, impartiality and so on. Solomon K and Samuel A. who quote Humphrey (2014:162-3) gave the etymological definition of justice as "IUS" which is derived from Latin and means right and law. Law and justice are intimately connected because the law gives meaning to justice and what is lawful is said to be just. Solomon and Samuel show this similarity by adding that justice, is dependent on the shorter Latin "ios" which means right (163).

In Greek justice etymologically is derived from the word *dikaosina* which means righteousness. According to Ogar et al, the usual translation is justice, though Aristotle often used *dikaosina* on the narrow English sense of justice (2018, 65). He remains ever conscious of a wider connotation of the term justice and is for him the same as righteousness.

Justice, in general, could be defined as acting under law. This is to say "to be just is to

be law-abiding. This definition displays the Oron traditional justice system, which has a traditional instrument of governance in which the Ekpe, Ekpu and several others were in charge of making law. Young A E (2006) who writes in support of this observes that:

It is therefore not in doubt that many ethnic groups in Nigeria had autonomous and organized societies with constitution however rudimentary, reflecting their tradition, culture, ethnic ways of life..... institutions that made and enforces the laws in the society (2). The shrine can be seen as a holy or sacred place dedicated to a specific deity ancestor or similar figure of awe and respect, at which figures (artistic, sculpture or objects) are venerated as gods, deities or ancestors believed to be intermediaries and worshipped as such. (2-4)

The shrine is a very important institution in Oron traditional society as it was associated with the ancestral cult. The Afi Obio shrine in Oron plays similar functions with shrines in Owerri as Ekeopara (2011) put the functions as the venue for the expression of the practical aspect of the religious life and values of the traditional society that house the divinity (133). The shrine Afi/Obio of the Oron people was the place through which the divine spirits (ancestors) communicate with the living. Shrines in Oron were found in compounds, under big trees/shrubs, farms, forests, close to creeks, rivers, streams and so on. In Oron, the shrines can be a mound of earth, centre of sacred trees, laterite rock or were constructed using traditional instruments. It was in 1943 that buildings were used for shrines in Oron as this can be seen in the writing of Keith Nicklin (1999):

In 1943 Murray, he at once set about preserving the Ekpo figures. At first, he attempted to repair some of the shrines where the Ekpo figures were housed, some carvings he removed for safekeeping (81-82).

THE FUNCTIONS OF AFI/OBIO (SHRINE) IN ORON

The Afi/Obio shrine in Oron plays several functions in the society that ranges from religious, tribunal of justice, socio-ethical/cultural functions, economic, tourism and educational center. Some of these functions are discussed briefly.

The Afi/Obio (Shrine) As Tribunal of Justice

In Oron, the jury was made up of both the living and the dead. That is, it comprised of the deities, the living dead (ancestors) the priests, chiefs, leaders of the town and other members of the community. The judicial process was pivoted on the credibility of the human conscience. According to Uya O. E. (1984), he is of the view that the ultimate risk for falsehood was ignominious death. "In the olden times, there were no policemen and there was no need of them as the gods were the policemen (59).

Michael Isokwu a researcher in crime detection on traditional African societies posits that:

“An in-depth study of the African system of justice reveals a prevalence of the use of religious methods in finding out who did what... Religion is a veritable instrument of social regulation (60)”

Oron community was never a lawless society before the advent of Europeans (colonial masters and missionary) or legal practice in Nigeria. Uya Okon Edet, Paul Bohannan and Philip Curtin have asserted that "Africa is one of the homes of advanced legal institutions" (9). The function of religion was not limited to personal edification, but also social righteousness and communal piety were adequately enforced through the force of religion.

In an oral interview Offiong Isanghadit added that in Oron religion and law were so closely linked in that religion was the engine of justice by using ekpe to make laws and trials, judgment, verdicts were also done in the Afi/Obio ancestral shrine which shows the diversity of religion in Oron especially in its judiciary system (oral interviews) . Uya who quotes Tekena Tamuno in a study of traditional police in Nigeria wrote that:

In Nigeria, both human and supernatural agencies (oracles, the departed spirits of ancestors) were supposed to have been actively involved... in the prevention and detection of crime. This mystical link between the dead and the living forces both in the

making and enforcement of African laws and customs... is of crucial importance involving dreaded punishment by unseen and alleged powerful elements... provided an effective preventive factor (63).

There were different ways of administering justice in Oron, some of them are:

Administration of Oaths/Mbiam

An oath is a solemn pledging of one's conscience or life to the cause of the truth so affirmed to a god, ancestor, king, chief, man or to attest to the truth of a statement or contract. Oron oath or swearing is always taken in the Ekpo ancestral shrine by the suspects or those involved and administered by the priest (Oku Oluglu) or member of the ancestral cult. Bassey Okon added that an oath can be taken anywhere, but it is always advised that it should be taken in the Ekpu (Afi) shrine. Bassey Okon gave an instance wherein Ine (fishing port) Edak was caught with Okokon fishing net and on asking him he denied and swore that the net was his own and the matter was advised to be taken to Atuhu Uda shrine where he will swear before the Ekpu and on their way Edak pleaded with everybody and confessed that he stole the net for about six months and hid it somewhere and that they should not take him to the shrine to swear so that he will not die and leave his family. Bassey concluded that at the shrine the accused swears with the name of gods, divinities, and ancestors who were supposed to be resting and if you call and swear with their name falsely the guilty one will die if he or she does not appease the gods immediately (Oral interview).

The Oron traditional oath-taking that is done in the shrine usually takes some time for the result to begin to manifest until signs of negative reactions such as swelling of the body are observed on the part of the accused. Within this period if the accused is found guilty he/she can confess and some ritual and sacrifices will be done to appease the gods/ancestors and the life of the defaulter will be spared if this is done and if not the defaulter will swell and die after which he will be buried in the evil forest and he will never be called as an ancestor.

Oku Olughu Manku/Oracle

In Oron traditional justice there are options for those that may not want to swear and one of them has to do with the involvement of the Oku Olughu (oracle/priest). In this process, the Aloughu may be the Ekpo ancestral shrine or the Oku Olughu (chief priest) through which the gods will speak or manifest. Oracle here is the Ekpu shrine that has been dedicated to the prophetic deity. Okpo Edem gave an example of the Oku Olughu/oracles in Oron as Ukit-eti of Eyo Bassey, Atakpa of Udung Uko and Etifit of Eyukut in Enwang. This village Olughu was used to detect crimes, settle disputes

between individuals and families and enforce village norms through rituals and punishment of offenders.

Offiong Edet gave an example of how one Mr. Effiong Bassey claimed land that belonged to Late Mr. Akan Bassey because his brother donated the land to him while he was alive while the children of Late Akan Bassey maintained that their father only lent the land to Mr. Effiong their uncle. After some years the matter was taken to Olughu Ubuoho of Eyotong, where the Alughu told Mr. Effiong Bassey that "goat milk is made for goat and cow milk for a cow". Mr. Effiong Bassey claimed he did not understand what the oracle was saying, and the oracle told everybody that when Mr. Bassey Effiong son Okon had admission into Hope Waddel in 1916 which was then a university His brother Akan Bassey told him to use the land and harvest the palm tree to help him train his son and that he will get the land from him on his son graduation. The oracle also made it clear that on his son's graduation he went to his brother and asked for extra 5 years which his brother granted and died before the expiry of the five (5) years. In conclusion, Mr. Effiong Bassey was asked if the oracle was lying or saying the truth which he admitted was the truth. He was asked to pay a fine, buy drinks for the Olughu and do the same to his village and return the land to his brothers' children within seven days and failure to do so he will die which he did all that was required of him within three days.

From the above, it can be seen that this pattern of Olughu was used in cases where there are no evidence and witnesses. Michael Imamudon Isokun also adds that:

The principle behind the use of oracle is that God, the divine can speak and does speak through what he created.... Oracle divination is an art involving interpretation of things or situations. It is not a trade that can be entered into by anybody-it is vocation (86).

The above statement is true as in Oron Olughu/oracles are believed to be born with such spiritual gifts and are not trained. Oracles are used in Oron for detecting crime or investigating an offense that lacks evidence, facts, and witnesses or where they are available but the people deny it's genuine.

Ordeals/Afia

Among the Oron people the first stage of the trial in their traditional justice system is to carry out Afia or ordeal, with the accused person, this is always done in minor cases like stealing, lying and some other crimes. These are tests designed to test

the disposition of the suspected persons. Michael Imamudon Isokun gave an example of this practice and observes that:

The suspected could be given some liquid to drink while the judges observe his/her disposition or reactions. He or she could be asked to hold an object in which case mere trembling of the limbs could be regarded as an index of a guilty conscience. (86)

The author also added that different people will react or act differently to any given stimulus or situation (86). From the above, Michael attributed the reaction to stimuli and indirectly questions the merit.

While Asuquo Okon gave an example of an ordeal in Oron as a spiritual exercise and not a reaction of stimuli with example of Awana who was accused of stealing from Mr. Ayene Effiong, which they both agreed that the matter should be taken to Afia (ordeal) where Awana's face was rubbed with clay and asked to make some incantation after the priest as follows: "If I Awana stole Mr. Ayene's goat after the playing of the drum may I not be able to open my eyes but if I did not steal may I open my eyes. Asuquo Okon concluded that after the drum Mr. Awana could not open his eyes until he confessed and mentioned who he sold the goat to and paid the Isop Afia (fine) that he was able to open his eyes.

Ime Akan also gave another example of an ordeal that took place in Enwang involving a husband who accused the wife of sleeping outside with a man and not the tarry night (night vigil) she claimed. The matter was taken to Afi and the woman was given a needle to swallow and after the woman was given a needle to swallow and after the incantation, she was able to vomit the needle and the husband was asked to buy the woman seven different types of wrappers for accusing the wife falsely. (Oral Interview) Afia the gods search the people's heart to prove their innocence and if guilty he punishes them with a sign based on the words of the incantation they recited. This proves that the ordeal was a pure manifestation of the god's power and not stimuli reaction as Michael earlier observed.

IMPACT OF THE SHRINE IN ORON

The shrine as a traditional institution has existed from the earliest time even amid internal and external forces such as Christianity and other modernization influences. The impact of Obio/Afi (shrine) in Oron is diverse from religiously as a place of worship, -spiritual recharge, healing centre, cultural institution and socio-ethical function as a tribunal of justice.

The Afi/Obio is in charge of sanctioning taboos or breach of any norms or traditional crime by judging all forms of misconduct and crimes in the village and

passing verdict and punishment. The shrine was also the place where the sacrifices were made in thanksgiving, petition and to appeal the gods in cases of taboos. Ekeopara (2011) expanded on this by noting that "the shrine provided the avenue where appropriate rites and rituals were performed to purify the offender, the land/community and appease the divinities and ancestors to restore the offender and the community to a sense of spiritual peace and harmony within them (114). The Afi/Obio (shrine) is a traditional institution of the Oron people that is rooted in oral tradition and symbolism which by implication, the physical structure of the various Obio/Afi reminds and enact moral teaching of the land (the acceptable dos and don't of the land) and also create the awareness of the unseen invisible divinities, and ancestors who sees in secret and judge in open and punishes any defaulter of the traditional norms/laws. The shrine by this is an ethical institution that promotes morality.

Another impact of the shrine in Oron can be seen in its role as a local police (CID) Criminal Investigation Department) that detects crimes of all kinds and also acts as a tribunal of justice that is not biased under the presiding lordship of the supernatural component of the God, divinities, gods, ancestors and physical leadership of the priest, elders and villagers (the spectators).

Among the Oron people the shrine is also seen as a ministry or department of health that combines uses spiritual physical rituals and formulae with herbs, plants, roots/trees among others for the treatment of all forms of illness and ailment which can be done in the (shrine) Afi/Obio, Ufok abia ibok *or* mbi usobo (healing/native/herbalist home healing homes). Ekeopara (2005) also noted that this treatment offered by the herbalist/priest (native doctor) traditional physicians showed that their knowledge and wisdom by treating the whole many soul and body. The shrine through the divine direction of the gods to the priest offers both physical and spiritual core (53).

CONCLUSION

This work concludes that shrine as one of the oldest traditional institutions of the Oron people has several roles and functions among them is its judicial role as a tribunal of justice. First, the shrine serves as an educational centre where the traditional values, norms, ethics, taboos, moral and spiritual ways of life were taught by the elders and the priest of the community respectively. The purpose was to ensure that the people were aware of what is expected of them and act appropriately as defaulters were punished for erring.

The shrine serves to promote social control and justice which was used in the administration and maintenance of peace and order through various forms such as arrest by the traditional police (ekpe) and trial at the afi/obio, administration of *mbiam*, ordeal, and olughu for detecting the guilty ones and justifying the innocent.

This work further concludes that there is a close relationship between religion and administration of justice as religion is a veritable instrument of social regulation.

The afi/obio pattern of administering justice in Oron is a void empirical application of modern judiciary system that relies only on physical facts and evidence while the afi/obio, also, uses spiritual methods in its administration of oath-taking, mbiam, olughu, ordeal, through invocation, incantation, and necromancy. In difficult cases, it can turn back the event through spiritual rewinding where people can have a glance at what happened using the spiritual mirror and a white basin accompanied by the invocation of spirit.

The Oron judicial composition of the Afi/Obio shrine was made up of deities, divinities, ancestors and physical entities such as the king, priests, chiefs, elders and the villagers who at some point were spectators.

RECOMMENDATION

This work recommends and calls on the federal government of Nigeria to adopt the Afi/Obio shrine system of justice into the Nigerian judiciary system in cases where there are limited or no pieces of evidence as the deities, divinities, and Ancestors through consultation, invocation, incantation, and necromancy can expose past events to the living. The accused and defendant can also be allowed to swear by the Ekpu oro ancestral figure for an oath of truth in the court of which its effects and efficacy are immediate and lead to a public confession. Another area worthy of emulation is the Afi/Obio video where any event or occurrences can be exposed for the general public to see what happened.

This work recommends the Afi/Obio shrine judiciary system which is incorruptible and unbiased for fighting corruption in Nigeria and transformed our political system to the desired democracy which will be planted on justice

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S/NO	NAME	TITLE	RELIGION	AGE	OCCUPATION	PLACE	TIME	DATE
1	Offiong Isanghadit	Chief	ATR/Christianity	65-75	Retired Principal	Eyotong Oron	1-3pm	Nov. 2014
2	Bassey Okon	Elder	ATR/Christianity	62-70	Civil Servant	Oron	4-5PM	13 th Nov. 2014
3.	Okpo Edem	Mr.	Christianity	50-60	Civil Servant	Ewet Housing Uyo	3-20PM	9 Nov 2015
4.	Offiong Edet	Mr.	Christianity	50-55	Farmer	Uda/Mbo	11-12 Noon	8 th Nov. 2014
5	Asuquo Okon	Mr.	Christianity	50-53	Fisherman	Uda/Mbo	1-2PM	8 th Nov. 2014

6.	Ime Akan	Mr.	Christianity	50-55	1-2PM	Uda/Mbo	4-5PM	8 th Nov. 2014
7	Nkoyo Okon	Princess	Christianity	58-60	Business Woman	Okodi Street, Calabar	11-12PM	11 th Feb. 2015
8	Sunday Abasi Eyo	Elder	Christianity	50-55	Fisherman	Ewet Housing Uyo	2-4PM	9 th Feb. 2015.

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