

**NEGLECT OF ANCESTORS (NDIICHIE): THE BANE OF
MODERN IGBO PROBLEMS.**

By

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Abstract:

In every human society, there are heroes of different values. These are people who have made impact or contributed in one way or the other the growth of their society. They are people who brought smiles into the faces of people and so are honoured and emulated by their people. Among the Igbo of old, people loved to live life of emulation, life of righteousness, life that attracted love and respect to the beholder even after here on earth. Such people when they died and befitting burial accorded them were remembered as ancestors. Ancestors are the custodians of Igbo culture. They were respected and honoured because of the worthy lives they lived. In doing that, feasts were celebrated in their honours, prayers and sacrifices accorded them. All these were to show that they really believed that the ancestors were still with them and then hoped to receive their blessings. Unfortunately, the modern Igbo because of influence of Christianity and urbanization turn their back on their ancestors and in place, run after the white man's ancestors, renamed saints. As a result of this, the blessings of the ancestors elude them. In this write-up, it is therefore advised that the Igbo should begin now to propagate their own indigenous religion whereby their holy one's should be properly remembered. This will go a long way in appeasing the ancestors whom the Igbo people have wronged by neglecting them and as such, attract their blessings,

Introduction:

One might conceivably hold a belief dispositionally for years or even for the rest of one's life without it's being activated, or on the other hand one might find oneself frequently or for continuous periods in situations to which that belief is relevant.

All our beliefs have a dispositional aspect. Our deliberate actions are infallible indication of our beliefs. The position that we believe is by definition, the one on which we act. This is well known to common sense. Assuming one professes to be magically immune to fire so that he can walk unharmed through flames and picks up hot coals. If one does confidently pick up burning coals or walk without hesitation into a blazing fire people should say that one really does believe that fire cannot hurt him. However, if one withdraws from flames like anyone else, people know then that one really believes that fire hurts.

The test of one's belief is found in his actions. "A real belief inevitably makes its appropriate difference to the way we behave"(Nick, 1983: 82). The Igbo of old really believed in the existence of Ancestors in their Religion and as such acted in the way people outside their culture area understood that they did. This belief is not peculiar to the Igbo alone. Jacobs (1977:257) says "The belief that those who depart from this earth continue in existence elsewhere and are actively in touch with those who are still here on earth is seen in certain cults." These cults are prevalent in West Africa, but the belief in the ancestors is much stronger among some people than among the other. For example, the Yoruba who concentrate more on the cult of divinities than ancestral cults are as a matter of fact less developed. The Yoruba have less important ancestral rites than the Igbo or Benin. However, these actions of the Igbo, other West African cultures and religious groups of the world towards their ancestors prompted the statement of Nick (1983:82) thus: "But during the last hundred years or so we have been making new observations and have realized that there is deep devotion to God, true sainthood, and deep spiritual life within these other religions..."

The above statement of Nick was as a result of the earlier belief especially of the Christian folk that apart from them, no other race or religion has a firm belief in God. So as a matter of fact, this distinction enables people to acknowledge both the one unlimited transcendent divine and also a plurality of varying human concepts, images and experiences of and response to that reality. These different human awareness of and response to the Real are formed by and reciprocally inform the religious traditions of the earth. In them are reflected the different ways of thinking, feeling and experiencing which have developed within the world-wide human family. Indeed, these cultural variations amount, on the large scale, to different ways of being human-for example, the Chinese, the Indian, the African, the Semite, the Greco-Roman, way or ways, and the way of our contemporary technological Atlantic civilization.

We do not know at all fully why the life of our species has taken these various forms, though geographical, climatic and economic factors have clearly played their parts.

However, given these various cultural ways of being human we can I think to some extent understand how it is that they constitute different “lenses” through which the divine Reality is differently perceived. For we know that all human awareness involves an-indispensable contribution by the perceiver. The mind is active in perception, organizing the impacts of the environment in ways of consciousness and by the particular sets of concepts embedded in particular consciousness.

Life and Death:

Human beings do have a double status which is unique among creatures of this world. On the one hand men are animals formed out of long slow evolutionary process. Men have emerged out of the lower forms of and they constitute part of the continuous realm of nature. Jacobs (1977:257) says that “The belief that those who depart from this earth continue in existence elsewhere and are actively in touch with those who are still here on earth is seen in certain cults.” As animals, men are mortal, made out of the dust of earth and destined to return to that dust. Men have a normal life span today. In our seventies or in our eighties or at most our nineties we shall die, and this living body, then lifeless and cold, will begin to disintegrate and return to the dust of the earth. This on one hand is true. Even Anedo (2007:147) supported it by saying that “For the Igbo people, what survives after death, are the spirits. They regard this as the real person himself, or a mirror of shadow “Onyinyo” and this “Onyinyo” is liable to God alone.”

But on the other hand while we are part of nature, in a quite precise sense we transcend nature. For we, are possessed of reason which is the power to contemplate and understand, including our own nature, from an intellectual vantage point outside it. The journey to the spirit land in some cases is believed to belong and arduous. At death the spirit leaves the body. “The disseminated spirit looks like the shadow cast by the person on a sunny day during his time” (Metuh, 1981:118). On leaving the body, the spirit hangs around the home stead for a few days, visiting for the last time, the place he used to be frequently while he was alive. Soon after burial, he sets out for the ancestral spirit land.

On Being Mortal:

Although it is entirely proper and appropriate when we are trying to think about the nature of the universe and the place of human life within it to emphasize, yet we still have to give our main attention to this present world and the problems of living within it. For as well as being immortal we are also mortal. And our immediate task is to live well the present life which is all that we are now allowed to see. Living well the present life is to reap the benefits afterwards as Arinze (1970:18) says "... not every ancestor is worshipped, not the wicked ones, not the wandering restless ghosts, but only good ancestors, who have reached the spirit world."

One may imagine here how such an ancestor believed to have reached the spirit world is dictated. As Anizoba (2002:78) also mentions that "It is not every dead relative that enjoys reincarnation or eventual life in the eternity", when a grown up dies the diviner is first of all consulted to find out why he died at all for the traditional Igbo do not easily attribute death to a natural cause but often suspect the hand of a spirit or an evil men at work. However, those who are young-in their tens and twenties-generally have not yet realized that they are mortals. Of course they know that all human are mortals and that they are human, and they draw the logical conclusion.

The Belief In Ancestor among the Igbo:

The history of ancestral belief among the Igbo is as old as how death came into the world. Among the Igbo people of West Africa, the belief that life extends beyond death is a serious issue. The Igbo believe that when one dies the soul separates itself from the physical body, leaving it to decay and as such goes and settles in a place prepared for it depending on the souls status. So it happens that when soul and physical self cease to relate, one is said to have died. And so Craig (1998:41) says,"In as much as it has certain relation to a body, the soul is a form to that body, that is the perfection of that body. It is a form because a natural body is composed of matter and form."

The belief, that the soul lives beyond this present life after separation from the matter is unquestionable among the Igbo. The Igbo therefore honour some of these souls believed to have lived exemplary life while on earth. In explaining this point, Anizoba (2002:79) says, "To live a

good life means that one must not be a murderer, a sorcerer and a liar. One must abstain from any unclean thing and uphold all the social norms and taboos of one's community."

These souls are called ancestors. The Igbo people know it as **ndiichie**. However, there are three types of **ndiichie** in Igbo belief system. These are **ndiichie di ndu** (the living ancestors). They are the oldest set of people in a community. Ajamma (2005; 13)) grouped them at the age bracket 71 and above. He says, "They are the apex of the hierarchy of the age grades. They hold in trust the tradition and culture of the people and ensure their sanctity always." The oldest among them is the head or obi of the village.

The living ancestors are believed to be closer to the dead ancestors and therefore serve as intermediaries between the younger ones and the dead ancestors. They understand and speak the language of the dead. As a result of their position in the families and the communities, they are respected. It is the belief of the Igbo people that whoever they curse or bless is ratified by the living dead. Therefore no one loves to disobey or challenge their words. An example was what happened in Gen, 27:33 thus: "Who was it then who killed an animal and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came. I gave him my final blessing and so it is forever." Apart from this, respect for elders has been with the Igbo from time of creation and that is why the elders snub the younger ones whenever they pass them without showing respect.

The second type of **ndiichie** is the **ndiichie no n'obi** (the ancestral cult symbols.). Anedo (2007:197) says, "It was found that as in every other cultures and religions of the world, symbols and symbolisms were prominent in Igbo culture." One cannot talk of religious aspect of Igbo culture without mention of ancestral worship. And so since ancestral worship is part of Igbo Traditional Religion, symbols play important role in the veneration of the ancestors.

Ndiichie no n'obi (ancestral cult symbols) are the consecrated carved representations of the dead ancestors through which the living ancestors commune with the dead ancestors. These symbols are always positioned inside the ancestral house (Obi) where both the dead and the living members of the family converge for deliberations on matters concerning them. The symbols in Igbo are referred to as **okposi**. Jacobs (1977:264) agrees with this saying "There are also family stools called **okposi**." Some other parts of Igbo land also represent these with **mpekele eju** (broken clay pot's neck) usually for women and rock (Okwute).

The third type of ***ndiichie*** is the one in vogue. They are the ones being represented with the ancestral cult symbols. They lived fulfilled life here on earth before their exit into eternal bliss from where they oversee the overall administration of their various families on earth.

Qualities of Ancestors:

Life is full of struggles. People therefore strive in one way or the other to make ends meet. In pursuit of that, some people are very careful not to injure others while others do not care to know whoever they step on their toes as far as success is their answer. The Igbo believe that the status of a soul is pre-determined by the person's performance before death. It is the outcome of one's observance of the taboos of the land. This was why Anedo (2004:7) says that:

What occupied the mind of every African of Pre-Christian time, was how to keep the taboos of his community or how to appease the land in case of violation and by so doing, helped entire community enjoyed a peaceful environment.

To achieve this, the Igbo man had to know the taboos, mended his life, and ensured that he did not violate any of the community's taboos. In keeping of these taboos, one must not have destroyed life in any way. This is on the belief that life belongs to God and Him alone has right to take it. Of course, one might argue that in the past, the Igbo sacrificed human beings to their deities. That to their understanding was in honour of those deities as it was believed to be the highest sacrifice due to a deity.

Other qualities of ancestors are that one should not die untimely. It is the belief of the Igbo that death is not for the young ones. Therefore one has to reach a ripe old age. One must not die a bad death and in-fact one must die with some one beside one. Having one beside a dying person helps the Igbo know full well who the person actually is for sometimes a dying person before his or her final breath confesses of his or her wrong doings. Wealth is also necessary here to show that such person is not an idle one. He therefore must take title.

Marriage is also a condition so as to show responsibility. In fact one must live a good life. To live a good life means that one must not be a murderer, a sorcerer and a liar. One must abstain from unclean things and uphold all the social norms and values of one's community.

Relationship between the Ancestors and Their People on Earth:

Among the Igbo, the belief that the living and the dead commune is real hence all the rites performed by the living for the dead some of which start immediately breath ceases. They believe that life goes on even after here on earth. The Igbo therefore wash the corpses of their dead relations especially the elderly ones, beautify it, cloth it and go on to bury him or her with some property. All these are in preparation of his or her journey unto eternity. On the other hand, if any of these rites due for the dead lacks, the livings receive aggression from the dead. It is because of this that Basden (1983:117) says that Igbo man being “.... deeply conscious of relationship to the unseen world, every precaution must be observed in order to keep the spirit of the dead in a state of peaceful contentment.”In-fact the symbiotic relationship that exists between the living and the dead is inevitable for peaceful progressive society.

The Roles of Ancestors:

The roles of ancestors made the Igbo feel their absence in the governance of the families and or towns. “The ancestor constitutes a very important instrument of faith and belief in African traditional Religion because of their roles in the lives of the living” (Anizoba, 2002:84). Anizoba further said that among the Igbo, the ancestral influence and capabilities in ensuring spiritual, economic and social well-being of the living members of the Igbo families is very real, clear and beyond doubt.

Among the numerous beings worshipped by the Igbo, ancestors are the closest to mankind and most loved. Reasons were that they were with the living and knew their problems. In-fact they care for the living more than any other worshipped being in the spirit world. Their spirits are always around to solve the problems of the living.

The Igbo people know that ancestors do not fail in their ability to care for the living. They serve as eye of the living in the spirit world. They therefore do not sit down and watch evil spirits torment the members of their families on earth. Even when the members of their families erred against spirit beings, the ancestors act as solicitors of the living. “They do this because they are capable of understanding both human and spirit languages” (Anizoba, 2002:84-85).

Ensuring that the livings also observe all the moral standards of the communities is the work of the ancestors. Violation of any of these is

disobedience to the ancestors therefore one has to appease them as well as the land-**kuo ala, kuo ndiichie**. Failure to do this amounts to catastrophe in the violator's life. In support of this, Parrinder (1949:124) says, "Under the presidency of Ala-the earth spirit- the ancestors are the guardians of morality." However, observance of these laws gives one a long life as the ancestors have it as a duty to protect the person spiritually and otherwise. Some times when one seems to have died, on one's way to the spirit land, the ancestor on seeing the person, send the persons back to earth.

Feast of Ancestors:

Among nations of West Africa, there are beliefs in ancestors and they have feasts and periods of feasts for the ancestors. So, ancestral worship is not peculiar to the Igbo alone. Jacobs (1977:261) says that "The mende people of Sierra Leone worship two distinct groups of ancestor spirits. These are **Kekeri**, ancestors whose names are known and **ndibia**, ancestors who died in the distant past." The later according to Jacobs are prayed to through the former. The **kono** of Sierra Leone refer to the invisible abode of the dead as **faa** and the residents of **faa** are spoken of as **fanu**-fathers, or **Mbinbanu**- the great ancestral fore fathers.

Among the **Fon** of Abomey, the cult of the ancestors is established by special priests and initiators. The annual ancestral ceremonies come up in May and June. The ceremonies last days and consist of sacrifices, prayers and dances by cult groups. Jacobs made us to know that in some areas in West Africa, important rites are held at the beginning of the yam season. No one must eat the new yam until the ancestors have taken their share of the new harvest. And after the rites, no old yam must be eaten. The Fon sacrifice goats and fowls at the shrines and slice of new yams are placed there. The flesh of the victims is eaten after a portion has been put on the irons of the ancestors.

The Yoruba ancestral cults have their own special characteristics. There are public rites as well as private rites. As among other peoples, offerings are made by individuals, to the ancestors called **Babanla** - the great fathers.

Among the Igbo, there is also an annual feast in honour of the ancestors. This feast is referred to as **Alommuo**. According to Arinze (1970: 20) "Although the ancestors are daily invoked and worshipped,

there is a special yearly feast about August time in honour of all the ancestors. This feast is variously called **Alom mmuo**, or **otute**, or by other names". Elaborate preparations are made; village paths are cleaned by children, sons and daughters abroad return. To the Igbo, this is the time for thanksgiving to the ancestors for their protection, economic boost in the families, insurance of peace and all other favours. This time also is when members of different families that did not get on well economically, socially, politically and otherwise, use to pledge the ancestral assistance in future endeavours. So it is a conference time for both the living and dead members of various families of Igbo nation. This time, there are libations and sacrifices to the ancestors. As the Igbo people observe this feast of ancestors, "The ancestral spirits also believed to be incarnate in man links him with his family, clan and other human societies" (Metuh, 1981:85).

The Benin people also devote much of their time to the ancestral cults. Jacobs (1977:265) confirms that "After the death of a father, his eldest son establishes the cult of the dead in the house." Understandably this symbol of the dead is placed there and there is also a special ceremony for it called **Ebo**.

Neglect of Ancestors:

The Igbo of old actually honoured their ancestors as enumerated above. The ancestors on their own part reciprocated, by fulfilling their obligations to the livings. Unfortunately, with the advent of Christianity and urbanization the Igbo of today now feel a sigh of relief. They do not want to go back to the practices of old. The young ones even find it difficult to respect **ndiichie di ndu**.

All the rites accorded the ancestors by the living no longer exist. For instance, the Igbo man can easily eat while turning back on the ancestors. In the past, before an Igbo would eat his food, he first of all threw a lump of food outside. This was for the ancestors, but no one does it now. The livings easily sweep their houses at night without drawing their brooms backwards after. They pour out water outside in the night forgetting that the ancestors are waiting for their turn of food outside.

These days, the feast meant for the ancestors has taken a different shape and the original name changed. For instance, **Alommuo** with which

this feast was known is now changed to **emume iwaji ohuru** (new yam festival). Right now, children, youth and some old people of today do not know actually why the feast is being celebrated and how it should be celebrated.

This feast is for the ancestors. It is a time when the ancestors come from the spirit land and join their families on earth which members also come back from where they reside to exchange gifts. The livings pour libations to them while they in return give blessings to the livings. All the things therein are now ignored and turned the Christian way. As a result of that, a Christian priest can now pray the Christian prayer with the people at a village square with the acclamation, “amen” not even **ise** which signifies the five basic needs of the Igbo as Idigo (2002: 32) observes thus: “When the Igbo prays, he has five thing in mind which he asks from God. This is why when he solicits any of these demands; at the end people will answer **ise**.” After that some roasted yams are cut into pieces, shared out to people, they eat and disperse. That is not the celebration of **Alommuo** meant for the ancestors. The **ise** are: **ogologo ndu** (long life), **ihe ndu ji ato uto** (wealth), **azu** (offspring), **udo** (peace), and **mee mmadu ka l choro ka o mee gi** (justice and fair play). As a result of the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of this feast, the ancestors are no longer involved thereby their blessings eluding the people.

Conclusion:

Ancestral worship is not peculiar to Igbo people alone. Almost every nation among the West African Sub-region recognizes the presence of ancestors in their midst. They therefore make every effort to please them for their reciprocal blessings.

It is understood that ancestors as loving fathers as they were before their death, do not sit down at the corridor of power of God and watch their children on earth suffer. But because of neglect of ancestors and subsequent violation of moral codes of the land by the livings, the ancestors allow certain unpleasant events to affect human beings. They do not do this out of hatred rather it is for the living to retrace their steps and change their ways. By so doing, the already battered situations of the Igbo will definitely come to normalcy.

It is therefore advised that the Igbo should borrow a leaf from Ajamma (2005:179) who says, “Take me back 50 years.” Ajamma was referring to what he termed as retrogressive newspaper article written by

one Professor in 1970's but later realized that the Professor was trying to get out of a degenerate society. The people should refer back to yester years when the people, the ancestors and Supreme Being were so close that when people cried, the ancestors took their cry to God from whom solutions to their problems come.

Ancestors are holy ones in African Traditional Religion. They therefore should be given due respect as their counter parts in Christian Religion. It is only an obstinate child that leaves his father whom he knows has every thing good for him and goes to another child's father, to ask him for that which his own father has and is willing to give to him. Why do the Igbo leave their holy one's unrecognized and pursue the holy ones of other Religions for solution to their problems? The Igbo forget that it is only their own ancestors that know them, their problems and understand their language and no other one.

It is therefore pertinent that the Igbo should re-plan their calendar so that all the communities should celebrate all these important ancestors together on one particular date wherever they reside all over the world.

In doing that, they can gradually ask that one or two days be approved for them by the Governments of Igbo enclave as work free days for the celebrations of these eminent fathers and mothers of Igbo nation who kept our culture and values with faith till their death. This will not only go a long way in showcasing the Igbo culture and Religion to the outside world, but it will serve as a way of enshrining this beautiful Religion and morals therein in the hearts of the growing youths of this Language Group called Igbo. When the Igbo people begin, to accord the ancestors their due right and respect, I believe, things will begin to work out fine for them in Nigerian society.

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