

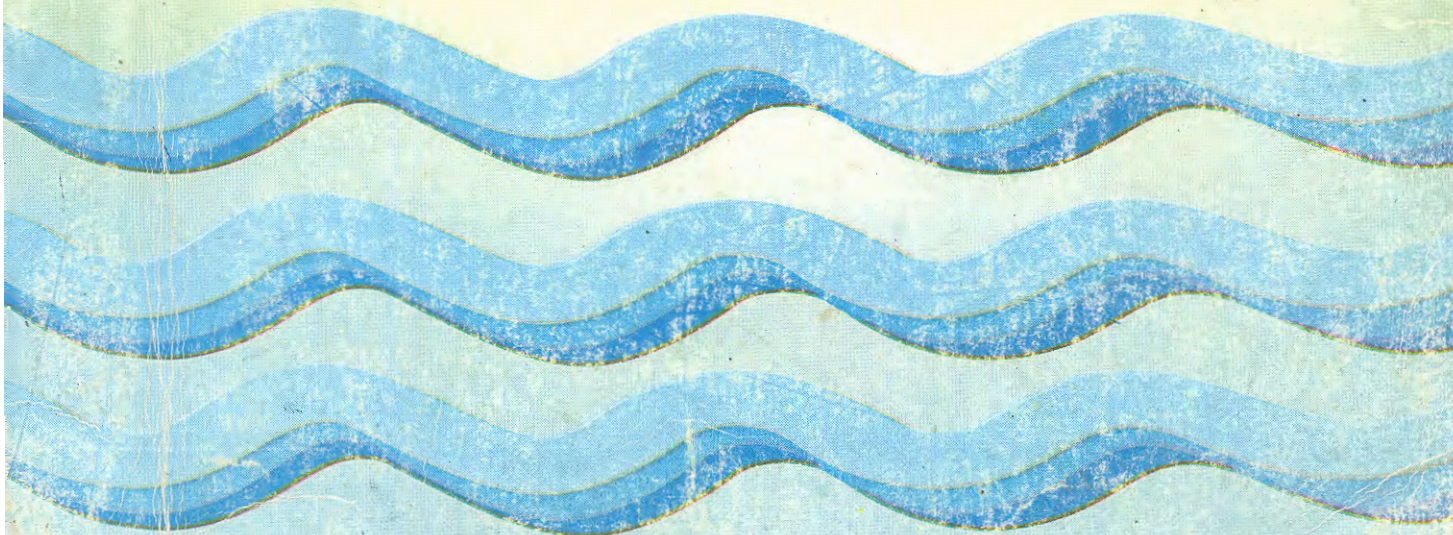
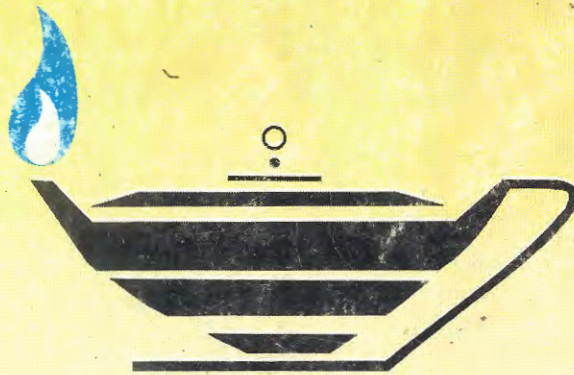


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The Urhobo People and Witchcraft Beliefs D.I.Ilega.	1
Science, Technology, and University Education in the Context of Nigerian Economy. Ferdinand Nwaigbo.	15
Aspects of Traditional Religion in Ola Rotimi's <i>The Gods Are Not To Blame</i> Eldred Ibibiem Green and Fyneland Korubo Solomon.	33
Agricultural Practices As Language Games: A Survey of Language Elements in some Traditional Methods Of Conservation of Biodiversity in Nigeria Taofiq A. Azeez.	39
Human Rights Discourse and Shar'iah Question in Nigeria: Agenda for Justice or Hegemonic Disguise? Abdulrazaq Kilani.	48
Janazah (Funeral) Rites among Nigerian Muslims - A Case Study of the Yoruba L.M.Adetona.	57
Abbreviation and Linguistics Performance in Nigerian Languages V.O Okeke.	63
Horace Obonna Enemugwem: His Religious Life and Times 1918-1999 John H. Enemugwem	69

TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND FESTIVALS: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Patrick Agbor Assibong

Abstract

It is customary in the world/Nigeria today to point to Africa/Annang whenever traditional institutions and festivals are mentioned as if Christmas and Easter are not festivals which are being "lubricated" and protected by the Christian science institutions. This ethnocentric and xenophobic approach by bourgeois academics, portray the African/Annang traditional institutions like (i) the "Ekpo", (ii) "Ekong" (iii) "Abang" (iv) "Mbogo" and (v) "Nka" as primitive, fetish and pagan while all the festivals organised by Christianity are eulogised and recommended for the people of the "Dark continent" Africa.

The paper argues essentially that since there are so many traditional institutions like the British monarchy, that of the Danish people, Christian and Muslim festivals which are respected by all and sundry, that of the Africans in general and the Annang in particular, should also be nurtured, respected and encouraged to grow so that the main tenets could be exported to Europe via seminars, publications and cultural exchanges.

It is the writer's conviction that once the Annang people work religiously hard and make others to believe in the above trajectories, their language, traditional institutions, festivals, literature and culture would be protected for posterity by the members of the "Ekpo" traditional institution and "exported" to Europe by the elites.

The paper concludes that while the Annang traditional institutions and festivals are among the best in the world, the re-documentation, protection and re-education of the world about their rich traditional institutions and festivals would be the best legacy the elites can bequeath to the Annang Nation.

Introduction

The traditional institutions of the Annang people like the "Ekpo", the "Ekong", "Abang" and the "Nka" traditional institutions were handed down to the Annang people from generation. These institutions have stories, opinions, beliefs and customs which underpin them.

These institutions performed various spiritual, administrative, economic, social, executive, judicial and legislative functions in the Annang country as far back as 1530. Political historians are now surprised to notice that some of the once most powerful institutions as the "Ekpo" whose symbolic representation is depicted by the "Ekpo" masquerade – mistakenly christened "Calabar juju" – has lost its authority, legitimacy, glamour and colour in the third millennium, some chiefdoms in the Annang nation have truncated the last vestiges of "Ekpo" power and influence by proscribing all that is associated to the "Ekpo" institution.

Some analysts would blame the "Ekpo" masquerades for their murderous, vindictive, ostrogothan and despicable postures during festivals and feasts and point accusing fingers to their unrepentent sponsors or chief priests as being the cause of the ostracism of the members of the "Ekpo family". But should the above force a very great and dynamic people as the Annang people to abandon an old traditional institution as the "Ekpo" institution? Did the members of the "Ebre" women society also kill members

of the larger society before most women in the institution? Did the Christians stop feasting on Christmas day when the exact date of Christ's birth became polemical? Can the revival of all the traditional institutions and festivals in the Annang nation revive the almost moribund spirit of Annang nationalism? These and many more questions would be answered in this extrapolatory exposition.

The Annang Nation: Traditional Institutions and Festivals

At the apogee of all the traditional institutions in the Annang nation, which consist of the great people of Ukanafun, Essien Udim, Obot Akara, Ika, Etim Ekpo and Oruk Anam Local government areas in Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria is the chieftancy institution popularly known as the "Obong" stool while all other institutions like the "Ekpo", "Akata", "Ekong", "Abang", "Ebre", "Mbogo" and "Nka" to mention but a few, are instruments at the disposal of the "Obong" and the council of chiefs to govern the people. Before 1530s, and after, the Obong possessed ascriptive powers in that he was the embodiment of the spiritual and temporal power who performed the judicial, legislative, executive and spiritual functions of the Annang people with express support from the council of chiefs. Hence once any law is approved by the Obong, it becomes law and the "Ekpo" masquerade executes or implements that law according to the spirit and letter.

The powers of members of the "Ekpo" traditional society spanned from placing injunction on property including land to execution of murderers. There was never a time that the "Ekpo" society either on its own, via the direction of the chief priest, the council of chiefs or the chief himself forced the masquerades to attack, maim or kill real or imagined enemies. Enemies were defined as anti-Annang from other ethnic groups not Annang versus Annang.

With a mono crop economy (Ake, 1972) and trade by barter, the "Ekpo" institution had little or no job to do as there were no pronounced cases of fraud. This serene atmosphere was guaranteed because there was no far away trade and the African mode of production did not permit cut-throat competition which often breeds criminals. A few wrong doers were sanctioned without recourse to the whiteman's court. The "Ekpo" traditional institution, controls members of all other institutions such as "Akata", "Obon" and "Ekong". In parts of Obot Akara and parts of Essien Udim, the "Ekpo" traditional leading role in the Annang civil society is fast declining as a result of the nefarious activities of a few over zealous masquerades in Essien Udim and Obot Akara local government areas of Akwa Ibom State.

The "Obon" traditional institution made up of mainly young boys, is being supervised by elders who are both members of "Obon" and "Ekpo". While the "Ekpo" festivals are scheduled once or twice a year between August and September that of "Obon" can be consummated anytime of the year. These festivals are organised as feasts with much to drink and eat. The "Obong" performs the traditional spiritual functions of breaking the kola nuts and praying via the much despised libation process.

The youths among the members of "Obon" serve as the "engine house" of the institution since the merry making process via dancing traditional tunes requires the exertion of tremendous energy which only the youths can supply.

The "Akata" institution which is similar to the "Obon" differs remarkably in some aspects as that of exposing wrong doers and the exhumation of the corpses of ghosts which terrorise the people.

The "Ekong" institution is also one of the few men society which acts as a regulatory machinery in exposing corrupt leaders and followers. The "Obon", "Akata", "Ekpo", "Ekong" and even the predominantly all women societies such as "Abang" which is largely for entertainment, the "Ebre" which rejects applicants whose children are thieves and those whose daughters got pregnant before marriage, perform economic social in some cases even political functions in the governance of Akwa Ibom in particular and Nigeria in general.

The "Nka" institution in the Annang country is designed both as a social organisation and as an avenue for women to emancipate themselves economically. For instance, there are many "Nka Eyop" or palm fruit processing groups and those for clearing the farms, weeding, hocking, harvesting and planting. The whole Annang traditional institutions also support the "Mbago" fattening room experience by young maidens who must eat and rest for six to twelve months without exerting much energy. At the end of the exercise, one, two or three days are set aside to celebrate the joyous events of the attainment of womanhood. These celebrations often take the shape of feasts and festivals, which had its historical antecedents from religions. The days set aside for these celebrations were believed to be "Holy Days" (the origin of Holidays).

The operations of these institutions are both secrete and open. Secrete to the extent that non-members are not buried or given assistance in case of any natural catastrophe. This is where both Talbot in his book *In the Shadow of the Bush* and Butt - Thompson in his 1929 book *West African Secret Societies*, erred by describing the "Ekpo" traditional institution from the Annang; the "Ekpe/Mgbe" from the Ejagham tribe, (Onor, 1994) the "mau-mau" in Kenya, "the leopard society" of Sierra Leone and the "Mbatsav" of the Tiv people as "primitive" (Britanica, 1972), when in actuality these represents variants of traditional African authority which have survived all attempts by Europeans to assimilate these great African traditional institutions.

The Comparative Perspective

The "Ekpo", "Obon", "Akata", "Ekong", "Abang", "Ebre", "Mbogo" and "Nka" traditional institutions have common characteristics with the "Ekpo" society among the Efiks, the "Mgbe society" in the Ejagham nation in parts of Calabar-Akim, Big Qua and Ikot Ansa, Akamkpa, parts of Ikom, and Etung Local Government, a group of people most historians erroneously christen "Iko" (Okafor, 1989), (Esen, 1982), (Obaro Ikime, 1982) and (Alagoa, 1978) the above clusters of people scattered all over the present Cross River State and some parts of the Southern Cameroons, are rightly called the Ejagham nation (Onor, 1994) because they possess land they can call theirs, they can be located on any world map, have the Ejagham language, a dynamic population, rich cultural history and very strong traditional institutions and festivals which made Nigeria and the black race proud-winning first price in 1972 during the Black Arts festival in Lagos with her "monekim" dance of the maidens which squares favourably with the "Mbogo" and "Abang" festivals in the Annang

nation. The three festivals mentioned above are concerned with preparing the young ladies for marriage by confining them into the fattening rooms while on the day of discharge, there is a lot of feasting and dancing – two aspects of the peoples lives (Annang and Ejagham) christianity and imperialist pulls and pressures have not succeeded to erase from their memories. In their frustration, they branded them “secret cults”. The underlying thread which binds these two cultures together is the secrecy in the recruitment formalities in the “Ekpo”, “Mgbe”, “Ekpe”, “Obon”, and “Akata” societies. This is not negotiable!

The element of secrecy has often been present in most important traditional and modern institutions in the world, including the most respected Christian religious institution. If “Ekpo” and “Mgbe” societies in Nigeria are secret cults according to European scholars, then Christianity is one because in ancient Rome, the Christians maintained secrecy in order to protect the Christian records and beliefs which had survived to this day. Professor Walter Martin in his book titled *The Kingdom of the Cults* published in 1996 listed the Jehovah’s Witnesses, mormonism of the Later Day Saints, Zen Buddhism, Baha’I Faith, Islam and Christian Science as secret cults. He had this to say of Christianity “... Christianity... is the largest gnostic cult in christendom” (Martin, 1996:279). With the above incontrovertible evidence, the Annang people and other Africans would be deceiving themselves to regard their traditional institutions and festivals as fetish and pagan while all what we read from Europe is real and Godly. There is nothing wrong with African (Annang) traditional institutions and festivals hence discouraging us from preserving them is tantamount to non-colonialism, manifest and latent functional illiteracy.

Godliness does not start and end with the Europeans neither does traditional institutions and festivals start and end with the Annang/African people. The Europeans christened anything they cannot understand primitive hence since members of the “Ekpo” and “Mgbe/Ekpe” society have refused to “sell” the secrets of their institutions to the whiteman, the two automatically carry the primitive tag. The Mesopotamian cultures of the Tigris-Euphrates valley were never christened pagan perhaps because the black race was not involved.

In Egypt, the main purpose of their festival “was to celebrate and maintain the continuity of the living, the *dead* and the *Gods*” (Britanica, 1968:126). In Greece, festivals were local in origin and the Gods of the Olympic pantheon were being honoured in cities. To keep the Olympic spirit alive, the Olympic games are being organised every four years in the world today. The Romans worshipped the earth yet when an Annang man pours libation to the same earth praying the ancestors to give their offsprings long life and prosperity, praying for the women to bear children, christianism calls this “fetish” being masterminded by “principalities”.

In Iran, the festivals have survived in the zoroastrian community where the “Amesha Spentas” is worshipped at least once a year. In Muslim countries, the “fifth pillars” of Islam pilgrimage (hajj), the feast Ramadan etc. are respected and protected for posterity. This is also true of people in Tibet, southeast Asia, India and China.

Prognoses for Action

For the traditional institutions and festivals of the Annang people to be maintained and encouraged to grow, a *Committee to Save the Annang Culture* should be instituted and charged with the responsibilities of studying the underlying causes of the murderous activities of some of the "Ekpo" masquerades and postulate more humane guidelines for all "Ekpo" members to follow during festivals. Proscribing the "Ekpo" institution in Annang country will not help exponents for the preservation of the Annang culture to succeed because the "Ekpo" institution like the "Mgbe" or "Ekpe" institution in Cross River State is, and, will remain the custodians and vanguard of all that is good in the Annang and Ejagham cultures.

The committee should appeal to the chiefs or "Obongs" concern to deproscribe these institutions because the "bad eggs" among the "Ekpo" traditional institution, are also members of the larger Annang family hence they could be checked by their family members who should report the erring members to the "Obong" who in turn should advise them and in case of murder, hand the culprit to the police for appropriate sanctions. Remember Christianity was not abandoned by the faithful when it became clear that the actual date of Christ's birth was polemical. Similarly the son of God was molested and killed by us for no reason, yet the church survived.

On the other hand, the tag of "secret cult" should not deter us from appreciating and respecting our traditional institutions as the "Ekpo", "Ekpe", "Obon" and "Ekong" because incontrovertible evidence abound to show that *all old and modern religions, possess traces of secrecy.*

The men and women of the Annang nation should not abandon their tradition on the pretext of following God because the language of liabation is prayer by itself hence the role of the traditional institutions and festivals in the Annang nation should be complimentary to that of the church.

Children should be taught about the traditional institutions and festivals in primary, secondary and higher schools in Akwa Ibom State and reminded that violence is not part of the Annang cultural heritage hence the Ekpo masquerades need not intimidate the populace during festivals.

Finally, the committee should develop the Annang language, print it and distribute to Annang sons and daughters because no group of people can develop and preserve her traditional institutions and festivals for posterity with a borrowed language, hence the Annang language has to be developed by those of us who are privileged to be educated so that all that is Annang can be stored and retrieved as at when due.

Conclusion

For the simple fact that the traditional institutions in Annang country like the "Ekpo", "Akata", "Ekong", "Ebre", "Obon", "Abang", "Mbogo" and "Nka Eyop" etc still perform political, spiritual, economic, social, legislative etc functions in the Annang nation, we cannot afford to proscribe them no matter whatever problems may crop up. Instead, we should advise ourselves that the survival of the Annang cultural values are at stake hence all hands should be on deck to help revive the hitherto vibrant and dynamic Annang traditional institutions and festivals which had been the best in Nigeria, Africa and the world. This should be, Annang cultural renaissance!

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