
Contemporary Etche Pre-Christian Religious Beliefs And Practices

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Abstract

The disruptive forces of missionary proselytization and European Colonialism undoubtedly created internal frictions that ruptured the ontological world of Etche Land. Therefore, the archaeology of indigenous knowledge embedded in the belief and cultural system of Etche people are now fast becoming relics of history. The advent of Christianity in the mid nineteenth century ruptured the social fabric and helped to undermine Etche people's religiosity. This paper interrogates the Contemporary Etche Pre-Christian Religious beliefs in deity and the constituting and grafting realities of Etche people's ontology and how this has been problematized in the age of Christianity. We shall further argue that cultural belief systems, though facing severe strains, remain a potent force in contemporary Etche society. The paper concludes by pointing out the essential features that constitute the core of Etche Pre-christian belief in deity and the dynamics of its practices and its implications to collective and individual consciousness in Etche Land.

Keywords: Contemporary, Etche, pre-Christian, beliefs, practices

Introduction

The field of religion and belief system is certainly one of the most fascinating areas of Etche Cultural experience and history. The people's acute sense of the sacred is proverbial. Hence M.G. Oconor, one of the earliest British Colonial Officers who worked among the people of Etche from (1929 – 1937), had rightly observed that:

“The traditional Etche people are, in the strict and natural sense of the word, a truly and deeply religious people as they eat religiously, drink religiously, battle religiously, dress religiously and sin religiously. In a few words, the religion of these natives, as I have all along endeavoured to point out is their existence and their existence is their religion. The people's rich network of ideas and belief system about the cosmos and supersensible realities is matched by the pervading and over riding influence of religion in the different facts of life. The preponderance of symbolic orientation characteristic of every traditional Etche community clearly portrays the kind of religion — dominated environment in which the traditional Etche people live as well as the nature of the general view of reality they uphold.”

Religion, apart from giving Etche people a sense of security and identity shows them also how to act in different situation and how to solve their problems (Mbiti 12). In other words, there is an inextricable connection between religion and culture in Etche land. In view of the above, the onus of this paper is to examine the influence of Etche Pre-Christian religion and their beliefs and practices. And to effectively do this, we shall explore the origin and elements of Etche Pre-Christian religion, its major beliefs and practices and the effects of these on the lives of the people, together with the effects of civilization on the traditional belief system of the people of Etche.

The origin of Etche pre-Christian religion:

Religion is a cultural institution and like other institutions, it is a means, an instrument for the satisfaction of needs (Otite 152). In other words, Religion is never metaphysics (Genertz 302) its very nature leads to concrete action in the form of ritual in which the needs and desires of human life are reflected. Thus, Etche Pre-Christian religion originated as people's own initiative to get satisfaction and continuity in this world through a spontaneous response to and propitiation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life (Frazer, 65). The Etche Pre-Christian religion developed as a liturgical response to self consciousness of his dependence on supernatural beings and forces around him. From this divine-human relationship developed ideas, beliefs, customs, methods and arts which regulate his daily living and give his existence a distinct meaning. Therefore, by its very nature, Etche Pre-Christian religion should appropriately carry the tag “Etche Indigenous religion” because it is a religion that is natural to Etche people – originating from within, in contrast to the missionary religions like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism etc which originated from outside the continent.

The term “Pre-Christian” connotes a belief or custom passed down from one generation to the other before the coming of western missionary christianity (Crowther et al 1267): And stating seriously, Christianity and Islam are so old in Africa that they could also be called “Indigenous religion” in the sense that since their inception they too have successfully been passed from one generation to the other. Commenting on the uniqueness of Etche Pre-Christian religion, scholars argue that the term “Pre-Christian” is distinctly used to mean “indigenous beliefs before the coming of christianity” — a description of the life — orientation of African indigenous societies which are fundamentally guided by their indigenous value systems despite their exposure to acculturating influence from Europe, America and Asia (Nabofa 76).

Furthermore, what is commonly called Etche pre-Christian religion is peculiarly Etche in origin, essence and formation as well as practice.

Elements or features of Etche pre-Christian religious beliefs and practices

Etche Pre-Christian religion is a vital component of the people's life which regulate their day to day activities. The life of the individual and his community is safeguarded by the indigenously formulated religious ideas, morals, laws, customs etc. as Quacoopome (2) says, "The traditional African Society explains the world around him both temporal and spiritual in religious terms". Ferguson also observes that the indigenous communities in Africa accepts traditional religion as a dimension of the whole of life because there is no distinction between the secular and sacred. These element to be succinct, are certainly essential features constituting the distinct culture and civilization of the vast population located in the large expanse of territory known as Etche land. As it is to be expected, there are variations, in the details of the beliefs due to differing ecological and socio-historical experiences of the communities that make up the Niger-Delta territory. The points will become clearer as we proceed to elaborate the various features of Etche Pre-Christian religious beliefs.

Belief in a Supreme Being

The belief in Supreme Being by the contemporary Etche Society has been a subject of protracted debate among writers and scholars, from the early stages of European Missionary Adventures and colonial government administration and ethnographers in Etche land up to the contemporary period; from the evidence available from some recent ethno-historical studies of Etche indigenous culture and civilization in general; and results of specific investigations of the oral sources, particularly the areas of prayers and ritual. We maintain that the belief in a supreme being is an integral element of Etche Pre-Christian religious thought. The names and attributes associated with supreme being in many parts of Etche contemporary communities provide some useful insight into the originality of the supreme being, he is commonly referred to as Chukwu Okike, Chineke and essential features constituting the distinct culture and civilization of the vast population located in the large expanse of territory known as Etche land. As it is to be expected, there are variations, in the details of the beliefs due to differing ecological and socio-historical experiences of the communities that make up the Niger Delta territory. The points will become clearer as we proceed to elaborate the various features of Etche Pre-Christian religious beliefs. In spite of the claims of inaccessibility and remoteness of the Supreme Being by some foreign writers, researchers have revealed that God is directly worshipped (as in Christianity and Islam) by Etche people in their indigenous ways. Without mincing words, the Etche traditional concept of Supreme Being is very strong, rich and His attributes clearly separate Him from other local deities. Just like the Christians and Muslims, Etche indigenous worshippers hardly have images dedicated to God" and nothing in likeness to compare with Him". (Idowu 142:3). In other words, there has been preconceived idea of the uniqueness of the Supreme Being in Etche belief system long before the presence of the Christian missionaries in Nigeria (Nwala, 9-10-2019).

Belief in deities

The belief in the cult of deities, Ndi-mmuo and Umu-agbara on the other hand constitute a dominant feature of Etche Pre-Christian religious thought and life. The reality of their existence does not pose any problem since visible manifestations of their power and reverence which people accord them abound in traditional Etche society. Large expanses of land, altars and shrines are usually dedicated to them. Fat live animal like bulls, goats and sheep occasionally offered to them are regarded as sacred and allowed to roam and multiply freely in some parts of Etche land, human beings are also consecrated to some prominent deities as osu. Priests, minister full-time to many of the deities and oversee whatever concerns them in their respective communities.

The deities also feature significantly in the fields of traditional art and culture in traditional Etche sculptures and as artists try their skills in expressing different motifs related to using wood, mud and chalk, especially in fashioning icons and images of the deities themselves. The deities are essentially spiritual beings, although they are anthropomorphically conceptualized as beings either male or female, sons and daughters and as exhibiting such human features as hearing, seeing, eating, drinking etc. As spiritual beings, however, they possess tremendous powers which human beings could harness. Their existence is thought to be intricately bound-up with the fortunes of man and the world.

The total number of deities and spiritual beings that are named and acknowledged by the traditional Etche community is yet to be known. No doubt, they run into hundreds as generally every Etche community has its own sizeable pantheon of deities. Both the names and actions vary from one place to another. But there are a few that are well known to be potent in Etche land. Such pan of Etche deities include Ala Etche (the earth-deity), Anyanwu (the sun deity) Ofo (the symbol of Nativity), Uzi Akpoku (the small god of thunder), Amadioha Ozuzu, /Kamanu Odufor is a powerful deity of lightning and thunder, the agent of divine justice. The functions performed by the deities among the Etche society usually encompass the major aspects of life and interests of individuals and the society at large. This range from fertility of human beings, animals and plants, to protection and the maintenance of inter-personal and group relationships. For instance, the earth deity, Ala, is the principal of fertility as well as a major factor of social integration throughout Etche land. Amadioha/Kamanu deity is a thunder striking deity held in great esteem in Etche Communities. The relationship between the traditional Etche people and their deities is believed to be a delicate and precarious one, involving strict ethical implications. The moral tone of Etche society is very high as people endeavour to abide by the traditional norms undergirded by the deities especially Ala (the earth deity) and other spiritual beings. The same deep concern for moral purity underscores the numerous taboos and purification rituals surrounding the socio-historical and religious life of Etche people.

Belief in ancestors

The ancestors, Ndichie are among the most important spiritual beings known in Etche Pre-Christian religion. They are the disembodied spirits of departed relatives who lived uprightly, passed away peacefully to the great beyond at ripe old age and have been accorded all necessary passage rites to ensure their successful entry into the noble status of ancestor-hood. Although physically dead, they are believed to be still closely related and present in the lives of surviving members of the lineage. Hence, they have rightly been called the “living dead.” As a result of strong belief that these ancestors have supernatural powers, they are often venerated and invoked in times of special needs to seek their blessings or avert their anger (Parrinder 24). Similarly, rituals and ceremonies are often observed in remembrance of them to ensure their continuous watch over the living members of their family. With civilization, however, the Etche heritage of preserving the memory of departed good parents have been Christianized in the form of “outing and memorial services” - practices which are not in the New Testament, but a development from indigenous orientation. The belief in the continued existence and influence of the departed parents who are ever watchful over the living ensured love and harmony among the members of a particular lineage and serves as a watch to any evildoer (Offor 3 14)2019).

Belief in life after death and future judgment

“In Etche Pre-Christian religious thought, death does not indicate the end to human life, but instead, acts as gateway to another plane of life” (Nwala, 5-10-2018). On the strength of this; there is a strong belief among Etche people in the hereafter and future judgment. There is a general belief that man is both a material and spiritual being, possessing body, soul and spirit.

Most Etche people believe that at death, the soul leaves the body (which eventually decomposes in the soil) and proceeds on a journey to the world of spirits. In particular, the Akpoku people of Etche believe that after death, the soul leaves the body and returns to God while the spirit turns into a ghost or an ancestor and begins to live in the underworld (Offor, 3-1-2019). The dead are commonly believed to go to a world under the ground (Parrinder, 138).

Belief in reincarnation

The belief in reincarnation, Ilo-Uwa, is an integral aspect of the Etche Pre-Christian religious belief on the cyclic movement of life. Human life is a sacred reality and a primary value among the people of Etche. Each individual receives his/her life principle *Ndu*, from *Chukwu* (God) through the mediation of the tutelary deities and ancestral spirits. Once created, life becomes interminable. It flows in a cycle beginning with conception, through birth, puberty, adolescence, married age and fully achieved adult, elderly status and death. With the completion of all passage rites, the departed becomes an ancestor. And the clearest manifestation of the ancestors benevolence to the surviving members of the lineage is by reincarnation in the lives of young children. The reincarnating ancestor has not only ensured the continuations of the lineage, he or she has confirmed the interminability of life. *Akagbuo*, a gifted elder identifies the particular ancestor that has come back in the life of a new born baby or divination is used to determine it. The ritual is known as *Igba-Aja*. This strong belief accounts for such names as *Nnenna*, (mother of the father)! *Nnanna* (father of the father) even among some Christians and Muslims. Unlike some religious traditions that regard the world as a place of sorrow and suffering, the Etche Pre-Christian attitude to life is world affirming and not world — renouncing. To them, this world is the best place to live in. Hence there is a strong desire, on the part of the living, to have their parents reincarnated as soon as possible after death (Nwanyanwu 2-9-2008).

Procreation

Much ritual is connected with child-birth in Etche land, to ensure safe delivery, good health and fulfilled life. Children are greeted with great joy throughout Etche society; that is, to have many children, especially sons, is a sign of wealth and prestige. On the contrary, to be sterile is seen as a bad omen. Owing to the shame, reproach and assault involved, barren women try desperately to escape their grim fate, trying every available medicine to ensure that they give birth at all costs. In fact, barrenness is a major cause of marriage separation and polygyny in Etche land. Consequently, the understanding among some European couples to remain childless is alien and unacceptable to Etche people. Moreover, due to the traditional importance attached to children, many Etche people still find it hard to embrace the family planning programme established nationally and internationally to check population. Similarly, abortion is abhorred and also seen as an abomination in Etche traditional society because Etche people place much emphasis on the sanctity of life.

Marriage

Marriage in Etche land, though a social affair has a religious undertone. Religious blessings often enter as a 'final seal' to the contract. The highly individualistic and often irreligious form of many modern European marriages with two people uniting without the appearance of the families and with strangers as witnesses is not only incomprehensible but highly unacceptable to most African Societies (Parrinder 97). Even with the introduction of Christianity and Islam, Etche converts with these foreign religions still adhere to the demands of traditional marriage rites called '*Ibu-Ngwo*' which is usually done before church wedding or Muslim *Nickar*. Moreover, in Etche traditional society, marriage is well protected against divorce, which had already become very rampant in some parts of the world. Similarly, chastity was often emphasized before wedding and extra-marital sex is considered a serious offence.

But these cherished cultural values are gradually giving way with the mighty onslaught against traditional values, due to globalization, socialization and influence of western media and the internet.

Social and Moral Ethics.

As pointed out by Idowu, (1945) "Morality in traditional society is basically a fruit of religion and it is dependent upon it. Man's concept of Deity has everything to do with what is taken to be the norm of morality. God made man; and it is He who implants in him the sense of right or wrong". In other words, the way the African dresses, comports himself and behaves in the society is usually in conformity with the demands of the society. As corroborated by Parrinder (1978), in indigenous African Society, morality is governed by custom, which is usually ascribed to the positive command of an ancestor or a god. His words:

Moral commands in the traditional African communities are like those in the Ten Commandments, with the exception of first and second. Parents are highly respected, the names of the gods are sacred and days are consecrated to them, murder adultery, theft covetousness, all have their prohibition — sexual morality is nearer to the old than the New Testament pattern.

It is, however, deplorable to say that, in Etche today, much of these traditional virtues have been lost to "Western civilization". There is disrespect for parents and elders; everywhere, there is disorderliness, dishonesty, drug abuse, robbery, vandalization of public property, sexual harassment, militancy and kidnapping. The dress code of our girls is an affront and abomination to African culture. The boys who braid artificial "dada" hairdo and wear torn trousers also aberrate culture. There is great need therefore, to reappraise our cultural ethical values back to the path of decency.

Conclusion

The complex network of cosmological beliefs, their related practices and institutions which the traditional Etche society developed over many centuries of their existence and exploitation of the geographical area called "Etche" is essentially an integral feature of the people's total socio-religious and cultural experience. Realistically, the socio-cultural and religious revolution which ensued in Etche land from the mid - nineteenth century onwards with the events of colonialism, civilization and Christian missionary enterprise has been unprecedented in Etche experience and history. All aspects of Etche traditional life have been forced to spin fast on the wheels of change by the alien agents of radical transformation. Christianity in particular has taken an enormous toll on the indigenous religion, though adherents believe it is for good. However in spite of the massive erosion and suggestions that Etche Pre-Christian religion has collapsed and now the preserve of only a handful of aging rural dwellers, the indigenous system remains a living and potent feature of contemporary Etche society. It is still the dynamic religion of thousands of Etche people even in this modern age.

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Appendice (Primary Sources of information)

S/N	Name	Occupation	Age	Place	Date of Interview
1.	Nwanyanwu Austine Uka	Lecturer	35	Akpoku Etche	2/9/2015
2.	Oluo Chibuzor	Farmer	50	Akpoku Etche	5/1/2016
3.	Nwala, Friday	Traditional Priest	60	Umuokede Etche	3/11/2019
4.	Offor, Anthony	Lecturer	45	Odufor Etche	4/10/2018
5.	Njoku Kingsley	Teacher	50	Mba Etche	3/12/2020