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POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SOME SELECT SYMBOLS IN IGBO  
TRADITIONAL RELIGION: THE CASE FOR IBAGWA AKA

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Ibagwa Aka is the traditional name for Ibagwa Nkwo. In fact, for the ordinary passersby, Ibagwa Aka does not exist or is not known. What such people are acquainted with is Ibagwa Nkwo. Nkwo is the name of the Ibagwa market day. It can be recalled that traditional Igbo reckon their days in terms of their markets which happen to be four. These are Eke, Olie, Afor and Nkwo. The cycle of the four days represents the completion of Igbo religious and economic experience for nothing happens in their social life outside those four days.

As Ibagwa instituted the Nkwo market, it gradually acquired fame and became the mark of identity for the town. Consequently, Aka, the name by which the community was traditionally known became detached and sank into the background and for many people became completely unknown. It is not unusual for this kind of experience to be shared in some part of Igboland, (Anigbo, 1980 47ff).

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These findings are based on field research in Ibagwa Aka. The full report is embodied in a Doctoral Thesis submitted to the school of Oriental Studies (SOAS) University of London under the title "Co-sensuality and social change in Ibagwa Aka .....<sup>1</sup> Anigbo, 1980.

Ibagwa Aka is five miles north of Nsukka and shares similar cultural patterns with it. There is however, another village group or town named Obukpa, which stands between Ibagwa Aka and Nsukka. To the north of Ibagwa Aka is Enugu Ezike group of villages regarded as one of the largest single traditional towns in Igboland. Enugu Ezike is also the headquarters of the Igbo-Eze Local Government Area, a political and administrative division carved out from the old Nsukka Division. To the west of Ibagwa Aka are Ibagwa Ani and Alor Uno, two distinct towns with which Ibagwa Aka shares a mythical founding ancestry named Ozizikoko Owegu, a migrant claimed to have come from the Igalla regions. To the East of Ibagwa Aka are Iheakpu Awka, Umuawerre and Iheaka. The Ofo and Arua of the group and also confer the Ana title of the major lineage.

In this paper I discussed the political implication of the Ovwelishi and his insignia of office; namely, Ofo and Arua. This is done to highlight the segmentary nature of Ibagwa lineage organizations.

The Ovwelishi is the oldest man in a major lineage. This needs further explanation in view of the respect paid to the aged among the Igbo generally. There, one is expected to respect and obey those senior to him in physical age even where the latter is older than the ego by only a few hours. There also, age is institutionalized in terms of service. Where there are things to share, the youngest must do the sharing while it is the privilege of the older person to choose first. The role of the Ovwelishi means more than this. It is an institution and therefore very unique to the Nsukka area of Igboland. In fact,

Shelton refers to it as a form of gerontocracy (Shelton, 1971:7).

The position of the Onyeishi is defined functionally because he is in charge of the ancestral shrine and mediates between the living and the dead forebearers (Meek, 1937:136). In Ibagwa Aka, the Onyeishi of the major lineage is in charge of the lineage because he keeps the Ofo and Arua of the group and also confers the Ama of the major lineage.

Ofo is the name of a tree deterium senegalense. The same term Ofo is used to define the joints of this same tree. When an elder prays for himself or petitions for his group, he holds ofo in his hand. On that occasion, the elder must be careful about his pronouncements lest his utterances contradict his life style. This is mainly because of the second meaning of Ofo for it means justice. The joint in itself represents justice. Even in its natural state, that is when it is not used for religious purpose, Ofo conveys to the Igbo the complex character of justice. The idea of this complexity derives from the nature of the joint itself. For both ends of the joint look alike. This dramatizes how difficult it is to underline in a practical situation who is just. This explains why the Igbo can be bewildered when confronted with the administration of justice. On such occasions, one can hear them say "onye ji ofo"? Who can be sure about who is just. They also say "ji ofo ato n'ije" - which means that a just man must complete his journey. This implies that a just man can suffer but he must triumph in the end.

The use of Ofo is surrounded by complicated rules and only those who are acquainted with the technicalities are allowed to handle them. Children are forbidden to touch them for fear of abuse and incurring the anger of the ancestors. It can define different kinds of people. But generally, any elderly man can acquire one and pray with it. However, such private uses have little political or economic significance. Ofo in social life defines a specific group. The smallest of such group is the minor lineage whose most senior member uses it to pray for the group on formal occasions. Ofo of this kind is inherited on the direct line. This is not so with the ofo of the major lineage which is one of the most important symbols of unity in the community.

Although, ofo of the major lineage is important socially, it lacks authenticity in Ibagwa community unless taken conjointly with Arua. Arua or Aro (Ok, 1937:119) is a staff of office or staff of authority. It can be a spear or a pointed piece of wood. But its use by a particular lineage strongly asserts that the lineage originated from Ibagwa Aka for it is held to be a gift from the founding ancestor (Anigbo, 1980:97). Arua and Ofo are symbols of unity and authenticity in Ibagwa Aka for their use indicates a group with specific rights to a piece of land granted to it by the founding ancestor. Neither acquired money or power can help a group institute such Arua or Ofo and be recognised in the community.

Arua is also a mark of identification in social life and plays crucial role in marriage. Because of the so called incest taboo,

people define themselves by reference to the holder of the Arua and decide whether they can marry or not, for to have the same man in charge of a common Arua indicates unity where marriage is impossible. The accepted local usage for that kind of inquiry is "onye kpo Arua unu"? - who is keeping the Arua of your group?

As soon as an Onyeishi dies, his chief wife or his eldest son must hide the Ofo and Arua for security reasons and they must bring them out on the day when the funeral of the deceased Onyeishi is being concluded. The loss of an Arua can be a serious matter. For a group not to have an Arua means not having originated in the village. This can be crucial in Ibagwa Aka where there are different categories of settlers.

In the first place there is what is known as Umu Nsukka, children of Nsukka. Umu Nsukka is a technical term widely used in Ibagwa Aka for identification purposes. It applies to children of Nsukka who are resident in Ibagwa Aka. But Nsukka as understood here does not refer to individuals who are from the Nsukka village group, only five or six miles away. Here Umu Nsukka refers to all non-Ibagwa indigenes who are resident in Ibagwa Aka but whose traditional homes are within the old Nsukka Colonial Administration. Old Nsukka during the colonial days, covered a wide area. For administrative convenience, it is now split into several L.G.As, the most notable ones being Igbo Eze, Isi Uzo, Igbo Etiti and Uzo Uwani.

There is also another category of strangers in Ibagwa Aka known as Ndi Ugbu literary meaning those of the lorry or simply lorry men,

to whom various epithets are applied, like Oji Azu abia - people who come with their backs turned. It means people who have arrived with their faces turned in the direction from which they came. In a historical setting it is the description of the sitting position in the lorries of earlier times when people sat facing the direction from which they came. The group with this taxonomy in Ibagwa does not come from any town or village groups administered from the old Nsukka Colonial Division. Any Igbo man resident in Ibagwa Aka who is not from the old Nsukka Colonial Administration is Ndi Ugbo.

People regarded as Ndi Ugbo have come from various areas of Igboland, distances notwithstanding. Some of them are business men, lorry drivers, motor mechanics and teachers. Some of them have lived in Ibagwa Aka for well over fifty years. They hold regular meetings and are identified and they also identify themselves as Ndi Ugbo.

Neither the Umu Nsukka, nor the Ndi Ugbo can wield the Ofo or Arua in Ibagwa community no matter how long they may have resided in the community. This is why the Ofo and the Arua can be considered crucial in marking off indigens from strangers in Igbo communities.

Where an Arua is lost, the entire village must be notified because it is the village acting as a cooperate group who must certify the originality of the major lineage group within the village structure and therefore approve the construction of a new one.

The insignia of office for the Onyeishi are therefore the Ofo and Arua. As soon as the funeral services of a deceased Onyeishi are concluded, the installation of his successor must take place. A new

Onyeishi assumes office as soon as he receives Ofo and the Arua of his group. One of the obligations on becoming an Onyeishi is that the incumbent must settle on the lineage land and never leave it. It follows that if he had been leaving away from Ibagwa Aka, he must come home finally and assume the headship of his people. He is not even permitted to live in Ibagwa farm land. A forticri he cannot live on any piece of land he may have acquired by purchase from any of the other lineage in the local community. This means that the Onyeishi has a direct say in choosing the political concillors of the major lineage.

The Onyeishi uses the Ofo and the Arua to pray for the entire membership of the lineage on specific occasions some of which will be discussed. He has also certain political powers. He confers the Ama title which is a necessary condition for becoming a concillor or member of government in the major lineage. Even a wealthy man cannot afford to be disloyal to the Onyeishi, specifically where he has not taken the Ama title. A man could buy land elsewhere, manage to secure a multiplicity of wives without the help of the Onyeishi, but he cannot acquire a title without him.

The question of the maintenances of the Onyeishi ought to be dealt with, since he does not leave his premises and therefore does not work. Provision for this has been made and is honoured by tradition. Each major lineage in Ibagwa Aka has a definite piece of land set aside for the maintenances of the Onyeishi. During the planting season,



the adult males may take it in turns individually or in groups to cultivate his yams and train them when they germinate. He also receives a share of each animal killed either in hunting by any member of the lineage or animal brought for sacrifices. People visiting him take all sorts of gifts to him. Members of his lineage who have been away for a long time pay him courtesy visit on returning home. Such people may offer him gifts of tobacco, money and other items considered suitable for an old man.

When the people approach the Onyeishi on a visit, each one stoops low in obeisance, at the same time calling his title name. Young men may take off their slippers in the Housa/Yoruba style before proceeding to shake hands with the old man. Having completed these formal respects, the visitor may settle down to await the invitation to explain the object of his mission. The objective of such private visits can be to solicit help from the Onyeishi on various aspects of matrimonial problems.

But there are formal occasions when the Onyeishi have to preside over the affairs of the entire descent group. One of those occasions is Igba Eze.

Igba means feast. Eze could be interpreted as king, a wealthy man or a leading personality in a special area of concern. Igba-Eze could therefore mean the king's feast or the feast celebrated only by the wealthy. It could equally mean the most important feast celebrated by the community. The latter interpretation is preferred

because Ibagwa has no king in whose honour such a feast is celebrated. Nor is it celebrated by the wealthy alone for every indigene of the traditional community including women who are married outside the town are deeply involved in the celebrations.

Infact, Egba-Eze is a reunion feast especially for married daughters for this is the time when they must come home to their natal home accompanied by their husbands and children. It is easy to assess from this how the entire community can become involved in the reunion exercise. A man can be shown to play a double role in the reunion process. In one instance he is playing the role of husband, presenting palm-wine and sacrificial animals to his affines - all these on the interest of his marriage. In another instance, he is the father or the brother of a woman and thereby because a receiver of palm-wine and similar items from a son-in-law for much the same reason. This explains why everyone is attracted home during the festivity. The town teems with life.

One may think that the village is chaotic this time because of pressure on individuals to meet all kinds of obligations. This is not the case. Every one is relaxed for there is a traditional system of organizing the reunion which considerably diminishes pressure or anxiety on everyone. A separate day is set aside for each of the descent groups in Ibagwa to host their reunion celebrations. There are three descent groups in Ibagwa Aka - namely: Amebo, Echara and Ezema.

No descent group may utilize Mkwo for the reunion of its members, however, because Mkwo is the market day and a general day of rest and

meetings for the entire community. Moreover, for any descent group to have an exclusive right to organise its own activities on Nkwo market days could suggest possible ownership of the market itself, and this would affect peaceful interaction in the community. To avoid this, the other three days, Eke, Olie and Afor are utilized for the reunion festival. Amebo, the oldest descent group in the community utilizes Eke day for its own celebrations. On the next day Olie, Echara and Ezema take their turn while Idi which is a sub-unit of Echara is excluded from the celebrations on Olie day and pushed on to celebrate alone on Afor day.

The merger of Echara and Ezema to celebrate together on Olie day is very interesting and significant. This is because a day in the Igbo traditional week is made to serve as a symbol of unity and exclusion. The explanation offered for the merger is that Idi is a latter arrival group in Ibagwa Aka. When the group arrived and accepted Ibagwa custom, it was accorded traditional status under the descent group of Echara Ibagwa. But during Egba-Eze traditional festival, Echara would prefer to dissociate itself from the late arrival Idi and merge with Ezema in order to emphasize traditional cooperation.

Every year, once Christmas is over, people in Ibagwa Aka talk about the approaching Feast. Even Christians of all denominations are involved in this talk because Egba-Eze presents peculiar problems to them. It is a traditional religious festival which Christianity opposes. Conflicts often arise out of the demands and the attempts to meet the

obligations which the feast imposes.

As soon as the new moon is seen any evening in the month of February, there is a general jubilation and shouting "Egba-Eze Alata - Egba-Eze feast has come round again. This is proclaimed and echoed throughout the breadth and length of the town. The general proclamation ushers in the sacred period which lasts for seven traditional weeks comparable in its solemnity to the Christian lent. But for the Ibagwa people the sacredness of Egba-Eze season dwarfs that of lent for during this period, society proscribes death and anything that would disturb peace and harmony in the village. However, should any one die, such a one is not mourned, he is lost to the descent group and would never be regarded as an ancestor.

At a specific time on the reunion day, the entire membership of the major lineage would assemble together with their Onyeishi before their ancestral shrine. The ancestral shrine can be marked or identified by different types of clay objects such as Ekere - a small earthenware vessel specially designed for the purpose or Onu Udu. Onu can be rendered neck, while Udu is an earthenware jug built to different sizes ranging from about a pint to well over eight gallons a piece. In normal usage, Udu stores palm oil and on formal occasions serves in the presentation of palm wine. Eventually, being an earthenware, it runs its full life when it cracks or gets broken accidentally. When this happens the neck may still be preserved for religious purposes.

Once the need arises, an elder can stick Ekere or Onu Udu to the ground and here either of them can become significant as a religious

object for it can represent different kinds of ideas in the traditional religion of the people. Ordinarily, and formally, Ekere or Onu Udu stuck to the ground indicates an assertion of definite rights. It is a formal way of indicating that a piece of territory belongs to a definite group. By sticking Onu Udu to the ground the elder proclaims that the territory belongs to him and that his ancestors are witnesses to that fact. In political ideology sticking Onu Udu to the ground is an open declaration of right of ownership as well as an invitation publicly made to any one to counter such claims.

Generally, Onu Udu or Ekeres stuck to the ground can either represent the Ci of any individual or mark a contact point between group and their reserved forebearers. Ci is the Igbo titular diety who acts as an intermediary between God and man. He is a fateful personal god who seems to come into existence with the conception of the individual and ceases to exist at his death. Ci protects and guides each individual and nothing can happen to his protege without his knowledge and acquiescence. The Igbo say Ife Melu-zmudu-malu-Ci-ya - what befalls a man also affects his Ci. Sometimes one cannot but feel that Ci is as helpless as the individual for whom he acts as guardian. Ci has a Shrine.

It is the symbol of adulthood for a man or woman to set up his Ci shrine. A man does this after he is married and sets up a separate cooking place for his wife. If he has a son, the sons Ci receives food and drink along with his father's. When a woman is married and is

established in his married home, she too may institute her Ci in the compound into which she is married. She does this by removing the symbol of Ci from her mothers shrine and invites members of her natal kin to perform the ceremony. As the individual acquires new symbols of wealth, which are either children or domestic animals, he offers sacrificial animals to the Ci in recognition of those favours. When the individual dies, these symbols are also removed. Ci cannot be discussed any further here because between any organism and its Ci, there is no disputation, no politics or arguments there is only agreement.

But where Ekere or Onu Udu represents the Ancestral Shrine, it assumes a special significance during Egba-Eze traditional festival because it is one of the most important meeting points for all the members of the major lineage during the celebrations. Towards evening, on the day the group is holding its reunion, the Onveishi gives the signal that the main event of the day is about to take place - that is that the ceremonies at the Ancestral Shrine is imminent. He does this by sounding the ancestral gong - one of the items he inherits on becoming Onveishi. He himself proceeds to the shrine carrying the Ofo and the Arua with him. He plants the Ofo and the Arua before the shrine. Statues or whatever recalls revered forebears are also brought out to enhance the solemnity of the occasion. When the decorations are completed the Onveishi would sit aside waiting for the congregation to arrive.

As the members arrive they sit or stand depending on their age or status. But all the title holders of the group are expected to be

seated. But before they take their seat, they must place their insignia of office known as Odu Atu - the tail of a bush cow.- before the shrine. By doing this they indicate their unity or oneness. When every one is settled, the Onyeishi would begin to address the ancestors.

First, he recalls all the revered ancestors in their genealogical details stressing the points of segmentation and the interrelatedness of all those assembled for the occasion. He links all the Ancestors to Ozizikoko-Owagu, the mythical founding Ancestor of the entire Ibagwa community. There is a panze. He then stresses the importance of the occasion and refers to the sacrificial gifts which married daughters have brought to honour the Ancestors. He generalizes on the needs of every one and seem to characterize them under three headings. These are birth of healthy children, good health and food to feed every one.

It should be mentioned that Egbe-Eze is the feast which concludes the year and ushers in the commencement of farm work. Therefore, good health is a necessary condition for successful farm work.

When the Onyeishi finishes his words of address, he is given an ovation which suggests that he has spoken the minds of every one present. Individuals can speak to stress the needy areas in their lives where they feel the Onyeishi has not touched upon. For example, a woman can promise the ancestors that she would return the following year if she has a male child. Other areas of concern can be stressed.

The animals sacrificed at the ancestral shrine must be shared to respond to different kinds of status groups within the major lineage. The Head of any animal killed goes to the children but sisters children must not eat the head as it has touched the shrine. They can share the claws of chickens as well as the carcasses. A leg of each animal killed goes to the young men of the group. The woman who provided the animal returns to her husband with the breast wing, one of the thighs and its drumsticks if it is a chicken. The father or step father of the woman invariably has the exclusive right to the gizzard. The neck of the chicken is used to validate social relationship because the father of the woman who brought the chicken must pass the neck to the oldest man within his own lineage. It is only the Oryeishi who must eat the neck of the beast brought by his own daughters. Who eats what and who takes what part home becomes a traditional system of validating social relationship in the community. To ignore the rule can lead to crisis and sometimes to segmentation or disruption of the existing links. Ibagwa festival creates favourable opportunity for an annual reunion of married daughters. Ibagwa insists on the reunion and welcomes suitors anywhere who is prepared to keep the custom.



### CONCLUSION

It is necessary to recall that the Onyeishi does not owe his position to any one but by virtue of his being the oldest surviving male in the major lineage, his physical age notwithstanding. Moreover, his office is not hereditary in the direct line. In other words, his sons cannot succeed him simply because he happens to be their father. He cannot rule arbitrary because he is constrained both by custom and the Ofo - to which he acts as guardian.

However, the political role of the Onyeishi cannot be questioned especially if one sees him within the context of the ancestral shrine where he acts as an intermediary between the living and the dead of the same descent group both parties benefiting from his services. In fact, the Onyeishi can be regarded as the flag bearer of his major lineage. This is because, like a political party canvassing for votes during electioneering campaign, in order to retain power, the keynote address spoken by him before the ancestral shrine can be regarded as an exercise in the politicization of children.

Children are important in the major lineage for many reasons. Without a child of his own the individual has no chance of becoming an ancestor (Middleton, 1960:45) a status highly coveted in this kind of society. This is even true for the ancestors themselves for they would readily be dead and forgotten. Middleton writing for the Lugbara of Uganda highlights the importance of children for the dead forebearers.

"A ghost witches a man giving food at a sacrifice to him. A brother of that ghost begs food of him. The owner will laugh and say "have you no sons"? Then he will think "why do my children give me food" (Middleton, 1960. 45).

In summary, the ancestral shrine embodies within itself, different types of social control mechanisms - politics, economics and all types of ritual powers. In fact, one could claim that the lineage system in Ibagwa Aka is a form of "primitive form of dictatorship since within it the aged have the last say in lineage affairs. Such interpretation would be incured for the power of the aged is held in check by others social institutions such as the Ofo and the Arua and the social structure itself.

NOTES

1. Ama Title: This is a kind of club for all the wealthy, trustworthy members of the major lineage. It is similar to the Ozo title in some other Igbo village communities. Needless to say that the Ozo title is not taken in Ibagwa Aka. Those who have taken the title can take part in traditional decision making processes of the village when they meet formally they are known as "Oha" something similar to the council of elders in other situation.
  
2. Odu-Atu: Is the ornamental tail of a bush caw which is the insignia of office for Ama title holder. He must carry it with him as he leaves his premises. Those who have taken the title do not shake hands. But instead flip their insignia of office these times as a mark of good will or friendship.

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