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STRUCTURE AND EVOLUTION OF A TRADITIONAL  
SYSTEM OF FOOD PRODUCTION: THE OWA EXPERIENCE

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The study identifies yam and briefly examines the systems leading to its production and various problems associated with it. The conclusion of farm work is signalled by a ritual festival which centres on yam and symbols which accompany it at that time. The setting is Owa, an Igbo village community of Anambra State.

The writeup leans heavily on personal experience derived from birth and socialization. But this is not all. With grants from Senate Research Committee of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, I am currently investigating cases of religious conflicts in Igbo Ekiti and Ezeagu Local Government Areas of the State.

Owa, a village community in Ezeagu Local Government Area is about four kilometres South of the Nine Mile Corner near Enugu. Nine Mile derived its name because of its strategic importance being the connecting point between the roads linking the South and the North of the country East of the Niger. It is also nine miles from Enugu, which was the regional headquarters of Eastern Provinces of Nigeria and still the capital of Anambra State. Owa is bounded in the East by Nsude and Ngwo, and in the North by Eke and Abor. These four distinct groups of villages are in Udi Local Government Area of Anambra State. Owa is flanked in the South by Aguobu Owa which is the headquarter of Ezeagu Local Government Area.

The name Aguobu-Owa needs some explanation because the exercise would give a hint to the nature of the socio-economic life of the people: Agu could be rendered farm or grass. It could also pass for a leopard or tiger. In reality, it means an uninhabited open ground left for wild animals to roam about and has other potentialities including areas for collecting thatch. Owa on the other hand means heart or centre of concern or where ones interests are concentrated. It could also refer to any piece of land considered suitable for permanent settlement. In the light of this explanation, Aguobu Owa means a settlement of migrants from Owa. Further down and still South of Aguobu Owa is yet another settlement of the Owa people known as Egbegbu Owa.

This pattern of migration leading to permanent settlements is very characteristic of the Northern Igbo peoples (see Udo, 1975:11, Anigbo, 1984). What inspires movements of this kind is quest for suitable farmland considered vital for success in growing yam which is the traditional occupation of the people.

Some serious observations have been made with regard to such migrations. Before colonialism, migrations may have been a significant factor in the acquisition of new territories (cf. Anigbo, 1980). In fact, the structure of village names especially in the North of the Igbo country lends weight to this observation. But today, new territories cannot be acquired that way because village boundaries are now clearly defined and acquisition of land by sheer force is no longer considered legitimate. But the migrations have continued nevertheless. As a result, the farmers who are involved must keep two homes, one at the place of work and the other in the traditional village and move following the cycle of agriculture. Such life style has been shown to be the cause of ~~dropouts~~<sup>dropouts</sup> in primary schools in the area (Ogito, 1978:3) because the farmer and his wife must stay together to work in the field and the tender child cannot live alone.

The farmer too cannot develop any of the homes because of fluctuations in migrations. None of these observations seem to disturb the State Government. In fact, there is a strong evidence to show that the State Government itself was instrumental to a policy which irritated the farmers out of their farmlands and thereby even fostering greater migrations (Ode, 1981:56). Despite all these the peoples' interest in growing yam has persisted.

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Yam, *Ji diascorea rotundata* is the Igbo staple food (Fasden, 1966:123). Igbo mythology traces the origin of yam to the remains of one of their sons from whose grave it sprouted (Fasden, 1966:389). The story has a far reaching implication for by linking yam to a first son, it suggests that for the Igbo at least, yam comes next to a child in order of priority. For them, too, traditional occupation would recognise growing yam as the chief (Fasden, 1960:265). Yet it can be shown that growing yam is as disintegrative as it is unifying in its social effects.

Some important observations have already been made about yam. It requires reasonably rich soil for successful growth and which may not always be readily available. This is mainly because of a large concentration of the people on agriculture which in the traditional Igbo context simply means growing yam. Secondly, frequent cropping depletes the fertility of the soil and continued use in turn produces poor harvest.

Demand for fertile soil does in turn cause a lot of conflicts among the farmers, solutions to which are sought in migrations (Anigbo, 1980).

Today, Owa people can be found all over Nigeria where there are available rich soil distances from their traditional villages notwithstanding. They are found in Anambra State, Imo, Bendel and Benue. This type of phenomenon associated with yam production can explain a lot of issues in the Igbo culture. It can explain the phenomenon of Agu and Uno which are the common features of the structures of the social organisations among northern Igbo group of villages (Karman, 1967). The meaning of Agu has been noted. Uno in its turn simply <sup>(nlegho)</sup> ~~means~~ a house, a home or a traditional home (Anigbo, 1980).

(11)

Yam also divides the sexes and fosters status differentials among the men. In the first place, there is the social ideology which precludes women from the ownership of yam. What it means in practice is that only men can take titles associated with it or enjoy the privileges or glories derived from the product. The social equation with regard to yam is therefore invariably men with yam and never with woman. But then, even with this recognition, the successful production of this commodity requires a joint effort between man and his wife.

There is work for the man and work for the woman and their joint effort is vital for the survival of the household. In the first place, the culture places embargo on women making yam hills and punishes them if they do. Women on their part have to provide support for their men by cooking for them while at work and weeding the fields from time to time as it becomes necessary. Women also cultivate coco-yam which is the only locally grown food stuff which the people have been able to process and store for use during the period between the conclusion of the planting season and the beginning of the harvest (Anigbo, 1980:145). Here, one recalls Shelton who examines coco-yam and the serious effort which women put towards its production for he sees it in terms of the interdependence of man and woman in meeting the food needs of the family. He concludes that women are generally responsible for the family foods when yams are no longer readily available because they have been planted (Shelton, 1973).

In Ibagwa Aka, a village community, not too far removed from Owa, it is for the mother to provide her daughter with some nucleus of coco-yam seedling to start her off in life at the beginning of her marriage (Anigbo, 1980:146). In Owa itself, mothers do it as optation not obligation. There, however, the woman must make the effort herself to acquire coco-yam seedlings. She can hire her labour out to other women and get paid with coco-yam. She can also

spend cash if it available. Her objective in life is to be independent on matters connected with the product for she can earn extra cash on her labour and spend the money as she wants.

On this account, it would be reasonable to infer that besides children to perpetuate the line, traditional occupation such as growing yam can be considered a significant factor which urges a man to marry and stay married. For then too, it is traditional for the potential bride and the groom to investigate each other before the marriage can be concluded. The investigation should not be confused with quests for a potential wife. For among the Igbo a man is free to scout for a potential wife and make an offer of marriage to her as he pleases. The girl on her part is free to turn the offer down. But several offers to different girls and refusals can become a form of indictment and the individual is discretely warned to think again.

The potential groom must thereupon critically examine himself and adopt a new strategy for subsequent approaches. None of these steps constitute formal investigations. Investigations properly understood must occur after the party of the groom and that of the bride have reached some levels of agreement on certain aspects of the preliminary steps in the marriage negotiations. At that level, after the presentation of the kola-nut and a number of issues dealt with, the bride's party may say to the party of the groom "Eanyi jua ene": which means, let us institute some inquiries. The kola-nut presented on that occasion represents what is technically known as Oji ajuju which means kola-nut that asks questions (Anigbo, 1980).

The kola-nut is the fruit of the kola tree chiefly cola-nitida and cola-acumata. It is common in tropical West Africa and there serves many purposes. But in contrast to its multi purpose use, it is very cheap (Nzekwu, 1961:67, Basden, 1966:165). For the Igbo it is a great means of social communications. Its role in a marriage setting cannot be exaggerated for without it, no marriage can be recognised (Adams, 1934:445).

Besides issues peculiar to the sexes, terms of reference for such investigations are the status of the man and woman as well as their distinct identity within the general descent links in the society as a whole. Issues governing impediments and adjustment mechanisms are also taken into consideration where they occur. In addition, there may be some consultations with the diviner or fortune teller on the opinions of the ancestors for the proposed union. Whatever verdict is handed out as a result of such consultations must be strictly upheld and adhered to by the groups.

Another important aspect of the investigation is the attitude to work of the potential bride and groom. Here the Igbo shows clearly he appreciates the importance of the genes or the pedigree in human beings for he does not select mates arbitrary.

What primarily motivates the choice of husband or wife is attitude to work. Work here specifically refers to traditional occupation and other household duties. Methods used to establish reliable opinions are both empirical and comparative. Each party to the union is very clear about this and must be satisfied that the attitude to work of the partner is good. The focus is not just on the potential bride or groom only for they may be young at that time and their attitude to work not confirmed. The investigation is therefore centred on the general approach to work of father and mother and indeed of the entire members of the descent group.

Specific qualities which are avoided in either man or woman are sluggishness, laziness, indolence of all descriptions and late rising. On the other hand, qualities which are sought or pursued are getting up early, sustained stamina in the pursuit of specific tasks and promptness in response to emergencies. These are qualities which can be crucial in approving or rejecting an offer of marriage. If the descent group is heavily loaded with people sharing either of the characteristics the candidate may be advised to change direction or get on with the business on hand.

Although for the Igbo, recurrent serious incidents of misfortunes such as deaths in the family can constitute obstacles to one getting a wife or husband (cf. Anigbo, 1982:516), the success of father or mother in farming or other business does not of itself influence the approval or rejection of son or daughter for a proposed union. The community can also uphold the character of father or mother and seriously question those of sons or daughters (Anigbo, 1980:90). This is because the Igbo do not attribute the success of an individual to the genes, nor to inherited qualities and not even to personal ability or ingenuity of the individual. Although they may accept the genes as a working hypothesis towards forecasting the achievement orientation of an individual, they are not relied upon as absolute guide in all cases. In the Igbo social ideology, various individuals can pursue the same type of occupation and equally dedicate themselves to it and yet in the end achieve differing rewards. What explains the differences in the results obtained is not the individuals ability. It is the Ci of the individual.

Ci can be seen as a fateful personal god who seems to come into existence with the conception or commencement of life of any organism and ceases to exist at its death. Ci protects and guides the organism and nothing can happen to its protegee without his approval or acquiescent. This may explain the Igbo saying "ife melu madu melu Ci ya" - which means "what befalls an individual also affects his Ci". This saying can lead one to conclude that Ci is as helpless as the individual for whom he acts as guardian (cf. Anigbo, 1980:165). This view is strengthened by the attitude of the Igbo themselves. For the Igbo an individual can challenge an opponent by asserting superiority in wealth or power not only over him but also over his personal deity - Ci. There, one can hear "aka nri kalea Ci gi" which means I am more powerful in all respects than you and your personal deity put together (Ezekwugo, 1973:128). As this kind of response is not frowned upon by the Igbo, it is obvious that Ci is not Chukwu - God the creator of all things (cf. Anigbo, 1980:164, Basden, 1966; Parrinder, 1971). Yet Ci has a shrine which must be removed at the death of the owner.

But by being intimately bound up by the fortunes of ones personal deity, the Igbo appear to accept a kind of fatalistic attitude to the business of life. This view derives from Igbo cosmology which upholds the existence of three worlds: the world of the living, the world of the dead and the world of children not yet born (Ezekwugo, 1973).

However, in the world of children not yet born, movement is free and individuals mingle together and even discuss with their Ci - their personal deity and agree with him on what would be its fortune in the world of the living. When eventually the individual is born into the world of the living, his failures and successes and indeed his fortune are seen as living out the agreement reached in the world of the children not yet born. Thus, one can see that the social ideology conditions individuals to accept failure and success as pre-determined and not as results of personal efforts.

The Igbo postulate of <sup>pre-existence</sup>~~existence~~ can be seen as a serious attempt by indigenous mind to come to grips with problems of evil, inequality, status differentials and other aberrations of social life. Although some individuals may at times find comfort in this kind of explanations, the philosophy of pre-existence poses similar problems as the doctrine of predestination or determinism which also has preoccupied highly tutored minds for centuries. Were such philosophy to be accepted and apply universally, society would grind to a halt.

Fortunately for the Igbo, their apparent fatalistic attitude to life is

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countered or match by another aspect of their social idiom which recognises that there are marked differences between achievements derived from sheer physical exertion sustained by a determination to make the grade and results from rewarded efforts. For example in Ibadan, the people are aware of the difference between the title of Okun and Ezaji. Both titles are linked to the process of growing yam. Okun means conqueror of yam fields. Any one who is able to make four thousand yam hills in a single day obtains the title. In fact, it is often poor men who are able to strain themselves to achieve it. Ezaji on the other hand does not derive from sheer physical exertion. The individual earns the title if after planting his yams, he is blessed with very unusual rich harvest which are measured in terms of quantity and quality yams. The latter is obviously conferred by the Ci - the personal deity (cf. Anigbo, 1980:147).

All these speculations and allusions are simply designed to show that the groom's party are most critical in their investigations because they would not be happy to be saddled with a woman without initiative, also lazy and constantly pushed on to perform the basic elements of her domestic duties. On the other hand, the family of the bride are not different either for it is clear to them that an indolent husband would surrender his own share of family responsibilities to a dutiful wife. It may be necessary to add that the example of the most eligible groom with the potentiality of living on handsome inheritance and therefore free from labour and the richly endowed bride calling for the luckiest groom are not verified in the Igbo traditional marriage pattern. If they exist today, it is a corruption of traditional practices or at best a form of acculturation.

Therefore, the expectations of a standard Igbo traditional marriage are bride and groom who are healthy, strong and who can live together in peace to explore their environment and wrest from it the means of their livelihood. Whatever fortunes or titles they may acquire as a result of their joint efforts are blessings from their, Ci - their personal deity.

#### ( IV )

In Iwa, marriage is virilocal. As soon as the negotiations are over and the bride-price paid, the woman is expected to settle with her husband. Their immediate preoccupation would be how to secure plenty of seed yams to start off their marriage. But it is not unusual not to have enough at the beginning. Such deficiencies can be made good by either the parents of the groom or the bride. Normally with the harvest over and yams stocked in the barn, it is customary for the father of the bride to invite his daughter



and endow her with what is technically known as "alwukwu ji".

Alwukwu means something heavy, great or immense. When it is associated with a gift of yams, it indicates unspecified but great quantity of seed yams. The non specification is not accidental because there is no strict reciprocity implied in the gesture. The daughter is therefore expected to receive the gift with gratitude, and on her part arrange the transportation to her matrimonial home where she hands them over to her husband.

Meanwhile, the planting season has started in earnest and the thrust to it may give rise to all kinds of groupings. There is the ohu which means select persons forming a work party and rotate their service accordingly. Both men and women can negotiate such alliance and all forms of farm work can be carried out in this manner: there is the sowing of the yams, training the tendrils and weeding. There is also ohu oja which means - work for the in-law. It could be father-in-law or mother-in-law depending on the nature of the job to be done. This should not be confused with bridal service to which reference has been made. In reality ohu oja - means the son-in-law mobilising some significant youths of the village in support of himself and all of them spending the full working day cultivating the yam fields of the father-in-law. The gesture is reciprocated in a lavish entertainment at the end of the day (see Anigbo, 1980).

Whatever success or failure accrues to a man and his wife after they have worked hard is attributed to their Ci. If for example there was a flood and their crop was not affected, the couple would claim that Ci anyi na anyi which means that our personal deity is awake and dutiful. Where on the other hand some people fall victim to some natural disasters and others escape, those affected by the incident would then say "anyi hu ndi njo Ci" which means our individual deities are evil. When a man has no child he would invoke his Ci to furnish him with a child. If his prayers are not answered he would begin to cogitate within himself whether he had not done something contrary to the custom of the land and is being punished for so doing by the deprivation of children (Anigbo, 1980:90).

Therefore, when the harvest is good or a child is born to a man, no man takes the honour to himself but recognises the place of his Ci in the scheme of his life. In like manner, victims of misfortune also react accordingly and plead for a change.

For the Igbo, success is gratuitously given not merited and not strictly achieved. This is because he recognises work as an important contribution for the award. In his life eating and merry are consequences of hard work and one without the other provokes seriousness, raises serious questions

which may demand that the character of an individual be scrutinised. A man who is given little reward from his labour blames his Qi and not his person for he can do nothing further. People tend to agree and sympathise with him. But a man who feasts himself and does no work is stigmatized and people avoid his company. Such one is considered a thief or rogue.

This belief system or philosophy of life is pervasive of the entire Ibo social life and experiences. It can also be identified from analysis of some of the rituals which occur from time to time especially those connected with yam. At the conclusion of a cycle of farm work, they mark it with one of such celebrations (Baden, 1966:67). In Owa, Akani is one such celebrations.

( V )

Akani is a festival which dramatizes the unity of the lineage or even the descent group for at that time all married daughters must return to their natal home. In this obligation is total, the unity of the lineage is restored with married daughters replacing wives as housekeepers. I will now proceed to analyse the structure of the festivity and other aspects of the celebrations.

There are three distinct but related items in Akani: Ibi Akani which means proclaiming the date for the commencement of the celebrations; Igo nna Akani - aspect of the celebration which reflects religious worship and Ikwa Ihe Akani - which means the making of the gift of yam which concludes the festival. Since Ibi Akani and Igo nna Akani refer to time or sequence of events and not directly to social structure, I will not disturb the analysis by describing how such activities are observed in the community. It is more meaningful to analyse the social implications of Ikwa Ihe Akani.

Ikwá Ihe Akani means husband organising yams and having them sent to his father-in-law to commemorate the marriage of his daughter. It is usual for wife to accompany the carriage. What is vital however, is that wife should return to her natal home during the period. This is an important social transaction and recalls many issues in a marriage.

at that time.

One could see the gift of yams as an exercise in reciprocity especially in view of the akwukwa ji which the father-in-law gave to the son-in-law through his daughter at the start of their marriage. But here the principle of reciprocity does not apply. This is because although the standard practice is to send nine large yams to father-in-law in fulfilment of the obligation, there is no strict equation between the gift and akwukwa ji. Moreover, it is not imperative that the number must be nine. What gives direction to the conduct of yams on this particular occasion is the condition of the marriage.

The first year of marriage demands that the husband should be very selective in his choice of yams for they must be really large, nine of them being carried as a kind of hearse, young men carrying them and singing songs reflecting the weight of their burden. They are taken to father-in-law and left before him as exhibits.

Yams in Akani have several implications. The size of yams presented can portray different aspects of human relationships in a particular marriage. They could indicate first year of marriage or that the husband is rich since yams for the occasion could be bought. Such may also suggest that the husband has had a rich harvest. Where the latter is the case, the yams can demonstrate successful joint enterprise. At times husband can present large sized yams to spite his wife. This situation can be verified where the son-in-law is at peace with his father-in-law but at great discord with his wife. Not to send yams would have been the natural thing to do. Here, yam becomes both a symbol of peace and hostility.

On the other hand, where the size of yams are considerably small would indicate bad harvest or very advanced affinal ties. The honour of wife demands that a son-in-law should not be mean in making the gift of yams to his affines. Therefore where the harvest fails, he is not expected to strain his pocket to fulfil the obligation especially if he has been dutiful.

This would be more so in the case of old couples who are no longer able to scout for rich soil which could assure them rich harvest of yams to meet the standard. Similarly, where the number of yams are less than nine could show that husband and wife are dead but left at least a son to honour the memory of mother. This is because as long as there is a male child surviving a woman, the obligation of the gift of yams would continue to be met at that time.

Sometimes yams are not sent at all and may no longer be sent. This calls for clarity because it throws light on some fine aspects of social relationships. In the first place, a man who cannot afford yams in any socially approved manner is not expected to stand to meet the obligation. Usually, father-in-laws are loathe to accept gift of yams from son-in-laws who are confirmed thieves for fear of being offered stolen yams. In fact, good citizens regard stolen things as polluting. Therefore, where a responsible good citizen could not afford yams, such a man would be given recognition due to any son-in-law who met the obligation. This would be more so if he encourages his wife to go home to her people with a pot of palm wine. The affines would acclaim his gift and promises of various kinds of aid made to sister in recognition of their poverty.

Where wife lives with husband and no yams are sent on her behalf is a clear case of crises. But the source of crises may not be immediately obvious for it could stem from the man or his wife. Where wife's father or brother is silent about the gift is a clear indication of a lull in a relationship. Father or brother may question a defaulting son-in-law on this important aspect of his duty to his wife and receive satisfactory explanation for his conduct.

In that case, withdrawal of gifts of yams at aheni becomes a warning to parents that daughter's behaviour constitutes threats to the life of the marriage. This is an opportunity for parents to take corrective measures against an erring daughter.

But son-in-law can equally be at fault. The crises would be resolved if he accepts and mends his ways. But it is also equally possible he would remain recalcitrant and still willing to live with his wife. Here, the honour of daughter is at stake. The father or brother can redeem it by declaring a war of food against the son-in-law. This step would be more necessary if the differences between the affines derive only from failure to make the gift of yams. The father-in-law could wage the war by reversing the conduct of yams at that time and have gifts of yams sent to the son-in-law. By that kind of move, the father-in-law challenges the son-in-law to accept that he is self sufficient in food supply and does not rely on his meeting up with the obligation in order to survive.

Such conduct provokes instant reaction, for the son-in-law cannot just accept the gift of yams and does nothing. Where he is anxious to preserve the bond, he must take all necessary steps to rectify the situation, otherwise he returns the yams to father-in-law and bow out from the marriage. This is a clear case of fighting an issue with food as demonstrable in the

in the *Kulaana Abutu* (Young, 1971).

There, Young shows clearly how the giving of food especially yam can be a form of aggression designed to shame an opponent (Young, 1971:189). But in the case of *Akani*, the reversal of custom enhances the identity of daughter and establishes her as a daughter of so and so. At the same time it blacklists a son-in-law and dramatizes him as a man guilty of dereliction of duty in an important issue of social relationship such as marriage.

Today, things are changing. With the advent of Christianity and its stiff opposition to things traditional (see Schuyler, 1968:210; Hastings, 1967:58) especially those associated with religion, yam at *Akani* has assumed a new dimension. Although, christians have accepted the principle of making the gift of yams to father-in-laws, they now insist they must do their own on entirely a different day and month from the original prescription. Here, yam represents opposition between christians and those still loyal to traditional religion.

One can really say that despite new factors influencing modification in the symbolic representations of yam, western education and some of the technology of mass production have not shifted the interests of the Owa people from their traditional method of growing yam.

#### CONCLUSION:

#### ( VI )

The paper dealt with yam in the light of the experiences of Owa people of Anambra State. The people cultivate it and treasure it as others do (Basden, 1966: Malinowski, 1922: Young, 1971). But for Owa, at a particular period in the year, yam becomes the yardstick through which issues in a marriage can be assessed or resolved. Then, its wealth as a system of symbolic representation is immense for it can indicate stages in a marriage process, strained relationship, obstinacy, inferiority complex or superiority, extinction of affinal connections and in christian era opposition between tradition and modern.

The festival however, is a landmark in the socio-economic life of the people. It emphasises the autonomy of the village group and in a special way redefines the unity of the major lineage for the return of daughters and exist of wives, the descent group is intact. One wonders whether this validates the matricentric theory of the beginning of family life (Bohannan, 1967:73).

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