

Traditional Medicine and The Promotion Of Inter-Group Relations: The Igbo And Igala (Igara) Experiences In Nigeria.

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Abstract: One central objective of history is to preserve knowledge especially where such knowledge is endangered. Even as a historian is not to sound evangelical, his views could and do change views and salvage threatened knowledge systems. In Igboland, the knowledge of traditional medicine is seriously threatened by the spate of condemnation it attracts from those who want to become more Catholic than the Pope. The spate of condemnation of African traditional medical practices are alarming and at best disturbing. This is because, the same people who would stop at nothing to buy Chinese made herbal drugs would condemn in its totality drugs made by local medical practitioners here in Nigeria. Rather than take the pains to study and understand the art involved in the profession and harness its potentials and more importantly preserve the knowledge therein, many obstacles are placed on the way of the traditional medicine men on account that they are “diabolic”, their products “unhygienic” and unsafe to drink or a nuisance to human health. The present writers hold a contrary view as traditional medicine is a portent force in inter-group relations and very effective where orthodox medicine has failed. How true the latter statement is to be demonstrated in how two brands of traditional medicine-*Odiette* and *Akpaballa* have helped in cementing relationships between the Igbo and Igala especially as it concerns their health and security. Lessons from the experience of these groups would go a long way in fostering peace in the nation especially now that there are several security threats to its citizens.

Key Words: Traditional medicine, inter-group relations, Igbo, Igala, Nigeria

Introduction: The connection between man and his environment is conditioned by his ability to understand nature which is the force propelling the environment. The mastery of nature to a large extent is reflected in the worldviews of people. The physical boundaries separating peoples of different polities may necessarily not be a barrier for the cross fertilization of ideas which result in a synergy of worldviews as certain concepts borrowed from one polity could be used by another to a better degree and with a more positive result. It was the quest by man to fully harness the potentials of nature that gave rise to inter-group relations. The latter statement is very true in the case of Igbo-Igala relations with regard to traditional medicine. The history of *Odiette* and *Akpaballa* among the two groups would buttress this statement.

ODIETTE AND AKPABALLA-THEIR CONCEPTS AND HISTORY

ODIETTE

Among the Igbo, medicine is known as *ogwu*. For the Igala, it is called *ogwuu*. Medicines among the Igbo are of different types. They range from that which is no more than an amulet to great, powerful, shrine-type which enjoy wide spread reputation¹. The two genres of medicine discussed in this paper belong to the latter. The understanding of traditional medicine should first start with understanding the concepts around it. Among the Igbo of old Nsukka Division that share border with the Igala, their concept of *Odiette* is same with that of the Igala. *Odiette* is an expression used to denote a strange force, wonderful or intriguing phenomenon or event. It is made as an exclamation to absolve ones' self of involvement in any dirty dealings among both these Igbo group and the Igala². This concept was later utilized in the preparation and institutionalization of traditional medicine among the two groups. However, what is not yet clear is when the concept came into use in traditional medical practice and which group borrowed it from the other. Oral evidence from Edem in Nsukka suggests that the idea of the herbal medicine known as *Odiette* came from Igalaland. In the words of Ezugwuja Nweze of Owerre village, the man who first instituted *Odiette* medicine in Nsukka communities of Edem, Okpuje, Ero Ulo(Alor Uno) and even outside Igboland in a place like Avurugo was a slave of Edem Ani origin who was sold into slavery to Idah people and

served as a slave to a medicine man/herbalist in Idah. The Idah medicine man/herbalist and master of the said slave from Edem named Amoke Inyi found his slave to be so loyal and allowed him to know some of the intricacies involved in the profession. However, as a rule, the Idah medicine man/herbalist used to upgrade his charms every seven years. As a rule he must use a human being to “sanctify” his charms. For the particular year that gave rise to the institution of **Odiette**, the choice of the person to be used was Amoke Inyi-the loyal slave. However, when the wife of the medicine man heard of it, she revealed the secret to Amoke Inyi and instructed him to plan his escape. The wife was said to have made an exclamation to absolve her of the husbands’ plans of killing his loyal slave. The exclamation she made was said to be “**Odiette**”. When Amoke Inyi came home, he named his medicine **Odiette** which meant that he was innocent³. Thus, **Odiette** is a medicine that is today venerated like a deity. The concepts used in instituting **Odiette** informed the type of medicine associated with it. The concepts are reward for the innocent, security of the oppressed even if it meant visiting the oppressor(s) with vendetta⁴. During his debut at Idah, Amoke Inyi learnt some of his masters’ trade and knew how they were applied. His master was said to begin any of his performances with prayers (invocations, pouring of libation at different points depending on the type of job he was doing and the type of sickness to be cured. From his master he learnt that one of the items used in neutralizing the potency of any charm is a type of locally bred fowl called *ichacha* or *avuke*. This type of fowl has very short feathers on its wing and buttocks that it seems as if they were trimmed. The rationale behind the choice of this class of fowl in the neutralization of poison is that the fowl is not as mobile as other fowls- first it can not fly when chased because of the short wings. This represents immobility and it was this concept of demobilization that is used in herbal medicine when it comes to neutralizing poisons⁵. Other items are in use but this fowl type is very vital for the success and efficacy of the charm or drug that is used in neutralizing poison. Central and very imperative to be taken note of by those who condemn traditional medicine on account that it is not based on any known concept is the fact that they are built on concepts.



Figure 1: THE ODIETTE SHRINE IN EDEM ANI

The term *Akpaballa* is for thunder. The Igala of thunder in periods of crisis and made use of the forces associated with thunder to good effect. According to Paulinus Idoko, the concept of **Akpaballa**, was borrowed by the Igbo from the Igala; however the way they make use of it in traditional medicine is tied to the Igbo world view of thunder.

AKPABALLA

derived from the Igala word has a way of invoking the god

“ We Igbo believe that thunder respects no one and finds no ones trouble except those that have found the troubles of the sky. That is why the Igbo developed the saying that *Obu Onye riri ihee Igwee n'atu akparaka egwu* i.e, he who ate

what belongs to heaven fears thunder⁶.

This informant posited that based on this concept, **Akpaballa** was devised to use the powers associated with lightening and thunder in addressing human problems.

The efficacy of **Akpaballa** is more pronounced in issues relating to security. However, it would be apposite to know the views held about thunder and lightening by the Igbo and how these views helped in developing the concepts that they built into their traditional medicine of **Akpaballa**. The Igbo words for thunder are *Egbe Igwe* and *Agbaraka*. As a force that emanates from nature, they are of the view that it could not be manipulated negatively. As such, they see thunder as an agent of God in the dispensing of retributive justice.

To ensure that the forces of thunder is used to full effect, other concepts that have elements of electrocution were combined with the forces of thunder to institute **Akpaballa**. One of such forces was copied from lioness. According to Clement Odeh, the chief priest of *Ajulaka* masquerade that is regarded among the Enugu Ezike people as the incarnate being of the traditional medicine men:

Female loins do the hunting. The male is lazy. When the female loin gets old, it tracked down its preys using her urine. She would urinate round a very wide area and lay inside the circle. Any animal that strayed into the circle got trapped as it will not have its way out of the circle before it was killed by the lioness.⁷

This phenomenon was believed to have been revealed to traditional medicine men in Igala and Igbo land by an Igala hunter named Ocheje Ugbeda who observed a female loin perform the said act during one of his hunting expeditions⁸. Through intermingling between the Igbo and the Igala, medicine men on both sides learnt to trap thieves or intruders using the soil mixed with the urine of a female loin, an axe that is said to be representative of thunder and other items.

ODIETTE AND AKPABALLA AS AGENTS IN THE PROMOTION OF IGALA/IGBO RELATIONS

These two brands or genre of traditional medicine are quite pronounced among the Igala and the Igbo people of old Nsukka Division. The rituals associated with them and the sourcing of materials used in their fortification gives evidence of cross fertilization of ideas and interdependence among the groups. For Odiette, there are some plants used by the priests when they want to track down thieves or hoodlums that must be sourced from outside their community probably because they were not readily available in their immediate environment or as an act of reverence for the source of their knowledge. For instance, they make use of the bark of *Inyi* tree (*Erythrophloeum suaveolens* Brenan) but the tree must be in a wilderness and must not be within a place where it would hear the crow of a cock (*Inyi anughi ekwa egbele*). One of the areas where they sourced this material was in Igalaland. For the plant to yield results, the stranger who wanted to make use of it must appease the gods of the land. As strangers are by right not allowed to offer sacrifices directly to the gods of the land but must do such through a son of the soil, the traditional medicine men made friends in Igala towns of Idah, Odeke, Ejule, Ibaji, Igabada to mention but a few⁹. Another item used in the medication is locally brewed dry gin made from raphia wine known locally as *kai kai*. This was sourced from Igabada and the drink itself is referred to as Igabada among Nsukka people, showing its source.

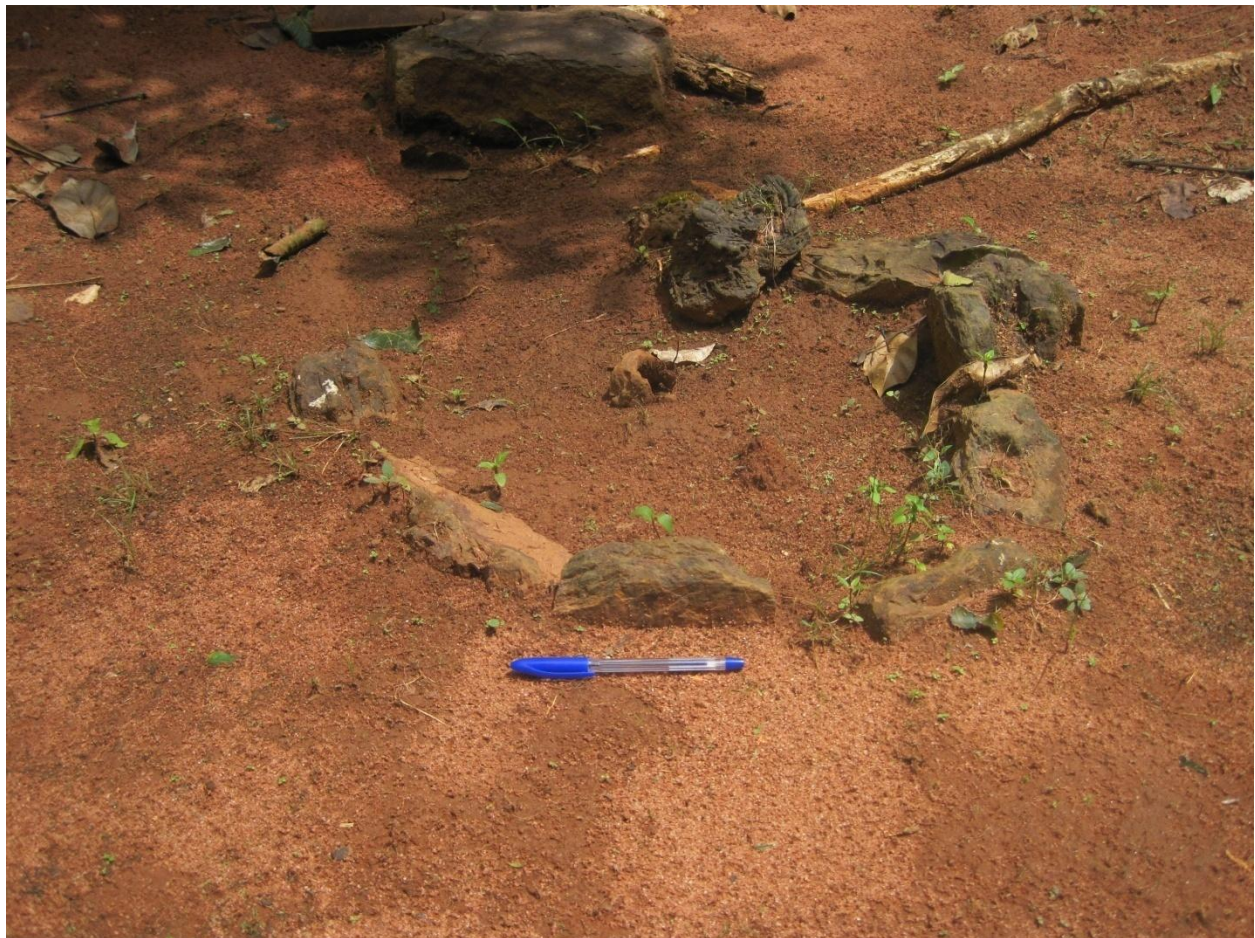
For Akpaballa, the rituals performed in one shrine during the sixth month of the Lejja local calendar are instructive. On the day of the festival which must be on an Orié market day; the priest went to the shrine in company of a woman that had long attained her menopause. The woman is there as a symbol of the lioness and the mother of the community that trace their origin to an Igala woman called Omeji. During the festival that seems to be a period of reaffirmation of ones faith in his ancestors and a period of reunion between the living and the dead, the officiating priest who should be the oldest man in the village came to the shrine to perform some rituals as a prelude to the main event that held in the evening. The rituals were held in a shrine (See Figure 2)



Figure 2: SHRINE OF EZELENYI OMEJI IN LEJJA WHERE RITUALS ASSOCIATED WITH AKPABALLA WERE PERFORMED IN ANCIENT TIMES

Within the shrine, there is a circular ring constructed with iron slag blocks and hematite. Inside the circle is an effigy of the progenitor of the village encased in something like a small anthill. After pouring libations and performing some incantations inside the ring in the morning hours, the priest left. In the evening, when all members of the village were assembled, drinking and eating commenced. After drinking, the priest would scoop sand from inside the circle in the shrine where libations were poured in the morning and robbed same on the forehead of all the participants. This was interpreted to mean that a covenant existed between the participants and the deity and failure to abide by the rules of the deity attracted sanctions not from men but from forces associated with the deity. This according to local wisdom was because the deity has through the rituals encircled the participants and therefore could not be eluded¹⁰.

It is interesting to observe the relationship or similarities between the practices during the rituals in the shrine and the evolution of Akpaballa. The center of spiritual force during the ritual is the circular ring; a replay of the activities of the female loin from where the concept was developed. Equally interesting is that the village where this act was performed –Umuoda-Eze village- trace their ancestry to Igala. Hence they are called **Umuoda Ezelenyi Omeji Attah Igara n’ata anu anu**. (Figure 3 showing the circular ring in the shrine)



**Figure 3 : CIRCULAR RING MADE OF IRON SLAG AND EFFIGE OF THE PROGENITOR
INSIDE**

The choice of an item associated with iron smelting (slag block) was to imitate the speed of thunder and lightning. History even has it that the paraphernalia of authority of this village known as Okaka Ezelenyi came from Igalaland and was said to be fashioned by the personal blacksmith of the Attah Igala who took same to Attah's medicine men to be upgraded with charms that have some magnetic field effect when its services were needed. Incidentally, the person who reserves the right to hold the Okaka is also the people who serve as the priest or his delegate. (See Figure 4 for the picture of Okaka). Consequent on the forces associated with this shrine and its medicines, Umuoda-Eze in traditional Lejja society was the war leader.



Figure 4: OKAKA EZELENYI

Conclusion

For the Igbo and the Igala, their world of traditional medicine reveals subtle ethnographic material and data that help to illuminate the penumbra region of their philosophy and ways of life¹¹. Ethnographic survey indicates that in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial era the Igbo and the Igala were in contact with each other and traditional medicine was one of the forces at play in fostering their relationships. A prominent feature of the type of traditional medicine that brought the two groups together is their ability to give clues to who offenders were in situations like cases of theft, abduction, poisoning through the magnetic force of the medicine. The case of Simon Onuwa of Aji in Enugu-Ezike who used his *Akpaballa* medicine concept to pin down thieves who came to his residence and they all went sleeping should be a food for thought for the Nigerian policy makers. Rather than inundate the nation with tales of battles between the police and other security agencies and bandits, the nation should assemble all traditional medicine men with the knowledge of *Akpaballa* and *Odieete*, and integrate their expertise into the nation's security arrangement. This will be a sure way of harvesting one of the positive results of inter-ethnic relations for national use and promoting interaction among various ethnic nationalities with similar examples.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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