THE OSU (CULT-SLAVE) SYSTEM IN IGBO LAND

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Among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria can still be found remains and in some places a symbolic continuation of what half a century ago was a venerable religious tradition: that of consecrating human beings to the tutelary spirits. This, though not a universal custom in Igboland, is very widespread.

We will examine the Osu system mainly as it existed in traditional Igbo society when traditional religious practices were unadulterated by outside influences, and when pagans sincerely and firmly believed what they practised. It is important to bear this in mind, because within the space of some sixty years, far-reaching and significant changes have already taken place in many parts of Igboland and some of the once cherished religious traditions have become or are rapidly becoming things of yesterday.

ORIGIN

The Igbo people are conscious of their absolute dependence at every moment of their lives, on the invisible powers that steer the course of human destiny.

There is a definite belief in the existence of a Supreme being, Chukwu or Chineke, who is conceived as a good God but rather far removed from us. Acts of cult to the supreme God are not commonly attested. 1) The supreme God has, however, created a host of other minor divinities to cover practically every aspect of human life. These are in direct contact with men. Prayers and sacrifices of different descriptions are offered to them according to need. These spirits, even the most benevolent of them, like the ancestral spirits, who have departed this world in peace, are still very sensitive to any acts of disrespect on the part of the living. When offended, they very quickly take revenge, by visiting the offender or even a whole village with different kinds of

misfortune. When a village or a whole town is threatened by some calamity likely to decimate the population, for instance, an epidemic of small-pox or dysentery, the elders have recourse immediately to a diviner, who alone is competent to interpret the minds of the spirits or ancestors. Similarly, any town that wants to be victorious in an imminent battle resulting from a border dispute, does not spend weeks drilling its men in the art of shooting and other war techniques. The people indeed sharpen their machetes, tighten up their bows and load the flint guns as a minor preparation. But these measures are not the main thing on which their victory depends. The necessary condition for victory is to be declared by the diviner after consulting the gods and ancestral spirits. 2)

In all such cases, some offering is invariably prescribed to placate the spirits. The offering can be in money or kind. In most cases, especially where there is a serious threat to life and property, a sacrifice is prescribed. For the Igbo people, sacrifice is the highest form of prayer: what cannot be obtained by sacrifice, cannot be obtained otherwise. It is the ejesia Igbo agwu, namely, the supreme and last resort. 3)

Now, for the Igbo sacrifice, a real victim is necessary. A victim is invariably a sense-perceptible object—money, food (cooked or raw), animals like fowls, goats, sheep, cows and in some extreme cases, a human being or a wild animal of great significance like the leopard. The quality of the victim depends on the nature of the sacrifice to be offered; the greater the need, the bigger and more significant the victim.

One often sees animals like fowls, goats and sheep slaughtered and the blood shed before an image during a sacrifice. Sometimes however, according to the expressed wish of the recipient of a sacrifice, the victim may undergo only a symbolic immolation: it is offered without being really destroyed or killed. In this case, after the sacrificial formulae have been recited over the victim by the priest, both ears of the animal may be split, or, in the case of sheep and goats, chopped off, or some toes may be cut off in the case of chickens. The purpose is to indicate that the animal has once and for all been withdrawn from human domination and service, and transferred irrevocably to the

2) Cf. Azikwe, Nnamdi, Renascent Africa, Lagos 1937, 143-144: "Why does the tree fall?... It is because certain supernatual beings were aggrieved and so they 'poisoned' that tree. This is an indication of African mentality."