THE IGBE CULT IN ISOKOLAND AND MISSIONARY AND GOVERNMENT REACTIONS, 1915-1930

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It is my aim in this paper to account for the dramatic historical emergence of the neo-primal syncretistic Igbe cult in Isokoland of Nigeria in the light of the socio-religious circumstances of the period preceding the rise of the cult. I wish to bring into focus the real socio-religious dimension of the cult, contrary to what seems to be a misunderstanding on the part of the alien crusaders who became its attackers. On the basis of the fundamental beliefs and organization of the cult underlying this rise, I wish to ascertain whether or not the movement had anything to do with the conflict arising from culture contact or from the people's reaction against foreign invaders, as is certainly the case with such movements in some preliterate societies. Our findings will enable us to conclude whether the opposition launched against it by the missionaries and the colonial regime was justifiable or not.

THE ANTECEDENTS OF THE RISE OF THE IGBE CULT

(a) Witchcraft beliefs and practices in the territory

The problem of witchcraft beliefs and practices and other allied antisocial evils appears to be the root cause of the rise of the Igbe cult in Isoko territory. A brief look at the basic Isoko beliefs in witchcraft and their early mode of control of its practice becomes necessary here.

The Isoko believe that there are spirit powers and principalities that may be essentially malignant and that these may have the power of operating through human agents, particularly witches and wizards (erieda). Idowu has rightly described these as human beings of very strong wills and with diabolical bent; veritably wicked ones who derive sadistic satisfaction from bringing misfortune upon
other people. Both day-to-day events amongst the Isoko and the information furnished me by my informants on this subject have shown that the beliefs of the Isoko people about witchcraft are many and varied. A detailed examination of these varied beliefs is outside the purview of this paper. Suffice it to indicate that basically the mass of the Isoko people hold strongly that this form of anti-social spiritualism is largely perpetrated by women and girls (witches). However, scattered evidence within the territory itself has also shown that men and boys can as well be members (wizards) of witchcraft brews (egba-eda) usually dominated by women. Witches are believed by the people to be able to use their individually acquired evil spirit of witchcraft mystically to cause untold harm and sufferings to others in diverse ways. Therefore, the Isoko consensus is that witchcraft, in all its ramifications, is a bad, evil, detestable practice worthy of total annihilation by society.

No Isokoman has doubts in his mind as to the existence of the phenomenon of witchcraft. If there is one thing to be regarded as the greatest enemy or the evil force most difficult to guard against, it is witchcraft in all its forms. Witchcraft has always posed a challenge and been a potential source of constant fear to the people, whether traditional worshippers or churchmen, literates or illiterates. In the early forties' Niger Mission Annual Reports, for example, Bishop Lasbrey noted the effect of witchcraft in Isoko churches when he said that the church was generally rent in twain by witchcraft and it was distressing to find even some of the leaders misled and deceived. Clearly, the situation prevalent in the area was ripe for the rise of any cult or movement that would effectively combat the evil of such a phenomenon in Isoko society of the period.

(b) Traditional Isoko methods of witchcraft control before the rise of the Igbe cults and the reaction of the British Colonial Government.

Because of the Isoko belief that witchcraft is a phenomenon having much to do with the spirits of the witch and of the person bewitched, methods of approach were primarily spiritual. Traditional concoctions, as well as religious symbols believed to protect a person assailed by witches or to cure those suffering from witchcraft acts, were generally used by the people. Traditional medicine-men (ebo), diviners (ebueva), veteran witches and wizards (igbebulu) and