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THE INFLUENCE OF TRADITIONAL PRACTICES
IN THE CHURCH LIFE OF ETCHE PEOPLE

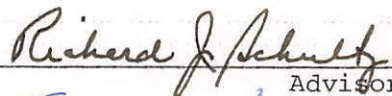
A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of History
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Sacred Theology

by

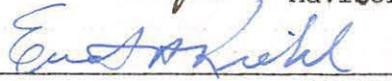
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Approved:



Advisor



Reader

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	ii
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Etcheland	1
The planting of Christianity in Etche	2
The place of Bonny in the Delta Church	6
Niger Delta an historic church	7
II. TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE PRACTICES	17
The Purpose and Place of the Dowry	21
Character Testing	27
Bridal-Wealth Settlement	28
The Marriage Ceremony	29
Children in Marriage	32
Polygamy	36
The Attitude of the Church Toward Polygamists	42
Divorce	53
III. CEREMONIES CONCERNING CHILDBIRTH	58
Childbirth	58
Traditional Rite After Childbirth	60
IV. PRACTICES CONCERNING DEATH AND BURIAL	65
Traditional Practices Concerning Death and Burial	65
The Concept of the Soul	68
Burial of the Dead	72
Second Burial	80
Reincarnation	83
Widows	83
V. TRADITIONAL RITUALS	87
Libation	87
Secret Societies	94
Traditional Priesthood	101
Chieftancy	102

Chapter
VI. APPRAISAL AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION 109
.
.
.
BIBLIOGRAPHY 111
MAP 115

PREFACE

There are many traditional practices which are presumed to have served the Etche and all Ibos, a people of Southeastern Nigeria, in past ages very well. Some of these have become so indispensable to them that to suggest their abandonment has always triggered a storm of opposition. Those who want to keep them feel that without them the essentials of their life would be lost.

All through the ages, even before the advent of Christianity, the Ibos, in general, have treasured these practices because they served their cultural and social concerns. But no sooner was Christianity introduced into the various segments of our society than conflicts upon conflicts began to erupt. The Etche man, like his relatives the Ibos, is torn between two worlds. Christianity demands that he give up his past, while his culture insists that he stick to his heritage. The Etche man today asks how these conflicting thoughts can be reconciled. In this thesis, the writer shall attempt to describe these traditional practices and suggest alternatives to resolve the impasse.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Etcheland

The Etche are part of the Ibo people and occupy a territory in the northeast section of the Rivers State of Nigeria. They originally migrated from parts of Owerri in Imo State. Some parts of Etche are only 5 miles from parts of Owerri. About 48 kilometers from Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State, is Okehi, the capital of Etche. At what point in history the Etche people began to leave their original home in Imo State is not known, but from the identity of village names, personal names and customary traditions, the Etche are without doubt Ibos.¹

The Ikwerre, who live about 1 mile and a half from Etche, are kinsmen. Both are sub-tribes of the Ibo tribe and since the advent of British rule, the Nigerian Government has administered them as such. By the arrangement of the Rivers State Government, the Etche and Ikwerre are fused into Ikwerre/Etche local government authority with its

¹Percy Talbot, Tribes of the Niger Delta (London: The Sheldon Press, 1932), pp. 15, 272. See also C. K. Meek, Law and Authority in A Nigerian Tribe (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 3; also, G. T. Basden, Among the Ibos of Nigeria (New York: Barnes and Nobles, Inc., 1966), p. 108; F. K. Ekechi, Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Iboland 1857-1914 (London: Frank and Cass & Co., Ltd., 1972), p. 201; Edmund Ilogu, Christianity and Ibo Culture (Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1974), p. has map of Ibo territory.

headquarters at Isicokpo. In addition, Etche is a district of its own with administrative headquarters at Okehi.²

The Imo River borders Etche on the northwest. The northeast border is the same Imo River which joins the Otamiri River and flows laterally across Etche through many villages to join the Ogunoche River and on into Owerri. The southern border is Ikwerreland. Etche is located in the border area between Imo and the Rivers State of Nigeria.

The planting of Christianity in Etche

The evangelization of Etche in Iboland owes its beginning to the missionary zeal of Christian converts from Okrika mission station of the Niger Delta church, most of whom were traders of palm products produced in Etche.³ As early as 1909, the Otamiri river, which flows into the Imo River at Imo, had been dredged and made navigable by the government so that these traders could traverse every nook and corner of Etcheland, buying and re-selling European-made goods which the Etche most needed. As a result of this trade relationship the Okrikans, who were from the River area of the Delta, found it possible to penetrate Etche with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Opobians also traded with Etche Ibos. They, too, were instrumental in the spread of Christianity in Etche. They set their settlements at Chokocho and Okomoko water-side, thus early Christian congregations began.

² Nigerian Tide, Dec. 18, 1976; Feb. 6, 1979.

³ Emmanuel M. T. Epelle, Church in Niger Delta (Port Harcourt: Niger Delta Diocese, C.S.S. Press, 1955), p. 64.

According to late Chief Samuel Nwodu, an early convert, and Chief Abel Amadi, these Okrika traders engaged the Etche in conversation about the Christian God, about Jesus, and His being the Son of God. The Etche people soon realized for themselves the joy of being believers from the experience of the Okrika people in their midst. Their consciousness of belonging to God dispelled their fears of the gods that enthralled the Etche. As a result of such contacts, Etche converts journeyed to Okrika on week days for class meetings, instruction and worship on Sundays. With the passing of time, many were baptized and later, after many years of catechetical instruction, were confirmed and admitted into communicant status according to Anglican practice. Most of the early baptism of Etche converts were performed at Okrika, as the parish baptismal register shows.

The Etche mission, properly speaking, belongs to the Niger Delta Mission.⁴ Etchelands, Ikwerrè and Khanalands culturally, geographically and ethnically, are not in the Delta region. These vast lands and peoples were not initially evangelized directly by the missionaries; rather Christianity came to these areas through Christian men directly from the Niger Delta Pastorate, so that eventually they all came under the supervision of the Delta Pastorate Mission.

As the mission stations grew with the assistance of the Okrika businessmen, there arose the need for teachers who understood the language because the Okrikans hardly spoke Etche dialect and this posed a great barrier to the development of the seed of the Gospel.

⁴Ibid., p. 64.

The Delta Church has since then continued to grow and gain a strong foothold in the interior lands outside its geographical and cultural boundaries. The Etche District churches were formerly under Aba Archdeaconry, while Eberi-omuma, part of Etche, was merged with Abayi-Umuocha district of the Interior Mission of the Niger Delta Pastorate mission within the political boundaries of Iboland.⁵ In 1963 all Anglican churches, parishes and districts in Etche political and ecclesiastical districts were put under the Bonny Archdeacon in the Niger Delta Diocese.

The spirit of "self-support"⁶ which the founding fathers had inculcated in their converts has spread through all places where the Niger Delta Church has been established. Since the watchwords of the founding fathers were self-support, self-government, and self-propagation, the Etche Christians have endeavored on their own to reach other parts of their country, as is evident today. Many places have been evangelized. Former temporary buildings have been razed and permanent structures have taken their places. For instance, St. Michael's Chokocho, one of the most highly Christianized and strategic villages in Etche, erected a permanent church building in 1949, dedicated by the late Bishop A. C. Onyeabo, an assistant bishop of the Niger Diocese. Since then scores of evangelists and pastors have worked in Etche.

⁵ Ibid., p. 64. In the foreign mission of the Church Missionary Society in Africa, Archdeaconries were carved out for administrative purposes headed by an Archdeacon under a bishop. Some dioceses may be divided into as many as six Archdeaconries, subdivided into autonomous districts and parishes.

⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

The Anglican Church in Etche was granted district status in 1946. The first district pastor then was the Reverend Jacob Okafor of Blessed Memory. The dedication of the church building at Chokocho was possible because of his kind pastoral guidance and inspiration.

After him, others of God's servants lived and worked in the Etche district, such as the later Reverend Lazarus Umeokafor. The church in Etche has made gigantic strides since its establishment, judging from the impact on the worship of traditional gods in the country, especially Amadi-oha at Ozuzu. Its adherents are everywhere in the eastern parts of Nigeria. As the Okrikans and Opobians carried Christian mission work among the Etche tribe, so the adherents of the god of Amadi-oha, propagated their cult in these river areas, especially Kalabari.⁷

Cultural influences benefited such heathen missions of the Amadi-oha agents. They returned home to Etche being able to speak Kalabari language and even adopted Kalabari style of dressing and manners. The Ozuzu Church and a group of other churches have always suffered because the Amadi-oha cult had long been entrenched in the area. There are evidences that the Niger Delta Church is making some appreciable progress in the entire Etcheland. Churches and schools have been built and a great number of sons and daughters from this area are school teachers today. Also, many of the church agents, catechists and pastors working in the Niger Delta are from many villages of Etche.

⁷Talbot, Tribes, p. 19.

The place of Bonny in the Delta Church

The Niger Delta Church was comprised of parishes in a few strategic towns in the river area such as Bonny, Brass (New Calabar), Okrika and Opobo,⁸ with its headquarters at Bonny, a commercial and administrative center of the Oil Rivers Protectorate under the British Government. Gradually, the commercial importance of Bonny began to catch the interest and attention of travelers both near and far, resulting in people from distant places like the Congo, Cameroons and Calabar visiting occasionally. Among such itinerant travelers was the Reverend Hope Waddell, a Scottish Presbyterian missionary. According to Emmanuel Epelle, the description of Bonny in Waddell's book calls it a "Juju House" and "a horrid place half-filled with human skulls and other unsightly objects. . . . On another framework outside were fragments of human bodies, relics of cannibal feast." In conclusion, he said, "Surely, the dark places of the earth are full of the habitants of cruelty."⁹

Waddell found there a large bell weighing several hundred pounds lying almost buried in waste. On it was inscribed, "This bell was for Opooboo Foobra (Opobu Fubara), King of Grand Bonny, by William Dobson, founder, Downham, Norfolk, England, 1824." Waddell refers to the intended religious purpose but remarked that the bell had probably never been used for anything except calling to the house of prayer.

⁸ Epelle, Church in the Niger Delta, p. 21.

⁹ Hope Waddell, Twenty-Nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa, quoted by Epelle, p. 7.

Waddell, hoping to establish a Christian Mission in Bonny, contacted the King of Bonny, William Dappa Pepple, who welcomed and encouraged Waddell to evangelize his town. In 1849 Waddell revisited Bonny and made efforts to secure a suitable site for a mission station. His efforts did not materialize. But he came again in January 1850, accompanied by his wife and a lady missionary, Euphemia Miller. This time he endeavored to teach the people the alphabet, namely, "the seed of the Divine truth."¹⁰ Thus, Christianity was planted in the Niger Delta by a Presbyterian missionary, to be watered by an Anglican, Samuel Crowther, under the enthusiastic support of King William Dappa Pepple.¹¹ The active part played by King William Dappa Pepple in furthering the evangelization of his country is detailed by Emmanuel Epelle.

Niger Delta an Historic Church

According to the late Bishop Dimieari, the Niger Delta Church is historic, since it was the early field of labor of a man later to become a famous bishop, Samuel Adjai Crowther.¹² This church became a monument to Crowther's "indomitable perseverance."¹³ The Church Missionary Society Secretary, Henry Venn, had advocated the establishment of an indigenous church, with its own indigenous ministry, self-supporting, self-governing and self-extending. Eugene Stock said:

¹⁰ Epelle, Church in the Niger Delta, p. 1.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 8.

¹² Jesse Page, The Black Bishop Samuel Adjai Crowther (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1908), p. 368.

¹³ Ibid., p. iv.

Preparation for . . . missions . . . was perhaps the most important work of Mr. Venn's life. The subject had perhaps never been touched when he took it up. There is no sign in the Church of England of the last century that anyone, either in the Church of England or outside it, had given a thought to the matter. Henry Venn led the way . . . and worked out plans which have since been adopted in substance by most missionary societies sufficiently advanced to have Christian communities to think about.¹⁴

The establishment of the Niger Delta Church was the fulfillment of the mission objective of Venn. By 1881, Crowther had begun to see the realization of this objective. The chiefs had shared some of the expenses in the establishment of the church after the death of King William Dappa Peppel about 1864.¹⁵ The mission enterprise was nearly brought to an end because of the death of King William, who was the only convert among the pagans of Bonny and whose continued living would have encouraged both the missionaries and other converts.

Crowther's Diocese was extensive and covered the Niger territory. This, therefore, meant that episcopal supervision was not as frequent as it should be owing to the bishop's crowded itinerary and irregular means of transportation. Because the junior African staff was isolated from the authorities, its members lapsed into moral deterioration, evidenced by immorality, drunkenness and neglect of evangelization in preference to trading. A committee composed of Bishop Samuel Crowther, three European missionaries, including Reverend J. B. Wood, besides Archdeacons Dandeson Crowther, James Johnson, and some other churchmen, had deliberated on the issue. J. B. Wood reported their

¹⁴ Eugene Stock, The History of the Church Missionary Society, Its Men and Its Work, quoted by Page, p. 391.

¹⁵ Page, Crowther, p. 309.

findings to the Church Missionary Society in London. The report was finally sent back to Crowther for consideration and comment. Consequently, a deputation sent by the Church Missionary Society was to confer with Crowther, and it was agreed that an English clergyman should be appointed to the Niger Mission as a local representative of the Church Missionary Society. The Reverend T. Philips was chosen. After his ordination in England by Crowther, Philips came to Onitsha. On returning to England after serving less than one year, he made recommendations which resulted in the dismissal of many of the African staff.

Eugene Stock tells of the following actions taken by the Church Missionary Society.

In August of 1890 or 1891 there was a division between the white and black missionaries of the Church Missionary Society over the personnel policy of the mission. A large majority favored greater strictness in the conduct of the missionaries and as a result, they released some agents from their positions. They did not consider such action adequate, for the secretary, on behalf of the Church Missionary Society, suspended certain others. The news of these drastic disciplinary measures caused great excitement throughout West Africa, and stirred doubts and controversy in England.

Consequently, a solemn letter was sent to all the Society's agents¹⁶ and congregations in West Africa, which promised an impartial inquiry into all that had happened, and finally laid down the principles by which the society must always be guided:

¹⁶Agents are church workers below the clerical rank.

The Committee is solemnly determined, in humble dependence upon Divine strength, to give the Society's support to Mission agencies and Mission agents, whether English or African, that are in their judgement "vessels meet for the Master's use." "Earthen vessel," they may be; we do not look for perfection in human instruments or instrumentalities; but we do deeply feel that true Missionary work is the setting forth of the Lord Jesus Christ both as Saviour and as King, and that this work must be done by those who, however feeble in themselves, do know Him as their Saviour and obey Him as their King, and who seek, by the power of the Holy Ghost, to be examples "in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity." Missionaries and teachers employed by the Church Missionary Society must not be merely men who can rebut particular charges in open sin, still less those of whom it can only be said that such charges are not proven. They must be men who in heart and word and life are the true and faithful servants of Christ. If the Society, in Africa or anywhere else, has ever seemed to tolerate a lower standard than this, it has been either from ignorance of the facts, or from generous desire not to form harsh judgments. But now we feel it more necessary than ever to emphasize and maintain the true standard of missionary character.¹⁷

The Policy Making Committee in London had opportunity to meet with members of the West African sub-committee. They observed that in 25 years there had been no question on which the committee was so divided. At last a report on the whole matter was adopted and issued in January 1891. On the personnel question, some of the action taken in Africa was upheld and in some cases it was overruled. About the general condition of the Mission, it was resolved that:

A careful review of the past history of the Niger Mission in the light of its present condition, has led to the conviction that, while at each stage in that history, the Committee faithfully endeavored to take such action as the circumstances of the Mission seemed at the time to demand, its present condition indicates only too clearly the inadequacy of the provision made for the superintendence of the Mission, and for the steps taken for its purification at certain crises in its history. For while the Committee

¹⁷ Eugene Stock, The History of the Church Missionary Society, Its Environment, Its Men and Its Works, 3 vols. (London: Church Missionary Society, 1899), 3:392.

devoutly thank God for the valuable services rendered by the African agents, as well as for some signal success both on the river and in the interior, the moral spiritual condition of the congregation generally has in it at the present time much that is extremely lamentable, and the prevailing ignorance of Divine truth and the low state of discipline are such as to call for serious consideration respecting the character and efficiency of the agency now at work.¹⁸

Evidently, Philips' report was very shocking, since much of what it contained sparked many English newspapers to criticize the mission's operation.¹⁹ The crisis of discipline which occurred in the Niger Mission was not the only factor leading to the establishment of the Delta Church, but it gave impetus to the formation.²⁰ In a way, one could say that the crisis was providential, for the indigenous people, despite the circumstances they found themselves in, felt that the time had arrived for them to effect, God-willing, the hope prophetically expressed by Henry Venn "that in time the churches in the Niger Mission shall become self-supporting" as those in Lagos are.²¹

Any account of the Niger Delta Church which attributes its history exclusively to the disciplinary purge carried out on the Niger mission²² without first considering the founding father's goal, the establishment of an African Church,²³ would be anything than objective

¹⁸Ibid., also 3:730. Mr. Philips' report had no adverse effects within the Mission organization but it is noted that his account of the situation was rejected in many circles in London.

¹⁹Epelle, Church in the Niger Delta, p. 35.

²⁰Page, Crowther, p. 371.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., p. 392. Cf. Epelle, Church in the Niger Delta, p. 33.

²³Page, Crowther, p. 391.

and would be discrediting the ingenuity of Crowther. The establishment of the Niger Delta Church is rather the result of a number of factors favorable to the extension and planting of Christianity in the Delta areas. In due time, a formal application for the granting of autonomous status was submitted to Bishop Crowther who forwarded it to Salisbury Square with his approval and support, with the following words:

When the extensive openings in the Oil Rivers in God's Providence are taken into consideration and the unhealthiness of the muddy Delta region as a natural impediment to European health and life is weighed, I feel convinced that the suggestion of the churches of the native pastorates of Lagos and Sierra Leone is providential that the Delta District should be made a native pastorate to be worked entirely through native agency, toward²⁴ the expenses of which they resolve to contribute a supplement.

After a careful negotiation, amid great rejoicing, on April 29, 1892, the Delta Pastorate was inaugurated at Bonny with special services of thanksgiving in St. Stephen's Cathedral and in St. Clement conducted, respectively, by the Venerable Dandeson Crowther and the Reverend J. Boyle. After a conference in London and in Lagos in 1896, a constitution was drawn up and a mutual agreement was reached authorizing self-government for the work in the Delta, so that the Niger Delta Pastorate Church became an accomplished fact. This agreement set forth its ecclesiastical basis as a branch of the Church of England, and provided for its administration as a self-supporting organization by Church Councils and Committees under the jurisdiction of a bishop. From then until now, the work has progressed and new churches have been built.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., p. 372.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 394.

All of the early stations have interesting histories. Since the purpose of this paper is not a detailed history of the spread of Christianity, but rather to investigate religious practices traditional in Etche, only brief references will be presented. For further details, Epelle's book, The Church in the Niger Delta, is invaluable.

The approximate population of the Etche sub-tribe has risen from 50,000 in 1930 and 110,000 in 1963, to about 200,000 in 1973. The main occupations of the people are farming, fishing, and trading. A substantial number of men and women are civil servants.

There is no railroad in Etche, but there is a network of roads joining all towns and villages. Because the roads are not surfaced, motorists have great difficulty reaching some remote parts of Etche. Motorcycles and bicycles are the cheapest means of transportation for the people. However, the new Chokocho Okpola trunk 'B' road has made communication between Etche people and other parts of the state very easy.

Etche is situated in a rain forest region of the Rivers State of Nigeria. The forest is always green. Trees of economic importance such as iroko, akpu and cotton trees are found. Oil deposits are found in Etche district especially at Umuechem and Odagwa. Rubber estates are located at Abara and Odagwa. The Rivers State Agricultural Development Co-operation owns three palm-oil processing mills at Chokocho, Umogba and Umuaturu.

There is a cottage hospital at Okomoko and dispensaries, clinics, and maternity wards are scattered here and there. The Etche people are also served by the government mobile hospital detachment from Port Harcourt.

One of the greatest achievements of the various missions among Etche people is the establishment of elementary schools in almost all the villages. We cannot be definite as to how many there are and any figure stated will only be a matter of conjecture. There are also three secondary schools and one teachers college.

From the period of the achievement of national independence to the present day, Etche has produced sons and daughters of distinguished academic repute in medicine, education, engineering and science. However, within the context of all Nigeria, Etche needs more aid to enable her sons and daughters to make greater achievements in the future.

Among the Etche, traditional religion is very well accepted. The cult of the gods is very attractive, especially that of Amadi-oha at Ozuzu.²⁶ The adherents are promised prosperity, children and the protection of god by the priest and his agents who propagate the cult of this god throughout the entire Etche.

Besides the traditional religion and the false offer its priests and agents present to the supporters, Christianity has spread to every nook and corner of Etcheland. There is in every village or town one kind of Christian denomination or the other. Among the dominant ones are the Anglican Church (Niger Delta Church), the Roman Catholic Church, the Apostolic Faith, the Seventh Day Adventist Mission, and the Assembly of God Mission.

The influence of Christianity has retarded the spread of traditional religion in Etche with the exception of Ozuzu. For instance, many villages have publicly made bonfires of their gods or the shrine

²⁶ Percy Talbot, Tribes of the Niger Delta, p. 23.

of the gods. Individually, many who owe allegiance to the gods have denounced them as no god. The rate at which the Etche now flock to the churches leads one to conclude that the influence of Christianity is phenomenal among the Etche but regrets the contradiction in practice when some Christians resort to the traditional practice in finding solutions in their life's problems.

In spite of the progress so far made in Etche, some cultural traditional practices have continued to resist the impact of Christian teaching and principles among the pagans and some professing Christians. What has made such traditional practices as durable as they are? It is the burden of this paper to investigate these and to suggest ways to either incorporate them into Christianity or reject them entirely.

First, it is to be noted that behind the idea of a resort to traditional practices is the need for the satisfaction of human needs. The practices here under discussion will be descriptive of these needs. It will be seen how in the traditional cultural ways, these needs are met. The writer will attempt to explain also how these human hungers are dealt with in Christian religion. However, it would seem by the resistance of these customs to Christian influence that Christianity is not adequately meeting these pressing needs. For instance, Christianity has been preached about 70 years ago in Etcheland, yet superstition, polygamy, and divination are still prevalent.²⁷

Culturally, the Etche people are hardworking and resourceful, as the rest of the Ibos. Many of the people are artistic from birth,

²⁷ These facts have been written from personal knowledge of the writer about the Etche.

and they produce many artifacts. A great many of these have been lost to the iconoclastic influence of the early missionary agents. Both men and women in Etche are very musical. They love to sing and dance. They use the xylophone, called "adima" or "ubo," and drums in good combination to produce rhythm and harmony. Wrestling is a good pastime enjoyed by the people.²⁸

²⁸The writer's brother Julius Amadi, supplied this information as he collected it from the elders of Etche.

CHAPTER II

TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE PRACTICES

According to Ibo tradition and belief, marriage is a covenant between two families represented in the persons of the consenting man and woman. It is not an alliance between families, tribes, or even countries. Marriage is a covenant, an agreement sealed by the partaking of the traditional kola-nuts, palm-wine and other customary items that normally concluded such treaties. Death does not annul the terms of this covenant. The perfect Biblical example of this concept is Levirate marriage among the Jews. In Deut. 25:5 (Cf. Mark 12:19), we read that "if brothers dwell together, and if one of them dies and has no son; the wife of the dead shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her." Among the Etche, if a man dies leaving a wife, the brother of the deceased inherits the widow. This is customary among all the Ibos. In the absence of a brother, the next of kin takes her as his wife. Dr. C. K. Meek says if a widow inheritor had been agreed upon by the family, they became husband and wife from that time.¹ Among Etche Ibos as well as other

¹C. K. Meek, Land and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 2nd ed., p. 312.

Ibos, any one who inherited a widow must provide a wife for the son of the deceased brother if the deceased man's son had not married.²

The purpose of widow inheritance was to perpetuate the name of the deceased and the family through the children that were born in the later marriage. Secondly, the traditional practice of widow inheritance was and is motivated by humanitarian concerns, namely, to enable the widow to remain in close familial relationship with her children and safeguard the risks of a broken family.³

Etche Ibos as well as other Ibo people and Africans in general have a very prolonged process of preparing for marriage, beginning even in infancy. In some parts of Africa the prerogative to choose a marriage partner belongs to the parents, who before the children know it, betroth them to someone. In some other parts, the choice is made for the young people by other relatives. It is also acceptable to allow the young people themselves to find their future wives and inform their parents who may not be favorable to their choice.⁴

Although Etche marriages were considered early or childhood marriages, early engagements did not necessarily lead to actual marriage in every case, for the young people might grow up and find different wives or husbands. Even if betrothal is not terminated, the actual contracting of the marriage traditionally does not take place

²Ibid., p. 321. Cf. Jonathan U. Ekong, "The Ibibio Tribe in Southern Nigeria, West Africa," (Unpublished Bachelor of Science thesis, Agriculture and Technical College, Greensboro, N.C., 1936), p. 221.

³Meek, Land and Authority, p. 321.

⁴J. S. Mbiti, An Introduction to African Religion (London: Heinmann Educational Books, 1975), p. 100.

until the two people involved approach the age of 16 to 20. To the Etche man, marriage is an important step, not undertaken lightly. Marriage norms forbid the intended to approach the girl directly. The traditional way is for a middleman to ascertain the girl's qualifications and secure the consent of the parents too.⁵

The actual courtship is called kwere di, around which elaborate rituals have been built, because the success or failure of the enterprise is at stake.

There are traditional regulations dealing with marriage among Etche Ibos, as among all Africans. There are prohibited degrees of marriage. These include one's kindred people on both the mother's and father's side in the extended family system. Originally, marriage among Africans was strictly allowed only within one's own tribe. No one dared marry a foreign woman, that is, outside the tribe. To a large extent, this practice is still prevalent today in Nigeria among some ethnic groups. This tradition comes very close to the Jewish custom (Gen. 24: 1-6).

In former times, Etche Ibos held tenaciously to this concept, as indeed did all Ibos. Today, however, owing to the mixing of people from various places, a different attitude has emerged. Marriages are being solemnized between persons of entirely different tribes. This is largely due to the fact that young people attend schools in other parts of the country and there arrange their marriages. There are still some

⁵Victor C. Uchendu, The Ibos of Southeast Nigeria (Chicago: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 50-51.

conservative ones who dare not adapt themselves to the changing times. However, whatever custom is followed, the families on both sides must necessarily indicate their approval by being involved. Then marriage will duly take place. Also, parents of the couple initiate visits and exchange gifts among members of the two families and their relatives.⁶

Among Etche Ibos courtship follows engagement, and consequently the relationship grows, develops and deepens into love. G. T. Basden got this confused because he interpreted the Ibo phrase "ifu n'anya" to mean "to look in the eye." Perhaps he later realized his mistake, hence he said "a substitute for love may develop consisting of a certain amount of affection bestowed by the husband upon his wife."⁷

This clarification is necessary because many take for granted that many African marriages are loveless, since children were in most cases not allowed to make their own choice of life's partners. This may be true but is not generally considered to be the truth. An example will illustrate this. There was a woman known to the writer whose parents had arranged for her marriage with a man for whom she had no ifu n'anya (love). The traditional requirements had been sufficiently met. The parents of the woman endeavored to force her into the marriage but she would not be persuaded. Since refusal to turn to the husband would mean paying back all that had been received on behalf of the intended, and the parents were unable to make restoration, they arranged

⁶ Mbiti, An Introduction, p. 100.

⁷ George T. Basden, Among the Ibos of Nigeria (New York: Barnes and Nobles, Inc., 1976), p. 71.

to carry her down to the prospective husband. A day later, she escaped and returned to her parents and in the end the marriage was dissolved.

Etche Ibos believe that marriage is a sacred duty. Therefore, at times without the consent of their young people, they provide their children life's partners, even as God, knowing that it was not good that the man should be alone, created Eve for Adam without Adams' prior knowledge (Gen. 2:18). The injunction to replenish the earth is a divine command which every Etche man believes he is called to obey through acceptance of marriage and family (Gen. 1:26).

The Purpose and Place of the Dowry

Basden relates that in some cases a marriage negotiation may be initiated by the young people involved. If a boy and a girl happen to meet and are attracted to each other, the boy may inquire of the girl's parents whether the girl has been engaged or not. If she was not yet engaged, then through friends he endeavors to learn something further about her ability to cook, trade, cultivate the farm or her resourcefulness in achieving or accomplishing something worthwhile in life. He also inquires about her character, whether she is of good temperament, quiet and industrious. If he is satisfied, then an intermediary (onye ukwu) is engaged officially to open the negotiation with the parents. Cordial visits to the girl's home are frequently made by the intended, accompanied on each occasion by a calabash of palm-wine, and other gifts.⁸

⁸ Ibid., pp. 69-70.

The traditional dowry in the past was British two pounds. Gradually, in some parts of Etche and Iboland, it rose to five British pounds and even fifty pounds. More recently the custom is to make the amount commensurate with the social rank or personal qualities of the girl.⁹ The practice was to pay the amount by installments. Nowadays, the bride-wealth or marriage gift has rocketed to heights one cannot imagine. The bride-wealth is received by the father of the bride, but other male relatives are entitled to receive a share of it. This is why among the Etche, bride-wealth is called "Aku oha" - wealth belonging to all. The payment of the bride-wealth, while an important factor in Etche, as in all Africa, is not absolutely necessary for the consummation of a marriage.

Geoffrey Parrinder quoted Koffi Busia who maintained that the traditional gifts were comparatively few compared with the lavish and crippling expenditures involved in marriage in Western culture. Payment of bride-wealth is not selling the bride.¹⁰ It is symbolic of the appreciation for the family, self-esteem, the giving and receiving of love. We have already seen that payment was made piecemeal, a time limit of two years, according to Robert Nassau, being standards for all Africa.¹¹ Actually there is no time limit for this payment since payment was required after the death of a man's wife.

⁹ Basden, Among the Ibos, p. 70. The Nigerian coinage before 1960 was in the denomination of pounds, shillings and pence. In this paper the writer has retained the term for convenience.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Parrinder, West African Religion (Great Britain: The Epworth Press, 1961), p. 104.

¹¹ Robert Hamill Nassau, Fetishism in West Africa, Forty Years of Observation of Native Custom and Superstitions (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), p. 7.

The payment of bride-wealth is important in Etche and in all African marriages because it betokens the outward sign of the serious intention or commitment of the consenting families. It binds the woman and the man together in the sight of God, gods, and the families as a demonstration of the marriage covenant. By the giving and receiving of the bride-wealth, it is hoped that a lifelong relationship will develop. The ideal concept of marriage among Etche Ibos is a lifelong union. However, this is seldom realized because of commercial motives of parents in the modern economy. Dowry payment also serves as a legal instrument, not so much authorizing the couples to live together and bear children, but rather placing a mark of possession on the bride and constantly reminding them to endeavor to live together with understanding in peace and love.

It is important to explain wrong notions about marriage customs among various Ibos. Some persons who are not conversant with the custom have glibly said that payment of dowry implied purchasing or selling of the bride.¹² Etche women are vehemently opposed to any insinuation that their husbands take them to be their property. The payment of bride-wealth should not be equated with selling. Etche women, whether married in the tribe or outside the tribal village, are still an integral part of the parental family and of their village. This is why when there is a development project undertaken in their original homes or towns, they are called upon to subscribe, and they do. This is also indicated by the fact that Etche Ibos and some Ibos of Owerri do not

¹²Mbiti, An Introduction, p. 101.

permit the burial of their married daughters in the husband's village, but the body must be taken to her home village for burial.¹³ According to Margaret Green, sometimes a payment must be made by the widower to permit burial in the deceased wife's village. Today this is not always done, but one does find cases of it both among Christians and non-Christians alike.

Before marriage, virginity is highly valued by both the girl and her parents. If a husband learns that his wife has had premarital relations, he may send her back to her parents. Etche people, as well as all Ibos, forbid premarital sex. A virgin brings more marriage gifts than a divorced woman or a widow.¹⁴

The parents of the bride conduct a similar inquiry about the personality and character of the prospective husband and his family. For this, the assistance of the diviners is sought to determine the success of the forthcoming marriage. Other investigation determines whether the family history includes any incidence of sudden death or twin birth, whether or not the bride's family has a record of barrenness, or whether the bride's or the groom's family are free-born, di-ala or slaves, osu.¹⁵

Discovery of slavery on either side is sufficient to nullify the marriage, because it is a taboo to permit a free-born to marry a

¹³Margaret M. Green, Ibo Village Affairs (Washington, D.C.: Frederick A. Praeger, 1954), p. 97. Cf. Basden, Among the Ibos, p. 71.

¹⁴Basden, Among the Ibos, p. 71.

¹⁵Uchendu, Ibos, p. 52.

slave. If investigations are satisfactory to both parties, the parents of the bride will be ready to speak of concluding the marriage.

Among the Etche, the occasion for the settlement of the bride-wealth or dowry or marriage gift is normally a day of excitement because of the haggling and tussling which is characteristic of the settlement. A certain amount of money was given¹⁶ or in lieu of money, a number of goats were accepted.¹⁷ Some husbands offered their services to their fathers-in-law when neither money nor material goods were available.¹⁸ The marriage gifts do not constitute marriage among Etche Ibos. Rather, they are necessary elements in the marriage covenant which if omitted does not entirely nullify the marriage, but if included solidify the marriage covenant and serve as a kind of social check that the couples may not resort to divorce.¹⁹

The great excessive demand for dowry since the end of the civil war in Nigeria has weakened the marriage tie rather than strengthening the marriage. To restore its original purpose, reduction to the simple basic elements is highly desirable.²⁰

Among Etche people, and perhaps other Ibos as well, courtship does not precede marriage. This is why some authors say that courtship and love are absent in Ibo marriage.²¹ Etche courtship is a family

¹⁶Parrinder, West African Religion, p. 106.

¹⁷Ekong, "The Ibibio Tribe in Southern Nigeria, West Africa," p.101.

¹⁸Parrinder, West African Religion, p. 106.

¹⁹Ekong, "The Ibibio Tribe in Southern Nigeria, West Africa," p. 101.

²⁰Parrinder, West African Religion, p. 106.

²¹Basden, Among the Ibos, p. 68.

affair, unlike its Western counterpart. Actually it begins after the couple has been engaged.

The purpose of the courtship is to lead to the settlement and payment of bridal-wealth (isi ego, or aku). Thus it can be seen why the whole family is involved. During the engagement, members of both families exchange visits and gifts to deepen the familial relationship. Also, in the process, the character and qualities of both families are strictly observed and studied. The groom at this point generally visits the bride-to-be and on each occasion presents the bride's father and his kinsfolk with palm-wine.

In some instances he may be required to perform customary rites, such as offering the members of the bride's family tobacco and some cash. If, in the interim, nothing happens to end the courtship, the family appeals to the father of the bride to be permitted to meet at a convenient time to fix a date for the payment. This is considered necessary in order that the intended may become acquainted with those who will become his brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law (that is, ndi o go).²²

A conscientious fulfillment of the carrying of palm-wine (ibu ngwo or ibu mmanya) was considered among Etche Ibos sufficient to permit an intended to take the bride. It goes without saying that every man who is engaged to be married must bring a calabash of palm-wine to his father-in-law each time he calls to visit. This requirement is mandatory according to native custom. Throughout Iboland this custom

²²Uchendu, Ibos, p. 52.

is observed. It continues, however, after marriage to a lesser degree. The fulfillment of this requirement is pertinent evidence of the loyalty, love and sincerity of the intended for his wife and her people. By this, the prospective in-laws determine whether the intended would be disloyal. If so, they can disqualify him. But if he completes the round satisfactorily, then comes another important stage.

Character Testing

Etche marriage, like marriage in other parts of Iboland, also involves testing the girl's acceptance of her marriage role. Custom requires that the bride serve as understudy of the husband's mother, provided she is alive, or if not, the husband's senior brother's wife. A period of six to twelve months is required. During the period, the bride is introduced to the husband's relatives, kinsmen and properties belonging to the family. Also, her capabilities in the household craft, working ability and habits are scrutinized. Everybody in the extended family system is expected to help her meet the expectation. At the end, she was decorated with uri or ede-ala (that is, African indigo for painting the body) and escorted back to the parents with gifts. It is a true indication that she has passed the test satisfactorily. If she does not satisfy the requirement, the marriage may be terminated. This could be called a trial marriage in other cultures.²³

Physical beauty is of secondary importance to the Etche people in evaluating the acceptance of a bride. First and foremost, Etche people, as well as Ibos, consider personal character an enviable quality.

²³Uchendu, Ibos, p. 52.

"Good manners constitute beauty," as a wise Ibo saying maintains. "Agwa bu nma." The bride is expected to be obedient to the mother-in-law and respectful to elderly female and male members of the extended family, to be careful with her personal cleanliness both in body and mind and to refrain from obscene talk and furthermore to be efficient in the home.²⁴

Bridal-wealth Settlement

The preliminaries completed, the next important phase is the settlement of the bride-wealth or dowry.²⁵ There is a great deal of hustle and haggling about this. It can also be a protracted business as the good and bad qualities of the bride are weighed and counter-balanced by the argument of those taking part in the bride-wealth settlement. After this haggling and tussling, the customary bride-wealth is asked for. The amount is never paid in full among the Etche. It is said that full payment is at death.²⁶

At first, a reasonable installment is paid and accepted. Then the good will of the ancestors, the elders of both consenting families are expressed and the blessing of God (Chuku, Chineke) is invoked upon the new couple. At this point the marriage is finalized. But until this time, the bride is not referred to as the wife. She was only a betrothed bride. He cannot have sexual access to her. The preservation of virginity is of vital importance because the bride, robbed of her

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ekong, "The Ibibio Tribe in Southern Nigeria, West Africa, p. 19.

²⁶ Uchendu, Ibos, p. 53.

virginity by someone else, faces the risk of rejection when discovered.²⁷ A saying widely known among the Ibos is "nwanyi adigh echefu onye wara ya ukwu," (translation, "a woman never forgets a man who broke her virginity.") Acculturation has made this a fact rather than being an ideal, yet the rule remains, a bride's virginity must not be broken before marriage.²⁸

Acculturation in many respects is ripping the fabric of all African society but Africans, in general, and Etche people in particular, are sparing no efforts to resist its influence by making conscientious efforts to preserve traditional cultural values such as family and marriage norms.

The Marriage Ceremony

In the past, marriage in Etcheland required no written agreement. Those present at the time, including ancestors, were considered sufficient witnesses to the marriage covenant. The ancestors are the great forebears of the tribe who are conceived to be living although invisible, but to the Africans their activities are real in the affairs of the living. They witness all that happens in the real world according to tradition. Today, young people are deviating from the sacred traditions, and parental involvement is less in marriage. This is probably the cause of the increasing rate of divorce. Yet, ideally Etche marriage is covenantal. It begins with religious ceremonies and ends

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., p. 52.

with a covenantal meal, a lavish refreshment in which both parties and their friends participate.

The most solemn period comes when the traditional blessing is bestowed, when the father of the bride or, in his absence, the bride's uncle or another close relative, takes a cup of palm-wine and offers it to the girl and bids her to sip it. Thereupon she gives it to her husband, with both families looking on. While doing this she says openly; "This is my husband". The father or his representative may now take the bride-wealth because evidently the girl has freely consented to the marriage and so they are declared husband and wife. If this free consent were missing the projected marriage would not be concluded.

Marriage is not just a secular contract²⁹ between two persons. It is more of a religious rite which is never concluded without the parties imploring the blessings of the gods. Also, among the Ibani people, for instance, before a man completed his marriage with a virgin he or the prospective bride were obligated to perform a ceremony before the presence of the household god of preservation. The ceremony was called "Turu Jua". The following were presented for sacrifice for the occasion: chalk or nzu, eggs, yams, palm-wine spirits, that is, kiki for the libation. The sacrifice of meat and drink especially, was offered to the gods by being placed at the front of the emblem of the gods by the bridegroom himself who in doing so besought "So", the deity,

²⁹Parrinder, West African Religion, p. 104.

to grant him health, wealth, and to drive the devil from all the members of his family and keep them from all harm.³⁰

The bride, too marked herself with the sacred chalk from her left arm downward to the tip of her fingers, and the husband, as the head of the house, presented himself and was marked on the right arm. A play was staged which lasted all day and night. Then the priest of the god presented them with two stakes of the odiri tree, about four feet in length, which they buried horizontally in the ground at the corner of the bridegroom's house. Again the priest performed a ritual over it and the couple were then seated with their feet placed on the two sticks. A goat was then sacrificed and the blood sprinkled on their feet and on the sticks. While doing so, he pronounced them husband and wife, and such a marriage was so binding that only death could dissolve it. He concluded his act with a benediction, wishing them marital prosperity.

According to native law and custom, the bride remains the man's legal wife wherever she goes and whatever she may do, no matter how many children she may have with another man other than her first husband. All of them are considered the first husband's children and he may call for them whenever he wills.³¹

Marriage practices are similar everywhere in Africa.³² This point should be borne in mind as we investigate the various marriage

³⁰Major A. G. Leonard, The Lower Niger and Its Tribes (Holland: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., N.V. Crafishe Industries, Haarlem, 1968), p. 414.

³¹Percy Talbot, The Peoples of Southern Nigeria (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 415.

³²Ekong, "The Ibibio Tribe in Southern Nigeria, West Africa," p. 19.

practices of the Etche Ibo's near neighbors, the Okrika and Kalabari people. The essential constituent of marriage here was the gift of the "okuru cloth and twenty-two manillas" on the eve of the marriage.³³ This okuru cloth was laid alongside the bride-wealth and until the guardian or the mother has taken the gift, the husband cannot assume that the bride is his wife. The final ceremony ended with a communal meal and the symbolic joining of the right hand of the bride to that of the groom. In second marriages such as igwa,³⁴ and so forth, except "iya", any wife may leave her husband without repayment of the bride-wealth and take custody of the children. The former is not recognized as marriage, no doubt because it lacks all the covenantal requirements of a true marriage.

Children in Marriage

The purpose of marriage according to the Etche is to bear children. This role, or obligation, is imposed and encouraged by God (Gen. 1:28). "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. . . ." This dates back to the beginning of human life. One who fails to get married commits a crime against traditional belief and practices.³⁵

Marriage unites the past and present age into one. Each succeeding generation is bound together in the act of marriage. The present as well as the past and the future are joined inseparably. The

³³Talbot, Peoples, p. 439.

³⁴"Igwa" is a free form of marriage (co-habitation) which is not so binding as "Iya" marriage which demands the traditional payment of bride-wealth.

³⁵Mbiti, An Introduction, p. 104.

generations before are represented by our parents, while we represent the present generation and our children represent the future generation. According to our forefathers the purpose of marriage is to bear children to build up the family, to extend life and to hand down the living torch of human life. This is why, for many Africans, marriage can only be happy after one or two children have been born. When there are no children in a marriage, the situation is very tragic for the woman. The couple does not consider their marriage a happy one and therefore efforts are made to get children into the family.³⁶

Through childbearing in marriage, the departed parents and other relatives are remembered. Most people name their children after departed relatives and thus they are constantly remembered. This is clearly understood by such names as "Ahamefula", "May my name not be forgotten." For anyone to depart this world having no one to perpetuate his name or to pour libations for him is a grave misfortune. Through marriage and childbearing, the unique characteristic of the family is maintained though older members have died. Through the birth of children the unique traits and features of each family are perpetuated. The purpose of marriage, among other things, is to bind people together in the family system.³⁷

All Ibos, including the Etche, hold to a doctrine of rebirth or immortality. This is enhanced in the family because younger generations preserve the memory of deceased ancestors.

³⁶Ibid., p. 106.

³⁷Ibid.

Such persons are certainly happy whether they are poor or rich because of the assurance that dead or alive, their lives have been extended beyond the pale of death through their children who will survive them and then their memories will be preserved. Even the poor realize a considerable amount of happiness in the assurance of being remembered after death. And the children derive great joy from preserving the memory of their parents.

God ordered that men should get married and beget children. Marriage therefore is a sacred duty which Etche people, like their kindred-men in other parts of the Ibo country, are in duty bound to honor. Failure to engage in this holy estate of life by any man or woman is considered a disregard to a divine will of God and the earth goddess, Ala. Society considers any deliberate act to refuse marriage a crime because it is deemed an act intended to depopulate the community. Such men are considered by society to be evil obstinate men for their intention to depopulate the country. Refusal is a serious crime for it cuts the vital link between death and life, thus destroying the life which would sprout and grow on the human tree of life.

The obligation to marry is seen as the hope for the survival of the world according to African philosophy. Marriage is a religious duty. According to J. S. Mbiti, a distinguished Anglican theologian and specialist in Comparative Religion, "in all African societies everything possible is done to prepare people for marriage and to make them think in terms of marriage."³⁸ Disparaging remarks common among

³⁸Ibid., p. 98.

Etche Ibos, are "iga alukwa nwanyi" or "iga alukwa di" ("will you ever marry?"). By means of procreation within the marriage relationship, life is preserved and perpetuated.³⁹

Marriage, family life and childbearing are considered as primary life goals. Even today, the centrality of marriage and family life has not been overtaken by education, now the hope of all developing countries. A friend once wrote in his letter of November 7, 1978, "I would have written you to scout admission for me but I am not yet married. My first task is to get someone who will help my mum if I am not at home. The remaining females will soon marry and go to their husbands." Only in rare cases do Etche people play down the obligation to marry. The writer's younger brother who was exasperated with him for what the former called calculated disinterestedness in his academic advancement, had this to say, "I am not happy . . . to remain at home next year. My mates are advancing academically, some are marrying . . ." These references are made to enable the reader to perceive the value placed on marriage and family life even today among Etche Ibos. Just as God is at the center of the Christian mind, so marriage and family life are central to existence.⁴⁰

Basden says the thought of marriage and getting married occupies a foremost place in the social economy of the Ibos. It looms upon the mind of every young maiden and adult as one of the functions in life that must be fulfilled with little delay and as early as possible since

³⁹ Ibid., p. 100.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

it is certain that they will marry. Celibacy is an impossible concept. A very high premium is placed on marriage. Persons of either sex who opt for celibacy, except for reasons obvious to all, earn public opprobrium or scandal,⁴¹ while childlessness is considered a misfortune for a man or woman. Childlessness is the motivating factor that leads to polygamy.

Polygamy

The practice of having more than one wife is a universal plague throughout Africa. Originally, polygamy was not the pattern of life style in Africa. In early times, according to Talbot, marriage in Africa was by exchange.⁴² It would appear that a man could only exchange one wife at a time. The incentive to multiplicity of wives arose from the desire of barren women to leave a name for themselves in their husband's families should they die without offspring. They, therefore, schemed to provide a second wife to bear children.⁴³

Promiscuity is often said to be the reason for taking many wives. This is not totally true, for in theory, polygamy is universal but in practice only the well-to-do can afford to have more than one wife.

The women do not prefer polygamy to monogamy at all, but if a woman finds herself without offspring she finds herself encouraging her husband to marry another wife. There is no limit to the number of wives

⁴¹Basden, Among the Ibos, p. 68.

⁴²Talbot, The Peoples, p. 446.

⁴³Ibid., p. 430.

a man may marry. But among the Muslims, a man is permitted to marry up to four. Among Etche Ibos and other groups only inability to afford the required bride-wealth can stop a man from marrying as many as he desires. For example, the Oba of Benin and other important chiefs in Nigeria may marry as many as three hundred to four hundred wives.⁴⁴

Promiscuity cannot be the cause of polygamy among Africans. We are forced, therefore, to look for other contributing factors. First, Africans believe that there must be no superfluous women. At least in theory, if not in practice, this is the rule. Talbot provided evidence of this belief when he said, "There are no superfluous women, all are married."⁴⁵

Polygamy is also due to other factors such as inheriting a deceased brother's wife.⁴⁶ Although these forms of relationship are familiar in many African societies, they are not officially recognized as marriage. For instance, among the Etche, an inherited wife even in a monogamous marriage feels inferior and the man does not regard her as his legitimate wife.

There are, however, three forms of marriage recognized by Nigerian Society. The first is the traditional marriage which, of course, includes monogamy and polygamy. The second is Christian marriage, wholly monogamous. The third is the civil marriage. Civil

⁴⁴J. L. Maxwell, Nigeria the Land, The People and Christian Progress (London: World Dominion Press, 1927), p. 35.

⁴⁵Talbot, The People, p. 429.

⁴⁶Mbiti, An Introduction, p. 106

marriage here means one man and one woman joined together before a civil officer without church ceremonies.⁴⁷

However, other forms of marriage are tolerable in many parts of Africa. Such other forms of marriage are exceptions but not the rule. That these other forms are meant to obviate any one being left single is a rationalization. It is interesting how traditional and Christian concepts of marriage meet on the issue of its divine origin, but differ greatly in practice. For Christians it is a life-long exclusive union and partnership between one man and one woman.⁴⁸

The Camerounian sociologist Dr. Henri Goa, writing about polygamy said,

All missionaries who have lived among the Bantus and who know something of native life are agreed on one point: polygamy is incompatible with the high moral ideals and the ideal of the family which Christianity has brought to the world. All fight against it.⁴⁹

Quite contrary to the traditional standard, Christ's teaching upholds monogamy as the only pattern of marriage in conformity with Christianity.⁵⁰ For many in Etche as well as in other parts of Iboland, the justification of monogamy over and above polygamy presents conflicts and problems, as this would mean in most cases the demand that one abandon his wives in order to belong to the new community, the Christian fellowship. However, conformity to this teaching has not always been acceptable. Therefore, the church time and again encounters problems

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 100.

⁴⁸ The Church of the Province of Nigeria Draft Constitution, 1977 (Lagos: C.S.S. Press, 1977), p. 45.

⁴⁹ Milligan College Missiological Quarterly, 5 (Fall, 1977):1.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 7-8.

when it insists that the converts must conform to the high standard of Christ's teaching.

Various attempts at solution have been put forward such as the socio-cultural approach conjectured by Dr. Masamba ma Mpolo. This view maintains that polygamy is a socio-cultural dynamic by which the Africans conceive not only the practical problems of life but also the profound dimensions of man. He argues that it is the psychological reflection of man. Marriage, therefore, is not a phenomenon of biological relations between two people of opposite sex, but it represents at the same time a series of feelings in traditional Africans, conscious or unconscious, profane and religious. Marriage unveils a world of interpersonal relationship and interdependence as human beings.⁵¹

To what extent it could be reasonably maintained that marriage is an "alliance" between the man, the woman and with each other's families, I hesitate to imagine, but marriage as it is conceived and practiced within the confines of Etche tradition is first a religious affair, and secondly, it is a covenant in which God, gods and the ancestors are believed to be involved. To conceive of marriage as purely an "alliance" is to depart from the universal⁵² and to the Etche man, it would be a great novelty.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid., p. 8.

According to Mbiti, "The life of the individual is extended beyond death by the fact of being married."⁵³ To consider marriage as an "alliance" leaves room for divergent practices and misunderstanding of the meaning of marriage. For instance, Dr. Mpolo quotes Pastor Nomenyo as saying that "the man married so that he would have a woman available to himself. She would satisfy his sexual needs and would concern herself with all his needs."⁵⁴ Such a conceptualization of marriage is most selfish, loveless and complete relegates to the background the idea that marriage is God's will and work. God instituted it so that the world might be filled with people to worship and honor Him (Gen. 1:26-27), our sexual needs being only secondary as a cure and an aid for our sexual human nature.⁵⁵

It appears that the socio-cultural factors identified by the proponents of polygamy are created by them to buttress their theory of polygamy. Briefly, their arguments are as follows: several tribes engage in polygamous marriage because polygamy is a social symbol, and he who has many wives and children assured himself that when he died, he will be mourned and surrounded by them to his glory.⁵⁶

Thus in some instances, earthly glory and preparation for the future accounted for the desire of many Etche people to have several

⁵³Mbiti, An Introduction, p. 106.

⁵⁴Milligan College Quarterly, p. 8.

⁵⁵Paul Althuas, Ethics of Martin Luther (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 85.

⁵⁶Milligan College Quarterly, p. 10.

wives who would bear children for them and honor them should they die. In view of such personal considerations, it can be argued that the adoption of the practice of polygamy in Africa or among the Etche people is due to willful disregard of God's Word and commandment.

Polygamy as it is practiced today among Etche people of Nigeria is a deviation rather than the rule. It is in my judgment a rebellion against God's divine institution. Likewise, the late Archdeacon Dandeson Crowther described polygamy as "the prevailing sin."⁵⁷ By implication, the exponents of polygamy are saying that it is better to conform to society than to abide by God's rule. We maintain that as many as are joined otherwise than as God's Word allows, have an unlawful marriage.⁵⁸ Etche which is experiencing an upsurge of cultural revolution in many areas of life lags in this area of polygamy because of vested interests.

Polygamy is slavery. Children and wives of polygamous households are incessantly consigned to toil and labor for their lord.⁵⁹ "We must take into account the value of women (or wives) as laborers, the military honor of the wife captured, and the high valuation in the patriarchal time, placed on children--'many children.'"⁶⁰ The cry for the abolition of polygamy in places where this style of life is acceptable opposes the belief that wives and children are things rather

⁵⁷ Emmanuel M. T. Epelle, The Church in the Niger Delta (Port Harcourt: Niger Delta Diocese, C.S.S. Press, 1955), p. 25.

⁵⁸ Alternative Service (London: S.P.C.K., 1966), p. 80.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

than human beings to be loved and respected. However, polygamy is not accepted by all. According to Dr. Mpolo, Disengomoko related in his novel how the practice of inheriting the widow and the children of the dead brother aroused protest in the first African Christian community because Kwekwenda refused to marry the sister of his father who had been widowed.⁶¹

From very early times distinguished Africans and leaders of thought in the Church and in the civil authority rejected any compromise on the question of polygamy. Notable among these were Bishops Samuel Adjai Crowther, and James Johnson. In Lagos, in June 1881, Professor M. T. Eulerajayi gave a speech condemning polygamy on four counts, calling it "cancer eating up and destroying our social system." He even reproached those missionaries who, although they refused to practice it themselves, advocated it for Africans.⁶²

The Attitude of the Church Toward Polygamists

The Church has always directed her members to the teaching of Scriptures on marriage (Eph. 5:25-27, compare Col. 3:18-20). Neither the former colonial government officials nor the foreign missionaries changed any pattern of marriage which in their judgment was in accord with Scripture. If changes occurred among those whom they have evangelized,⁶³ it was due to the power of the Word of God with which the

⁶¹Victor E. Hayward, African Independent Church Movement (Edinburgh: Edinburgh House Press, 1963), p. 53.

⁶²C. G. Baeta, Christinaity in Tropical Africa (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 224-225.

⁶³Milligan College Quarterly, p. 12.

people had now been brought face to face. If missionaries did forbid any sexual union or marriage which was contrary to the Word of God, it should be understood that they did so on the authority of the Word and not on their own. To argue as some do that "the teaching of monogamy is considered . . . to be based on European usage and custom", that is to make the African a stranger to God's Word, which applies to all, no matter who they are.⁶⁴

The traditional church position against the polygamist is reflected in the African established churches which consider the baptism of such persons as incompatible with the spirit of the Gospel. Gen. 2:24 is often quoted as Scriptural authority for determining marital relations. The report of Mindolo Seminar of All Africa on Christian home and life uses the argument that God's promise to Abraham was accomplished in Isaac, son of Sarah, and not in Ishmael, the son of Hagar, Abraham's second wife, as evidence for the ideal of monogomy in God's thought (Gen. 21:9-21). "The autonomy of each person cannot be affirmed or accomplished in polygamy. . . . That person only has value when he is recognized as such before God."⁶⁵

Also, the Pan-African Conference of the Lutheran Church adopted in 1960 two resolutions relative to polygamists in her midst. The participants said,

We affirm that monogamy is God's plan concerning marriage, that it is the ideal relation expressing love between the man and woman,

⁶⁴C. G. Baeta, Prophetism in Ghana. A Study of Some "Spiritual Churches" (London: S.C.M. Press, 1962), p. 133.

⁶⁵Milligan College Quarterly, pp. 14-15.

and that it reflects the just atmosphere in which a Christian family should be founded. For a Christian to contract a polygamous marriage is against the law of the church.

It is the responsibility of each church, guided by the Word of God, by the help of the Holy Spirit, and recognizing the particular character of the moment, to search for the means which, on the one hand, does not compromise the norms of Christian law vis-a-vis the world, and on the other hand, will not be a stumbling block for those who seek the blessings of the church.⁶⁶

It appears that both the traditional church view and the resolution of the Lutheran African Conference, 1960, are unacceptable for the following reasons. Abraham's domestic life is not such that it will convince a polygamous African that polygamy is a sin. The Lutheran Church makes polygamy a sin against the church and not a sin against God. Is marriage the church's institution or God's? The church makes no law apart from what has been commanded by God. The church only applies the command of God within the sphere of her operation. Should the church condone sin in order to be less totalitarian toward polygamists? Did Jesus compromise sin even in the case of adultery? Rather than compromise the issue, he said, "sin no more" (John 6:10). The church might say polygamy is sinning against God, not against the church, but for those who have already contracted a polygamous marriage, do not send your wives away,⁶⁷ but know sincerely that a true professing Christian can no longer indulge in such a relationship. Dr. Mpolo quoted Dr. Ephraim Anderson as saying:

Polygamous men are converted to the Gospel so that they would get rid of quarrels with their wives. In many polygamous families there were constant quarrels between husband and wives, as well as among

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 15-16.

the wives, because of jealousy . . . In order to escape from that situation, he chose to become a Christian . . . Thus, his decision to be converted was a process of progressive maturation. In the end, the lack of success in his matrimonial life became the surface motivation for his conversion.⁶⁸

An evangelical method such as the one quoted above does not solve the problem altogether. It does not consider the question of the wives and children so abandoned. It neglects both spiritual and physical concerns of the wives and the children. The writer feels that the church should sincerely face up to the problem by adopting a caring and a patient teaching pastoral attitude toward the people so affected. The church which insists that converted polygamists should abandon their other wives faces the question of what becomes of the wives and children so abandoned. The church should honestly recognize the problem by standing at the side of the sufferers, in like manner and in love, bear with them their burden (Gal. 6:2). If a polygamist who has never accepted Jesus somehow feels drawn to Him and confesses his sin and wants to be baptized, the church's standard should be unveiled to him and his compliance insisted upon, that is, choose one only from among your wives and have her as your wedded wife,⁶⁹ and send the rest away.

For their Christian education program, the pastor should continue to teach the converts the joy of the Christian marriage and family life as is portrayed by Paul in Eph. 5:25-28.

⁶⁸ Ephraim Anderson, Church at the Grass-Roots (London: Lutterworth, 1968), quoted in Milligan College Quarterly, p. 22.

⁶⁹ Hayward, African Independent Church Movement, p. 55-57.

Teaching people to abandon their responsibilities is a disservice to the church and the new convert. First, this evangelistic method does not consider the position of the abandoned wives. The good news of Christ should result in peace in the midst of misunderstanding and quarrelling. Christ is able to do it if the human agent will humbly apply those principles suggested later in this paper, namely that of correctly dividing the Law and the Gospel.

The progressive view on polygamy is a very liberal view. It makes the doctrine of Justification a stepping-stone for preaching cheap grace. According to this view, salvation is only through grace. Human law should not be opposed to grace. To require polygamists to free themselves from their wives before receiving baptism and participating in the Lord's Supper is contrary to the Gospel. Referring to baptism, the Commission on Theology of the Evangelical Church of Togo says:

It is essential that baptism appear as the manifestation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ and as the point of departure of a new life in which the convert will discover what God, who loves him, wants of him. It should never be that baptism become a diploma attesting that the convert already knows all about God and is putting his faith into practice. No biblical text could be interpreted as permitting the baptism of adults while denying them Communion.⁷⁰

No doubt it could be said that the Evangelical Church of Togo maintains a very liberal theological stance with regard to baptism and the Lord's Supper. Dr. Mpolo described their statement as "progressive" and added that several pastoral directives have emerged as a result of this position.

⁷⁰ Milligan College Quarterly, p. 16.

The result of the so-called pastoral directives is that even today, in most Nigerian churches, polygamists who have come to faith in Jesus Christ are accepted for baptism. They are no longer required to dissolve the excess unions. But they do not participate in the Lord's Supper nor in church meetings where decisions are made. Polygamists may not hold offices in the church such as secretary.

Usually, only the first wife may be a member of the church in good standing. Some churches tolerate all the wives and children of polygamist marriages at the Lord's table and in church meetings. Even in stricter churches, the other wives and children of polygamists who manifest conversion are baptized.⁷¹

What shall we say to this comparatively new stance of accommodation of most protestant churches among the Etche? This new stance seems to compromise the Gospel, to accommodate the Word of God to prevailing social customs. It is the contention of this thesis that this is not permissible. The writer proposes that the Word of God must inform such institution as marriage. The biblical principles of monogamy must be taught at every level.

Churches that compromise the Scripture because of cultural traditional practices encounter the problem of how to reconcile their earlier stance with the later stance and still maintain "thus saith the Lord". This is what is happening today in places where the formal opposition to polygamy is tempered with accommodation.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 17.

Divorce was an issue of great controversy at the time of Jesus.⁷² The great schools of thought at the time were divided on the issue. For instance, the School of Shammai upheld a strict interpretation. Marriage as a covenant was indissoluble except in the event of the wife's infidelity. The School of Hillel maintained a very liberal view and allowed divorce for almost every reason.

The Pharisees and Scribes held to the Mosaic enactment (Deut. 24:1-4) Compare Mark 10:4, which permitted the husband to give his wife a written divorcement if she had committed adultery. But Jesus first pointed them back beyond Moses to God's ideal at the beginning, from which we infer that marriage was instituted as the divine ideal for man and woman, and that the bond is permanent and indissoluble.⁷³

Jesus did not approve the social practice of divorce and remarriage current at His time.⁷⁴

Marriage is for life. No causes for separation are admitted as valid. This is Jesus' ideal.⁷⁵ At this point, we may briefly examine also Paul's thought on this subject matter.

⁷²The Pharisees demanded a statement from Jesus expecting perhaps that he would contradict the Law. From the beginning of creation He said God made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother . . . What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put assunder. (Mark 10:6-7), Compare Gen. 2:18-24.

⁷³The New Bible Commentary: Revised Edition by D. Guthrie, J. A. Motyer, A. M. Stibbs, D. J. Wiseman (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmann Publ. Col, 1978), p. 871.

⁷⁴Alfred Edersheim, Sketches of Social Life (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.), p. 143.

⁷⁵Robert Henry Miller, The Life Portrayed in The Sermon on the Mount (Boston: W. A. Wilde Company, Publishers, 1934), p. 87.

St. Paul following the Lord's teaching, forbids divorce in 1 Cor. 7:10-11 for the Christian couples. His counsel of wisdom for those separated Christians who cannot live the single life happily is to be reconciled or remain single. There can be no remarriage while the separated wife is alive. In Rom. 7:2-3, Paul adopted the figure of a spouse to make the point about the Law which makes only death a possible condition for remarriage. Otherwise, to marry again during the life time of the marriage partner is to commit adultery.⁷⁶

The church received from her Lord the commission and the task of teaching biblical truth to all people. In addition, the church should take absolute responsibility for the divorced families. If a separation or divorce occur, the church should deal with those involved with the spirit of Jesus. It will be more in conformity with the mission of the church if in keeping with the spirit of Jesus, the people of God put every effort into prevention of divorce through education, rather than dealing severely with those whose matrimonial enterprises have been destroyed.⁷⁷

The problem raised by polygamy among Etche Christianis is due to the churches' lack of preliminary biblical teaching on the meaning and the purpose of marriage. Neither in the traditional society nor in the Christian community has thorough instruction on marriage been given to couples. There is no counseling to help people prepare for

⁷⁶ D. E. H. Whitely, The Theology of Paul (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).

⁷⁷ Miller, The Life Portrayed in the Sermon on the Mount, p. 87.

the marital status, to make them aware of the exclusiveness of marriage and the commitment to each other, "to have and to hold, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God's Holy ordinance."⁷⁸

The church of the province of Nigeria directs". . . the priest who solemnizes the marriage shall be satisfied that both the persons are conversant with the principles of Christian marriage and themselves intend that their marriage shall be monogamous and indissoluble."⁷⁹

How this is to be determined is not specified. In these areas of traditional practices in which the church has stood consistent in her teaching and exhortation and eschewed self-contradictory directives, the cultured Etche man has always yielded his old practices to the new. For example, the Etche are no longer trafficking in slavery.⁸⁰

The modern continuation of polygamy in Etche is largely due to false assumption that having many wives is prestigious.

Although there was no equality between the woman and the husband in the world in which Jesus was born in the marriage relationship, the prevalent concept was monogamy. Jesus became the champion of the cause of women and children. He emancipated them and mankind. He treated all persons as equal and attached no stigma or differentiation in sex. He had as His close friends Mary and Martha in whose home He was a guest. He healed women freely as He did men and has no qualms in accepting Mary

⁷⁸The Book of Common Prayer, Protestant Episcopal Church (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1945), p. 301.

⁷⁹Draft Constitution 1977, p. 47.

⁸⁰Ekong, "The Ibibio Tribe in Southern Nigeria, West Africa," pp. 23-24.

Magdalene's tribute as a token of friendship. He condemned the practice of easy divorce so vehemently that the disciples exclaimed: "If it is so with a married man, it is not good to marry."⁸¹

When monogamy is viewed from the perspective of sociology and psychology, it is found to be the most advantageous of domestic relationships, and from the Christian viewpoint, it is the only right form of marital union. The monogamous form of marriage derives its authority from God and it is based on understanding what God's will is, that both love and trust each other in their indissoluble union.⁸²

Also to be considered are economic changes in Etcheland. For, besides the creation of untold problems such as rivalries and quarreling among wives, lack of proper care for the children and their mothers, there will be in due time some women who will demand equality with men in all areas of life. Already there is a movement in this direction as is evident in the presence of women in many departments of labor today, and even now "polygamy is passing" away as many Etche men and women find more value in the other human aspirations.⁸³

In seeking a solution to the problem of the continued accommodation of polygamy alongside of monogamy in Etcheland, the churches should bear in mind that the Etche people are apt to imitate whatever attitude the churches adopt as the guardian of the Christian conscience. Therefore,

⁸¹Matt. 19:10.

⁸²Hayward, African Independent Church Movement, p. 55.

⁸³Ibid., pp. 57-58.

it is my contention that the churches ought to take a forthright stand on monogamy. It is biblical and very close to the Etche concept of marriage.

The Etche concept of marriage is linked with the idea of immortality. It is a belief of the Etche that the dead couples will reunite after death. This is why, when either of the couples die, the living partner is wont to say "be going and wait for me." The saying has become a cliché which the churches in Etche have not corrected. The church teaches immortality and resurrection from the dead (Rom. 2:7, compare 1 Cor. 15:53, 1 Tim. 6:16, 2 Tim. 10), but not reunion of the married couples. Jesus' statement on the issue is very significant. He declared that . . . "they neither marry nor are they given in marriage" (Mark 12:25). Similarly, St. Paul says the woman is bound to the husband by the law as long as the husband is alive but if the husband is dead she is free from the husband (Rom. 7:2).

How can the churches overcome their inconsistencies⁸⁴ on polygamy and the problem it has posed today? To the church in Nigeria in general and Etche in particular, it is pertinent to give the following suggestions.

(a) That there should be a Christian home and family life programme established in each local congregation. The establishment of such a programme means a restoration of marriage and home life to its ideal among the people of God and the society around them.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 59.

(b) There should be a realistic pastoral approach from the pulpit on the importance of the home. Christ's concept of person, the rights and duties of parents, must be taught to Christians so that they make their profession meaningful in their community.⁸⁵

(c) The Church and State should adopt marriage counselling programs for their community. Seminaries and universities should include counselling in their curriculum of studies and pastors presently without counselling skills should be encouraged to specialize in degree programs in this field, and apply their expertise to the needs of their people.

It is hoped that through the preaching the Gospel, the majority of Nigerians will be led to value women as persons and not just men-pleasers and bearers of children. Thus, according to Dr. Lamoth in his book Revelation in Mission, quoted by Victor Hayward:

. . . the ethical line is clear throughout the ages. Under the guidance of God's Spirit the Christian community is now moving forward toward the type of life revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. Toward that ideal we move, no matter how we may differ with respect to applications to specific situations.⁸⁶

Divorce

Among Etche people traditionally, divorce rarely occurred. If it did, it was in extreme cases and even then it was more often a temporary separation, rather than a complete divorce. The community, the family and friends all endeavored to encourage married couples to continue to live together. For the ideal marriage covenant is eternally

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

indissoluble in nature and secondly, the Etche dread the hazard of a broken home and the resultant consequences. Here is the essence of the community involvement in the marriage contract.

Divorce was never encouraged, although sometimes, did occur. The fear of the gods, the ancestors did not permit Etche people to break the covenant or to sue for divorce frivolously. Even if divorce occurred among Etche people, it was not for a trifle. A man cannot simply send his wife away or a woman divorce her husband at will. There must be valid reason for contemplating divorce. If either of the two resorts to divorce action without cogent reason, efforts were made to find out the guilty one. For example, if the woman was guilty, she was ordered to refund the bride-wealth, and the man was also given the custodianship of their children. The most common reasons for divorce are lack of industry, adultery, and infertility.⁸⁷

Philip Nsugbe, an Ibo anthropologist, said that the Ohaffia Ibos tolerate divorce at the instigation of either the man or the wife.⁸⁸ This attitude is very strange, since in general Ibos abhor divorce, and accept it only as a last resort in seeking to resolve a domestic problem.

Only about five per cent of the Etche women are separated from their husbands. In Etche, divorce simply means that the husband and

⁸⁷Ekong, "The Ibibio Tribe in Southern Nigeria, West Africa," pp. 19-22. Cf. Nassau, Fetichism in West Africa, pp. 3, 5, 7. Also, J. S. Mbiti, African Religion and Philosophy (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publisher, 1969), p. 145.

⁸⁸Philip O. Nsugbe, Ohaffia, A Matrilineal People (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 82.

the wife are separated. She may go home to the parents or live on the compound of the husband but the relationship as husband and wife is interrupted for the time being. She can fend for herself until they are reconciled. The consequence of total divorce being great, every effort is made to heal the breach.

The heads of both families may summon the couple together for a hearing in order to reconcile them. Since counseling service as it is practiced in advanced countries was not practicable, these act as counselors and in many instances their intervention remedied the situation. At other times, the counsel of the village chiefs is sought. The chiefs are authorized by the government to settle some minor cases of non-criminal nature out of court.

There is no payment of living allowances to the woman after she has been divorced. Etche women as well as other Ibo women from very early times established domestic independence by farming and supplying their own needs until perhaps they would remarry. The children of a broken family invariably experience the hardships of children whose mother is no longer available to care for them. But owing to the Etche family system, such children are not severely affected by separation or total divorce.⁸⁹

Historically, neither the Anglicans nor the Roman Catholics of Nigeria made any provision at all for divorce. The Roman Catholics in Nigeria would tolerate separation, but not outright divorce. Some churches

⁸⁹Mbiti, An Introduction, p. 46.

sanction divorce on the grounds of adultery. For instance, the Methodist Church of Nigeria says:

We recognize adultery as giving grounds for divorce. As to other causes and until guidance on a wider basis can be obtained, we recommend that grounds for divorce other than adultery should be decided after full consideration of any particular case in the court of discipline of the synod.⁹⁰

Since the 1970's the attitude of churches in Nigeria towards polygamy and divorce has been very much accommodating and relaxed. Until my ordination into the Anglican Order of Priesthood in 1972, I had never been acquainted with the possibility of granting permission for the dissolution of a Christian marriage. However, my first knowledge of this occurred when in 1974, the late Reverend Harrison was divorced by his wife. This was shocking because the Church had never been so tolerant or accommodating over such matters. If such lukewarmness was permissible with an institution ordained by God, tolerance of contradictory and divergent traditional practices would not be difficult.

On polygamy, the new draft Constitution of the Church of Nigeria states, "Unless under exceptional circumstances and with the direct permission of the Bishop given in writing, no man living as a polygamist shall be admitted to Holy Baptism; a baptized person who becomes a polygamist shall not be admitted to Confirmation or Holy Communion."⁹¹

Under the provision of Canon IV(e) the wives of a polygamist may be admitted to the Holy Baptism and shall not be kept from Confirmation

⁹⁰ Geoffrey Parrinder, Religion in African City (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 172.

⁹¹ Draft Constitution, 1977, p. 48.

and Holy Communion solely on account of such marital circumstances. Furthermore, it states that a communicant member who divorces and contracts a new marriage shall be suspended from the reception of Holy Communion.⁹²

These directives seem very contradictory. The question that comes to mind is what will be the exceptional circumstance when a polygamist may be granted church rite? One of the difficulties is that the churches of Nigeria have not addressed themselves to these questions of vestigial social customs by identifying clearly what aspects of such customs can be retained by Christians and which aspects must be eliminated. Therefore, there is no unanimity within the churches nor among them. To cause the churches to approach the issues involved, the best one can do is to point out the contradictions to them and challenge them to take stand on the Scripture and avoid further flagrant practices.

⁹²Ibid.

CHAPTER III

CEREMONIES CONCERNING CHILDBIRTH

Childbirth

Signs of pregnancy are a great joy among African wives, husbands and relatives.¹ It is a festive event among Etche Ibos at which sacrifices were offered to the earth goddess, Ala, a custom widely observed among the central Ibos.² According to Talbot, in most parts of Africa the fertility of the marriage bed and of the crops is deemed to be chiefly due to the Great Mother Goddess of the Earth.

According to the chief priest of the goddess, "Ala is our mother and our god, all that we have comes from her and without her gifts, we must indeed be lost."³

If pregnancy were delayed, a consultation was arranged with a dibia, a priest. In some instances the same person was also a medicine man. He generally listened to his consultants and at the end he ordered them to make sacrifices to the gods and the ancestors who are thought to be more powerful than Ala for granting of fertility. The dibia

¹Jonathan U. Ekong, *The Ibibio Tribe in Southern Nigeria, West Africa* (Unpublished thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the degree of Bachelor of Science at Agriculture and Technical College, Greensboro, N. C., 1936), p. 22.

²Geoffrey Parrinder, West African Religion (Great Britain: Epworth Press, 1961), p. 96.

³Percy A. Talbot, Some Nigerian Fertility Cults (London: Humphrey Press, 1927), p. 60.

prepares for them some concoctions as protection or charm and the rest he asks them to take home and apply from time to time.⁴ Before long, the pregnancy is known to others and every care must be taken to ensure the safety of the mother against witchcraft⁵ and evil spirits that would attempt to cause a miscarriage.⁶

Etche Ibos consider a pregnant woman to be standing between life and death. Every consideration and care is accorded her. In some parts of Nigeria, for example, among the Etche people, the woman retires to her parents' home until she gives birth.⁷ In the meantime, certain regulations and taboos were enjoined for the safety of the pregnant mother to avoid miscarriage. The cessation of all bodily contact was commanded; lifting of heavy weight was forbidden, indeed no strenuous tasks were to be engaged in (no splitting of firewood, no drawing of water, pounding of food, etc.). There were also food taboos. A pregnant woman was forbidden to eat certain animals, like porcupine or monkey.⁸ The eating of these prohibited animals was thought detrimental to the appearance of the baby and capable of complicating delivery.

There was usually great tension and expectation among friends and acquaintances of the couple, from the beginning of pregnancy until

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ J. S. Mbiti, An Introduction to African Religion (London: Whitstable Litho. Ltd., Kent, 1974), p. 84.

⁶ Ekong, "The Ibibio Tribe in Southern Nigeria, West Africa," p. 22.

⁷ Mbiti, An Introduction, p. 84.

⁸ Ibid., p. 82.

the arrival of a baby. The menfolk were never allowed in the house where the delivery was taking place. Only women may superintend and take charge of the situation. When the child was born there was great joy. Both men and women were anxious to know the sex of the baby. Tension and anxiety flee with the announcement of the birth, and shouts of joy take their place, such as "anyi ga nga di-ya; omola, omola nwa."⁹ (Oh, she has delivered a baby; let us go to her husband's place.) This was echoed many times by the jubilant women. Such expressions are interpreted as expressions of gratitude to God. But afterward, the couple will go to the priest, the dibia, and offer sacrifices to the gods rather than to the Almighty God.¹⁰ However, Christian women, after some three months, go to the church to baptize the infants and to give thanks to the Lord in grateful recognition that children are the gift from God and not the Mother Earth (Ps. 127:3). The Anglican Church has a form of service for this called the "churching of women" after childbirth.

Traditional Rite After Childbirth

The Etche infant, like every other Ibo baby, is from the very start threatened by many practices because of the superstition and ignorance of his parents. There exist customs calculated to ensure the child's acceptance, and to allay the fears of the parents. For instance, it is still a common belief that if the newborn baby fails to cry aloud at birth, the chances are that he may not survive the first few moments of

⁹Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁰Ekong, "The Ibibio Tribe in Southern Nigeria, West Africa," p. 24.

birth. The failure to wail loudly was also considered as a sign of evil and therefore a warning to the parents. As a result, such children were killed or abandoned. Multiple births are also bad signs, Dr. G. T. Basden says.

According to Dr. Basden, who was very much acquainted with the customs during the period of forty years of faithful missionary service in Iboland, the birth of twins was considered among the tribes of South-east Nigeria as the most depressing event that can befall a couple.¹¹

He writes:

The birth of twins is a calamity of the first magnitude, and spells disaster for them and the unfortunate mother. The underlying idea is that it has been ordained that mankind should propagate his species by single births, in contradistinction to animals. For a woman to bear more than one child at a birth is to degrade humanity to the level of the brute creation. Plural offspring is nature's law for goats and dogs; for a woman to imitate them in this respect fills the Ibo with unspeakable disgust. Mother and children are cursed and subjected to contempt and ill-treatment. The woman makes no attempt to defend herself or her children, she accepts it dumbly, and merely wonders why she, specially, has been selected for such dishonor. Her hatred for her offspring is as bitter as that of relatives and neighbors. She turns from them with loathing and despair and, unless compelled, will make no effort to nurse them. It is believed that in some mysterious manner, there has been an unholy alliance with an evil spirit during sleep and the second child is the result.

With all haste the abomination must be removed. The children are thrust into an old water pot without even a passing thought for the pain inflicted. Coconut fibre or leaves are thrown in to cover them, and the pot is deposited in some lonely spot in the bush. The newly born infants received no attention whatever. They are cast away at once, as unclean in the sight of gods and men.¹²

In Etche in particular, when such births occurred the couple and the relatives were wont to say that evil has entered into the family.

¹¹ George T. Basden, Niger Ibos (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), p. v.

¹² George T. Basden, Among the Ibos of Nigeria (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965), p. 57.

In early times among the Etche, twins were regarded as spirits, later triplets were too. Because of the fear of the spirits, twins and triplets who escaped death at the birthstool for the time being, invariably were killed later by subtle means.

According to Dr. Geoffrey Parrinder, formerly a lecturer at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, the Ibos generally allowed twins to die.¹³

Hostility to mothers of twins was not only common among the Etche. For instance, among the Ibibios of the Cross River State, twins and their mothers were separated from the rest of the family. They were required to be ritually cleansed.¹⁴ In some circumstances, they were ostracized by the village.¹⁵

However, the beginning of the 19th century witnessed a change in the cruel and inhuman treatment toward twins chiefly because the practice had been outlawed by the government. Still the superstitious beliefs engage the minds of many in out-of-the-way places.¹⁶ Through the efforts of the indefatigable Scottish lady Presbyterian Missionary, Mary Slessor, the practices were attacked and brought to an end. By her selfless service, by going into the bush day and night, she saved countless babies from the hands of heartless fathers and mothers who dumped them into surrounding bushes to die.¹⁷ Ekong says that cases of killing

¹³Parrinder, West African Religion, p. 99.

¹⁴Ekong, "The Ibibio Tribe in Southern Nigeria, West Africa," p. 23.

¹⁵Mbiti, An Introduction, p. 90.

¹⁶Ekong, "The Ibibio Tribe in Southern Nigeria, West Africa," pp. 23-24.

¹⁷Ibid.

of twins probably occurred even under the watchful surveillance of the missionary doctors. Killing of twins could occur as a nurse stepped out of the room to attend to a patient. Through the efforts of missionaries among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria and through the presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, this wicked custom was stamped out.¹⁸

We must not underestimate the reality of the spiritual world to the Africans in general nor the power which superstitions had over them. The fear of the gods was so dreadful that they dared not risk offending them, thus placing themselves at the mercy of the evil spirit.¹⁹

Etche people, like all Ibos, normally manifest great love for children. The cruel treatment meted out to the twins and their mothers can only be understood as dictated by their superstitious beliefs.²⁰ The preaching of Christianity has brought forth amazing results through the length and breadth of Iboland. The attitude toward twins and triplets has changed from hostility to love.²¹ They are not looked upon any longer as signs of visitations from the spirit world, but are seen as God's abundant gifts. This view is not common among the Etche Ibos, but is held by the Okrikans, Ibibios, Ijaws, Yorubas and the Effiks. Thus, God has again turned the wrath of sinful men to His praise (Ps. 76:10).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Basden, Among the Ibos, p. 59.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 61.

²¹ Ibid., p. 64.

It is my hope that, as in the decades before many inhuman and wicked practices were stopped by the teaching and application of the Word of God, so even at this age, many besetting customary practices among the Etche will inevitably be eliminated by His grace and the conquering power of the Sword of the Word of God. (Eph. 6:17).

CHAPTER IV

PRACTICES CONCERNING DEATH AND BURIAL

According to Harold Turner,

The heart of a people's religious belief is often expressed most clearly on the occasion of death, and it is round this event that some of its most tenacious customs gather.¹

With this assumption, we shall proceed to examine the traditional concepts about death among Etche Ibos and how such traditions are reflected on the church life of these people.

Traditional Practices Concerning Death and Burial

To the Etche people and other Ibos, dying and being buried in a strange land is utterly repugnant. Etche people pray and wish to die at the place of their birth. A general belief among Etche Ibos as well as other Ibos is that the spirit of the deceased person never finds rest in a strange land. Because of this, the Etche people traverse land and sea to transport the corpse of one of their members who died elsewhere back home for burial at his original home town. If for any reason a man or woman was buried in an alien place, later the remains will be exhumed and finally laid to rest at the original birthplace wherever that may be. For example, at the end of the civil war in Nigeria, 1967-70, the remains of many who died outside their homes in

¹Harold Turner, African Independent Church. The Life and Faith of the Church of the Lord Aladura, vols. 1 and 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 252.

refugee camps were exhumed by their children or families and reburied at their homes. This practice is not peculiar to the Etche. Dr. George Basden says that the "wish of every Ibo man and woman is to rest the dead among the souls of their ancestors, and this is a very real poignant hope."² Traditionally, Etche customs demand that a married woman, on her death, be brought back to her kinsmen for burial.³ The only exception to this rule is when the death occurred at a place where it would be impossible to reach or to retrieve the dead body for burial.

The Etche people are very superstitious about death. On every occasion of death, whether it be of a child, woman or man, a dibia must be consulted to ascertain the cause of the death. The dibia's diagnosis is more readily accepted than the medical doctor's report. For the former is believed to have access to oracles which are capable of establishing the cause of a man's death.⁴

The cause of death among the Etche often is attributed to offended ancestors or kinsmen, who are also accused of bringing sickness to the living for neglecting them. Ancestors who have been neglected by the failure of their survivors to accord them second burial, reveal their dissatisfaction against the living by causing them harm in many forms: death, sickness, childlessness, lack of progress in business, and accidents. The ancestors are believed to be interested in the affairs

²George T. Basden, Niger Ibos (New York: Barnes & Nobles, Inc., 1966), p. 278.

³Ibid., p. 116.

⁴Margaret M. Green, Ibo Village Affairs (Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, Pub., 1954), p. 95.

of their progeny. In this way, they could wreak vengeance on living individuals or on a community.⁵

To most Ibos, the cause of death is the breaking of taboos, the swearing of oaths, or cursing by other men.⁶ But, to the Etche, death is caused by enemies, either living or dead. It is possible to believe that God may be responsible for the death of a man or woman, or even a child, but the most common assumption is that a human enemy has done it.⁷

Death among Etche people is never regarded as natural.⁸ This accounts for the suspicious spirit among the Etche Ibos. The way for them to reconcile the problem of death is to lay the responsibility upon enemies and seek ways and means to discover the enemies culpability. Although a majority of Etche people attribute death to the doings of human enemies, there are a few who believe that death has been caused by the soul-snatcher, -demon.⁹

Death stirs up contradictions in the minds of Christian and non-Christian Etche people. Often, death is not accepted with clear hope and understanding that it is not simply the dissolution of the individual. The Christian hope of new life in Jesus Christ seems a very remote concept. The Pauline exhortation not to grieve as those who have

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ J. S. Mbiti, An Introduction to African Religion (London: Whitstable Litho. Ltd., Kent, 1975), p. 112.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Geoffrey Parrinder, West African Religion (Great Britain: Epworth Press, 1961), p. 106.

⁹ Maja A. C. Leonard, The Lower Niger and Its Tribes (Holland: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., N.V. Grafische Industries, Haarlem, 1968), p. 172.

no hope does not mean a lot to them (1 Thess. 4:13). This lack of hope is revealed by the great sorrowing and manifestation of sorrow when one of their members passes away.

Today, there are signs of a change of attitude. For instance, Etche Christians now face death confidently, knowing that for the Christian death is a gateway into glory. Death of a Christian is no longer regarded as mere dissolution of the personality but rather a rest in the Lord until the resurrection. Although the traditional Etche does not believe all this, the Christians rejoice because of their consciousness of knowing that the life of their departed ones are hidden with Christ in God and Christ shall appear with him in glory.¹⁰ The change in attitude among Etche Christians about death is manifested in the reducing of the period of mourning from its extended time to six months.

The Concept of the Soul

Ambiguity surrounds the use of the word "soul" in the Ibo language. I will here attempt a brief explanation. The word "soul" may be partially understood as a synonym for spirit, evil spirit or good spirit, by persons who are not conversant with the nuances of the Ibo language.¹¹ But if one interprets the sentences as they occur according to the context, a fuller meaning and implication emerge. For instance, Nkpolube is not a synonym for the soul. Nkpolube is the

¹⁰Col. 3:3.

¹¹Leonard, The Lower Niger, p. 140.

conscience. The soul among Etche Ibos can mean one of the following: spirit, nmo, Holy Spirit, that is, Nmo Nso, Ghost, that is, Nmo ojo -- Ekwensu¹² or agbara.

The Etche recognize the spirit as an unseen force in the world. It never dies. Also, among the Etche Ibos, the spirit is called "Chi" or guardian spirit. Dr. Basden writes:

The Ibos has the benefit of being able to transport the souls of his ancestors whensoever and wheresoever he moves, he removes his habitation. He carried the "Okpensi" of his ancestors, and so has the souls always at hand. The souls are not in the "okpensi".¹³

Likewise, the Etche are convinced that the soul has connection with God. The following statements elucidate the point. Chineke bu Nmo. God is Spirit (John 4:24). Chineke adigh anwanwu. God is eternal. The soul is confined to the body but the spirit is not. The soul is the animating principle in all men.¹⁴ When the soul stops working in any man, the man is dead. Just as a clock that stops ticking is dead.

The Holy Spirit (Nmo Nso) is understood as the Third Person of the Trinity. He is God and He sanctifies the children of God. He abides with the Church and where God's people meet together.

¹²In early days, three days were customarily devoted to propitiating the devil. It was known as "Ekwensu Day." Among these people, on such occasion, there was no moral restraint. By such self-indulgence, it was believed that they will humor the devil. Basden, Niger Ibos, p. 38. The influence of Christianity has done away with this practice. George T. Basden, Among the Ibos of Nigeria (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965), pp. 232 and 235.

¹³Basden, Niger Ibos, p. 266.

¹⁴Leonard, The Lower Niger, p. 141.

The existence of the soul has never been a problem for the Etche man. This is the case not because he had a correct understanding of it, but rather because the Etche are not skeptical about such abstract questions. He simply believes that God is the Creator of the soul. The soul to the Etche is conceived as that without which no man can ever live. The soul is the active principle in human beings. According to traditional belief, it can be scared away especially when a man is asleep. This concept of the soul is perhaps basic to the Etche practice of not waking a sleeping boy suddenly for the fear that his soul may leave him and not return again, thus causing death. Our forefathers and the traditional priests maintain that the body dies but the soul does not. Rather, it returns to God after death.¹⁵

There is a great deal of superstition and hazy notion about the soul among the Etche, except on the conviction that the soul originates from God. The fear that the soul may leave the body of the sleeping boy if suddenly awakened is clearly superstitious. Such superstitious thinking can be understood as an attempt to account for what happens to the soul after the dissolution of the body. There is a pronounced belief in the immortality of the soul which is confused with the belief in reincarnation or rebirth.

The Christian concept of the soul derives from the Bible and the creation of man (Gen. 2:7), "The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 142.

a living soul."¹⁶ There is some similarity between the Christian idea of the soul and creation of the man and the traditional Etche concept of the same. But this has been fused with the heretical concept of reincarnation.

There are many different opinions held by many theologians about the soul and how it came into being.¹⁷ However, the Etche man is not concerned with the different philosophies of the different schools, some of whom deny the immortality of the soul. Others affirm it and raise doubts about its substance, yet others argue about its form.¹⁸ It will suffice here to mention briefly some of these views: Creationism, which maintains that God implants the soul in each new human being at birth; and Traducianism which teaches that the soul as well as the body is transmitted from one generation to another.¹⁹

It appears to me that the belief in reincarnation which is so strongly affirmed by Etche people and other Ibos, leans toward the heretical Traducianism rather than Creationism which is sound doctrine.²⁰ Reincarnation cannot be accepted by the Christian Church.

The Etche regard ghost or nmo as a diabolical force active in the world and is personified as Ekwensu. Among Etche Ibos, the term

¹⁶ Gen. 2:25, 5:1-3, Mal. 2:10.

¹⁷ T. C. Hammond, In Understanding Be Men. An Introductory Handbook of Christian Doctrine (Bedford Square, WCI: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1965), p. 76.

¹⁸ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Anti-Nicene Fathers, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), p. 184.

¹⁹ Hammond, Understanding, p. 76.

²⁰ William Reany, The Creation of the Soul. A clear and concise exposition from psychological, theological, and historical aspects (New York: Benziger Bros., 1932), p. 54.

"Ekwensu" is used to indicate evil or the evil one in a generic sense.²¹ Many in our time have testified to me that they have encountered him. It is important to note that not all nmo are evil. We can only determine a ghost or nmo ojo, by what it does.²²

The soul does not appear to anybody either personally or collectively, but the spirit or nmo ojo is thought to be able to appear to anyone whom it wishes to harm. Nmo or spirit rarely does appear, and if it does, it is only to relay or reveal secrets or even to bring a good will message, or warn of an impending danger. The ghost is alleged to have been seen by some people. Dibias sometimes claim special abilities by which they can manipulate them to victimize their opponents.

The dibias also assume for themselves powers to hold conversations with the ghosts, drive them away from molesting some haunted individuals or even around their dwellings. The distinction between ghost, soul, spirit and Spirit, I admit is confusing; nevertheless, the Ibos who use those words apply them appropriately when necessity demands. The words may be the same, but the context, I emphasize, determines the meaning each of these will convey in any given situation.²³

Burial of the Dead

Burial is an unhappy occasion. Families are known to have sunk into debt in an attempt to establish a reputation for themselves and to please the spirit of their dead by discharging their duty toward one of

²¹Leonard, The Lower Niger, p. 143.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

their members upon his death.²⁴ Burial is an unhappy event because of the fear of expenses; sometimes the survivors even feign sickness or insanity to avoid the obligation. Burial stirs up thoughts in the minds of old people so that according to Basden, they preferred to die rather than live on in pain and the money that could be used to give them a decent burial is spent fruitlessly to cure them, all to no avail. Some arranged for their burial with someone whom they trusted to execute their wills at their death.²⁵

The death and burial of a chief was an especially costly affair. In many respects, it was an unfortunate event for the innocent wives and slaves who served as scapegoats accompanying the burial of the chief.²⁶ In the olden days, it was said that some of the slaves were buried alive with the dead chief while others were sacrificed and their bodies laid in the grave and the body of the late chief was then lowered into the grave and the burial was completed. Besides these human treasures, there were other valuable good such as house ornaments and money that were added to the grave.²⁷ It was believed that he would continue to live the life he had lived in the world, even in the spirit world,

²⁴Jonathan U. Ekong, "The Ibibio Tribe in Southern Nigeria, West Africa," (Unpublished thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the degree of Bachelor of Science at Agriculture and Technical College, Greensboro, N.C., 1936), p. 25.

²⁵Basden, Among the Ibos, p. 112.

²⁶Percy A. Talbot, The Peoples of Southern Nigeria (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 472.

²⁷Ekong, "The Ibibio Tribe in Southern Nigeria, West Africa," p. 25.

therefore, he needed the continued services of his wives and slaves.²⁸ Just as the killing of twins and abandoning of the mothers was prohibited by the preaching of the Gospel and the enforcement of the same by the government, so human sacrifice is prohibited but an urge or reversion to this may arise when a distinguished chief dies. The desire to kill nowadays is satisfied by slaughtering of many goats, sheep, cows and fowl at the burial of great men.²⁹

Proper burial of one's parents is said to be the duty of children among the Etche. When a young man dies before the parents, there is a great sorrow, for the parents might not be given the hope for decent burial. Any person, man or woman, who has not buried his parents is indebted (onye na elibegh nne ma obu nna ya ji ugwo). There is no tribe among the people of Nigeria where proper burial for the dead is not accompanied with the accustomed rituals. The Etche spend much time and money celebrating decent burial for their forebearers because of their belief that without such rituals, the deceased will not enjoy the blessedness of heaven. Rather such a one will go to the place of torment, or perhaps wander about desolate and without food, haunting the houses of the living and encountering the offenders wherever possible.³⁰

This is not surprising when we remember that the dead are feared by most Etche people because they have become more powerful than

²⁸ Talbot, The Peoples, p. 742.

²⁹ Basden, Among the Ibos, p. 121.

³⁰ Talbot, The Peoples, p. 470.

the living and are capable of affecting one for good or bad. Their good will is necessary for prosperity and success in life.³¹

No one may be denied burial. Even when people died uncertain deaths, burial was arranged for them, except people who died of infectious diseases like elephantiasis (igugo, small-pox, oku agbara, etc.). These were thrown into the bush because it was believed that if they were buried like those who died under natural conditions, there would be a recurrence of the sickness in the family. Although they were thrown into the bush, a mock burial was organized in their honor. It is strongly believed that if neglected, their spirits are capable of harming members of their families. It seems, however, that most people prefer not to perform burial for such persons because no one expects them to become reincarnated in their families.³²

Etche Ibos hold tenaciously to a profound belief in the supernatural world. Being thus minded, they are always conscious of their relationship with the deceased who now has entered the unseen world. Therefore, like the rest of the Ibos, the Etche take every precautionary measure to keep the spirit of the departed in a state of peaceful contentment. This is why all Etche families will endure everything and give anything demanded of them by their kinsmen to ensure that proper burial rites were accorded their dead. The future of the dead in the unsemen world and the survivors' welfare, according to Etche traditional belief, depend upon right performance of the burial rites.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Hence, in a lifetime, the preparation for these rites takes a prominent place in man's calculation. According to Basden, it was not uncommon for a woman to prefer to die before she reached the age of enforced inactivity and productivity and be unable to receive a decent burial. Most men and women in Etche endeavor to lay aside some money and clothing, in anticipation of their death and burial, in advance preparation for the day.³³

It is a cliché among Etche people to allude to death as returning home. The dead are generally referred to as not being dead but as having only gone to wait for their survivors in the spirit world; in this hope, therefore, mourning becomes bidding farewell for the time being. There is a strong underlying conviction that each person has been given a mission on earth. Each has a talent and task to accomplish in this life.³⁴ When anyone completes his or her mission on earth, he returns to the Creator and lives with him in the spirit world. The death of infants does not cause much consternation among many Etche for they were merely strangers and not full citizens until they will perform the work which they have been assigned by the Creator.

There is no elaborate funeral for the infants. They are quietly buried. It is customary among all Ibos when couples lose infants consecutively to suspect that the first who died was reincarnated, and if he dies again, his or her body was mutilated and taken outside and there

³³Talbot, The Peoples, p. 470.

³⁴Ibid.

buried.³⁵ Customarily, in Etche and among other Ibos, only close relatives wash and dress the corpse of one of their members. According to local custom, the finger and toe nails were padded and hair cut. Other customary rites such as talking to the dead, asking the dead to protect and defend the survivors were performed. The dead body was then dressed in the finest clothes bought for burial and laid in state for the public and personal acquaintances to view and pay their last respects.³⁶

If the dead person was a chief or a prominent individual, the death was never announced until everything for the burial was ready. Weeping usually announced the passing of any person, great or small.

Some days were not good days on which to die or be buried. For instance, the Eke Day was considered bad.³⁷ Burial was postponed if it would fall on this day or when the first son of a man, or even close relatives, were absent. Under circumstances such as this, the body was preserved by being dried over a fire-altar on which some fragrant herbs were placed until the people were ready for the burial. According to Talbot, certain evisceration and embalming was occasionally carried out in parts of West Africa. In both the Okrika and Obolo sub-tribes of Ijaw, Nigeria, the dead are still preserved by embalming for later

³⁵ Ibid., p. 119.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 471.

³⁷ Charles K. Meek, Law and Authority in Nigerian Tribes, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 36. According to Ibo calendar, there are four days in the week. The rest of the week days were open for daily business but "Eke Day" normally Thursday was not because the gods were worshipped that day. It was a holy day.

burial.³⁸ Also, a wrestling contest was arranged in honor of the deceased, especially if he was a champion wrestler during his life time. Since wrestling is one of the past time enjoyments among the Etche, at the death of every grown man, a match was organized and staged as a last honor to him. The contest does not last long. It was hoped that when the dead man would be reincarnated, he might be a champion.

Talbot writes that the grandeur of the burial depended upon the wealth of the family.³⁹ Similarly, Dr. Parrinder observed that funeral and mourning ceremonies were long and intricate, frequently involving a first and second burial ceremony. As many as five phases were implied, including preparation for burial, the mourning after burial and later mourning.⁴⁰

The death and burial of an old man or woman brought great joy and happiness for it was generally said that the person had gone to rest. But the death of a young man was a tragedy. Before the burial, the body of the dead man or woman was carried round the village on the heads of two strong youths accompanied by a large crowd in a procession singing a dirge. The dead were carried on the head since in some instances, quite a distance was covered on foot. To bear the dead on the

³⁸Talbot, The Peoples, pp. 471-472. The Reverend Julius Oyet told me that Obolo people kept their dead ones from decomposition by the application of lines of tobacco and gin through body openings and thus preserved the dead for days or months until burial was ready.

³⁹Ibid., p. 501.

⁵⁰Parrinder, West African Religion, pp. 106-107.

head was most convenient. This practice may be found in some parts of Etche today.⁴¹

Before the burial, various traditional rites were performed. They are "igbu egbugbu-aka," "izu ahia," "iya nkita anya abali", wrestling and dancing. I shall describe these as they occur and their significance for the Etche. Igbu-egbu-aka is a very barbaric practice. Custom decrees that when an adult man dies in Etcheland, certain things belonging to him such as dogs, plantain, coconut trees and the family assembly hall should be destroyed or cut down. Fowls and goats were not excluded. The practice may be carried to extremes if the participants turned out to be jealous of what might be left for the children and to deprive them of these things. However, tradition holds the purpose is that the dead would be a strong good hunter when he is re-incarnated again into the family. A similar practice is observed if the deceased is a woman. It is called izu ahia. The izu ahia is a superstitious pagan custom among women. Thus when a woman dies, her associates arrange and set a day aside for going to market on her behalf. It is believed that the mock buying and selling would enable the deceased woman to become a good trader when she would reincarnate. This practice seems to me to be a kind of traditional wake-keeping in imitation of the Christian wakekeeping for the dead. The Christian churches have discouraged such practices, but it is not unknown some Christians have secretly performed them when one of their members died.

⁴¹The above information was gleaned for me by Mr. Julius Amadi, from the elders of Etche. His information complements some of the information not covered by Basden, Talbot and Meek.

It was and is customary among the Etche Ibos to sacrifice a dog when an old man dies. The dog sacrifice was calle Nkita anya abli. Among the traditional worshippers, it is believed that the dead man would become a clairvoyant at his second birth if this ritual of dog sacrifice was performed.

Second Burial

Among many tribes in Nigeria, second burial (Ikwa ozu or Ikpasu okwukwu) is an important ceremony. The living as well as the dead, look forward to it. It may be performed a few months or years after death. There is no time limit for much depends on the preparation and wealth of the family involved. For instance, a rich household could gather foodstuffs and drink necessary for the occasion and conduct the ceremony soon, but not much later than six months after death and burial.⁴²

There is a distinction in the terms used for the first and second burial. The word used for the first burial is Ili Ozu, to bury the dead, while the word used for the second burial is Ikwa ozu or Ikpasu Okwukwu- The translation in English implies actual burial, but this is only true in a few cases. For instance, if the body of a person was exhumed from somewhere, it was customarily reburied. In this sense only could there be said that there was a concrete second burial.

According to Dr. Basden, the deceased had already been buried amidst much weeping and lamentation with less ceremony, compared with the pomp and pageantry of the second burial ceremony.⁴³ All that the

⁴² Talbot, The Peoples, p. 473.

⁴³ Basden, Among the Ibos, p. 120.

relatives of the deceased did at the first burial was considered to enable the dead to be introduced to his friends with due honors, to those with whom he must henceforth associate in the spirit world.⁴⁴

In the early days, the articles for the celebration of a second burial included palm-wine, and a sufficient supply of gin (kiki). But if the deceased was a renowned chief or a prominent farmer, a ram (ebulu) was slaughtered as a mark of honor on behalf of the deceased. The living enjoyed the meat. This ceremony is known as "ikenga". Literally, it is the ceremony of the personification of a man's strength of arm.⁴⁵

In days gone by, after this ritual had been performed, head hunters took to the bush. Whatever was caught, be it beast or man, was consecrated and partaken of in pious memory of the late comrade in arms.

The firing of the cannon traditionally announced the beginning of the second burial ceremony. Since there were not many literate people in those days, expected guests came when they heard the sound of the cannon. Also, the sound of the cannon and shotguns scared away spirits that normally were lurking around to molest the offending ones or notified the spirits that the ceremony was about to begin. In this way, both the dead and the living relatives rejoiced, being fully conscious of the final dispatch of the dead man's spirit to join its brothers in the spirit world.

An Etche man or woman who fails to fulfill the obligation of second burial is always haunted by fear and the disastrous consequences

⁴⁴ Meek, Law and Authority, p. 85.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

of such neglect. He knows far too well that the spirit of his departed relative or parents are unhappy, homeless and wandering about and will not cease to haunt their former compounds and certainly will wreak vengeance on them for their lack of feeling and undeserved neglect.⁴⁶

Talbot writes that a family which hesitates in spending a large part of the deceased person's property at his funeral is believed to be at the pale of death for they will assuredly earn the anger and displeasure of the dead.⁴⁷

That is why it usually takes a long time to prepare for the second burial. Fifty years or more may not be too long a time for the celebration to take place. The important thing is not when but whether it is done. Dr. Basden relates an account of a second burial ceremony he was chanced to observe among the Awka Ibos as follows:

I was passing through Awka one day and came across a display of funeral trophies. There were twenty-one skulls of cows, eleven of pigs, and ten of goats. The price of cost is 5 a piece, pigs 2, and goats 10. In addition to these animals provided for sacrificial feasting, many cases of gin (then 15s per case) and an unlimited supply of palm wine, yams and other provisions were consumed. That funeral must have cost at the lowest estimate 150 and it would probably be nearer the mark to fix the figure at 200....Such expenses could be incurred only by a rich family, but every family will spend⁴⁸ to its utmost capacity when fulfilling the rite of a second burial.

The celebration of a second burial finalizes everything the Etche tradition and social obligation toward the dead demands of the family, the

⁴⁶Talbot, The Peoples, p. 474.

⁴⁷Basden, Among the Ibos, p. 121.

⁴⁸Ibid.

children and the relatives of the deceased expect that he or she would be reincarnated and born again into the family.

Reincarnation

Etche people have a strong belief in reincarnation. Belief in reincarnation is a widely known concept not only among the Etche but throughout Nigeria. It is the belief that the family is perpetuated through rebirth. It is believed among the Etche as well as the Ibos, that a person may be reborn into more than one individual. His head may be reincarnated in one man, his hand in another, his foot in still another and the main part of his spirit in another. Persons are reborn into the family of their father or mother.⁴⁹ The belief in reincarnation is rejected by the Christian church as inconsistent with the revealed account of the creation of man.⁵⁰

Widows

Widows in Etche and other Ibolands were a very unhappy group. When a woman lost her husband by death, she was confined to a small room for several days. She was not allowed to change the mourning clothes or braid her hair until the mourning period was over. Those who were suspected of causing the death of their husbands were made to undergo an ordeal.⁵¹

⁴⁹Meek, Law and Authority, p. 54.

⁵⁰The church has always opposed belief in reincarnation as un-Christian. It feels that the theory of reincarnation is the traditional attempt to account for the creation of man. This explanation is more of a Traducionist than Creationist view. Cf. Gen. 1:21-27, 2:25-27, 5:1-3. Supra, p. 73.

⁵¹Talbot, The Peoples, p. 474.

Widows also received cruel treatment from other women, especially the elderly. They were required to sit down on the floor, clothed in the most ragged of clothes and were forbidden to eat with their hands except with a forked stick. They remained in this condition as long as the corpse was not buried. But after burial, she was ceremonially cleansed by the older women of the extended family with palm-fibre abubu and a small chick. Her head was shaved and she donned black clothes. Thus began the mourning period which lasted for a full year.

During this period, she could attend to her business but had to refrain from sexual acts. This is still the norm today. According to Meek, before she removed the mourning clothes, she was interviewed on oath by senior members of the family of the husband whether or not she had had sexual relations during the period. If she refused to swear, she was found guilty and was accordingly fined. If she was pregnant, she was ridiculed and more charges demanded. But if she was pregnant by the husband heir, no fine or abuse was necessary.⁵²

A widow who for any special reason was not inherited is at liberty to live on the compound of the deceased husband, especially if she had some children. She is always identified with the late husband.

At the end of the mourning period, she invited the family members and friends to loose her from the obligation of putting on the black clothes. For this, she made great preparations and cooked fine dishes for them. After they had eaten and drunk, they rose up and

⁵² Meek, Law and Authority, p. 311.

removed the black clothes and she was dressed in fine new clothes provided by the heirs of the late husband. She was then remarried to a relative of the late husband.⁵³

Among the Etche Ibos and most other Nigerian tribes, there is no public welfare system on which a man or woman could depend when sources of support fail. Our extended family system takes care of this. Thus, if a woman becomes a widow, she is inherited by a male relative of the late husband and thus stayed in the family and was cared and provided for, as also were the children. If a man was sick and could not farm, members of the family took him and cared for his needs.

Therefore, when the churches condemn remarriage or widow inheritance because it is a springboard for polygamy, they cause upheaval in the social system of the people. Rather, their advocacy for letting the woman go and be remarried in another family is a disservice to the widow, the family, and the children because of the enforced separation. Secondly, they thereby encourage illicit relationships resulting in the birth of children uncared for when there is no father to look after them. No wonder that although Christianity has been preached among the Etche for a little less than a century, such practices as Levirate marriage, widow inheritance and polygamy have resisted the high ideal of Christianity. It should be remembered that the traditional Etche practice of widow inheritance was and is motivated by humanitarian concerns,

⁵³ Ibid., p. 312.

namely to enable the widow to remain in close family relationship with her children and safeguard the risks of a broken family.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Meek, Law and Authority, p. 321.

CHAPTER V

TRADITIONAL RITUALS

Libation

Libation is one of the customary and traditional ways the Etche as well as the other Ibos maintain fellowship with ancestral spirits of the family. The medium through which this fellowship is maintained is by the offering of some gift of foodstuffs and drinks at the family shrine or at some other place. The belief in the continuity of life after death and the solidarity of the living with the dead seems to be the primary force behind the practice.

Libation is offered to the spirit of the ancestors who died many generations ago. Not all, however, perform such honors. For example, little children and women under no circumstances will perform this ritual even though there is no full grown male. In some places, heads of families performed the libation. However, when a person of this standing was absent, another adult, whether he was married or not, officiated.

There is an ulterior motive behind the offering of a libation. The living representative of the ancestors solicit favors from the ancestors by offering some material gifts in order that their life and their affairs may be protected. Libation is an evil way of appealing to the dead either for good or evil. It is a pagan practice.

According to Dr. J. S. Mbiti, the names of the ancient departed are remembered and invoked during libations.¹ From the early days of the introduction of Christianity, Christians have been forbidden to indulge in it, because libation is praying to the ancestral spirits. The names of the ancient departed are remembered and invoked, according to Professor Emmanuel Idowu.² In Yorubaland, libation appears in the context of worship. The performance of this ritual introduced the subject matter for which the individual had come to approach the god.³

Scriptures forbid that the Christian should pay homage to any other than the Almighty God (Ex. 20:2) . . . "I am the Lord thy God . . . You shall have no other Gods before me." "I am God and there is no other" (Is. 45:22), (see also Ps. 86:10), "There is but one God" (1 Cor. 8:6). Worship and adoration given to any other god than the Creator God in whatever form, is condemned. "They shall not pour libation of wine" (Hos. 9:4).

Present-day Nigerian Christians claim that they have found support and encouragement from the Scriptures for holding to the practice. They point to such passages as 2 Cor. 13:14 that speak about the fellowship of the saints as approximate or equivalent to their purpose of libation.⁴ The Scriptural passage in question is completely misapplied.

¹J. S. Mbiti, An Introduction to African Religion (London: Whitstable Litho. Ltd., Kent, 1975), p. 123.

²Emmanuel B. Idowu, Olodumare, God in Yoruba (Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, Publisher, 1963), p. 109.

³Ibid.

⁴Mbiti, An Introduction, p. 123.

The passage truly refers to Paul's apostolic benediction, which he appended at the close of his epistle to the Corinthians.⁵

In place of the pagan 'farwell' St. Paul invoked upon the worshipping congregation the Christian 'Chris.'" According to Pauline usage, this familiar word of 2 Cor. 13:14 was already becoming liturgical formula. The Communion of the Holy Spirit probably meant the participation by Christians in the Spirit.⁶

The three Persons of the Trinity are invoked each to vouchsafe His presence according to His nature, or the part which He bears in the divine work of salvation. Christ takes precedence, because through Him there is access to God (Eph. 2:8, 3:12). Grace belongs to the Father, but is here ascribed to Christ especially because through Him, God's love manifested and still manifests itself in the form of undeserved favor towards men, and most outstandingly in Christ's great act of grace (2 Cor. 8:9), for Christ, Himself, is "full of grace and out of His fullness, believers receive grace upon grace" (John 1:14, 16). "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, . . . full of grace and truth. Of His fullness have we received grace for grace."⁷

The church is truly a fellowship of the saints with God which He shares through the indwelling Spirit with those who are members of the

⁵ Matthew Henry's Commentary, vol. 6: Acts to Revelation; 6 vols. (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1930). See 2 Cor. 13:14.

⁶ Matthew Black & H. H. Rowley, eds, Peak Commentary (Ikeja, Lagos: Thomas Nelson & Son, Ltd., 1962), p. 972.

⁷ Holy Bible Commentary, vol. 3: Romans to Philemon; 6 vols. (London: John Murray, Albermarle Street, 1881), p. 481.

body of Christ. "The Church is more than a social group with a common interest in religion, more than a gathering of people for worship, or an organization for the service of others."⁸ This is the significance of the fellowship of the saints for believers and since in libation these concepts are nowhere present, Christians are still forbidden to indulge in it.

To the Etche, as well as other Nigerian people, the general belief is that the dead members of their families continue to live on, and that they take active interest in daily life on behalf of their living descendants.⁹

Dr. Talbot writes:

When people of the Otamiri were on their way to the long juju, they had to pour out libation of gin and sacrifice food. They went to the house of the priest who took them to the juju and told him: "These men have made offerings to you and wish you to look after them till they return."¹⁰

Both in the formal and the informal setting, the purpose of libation always is to appease the ancestors by sacrifices. The words spoken by the priest validates this statement:

Aa Chinekem Nnam, abialam nihi Gi,
 Nde newmni abilam nihunu, agbakolam nu,
 Anokwam na egbe bere ugo bere, onye sim -nwua, ya buru
 uzo nwua.
 Nde nwamni nu ta oji, nu nuru ma. Onye wetara oji wetara ndu.

⁸The Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, vol. 10, Corinthians, Galatians & Ephesians, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, n.d.), p. 425.

⁹Idowu, Olodumare, p. 109.

¹⁰Percy A. Talbot, Tribes of the Niger Delta (London: McMillan Co., 1930), p. 57.

So he concluded his prayer and dropped a few drops of either palm wine or gin on the ground. The translation is as follows:

O God, my Father, I have come before Thee,
 My ancestors I have come, I have taken refuge with You.
 I believe in live and let live, whoever wishes me death,
 let him die first.
 My ancestral spirits I present you kola, I offer you drink
 For whoever that offers kola brings or has life.

The practice of libation is observed by many Nigerians because it serves as a link between the living survivors and their departed ones.¹¹ Both Christian advocator and non-Christian adherents maintain this point.

Besides appeasing the ancestors, libation serves other purposes. It is used for blessing, cursing and as a means of fellowship.¹² Libation is purely and simply a pagan religious ceremony. The libator addresses himself to God, then to the gods and the ancestors.¹³

The Old Testament libations (Lev. 2:7-13; Num. 15:4-11) were offered to the One and the only Living God. The object of worship is God unlike the kind of libations carried out among traditional worshippers. In the latter case the objects of worship are various, for example, ancestors', gods and spirits. "The sacrificial worship of ancient Israel is a very complicated phenomenon, which has grown up out of different

¹¹ Sidney George Williamson, Akan Religion and the Christian Faith, ed. by Kwesi Dickson (Accra: University of Ghana, 1965), p. 132. Cf. Joanathan U. Ekong, "The Ibibio Tribe in Southern Nigeria, West Africa" (Unpublished bachelor of Science thesis, Agricultural and Technical College, Greensboro, N.C., 1936), p. 39.

¹² Mbiti, An Introduction, p. 109, 123.

¹³ Idowu, Olodumare, p. 109. If the pouring of Libation has been overtaken by modern times, and there is nothing unChristian in the act, why should the libator address or invoke the names of the ancestors and gods in addition to the Almighty God? Does the Scripture not warn against having other gods (Ex. 20:3)?

conceptions and customs, . . . according to the late Professor Stade (Bibl. Theol. d. AY., 156)." During the period covered by the Old Testament literature, sacrifice was thought of as a gift to God.

The motives which induced the giving of such gifts are nowhere stated in many words but may be clearly inferred. In the early period, the gifts were offered to an earthly ruler as homage or as an expression of gratitude for kindnesses received, especially in the very numerous cases of vows¹⁴ (Num. 6:13-20, Ps. 76:11, Eccl. 5:4. See also 5:5, for among the Hebrews it was believed that gifts persuaded the gods.

The Hebrew law-codes command that none shall appear before the Lord empty: that is, without a gift (Ex. 23:15, 34:20). In his article on "Significance of Sacrifice in Old Testament" quoted in the Hastings Bible Dictionary, Schultz pointed out that the Old Testament witnesses to the conviction that the gifts of piety produces a gratifying, propiti-ous, and in the end concilliatory effect on God. The form which these "gifts of piety" took was mainly in the form of food.¹⁵ The Hebrews offered to God the things which his table could furnish and these were the best. To the Hebrew, sacrifice was "the food of God". Some such con-ceptions are found in the Holy Scriptures (Ezk. 44:7, Lev. 3:11, 21:6. See also Num. 28:2, 'my food', Mal. 1:7, 'the table of the Lord'.

In the exilic time, the typical sacrifice was the peace offering of which the most important aspect was the communal meal after the actual

¹⁴James Hastings, Dictionary of the Bible (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), p. 817.

¹⁵Ibid.

sacrifice. The importance of the common meal was that the worshippers united with the god by partaking of the flesh and blood of the sacral victim.

By thus sharing, as the guests of God, the common meal of which the worshipper and the worshippers partook within the sanctuary the latter renewed the bond which united them to their covenant God. They ate and drank before the Lord in full assurance of the continuance of all the blessings which the covenant relation implied.¹⁶

In the later period of Jewish history, the thought of the sacrifice as "a table-communion" with the deity gave way in favor of another concept which in the early period had received less prominence: namely, that sacrifice was the most divinely appointed means by which the ideal relation of a holy God to a holy people was to be maintained. For all unintentional omissions and transgression, and for all cases of serious ceremonial defilements which interrupted this ideal relation, an atonement sacrifice was made.

The significance of the Old Testament sacrifice lies in the fact that it represented a gift or homage to the Divine Sovereign. In the earlier period, it was a rite of table-fellowship with the covenant God of Israel. Later it became pre-eminently the appointed means of purification and expiation as the preliminary to forgiveness.¹⁷

The Old Testament sacrificial system was an educational device adapted to the understanding of the people of that time and was designed to help them develop right concepts concerning the holiness of God, the heinous nature of sin, and how they might approach God and become

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 818.

reconciled to Him. Yet at the same time, both the Old Testament and the New make clear that the sacrifices were less important in the practical lesson of godliness. (Micah 6:6-8, Matt. 9:13, 12:7). The Old Testament sacrifices¹⁸ were a type of the true sacrifice of Christ (2 Cor. 5:7; see also Heb. 10:1-11). The Old Testament libations of wine, and so forth, transcended libation as is current in the traditional religions where it is simply a selfish means of manipulating the ancestors and the gods to obtain one's desire as the adherents claim. It completely lacks a sense of justice. For instance, if the gods or the ancestor are appeased in order to favor the worshipper and undo the enemy, it does not matter. Can the sincere Etche Christian continue in the practice of pouring libation? "No?" is the answer, for at his baptism, he renounced all the works of the devil and has no more need for them.¹⁹ A Christian Etche who engages in libation indulges in mixing Christianity with other religions. That is syncretism.²⁰

Secret Societies

Before the advent of the British, the administration of government in many parts of Nigeria was in the hands of many secret societies. The

¹⁸ Siegfried H. Horn, Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1960), pp. 942-43.

¹⁹ Common Prayer Hymns A&M (London: Collins Sons, Co., 1968), p. 192.

²⁰ . . . "Within a given religion, syncretism appears first of all as the fusion of godheads. The traits belonging to different gods are transferred to a certain god who is then revered as the supreme god, Sacramentum Mundi, vol. 6, Scandal-Zionism (London: Herder and Herder, Burns & Oats Ltd., 1970), pp. 201-203. Cf. William A. Smalley, ed. Readings in Missionary Anthropology (South Pasadena: William Carey Library, n.d.), pp. 235-36.

only exception was in those parts of the country where there were very powerful kings. According to Percy Talbot, these secret societies appear to have sprung from ancestral worship and witchcraft.²¹

Christianity is very intolerant of such traditions which are not in keeping with the teaching of the Bible. From the point of view of the Christian churches in Etche, secret societies have practices in which the churches feel a Christian should not be involved. For many years this has been a bone of contention between Christians in this part of Nigeria. This is not simply because the traditional practices are primitive, but because their motive and content have not changed despite what the practitioners would have us believe. The church maintains that they are still pagan and therefore, incompatible with the Christian faith. They uphold such practices that are very much in conflict with Christian doctrine and morality. For example, libation and all kinds of sacrifices are encouraged and performed by the members.

In his book Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief, Dr. Idowu says,

There are some certain secret societies whose main purpose as far as can be ascertained, are antisocial. Members of such societies enter into pacts to cooperate through thick and thin for the achievement of their purpose and to make sure that no member betrays the others.²²

Secret societies are not important in the life of Etche people. The Nmanwu is the only society found in Etche and it is not organized as in other places in Iboland. For the Etche, there is nothing mysterious in Nmanwu. Various age grades of boys and youths stage the Nmanwu

²¹Percy A. Talbot, The Peoples of Southern Nigeria (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 754.

²²Idowu, Olodumare, p. 150.

for the entertainment of the public at some seasons of the year. There is no ritual introduction into this club. The members beat their drums and dance around soliciting favors from their admirers. But in some other parts of Iboland the Nmanwu, according to Dr. Charles Meek, anthropologist and onetime resident in Nigeria, was based on the belief that the ancestors still live on and take interest in the concerns of their living descendants. Thus, in those parts where there are organized secret societies, Nmanwu is regarded as a secret society. Meek says that the first step toward initiation into the society was taken when the boys approached the age of eight or ten. Later when they became old enough to be entrusted with all the secrets of the society, they were fully admitted.²³

In recent times, the Etche have been exposed to the influence of the Ogboni secret society which for a long time had been the dominating spirit in Yorubaland. To many leaders in Etche, Ogboni secret society is the only society attractive to them because of its promise of better social and economic life and social concerns for the people. They try to win the people by telling them how much help they would render to them if they belonged to the society. They claim that they assist their members to secure jobs, scholarships, win court cases, and contribute to rehabilitation of the dispossessed.

Owing to lack of moral principle, false teachings, etc., the churches have always had a resentment against them. The Christian faith

²³Charles K. Meek, Law and Authority in Nigerian Tribes (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 2nd ed., pp. 66-69.

demands that members of the Christian churches dissociate themselves from secret societies which practice and perform acts which in their judgment are against the Christian conscience. Such a demand had caused several splits within the secret societies and the result was in some places, there are to be found Christian and non-Christian groups.²⁴

In the early days, an unlawful association with the group or intruding into their business would result in killing the person.²⁵ They vent their dislike of such an interruption today by obstructing such a person in other ways, for example, in politics or in business. The society considered itself a law unto itself. For instance, the Ogboni society arrogated to itself the power to be the arbitrator in settling all matters, as when the Ijebu people broke the treaty with Governor Carter of Lagos, the Awajole explained that it was the Ogboni secret society that instigated it.²⁶

According to observers, the Ogboni secret society has lost much of its early powers after the formation of a central government. Also, the breach which occurred within the society in 1944, resulted in the formation of the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity, led by the Reverend T. A. J. Ogunbiyi.²⁷ The aim of the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity was to found a Christian society within the church for Christians. Such a society would

²⁴ G. I. Jones, The Report on the Status of Chiefs, Eastern Nigeria (Enugu: Government Press, 1956), p. 84.

²⁵ Talbot, The Peoples, p. 762.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 762-64.

give Christians social status which they had in the Ogboni secret society formerly. It was hoped that all practices abhorrent to the Christian faith would be eliminated.²⁸ But the formation of such a society by an Anglican priest aroused great opposition and the two Anglican bishops in Lagos, Tugwell and Oluwole, forbade the application of the name "Christian" to the society. The bishops argued that the Bible was being profaned by being kept in a calabash together with other pagan symbols of the Ogboni secret society. Moreover, the leaders of the Reformed Ogboni themselves had been inducted into the society by members of the Ogboni society in which pagan rites and symbols had been used.²⁹ Therefore, there can be nothing worthy in the society which Christians could accept or approve.

The existence of secret societies was considered dangerous both by the leaders of the Christian church and by the Muslims whose members were reported to have been joining the societies. The Christian churches forbade their members to affiliate with the societies.³⁰

The Ogboni secret society, for instance, claims to be a religious organization and endeavors to confuse the uninformed because they conduct prayers, read the Bible, hold initiation ceremonies for the new members and even have fellowship meals, very similar to Christian rites. Adherents of the society claim that there is nothing incompatible in their society with Christianity. But the witness of those who are

²⁸ Geoffrey Parrinder, Religion in an African City (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 178.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 178-79.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

dissatisfied with the society and who left reveals that they offer libations and offer sacrifices which are very unChristian. The members worship the earth goddess and the emblem of the society is a mental image of a human figure known as Edan.³¹ This symbol they display publicly in their homes which was formerly kept secret.

The Ogboni secret society correctly speaking was a political organization formed for the discussion of the measures to check the tyranny of the rulers. As such, it served as the link between the tribes and the best unifying machinery in all Yoruba for the achievement of a common purpose.³²

The Ogboni secret society in its organization and function today appears to be a social and an in-group organization rather than a religious institution, it is claimed. It has no creed, no doctrine, no moral ideal, no confession of faith and no demand for repentance. It makes the payment of a heavy fee the prerequisite for admission and imposes an oath of secrecy upon the members.³³

The confusion of the members of the secret societies was their inability to disassociate Christianity from foreign societies which claim to be Christian but are not, such as Freemasonry. Space will not permit a detailed digression to discuss Freemasonry here. But suffice it to say that Freemasonry is a false religion, even though some Freemasons claim

³¹Geoffrey Parrinder, West African Religions (Great Britain: Epworth Press, 1961), p. 132.

³²Talbot, The Peoples, p. 755. Cf. Parrinder, West African Religions, p. 132.

³³Parrinder, West African Religions, p. 132.

that it is a saving institution and that it is a true religion. Others, of this same society hold a different view and maintain that Freemasonry is the handmaid of religion, a system of refined morality. Still others claim that it is simply a fraternity or mutual insurance company.³⁴

To some, Freemasonry is a form of theosophic occultism in charge of Ancient Wisdom which is to be spread through lodges. To another, it is a form of mysticism, a secret path along which the soul travels on the way to divine union. To some, Freemasonry is nothing else than a school for moral and intellectual culture.³⁵

According to Professor David McDill,

Masonry is a sort of religious sect, a kind of church. It has a religious creed. It has a religious test for admission of members, it has a religious ritual. It has its hymns and religious readings and exhortations. The lodge is opened in the name of the Almighty. In Thy name we have assembled and in Thy name we desire to proceed in all our doing.³⁶

The argument is not whether Freemasonry is a religion or whether it has temples, altar, official rituals, hymns, prayers, consecrations, benedictions, high priests, chaplains, written and authorized forms for opening and closing its meetings, but the contention is that there is nothing distinctly Christian in Freemasonry. It is purely a work righteousness institution.

³⁴ Charles Finney, The Character Claims and Practical Workings of Freemasonry (Chicago: National Christian Association, 1913), p. 199.

³⁵ Theodore Dierks, Christianity vs. Freemasonry (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1932), pp. 34-35.

³⁶ David McDill quoted by Martin L. Wagner, Freemasonry an Interpretation (Columbus, Ohio: The F. J. Heer Printing Co., 1932), p. 83.

We have digressed thus far because members of the secret societies among Nigerian Christians falsely justify their affiliation with secret societies because they claim that the counterparts of religious secret societies in foreign countries are accepted as Christian organizations without any restrictions.

The problem of the secret society today is not the concern of one church body. The churches have been infested with this disease and it is a serious one. For instance, the Church of the Anglican Province of Nigeria maintains that Christians should not join any secret society. And those who had been members of such societies already should not converse, teach or recruit other members into such societies.

Traditional Priesthood

Before the coming of Western Christianity, the Etche had been worshipping God through the administration of consecrated persons called chief priests, that is, Eze-agbara. In that setting, they sought to obtain guidance and answers to life's problems, for example, sickness and death from their acclaimed religious leaders who played a prophetic role among the people. Most definitions of the cause of death and sickness according to these reputable religious leaders was generally attributed to the work of the enemy, offended ancestors, or even the gods. For this, the priests prescribed consultation with the gods and an offer of sacrifice which they, on behalf of the consultants, offered to the gods. The Etche, being so religious and superstitious, accepted the definitions of the cause of death or sickness as given by the priests or priestesses. The result was that the life of innocent persons so accused were hunted and in a subtle way, destroyed.

According to Parrinder, the cult of the priesthood has developed into a distinct class. The priest and priestesses are cultic leaders. They offer sacrifices at the shrines or temples. Others such as mediums and devotees are persons connected with the shrines and operate as messengers of the gods.³⁷

The training of the priests and priestesses is held in privacy. Along the West coast of Africa, only in Dahomey has a convent been built for that purpose. During the training, many restrictions are imposed upon the postulants. The strictest rule of chastity is observed. Absolute chastity is required because the postulant is consecrating himself or herself to God and is now literally "married to the god."³⁸ Similar abstinence from alcoholic drinks was required of the priests who served the gods. These restrictions were surrounded by taboos and the violation of any one was visited with punishment and in extreme cases, one's training was interrupted, even terminated.

Chieftancy

Chieftdom as an organized institution had never existed in Etcheland prior to the introduction of the British rule. The same was true of the rest of the Iboland. The only exception was at Onitsha where kingship was found. The origin of the kingship at Onitsha traces back to the period of their migration from parts of Benin from whence they had descended.³⁹

³⁷Parrinder, West African Religion, p. 75.

³⁸Ibid., p. 78.

³⁹Meek, Law and Authority, p. 86. Cf. Jones, Status of Chiefs, p. 87.

G. I. Jones writes that the Ibo traditional forms of government are more democratic and in tune with the electoral and other principles of local government reform. There was no division between literate and illiterate as occurred in some other areas. Chiefs, traditional heads, young men, and literates have found their place on the local and higher Councils.

The appointment and succession to a chieftancy stool was and is governed by many factors, the two most common being descent and age. When a leader (Chief) dies, traditionally the next eldest man in the patrilineal descent automatically succeeds him. the descent group in some instances differs from the lineage or clan system. In the former, succession gradually became a matter of primogeniture because each dying man nominated his eldest son to succeed him.

In some places, there has been a total abrogation of this system. The succession may follow from the dead chief to his sons, and from his grandson to their sons according to their birth, and when they all had died, reverted to the great grandson, always following the order according to their year of birth.⁴⁰

This system has been the cause of many rivalries and civil wars between families and individuals.⁴¹ In most of Iboland, where the above system was not challenged the eldest son succeeded his father and the

⁴⁰ Jones, Status of Chiefs, p. 13.

⁴¹ Meek, Law and Authority, p. 86.

succession was referred to as passing to the eldest man either in the whole group system or in the direct line of descent.⁴²

Chieftaincy in Etcheland is not so well organized, but its forms have always been there. It is a well known fact that in very many Ibo communities the leading personalities within the group hold the title "Eze" - the most coveted traditional title.⁴³ The early Etche people who functioned as chiefs were simply leaders hand picked or appointed because of wealth, outstanding characteristics such as excellence of character or charismatic leadership role in the community.⁴⁴ This had developed into hereditary succession following the system of patrilineal descent. But it happened that with the introduction of the "indirect rule",⁴⁵ the "Warrant Chief" system replaced the hereditary succession and has since then been the cause of many unhappy rivalries unknown among the Etche.

Prior to this innovation in administration of Nigeria the hereditary chieftaincy rule as an organ of indigenous administration has always been a glorious office. Only the best of men could aspire to it. The chiefs represented their people and communities and were accountable to them.⁴⁶ No sooner had the indirect rule gained ground⁴⁷ than many

⁴² Jones, Status of Chiefs, p. 14.

⁴³ Meek, Law and Authority, p. 154.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 111.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 114.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 326-27. Cf. Jones, Status of Chiefs, p. 1.

of the warrant chiefs who were mere nominees of the British government, and had no traditional claim to their office, began to enhance their position by adopting the traditional title "Eze,"⁴⁸ that is, chief.

The appointment of warrant chiefs to district courts with powers covering whole areas beyond their own villages was totally against indigenous principles because the chiefs were now responsible to their appointees rather than to their people and communities. As a result, they saddled the people with heavy tasks since the communities and people could no longer make them answerable to them. The village traditional councils could not check them any more. Like the kings of neighboring kingdoms, the chiefs became very despotic⁴⁹ and made the people serve them.

Dr. Meek quotes Dr. Talbot as saying,

The power of the king of Bonny is absolute, and the surrounding country, for a considerable distance, is subject to his dominion. His war canoes are capable of carrying one hundred and forty persons each, and have often a gun of large calibre mounted on the bow. He had destroyed the town of New Calabor (sic) twice and boasts of having eaten part of the heart of its king.⁵⁰

Following this innovation in the indigenous rule, the hereditary character of chieftaincy was ruined and since then upstarts have been vying for the office. Consequently, the history of the chieftaincy in

⁴⁸ Meek, Law and Authority, p. 336. Cf. Emmanuel Epelle, The Church in the Niger Delta (Port Harcourt: Niger Delta Diocese, C.S.S. Press, 1955), p. 8. The warrant chiefs became oppressive tyrants, detested by the people and the right of appeals to the supreme court, especially inland cases brought in its train ruinous and futile litigations. Meek, Law and Authority, p. 5.

⁴⁹ Meek, Law and Authority, p. 7. Cf. Talbot, The Peoples, p. 251.

⁵⁰ Meek, Law and Authority, p. 8. Cf. Jones, Status of Chiefs,

Etcheland has become as in other parts of Nigeria a catalogue of dispute.⁵¹ Although the hereditary character of the institution has been phased out, chieftaincy as an institution of indigenous administration has been reconstituted and the electoral system has taken the place of the hereditary system of the early times.

Chiefs are not simply political functionaries. They function as both secular and religious leaders. The office links the occupant with the spiritual world. The chiefs or the kings are perceived as divine beings⁵² and they regard their office as deriving from the God. They are God's representative for the well being of His people on earth. People regard them as such and ascribe to them due honors.

The chiefs or the kings, as the case may be, are not expected to be seen in ordinary life. Traditionally, the chiefs are not permitted to leave their palace. They may do so on some important annual festivals, but for the rest of the year, custom forbids them further public appearances. They can only receive visitors at their palace. They are obliged to keep the following ritual. At 5 A.M. a gong was sounded and after the chief or the king had performed his ablutions which were to some extent ritualistic he moved to the hut where the Ofo was kept. Taking the Ofo in his hand and a kola-nut in his right, he began to say:

⁵¹Jones, Status of Chiefs, p. 29.

⁵²J. S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Pub. 1969), p. 182.

Chuku (God) and my ancestors, protect my life and the life of my people. May they and I live at peace with one another,⁵³ Prosper their crops, so that they have enough for themselves.

The necessity for the proper performance of this rite was the reason why the chiefs or the kings never left their palace for fear of neglecting their religious duty.⁵⁴

The chiefs or the kings were perceived as the source of justice and the supreme judge of their people.⁵⁵ For instance, the Obi of Onitsha town was himself the "court" of the people. He had powers of life and death and was referred to as "ogbu onye ubochi ndu nagu ya." "He who kills a man on the day he desires to live."⁵⁶

Chieftaincy or kingship has become a divisive and corrupt institution in many parts of Nigeria owing to the remunerative attachments to it. Today, the institution appears to be for the personal aggrandisement and ingratiating of oneself with a title, for example, "Eze-Ekpeye Legbo", "Ochie of Etchie", "Onyeisi of Etche", "Uwema Abunam", and so forth. (See Nigerian Tide, Thursday, July 7, 1977).⁵⁷

The church bemoans the chieftaincy row in Nigeria as contrary to the will of God because of the corruption of the institution by ambitious individuals. However, the church recognizes chieftaincy as an institution

⁵³ Meek, Law and Authority, p. 187.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Jones, Status of Chiefs, p. 12.

⁵⁶ Meek, Law and Authority, p. 188.

⁵⁷ Ibid. "Igwe," "Obi," the chief who was known as king in some parts may be called "Eze,"--"Chief." The king ruled his people through titled officials who bore the different titles.

good in itself but views the corruption in the rank and file involved in it as unfortunate. The church admonishes her members to eschew the corrupt practices and avoid the rituals and sacrifices which their office imposes on them. For no matter where, ". . . ancestral worship is the basis of the chief's authority. The chief or the king is the one who sits on the stool of the ancestors."⁵⁸ This is what Christianity attacks. Christian chiefs and kings are encouraged to continue to lift up Christ before men in their sphere of influence. For the saying is true to chiefs and kings as to the ordinary persons: "Your light must shine before men." (Matt. 5:16).

⁵⁸ K. A. Busia, The Position of the Chiefs in the Modern Political System of Ashanti (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), p. 136.

CHAPTER VI

APPRAISAL AND SUGGESTIONS

FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

The importance of cultural or traditional practices cannot be over-emphasized. In the past, foreign missionaries have been accused of destroying most of our traditional values without knowing the significance of those customs and practices. To some extent this observation may be correct. But it must be understood that those missionaries had no sinister purpose in the suppression of such traditional practices which were seen as contradictory to the Christian beliefs and practices. These ambassadors of God had no other choice.

However, today we are in an era when most of the leadership in the churches is in the hands of Nigerians themselves. The question now is how much of the traditional practices may be genuinely accepted. Ecclesiastical statesmen who support and encourage the revival and retention of practices previously condemned, are doing so now because of the spirit of nationalism. Worse, Christians have acquiesced to it without any compunction of the heart. Regrettably, this has led to a charge of inconsistency against the mainstream churches by the Separatist Group.

On the other hand, churches that sprang up from the traditional Nigerian background have integrated these unacceptable customs and in so doing, experienced phenomenal growth. They argue that Jesus permitted the growth of the weed among the good seed until the harvest. (Matt. 13:37).

Such a theology of accommodation does no good to the Church. Officially, the mainstream churches forbid these practices, but here and there you may find that they have allowed a serious lapse in the life of one of its members. This is terrible for the converts from pagan religions who have abandoned their past in the hope for the best in Christianity only to find that the church has condoned a moral lapse in the case of a "respectable" individual. In these matters, the individual Christian guided by the Holy Spirit should know when he or she should desist from traditional practices which in his and the church's judgment militates against the Christian conscience.

The best example here is the story of the Jewish youths who refused to defile themselves by worshipping the image of the king (Daniel 3). Likewise, St. Paul warned against conformity with the world (Rom. 12:2).

On the question of traditional practices, there is no doubt that many of them are incompatible with the Christian faith. The church has insisted on this for a long time without actually backing up its stand with Biblical instruction. The time has come when Nigerian churches should encourage more interest in studying the Scriptures from which would result spiritual and numerical growth. I conscientiously believe that by so doing the Etche Christians will soon realize the uselessness of hanging on to their practices themselves.

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sociological. It may be said generally that the most characteristic feature of Ibo society is the almost complete absence of any higher political or social unit than the commune or small group of contiguous villages, whose customs and cults are identical, who in former times took common action against an external enemy (though they frequently also fought amongst themselves), and whose sense of solidarity is so strong that they regard themselves as descendants of a common ancestor. These communes may be regarded as clans, and if so there must be at least 2,000 Ibo clans. Concrete examples of these will be given later. In the meantime it will be convenient to include here Dr. Talbot's list of Ibo sub-tribes and clans, together with a map.



Sub-tribe	Clan	Persons
Abadja	Abadja	640,326
Abaja	Abaja	72,896
"	Abaja-Ozu	27,213
"	Obowo	34,299
"	Osu	51,070
"	Ekwarazu	33,681
"	Ugiri	14,889
Abam	Awhawfia	40,000
"	Abam	20,094
"	Abiriba	11,064
Alensaw	Ozuzu-Uzuama	26,966
"	Alensaw	7,048
Aro	..	56,024
Awhawfia	..	3,834
Awhawzara	Awhawzara	54,318
"	Okposi	14,107
"	Onitsha	12,602
"	Isu	10,420
"	Uburu	7,515
"	Oshiri	5,727
Awtanzu	Awtanzu	22,930
"	Awtanchara	17,311
Edda	Elei	40,005
"	Edda	29,078
"	Isu-Kweataw	22,929
"	Afikpo	17,859
"	Amasiri	8,986
"	Ake-Eze	5,391
"	Unwana	2,918
Ekkpafia	..	22,784
Eshielu	..	9,174
Etche	Etche	33,807
"	Ozuzu	5,988