

Egwu-Afia Igala Cultural Practice among the Indigenous Igala People of Onitsha, Anambra State and its Role in Peace Sustainability in the Society

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Abstract: The aim of this work is to study Egwu-afia cultural practice among the indigenous Igala people of Onitsha, Anambra state, as well as the role of the culture in peace sustainability in the society, using interview and observation research methods. The results show that Egwu-afia cultural practice helps in bringing and/or maintaining peace in the society such as settlement of family disputes, bringing families together, checking of excesses of wives at home, etc. It was concluded that culture is a necessity for the sustainability of peace in our society. It was then recommended that our society cultural practices such as this Egwugwu cultural practice of Igala people of Onitsha should be revitalized or sustained to create peace within the family, clan and the society members at large.

Keywords: Anambra, Egwu-afia, Igala, Mmuo Ogonogo, Ogbe-Olu, Onitsha.

I. INTRODUCTION

Peace is the state of mind (psychological) and demonstrated in action or reaction to another, and it is a social concept which denotes the absence of violence, hostility, or bloodshed in extreme terms (Rowel, 2016). In other words, peace is not total absence of conflicts except it becomes that in extreme terms between two more people or communities or countries.

According to United Nations Declaration on Culture of Peace and Non-violence, peace has been defined as “the integral approach to preventing violence and violent conflicts, and an alternative to the culture of war and violence based on education for peace, promotion of sustainable economic and social development, respect for human rights, equality between women and men, democratic participation, tolerance, the free flow of information and disarmament”

Culture is an essential part of conflict and conflict resolution, and it is like an underground river that runs through our lives and relationships, giving us messages that shape our perceptions, attributions, judgements, and ideas of self and other (Michelle, 2003). We learn from culture of our own and that of others too, and the lesson learnt are to be applied in the society for peaceful co-existence as no man is an island.

Peace sustainability is the process maintaining of peace in our society at a certain rate of level. Sustainable peace is “the state in which the use of probability of using destructive conflict, oppression and violence to solve problems is low so that it does not enter into any party’s strategy, while the probability of using cooperation, dialogue and collaborative problem-solving to promote social justice...” (Peter, 2012).

Onitsha is a town in Anambra state. It is mostly called Ado na Idu, meaning Ado and Idu people. They have a king with the

title called Obi of Onitsha. Onitsha is said to have nine villages, in which four are from Benin, three (Obikporo, Mgbaleke and Ogbeotu) are from Igala (Idah, Kogi state) and two are from some communities around the river and Nris. According to oral history and various sources, Igala people who are mostly fishermen had already established their settlements in Onitsha before the arrival of Benin and other people. In fact, the Benin people were helped to cross the river Niger by Igala fishermen in their canoes. In addition, the earth god of Onitsha is owned by Igala as that was the culture of Igala people in those days, as they must first establish the earth god in any location before the build any house or camp. It is called Ani god in Onitsha, and Ere-ane or Ane in Idah, Kogi State. The Obi of Onitsha or the ruling house of Onitsha are Benin descendants of Ezechima or Ezechima. The Benin palace of people also regard the Onitsha people especially the Obi as their family members or blood relations. Just Amb Ayegba of Attah Igala palace is reconnecting Igala people from across the world to Idah, Igala Kingdom headquarters, Prince Imasuen Amowie Izodua is reconnecting Benin descendants from across the world to Benin Kingdom. The present Obi of Onitsha is HRM Obi Nnaemeka Alfred Achebe. Igala are in charge of royal burial when any Obi travels to the underworld. Ado na Idu (Ado and Idu) simply means Ado (we have settled or our settlement; Ado as Igala word, for Igala settlements by the river side) and Idu (children or descendants of Benin). The Igala people of Onitsha always have their representatives in any Igala cultural events done by Attah Igala in Idah, just like other Igala communities in Edo, Delta, Rivers, Enugu, Ebonyi, etc.

A. Aim

The aim of the work is to study the application of culture for the sustainability of peace in our society

B. Objectives

- i To study how Egwu-afia festival is celebrated by indigenous Igala people of Onitsha, Anambra State
- ii To examine the importance of the celebration to the society
- iii To study how the cultural practice helps in peace sustainability in our society, Onitsha Igala communities in particular.

C. Statement of the problem

Peace is one of the items that is lacking in our society today. Everyone needs peace, as without peace, there will be no development and unity. Therefore, while we all work towards having a peaceful society, we should also look for the way to have a lasting and sustained peace in our society. Thus, the

culture we practice in our society can be used as one of the apparatus for the sustainability of peace, hence the need for this work.

D. Definition of some terms

1. Peace: Peace is defined as the freedom from public disturbance, war or discomfort. It is therefore an agreement between people.

2. Culture: Culture is the total way of life of a people such as beliefs, arts, dress, etc as well as institutions passed from generation to generation.

3. Society: Society is defined as the group of having common traditions, interests and institutions. It is a group of people staying together and bind by same laws or traditions. A group of people living as a group as a community.

E. Egwu-afia festival

Egwu-afia also called Egwugwu or Egwu-avia or Mmuo Ogonogo by some Onitsha Igala people is festival of remembrance of the deceased or dead members of the clan or society. The Egwu-afia is the representative of the spirit of the ancestors who come out from time to time either during events, burials, or special occasions, etc. where they are to perform a function. In a literally term, Egwu means the dead one, while afia (avia) means the long height, as both are Igala words used to describe the spirit of the ancestors in that form. In Onitsha term, Mmuo Ogogo also describes the spirit or masquerade in terms of the height. During the celebration of Egwu-afia or whenever Egwu-afia is coming out to perform a function, all the non-Igala people there are to leave the venue or the area when the spirit is to perform his function.

E. How Is Egwu-afia festival celebrated

The celebration of Egwu-afia cultural practice is done in Onitsha during burials or when there is need for him to come out. This celebration involves sacrificing of foods and drinks to the Egwugwu at the temple of the ancestors which is a sacred building or location in the community. Various families travel from far and near to the town where the burial of an elder is taking place. They all provide foods especially to honour and remember their deceased members of the family whom the Egwugwu has come out to represent. These foods and drinks are shared by them and their guests who all enjoy together. No one gets near the Egwugwu apart from Igala men or people of Igala descent, and who are already initiated. The Egwugwu, being an Igala spirit speaks Igala language to the people when communicating with them. Musics, dances, and many other activities also take place as the burial is taking place.

II. METHODOLOGY

The research adopts descriptive research method (interview and observation methods) to discuss the role of Egwu-afia also called Egwugwu culture in maintaining peace in our society, Onitsha Igala communities of Anambra State in this case.

A. Study area

The study area consists of three towns in Onitsha which were founded and occupied by indigenous Igala people from Idah, the headquarters of Igala kingdom, many years ago. The three villages are Obikporo, Ogbeotu, and Mgbeleke (Ugbe and Ekeke). They are collectively called Ogbe-Olu people. Olu people are Igala people. That is why there some communities in Anambra State living together are grouped as Olumbanasa meaning seven Olu (Igala) communities. They are Ode, Igbedor, Odekpe, Alla, Onugwa, Odomagu and Igbokeanyi.

They are all in Anambra West LGA of Anambra State. According Chief Ik Areh, the Gbosa-Obi Onicha, Obikporo people are descendants of Idoko, the son of Prince Onoja Oboni, a warrior, medicine man and hunter from Idah in the present day Kogi State. Onoja Oboni was a prince from Aju Ocholi Attah Igala ruling house, the house that Attah Idakwo Ameh Oboni II ruled from before he went hunting in 2020. Onoja married Ushe, a daughter of one of then Obi of Onitsha known as Obi Omozele. Obikporo people are Igala. Obikpo Igala women are greeted Onyeagwa, meaning Agba people, and Agba is the greeting of Igala people worldwide. They would say Agba, Nago, Agba, Awa, ... when greeting one another.

One of the Chiefs of Onitsha; Gbosa-Obi Onitsha is of Obikporo Igala town of Onitsha. Some other prominent men of Onitsha from Igala towns are Chief Akunne Francis Edekobi, Chief Akunnia Paul Iwejiora, Chief Modebe, Gen Eche (rtd) and many others.

In addition to the indigenous Igala people of Onitsha, Egwu-afia culture is being practiced by Odekpe and Ossamala Igala people of Ogbaru Local government area of Anambra State. Also, in Edo state, the people of Ifeku Island practice Egwu-afia culture. The people of Asaba, Oko, Aika Ezeolu, Illah, Ebu, and Okpanam all in Delta State practice Egwu-afia culture, as they are all of Igala origin. In Benue State, most of the Idoma communities that are of Igala origin practice the Egwu-Afia culture. In their case, it is called Alekwu-afia, which are also Igala words. Alekwu literally means one that is dead. The Afia also describes the height of the ancestral spirit or masquerade. Just like those of Onitsha, Odekpe, Ossamala, Edo and Delta state, the Egwu-afia or Alekwu-afia of Benue people chants or speaks in Igala language. All the incarnations are done in Igala language too as they were Igala when they were in the world before they joined the ancestors. The Igala people of Umaisha, Panda in Nasarawa State also practice Egwu-afia culture. They are descendants of Ohemi Eje from Idah. In Kogi State, there are numerous communities of Egwu-afia clans. They are called *amoma Egwu-afia*, which means "Children of Egwu-afia". Examples of such clans are Achikala people of Okpachala, Idaka people of Dekina, Ibochi people of Igalamela, Ojuwo Ino People, etc.



HRM Agabaidu Mathew Alaji Opaluwa Oguche, Attah Igala from 2021 – (The 83rd Attah Igala)

B. Origin of Egwu-afia celebration in Igala Kingdom

According to HRM Agabaidu Alh Aliyu Obaje, the Attah Igala from 1956 - 2012, stated in his own version of Igala history, that Igala people originated from the ancient Nile Valley area where the Galla people of Ethiopia are presently. He added that they migrated through Yemen and Mali where Atta people are. Also, according to HRM Agabaidu Idakwo Ameh Ooboni II; The Attah Igala from 2013 – 2020, in 2020 stated that Igala people originated ancient Egypt; the Nile Valley area. He added that Igala people migrated from the bank of the Nile river and settled in the location called Tjebu which is a high land where they stayed and formed the tenth dynasty rulers of Egypt.



Photo of Egwu-afia from Onitsha Igala Community of Anambra State. (Source: Facebook)



Photo of Egwu-afia from Kogi State Igala Community (Source: Musa Abdulkarim Itodo, Facebook)

Thus, the origin of some Igala cultures are traced to this origin of Igala given by the kings in their various histories. In ancient Egypt, similar culture existed. It was called festival of the valley or beautiful feast of the valley. In ancient Egypt, it was celebrated yearly just like its being celebrated among Kogi State Egwu-afia clans. It is the feast for the dead members of the family where people come together to celebrate and remember their deceased family members. It is called Okwula or Egwu or Ibegwu or Otegwu, or Egwu in some communities of Kogi State.

In Mexico, it is called Day Of The Dead, written in Spanish as “Dia de los Muertos”, while in Malawi, it is called The Chewa’s festival of the dead which occurred in the Bantu community called Chewa.

III. RESEARCH ANALYSIS**A. How Egwugwu or Egwu-afia Culture is used for peace sustainability in Onitsha**

1. He is used for the settlement of clan dispute: In Igala tradition, no one keeps malice with a brother or sister or blood relatives and come to the event where the Egwu-afia of your clan is coming out. He is a spirit and sees everything on the mind of everybody. Anyone who is the enemy of any family member cannot eat or drink at the venue without first of all make peace with the person he or she is having problem with. In some cases, when the issue is much, the people involved will be called to the front of the temple where the Egwu stays for the event. Each of them will then state what the matter was, and the Egwu will settle them amicably. If one still keeps something in mind against the other, when he or she eats there, he or she may fall sick and will still go for confession later and also perform a cleansing ritual.

2. He enacts laws among his descendants in the society: Laws are rules and regulations made available in the society in order for people to have the ways or acceptable ways of doing things. When there is a certain problem in the communities, or when a certain problem in future is seen, the Egwugwu can come out on his own and bring the elders together and give them the new law to be obeyed in the society. For instance, the Egwugwu can say from that moment, no wife should cook late in the night. It could also be that all the heads of families must from that day ensure that they are at home before night except there is a strong reason like sickness or its like. This could be that the Egwugwu has seen one of the men having a problem while staying outside late in the night and has to stop it.

3. He ensures peace and unity between Igala man and his wife: Although, no family is completely or one hundred percent peaceful, some families or couples are more peaceful than the other. Also, some women can fight to a point of tearing the cloth on their husband and some even falling him down. In addition, some women only like to quarrel when they are cooking food so that the husband will annoyed and refuse to eat it not knowing that ancestors also join the man to eat the food. Egwu-afia clans including those in Kogi State Igalaland forbid all these- fighting the husband, holding his shirt or tearing it, quarreling while cooking or serving food, etc. In Onitsha, Egwu-afia drives a wife from house when her problems become much and has been seen by the ancestors that the woman is about to kill the man. It is one of the greatest role of Egwugwu, and when this happens, everyone in the society will have the knowledge of the extent of evil the wife might have carried out in the husband’s house. This is rare but it is one of the regulatory mechanisms. The consequence on wife

and some on husbands too will always make the two to behave well or act with caution irrespective of how annoyed they are.

4. He used for burial in order to lead the deceased to the world of the ancestors: When not done, people can die or faced with strange diseases. Burial process is the rites or processes of transition from the present world or surface of the earth to the land of the ancestors. This has many stages or processes involved handed down by our ancestors and passed from generation to generation. Although western culture has taken over some cultural practices, there are some that cannot be abandoned or diluted, an example is the role of Egwugwu in Burial or male elders in the society. In Kogi Igala land, it is the same practice as the masquerade may come out or stays in the temple to take part in the burial. In some cases, he sings some songs which are re-echoed by those at the shrine or temple and the song repeated by those performing the burial process. Failure to pass through this process will spell doom for the family members and by extension, the clan people because the deceased will not be allowed to join the family members in the great beyond.

5. He acts as a check to Obi's actions in a way: The Egwugwu culture was brought to Onitsha by Igala people from Idah. Onitsha is made up of Igala, Benin and Nri people. While the Benin people are in charge of the rulership, it is a known fact that Igala people- the Mgbekeke people were the first in the area as they were staying by the bank of the river doing their fishing. In fact, it is record as confirmed by the present Obi of Onitsha in his lecture at Kogi State University, Anyigba, Kogi State some years ago when he was discussing about the Igala people of Onitsha in which he stated that Igala people who were settling by the bank of river Niger on the side of Onitsha were the ones who used their canoes to cross the Benin (Ezechima) people on the river to the present-day Onitsha. This made strong tie between Igala people and Obi clans to be made. Though it has never happened, sources said that when the Egwugwu of Igala people sits on the throne of Obi of Onitsha, it means that the Obi is no longer on the throne. This might be probably part of the mechanisms established at the early stage or at a particular point in time between the Igala and the Onitsha ruling clans. Egwugwu is a deity, a god and an ancestor, hence serves during purposes when the need arises.

6. Brings the family members together: During the Egwugwu or Egwu-afia cultural festival or event, people of Onitsha Igala towns come home from across Nigeria to celebrate the festival or to take part in the event. It is the event where people relatives or brothers who have not seen one another for the past two to three years meet. Apart from meeting one and another, the family members eat together from the same pot, share food and drinks with one another, and rekindle the relationship and feelings again.

7. He has the final say in family dispute: In Onitsha Igala communities, no matter how difficult a case is, there is someone who can settle it. If the case has been taken to court, he has the power to ask that it should be withdrawn. That is Egwugwu performing the role of the father which he is. When there is a dispute among family members or members of the village and people could no longer settle it, the Egwugwu can come out and go to the people concerned, called them together, and settle the case. No matter they feel at the end, no one can take the case to court or continue with the case in court. The Egwugwu has the final say.

8. Plays the role of father to all whenever he comes out by encouraging them to be good to one another and to remember

what is forbidden in the family: When a father visits his children or when the children come home, and are all gathered in front of him, he will advise them to continue to be of good behavior. He will ask them to look up to him and their mother and be patient in any situation. He will ask the females to respect their husbands and ask the males to love their wives too. He will ask them to be a good ambassador of the home while staying outside there. These are obtainable when the Egwugwu comes out during an event. He ensures he talks to each and every one especially the elders. Sometimes, family problems or personal problems are shared with the Egwugwu and he provides them the solutions or answers. It helps in removing a burden from their chest, and normal life returns again.

9. Checkmating witches and wizards in the clan or community: The Egwu-afia has the capacity to know whatever is happening or trying to happen in the society. That is why they appear to the descendants in dreams and let them know about some things. When a witch wants to perform the act in the society, they are aware that whatever they do in secret, the Egwu will reveal it, and they will be disgraced or sent any from the community in some cases. This makes them not to carry out their evil acts in the community.

CONCLUSION

This work has been able to discuss the Egwu-afia or Egwugwu cultural practice of indigenous Igala people of Onitsha, Anambra State. In the work, the role of Egwu-afia cultural practice in bringing and/or maintaining peace in the society have been discussed such as settlement of family disputes, bringing families together, checking of excesses of wives at home, etc. It can therefore be concluded that culture is a necessity for the sustainability of peace in our society; the indigenous Igala communities of Onitsha, Anambra State in this case.

Recommendation

It is recommended that our society cultural practices such as this Egwugwu cultural practice of Igala people of Onitsha should be revitalized or sustained to create peace within the family, clan and the society at large.

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