

Festival Associated With Ali-Isiokpo Deity

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is on the examination of festival associated with Ali-Isiokpo deity. The paper shows that there are two crucial stages of preparation in which Ali-Isiokpo deity festival are organized. The spiritual and the physical preparations; The spiritual preparation which comes first and also the most important enables the priest to prepare himself in order to be ritually clean and acceptable before the deity. The paper argues that without these preparations the actual celebration of Ali-Isiokpo deity festival will not take place. The study adopts phenomenological approach as a tool to analyze, interpret and describe the data as they unfold without forcing in and forcing out meaning into them findings show that Ali-Isiokpo festival has helped to promote social interaction and cohesion in modern Isiokpo society especially this era of rapidly changing world, where values are fast retrogressing. Thus, it has helped to sustain the cordiality and friendship among the communities.

Introduction

Isiokpo is located at the north-east margin or Niger-Delta having boundaries with Omuagwa the seat of Port Harcourt International Airport

on the South. On the South-East by Emohua, Headquarter of Emohua L.G.A. On the North by Uvuawhu, & on the North-West by Omunawa & Elele. The town itself is a conglomeration of villages namely: Mgbo, Agwara, Omuokpirinkpi, Nkarahia, Omueke, Adanfu, Ogbodo, and more recent Azumini, which are bound together partly by alleged common ancestry and partly by historical contingency and accident. At present, Isiokpo is the headquarters of Ikwerre L.G.A. of Rivers State (Tasie, George, 199:76).

As for their economic life, the people of Isiokpo are predominantly farmers. They engage in production of Coco-yam, Palm wine, Fish, etc. but the most important are yam & Cassava which are planted in large quantities. As a people located within the Niger-Delta climatic condition with two main seasons namely, the rainy season and dry season. The rainy season takes place between March and November, the dry season occurs between November and February (Tasie Finface, 2016:42). With regards to their religious life, there is unshaken belief in the existence of a supreme being to which the people refer to a Chiokike (the creator God of the universe). Isiokpo, like other traditional African societies do not approach Him directly, rather He is approach & worshipped through the pantheon of Divinities (Tasie Finface, 2016:42).

Festivals: An Overview

According to Quarcoopome, T.N.O. (1987:87), Festivals are annual gathering at which the whole community meets to honour and give thanks to God, the divinities and the ancestors. More elaborately Ejizu, C.I. (1990:134) defines it as any species occasion, observance or celebration which may be religious or secular in nature and which is generally marked by merry making, performance of music and the like. A.S. Hornby (2000:45) also defines festival as "a day or period of the year when people stop working to celebrate a special event, often a religious one". Similarly, Abraham Ayinelechi (2013:236) defines festival as an event, usually and ordinarily staged by a local community, which centers on and celebrates some unique aspects of that community. Significantly, on traditional

African societies, festivals generally are used to energize the spirits and renew covenants with the goal. Thus, festivals are seen as supreme acts of worship offered periodically to established and thus sustain the cordiality that exists between the invisible, spiritual realm and visible, physical realm African religious thought. It is believed that the two realms cannot function independently without the others. Also, festivals bring together the whole community and provide an occasion for the renewal of fellowship between members of the same tribe or clan or lineage (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004:99). In the remaining section of this essay, we shall examine festival associated with Ali-Isiokpo annual festival according to my respondent, Nzirim Isaac, begins with the spiritual preparation. Significantly, it enables the priest to prepare himself in order to be ritually clean, pure and acceptable before the arch-divinity. To get this done, the priest has to undergo certain ritual seclusion. Since the ritual is expected to start on Akwo-Ali, the sacred arm of the deity, on the *we owho*, the priest is expected to abstain from sexual relationship, to eat certain foods, to communicate with people. By observing this, the priest not only makes himself spiritually fit and able to celebrate the festival, but also able to enhance his purity thereby setting the atmosphere into sacred mood for the great festival. When this has been accomplished, the priest can now proceed to the physical preparatory aspect of the festival. (Nzirim I. 17/11/2019 oral testimony interview)

With regards to the physical preparation, it begins with the announcement of the date of Ali-Isiokpo annual festival. Like I said earlier, the announcement does not take place until the spiritual preparation has been accomplished. According to oral testimonies, the announcement of the date is the exclusive preserve of the priest. He does this without anyone, his cult functionaries inclusive. When the date has been announced, the priest will pass the information across to the Isiokpo Council of Traditional Rulers and Chiefs who will in turn inform their various subjects and communities. This is significant in the sense that it ushers in peace and love in the land. Also, it forbids people fighting or quarreling, to spilling of the blood of a

neighbor, to stealing. In fact, any form of violence capable of disrupting the festival is prohibited. This in turn launches the entire villages of Isiokpo not only into festive mood, but also into a period of sacredness.

Based on this, it is believed that whoever fights or spills blood of his fellow kinsman be it accidental or deliberate not only desecrate the land, but also offended the gods of the land. In consequence of this, people are compelled to adhere to these injunctions in order not to incur the anger of the gods. This further explains why high degree of cohesion is sustained throughout the festivity. During the festivity, the whole community works like bees decorating and painting their houses. People also spend money on drinks, food items, etc to host their friends and relatives. Parents also buy clothes for their children, shave and braid their heads in colorful patterns. During the festivity, all the Isiokpo sons and daughters living outside are expected to return home observe the festival (Azunwo, F. 15/10/2019, oral interview). In addition, there is the general cleaning and decoration of the shrine of Ali-Isiokpo deity. All the grasses in the shrine including the surroundings are weeded and cleaned. It gives the shrine a more captivating look. Also, the emblems in the shrine such as the sacred pots of Ali-Isiokpo deity, cutlass, iron bars, etc are adorned with white clothes.

More importantly, the walls of the miniature house in the shrine of Ali-Isiokpo are bedecked with some patterns of colorful drawings. It also add more beauty to the whole scenario. Trees such as *Aboshi* (baphianitida), *Ikini* (newboundialaewis), etc erected about the main shrine; regarded as the most sacred where the deity receives offerings, sacrifices, etc are adorned with white clothes and pristine of palm fronds. All these among others, constitute part of the activities marking the preparatory stage. Significantly, it is a harbinger that Ali-Isiokpo deity annual festival is about to take place (Oparum, V. 20/10/2019, oral interview).

As for the actual celebration, it does not take place in the shrine of Ali-Isiokpo deity rather it is celebrated at Mgbouwhara play ground of Isiokpo. It begins on *nkwo-Ali*, the sacred day of worship. The festival is declared open with six terrifying gun shots; a signal that the festival has begun. This

is followed by salutation by the priest. The priest by way of dancing recognizes the presence of all and sundry by waving round his hands with discernable smiles and deepened enthusiasms on his countenance. Next, is the presentation of tray-full sliced roasted yams. As customs and tradition demands, the priest is expected to be the first person to pick a slice and consumes; an act which signify that the priest has eaten the new yam. When this is done, people can now proceed to collect theirs.

This is closely followed by offering of items by each community elder on behalf of his community. Studies in this regard reveal that the items signify friendship and cordially among the communities; with this, the communities through the priest asks for Ali-Isiokpo's blessings and protection during the year and years to come (Wobodo, A. 25/10/2019, oral interview). Next, is the presentation of items to the deity by those who came to fulfil their vows. This is accompanied with prayers by the priest. The next is marked by offering and presentation of items to the deity by those who came to show gratitude to the deity for blessings, favor and protection, they have received from her. This is also complimented with prayers by the priest. The priest is expected to appear on red George wrapper gorgeously tied on his waist with white Don to compliment it with (Imenwo, C. 10/11/2019, oral interview).

The climax of the festival is marked by formal offering and presentation of sacrificial items such as she goat, hen, locally distilled gin, alligator pepper, native kola, (with four valves), palm wine (that doesn't touch the ground), etc to Ali-Isiokpo deity at the most holy of the holies (that is, where Ali-Isiokpo deity receives offerings, sacrifices and so on) in conjunction with the owhor- holders and other traditionalists of Isiokpo. The festival attracts people from far and near. Generally, the festival is characterized by merry-making, display of traditional music and dance and so on. As for the significance, one noticeable religious significance of Ali-Isiokpo festival, which is the most important, is that it is observed in honour of the deity. For instance, through the festival meals and the immolation of the sacrificial items avenue is created for communion and communication among the

devotes on one hand, and between them and the objects of worship on the other hand. Apart from this, it is an opportunity by which the dangerous Isiokpo people express their inward feelings and faith in their beliefs about their relationship with Ali-Isiokpo deity. Socially, it brings together the indigenous Isiokpo people and provides an occasion for the renewal of fellowship, communion communication among the people. Another social significant of Ali-Isiokpo festival in traditional Isiokpo society is that it provides an opportunity by which the people exchange pleasantries and this renew the bond of friendship and other forms of existing relationships. In addition to this is the economic significance of Ali-Isiokpo festival. It provides wealth for the priest. For instance, it is on this day that supplicants usually come to show gratitude to the deity for favour, protection, and blessings they received from her, such gratitude may attract such items as goat, fowl, tubers of yam, George wrapper, plantain, walking stick, umbrella, cash (i.e. money) etc. another noticeable economic significant is that it boost the stock of traders in the community. For instance, it is a period when traders in Isiokpo exorbitant profits from their sales as people go to their shops to buy food items, drinks, and so on to celebrate the festival (Alexander, E. 15/10/2019, oral interview).

Statement of the Problem

The place of the festival associated with Ali-Isiokpo deity in tradition Isiokpo society over the years cannot be over emphasized. It provides an opportunity by which the indigenous Isiokpo people express their inward feelings and faith in their beliefs about their relationship with the Ali-Isiokpo. It brings together the indigenous Isiokpo people and provides an occasion for the renewal of fellowship, communion and communication among the people. Thus, it provides an opportunity by which the people exchange pleasantries and renew bond of relationship and other forms of existing relationships.

Despite this, the place of the festival also with Ali-Isiokpo deity in the life of Isiokpo people has continued to escape scholar's attention in the

sense that no research has ever been carried out on the festival. Apart from this, genuine votaries of the deity are dying. Also, since traditional Isiokpo society, like other African societies depend largely on oral traditions as sources of information about her religious practices. It is discernable that if no work is done on the festival associated with Ali-Isiokpo deity. It is likely that in the nearest future the place of the festival in the religion socio-economic life of the people will be forgotten.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is:

To examine the religio-socio-economic significance of Ali-Isiokpo deity festival in traditional Isiokpo society and to see how this has helped to promote peaceful cohesion among the people especially in this era of a rapidly changing world, where values are on the fast decline.

Methodology

Data for this study were collected from two major sources: Oral and secondary sources. Oral sources (interviews with indigenous Isiokpo heros gender). Secondary sources (published materials). The study adopts phonological approach. With this approach, the researcher was able to analyze, interpret and describe data as they unfold without forcing in and forcing out meaning into them.

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