

## THE SECULARITY OF THE SACREDNESS OF THE PRIESTLY OFFICE IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES

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### Abstract

*The priest in African traditional societies had a unique place in the totality of the people's life. Primarily, they stand between the people and God. They are thus the bridge between the devotees and the object of their worship. It is therefore not surprising that they hear and speak on behalf of one to the other. This is why the priest is regarded as a sacred specialist and the religious symbol of God among his people. They have a language of their own, their own symbolism, knowledge, skill and practice, which is embedded in their 'office personality'. In this piece, the researcher engages in a study of the place of the priest in African traditional societies, their call and installation. The researcher discovers that not minding the sacredness of the priestly office, it also has secular dimensions, which are political, economic and social. This is where it is necessary to distinguish between the 'priestly office' and 'priestly status', and his 'sacramental acts' from other actions.*

### Introduction

Most African traditional societies believe that the world is inhabited by myriads of spirits, both benevolent and malevolent; and these spirits in one way or the other affect the activities of human beings, the life of plants and animals. The outcome of this belief is the understanding that every event in the life of someone is either a reward or punishment from the gods for something done by the person in question or by his or her ancestors. To remedy the situation, sacrifices are offered. However, before any sacrifice is offered, people with special functions in the society are consulted to know the kind of sacrifice that is required for the appeasement of the gods (Onuigbo, 2009). People who undertake such functions stand as intermediaries between the people and the world of the spirits. They are regarded variously by different authors, as sacred personages, special men, sacred men, sacred specialists, but sometimes as 'specialists' (Mbiti, 1969). As specialists, they belong to a special category, they have a language of their own, their own symbolism, knowledge, skill and practice which John Mbiti calls their 'office personality'. Among these are the medicine men, rainmakers, kings and priests. They play significant roles in the life of African villages and communities (Mbiti, 1969). This

notwithstanding, the burden of this piece, is to unveil the ramifications of the place of the priest in the African traditional society.

### The Priest in Traditional Africa

Loosely, the term priest is used to include any religious leader. Mbiti (1969) observes that it is an institution that is stronger in West Africa than in other parts of the continent. It could either be a man or a woman, and in the case of a woman, she is called a priestess. Even though scholars like Arinze (2008) would argue that there are no women priests, especially in Igbo traditional religion. This is however, contestable. In the novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe (2008 p.39) wrote about women priests, one Chielo was described thus, "She was the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the hills and caves". One may wave it away as mere fiction. But we know that theatre fictions reflect a people's cultural life. Such that what is reflected in fictions disclose a people's culture. It is not just for entertainment, it has an educational dimension. In it acceptable values are demonstrated and propagated.

But strictly speaking, a priest is a person specially trained to mediate between a god and its worshippers, especially in sacrificial and allied matters. They are always ready to give consultations and spiritual advice and to do all in their power to tie down evil spirits (Arinze, 2008). The Igbo call him *eze alusi*, *eze* means *king* while *alusi* means *spirit*. When translated into English it means the king of spirit. In Nsukka he is called *atama*. In some parts of Owerri he is called *Nwanjo-oku*. In Asaba, he is called *Orhene*. But generally he is called *Onye isi mmuo* (*chief of the spirit*), *onye isi nchuaaja* (*sacrificer*), *onye na enye alusi nni* (*the person who gives food to the spirit*). However, the commonest name is *eze alusi* (Arinze, 2008).

Although every adult is considered capable of invoking the gods and soliciting their favour through prayers and offerings, it is only the priest that has the onus to offer major sacrifices to a particular deity (Cavendish & Innes 2009). Onuigbo (2009) adds that they help to preserve oral tradition, the myths and the body of religious concepts and ideas which constitute the people's heritage. It is also their responsibility to keep the shrine clean by sweeping or weeding of its environs. Ekwunife (1996), quoting Arinze and Metuh observes that the priesthood in African traditional societies is a public functionary attached to a particular shrine, temple or sacred grove where sacrifices are offered, and who performs sacred rituals on behalf of the people to the particular spirit who owns the shrine or temple. In this case, a priest is the priest of one spirit and its shrine, for example *Udo*. They take to the gods the cries and thanksgivings of people and receive from the gods, instructions and messages of doom or reward for the people; it is in this regard that Shorter (1998, p.73) refers to the priest as 'a ritual agent who officiates in religious worship on behalf of the community'. They manipulate supernatural forces

through established contacts with the gods and spirits. Pritchard (1996) further expatiates the priestly role of mediation when he observed that:

The virtue which gives efficacy to his mediation resides in his office rather than in himself. Consequently, it does not matter what sort of person he is, socially, psychologically or morally. The virtue derives from the office having been established by god at the beginning of things as a part of the social order (p.85).

However, Arinze (2008) observes that if there are defects which make it impossible for the successor to carry out his priestly functions, such as blindness or dumbness, such a person is disqualified.

There are times when there is a crisis of identity as regards who the priest really is. There are times he is called by authors as 'sorcerer', 'witch doctor', 'medicine man' or 'juju' priest. It is good to understand that a priest could perform all these functions. There are times when he acts like a witch doctor, or sorcerer or medicine man. However, a medicine man, a sorcerer or a witch doctor is not necessarily a priest. They are functions that could be fulfilled without being a priest on the one hand; while on the other hand, they are functions that could be fulfilled as a priest (Arinze, 2008).

### The Call to Priestly Office

Ebosele (2006) observes that in the traditional African setting, priests receive their call through any one of the following ways: apprenticeship, heredity, extraordinary signs through dreams and visions and Age.

1. **Apprenticeship:** Metuh (1985) observes that there are no institutions for training priests, the priest-to-be learns through observations. An aging priest will normally choose an assistant who is interested in the cult; this could be a close relative or a son who would in due course take after the aging priest. As the candidate continues with the training, he undergoes different duties such as errands, household chores, carrying materials for ceremonies and gathering of herbs with and for the master. During this period of training, usually nothing less than three years, the priest-to-be gathers much of the priestly sayings and practices, especially with reference to sacrifices (Arinze, 2008). Such candidates are sometimes given particular marks on their bodies. They have a particular attire they wear. They are expected to be totally obedient to their masters and are sometimes expected to be celibate and ascetic so as to discipline the mind and body. They might not be allowed to mingle with the outside world until their training is over (Ebosele, 2006). During the period of training among the Esan people, the candidate is to avoid alcohol, group palm wine taking, and eating with

people in public. They rather eat with their masters. Morality was the highest point and must be followed to the later. In Igbo traditional societies, those under formation are called *Oje Ozi* (messenger).

2. **Heredity:** There are times when one inherits the office of the priesthood. In this case, a child usually the first is chosen to take after the father or mother. The person who inherits the office also has to go through some apprenticeship from whomever he or she would succeed (Onuigbo, 2009). In this case, a particular family has the responsibility of producing a priest for a particular shrine. The reason for this particular demand could be as a result of the particular role played by someone from that family in the early days about the deity.
3. **Extraordinary signs:** One could also be summoned into the service by a deity during an ecstatic trance at a religious gathering. One could also dedicate himself or herself to a deity after being healed by it or having received a favour from it. These extraordinary events could include the invasion of a man's house by animals sacred to the spirit or extraordinary increase in animals like cows, goats, sheep (Arinze, 2008). This according to Onuigbo (2009) is interpreted as a call.
4. **Age:** There are smaller gods in every family that protect and provide for the family. There are also personal gods owned by individual persons. They are believed to care for and provide for the individual persons. In Igbo traditional societies, the family god is called *Aniobi*, while the personal god is called *Chi*. During marriage, naming ceremonies, circumcision and the celebration of milk-teeth the most elderly person in the family acts as the priest. He calls on the family god to come and take control of the occasion and bring it to a successful end (Onuigbo, 2009). When it comes to the priesthood of public spirits like Udo, Omaliko, Eke, Idemili and Amadioha, elders do not have the right to offer sacrifices to them (Arinze, 2008).

No one takes up the office of a priest who was not called to it in one way or the other. The office is not obtained by wealth or bribery. To go for the office without being called is to seek for immediate death.

### The Installation of Priests

The installation of a priest usually takes place at the shrine of the particular deity in question. It is the rite of installation that gives the priest his staff of office. It is a sign that he has been accorded the privileges and benefits of a priest. Onwubiko has observed that among the Igbos, there are four steps in the installation of a priest.

1. During the first stage in the installation process, one part of the priest is rubbed with *Nzu*, and the other with *Uhie-cohise*, chalk and cam wood respectively. This is the rite of purification. This rite signifies that he has a dual nature, half man, half spirit, and as such, a go between among human beings and the gods. *Uhie* is

part of the mortuary preparation of a corpse before burial; it signifies that he is dead, and as such belongs to the world of spirits. *Nzu* is usually rubbed on the body of new born babies, as a symbol of life (Onwubiko, 1991). The idea of death and life symbolized speaks of the priest as intermediating between the world of humans and the dead.

2. In the second stage, he is worn the priestly garment of the deity. This shows that he now belongs to and participates in the world of the deity in question (Onwubiko, 1991).
3. In the third stage, he is worn the anklet of the deity, which establishes a union between the priest and the deity. A union which only death can break (Onwubiko, 1991).
4. The fourth stage, the priest-to-be carries the sacred symbol of the deity in a sacred pot or basket to the deity's market. This is regarded as *ipu ahia muo*. It is a public appearance of a new priest, during which he is acclaimed and proclaimed a new priest of the deity in question (Onwubiko, 1991).

The celebration usually ends with a feast during which other priests and relatives are entertained (Metuh, 1991). This celebration according to Francis Arinze takes place only when the succeeding priest has gathered enough money to foot a rather costly festival. He would have to invite all the other priests of all the spirits in his town and also the titled men (*ndi Nze*), and perhaps all the daughters of the village married elsewhere (*umuokpu*). The celebrations vary in solemnity according to the importance and influence of the spirit in question.

### The Dimensions of the Priestly Function

The priest has a special role to play in African traditional societies. This role is not limited to the shrine. To understand the priest's role outside the shrine, we need to distinguish between 'priestly office' and 'priestly status', between the 'sacramental acts' or roles he performs which only a priest can perform and the other acts which he performs because of the high regard in which society holds him.

#### 1. Religious functions

The religious function of a priest is what we have already enumerated. He officiates as a mediator between the gods, spirits and the people in all cultic matters like sacrifices, offerings, prayers, blessings, curses, administration of oaths, libations, etc (Ebosele, 2006).

#### 2. Social functions

The training of a priest is always communal oriented. Communal in the sense that priesthood is for the people, priests are consecrated for the entire community and society. He therefore ensures a healthy social interaction among the people through the mechanism of religious intervention techniques. This may include the

administration of oaths for the restoration of confidence among people in each other. He is highly involved in the social celebrations or festivals of the people. He adjudicates justice to offended parties and brings to light the sacred dimensions of a people's taboos, mores and customs (Ebosele, 2006).

### 3. Economic functions

The priest's duties also have an economic dimension. Like kings and queens, he enacts laws and sanctions governing the economic life of the people. They regulate the seasonal rhythms of nature for economic activities through festivals. Like among the Igbos and Esans where yam is one of the basic sources of income, the priest through the god of the land, called *Ohen* in Essan and *Ana* in Igbo introduces festivals during which this god is honoured so as to boost the fertility of the soil for economic development (Ebosele, 2006).

### 4. Political functions

In traditional African societies, no political system ever does without a priest. His role is absolutely crucial. They are needed at the installation and coronation of kings, queens, celebration of festivals, the initiation of youths in the community, purification rites in national crisis etc. They serve as judges, guardians and directors with regard to the general wellbeing of the community in which they live (Ebosele, 2006).

## Conclusion

The African has a strong idea of the priesthood. This becomes very important for consideration since the African has always felt the need for a special mediator between himself and the object of his worship, especially in the area of sacrifice. These priests are the repositories of knowledge, practice and the religious life of the community. They are the ones that make the history of African traditional societies sacred and religious. As such, Africans appreciate their presence in every community. Without them, African societies would lose sight of and contact with their religious universe. And this only reveals that even though Christianity seems to have eaten deep into the African, there are still instances of continuity with the primeval worldview. Here is a true case of the change of affiliation without change of conviction.

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