

MATRILINY AND THE SANCTITY OF YAM AMONG THE CROSS RIVER IGBO

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Abstract

*There are certain categories of property that members of the matrilineages among the Cross River Igbo area cannot dispossess of the offspring of their deceased brothers without his permission while he was alive. The seizure of the yam, which had, and still has, severe consequences checked the excesses of the **Ikwu Umunne** (matrikins) who readily swooped on their brothers' property at their death. The paper concluded that the spirituality of, and the reverence accorded to yams, its cultivation and God, **Nfijioku**, prohibited its seizure.*

Keywords: Matriliney, Sanctity, Yam, Igbo, Cross River

Introduction

The Cross River Igbo area is one of the five subcultural groups that make up Igboland. The area lies to the northwest of the Cross River valley and comprises the Abam, Edda, Ihechiowa, Ohafia and Ututu, among others. However, there are differences in opinion regarding the communities that really make up the Cross River Igbo. Philip Nsugbe and Ogbu Kalu have included in their classifications the Nkporo, Abiriba, Ezza, Ikwo and Ezzikwo, Afikpo, Uburu, Okposi, Unwana, Igbere, Isu, Ukwu and Arochukwu. Significantly, only the Arochukwu are not matrilineal (Okoko, 1983; 1986; 2015).

The Cross River Igbo communities are spaced into slightly different vegetation zones, from the derived Savanna to the tropical rainforest zones. It has an alternating wet and dry seasons. The people practice sedentary agriculture which has encouraged the maximal concentration of populations. This, therefore, does not entail the periodic uprooting of settlements and their relocation to unfarmed areas. Rotational bush fallowing is preferred and it is largely employed to increase the yield of exhausted soil and it also reduces the risk of premature re-cultivation of tracts of land.

The Cross River Igbo people have a root crop economy, and the cultivation of some of the root crops is regarded as prestigious. There are a variety of yams, such as white yam (*Dioscorea rotundata*) which in turn has varieties, namely, Akuru and Eziji; yellow yam (*Dioscorea cayensis*) – Oku, which matures late; and water yam (*Dioscorea Alata*) – Mbila (Mvula), which matures early and is not popular. It is used in supplementing white yams between March and May which marks the period of

the planting season every year. It was, and still is, not prestigious if a man cultivates/cultivated only water yam.

Yam is not indigenous to Africa. But the varieties of yams available for consumption and cultivation raise the issue of the existence of indigenous species that would have been domesticated from the wild. These are in addition to the ones introduced from outside, specifically overseas, into Igboland. The origin of yams is not what this paper seeks to survey but what underpins the spirituality attached to them to the extent that they are revered by the people and cannot be seized like other property, such as houses and hoes, by the matrikins among the Cross River Igbo. It becomes pertinent to survey “yams” from the points of cultivation to harvesting which has assumed the dimension of rituals and underpinned by festivities in all of Igboland. This is because the reverence associated with the cultivation is well planned, thought out, and associated with the people’s religion and sustenance. It is a man’s product and certain aspects of its cultivation, such as mound making and staking, are carried out by the men (Okoko, 2014).

Yam Cultivation

Bush clearing usually starts in earnest in January and is usually finished by the end of February, to avoid the coming rains. Expert climbers lop off the treetops, **igbo elu**, and sticks for staking yams are collected in the process. In the first week of March, when it is felt that the bushes have dried well, the lineage heads give the order for their burning. This is done in a bid to avoid a situation where some will not be well burnt. The ash base formed as a result of the burning serves as manure. During mound making, care is taken to mix effectively the outer layer of earth containing the ashes with the inner layer.

Four days after bush burning, though this varied, un-burnt sticks and tree stumps are removed from the land surface for easy making of mounds. This activity is known as **ikpa achichi**. Yam planting starts with the early rains and ends, usually, before April, unless the rains do not come on time. This is the time when women start planting other crops in-between the yam mounds. When the yam tendrils shot out, the men will stake them to the sticks cut during bush clearing. This process of staking is locally called ‘**igba akaji**’. The men are now relatively free from farm work, except that they make occasional trips to the farm, to see how the yams are growing. This is, again, when men embarked on wars in pre-colonial times, but they normally returned by early August for the new yam festival. One can safely say here that Abam military campaigns, except in emergency cases, were carried out after the planting season.

NEW YAM FESTIVAL

Preliminary activities leading to the new yam festival start between late May and early June, annually, marking the end of the planting season. This varies among the communities of the Cross River or Eastern Igbo because some start theirs from June. The season is enunciated with the wrestling '**Omume ngba**' festival, during which wrestling contests are held between compounds and sub-clans, to find out who is the best wrestler among the people and possibly represent them in inter-clan contests. The '**omume ngba**' festival is also a period when the remains of the last season's stock of yams are disposed off or eaten, to make way for the present season's bounty. This festival officially marks the end of famine, '**unwu**', which lasts between March and August each year, in most Igbo communities.

Two other events, preparatory to the new yam festival, are the '**ibu ite**' and '**ite ochichi**', which are totems symbolizing fertility. These sub-festivals mark the climax of '**omume ngba**'. At this time sacrifices are made to the earth goddess, '**ali**', the renowned deity of fertility and agricultural productivity. This ritual is performed by women who are past the ages of mating, their menstrual circles and are in their eighties (80s), as evidenced by their tapered and dangling mammary glands. These qualities imbue them with the required purity to qualify to sacrifice to '**ali**'. Except the loin cloths tied on their waists, they perform this ritual bare-bodied. As their solemn procession traverses the village, headed to the shrine of '**ali**', they sing thus:

*Ole nde wo
Iyabara
Ole nde wo
Iyabara*

(The mystical content of this song cannot be translated to the uninitiated)

Other deities sacrificed to are '**igwe**' - the sky god for its benevolence in bringing enough rains throughout the farming period, '**kamalu oba**' and '**kamalu agbata-uzo**' for guiding the barns and protecting all those going out of, and coming into, the village. They are expected to deal decisively with whoever comes to Abam with any evil intent. Rituals are observed in honour of their patrilineal ancestors and matrilineal ancestresses.

The '**omume ngba**' festival is also the period when maidens are initiated into womanhood. It is their official public outing adorned in the latest hairdos and '**uri**' (dye) robbed at certain parts of their bodies, indicating vital zones. The aim is to attract members of the opposite sex. It is intended to flaunt their chastity as symbolized in the way they are dressed, all bare-bodied, except for some three to four strings of beads, '**asii**' worn around their waists on skimpy waist cloth, showing off nice legs and fully formed, erect and bubbly breasts. The new yam festival also gives young men of marriageable age to sight, and possibly choose, prospective wives.

There is also the symbolic **'umuagbogo'** bath (maiden bath) in the **'Idogo'** spring in the Ozu village in Abam. The spring, which empties into a cave-like natural pool is so revered that the fish in it, that is of the catfish **'arira'** species, is deified. A bath in the **'Idogo'** spring is an annual purification rite for maidens in Ozu Abam. The fish are referred to as **'nwaoma'** (that is the beautiful children of the **Idogo** deity). Women who are having their menstrual flow and have given birth to twins are forbidden to set foot in this spring. During the pre-new yam festival of clearing the paths, **'ibuo uzo iyi'**, leading to streams and dredging the streams, **'ikwo iyi'**, of the accumulated silt of the previous season, the **'nwaoma'** fish, which are no longer scared of people as a result of the constancy of this activity, are carefully handled and praised in the process.

The efficacy of the **'Idogo'** deity was tested in immediate post-Nigeria-Biafra Civil War Abam. It is recounted that some Nigerian soldiers stationed in Ozu Abam, who unknowingly feasted on the **'nwaoma'** died afterwards. The corpses of these soldiers looked charred and dark, exactly like the skin of the **'nwaoma'** catfish. It is not in the people's account if the military authorities investigated this occurrence. Although traditionally ambiguous, these deaths were attributed to either diarrhea or acute dysentery (A. U. Agada).

Prelude to the new yam festival, an annual cleaning ritual is undertaken as a reception for the new yam. All the paths leading to major farm areas are weeded and trimmed. Women and young maidens embark on full-scale cleaning of streams, compounds and decoration of huts. Agada ⁴ thinks that the reason for such cleaning is to make up for the neglect during the farming period. The various compounds are made to wear new looks, preparatory to the new yam festival. The fences round the compounds are mended, and the huts, which in pre-Zinc and cement times, were either of mud or thatch, are remade and decorated with chalk, **'nzu'** and **'uri'** a species of ochre mixed or fermented in water with some herbs to produce an alluring fragrance and which could, also, ward off evil spirits. These decorations, in pre-zinc and cement times, came in various colours of red, yellow, brown and white. Although cement and zinc are now used in place of red earth and thatch, the annual cleaning ritual still takes place.

After the pre-new yam **'ibu ite'**, **ite ochichi'** and **'ikpirikpe'** ceremonies, comes the **'ikeji'**. The **'ikeji'** is a period when farmers embark on a test-harvest, to ascertain the extent of the maturity and size of yam tubers, prelude to proper harvesting and festival. The **'ikeji'** is the climax of the anticipated new yam festival. The songs sang at this time are indicative of the longing for new yams created by the period of famine, **'unwu'**. Sang essentially by children, it goes like this:

*Oreyi mo moo mooo
Ji nnam no ra-ubi na aguu mo
Moo! Mooo!! Moooo!!!
Ananta moo mooo
Kpogorikpo o! oo!! ooo!!!*

This song, which defies accurate literal translation, is aptly in regret, bemoaning why the 'ikeji' is not the actual harvesting of yams. The children wonder why there should be so many yams in the farms while they go hungry. The children range themselves at the entrance to major farm paths where those that went for the 'ikeji' would definitely pass enroute to the village, and sing after those carrying baskets, 'abo' of new yams. This gloating is associated with the traditional notion of the importance of yam as a food item. In another song (sang by the Afikpo - Ehugbo), the yam is portrayed thus (Agada):

*The yam is palatable
It has no bone
It does not need anything else to take with it
Salt, oil, pepper, it has them all
The yam is good.*

As is the practice in Igboland, eight market weeks precede the new yam festival in early August, terminating on an 'nkwo' day. Before the new yam festival proper, relatives and friends exchange pleasantries and gestures. Young unmarried and betrothed girls fetch bundles of firewood from the wild and give to their aged female relatives, friends and mothers'-in-law. This is known as 'nku ikeji'. According to Agada:

The girls do that to remind their relatives of their lineage and connections and also to make sure that those relatives and friends have sufficient wood to eat (sic) the new yam while the relatives in return give them gifts such as coconut and fish.

Young males also undertake to repair the cracked mud walls and leaking roofs of the aged, related or not. This act of compassion has been thrown into the dustbin of history, especially with the pervasiveness of wage labour. Close relatives and the Christian churches now carry out this responsibility.

To entertain the elders during the festival, certain age grades are mandated to undertake a hunting, 'igba nta', expedition to harvest enough bush meat that will be used in preparing a sumptuous meal befitting the occasion. It is usually the melon, 'egusi', soup with specially baked melon balls, 'ahu' eaten with pounded yam. These

delicacies are reproduced in all homes with assorted fish and meat. In appreciation of the role played by the family head, members usually made contribution of yams to him before and after the new yam festival. This gesture is known as **ivutaji**.

Although the Ozu Abam, for instance, are matrilineal, they are in practice unilineal, tracing descent not entirely from the mother's side but also from the father's lineage. However, it is the '**obi-asato**' eight patrilineal families among the Ozu Abam of the Ohafor sub-clan that enunciate the new yam festival after which the matrilineages join in the celebration (Okoko, 1986).

The period of the eight market weeks is marked by utmost peace, to the extent that anything that would cause or create any form of disturbance or misgiving is avoided. In pre-modern times, death at this period is seen as a taboo. The corpses of such dead persons are usually buried secretly and without rites. Or the bereaved family will keep the death unannounced. This is unlike in present times when the corpse will be deposited in a mortuary. The dead, at this period, are regarded as having defiled the land. Fighting, quarrelling and even crying are forbidden. Children will not be punished to the extent of inducing loud crying. In some Igbo communities, such as Ehugbo (Afikpo), the dead would be thrown into the evil forest as punishment for dying during a holy season. Others hold that the gods feast on such corpses.

After the **Obi-asato** initiates the new yam festival, having made sacrifices to appropriate deities, such as **Kamalu, Kamalu oba, Kamalu agbata-uzo** and **Nfijioku** - yam deity, the new yam festival starts in earnest at the last **Nkwo** market day of the Igbo eight market weeks. Families troop to their farms, carefully selecting, by adult males, the yam mounds, which are assumed to have matured and bigger tubers in them. Matured yams can be identified through the extent of the shriveled or dried leaves on the yam stems. The new yam festival marks the end of the Igbo year. Starting with the commencement of **Omume ngba** ceremony, each family makes sure that its stock of old yams are disposed of. At best, they are eaten up as a sign of the passing season - **Ichu ava**. The **Iri-ji** festival begets the **Igba-aju**, which is when relatives and friends invite or visit each other for feasting. It affords the people the opportunity to know how they fared during the farming and famine '**unwu**' periods, how good their harvests were, and how they celebrated the new yam festival. The annual new yam festival in most parts of Abam, is usually concluded by the **Igba Ekpe** ceremony, which comes up in early September. The **Igba Ekpe** runs through a period of four years, for any age grade involved in the maturity rite for both males and females (Douglas Kalu, 2013).

The Matrikins and Yams

The matrikins readily swooped, and still do, on the property of a deceased matrikin and deprive his biological children and wife of them. The property ranges from the movable to the immovable. Matriliney, which emphasizes the trace of descent and inheritance to the motherline views with fear any attempt to deprive the matrilineage its property. This is against the background that matriliney insists that property owned by the deceased revert to it since their brother's biological children and wife belong to another matrilineages, unarguably their mother's, where they stand to inherit property, titles and offices. Thus, leaving a matrikin's property to his offspring amounts to a total loss to the matrilineage and a double inheritance to the offspring.

The matrikins over the years and till the present (2016) seized everything that ranged from lands, houses and farms. Except in post colonial when fathers made it clear that certain of their property be left for their offspring. But this has been adhered to if the said property are privately- owned, independently of matrilineal property. It is common knowledge that some matrikins, in spite of such declarations, have attempted dispossessing the children. Some even went to the extent of vandalizing such designated property. This is, however, common if the children are not grown and could be intimidated.

According to Ukpai Uka (2013), the most important thing is for the father to point out to his matrikins what he wants the children to inherit before his death since there have always been squabbles over property. The irony of the situation is that matrikins were, and are still, not perturbed by the bonding between father and children (especially the sons who should have been their natural heirs) through consanguinity and upbringing. The matrilineage in the Cross River Igbo area has been the primal institution that determined, and still determines, inheritance and succession. It is so entrenched that even in post colonial times, with the trappings of modernity and Christianity notwithstanding, the **Ikwu umunne** could lay claims to even purchased or private lands and movable property, such as cars, houses and clothing.

In essence, whatever landed property which a father gives to the children, other than privately acquired ones, will revert to his Ikwu at his death. Ukpai (2013) further illustrated **Ikwu** prevalence when he narrated how the Ikwu Mgbereola to which he belonged retrieved a landed property which was rightfully given to his brother, David Uka. Continuing, David was given a piece of land to build a house by the Ikwu. But along the line, David discovered that the topography of the land was not suitable, as it will need a lot of money to check erosion, and sold the land to someone else who is not from the Mgbereola matrilineage, however, without consulting them. The **Ikwu** promptly forbade the buyer from laying claims to the land. This is in

spite of the fact that David's building on the **Ikwu**-given land had reached the DPC level. All logic succumbed to **Ikwu** principles.

According to Isaac Okorafor Ike (2014), Captain Chibuike Usim (retired) in Ozu Abam, for instance, had to buy back his father's car from his matrikins when there arose the controversy over who would keep the car. It was, and still, not the custom for the son to buy the car but because the bonding between Chibuike and his father was high and essentially because he could afford it decided to do so.

As mentioned earlier, matriliney is predicated on the fact that every biological father belongs to a matrilineage which is different from that of the wife to which their children traditionally belong, and from where they stand to inherit wealth; and that the wealth one gets from his mother's matrilineage is more substantive than the perishable property one could hope to inherit from his father, if any at all. This is because the tangible and immovable property, such as land and economic trees, belong to his father's matrilineage. The matrilineage is a communalistic/cooperative endeavour which has the duty imperative to protect matrilineal property. Yet, the yam cannot be seized by the matrikins. Certain events, as oral traditions recount, that occurred among the various communities of the Cross River Igbo led to the reverence of yams.

There are certain property which members of an **Ikwu** cannot seize or share without the permission of the deceased. In the absence of such permission, perhaps as a result of sudden death, the elders would supervise the sharing; making sure that the children of their dead brother got the greater share of yam seedlings for cultivation. In any yam barn, there are the type of yams that are for eating and the others that are for planting. The ones for planting which are usually smaller in size have a greater spiritual value attached to them since they anchor a continuum in yam cultivation. It was a kind of 'curse' for a man's plantable seedlings to drastically reduce in number. Sacrifices were promptly made to **Nfijioke** or **Kamalu Uzo Oba**.

Two examples have been used to buttress the sacredness of yams among the Ohafia. Before Nnam Kalu Eke died, he showed his children what rightly should be theirs after his death. That they should inform his brothers and sisters, or members of his matrilineage, in general, of his say so. He equally advised that his yams must only be shared amongst his children. But that if any member of his **ikwu** insists on having a share, the children should not quarrel with the person, the battle which has been declared between the living and the dead should be left for him alone to fight. Eventually, one of the sisters, who insisted, as a matter of **ikwu** principle, and pried off some yam seedlings from his brother's children without their permission, is said to have dropped dead enroute to her farm with the seedlings. Another example is the

refusal of a stepmother to give yam seedlings to her eldest stepson. We are told that she dropped dead, too, enroute to her farm with the seedlings.

Conclusion

This paper surveyed the spirituality of yams among the matrilineal communities of the Cross River Igbo. This has been buttressed by the fact that the matrikins who have the propensity to swoop on their brothers' property at their death. The emphasis placed on the cultivation, the processes of tending, harvesting and associated festivities, of yams imbued it with some degree of reverence and spirituality. The yam in Igbo culture has its specialist god "Nfijioku" that was sacrificed to in the event of low harvest of yams or its tendrils get blighted or eaten up by pests. The matrikins who deprived their brothers' offspring of yam seedlings all died mysteriously along farm paths. It is held that Nfijioku usually carried, and still carries, out the killings.

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