

## RELIGIO-POLITICAL RELEVANCE OF IJA-ELIJU RITUAL OF AGBADO-EKITI

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### **Abstract**

The paper examines political lessons from Ija-Eliju, a traditional ritual at Agbado-Ekiti meant to traditionally resolve power tussle between the power-wielding age-group, and its successor. The paper concludes that when a political system is imported to a culture, for it, to be sustained, the system must be grafted to the host culture. Nigerian democracy must seek its relevance in the context of traditional political system. This paper sets out to expose the cultic ritual of Ija-Eliju among Agbado-Ekiti people and the lessons inherent for Nigerian contemporary democracy. This article begins with introduction, then examines ritual, the traditional political structure of Agbado-Ekiti society, and finally the relevance of the ritual then the conclusion.

**Key Words:** Religio-Political, Ija-Eliju, Ritual, Relevance, Democracy

### **Introduction**

Among the people of Agbado-Ekiti in Ekiti State of Nigeria, an elaborate ritual takes place every nine years, which undoubtedly is the key to understanding their political life. In this ritual the ideals, values and expectations of the people are dramatized. The significance of this ritual is much more so because it is bound up with other facets of life; education, religion, economic and politics.

The Objective of this paper is to assert that rituals carry heavy symbolic imports than contemporarily stated, where ever they are enacted. In Ija Eliju ritual social friction is eased, while citizens are made into social and political beings. For us to exhaustively decode the lessons inherent in this paper, anthropological method is effectively utilized to gather the research facts, while phenomenological method is employed to systematize the findings. It was discovered that Ija-Eliju was not just a religious ceremony enacted every nine years to appease certain gods, but a deliberate cultic drama enacted to provoke peace and communal renewal politically among the cultural groups as power is peacefully transferred from Igbamo age-grade, to Oteyin age grade. In Ija-Eliju an internal mechanism is put in place to resolve conflict, entrench political culture of checks and balances fight despotic tendencies, and engrafting periodic communal regeneration. Stability is the major lesson of Ija-Eliju, and is recommended to Nigeria of today for consideration.

Ija-Eliju ritual is certainly a ritual in the rite.of passage; but it is remarkable and peculiar only in the sense that its operational meaning transcends the religious, more akin to public ritual enacted to ease social friction and to guarantee political stability needed for

human development, while enlisting divine affirmation in the process. Moreover, unlike the usual rite of passage interested only in introducing the child to the corporate community or making him a social being (Mbiti, 1969:121) through his preparation for responsible roles in the society by means of naming and initiation rites, this ritual is a key moment in the corporate rhythm as political and executive power is ritually transferred from one age group to another. Igbamo group controls the political and the executive arm of the traditional government in Agbado-Ekiti. Ija-Eliju ritual promotes and transforms members of Igbamo to Agba-ilu (elders) who control the legislative arm) and members of the other groups are promoted forward reminiscent of the educational system. This ritual once and for all-affect every age group, but the major actors in the battle are the Igbamo who must relinquish power, and the incoming group - Oteyin who must wrestle power away from Igbamo by becoming the new Igbamo.

A ritual is a set form of carrying a religious action or ceremony. It is a means of communicating something of religious significant through word, symbol, and action. Therefore a ritual embodies a belief or beliefs. The ritual word is powerful since it is spoken in seriousness and solemnity, and it is repeated everytime that ritual is enacted. Through the ritual action and word, people feel able to exercise a certain amount of control over the invisible world and the forces of nature (Jurdsevic & Olsen. 2016). In this way, according to him, man sees himself not just a passive creature in the universe, but a creative agent. For the purposes of ritual he uses almost everything at his disposal, including symbols, and colours, incantations and prayers as well as the help of mystical powers if necessary (Mbiti 1975:82). Ritual reveals values at their deepest level. Men express in ritual what moves them most and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed. We see in the study of rituals the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies.

According to Van Gennep's (1960) (Lukes. 2016) has three phases; separation, liminal or threshold period and a period of incorporation or aggregation. In the first phase-separation, ritual subjects perform symbolic rites to indicate that they have been removed from an earlier fixed point in the social group, they do not belong to that group any longer. Rites of separation may be expressed by ritual subjects going into seclusion, removal of clothes associated with their state, having their hair shaved, passing between the parts of an object which has been cut into two or under something (Metuh. 1987:187).

The Liminal or threshold period marks a very important period in the lives of the ritual objects. It is a period between two fixed phases. Separation and incorporation. At this period, the social status of the neophytes is ambiguous for they had left their former status and are yet to be incorporated into a new status. They are “betwixt and between”.

The symbols that stand for the neophytes in this liminal period are in some societies drawn from human biological processes or imagery of death, what Levi-Strauss calls isomorphic (Turner. 1976:96). The neophytes may be subjected to "burial" or even forced to be motionless for a long period.

According to Miller (Bruno, 1979:232) initiation ceremonies

are intended to cut off the youth from his negligible past as if he had died and then to resurrect him into an entirely new existence as an adult.

As the neophytes are not yet incorporated into a new status, they are symbolically treated as newborn babies.(John. 2016)

The phase of incorporation marks final stage in the rites of passage. The rites associated with this final stage demonstrate that the neophytes have achieved a new status. In a colourful ceremony, the tools associated with the new status may be handed over to them (Metuh. 1987:187).

Levis Strauss (Shorter, 1973:12) rather glimpsed rituals as a means of introducing harmony into the society. This is true of Ija-Eliju

### **Traditional Political Structure of Agbado-Ekiti**

The traditional society is structured for easy governance. At the very top is the Oba (king) who is a divine ruler. He derives his authority, as a divine being who is ritually the melting pot of the society. Prosperity and recession in the town is linked with his ritual person. He governs the town through the Agba-ilu and the Igbamo.

Next after the Oba is the Agba-ilu (The legislative arm). They are all above the age of sixty then the Igbamo group (50-60 years old) who performs executive functions, they initiate programmes and execute them after it has been sanctioned by the Oba and the Agba-ilu. The next groups is the Oteyin group (40-50 years old). They are waiting in the wings to take over the mantle of power from Igbamo. Other age grades are as follows: Orusu (30-40 years) Ojewere (20-30 years) Ataiyese (1 5-20 years).

### **Idotu**

At the interval of nine years the baton of power changes hands. Three months to Ija-Eliju. Idotu ceremony is done when the Oba and the Agba-ilu appoint a ritual leader (Olotu) for the Oteyin group after a thorough divination. The Olotu (Group Chief) will be carried ceremonially like a chief joined by other members of Oteyin group. A goat is killed and shared; the meat is used to touch individual members. They will now dance around the town with their ritual leader. Three months after Idotu, Ojewere group is sent to prepare the path to the grove for the ritual fight between Igbamo and Oteyin groups. The group after clearing the path must not go home directly but dance around the town with their hoes and cutlasses.

In the evening of the same day, the traditional trumpet will be blown signifying the beginning of the ritual war. The two warring groups cut their thorned clubs to be used for the fight. The fight is strictly between Igbamo and Oteyin age groups. The Igbamo who wields the executive power tries to maintain the status quo. This generates conflict of interest. Ija-Eliju is an avenue for the groups to confront each other and resolve their differences.

After three days of psychological warfare by the groups actively supported by their women when they dare, threaten, and intimidate each other in dances, songs, conducts and gesticulation. The two groups will enter the ritual grove accompanied by their Olotus (Chiefs). The Igbamo members are covered by palm fronds.

Only the Igbamo members will come out still retaining their palm fronds and their clubs. The Oteyin members by now would be unconscious in the grove. The family members and friends will enter the grove now to carry the unconscious bodies of members of Oteyin group. As they pass, the bodies are watered with pap solution. The Oteyin members will later resuscitate. The Igbamo group will later return to the grove, they must not meet any of the unconscious bodies; else the body will never regain consciousness.

### Riro

Three months after Ija-Eliju the two groups are summoned to the Oba's Palace. If a particular-Igbamo group has been unruly, the Oba and Agba-ilu may veto the call, meaning they will not be allowed to celebrate riro, hence no promotion to Agba-Ilu. In the meeting, the two groups will kneel down before the Oba. The Oba will critically assess the performance of the outgoing Igbamo group positively or negatively. He will later pray for the two groups. The moment they stand up from there, riro has commenced, lasting fourteen days. The two groups will dance and feast for days. At the end, the new Agba-Ilu members will be made to remove a ritual knife from its sheath. Whosoever failed in this respect must die before the end of the year. By the end of the riro, the former Igbamo group would have become **Agbailu**, and the Oteyin, Igbamo.

### Significance and Meaning

Ija-Eliju is first and foremost a religious ritual, though with manifestation of other societal structural variables. It patently conforms to Arnold Van Gennep's three stages in the rite of passage; separation, transition and incorporation. Idotu, which precedes Ija-Eliju, could be seen as mere preparation for the separation. The Ija-Eliju itself is the core of the ritual when the members in the two groups have been separated and in a transition. This is a period of aggregation, between two fixed terms. A period of **ambiguity**, in this phase people are metaphysically and sociologically remade into new beings with new social roles. This remaking of man involves the symbolic destruction of the old and the creation of the new. At this critical point, people are neither what they were nor what they will become. They are momentary anomalies, stripped of their former mode of being, ready to become something new.

Ija-Eliju further conforms to Victor Turner's (1970:50) structure of ritual, symbolic structure, the value structure and the role structure. The riro, which follows, is a ritual for incorporation of the two groups back to the society. Thus Ija-Eliju is seen as a religious ritual enacted for political end. In it, power is transferred. This is traditional democracy at its best! This ritual dramatizes the conflicts and tensions at, and between different structural levels within society. It is aimed at resolving crisis in intergroup **relationship** on a micro historical plane and re-establishing unity, security and prosperity. (Kertzer. 1989), (Ellis. 1998)

The traditional African society is imbued with internal mechanism for checks and balances to fight despotic tendencies. Dynamism of power and its uses seems to be more comprehended in traditional society than the modern African society with knack for producing stay-put rulers, who are more often than not killed or disgraced out of office. Perhaps this is more recurrent in societies with less than democratic set-up as shown above.

This small community is conscious of nature's dynamism. Nature abhors stagnation. Therefore, the internal mechanism within its culture guarantees stability by allowing the different age grade to roll with time, thus promoted. Democracy is meant to secure participatory involvement in democracy. There is no segment of Agbado society that is not esteemed. The different age grades are thus mandated with variant political responsibilities at different levels. The Oba is the only thread sustaining continuity, in the transfer of power from one group to the other.

The greatest lesson for Nigerian democracy is the combination of the transient and the seemingly **permanent** in this traditional arrangement

While the Oba who epitomizes the law and justice gives enduring stability to the polity, the different segments are encouraged to be politically involved in the active governance of the town, at different levels. This notwithstanding, the executive power could only be inherited and wielded by those who had been time-tested and proved to be politically virile. Certain requisites are demanded, patently tied to age and maturity. Power is transferred without physical violence or rancour.

Nigeria of today must accept that our political leaders must be tested in age and maturity. It is high time political neophytes were stopped from fouling the political atmosphere with deceit, and duplicity. Only principled, morally robust men should be trusted with the mantle of power.

The judiciary, the only permanent structure in governance should be strengthened to maintain its arbiter role to stabilize the polity. For Nigerian democracy to survive, the syndrome of "do or die" in quest of power must stop. Only credible characters should be allowed to enter the political terrain to contest. Whoever that is coming out must be somebody with something to offer the system. Our political scientists should look inwardly, into our culture and traditions, in fashioning out a credible political character for Nigeria. In doing this, our culture must be seriously considered.

The moral significance of this ritual is not less significant than the political import. It encourages the just use of power for fair play and development. Any abuse of power by the Igbamo group is punishable by the veto of Agbailu and the Oba from allowing them to perform riro ritual (incorporation to the society)

The ritual (Ija-Eliju) threw up varied symbols encoded with significant meanings. The Igbamo group's attire-spotted face with chalk marks, the garment of palm fronds, the thorned-club carried, all externalize the sacred values of power controlled by the group. The Yoruba recognize frond (mariwo) as a supernatural garment for gods. The Igbamo group holds power, which is sacred in trust for the gods. And this means political power must not be misused for any reason. Whoever abuses the political trust is punished by the gods when he fails to withdraw his sword from the sacred sheath during riro rites, which climax the Ija-Eliju ritual. This failure is punishable by death within the year.

The sacred sword's sheath is a mysterious material. The sword stretched inside is a symbol of power. It shows the interaction between the invisible world (represented by the sheath) and the individual Igbamo members; it is a covenant of sort to judiciously use power to the benefit of humanity. When the gods disallowed the sword from coming out of the sheath, it is a ritual message, that because the victim has abused the political power

entrusted to him, they (the gods) have incorporated the life of the victim to celestial realm, which within the year will materialize concretely in the death of the member.

This is a celebration of the universal truth that whatever you sow is what you reap, a timely message to all our ailing elite that power is transient and deadly wherever, and whenever it is abused. Political sensitivity and responsiveness is the hallmark of responsible leadership.

### **Dying to Conquer**

This simple society, perhaps because it is a simple society makes no pretense about the tussle that accompanies power succession. Thus a ritual outlet is created to ease out the present power wielders by making them to face their successors in ritual combat, where the latter subordinate position is asserted forcefully when they "die" only to wrestle out power from their conquerors. But by "dying" they are baptized to the spirit realm where they are made to participate in ancestral ingenuity and age long wisdom to succeed as the next executive arm of government. Initially they succumbed to the superior ritual and fire power of the Igbamo by slumping into comatose. They are brought home unconscious from the battleground, while the Igbamo group came home gallantly as the victors, but in actual fact were the losers, because they lost out in the power play. The Oteyin group died ritually to conquer politically. This greased the ego of the Igbamo group. The Oteyin group stoops ritually to conquer politically.

### **Communal Renewal**

In Agbado-Ekiti community the ritual of Ija-Eliju affords the society a periodic ritual and political renewal. At interval of nine years the Igbamo, that is the power-wielding group, drops the baton of power to a younger group, with more vibrant ideas and exuberant energy to move the society forward.

Nigeria and many other modern nations have something to learn from this. No society has anything to gain from cerebrally and politically spent forces.

For more than four decades now, the same set of ruling elite have been in control of power wielding in Nigeria. The same sets of vicious leaders are queuing up to rule Nigeria again. What remarkably different is to be expected from such leadership who are being re-circled?

Nature is dynamic, always in constant change, it abhors stagnancy of any kind. Man as the centre of nature personifies this fluidity, by absorbing, by rejecting, by adding and **by eliminating**, man; the crown of creation, in all sectors of life authoritatively stress this elasticity. The society, a sum total of a given people in a community, like chameleon, takes up this dynamic **colouration**. The dynamic expressiveness of the society is overtly demonstrated for it is privileged to replenish and to re-nourish itself from its abundant resources. The weakened part of its structures is made to give way to more virile, more vibrant, more potent ones, thereby like phoenix the mystical bird, its strength is thus periodically renewed and revived.

## Conclusion

Nigeria will do well to learn from this small town and look inward to internal values for the sustenance of democracy and developmental progress. No nation or people can thrive on a wholesome imported institution without commensurate inputs from the host culture.

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