African Traditional Religion in Igalaland, Nigeria (c. 1000 – present)

Fidelis Achoba*

Abstract: This study examines various aspects of African traditional religious beliefs in Igalaland which have been largely neglected by indigenous scholars, the objective being to bridge the gap in the historiography from c.1000 to the present. The period marked the beginning of Igalaland as a territory with central authority. This study adopts the use of primary and secondary sources: data was obtained from in-depth interviews with traditional priests, elders, archive documents, historical sites, textbooks and journal articles. For research purposes, it is imperative to note that the root of African traditional religion in Igalaland goes back to primeval times. The Ifa oracle played a vital role, as it dictated the reverential and sacrificial life of the people, by which they were cleansed of their abominations and gained the aid of divinities. Belief in the spirit of the departed was also of high importance. Unlike Western society, religion permeates every aspect of life in Igalaland.

Keywords: African traditional religion, Igalaland, Ifa oracle, divinities, God (ojo).

* Dr. Fidelis Achoba was born on 9th October 1965 at Idah, Kogi State, Nigeria. He got his PhD in History at Ibadan, Nigeria, 2014, his M.A. in History at University of Lagos, Nigeria, 2003, his B.A. in History and International Studies at Lagos State University, Lagos, Nigeria, 2001, NCE (Advanced level) History/Social Studies, 1997, among others. He has lectured in the Lagos State University External System (2006-2014), University of Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria (Sandwich Programme) at Lagos (2012-2014). Currently, he teaches History and International Studies at the Federal University Lokoja, Nigeria. His research interests include: pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial intergroup relations, religious studies, conflict and peace studies and Nigerian History. Contact details: Department of History & International Studies, Federal University, Email: fidelisachuba@gmail.com
Introduction

In 1942, J.B. Danquah stated that “the spirit of God is abroad even in Akan of the Gold Coast”\(^1\). In his book, he was making a case for African religion and for the belief in a Supreme Being. Describing religion itself, K.A. Dickson saw it “as a search for God and an organised attempt to escape from him.”\(^2\) To E.B. Idowu, traditional religion is man’s concept of deity and the idea of morality towards worshiping or serving the almighty God known as *Oludumare* in Yoruba. He states further that there is no religion where the principle of continuity and discontinuity is not manifestly in operation.\(^3\) Whichever way it is seen: religion exposes the belief in a supreme being seen as the creator of heaven and earth. The Igala people believed in the Supreme God called *Ojochamachalla*. There is much evidence to suggest a clear awareness of such a Being among many African peoples. This is followed by the belief in varieties of deities based on environmental circumstances and the veneration of the spirits of their departed ancestors. Many African peoples consider the lesser gods sons of the Supreme Being. Thus, African religious practice involved a constant keeping in touch with spiritual reality often through sacrifice. This comes as a result of the myth which sees man as being alienated from God because of


disobedience and waywardness. In spite of being considered lesser divinities, they were approached as ends in themselves.

The people believed that, after death, the spirit of the departed lingered on and was able to help their descendants. The Attah, who was the central head of the kingdom, was believed to have a direct link with the ancestors. As such, the Attah was looked upon as a divine being or a quasi-god. In the immediate Idah south, the pouring of libation formed part of their religious life. It involved mainly the use of native gin and sometimes refined local gin known as Ogogoro or kaikain, as well as palm wine.\(^4\) The pouring of libation was mostly used in ceremonies such as marriages, burials and chieftaincy titles; coronations, outdoor ceremonies, puberty rites and other festivals. They were poured on the ground for their ancestors or for any object of worship. The purpose of this was to obtain blessing from the spirit world. Sometimes, among the riverine Igala, libation was poured on water to appease the water god or goddess, as the case may be. It could be done by the individual or the community as a whole. It was also done in the event of an outbreak of epidemics to bring an end to such calamities.\(^5\)

The Igala people believed in the existence of a variety of spirits in rivers, trees, land, rocks and mountains. These spirits were also believed to move about late at night to see to the needs of their clients, while some could be on harmful expedition. This was the reason pregnant women were not allowed to move about at night, especially in the riverine part to avoid


\(^5\) Interview held with Hadizah Ahmadu, aged 80, retired politician and woman leader at Idah, 12 July 2015.
the wrath of the wicked spirit hovering around. This practice persists in present day Igala. The worship of an ancestor was primarily individual, although it was sometimes collective. The spirit of the dead is usually embodied in a calabash filled with ash and bound with a piece of cloth or string. This was known as Itu, Egu or Ibegu. A household may have many of these. A man would have one representing his dead father, another one called Iye representing his late mother and the third one, where available, called Oja representing his late father’s wives. These were treated with great respect as continual sacrifices were offered to them through oracle (Ifa) and dream revelations.

This practice was so strong in Igala society that the Attah would sometimes leave the Achadu’s compound, going through Egbe, where the Achadus were buried; he halted there to make a propitiatory sacrifice to the royal burial ground at Ojaina. He presented himself at the house of the Ugwolla (the keeper of the tombs), where he remained in close seclusion for eight days. During this period, he was shown the graves of his predecessors and was supposed to commune with their spirits. On the eighth evening, he would be presented with a garment made in the form of a child’s shirt by the Ugwolla. He proceeded that same night to Ofukolo, regarded as “the birthplace”. There he would be joined by the senior wife of the late Attah, before whom he had to display his nakedness and with whom he had to co-habit that night. At the end of this rite, the title of Iye-amone, now known as Iye-oja, was conferred on her and she became the

---

6 Interview held with Priest Mohammed Alfa Aruwa, aged 81, Onubiogbo’s clan head at Idah, 12 July 2015.
Chief Wife in his compound. Culturally, she was supposed never to be intimate with the *Attah* again. The explanation given for this is that the relationship linked the *Attah* with his predecessor so that the line remained unbroken. It has its parallel in the Jukun ritual where intimacy was practised between the *Aku* and the departed *Akus*.\(^7\)

Though he is head of the people’s belief and spiritual wellbeing, the *Attah* delegated some powers to his subordinate chiefs, such as village and clan heads – *Onus, Gagos* and *Madachis*. He was the spiritual head of the people because it was believed that the *Attah* was a direct descendant of *Ojo* (God), as claimed by the *Attah* himself. His forefather, *Aganapoje*, was said to be born directly from God. It was based on this assumption that successive *Attahs* have always claimed that “God made me after His own image: I am all the same as God: He appointed me a king”.\(^8\) In Igala society, the *Attah* had his priests, especially the earth priest in charge of the earth shrine. For instance, during the early phases of Igala settlements, the heads of the homestead, apart from other responsibilities, were in charge of the earth shrine.\(^9\) As a matter of fact, in the pre-Christian and Muslim missionary era, for any settlement to be successful, the earth god had to be appeased and worshipped. Each hamlet, village, town or community had an earth god whose worship was presided over by its priest. The significance of its worship were: (a) for the fertility of the soil, so that it could yield

\(^7\) Interview held with Priest Mohammed Alfa Aruwa, aged 81, Onubiogbo’s clan head at Idah, 12 July 2015.


good produce; (b) to avoid the wrath of the earth god, manifested via infant mortality and high death rate; (c) for peaceful settlement among members of the community and (d) to avoid invasion by enemies.  

On every occasion of the worship of the earth god, no one in the community was allowed to work on the earth or to use iron tools for anything. This worship usually took place either on Ukwo or Eke market days. However, there were very small number of villages who observed the worship of the earth god on Afor or Eke market days. Sometimes, depending on the level of urgency, it was necessary to propitiate with animal sacrifice an angry earth god, who must have been offended by moral decadence in the society as revealed by the Ifa oracle.

There are two broad categories of spirits, namely: the good and the bad spirits. The people use charms to keep the bad spirits away. The good spirits were usually implored to become personal gods or guardians known as Ojomi – (my god) in Igala. The dead ancestors also function as good spirits. The people believed that the good spirit enhances blessings of all types such as fertility, high crop yield, wealth and good health, while the bad spirits do havoc to farm crops or ruin the ones in the store and even cause insanity. By and large, spirits were generally messengers of the gods and of powerful magical men who sometimes invoke them for a particular assignment. Some of these spirits possessed trees, rocks, mountains, animals, streams and human beings. They also believed that people use the powers of evil spirits for witchcraft; the aim being to harm their fellow

10 Ibidem, p. 63.
11 NAK SNP 17/2445, Miles Clifford: Notes on the Igala, Ndoma and Okpoto, p. 22.
12 J. N. Ukwedeh, op.cit., p. 62.
human beings, including their property, if they so wish. This aspect of belief was mainly individual and not centrally controlled or managed by the king.

In the field of medicine, herbs were principally used for curing all kinds of deadly and periodic diseases like measles, small pox and chicken pox. Besides, there were medicines for diseases such as venereal diseases, infertility, fever, headache, stomach pain, wounds and anaemia among others. Some herbal medicines were family heritage and the knowledge was passed from generation to generation or to another family through blessing, or dependent on favours received or service rendered. The significance of medicine men in Igalaland was very important to the people. They had accumulated experience as ritual practitioners, hunters, warlords and naturalists who employed divination as a basis for treating serious illnesses. Such terrible diseases include snake bites, broken bones, swollen joints and chronic infections believed to be spiritual. Closely related to the above is the use of magic. Magic enabled people to achieve what they could not achieve naturally. It was used to control unseen forces. Its medium was through religious articles and incantation. In Igala society, magic was used for various purposes, especially for protection and defence. This practice is, however, not peculiar to Igala. It was a common practice among traditional African peoples in different places and societies before the coming of the Europeans.

13 Ibidem, p. 63.
Within the royal house and society at large, the practice of totemism formed an important aspect of religious belief. This resulted from a myth that traces imperative royal ancestry to an anthropomorphic leopard in a legend that states:

The first ruler had a daughter who went daily from the capital to collect firewood in the groove that is now called Ojaina. As she was visiting this grove, she met a leopard there who took the form of a young man. He wooed her and was accepted. So the young girl was going daily to meet her lover in the bush. He killed game for her and made presents of buffalo and other animals to her parents who began to be curious about the mysterious lover. When the girl told the leopard of the situation, the leopard promised to appear and fixed a time at which he would show himself to her. But when the leopard came out of the bush, the girl’s parents ran away in terror. So the leopard ran and hid himself again in the thick bush at Ojaina and went into the ground there. His lover later delivered a child named Abutu Eje, who was the founder of the royal clan. The Ojaina groove is the spiritual centre of the royal clans and forms the final resting place of all deceased Attah.\textsuperscript{15}

Based on that event, the leopard became a sacred animal to all Igala people until today. So much that in hunting, its name must not be mentioned, as this act was supposed to be enough to defile the hunting medicine that protect hunter against wild animals, especially the carnivorous ones. Besides, if its presence was seen or felt in the bush, the hunting had to be abandoned as a mark of respect, refusal of which portended danger. If a leopard died, its death was mourned in the same way as a member of the royal clan and the mourning period would not end until a member of the royal family had been sent from Idah to collect the pelt for

\textsuperscript{15} J.S. Boston, \textit{The Igala Kingdom}, Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1968, pp. 15-16.
the Attah who supervised the ritual burial of the leopard’s body. The eating of leopard meat is forbidden so as to not invite doom.

Other aspects of totemism in Igalaland are found in the riverine areas where certain animals were taken to be quasi-divine as a result of metamorphic assistance in the past. For instance, in Ogwu-Ajah, the crocodile was worshipped and is still paid homage to this date. This is a result of an oral tradition which claimed that at a time when the people of the community were in danger on the river Niger during heavy tide and their canoe capsized, a crocodile came and turned itself into a big canoe, salvaged the situation and took them across the river. The crocodile then became their god, receiving obeisance and homage from them. This kind of belief cuts across most riverine Igala people who had similar oral tradition. The belief in totemism is substantial in Igalaland and, as such, eating of such animals is forbidden. In confirmation of the place of totemism in Igala society, Madam Edeh Okoliko (late) stated that:

*a crocodile had saved her from drowning at the Ido-Okoliko water side near the market when she went to fetch water in the morning. She explained that her clay pot had slipped from her hand into the deep part of the water. She had gone after the pot only to slip further. Then, suddenly, a big crocodile threw her and her pot unto the bank. Looking back, she saw the big crocodile swim back into the deep.*

She further explained that because of the assistance of such an animal in those days, no indigene of Idah ever drowned in the river right

16 *Ibidem*, p. 50.
17 An account narrated by Madam Ojah Ede Okoliko (late) aged 82, at Idah, 20 June 1993.
from Ocheche to the villages along the left bank of the Niger. However, Islam and Christianity have changed the attitude of Igala people towards totemic deities. The possibility of being saved by a crocodile or any object in present day Igala is ruled out, as some people have started eating the forbidden animals.

In the plains of Idah, people worship some features of the environment. These they see as tutelary spirits or protective agents. The most conspicuous are mountains and rocks. The belief here is that spirits possessed environmental features and, if worshipped, could give refuge. The Udi hill range of Igalaland was worshipped for this reason. Human sacrifice was the highest and last resort to avoid massive disaster. In this case, the victim became a sacrificial lamb to redeem his / her people and, as such, is later worshipped as a god or goddess. This type of sacrifice was done as a condition for the gods to come to the aid of the people in critical situations like war, epidemic and so on. The victims of such sacrifice were usually undefiled persons such as a virgin or chaste person. Thus, in the light of the above, it is obvious that the Igala people of old believed in quite a number of totems and deities through which they venerated the Supreme Being. But today, Christianity and Islam, which became prominent in the late nineteenth century, have changed the attitude of the people, as well as reduced the value of these deities.

---

18 An account narrated by Madam Ojah Ede Okoliko (late) aged 82, at Idah, 20 June 1993.
19 Unanimous oral tradition collected at Ajaka and Adakpa, 7 June 2015.
Belief in the *Obutu* Spirit

Another important religious belief in Igala society was the belief in the *Obutu* spirit. An oral account has it that there arose a period of famine in Igalaland and the people cried to *Ojochamachalla*, the Supreme Being. In response to their cry, *Ojochamachalla* told them to take some Iroko Wood, burn it and put the resultant charcoal or ashes in a small vessel, promising to send a spirit to live there who will increase the fertility of the soil or land. He called the spirit *Obutu*, which means whirlwind or dust devil. He instructed the people to offer him food and, when the new crops were harvested, to give him some before eating themselves. The food must be cooked and placed on the vessel. This was said to prevent any sickness. The *Obutu* spirit thus becomes the god of fertility in Igala society.

The *Obutu* can be consulted by going to the *Obabo*, or Diviner, who was approached through the *Atama*, the man in charge of the *Obutu*. The method generally used by the *Obabo* was to throw the ‘*Iifa*’. Sometimes kola nuts or cowries were used and thrown like dice from a calabash. The meaning was usually read from the way they fell, which determined fortune or misfortune on the land.

The main *Iifa* oracle

*Iifa* has its origin in Yorubaland and forms part of the argument that the Igala originated from the Yoruba people or that they were Yoruba who migrated southwards. It is an instrument of divination practiced by those
mastered in it. It constituted another religious belief in Igala society. It consists of four strings, on each of which are four Kawo strings separated from each other by seven or eight cowries. The Obabo throws these out in pairs so that all four strings lie more or less parallel. The message is interpreted by the way the seeds fall, flat or round and it is read across thus:

Round flat, flat round,
Flat round, flat round,
Flat flat, round round.

Before throwing the Ifa, he lays the four strings on the ground and goes through a sort of invocation with the Ingono. This is a small instrument made from a goat’s horn, bone and the bone from the fin of the Kurungu fish which is considered best. Its length is between four to seven inches. The Obabo’s assistant first touches the Obabo’s mouth with it, and then draws it across the strings from right to left touching each of the seeds, saying:

If you are sleeping, wake; if you see palm oil tell me; if you see blood, tell me.20

The invocation may vary, though he also asks what he shall give the spirit world to cure sickness – or whatever is the case before. A fowl or goat may be demanded if need be. Its blood is then poured on the ground. The person consulting the Ifa may be asked to provide white lime that will be used to rub the inside of the kawo seeds if more consultation was required.

20 NAK/SNP172445, Anthropological and Historical Note On Igala, p. 3.
Having made the invocation, the *Ifá* priest touches the ground three times with the point of the *Igono*. This is to drive any evil spirit into the ground. He thus puts the base of it to his mouth and would repeat the request for whatever information was desired. He then draws the base across the strings, touching each seed as he did before with the point. He then lays the *Igono* on the ground to the right of the *Ifá* and throws the strings two at a time again and again, repeating the request for clearer information, saying: “Let the spirit of *Ogbe Okala* come here and tell me what I want to know”. In the story of the *Ogbe Okala*, he was a fair chief justice who was killed by violence so many years ago. In Igala belief, the name of any just man who had died a violent death would do the same. After saying this, he again taps the seeds. If the bottom row of the seeds face downwards, this is usually a very bad sign, and some great misfortune, such as the death of an influential person may occur.21

**Belief in the Thunder god**

Another religious belief that prevailed in Igala society was the belief in the god of thunder, known to the Yoruba as *Ogun*. This is yet another evidence of a Yoruba-Igala relationship. The god of thunder is known as *Akpabana* in Igala society. *Akpa* means hard tree, while *bana* means split. *Akpabana* thus implied breaker of strong trees, which signified the violent nature of the god. Some say it is the messenger of *Ojochamachalla*, as it carries out orders from the Supreme Being and kills whom he decrees to

21 NAK/SNP 17445, *Notes on the Igala, Idoma and Okpoto and Customs and History*, p. 3.
die. It can also be manipulated by a powerful thunder priest when he strongly hates the accused and thus attempts to prove his guilt by sending a lightning bolt to strike him during rain fall. The Igala people believe that Akpabana contains a spirit, given to it by Ojo. It is also used in administering an oath, and anyone swearing falsely on it is expected to be killed when the next ‘Rains’ come.\(^{22}\) The god of thunder naturally killed the evil doers in society in the pre-Christianity and Islamic period. Thus, during rain evil doers were usually afraid of being in the open air for fear of being struck by a thunder storm. To a great extent, it was a cleansing god, except that in some cases it could be manipulated. However, there is a specific tree known as Obobo in Igala language that diminishes the power of thunder. Anywhere the tree is, it swallows lightning when it attempts to strike at something else.\(^{23}\) In Yorubaland, this thunder god was a mystical human being who spat out fire when speaking. He is known as Ogun. Unlike in Igalaland, his worshippers put on red clothes signifying blood and fire.

**Belief in Ancestors as Protection against the Enemy**

In Igala society, belief in ancestors was almost a way of life. People believed in the ability of their ancestors to protect and defend them. Hence, they worshipped them religiously and at times offered sacrifices to them. Ambegu are the spirit of the dead. In other words, it is the name given to the spirit that attends to the fortunes of families. Allegedly, some have the

\(^{22}\) *Ibidem*, p. 5.

\(^{23}\) Field work in the Ibaji area of Igalaland, 7 August 2008.
power to kill evil doers or trespassers on family property. They also make
the adulterer to become sick or die, if she refuses to confess. As for the
men, they were traditionally polygamous and, as such, were not punished
by the ancestors when they had extra marital affairs, except with
somebody’s wife. This was due to the fact that the ancestors kept the same
tradition which was common to most African societies, where polyandry
was absolutely forbidden. In the case of atonement for such sin, Ifa was
usually consulted on what to use to appease the spirit of the ancestors.

A common symbol or juju which attracted the spirit of an important
ancestor was an iron spear, about five feet in length, possibly longer
originally and intended to be the height of a man. This was thrust into the
ground leaving half of the blade exposed and a cloth called Awkwa was
wound round it or tied to it. This also was used for oath taking, and, if
anyone subsequently died who had sworn on it, he was alleged to have
sworn falsely. A year was generally allowed as the time limit for the oath
attached to the spear to take effect and any charm the victim may have worn
was taken and tied to the spear. A small hut was usually built for the juju
spear.24 A common form of prayer to Egu on a personal matter, after
sacrificing a black cock, is: “with this spear, kill my enemy in the night”.25
If success was achieved when such curse was pronounced, a white cock is
sacrificed. There appears to be a distinct connection of white with good and
black with evil in the Igala mind, which seems to correspond to the old
English idea of white and black symbols.

24 NAK/SNP 17445, Notes on the Igala, Idoma and Okpoto and Customs and History, p. 5.
25 Interview held with Atabo Omede, traditional priest, at Idah, 12 July 2015.
Belief in the Invocation of Royal Ancestors through the use of a Cognomen

The royal ancestors comprised four ruling houses in Igalaland. In the beginning, there were the three direct sons of Attah Ayegba: Akumabi, Akogu and Ocholi. Akumabi succeeded their father, Ayegba, whereas his younger brothers, Akogu and Ocholi, succeeded him accordingly. However, two of Akumabi’s sons succeeded Ocholi respectively and this made the ruling lineages become four ruling houses, as Akumabi’s lineage split into two. Thus, any of the offspring of these ruling houses who ascended the throne has the right for the invocation of the royal ancestors through the use a cognomen.

The cognomen consists of poetry praising the past and present Attah princes and their supporters based on their historical achievements and weaknesses. Through the use of a cognomen by an incumbent Attah, he can implore the spiritual assistance of a particular late Attah by invoking the power of Otutubatu, the royal ritual staff. One can also interpret the political history of Igala through these specific praises and proverbs attached to the past Attahs of the Igala kingdom.

Some notable Igala cognomens are as follows:

- *Ayegba, akp’onu Apa ki a kp’onu Ichi* [“The one that kills the Jukun king (Chief of the north-east) will also kill the Ichi king (Chief of the south-west)”]. As Ayegba Oma Idoko conquered the Jukun and established political independence for Igala, he will further do the same for Igala in case of
external aggression. *Apa* in Igala refers to Jukun, who were conquered by *Attah* Ayegba during his military campaign, while *Ichi* refers to the people situated in the west of Igala, who were conquered by *Attah* Ayegba during his expansionist military campaign. The people here referred to the immediate neighbours in the south-west. The religious implication was the alleged power of the past *Attah* to save the kingdom any time he was invoked, especially at the time of adversity.

- **Imotoru, le Omi Kafu Kerebo** [“A child runs from rain but the wind storm that follows the rain catches up with him”]. This is the second praise name of *Attah* Ayegba Oma Idoko, the protodynastic royal ancestor, represented by *Otutubatu* staff. Metaphorically, it refers to the king’s position of greater challenges that befell him when compared to his father, from whom he took over. This level of invocation was usually done at the peak of challenges in the kingdom in reference to how *Attah* Ayegba surmounted similar events in his time.

- **Ayegba Obaka, *ela ina abotifi gonogono***: this literally means “Ayegba, the sacred animal that has long tail”. In this context, he is identified with the leopard, the mythical beast of the royal lineage. Thus, the leopard is called *Omataina* to this day in Igalaland. It is revered, adored and worshipped. Its name remains sacred and must not be mentioned on
hunting expeditions; leopard sightings send hunters home for the day. This praise signified Ayegba’s royal descent power. Though he was not the first Attah, the power of this cognomen was really manifested in him as the founder of Igala dynasty.

- **Aji ina ki da ane Idoma**: “The sacred great stream that is in Idoma land.” This is spoken praise of Idoko and it refers to the tradition that he died in river Benue. Idoma, in this regard, was the ancient Idoma kingdom whose headquarters were immediate north of Benue, now the Doma in the Nasarrawa State of Nigeria. This praise helps in terms of danger from water spirits.

- **Aku Otemeje, Oma Idoko, Kwu, Ka, Oma Wu, Meji, Mu, Do Onu** [“Aku the mighty son of Idoko died and two of his sons succeeded his throne respectively”]. This praise signifies the breaking of the royal houses into four, apart from the hitherto three ruling lineages which were the Akumabi, and Ocholi and Itodo ruling houses. This cognomen is usually used by the forth ruling house of the Itodo lineage to invoke its royal ancestral power at the time of need and also in remembrance of its ruling house.

- **Amocheje Ideji ti’ikwu ka ayi, lo be’ekata** – it means “Amocheje took two of the heirs and tied them up to make the third one afraid”. This praise name is associated with the war in which he fought two ruling opposing houses that
made the third one afraid before he secured the throne. This praise poetry is usually used by his lineage in the face of succession dispute, when the heir apparent of his ruling house is facing challenge to secure the throne and while he is being threatening on the throne.

- *Onu Okpaku kiya bi Ona* – this cognomen refers to Ayegba’s eldest son Akumabi, who fortified Idah, the capital of Igalaland, by building ditches and walls round the city against enemy aggression. This verse is therefore used only by the succeeding *Attah* for the fortification of the kingdom and to re-enact such power on himself for victory at every challenge.

- *Oguche kekele, Oma, akoji Baba* – the young child that represented his father, this refers to the situation in which the young heir apparent succeeded when it was his ruling house’s turn, being the only direct son of the immediate past king of that lineage. The invocation usually takes place when the *Attah* is facing a serious threat by other senior elders. He, therefore, asks for the intervention of the Oguche spirit for wisdom to deal with such a matter.\(^{26}\)

It should be noted that there are some other cognomen used in Igala in the *Attah*’s palace which were not mentioned above. It is also an ongoing phenomenon based on the achievement of any of the past *Attah*(s). They are, indeed, used to express political and social superiority and

\(^{26}\) J.S. Boston, *op. cit.*, pp. 200 – 201.
belongingness to the past *Attah*. In the case of the present *Attah*, its cognomen is used by his subjects to attract spiritual boast. However, the subchiefs in Alubi’s royal descent of the Ibaji district of Igala, invoke the cognomen usually by thrusting a spear into the ground with a charm and a piece of red cloth for the human sacrificial lamb.27

**Belief in Transmigration and Transfiguration (lycanthropy)**

The concept of reincarnation is a common phenomenon in most African beliefs. It has manifested in such names as *Makedono, Abimaje, Acheneje, Iyabo, Babatunde, Nnenna, Nnnanna*, and so forth. The belief in life after death is thus a part of the culture of African societies’ especially primitive and pre-colonial communities. The Igala share this belief with other African peoples, that the spirit of an ancestor is reborn in a child. As part of the concept of reincarnation, they believed that a child born within a certain period, especially after the death of a loved one, will be named after him. The belief here is that the dead relative can come back to this world by re-incarnating into the family that showed him or her love, while he was spending his / her first life on earth.

There is also the common belief in lycanthropy known as *edida* in Igala language. In this case, the living person is temporarily transformed into an animal, such as buffalo, hippopotamus and so on. The change was effected through a charm. These charms vary; in some cases they were a

---

27 Interview with Joel Etika aged 69, at Festac Town, Lagos, 3 December 2011.
sort of magic draught, in others it could be some concoction such as the ones made by old witches from various ingredients.

In a comparative analysis, C.K. Meek narrates his experience as follows:

A Bunu once reported to me that he had accidentally shot his sister-in-law. She had turned herself into a bush-pig. He came across her in this form and shot her with a poisoned arrow. When shot she immediately resumed her human form. (Investigation into the case showed that the man had gone out hunting. His sister-in-law followed later to collect palm-nuts, and as she was bending down he saw her and mistook her for a pig). Some Tangale change themselves into birds when they wish to reconnoitre the enemies’ defenses. An Idoma husband recently accused his wife of sitting on the top of his house in the form of an owl. Yoruba sorcerers commonly attack people in this guise, and if the owl can be caught and injured a corresponding injury is done to the sorcerer’s body.28

In addition, he also offers another report:

A British officer stationed among a hill-tribe recently set a rifle-trap for a hyena which had been troubling his compound at night. The hyena was shot. Its pug-marks suddenly became those of human footsteps, and streaks of blood were traced to the compound of the Galadima – a principal chief of the town. The villagers next day taxed the British officer with the death of the Galadima, who was known to be a wer-hyena.29

Lycanthropy or transmigration was quite a common spiritual power in pre-Christian, pre-Islamic and pre-colonial African societies. Some animals were and are still associated with certain African families and villages. For instance, the hippopotamus was associated with the Bachama people and, as such, its consumption was forbidden.30 This, of course, is a

29 Ibidem, p. 184
30 Ibidem, p. 185.
common phenomenon in Africa: that people do not eat the animal into which they can allegedly transform.

**Belief in Witchcraft**

The phenomenon of religion is so pervasive in the life of Igala society and so inextricably bound up with their culture that it is not easy to isolate what is purely religious from the other aspects of life. The belief in witchcraft or the use of malevolent spirits was very prevalent among the Igala, like other primitive African societies such as the *Akan* of the Gold Coast (now Ghana). Certain people were believed to have second sight. This power was believed to be in-born and enabled them to see and communicate with spirits. A very successful man who was able to make money and seemed very prosperous was believed to have dealings with a spirit. This was irrespective of the occupation of the man or, in minor cases, woman. An individual with second sight may choose to have dealings with evil spirits so that he could do harm to his fellow men and such an individual becomes a witch.31 He was then capable of taking the form of any object or animal.

A man or woman who was believed to have these supernatural powers and who used them for good, that is, to give good advice to the chief – the *Attah* Igala – and to detect evil or wicked witches, and to heal the sick, or to make sacrifices so that undertakings may be successful, was

---

called a witch-doctor or perhaps a more accurate translation in many cases would be “seer” or “prophet”. Thus, in Igala society, a man or a woman will not go on a day’s journey without consulting some spirit through the Diviner, or fortune teller, in order to avoid being negatively affected by witchcraft. So, in every event of their lives, appeal was made to the unseen, the aim being to settle their course of action and to help them in earnest, as well as save them from evil or witchcraft.

It was believed that wicked witches cause sickness which may lead to death. In some cases, people actually confessed using witchcraft to cause sickness or death to relatives. When rampant sickness or a number of deaths occurred in a family, witchcraft was at once suspected and a good witch-doctor, otherwise called Diviner, was consulted by the family head, Onuefunyi. Sometimes, the whole household or all in the compound accompanied the family head to the Diviner, known as the Obabo. He would then present the Obabo with a white cock and some lime. He would also give him four kolanuts and some small red alligator pepper (‘ata’). With this, the Diviner consulted the Ifa and the Ebbo on which it had been placed. On the next day, the Obabo would go back to the Diviner to seek the cause of death or sickness. If the Ifa revealed that the cause was witchcraft, the family members were called together and the Onuefunyi would deliver the message to the guilty person who would be called upon to

32 Ibidem, p. 6
33 Interview held with Omale Amaga aged c.82 at Egumeh. 7 April 2011.
34 NAK/SNP 17445, Notes on the Igala, Idoma and Okpoto and Customs and History, pp. 9-10.
confess to the crime. Failure to confess would normally bring grave consequences on the guilty by the gods.

In the event of no confession, a description of the witch or witches was sought by the family head through another Obabo. The Igala word for witch is ‘Ochu’, which means somebody possessed by an evil spirit with the intention of causing harm. Igala tales on witches are comparable to those of Medieval Europe. In both epochs, witches are said to possess charms or potions to make an enemy mad, blind, deaf, or sick in any way desired. In Igala society, a man could obtain from the Atama an image made from black mud in the shape of a man. This he would torture in any way he wanted with some incantation, firmly believing that his enemy would suffer in the same way. It was similar to the wax doll used for the same purpose in medieval Europe. While not discarding the system, it could be argued that what really happened was a calculated effort of a group to create psychological fear in the mind of those who were not aware. Many people in modern day Igala see them as mere superstitions which indeed achieved the desired effect.

**Belief in Love Potions**

Marital strength or weakness stems from the interaction between attractions, barriers and alternative rewards to a relationship. The degree of cohesiveness experienced is, in most cases, a function of the partners’

---

35 Interview held with Atabo Odibo aged c.85, Chief Priest at Egume. 7 April 2011.
positive attraction to each other.\textsuperscript{36} It is as a result of this that most African societies, especially within the period of this study, believe that marriages between men and women with different social characteristics seem to encounter greater difficulty than marriages between more similar persons, and would do anything for their sons and daughters to marry within their community.

One instrument employed in this respect was the love potion. Love potions were widely acknowledged and used in Igala society. These could be obtained from the \textit{Atama} and were of various sorts. For example, one such potion was smeared in the young man’s hand, with which he grasped the wrist of the reluctant woman, who thereafter became more yielding. Another method was that the \textit{Atama} could make a charm which he put in the horn of an animal. It was employed as a way of attracting a young lady to a young man. This was especially used when the young man desired to marry a disinterested lady. Having done this, the \textit{Atama} would then call the name of the woman three times and would place the horn in the sun on the roof of the young man’s house (it could also be placed on a tree). After this has been done, the young man proceeded to the girl’s house after the \textit{Ifa} has been consulted to confirm her response.

Love charms in the Igala society were made mostly using red feather. It was usually taken from a parrot’s tail and tied to a small piece of white cloth with some other ingredients. It was then hung on the roof of the young man’s house for a period of time. At the expiration of the period, the

young man took the charm, sneaked into the girl’s house and dropped it into
her drinking water. More so, a young man could add a concoction called ‘ideju’ into his bath water. After the bath he would eat some kolanut and
expectorate some of it into the small bag in which he carried the charm
along with him to see the young woman. The belief in charms thus became
a way of achieving what they could not attain by natural or normal means.
Magical devices helped accomplish things regarded as difficult in favour of
an individual who needed assistance.

Conclusion

The traditional beliefs of the Igala people are governed by
superstitions, myths or legends and ancestral spirits. Religion is central to
the people’s wellbeing, so much so that they relate everything about life to
their religious activities. The Ifá oracle, to a great extent, dictates the
people’s response to personal and communal events, as well as their
sacrificial life. The people are, therefore, polytheist, as they had many gods,
but recognized the almighty God as supreme. Thus, they believe in the law
of retributive justice. Hence, this belief enhances their righteous living and,
as such, reduces evil activities in the society. The Igala religion adopted
anthropomorphism, fusing three ideas of nature, animal and man especially
in the concept of the god king and the supernatural aspect of some men. So
its religion, similar to those of other African societies, has ethical content,

37 NAK/SNP 17445, Notes on the Igala, Idoma, Okpoto and Customs and History, p. 11.
as well as objects of worship. In this case, there were and still are many taboos associated with various polytheistic aspect of worship.

**Bibliography**


National Archives Kaduna (NAK), SNP 17445, *Notes on the Igala, Idoma and Okpoto and Customs and History*.

NAK, SNP172445, *Anthropological and Historical Note On Igala*.


NAK, 37/1929, *Customs and Beliefs of the Igala Tribe*.

NAK, 212/1930, *Igala History, Rites and Ceremonies – Notes*.

NAK, Lokoprof, 216/1922, *Pagan Priest Appointment to Chieftainships*.
