

DEMARGINALIZING INDIGENOUS AFRICAN DEITIES IN AN AGE OF TERROR

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Abstract

The demonization and consequent marginalization of African indigenous religious practices by the colonial West has indeed led to the erosion of African values. Despite the terrors orchestrated by alien religions across the globe in general and Africa in particular, only a few scholars have called for the demarginalization of indigenous African spirituality as a means of rebuilding the man and his world. For instance, Soyinka, one of Africa's foremost literary scholars has contended that African spirituality has been marginalized by the aggressive, often bloody intrusion of Christianity and Islam on African soil. And for him, African spirituality provides sources of spiritual strength to its people and acts as rallying point in their struggle for liberation and human dignity. In its attempt to further this line of thought, this paper argues that African indigenous deities have been misrepresented, demonized and pushed outside the margins of the continent's discourse of spirituality by the practitioners of alien religions who at the moment seek to bring the world to a state of nothingness. Focusing on some selected Igbo deities, the paper interrogates some disgruntled mistranslations that demonize heroic indigenous deities in order to establish instances of the epistemological damages which the colonizer has done to the colonized. It further argues that given the curious approval of terror in alien religions, and especially the mindless ferocity of their fanatic and fundamentalist adherents, it is expedient to interrogate the grounds upon which African indigenous religions and deities are marginalized. Noting that the assault on African spirituality accounts for the erosion of African identity and indigenous values, the paper suggests that in the current age of religious terror, there is an urgent need to demarginalize and uphold the enduring values of indigenous African spirituality.

Keywords: Culture, Religion, Demarginalization, demonization, Christianity, Islam, Postcolonial, deities, Ekwensu, Devil

Introduction

African indigenous system of knowing in western imagination belongs to the remote, the dangerous, and the obscure and has nothing to pride itself of than strange animals, weird plants and castaways who are barely able to survive. Although African scholars continue to confront the monster of colonial prejudice against the African human person, the distortion, misrepresentation and consequent marginalization of African indigenous deities has been given little attention. The incursion of Christian missionaries into Africa during the period of British colonialism in the 20th century came with misrepresentation and cannibalization of African deities, leading to the total decline in the number of adherents of the African indigenous religious practice. African ancestors were replaced with European saints and African idols with European statues. And while African indigenous religion involves praying to the Almighty God through ancestors, Europeans pray through their saints, replacing African chants with European intercession. In poetry, Leopold Senghor's "Nuit de Sine," and "Black Woman", Casely Hayford's "Rejoice" and "Nativity", Dennis Osadebe's "Who Buys my Thoughts", were all poetic attempts to recall and venerate the fast eroding African spirituality.

Among other postcolonial scholars that have identified this virulent colonial prejudice is Ingrid Waldron (2000) who observes that "as research and development activities gained in importance, Western

society constructed a hierarchy of knowledge whereby diverse, but equally valid forms of knowledge were ranked unequally based on their perceived value” (p. 51). Thus this paper sees the urgent need to interrogate this virulent marginalization. Acknowledging this notion, G. J. S. Dei (2000) argues that indigenous knowledge seeks to examine the process of knowledge production by questioning and challenging how imperial ideologies about legitimate and non-legitimate knowledge serve to marginalize and silence subordinate knowledges. Consequently, non-Western knowledge systems evaluated on a Western epistemological frame of reference are ultimately devalued and delegitimized (Waldron p. 52). The inherent power inequities between indigenous and Euro-Western knowledges are encountered in the relegation of African indigenous religious practices by the West who imposed their religious tradition on Africans and by the postcolonial Africans themselves. Perhaps L. L. Karumanchery’s contention that the oppressor “mapped out social space in ways that normalize, idiologize and reify his image, knowledge and experience...” (2000, p.175) seems to validate this position. We need to point out immediately that this seems to be the case because, as Waldron rightly points out, most often “it is Western scientific traditions, epistemologies and practices that often dominate within the social structures of Western and non-Western societies, resulting not only in the normalization and privileging of these traditions, epistemologies and practices, but also the pathologizing of non-Western ideologies and practices” (p.52). Considering the “indigenous knowledge project’ a viable critical engagement, this paper in its deconstructive and postcolonial approach, attempts to interrogate this ideological demonization of African indigenous deities using some selected Igbo deities as points of reference.

Demonization of African Indigenous Deities

In his postcolonial monograph entitled *Ekwensu is the Igbo Imagination: A Heroic Deity or a Christian Devil* (2009), Damian Opatá, one of Africa’s very important literary and archival researchers, has observed that the mistranslation of the Christian Devil as the conceptual equivalent of Ekwensu, a heroic deity of the Igbo, is one instance in which translation can become virulent (p. 4). Contending that colonialism was constructed around a discursive regime of negation, he gives instances of the ideological representation of the white and black colours. While the West use and have continued to use the white colour to represent the desirable, the good, the pure and the innocent, the colour black, curiously is always used to qualify the African as a symbol of negation such as evil, the bad and the guilty. As Opatá argues, “Take the election of a pope. Black smoke issuing from the Sistine Chapel sends out a message to the world that the College of Cardinals has not succeeded in electing a new Pope. However, when a new Pope has been elected, white smoke is used to convey the good news” (p. 4). The enduring myth of colours is made manifest in the Western classification of the angel as white and the devil as black, a myth that serves as an ideological instrument in the hands of European colonialists. The Western ideological view of Africa sees it as a typical “geography of evil- a charted territorial space occupied by people whose colour is that of the European devil” (p. 8). Opatá’s observation, apart from its revelation of the enormity of trauma which a people may pass through in coming to terms with Western ideological translation of their innocent names to the demonic, also shows how a people blindly retranslate themselves. For beyond the epistemological harm of the early Missionaries and their mistranslators, it is Africans themselves who religiously retain and promote the new concepts in their adulterated versions.

The black/white and consequent demonization of African indigenous deities are salient issues for African postcolonial and postmodern thought. The term ‘indigenous’ may refer to particular groups of people who are grouped under the criteria of ancestral territory, collective cultural configurations, historical location in relation to the expansion of Europe, and knowledge that emanates from long-term residence in a specific place. Since the past three decades, the term has been used alongside ‘knowledge’ to signify a social, philosophical, and ideological perspective that acknowledges the significant role that knowledge plays in the power relations that emerged from the expansion of Europe (Waldron p. 51). And for Roberts (1998), indigenous knowledge is knowledge “accumulated by a group of people, not necessarily indigenous, who by centuries of unbroken residence develop an in-depth understanding of their particular place in their particular world” (p. 59). This paper uses the term ‘indigenous’ alongside African deities to indicate that these deities are, as J. O. Awolaju (1975: 1) notes, “aboriginal or foundational, handed down from generation to generation and upheld by Africans today.” Although the worship of these deities is a heritage from the past, it is not treated as a thing of the past but as that which connects the past with the present and the present with eternity. It is a system of worship practised by living men and women. Thus African indigenous deities refer to those religious deities which the Africans have worshipped from the dawn of time. They belong to a religion that derives from the “sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans, and which is

being practised today in various forms and various shades and intensities by a very large number of Africans, including individuals who claim to be Muslims or Christians”(Awolaju p. 2).

It is curious then that the West make themselves constantly liable to misunderstand the African worldview and beliefs. Demonstrating some of the ways in which the colonialists had demonized the colonized, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994: 60) observe that in America, pre-existing forms of ethnic and religious otherizing were transferred from Europe to its colonies; the presumed “godlessness” and “devil worship” of the indigenous people becoming a pretext for enslavement and dispossession, leading to European Christian demonology setting the tone for colonialist racism. For it is intellectually ridiculous to believe on the one hand that there are white and black angels as well as that angels are non-corporeal or disembodied beings on the other. Yet all our books are littered from end to end with pictures depicting angels in white colour and devils in black colour. The reason for this ideological colour war derive from the fall of the Angel Lucifer whose colour must change to black as a symbolic representation of sinfulness because for the European, black is symbolic of evil and the sinister.

The question of the terrible which is ascribed to African indigenous religions and deities is not peculiar to any particular religion since as Terry Eagleton (2005: 2) has clearly noted, religion generally is “all about deeply ambivalent powers which both enrapture and annihilate.” Terror or terrorism itself, for him begins as a religious idea and it is not easy to understand the concept of terror without also grasping its curious source. Tracing the origin of the ambiguous matrimony between the concepts of terror and the sacred to the pre-modern era, he argues that both notions are kindred elements originating from the same source, that is to say, from religion. “The word ‘sacer’ ambiguously means either blessed or cursed, holy or reviled; and in a way contains the kinds of terror in ancient civilization which are both creative and destructive, life-giving and death dealing”(p. 23). Hence the sacred is dangerous and must be caged rather than kept carelessly. Describing Dionysus, the Bacchic Divinity, as one of the earliest terrorist ringleaders who combines within his being those ambivalent powers that create and destroy, Rene Girard (2005:5) observes:

Protean, playful, diffuse, erotic, deviant, hedonistic, transgressive, sexually ambiguous, marginal, and anti-linear, this Bacchic Divinity could almost be a postmodern invention. Yet he is also an unbearable horror, and for much the same reasons. If he is the god of wine, milk, and honey, he is also the god of blood. Like an excess of alcohol, he warms the blood to chilling effect. He is brutal, rapacious, and monolithically hostile to difference- and all this quite inseparably from his more alluring aspects.

If Dionysus has the charm of spontaneity, he also betrays his mindless ferocity. For this god, what makes for bliss also makes for butchery.

If Ogun, the Yoruba god of Thunder, like Dionysus, promises fathomless degree of love for their adherents, it equally has unbearable horror and aggression, destroying as much as it creates. In Soyinka’s “Ogun Abibiman”, Ogun fashions a weapon with which he clears a path for the reunion of divinity and humanity long after their primordial separation, but with the same weapon, he kills his own followers in a moment of drunken blindness and blood possession on the battlefield (Adekoya 2006: 8). This symbolic destruction of the bridge of nexus, as S. Adekoya has further indicated, is a movement towards incarnate void, the main reason Ogun is the archetype of the gulf of transition which symbolizes the perpetual struggle between hubris-driven humanity and all-conquering nature.

The Igbo creation myth collected by I.N.C. Nwosu also illustrates the “original co-existence of the good and the evil in the ordinary creator God, thus pointing to the origin of evil in the world as not resulting from the fall of man, but as existing co-evilly with Chukwu” (Opata p. 15). Thus Ekwensu, the most controversial Igbo deity that has suffered the worst form of epistemological mistranslation as the “Christian devil” by the early Christian missionaries is “that ontological mysterious violent force which when aggravated or invoked could be effectively used either for good or destruction” (P. 15-16). But this picture does not differ radically from what the Christian Bible says in some instances about God or the Islamic Quran about Allah which shows a mixture of this same great love and unbearable horror towards mankind. Both feuding religions, Christianity and Islam apparently demonstrate a mindless ferocity that avows the application of terror as a religious practice, a project that engenders an upsurge of atavism that threatens to throw the world into the ever prophesied state of nothingness. The various refinements of terror which they unleash show the extent to which the godhead has been misconstrued. Wole Soyinka(1991: 10) paints the picture thus:

A passenger bus on a highway; two or three armed men appear from ambush. The passengers are forced to disembark and separated into their religious persuasions. One group is machine-gunned on the spot – women and children are not spared.

Or they are ordered to remain in the bus into which grenades are then thrown, while the survivors are machine-gunned to death.

This obsession with terror has been observed to derive from some portions of the holy books. Sami Zaatari (2007) cites instances in the book of Deuteronomy where the Christian God is said to have asked his believers to take a city by force and slaughter the inhabitants to show that there is approval of terror in the Bible:

When you approach a city to fight against it, you shall offer it terms of peace. If it agrees to make peace with you and opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall become your forced labor and shall serve you. However, if it does not make peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. When the Lord your God gives it into your hand, you shall strike all the men in it with the edge of the sword. Only the women and the children and the animals and all that is in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as booty for yourself; and you shall use the spoil of your enemies which the Lord your God has given you. Only in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes" (Deut. 20:10-17)

In response, the propagators of *TheReligionofpeace.com* argue that there is a threat credited to Allah in the Quran that: "I will instill terror into the hearts of the unbelievers: smite ye above their necks and smite all their finger-tips off them" (8:12) and Muhammed's instruction to his followers: "Whoever changes his Islamic religion, then kill him" (Bukhari 84:57) both of which affirm that Islam encourages terror.

It is remarkable from these that terror is inscribed in the history of these religions despite their claims to peace, tolerance and common humanity. It is for this reason that Daisaku Ikeda, in Soyinka's *The Credo of Being and Nothingness* (1991), observes:

Witness the revival of fundamentalist movements and the proliferation of new religions with their anti-rational, anti-intellectual cults and self-styled prophets. We must beware of religions that turn their backs on the progress of history and society, and of the tendency to do so that is inherent in all religions (Prefactory Note).

Describing 'Holy Frenzy' as the fundamentalist forces- Christian, Judaic, Islamic or other- that are hostile to secularism, Ikeda observes that there is something antithetical about every religion. This is why it is important to point out that no religion has the right to fault the other. The criminalization, demonization and marginalization of African indigenous religion and deities are therefore all forms of epistemological terrorism. It is pertinent to note, as Soyinka further argues, that African indigenous religion can boast of never having launched a war or any form of jihad or crusade to further its beliefs. It is not one of those religions that command their adherents to "erase that temple! Demolish that mosque! Obliterate that cathedral! Flatten that shrine" (p. 12). Instead it has continued to provide spiritual strength to Africans at home and in the diaspora and to act as a rallying point in their struggle for liberation and human dignity. Its belief system has proved themselves bedrocks of endurance and survival, informing communities as far away as the Caribbean and the Americas.

Urgency for Demarginalizing Indigenous African Deities

The Igbo indigenous deities have been found to play significant roles in the sustenance of a stable society and this is why the need for their demarginalization is urgent. Although some rites prevalent in the indigenous religious practice were "demonised by Christian missionaries" (Ene 2010: 6), the consideration of what is fetish and demonic is ideological. Chambers and Rucker (2009:14) observe that remnants of these same rites had spread among African descendants in the Caribbean and North America in the era of Atlantic slave trade and are still practised there today. In fact some aspects of Igbo masquerading traditions can still be found among the festivals of the Garifuna people and Jonkonnu of the British Caribbean and North Carolina. Let us appraise the things that make up the Igbo religious thoughts and practices in order to find out what is demonic or otherwise about them.

Odinani, the Igbo indigenous religion and culture is both monotheistic and pantheistic, with a single God- Chineke or Chukwu- as the source of all things. According to the Igbo myth of origin collected by Nwosu, the ancient Igbo believed that Chukwu had the appearance of a pair of Siamese giants one of which had masculine figure and was called "Mmuo" while the other figure had feminine appearance and was called "Agwu". The two figures of Chukwu were joined at the buttocks, facing opposite directions. Mmuo the masculine face of Chukwu was always benevolent and did only good. "Agwu" was always malevolent and did only evil. Agwu had to be appeased to so as to allow Mmuo's goodness to reach the recipient. While the myth shows the co-existence of the good and the bad in the originary creator Chukwu, it equally reveals that

Agwu is a deity that represents the malevolent image of Chukwu in the Igbo imagination. Some controversies trail this myth because for some scholars, Agwu represents both the evil and the good. If for instance, J. A. Umeh (1999: 103) sees it as the equivalent of the Holy Spirit of Christianity (p. 197), he equally lists its other aspect, “Nde Olusi Agwu”, as one of the one hundred and twenty seven evil spirits among the Igbo (p. 103).

Below the supreme God, Chukwu, is a pantheon of lesser spirits which expressly serve as elements of the high god (Ene 2010: 45). As a compound word, *Chineke* encompasses the concept of the divine masculine force, *Chi* and (*nà*) the creative and divisive feminine force known as “*eke*”. *Agbara* as a divine force manifests as separate deity in the Igbo pantheon. According to *Agbasiere*, “A concept of ‘the eye of sun or god’ (*ányá ánwú*) exists as a feminine solar deity which forms a part of the solar veneration among the *Nri-Igbo* in northern *Igbo*land. *Alusi* are mediated by *dibia* and other priests who do not contact the high god directly. Through *áfà*, ‘divination’, the laws and demands of the *alusi* are communicated to the living. *Alusi* are venerated in community shrines around roadsides and forests while smaller shrines are located in the household for ancestral veneration (p. 48). It is common belief that deceased ancestors inhabit the spirit world where they can be contacted from time to time to assist in human affairs. For *Agbasiere*, there is also another “class of beings which are under *ndi mmadu*, ‘visible beings’: these include *ánù*- animals, and *ósísí*-vegetation, and the final class *ùrò* which consists of elements, minerals and inanimate beings” (op. cit).

In the *Ibani* traditional religious practice of the *Ijo* in the *Niger Delta*, there is this same belief in a Supreme Being and other committee of deities. Here the Supreme Being is called *Tamuno* who is assisted by multitude of deities. *M. J. Jaja* (2013: 39) states that “*Ibani* cosmology revolves round the tripod –God, deities and ancestors who are venerated and appeased with various items to intercede and ensure the stability of society.” The central function of this high god and the pantheon of deities is to ensure the stability of society. This indigenous religious belief system which still lives on in the lives of the *Ijo* people is consistent with the *Igbo* worldview. *Chukwu* is reached through various deities mainly under the spirit class of *Alusi* who are incarnations of the high god; no sacrifices, however, are given to *Chukwu* and no shrines and altars are erected for him (*Agbasiere* 2000: 48). If an *alusi* is assigned to an individual, it becomes his *chi*, a personal guardian god. The *chi* manifests as *mmuo* - spirit, and as a person’s spirit is earth bound, it chooses sex, type, and lifespan before incarnation in the human world (*Wiredu*:2008: 420). *Chi* as the personal spirit-*m̀m̀ú-`* of a person determines his destiny. This is why the *Igbo* believe that, *onye kwe, Chi ya ekwe* (“If a person agrees to a thing, his spirit agrees also”) a saying which assumes that people are the creators or makers of their own destiny (*Okoh* 2012: 37). *Chi* is believed to be a spiritual connection between an individual and the high god and it dictates the trajectory of a person’s spiritual journey on earth. *Amaury Talbot* (1916: 307) asserts that “each *chi* is personal and is in communion with and inseparable from the universal *chi* of all things.” *Chukwu* is believed to assign *chi* before and at the time of an individual’s birth. It is a guardian spirit providing care, guardianship, and providence, hence, the concept of *chi* is comparable to the concept of a guardian angel in Christianity, the daemon in ancient Greek religion, and the genius in ancient Roman religion. A *dibia* can identify a person’s *chi* through divination, *áfà*, and he usually advises adherents of ways to placate it. Households usually contain a *chi* shrine which could be focused on a tree. Hence as a marker of personal fortune or misfortune, good or ill, *chi* can be described as a focal point for ‘personal religion’.

Significantly, *Igbo* indigenous deities play the roles of mediators of war and peace. Some scholars have argued that *Ekwensu* is a deity of violence that possesses people with anger and that it has the inclination of bringing calamity for which it is regarded as an evil spirit. And among the Christian *Igbo*, *Ekwensu* is viewed as a representative of Satan and a force which places itself in opposition to *Chukwu*. However, other scholars of *Igbo* tradition and culture like *E. O. Udoye* (2011: 46) argue that “praying to *Ekwensu* was said to guarantee victory in negotiations”. *Udoye* notes further that as a force of change and chaos, *Ekwensu* also represents the spirit of war among the *Igbo*, invoked during times of conflict and banished during peacetime to avoid bloodshed which it always incites in the community. In the masquerade tradition, there is a song that says: “*akakpu bu Ekwensu di na Mmanwu*” (the midget masquerade is “*Ekwensu*” because it creates pandemonium and chaos, which ironically endears it to many of the spectators. The entertainment at masquerade displays is, therefore, deemed incomplete whenever it is absent, which is a revelation of man’s secret nostalgia for chaos. Among the youth, there is preference of this ‘disorder’ to the sombre, meditative quiet and mature strides of the mother masquerade. Thus the obsession with its vibrant temperament made ancient warriors to set up shrines for *Ekwensu* to help them in executing wars.

Ekwensu festivals are held in some *Igbo* towns where military success is celebrated and wealth is flaunted. According to *Umeh* (1999: 197), what the evil forces and the evil ones among the *Igbos* are have not been a subject of controversy or confusion until the colonization of *Igbo*land and the importation of foreign religion. Since then, one of the *Igbo* traditional spirits of war and victory, namely *Ekwensu* has been

mistakenly dubbed the devil. These researches derive from the discovery of old shrines which were dedicated to the worship of the spirit as well as the recounting of old oral stories which depict its character. It is obvious then that what led to the conception and mistranslation of Ekwensu to mean “the devil” by the early Christian Missionaries is difference in worldviews. Thus apart from such coinages in Igbo as *Chineke* and *mo ozi*, which were supposed to stand for God and angel respectively, these missionaries also imposed a new meaning on some of the existing constructs, notably Ekwensu which in the true Igbo religion is the deity that repels, wards off or otherwise frustrates evil designs. Unable to find an equivalent concept for Satan, in the host society, the Christian Missionaries adopted the name of this anti-evil deity but reversed its semantics. He says that he is aware of someone named after this deity in its authentic form and that it was a usual practice to name a baby after a deity, which is believed to have aided in his or her birth” (qtd in Opata p. 34). As D. I. Nwoga (1984: 62) reveals, in the final steps of the celebration of *Fejioku* –new yam festival in *Umuawulu*, Ekwensu is invoked:

Finally running round the compound with a cock that has been turned into the scapegoat, evil is driven away with the shouts: Ekwensu mee! Ekwensu mee! Gbatia! Jetia! Everybody follows the example of the leader and runs around with the scapegoat cock. The cock is sacrificed at the shrine of the ancestors and the new yams now become available for the festival or revival of fullness.

The invocation “Ekwensu mee” my Ekwensu; Gbatia! Jetia!- ‘stretch out, reach out, go on’ suggests that the being that is referred to is reverent (Opata p. 34) and therefore adorable and must be beyond evil if it could be summoned to drive away evil.

Evidences of the lineages of Ekwensu abound in different parts of Igbo land. Opata himself reveals that a family in his home town, *Lejja*, in *Nsukka* area of *Enugu* State changed its name from “*Umu Ezike Ekwensu*”, that is, children of *Ezike Ekwensu* to “*Umu Ezechukwuka*,” that is, children of God Almighty simply because the former name seemed to mock them as children of the devil (p. 35). Another community, *Owerre Eze Oba* in *Udenu* area of *Enugu* state changed its name from “*Oba Ekwensu*” and changed the name of a primary school earlier named after the deity Ekwensu on the advice of Father Mellet who told them the same was devilish. A kindred known as *Obukpa* in *Nsukka* area changed its name from “*Umu Ekwensu*”, descendants of Ekwensu to “*Umu Ezekwe*” while another community in *Isi Ala Ngwa* in *Isi Ala Ngwa North Local Government Area* of *Abia* State changed its name from “*Obi Ekwensu*” to “*Obi Chukwu*” (36). Despite the fear of being ridiculed as “children of the devil”, there are other communities that have refused to change their names. These include “*Nru N’ato Ezike Ekwensu*” in *Nsukka LGA* and “*Imilikpe Ogo Ekwensu*,” *Udenu L.G.A.* Opata further suggests that one reason people answer to the name Ekwensu is that Ekwensu may have been a powerful and towering warlord such that his name became a license against attack by other communities. Many communities in the *Nsukka* culture zone who claim the *Igala* ancestry do so on account of the overriding power of the *Attah* of *Igala Kingdom* during the nineteenth century” (p. 37). Thus he argues that since Ekwensu is associated with war and victory, and since Ekwensu is an ancestral name, then it cannot be an evil spirit because it is only those who led upright life and, therefore, were accorded full burial rites that become ancestors in Igbo imagination. Importantly, traditional Igbo communities loath crime, evil and abomination and no community would, knowing that Ekwensu is evil, decide to answer to that name.

Like Ekwensu, *Ala* is another deity that forbids evil and helps to regulate moral consciousness in the land. In fact it is at the head of the Igbo pantheon, maintaining order and carrying out justice against wrongdoers. *Ala* which means ‘earth’ or ‘land’ in Igbo is the feminine earth spirit who is a symbol of morality that sanctions Igbo customs from which moral and ethical behaviours are upheld (Ogbaa 1995: 14). She stands for fertility and things that generate life including water, stone and vegetation, colour (*àgwà*), beauty (*mmá*) which is connected to goodness and uniqueness (Agbasiere, p. 49). She is home to the dead ancestors who are stored in the underworld in her womb. The most worshipped deity in *Igboland*, almost every Igbo village has a shrine dedicated to her called *íhú Ala* where major decisions are taken (Udoye p. 45). *Ala* is believed to be involved in all aspects of human affairs including festivals and offerings. It is the ground itself, and for this reason taboos and crimes are known as *ńsọ Ala* (‘desecration of *Ala*’). All land is holy as the embodiment of *Ala*, making her the principal legal sanctioning authority. She forbids murder, suicide, theft and incest. People who commit suicide are not buried in the earth or given burial rites but cast away in order not to further offend and pollute the land, while their chances of rising to ancestor-hood is therefore nullified (Okoh p.37). When an individual dies a ‘bad death’, such as from the effects of divine retributive justice or breaking a taboo, they are not buried in the earth, but are cast into a forest so as not to offend *Ala*.

In the pantheon of Igbo deities also is *Amadioha*, a deity that represents divine justice and wrath against taboos and crimes. A name that is formed by joining the two words *ámádí* and *òhà*, ‘free will of the people’, *Amadioha* is the deity of justice, thunder, lightning and the sky. He is referred to as *Amadioha* in

southern Igboland, Kamalu, Kamanu, Kalu among the Aro and other Cross River Igbo people, Igwe among the Isuama Igbo and in northwestern Igboland, and Ofufe in certain parts of Igboland. His governing planet is the Sun. His color is red, and his symbol is a white ram (Diala 2005: 104). Metaphysically, Amadioha represents the collective will of the people and he is often associated with Anyanwu. In oaths, he is sworn by and he strikes down those who swear falsely with thunder and lightning because the swearer does not observe ofo-na-Ogu, the law of retributive justice which vindicates the wrongly accused, those whose "hands are clean". It is only the righteous that can invoke Ofo-na-Ogu in prayer, otherwise such a person would be struck by the wrath of Amadioha. His shrines exist in different parts of Igboland, while his main shrine is located at Ozuzu in the riverine Igbo region in northern Rivers State. While Anyanwu is more prominent in northern Igboland, Amadioha is more prominent in the south. His day is Afo, which is the second market day. In Mbari houses, he is depicted beside Ala as her consort (Kleiner 2009: 219). Thus we cannot associate these deities with the demonic in the sense of evil.

These are the features of the beautiful world of indigenous Igbo religion, a vibrant system of knowing and worship before the clash of civilizations between the West and Africa. This clash created the crossroads which as Achebe points out possesses a certain dangerous potency: "Any one born there must wrestle with their multi-headed spirits and return to his or her people with the boon of prophetic vision, or accept, as I have, life's interminable mysteries" (2012: 8). Apart from the desire to interrogate the cross-cultural currents of the era, the beautiful tales of the Igbo oral tradition which were resolute in their moral message were part of the motivations that drew Achebe into the art of storytelling. He writes further: "I can say that my whole artistic career was probably sparked by this tension between the Christian religion of my parents, which we followed in our home, and the retreating, older religion of my ancestors, which fortunately for me was still active outside my home. I still had access to a number of relatives who had not converted to Christianity and were called heathens by the new converts. When my parents were not watching, I would often sneak off in the evenings to visit some of these relatives" (p. 11). Achebe notes interestingly that these indigenous religious worshippers were content in their traditional way of life and worship, and as he was later to confess, the humility inherent in the indigenous religion, the idioms and proverbs "are far more valuable to me as a human being in understanding the complexity of the world than the doctrinaire, self-righteous strain of the Christian faith I was taught" (p. 12).

In comparison, Achebe finds the alien religion merely "artistically satisfying" which does not provide an answer to the question of the individual's history and identity which the indigenous religion does. His uncle, an astute follower of the traditional religion and a leader in his community, was a moral open-minded and prosperous man who had prepared such a great feast when he took the ozo title that his people gave him a praise name. This man wonders whether he should throw all that away because some strangers said they were demonic (p. 13). Despite accepting the benefits which the coming of the early Western Missionaries brought along, we also ask, as Achebe does again: "Does it matter... that centuries before European Christians sailed down to us in ships to deliver the gospel and save us from darkness, other European Christians, also sailing in ships, delivered us to the transatlantic slave trade and unleashed darkness in our world?" (p. 14). These are questions which this paper considers very salient in its submission.

Conclusion

The moral principles of African indigenous religious practices are necessary and function so well for refining the people as human beings, and modulating their bullish animal drives. The above evaluation suggests that indigenous Igbo deities abhor all forms of evil. In our time, it is unimaginable that these same deities are blackmailed and set outside the margins of our own discourse, and with them the many positive values which they propagate in the lives of the people. Western epistemological gladiators bestow freely upon themselves the absolute right to show the colonized a new way of viewing the world which all men and women must submit blindly to. This paper has suggested that the rights of the practitioners of African spirituality in general and traditional Igbo religion in particular need to be recognized and their indigenous deities acknowledged and accorded their respects and privileges rather than marginalized or mocked. It is noteworthy that in many institutions in Africa where lands are appropriated and set aside for the promotion of other faiths, the same should also be given to the practitioners of indigenous religions. The proliferation of churches and mosques in every corner of the land has not diminished the volume of crime in society nor has it mitigated the ever rising profile of terror, corruption, fraud, and the profane. If anything, all these seeming evils take place in the full glare and even sanction of these religions.

It is erroneous, therefore, to accuse indigenous religions of evil practices and marginalize them. What other excuse would the West, who came with the conception that indigenous deities were responsible for societal evils, offer in the face of these crimes that have enveloped our society after decentering them?

The alien religions need to learn to stop the pretense of not recognizing evil when they see one, and the pretense of serving a great God when it is their own ideological selves that they serve. They seek to steal God's clothes and now it is their own terrible powers which we are invited to approach with fear and trembling. Eagleton observes that, far from having disappeared from history, God has simply been replaced by an alternative supreme entity known as Man (p. 70). And once the Almighty and all his works are generally discredited, the question of the source of our freedom must reappear. And for the modern epoch, it is now not God but humanity which is the eternal author of itself, conjuring itself up out of its own unsearchable depths without visible means of support (ibid). In their lip-service to faith, these alien religious warriors unleash the terror that is now consuming the whole wide world in sublime fury. Rather than accept responsibility for their own evil machinations, they instead ascribe them to Ekwensu, Amadioha, Agwu, Ogun, innocent African deities and criminalize them as evil spirits. It is the position of this paper then that these overzealous faithfuls of alien religions ought to recognize and tame their duplicitous nature and as technicians of terror, realize that terror itself, like Dionysus, is likely to turn around and tear its wielder apart.

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