

IGBO BELIEFS IN TABOOS AND OATHS TAKING: AN ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Emmanuel C. Anizoba, PhD

Department of Religion & Cultural Studies

Faculty of the Social Sciences

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

emmanuel.anizoba@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

The Igbo people of Nigeria believe tenaciously that violating of taboos and oath breaking are part of the mystical causation of diseases and environmental hazards as against the western germ theory of disease. The aim of this paper is to examine this Igbo belief in causation and its implications for the environment. As a qualitative study, it adopts a Phenomenological research design and descriptive method for data analysis. Personal interviews form the primary method of data collection while the secondary sources are the library materials. The findings reveal that, in Igbo cosmology, the violation of taboo and breaking of oath, may account for untimely deaths, diseases like swollen legs, strokes etc., and other related ailments which are believed to be mystical in origin. The study among other things recommends that hospitals in Nigeria and beyond should take into account such mystical agents like violation of taboo and breaking of oath alongside other pathogenic agents that caused diseases for better management of diseases and the environment.

Key words: Mysticism; Disobedience; Taboos; Oaths breaking; Environment; Igbo; African; Nigeria

Introduction

Disease is one of the cardinal problems and challenges that humans have had to battle with from the earliest of time. In fact, it has caused more deaths and sorrows than all other factors put together. Human beings in one way or the other fall sick, and therefore go for treatment depending on their choice of treatment (religious perspective or Western medical treatment). Although African Traditional Religion is not against the Western medical way of treatment or healing process, its followers believe that there are some diseases that Western medicine cannot treat, and therefore need spiritual attention, as it is sometimes practiced in churches. At the backdrop of this challenge, Humans in every age have had to device various

means of combating diseases. Two of the major and most universally accepted methods of combating and battling disease are Mystical/Spiritual and the western medicine.

It is believed in African Traditional Religion that there are some mystic forces in the universe which can be tapped and utilized to bring about some effects, good or bad (Omoregbe 1999; Kanu 2015a). Omoregbe observed that some people have access to these forces (Supernatural powers) and make use of them. Some utilize them for good purposes, such as healing and solving difficult problems. These include the priest-physicians. Some people however make of use these powers for evil purposes, such as causing harms and disease to other people.

Omoregbe (1999) maintained that some people who have access to these force use them to cause mysterious illness, disease and death to other people. These are witches and sorcerers who do a lot of havoc by means of mystic forces. In this regard, African Traditional conception of causes of diseases and sickness are always tied to some forces higher than humans. These higher forces can be the product of displeasure of some gods, divinities or often spiritual forces or through the violation of taboos and breaking of oath. Humans can also manipulate some forces to cause disease or sickness for their fellow humans. But even in the midst of wide spread orthodox medical practices, Africans in modern times, still believe tenaciously the violation of taboos and breaking of oath as are causation of certain diseases (Ilogu1987; Ngong 2009; Kanu 2015b). Seen from this background, the question then is “are diseases caused by mystical forces in African believe or, by germs according to the western believe?” Set against this background therefore, the aim of this research is to critically examine violation of taboos and breaking of oaths as factors of disease causation as maintained in African traditional belief system.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative phenomenological research design and the descriptive method of data analysis. Personal interviews form the primary sources of data collection with 5 informants chosen at random for the interview. They were given code names which range from informants 1 to 5. These informants were diverse in terms of distribution of five states of Igbo land, gender, occupation, and religious affiliation with particular regards to Christianity and African Traditional Religion. The interview questions were semi-structured. This allowed the researcher to follow up with similar groups of interview questions based on the respondent's responses. All relevant issues guiding the conduct of interview were

followed. It was made known to the informants that the information gotten from them will be solely used for this research. The period of the research was from 2018 / 2020 when field work was conducted for the research.

African Traditional Religion's Idea of Mysticism

The term mysticism typically denotes a complex of beliefs and practices related to the immediate experience of the divine. Much, although not all, mystical thought and practices derives from or draw upon formal religious doctrines, emphasizing reflective, introspective, and meditative practices as the keys to cultivating perception and awareness that will ultimately lead to knowledge of and communion with the divine.

When one turns to mysticism in African thought, and specifically to the mystical tenets extant in indigenous religious beliefs and practices, the common Western definition is necessarily altered. Therefore, Mysticism continues to describe the realm of interaction between humanity and the divine or supernatural, but owing to the prevailing nature of indigenous African belief systems, the orientation and manifestations of mystical practices are of a different character (Kanu 2013). The orientation is social and utilitarian, and the manifestations occur within the structure of indigenous rites. Mystical practices aim at fulfilling needs in society, and they do not exist as a separate body of practices. This reflects the general African cosmology and understanding of arenas of interaction between humanity and the divine or supernatural

Violation of taboos and breaking of oaths as a means of disease causation

Many traditional healers and practitioners among the Igbo are of the opinion that violation of taboos is one of the ways people could become sick (Gyekye1995:133). Taboos form an important part of African traditional religion. They are things, or a ways of living, that are forbidden by a community or a group of people (Isiramen1998:186). Taboos are also a social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with particular persons, places or things (Westerlund2006:139). Taboos exist to make sure that the moral structures of the universe remains undisturbed for the good of humanity (Magesa1997:76, 148-149). There are food- and meat-related taboos in various communities. Violation of taboos could lead to severe illness for the person(s) or community involved.

Although all these are termed as taboos, they have some moral and ethical connotations. The amazing part of many of these taboos is that, when one violates any of them secretly, the person does not go scot-free. The consequences always manifest either on the person(s) concerned or the entire community in the form of diseases, and possibly death. This is what Magesa (1997:51) termed the effect of life force. Magesa (1997:51-53) argues that moral behaviour maintains and enhances one's life force, but disobedience and disloyal behaviour towards tradition passed on by the ancestors will weaken the life force. This can, therefore, lead to punishment from the ancestors or the spirits in the form of diseases and misfortune.

Using oath taking as an instrument of securing life and property in African Traditional Religion Ugwu, (2007) recognised the involvement of the two characters, one taking the oath and the deity who acts as both witness and executor of the terms of the oath, to justify the truth or punish the one telling lies. He stipulated that the gods are believed to be in the position to punish or testify because they are regarded as impartial judges that means inflicting the individual concerned with some mysterious sickness or diseases like swollen legs, strokes etc.

The synergy between environment, oath taking and taboos in the midst of diseases causation

According to Informant 1 (Personal Communication April 2, 2020), the environment could be defined as the entire surroundings, and the influences on specific items of interest; the natural world (ecological community and its environment). Oath taking in the environment is an act to prove the authenticity of someone's sincerity and honesty as a way of life without any element of doubt. To be candid, when an oath is administered on someone, it erases doubt surrounding that particular person. Informant 2 (Personal Communication March 9, 2020), observed that Oath taking helps to establish truth and restore trust. Anyone who is a suspect of environmental crime, he/she would be required to take oath as to prove innocence, but if he/she refuses to take the oath, it's expected that the gods punish those who swear falsely while the community punish those who decline the Oath showing they are guilty. If the person in question later admitted the crime committed, then cleansing ritual would be required due to sacrilegious crime. The cleansing could be done in the form of fine, ritual, payment and invocation of the spirit of gods to temper justice with mercy. When an offender or violator hardened his/her heart, the punitive measures are infliction of diseases

or untimely death as the case may be. Informant 3 (Personal Communication April 22, 2020) said that the gods in the environment promote justice and harmony in the community.

For Informant 4 (Personal Communication May 10, 2020) Taboos in an environment, are various deeds that are termed to be taboos; much emphasis was laid on abortion and adultery, for example, whoever commits abortion and a married woman caught in adultery, receive instant punishment. Take for instance, abortion is a heinous offence which has claimed lives of so many people either directly or indirectly. A girl who commits abortion with the consent of the man who impregnated her, the mother, the father, and even friends are liable to the penalty of sickness and death if the sacrilegious crime is kept as secret.

Informant 5 (Personal Communication June 24, 2020) stated that the consequences of violation of taboos and breaking of Oaths depend largely on the magnitude of the offence committed in the environment (land). The penalty could be ailment, madness, mystical trauma, malefactor, and finally death. The consequences depend on the area one finds oneself, for there are variations of the spiritual invocations; some gods in a particular environment are silent and harmless while in other environment their gods could be hostile and harmful. In harmless environment, there are no hard and fast rules in the code of conduct, so they live carefree lives without anathema.

Summary and Conclusion

God carefully fashioned everything in opposite numbers. Thus we have the good and the bad, the physical and the spiritual, the material and non-material. In Igbo world-view, all these work in complementary fashion Madu (1999). As the material beings exist, so also are the spirit beings. Just as in Igbo belief system in violation of Taboos and breaking of Oaths constitute one of the mystical causes of diseases so also we have Western germ theory of disease causation. By nature of their enhanced influence and powers in disease causations, the spiritual forces continue to influence the lives of man for the better and to the worse when it is the worse, they cause distress, sadness, sorrow and diseases amongst men.

But one thing is certain which offer men some solace when these spirits like the consequences of Igbo Belief that violation of taboos and breaking of Oath effect man. They can be manipulated with the use of traditional techniques not yet open to Western laboratory analysis. These must not be brushed aside under any pretext by scholars, despite the pervasive influence of germ theory. By so doing,

humans can venture into western orthodox beliefs by scientifically diagnosing the cause of his/her sickness and disease and proffer solutions more holistically.

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