

FEMALE-ORIENTED CULTS AND RITUAL PRACTICES IN IJEBULAND, OGUN STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Existing research on Ijebu indigenous beliefs has concentrated more on male dominated cults, but no significant attention has been paid to female cults their ritual practices among the Ijebu people despite the influence of Christianity and Islam. This paper, therefore, investigated the nature of traditional rituals and cultic activities performed by women in the area with a view to identifying the types of rituals, how they are carried out and their benefit to people.

This study was centred on modernism, which highlights the persistence of certain cultural practices in spite of social change. Three major cults in Ijebuland were selected, namely *Iyemule*, *Iyemoji* and *Imale*, two indigenous rituals were performed by these cults, namely: initiation –into-priesthood and rites of passage rituals. All the cults performed the initiation rituals the same way: pouring of libation, divining with kolanuts, offering prayers, taking unobstructed procession to the river side, collecting water for therapeutic purposes and returning to the shrine for final ritual dance. The *Imale* initiates were distinguished by the scraping of their leads and the making of the divinity symbols on their heads. Those of *Iyemoji* and *Iyemule* were distinguished by the traditional hair –weaving. All the cults performed the rites of passage at pregnancy, birth, marriage and death. These were characterised by ritual killing of animals, ingestive of sacred foods and drinks.

Women religious rituals still persist in Ijebuland despite the popular assumption that women are irrelevant in the socio-religious sphere. Many Christians and Muslims in Ijebuland patronised the cults because of the benefits and potency associated with the rituals. Women have continued to play leading roles in traditional rituals despite the incursion of foreign religions.

Keywords: Traditional rituals and Divinities, Women cults, Priesthood, Ijebuland

Word Count: 275

Introduction to Female Cult and the area called *Ìjèbùlánd*

These are cults which pay reverential homage to a Divine Being(s). It is not a secret cult but a religious cult in which women in large numbers come together to worship, reverence, care and adore the Supreme Being, the divinities and the ancestors. In these female-oriented cults, women are the sole officiating minister. They have the responsibility of performing roles like the ones traditionally and culturally assigned to men. From the various activities performed by women in these cults, we see that they are not relegated to the background and are not really barred by custom and tradition from occupying certain positions. Just like we have male-oriented cults like *Agemo* cult likewise we have female-oriented cults like *Iyemoji* (*Ìlónè*), *Iyemule* (*Ìjèbù-Òde*) and *Imalè* cults in *Ìjèbù-Igbó*. In these cults women play equal roles with the men and there are still many adherents who are totally dedicated to these various divinities and the veneration

of the ancestors. In these cults group, God is accorded regular direct and indirect worship at conventional periodic intervals and the calendar is usually kept by young and old dedicated priestesses. With these various female-oriented cult in Ijebuland. We see that women are consider central to the spiritual quest of the communities.

Ijebuland consist of the Yoruba ethnic group called the Ijebu and they are part of the Ogun State which is located in the South Western part of Nigeria. The Ijebu people occupy six local governments area in Ogun state, namely: Ijebu-Ode, Ijebu-North, Ijebu-North-East, Ijebu-East, Odogbolu and Ijebu Waterside, Ijebu-Ode is capital city of Ijebuland and they all come under the over-lordship of the Awujale (the head of the paramount rulers for all the Ijebu Kings).

The Institution of Priesthood in the Female Cults

Parrinder, (1962, p.75) observed that:

... priest and devotees, mediums devoted to the gods, are set apart for divine service and receive some kind of initiation and training for it... these religious persons give themselves to the service of the god, either spontaneously or by the choice of their superiors.

According to Mbiti, (1970, p.187) the term priest is used to include all religious leaders. Strictly speaking, priests are religious servants associated with temples shrines and places of worship. In African situation, the word is used to cover everyone who performs religious duties whether in temples, shrines, sacred groves or elsewhere. There are priests reported among many African societies which includes; Ankore, Yoruba, Igbo, Akan, Shona, Baganda, Basoga, Ewe, Sonjo and others.

The institution of priesthood among the female cults in Ijebuland comprises religious specialists who perform sacrificial rituals on behalf of the community or congregation. These religious specialists could be men or women. The institution is strong and developed among the traditional worshippers in Ijebuland and they are highly honoured and favoured. Concerning the institution, among the Yoruba, Idowu, (1973, p.136) observed that:

...the priest has always been an important social figure. He is inevitable in the social pattern of the Yoruba since the keynote of their national life is their religion. Virtually nothing is done without the ministration of the priest. For, apart from

looking after the “soul” of the community he features prominently in the installation of Kings and the making of Chiefs.

In Ijebuland the priestesses in the female cults are usually called *Olorisa* (one who cares for the divinities) “... for the *Orisa* abides in that person and can be a vehicle of the *Orisa*’s self expression at any time or place”. With regard to the female cults in Ijebuland, a priestess performs the sacrificial ritual which is one of their essential characteristics. This ritual is carried out at designated places such as in the shrines, sacred groves, altars, all cross-roads or any other places, when the need arises. There is no age barrier as to who becomes this cultic official among women in Ijebuland. When one is eight days old and they do the necessary rituals and cast the sixteen cowries used for the divination called *Eredogun* or the kolanut, the person can be called, and initiation would be done. But if the priestess is still a small child, she cannot use the *Eredogun* because she may not be able to understand the message. She can do some other things in the shrine. When she grows up to twelve years old, she can then learn the art of divination. In Ijebuland, the priestess is involved in the act of divination using the *Eredogun*, it is only men that can use the *Ifa* divination. Women are not allowed to handle divination instruments: that is, *opele* and *opon Ifa*, since it is only men that can enter their *Igbo-odu*, the initiation ground for men. Traditionally, before the advent of women cults, women are not allowed to partake in the process of divination using the *opele* and *opon ifa* (diviner’s plate). Other reasons giving for this include the belief that women cannot keep secrets and sometimes they are regarded as ritually unclean during their menstrual period.

In Ijebuland, it seems as if women are the only ones in charge of the *Okanlenirinwo Imale*, that is, 401 divinities. They are the ones that are usually found in the shrine, the custodians who are usually initiated into the priesthood. Men are also involved in the initiation but not in *Idosu Osudida fun Orisa* that is, being consecrated for the divinities it is usually women affairs. Men are usually given subsidiary roles to play, but not at the highest level of the hierarchy, like being the *Olumogba*, *Aseto orisa*, *Alase* and *Ojuwa*. In addition, it should be noted that the female cults were not established as a rival to male cults but to recognise and appreciate the importance of the divinities irrespective of their sex in general. Therefore, the male complementary role is not out of place.

Call to Priesthood in the Female Cults

The institution of priesthood may be hereditary or vocational. Candidates are usually chosen by the divinities, trained, initiated and ordained. They serve both God Almighty (*Olodumare*) and the divinities that are considered sons and daughters of *Olodumare*. The divinities are ministers of God who are “believed to be charged with vital functions, universally recognised and worshipped by the Yoruba”.

Idowu, (1973) asserted that priesthood of a particular divinity may be through heredity when he wrote that:

A woman who came into a house with her own cult remains the officiant at the shrine of her divinity because she is the *Olorisa* and this line of officiants is continued by her own offspring. The ‘stranger’ (and the offspring after her) who came into a compound with a cult is naturally the officiant at the shrine of her divinity since it is she who knows her object of worship

Apart from heredity, a devotee can also be called to belong to an *Orisa*. The divinity can possess the person, through ecstatic trance, when she is alone or during a public ceremony or the divinity may appear to the person in a dream or vision.

The would-be priestess could even be struck by affliction which may not be treatable by either orthodox or traditional means. Through divination, it may be revealed to the people that the solution to the patient’s problem is to be a priestess. After the performance of the initiation, such a patient usually gets well.

According to one of the informants, *Akomoje Olorisa Fausat Omitutu*, the would-be priestess may even be faced with one problem or the other. She would be searching for solution until she would be told that it is a particular divinity that is troubling her and that the divinity wanted her to serve in the shrine. If the victim agreed, the initiation would be performed. *Olorisa Fausat Omitutu* herself claimed to have suffered from one ailment or another before she finally devoted her life to full work in the shrine. She was trained and initiated at the age of five years but she refused to serve. When things were not going smoothly for her, she abandoned all and became a full-time priestess. Some priestesses may be called to serve on part-time basis that is, engage in some other vocations. They were allowed to get married on the instruction of the divinity. Such husband may be a member of the male cult or a priest in another cult group. At times, a divinity might not allow the priestess to marry outside the cult. To refuse to serve may result in permanent disability, insanity, or any other disastrous occurrence or even death.

A person may decide to become a priestess of the divinities after being healed by the divinity of a particular ailment in order to avoid a re-occurrence of the ailment. The person would then serve as an apprentice with an accomplished priestess in the shrine. The priestess will initiate the person and train her in the rudiments of the spirits, the various rules and regulations and the techniques of office of the priestess. In addition, she will learn the names and

attributes of the object of worship, the various incantations and the taboos of the divinities.

By vocation, priestesses can recruit their members from the young girls in the community or those that visit their shrines often during worships or their annual festivals. They still have to consult the divinities so as to be sure that the person is a choice of the divinities. The initiation and training is a sort of examination or ritual test to ascertain that the would-be priestess is capable or genuinely prepared for the task before her.

Initiation into Priesthood in the Female Cults

The institution of priesthood is complex and developed among the Ijebu people. The initiation and training are still widely practiced among the people with its full rituals performed. Among the people of Ijebu-Igbo, Oru, Awa, for instance, the initiation and training are done for all the divinities, that is, one initiating would qualify a priestess to be able to serve all the divinities.

During initiation, the head of a would-be priestess would be shaved and decorated with white chalk (*Efun*) and camwood (*Osun*) with the design of each of the gods/divinities. In Ijebu-Ode, Ilone and Esure, this is not so. Each divinity demands its own initiation. To be a priestess of *Iyemule* and be able to perform its ritual and rites for instance, one must be initiated into *Iyemule* cult. Such an initiation did not qualify a priestess to play a leading role in the worship of other deities. The reason for this according to the informant was that the priestesses in Ijebu-Igbo believed that their own initiation was deeper and all embracing than the initiations performed in other parts of Ijebuland. In Ijebu-Igbo, single-deity initiation was not performed because of the expenses involved. They prefer an all-embracing initiation that might be complex but cheaper. This type of initiation is considered to be cheaper in the sense that it is an all-embracing initiation into the cult of different divinities at the same time. It saves cost and time. Therefore, rather than being initiated into different cults at different times, the initiation is done once and for all.

Olorisa Fausat, claimed that “*Gbingbin la gbin ogede, lilo la lo ireke, tiwa yato si tiwon*”¹(Though truly, both plantain and sugarcane were planted, there are some differences. Our initiation is different from theirs). The people of Ijebu-Igbo believe they are less expensive and more considerate when it comes to initiation process and it usually lasted for fourteen days. The priestess was also to learn the *Eredogun* (the sixteen cowries used for divination). The training for *Eredogbon* has no time limit. It depended on how intelligent the priestess was. During the period of *Eredogun* training, the priestess would also be taught about the laws and taboos of the divinities and the cult generally.

During initiation ritual, each divinity would be given its own favourite items. Such items include leaves, for example, *ewe woro*, *ewe eson*, *ewe tete abalaye*, *ewe matiluko*, *ewe ogbo*, *ewe abamoda*, *ewe akoko*, *ewe olosaan*, *ewe epin*.

Each leaf has its own symbolic meaning. For instance, *ewe tete* symbolises that the would-be priestess would live long; *ewe matiluko* symbolizes that all would be well with the initiate, that in the performance of her duties she would not be sent on exile during her tenure, all would be well with her and the entire community. Other items include *eran agbo*, *eran ewure*, *obi ati ako adie*, *igbin*, *obi abata*, *aadun*, *epo*, *ori*, *ireke*, *oyin*, *eyele*, *pepeye*, *eledede*, *oti ati omi*, (Ram, goat, sheep, hen, cock, snail, four valves kolanut, sugarcane, honey, pigeon, duck, palm oil, sheabutter, pig, alcohol and water). From these arrays of items, they knew which one was for each of the divinities; as one divinity’s favourite might be another one’s taboo. For instance, palm wine and salt were taboo for *Orisa-nla*, while some others loved the two. They would be careful not to give *Orisa-nla* palm wine or salted things.

Initiation rites into priesthood vary from one locality to the other in Ijebuland. The initiation rite is a covenant relationship between the person that is being initiated, the divinity or divinities as the case may be and the other members of the cult. This initiation ceremony is called *Idosu* or *osu dida fun Orisa*. Initiation usually started in the evening or sunset at about 5 p.m., when they believed all the divinities in the shrine were back at home. In the first day, there would be washing of the emblems of the divinities with leaves and local soap, (*ose dudu*). It should be noted that this washing is necessary to consecrate the divinities and also to replace the damaged emblems where necessary. After washing, they would be left to dry. Thereafter they would apply the camwood (*osuni*) and chalk (*efun*) to the various emblems. The type to be used for each divinity would depend on the taste of the divinity. For instance, chalk (*efun*) would be used to polish the emblem of *Oris/hanla/Osoosi* while the *osun* (camwood) would be used for *Osun*.

The trainers are senior priestesses who are versed in the knowledge of the *Idosu* (initiation) of the individual divinities. It is not every senior priestess that can train a would-be priestess for *Idosu*. Some priestesses may be old and may not know all that *idosu* entails within a particular deity’s cult. The chief initiator is the person that knows much about the divinities and she is called *Alagbo*. In case the would-be priestess has no *Agbo Orisa*, the *Idosu* will be done in the officiating *Alagbo*’s shrine of divinities. During the annual festival of her trainer, the would-be priestess must join her to play the role of *Omo Orisa* (divinities’ children). Anytime the would-be priestess without her own shrine of divinities wants to worship her divinities, she is expected to go to the shrine of her initiating priestess with the necessary ingredients of worship.

There is hierarchy of seniority among the priestesses. The year of initiation is used to mark seniority in the *Agba-Orisa*. Somebody that performed her own in 1994 (though at two years old) would be a senior to somebody that performed her own in 2006 (even if she is fifty years old). This seniority is very important because when it is time to pay homage or obeisance to the divinities, to eat or do anything in the cult, the hierarchy of seniority is strictly adhered to.

Before initiation can take place, the would-be priestess must have got ready all the items for initiation and paid a token sum of money ranging from three thousand to five thousand naira to the chief trainer, who then must send some amount to other priestesses to join her in the initiation. It may range from one hundred to five hundred naira depending on the distance involved. After this is done, the day for initiation is then fixed.

Other items for initiation include: *opolopo adiyé* (many hens), *eran agbo* (ram) for *sango*, *ewure* (she-goat), for *Orisa-nla* and *Osun*, *obuko* (he-goat) for *Obaluwaye*, *opolopo Obi abata*, (many four valves kolanut), *orogbo* (bitter kolanut) *igbin* (snail), *ataare* (alligator pepper), *epo* (palm oil), *eyele* (pigeon), *itan olube*, *aika* (bush meats), *eja osan*, *eja aro* (cat fish), (this is not included in the initiation items for *Iyemule*), *eja*, *oyin* (fish), *aidun*, *iyo* (salt), *ori agbo* (ram's head), *iye agbe*, *iye aluko*, *ikoride* (*Iye odidere*) (feathers of various birds).

Early in the morning of the first day of the initiation, the would-be priestess would first and foremost worship her 'overself' (personal god) *Ori*. For this purpose, *obi Adiyé* (hen) is used. This hen is also seen as *adiyé adanikanje* (hen to be eaten alone). The would-be priestess alone must consume the hen, though other priestesses might help her to cook it. This hen must also be cooked immediately after the sacrifice so that everything must be cooked and eaten the same day by her.

Starting from the first day of the initiation to the last day (fourteenth day), she is not expected to do any work. This could be seen as a sort of fattening period. At the end of it all, she might be a bit fatter. During the period of initiation, she must not eat overnight food. She cannot take water that was not fetched that day and she must not walk on the floor that has not been swept that morning (*ile ikasi*). Her food must be cooked on that day and eaten same day by her alone. This is because of the necessary *aito* (rituals) to be done for her.

After sacrificing to the head (*ori*), they will also make sacrifice to *Ogun*, the god of iron because most instruments for her are made of iron; also because *Ogun* is the "pathfinder" who is to show cult members the way. After the sacrifice to *Ogun*, sacrifices will be made to *Esu* and *Esu* is believed to be the inspector general of rituals, the messenger of the divinities. After *Esu*, veneration would be made to the ancestors. This ancestral veneration is called *Eyinba* in Ijebuland. They would venerate and pay homage to those who have gone before them and call on them to stay at the back of the shrine (*Eyin agbo, ni ita*) and partake in all the sacrifices so that it will be well with all they would do inside and outside the shrine.

Oluwéri, who is an aquatic divinity, would be offered sacrifices. The sacrifice would be offered at the stream where they have put the emblems of *Oluwéri*. The rationale behind sacrificing to all the divinities is that in Ijebu-Igbo and its environs, the cult is an all embracing cult and an initiate has to offer sacrifices to all the divinities in the shrine. After this is *fo-osu*, before this is done, they would cast kolanut to know where the washing should take place. For the washing could

either be in the market place, where there is running water (stream) or where the household refuse is dumped *ori atan or eyin agbo ni ita* (at the back of the shrine). The washing is usually done in the night at around 10. p.m. on the first day. This is believed to be the time when the divinities are available and they could be invoked to attend the sacrifice. This time, the atmosphere is calm and cool unlike in the day when there is hustle and bustle. The items for the washing include a pot of water, hen, some of the leaves that have been used to wash the emblems of the divinities, local sponge and local soap. The would-be priestess would carry everything on her head. She would not wear anything except a white wrapper. She would go in front of other senior priestesses. They would be singing, offering prayers and incantations to appease the divinities. The would-be priestess would be bathed from head to toe and blindfold her. Three people would guide her back to the shrine. All items used for the washing will be left at the spot, none of them would be brought back not even the cloth she wore to the spot. This symbolises purification and rebirth.

On getting inside the shrine, the initiate would be made to sit on a mortar that has been turned upside down to cover the *aito* (rituals items). It would be covered first with *eni fafa* (raffia mat) which is a ritual mat used for substitutionary sacrifice, "buried" instead of a person or wrapped and put at the crossroad with other rituals. On top of *eni fafa* is the normal mat, *eni ori*. She would then sit on this, from where other *aito* would be done.

This aspect of the ritual starts with the cutting of the hair from the middle to the back. After this, they would apply chalk and camwood and then draw the symbols of the divinities on the head. The shaven hair and the blade would be wrapped in a small white cloth. The would-be priestess must never see or come in contact with it. After this, she would get up from the mortar and sit on *ite* (glorious mat) for seven days. Only the senior priestesses may sit with her on that mat. If it were initiation for *egbe* the would-be priestess will put on *ude* (chain made of cowries on her shoulders and ankles) but no shaving of the head. Everyday at about 6 p.m. the senior priestesses will wash away the *aito* on the would-be priestess' head. The following morning after bath, they will re-apply it. If the head is covered with chalk, the young priestess must not eat salted things on that day. It means the symbol on her head is for *Orisa-nla*.

On the third day, the priestesses would cast the *eredogun* to know *Orisa to bi olosu* (the spirit through which the initiate has come). The initiates are usually identified with a particular spirit. After identifying the spirit, they would join others in their group to tell the would-be priestess the dos and don'ts of the spirit. These spirits include: *Onileowo*, *Esaogbin*, *Aroile*, *Lebioye* and *Onigboola*. Each of these spirits has its taboos.

Early in the morning of the seventh day, the senior priestess would remove the *ite* (glorious mat). After this, there will be no more painting of the head. The would-be priestess can now move freely within the house but not out of the house. She can just put on white wrapper; but there must be no

wearing of other clothes until the fourteenth day when the final rituals have been performed.

The fourteenth day is symbolic. It is the last day of the rituals. The final *aito* will start in the morning. The would-be priestess would go and fetch water from the stream and carry the pot on her head to the shrine. She will also fetch wood on her head to the shrine. We need to note that since she had been shaved, nothing must be carried on her head until the fourteenth day.

With the shaving of the hair and the initiation, it is a taboo for her to carry things on her head or to be initiated into another cult. She must not sit on mortars again. Those things she carried on the fourteenth day are a sort of “appeal – preventive sacrifice” *ebo kojumoribi*. This is a sort of precautionary measure against danger and disasters in case she is hit on the head. Sacrifice would also be done with *atupa* (local lantern). This is because the person must not play unnecessarily with fire because of the god of fire and thunder (*Sango*).

Finally, the would-be priestess would be beaten with cane to mark the final time she would ever be beaten with cane. A certain *aito* would be performed to ward off evil from those who might not know that the priestess should not be beaten with cane especially if she is a young girl.

The final preventive ritual is the process of making incisions on the head from the front to the back. They will slaughter a tortoise and use its blood to rub the incisions. The tortoise would then be cooked for the senior priestesses present but the initiate would not partake of the meal. This sacrifice is done so that the would-be beyond human imagination.

After the incision, she will then be dressed in her best new attire, ready for the “graduation party” which will last till the following morning. This is accompanied with wining, dinning and dancing to traditional music. This merrymaking will be accomplished by offering of gifts, no money must be placed on her head, but in a calabash put beside her or carried by a senior priestess. The above initiation rituals symbolise death and resurrection, in which a new personality has emerged with new language learnt to communicate with the divinities. The priestesses’ attire as shown in some of the pictures is white and this is symbolic of purity, likewise the water used in rituals. Also, the emblems of *Orisa-nla* and *Osun* divinities are white because they believe strongly in the purity of the gods and goddesses. However, other gods and goddesses allow the use of different colours for their attires. This explains the reason why different worshippers dress in either completely pure white attire or mixture.

The Grades of Priesthood in the Female Cults

The grade of priesthood has to do with the various cultic functionaries that exist in the female cults in Ijebuland. These functionaries include:

Alagbo:- This means the owner or the person in charge of the shrine. She is the head of all in the cult; she may be an elderly woman or somebody that is of middle age. She is in

charge of the rituals *aito* that is taking place in the shrine or outside the shrine pertaining to the divinities.

Alabe:-

She is next in rank to Alagbo, she is the priestess who is responsible for the shaving of heads of new initiates during *osu dida fun Orisa* (initiation), she is a sort of bodyguard to the Alagbo.

Alagbo:-

She is the catering officer who is also responsible for buying the materials for sacrifice. She is in charge when people are paying their vows and at times in collecting money from devotees for use in the shrine: a sort of treasurer. After sacrificing animals to the divinity, she makes arrangements for the cooking and its fair distribution among members. She knows “the parts” each priestess must have.

Koburu:-

This is a sort of chief whip and police officer. She kept order among members.

Apart from the above cultic functionaries who are in charge of a particular shrine, there are also other officers like *Akomoje*. *Akomoje* is the head of all the *Olori Olorisa*. Each town in Ijebuland has its own *Akomoje*. She oversees all that happen in the shrine of all the divinities. She represents the women (*Olorisa*) in the king’s palace. She is very vast in the knowledge of the divinities and when it comes to community rituals, she leads and acts as the central officiant in the divine ritual. There are other functionaries, which include the *Esin-nla*. This is an official title of the sango priestess. Other official titles include *Arobasalu*, *Ajipelede*, *Ashipasoro*, *Agarisha*, *Magunmiyi* and *Akeweje*. These groups of priestesses lead whenever there is a communal ritual. They sit in the order in which we have mentioned their titles. They are usually given a calabash during their installation ceremony.

Individual Rituals

Individual rituals can be seen as a sort of personal or private ritual which primarily may affect a single person. One person is the primary actor, while another person may be the ritualist. The ritual is performed along the life’s journey of each individual, Mbiti, (1981, p.127) explained that:

Thus, the life of the individual is accompanied by rituals. They begin during pregnancy. They continue at birth, naming, teething, during puberty, at circumcision or clitoridectomy, in other forms of initiation, at engagement, marriage, child bearing, eldership, old age, death and when one has become a living dead... Personal rituals

draw attention to the uniqueness of the individual. They tell him and the world around 'that he matters. That he is valuable, and that he is a member of the wider community.

Ritual is an important religious stage and sacrament in the life of an individual, his or her family and the entire community, every stage of life is marked with religious rites because generally, Africans, Ijebu inclusive, wherever people are they enjoy celebrating life, Idowu, (1973, p.5) surmised that:

Religion forms the foundation and the governing principle of life for them... Before a child is born, the oracle is consulted and due rites observed. When the child is born, the oracle gives direction about it; at every stage of life – puberty, betrothal, marriage, taking up a career, building a house, going on a journey and, in fact, the thousand and one things which make up human existence here on earth – man is in the hands of the Deity whose dictate is law....

Individual ritual can be divided into two: the passive period when one cannot fully understand what is going on (pregnancy, birth, naming and funeral rites) and the active participatory periods when one is fully aware and can take part in what is going (puberty, and marriage rites). Hence, it will be apposite to examine some of these individual rituals among the Ijebu people.

Rites Of Passage in the Female Cults

At this juncture, it will be necessary to examine the rites of passage as it is practiced in the female cults in Ijebuland with a view to uncovering their views about the different phases of life among the Ijebu people. In the lives of individuals and families, there are some important events which have religious connotations and involve transition or crossing from one stage of life to another. Whatever a person is doing in the ideal traditional community has religious connotation. Religion is part of life. It permeates a person's life from the cradle to the grave. A person is born into a religious atmosphere and from his or her conception to his/her existence. This is called "rite of passage". Parrinder, (1962) stated that:

In the lives of individual and families there are important events which have religious associations. These are what the Dutch writer; Van Gennep called 'rites of passage', or transitional rites. They involve transition or crossing from one place or stage of life to another. Important among these are the stages of life, birth, the passage through puberty, the new state of marriage, the ceremonies of burial; these are the sacraments of personal and family life. Some of these rites have more religious importance than others...

These rites of passages are also known as initiating rituals and are performed to mark certain passages in the life of an individual or group. The female cults as exemplified in *Iyemule* and *Iyemoji* also perform different rituals to initiate its members at different points in their lives from childhood to adulthood and even to death. Thus, these rites among others include the following:

Pregnancy, Birth, Naming Ceremonies

Pregnancy ritual is also known as pre-natal ritual. This ritual is performed to make sure that the child and its mother are perfectly healthy. Immediately pregnancy is confirmed, the woman is given the best care. Pregnancy is usually a joyful state of the woman and her entire family, the mother-to-be is set aside from other people. She is seen as *Abarameji* or *Alabaraji* (pregnant woman) and by virtue of this; she is given necessary locally prepared medicine. She is pampered, set aside and prepared for the experience of birth, especially if it is her first experience. The mother-to-be is given various preparatory rituals and at times a sort of ritual is done so that the pregnancy can stay.

In the traditional Ijebu societies, people calculate the period in lunar months. At the end of the 9th lunar month, the ritual is released from the tree so that the pregnancy can come down and the baby, delivered. The would-be mother is given a concoction prepared with snail to eat so as to have quick and prompt delivery. All sorts of rituals are performed in order to transform the foetus into a real person. One such rite is called *Agbalegbo*, that is, "may the foetus not grow into abnormal size, for it is designed to make the baby come out easily. It is after birth that it now grows fast.

Childlessness is seen as a bad omen and it prevents continuity not only in the family but also in the human race. All things humanly possible, therefore, are done to remove

barrenness in the homestead through various rituals. This is why people patronise the priestess of *Iyemojì* and *Iyemulè* to avert this situation. At the early stage of pregnancy the would-be-mother is not allowed to do heavy work. She is to eat warm food and she is not allowed to do any work that would require her to bend down too much. She is restricted in her movement and not allowed to walk under the high sun and at night because of bad spirits or the spirit of “born-to-die” children. Always on her person, she wears protective amulets. Towards the ninth month, she is then allowed to do some work like serious washing of clothes or told to do some trekking to facilitate her labour and ease her safe delivery. The situation in which the pregnant woman dies with the foetus still inside her is treated as an abomination and the *Ìjèbú* people do all things humanly possible to protect the baby and the mother-to-be.

In *Ìjèbúland*, there are traditional birth attendants who may be called midwives. Often times, the birth attendants are priestesses. They take delivery of the baby when its time comes. They are usually aged and experienced mothers themselves. They take the delivery with necessary herbs and medicinal preparations, while the pregnant woman lies on her back on a mat. When the baby has been born, the placenta and the umbilical cord which are the link between the baby and the mother are put in a pot with some ritual items and buried on the ground. If the baby is “*Ànáná*”, that is, his or her umbilical cord is put in a clay pot in the shrine with some ‘*àitò*’ which would include a lot of palm oil.

On the third day, kolanut is cast to know the type of child the baby is, his/her destiny and what exact message he or she has brought from the divinities. This people call “*Ìkosèwáyé*”. They also get to know through this medium which of the ancestors has partially reincarnated. The *Ìjèbú* people (like other Africans) seriously believe in reincarnation. A baby is carefully scrutinised to see what marks of resemblance it shares with dead parents or relatives.

From the day the baby is born, up to the seventh day, the child and the mothers are expected to be in confinement. This is to ensure the health of the mother and the development of the child. During this time, the child would be called “*Ìkókó*” (baby) and the mother “*Ìyá-Ìkókó*” (mother of baby) until the eighth day when the baby receives a name.

On the eighth day, there is a large gathering of relatives, friends and well-wishers for the naming ceremony ritual. This is called “*Ìkómojádé*” (bringing baby and its mother into the society). The baby is given its own name and identity in the family and the community at large. It is always an occasion of joy and celebration. The mother is made to sit on a traditional stool carrying her baby. The ceremony is performed by a priest/priestess, to thank God and the various family deities for safe delivery and to bless the child and mother. Finally, the baby is given a name. *Ìdòwú*, (1979, p.5) opines that:

Every Yorùbá name has a character and a significance of its own. No child is given a name without a cause; and that cause is not the bare inevitable

one that a child must be born before it can receive a name. Every one of the name is almost invariably a sentence, or a clause, or an abbreviation of a sentence, which can be broken into components parts, besides, the name must tell some clear story, whether it be of the circumstances surrounding the child’s birth, the state of the parents’ or family affairs when it is born, or a remarkable event in the town or the general world into which it is born.

Items used for the naming ceremony rituals include; water, honey, sugarcane, dried rat, palm oil, salt, dried catfish, kolanut, bitter kola, alligator pepper and “*Áídùn*” (corn powder mixed with palm and pepper). These items have ritualistic symbols and are used by the priestess to pray for the child.

Honey, sugar, sugarcane and salt symbolise sweetness, prosperous life and comfortability. Thus the saying; “*A kí fì oyin senu ká tutó è sonù*”, “*dídùn dídùn là n bá ilé olóyin*”. “(One never spits out honey from one’s mouth, and every moment the house of the one who has honey is always sweet)”. The dried catfish is also used. Catfish lives in the water and always uses its head to push things. “*Orí ni eja fì n la ibú já*” (With its head the fish normally wades through the deep waters). Your “head” (personal god) would guide you in your journey in life and it will see you through. The dried rat, “*eku, o sí kè ká fì orí è sí enu*”, (the rat is not killed because it cries). As the baby cries and grows, enemies would not be able to harm him/her. The child is blessed with all these items, some are put in his or her mouth and the mother eats the rest, with the hope that, the baby would suckle the rest from the mother’s breast. The mother is expected to breast-feed the baby at the early stage of his or her life. As the baby grows, other foods starting with liquid or soft foods are introduced to feed him/her.

The appearance of teeth is greeted with ritual soap (*osè eyín*) which the mother uses to wash only the baby’s head with a separate local sponge which must not be used to wash other parts of the body. It is only the male child who is circumcised; no circumcision is done for the female child. The circumcision is done immediately after the eighth day when the mother is still in seclusion. The mother is expected to stay indoors for forty days to nurse the baby.

Marriage

The next stage as the child grows up is puberty. Puberty ritual is performed when the child reaches adulthood. The child is sexually able and is a responsible member of the group with whom he or she shares identity. But puberty rites among *Ìjèbú* community are not well pronounced as in other Yorùbá communities. The stage after the puberty is marriage.

In *Ìjèbúland*, marriage is a domestic ritual which does not only intimately involve the two individual adults. It also

involves their families and their community. This is because the two individuals now form a new household through marriage ritual. It marks the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The ritual goes a long way in uniting the families and entire communities together. All these uniting public rituals are marked by celebrations. It is only when they have been warned by the oracles through the casting of kolanut not to have elaborate celebration, that the marriage rituals would be performed quietly.

With the marriage ritual, the young-intending couples are placed upon the path of their parents and ancestors. It is a path of self-discovery and social responsibility as husband and wife, father and mother, family and community leaders. Among the items for marriage is a mortar and a pestle, “*omo olo àti ilota*” (grinding stone) which are good symbols of ideal couple and a ‘*Àmù*’ the big clay pot with a cover. Using these various items with the necessary ‘*àitò*’ gives the would-be-wife assurance, spur and boldness to be able to conduct herself in the new status.

Before marriage is contracted, a lot of rituals must have been observed along with sacrifices and offerings made to the divine beings as well as the ancestors. The husband and the wife are not expected to have sexual intercourse before wedding. According to our informant, things have changed, nowadays, because not all the young ladies remain virgin, though a few of them still are.

Another important aspect of the marriage ritual is the payment of bride price (in cash) and some other gifts, namely, kolanut, yam, alligator pepper, bitter kola, dried fish (which the people believe must be forty-one or twenty-one), wine, goat, clothes, honey, sugar cane and ‘*àidùn*’ for the wife’s families.

On the day of marriage, the bride would be made to sit on the local stool (*Ìpèkù* or *àga iyàwó*) on which they had done some rituals. Prayers and blessings are then offered to her at the family altar or inside the shrine. She then carries her “*àga iyàwó*” (bride chair) with other luggages to her husband’s house.

Despite the facts that with modernity, things have been modified considerably, the use of “*alárinà*” (intermediary) still features very prominently in the traditional Ìjèbú-society. This intermediary may be a man or a woman who knows the family of the girl and the boy very well. The person is chosen by the parents of the groom to take their proposal to the parents of the girl and to inform the groom’s parent’s of the intention to marry the girl to their son. This is because, marriage is supposed to unite the two families of the couple into a single family. Therefore, the parents arrange the marriage for their children and its ritual has main effects upon the society as a continuance of a family line.

Funeral Rites

The last and not the least in the rites of passage are the funeral rites. The Ìjèbú people, like all other Yorùbá, believe that death is meant for the aged and under normal circumstances people should live to a ripe old age. Death is seen as one of the passages or crises of life. It is a universal phenomenon, an experience which one must pass through in life. It is inescapable and beyond human control. Idòwú, (1979,

p.201) remarks that:

The fact of death is a baffling and disturbing question – mark written conspicuously on the face of things. Mans has been forced, therefore since he became acquainted with it, to apply his mind to the question of its origin and purpose. In this, the Yorùbá as corporate members of the human race are no exception; for, from the evidence at our disposal, we find that it is a subject to which they have given careful thought. Their name for it is Iku, which besides being their designation for ‘dying’ stands also, and more importantly, as the name for the personified power, the agent which the Yorùbá believe to be responsible, under commission from Olódùmarè, for killing and removing people from this earth.

It is a necessary end, which spares neither the young nor the old. It could be seen as separation of the body from the personality-soul which is a spiritual substance. Death is the separation of the body, which is the material, the tangible, the measurable from the spiritual substance, the intangible and the immeasurable. When the two are separated, the body will decay and the essential person which is divine in origin, the personality soul, will return to the source from which it came.

The Ìjèbú, like all other Yorùbá speaking people, believes that death is not the end of life; it is only a way of changing the present earthly life for another. The belief is very strong that death does not write ‘*finis*’ to human life. Awólálú, (1972, p.116) surmises:

The present life

continues in the next world and this new existence is regarded as superior to the present one. The Yorùbá describe it as “Ehin Iwa ti is’egbon oni” (after life which is the superior of today or the present). A man must be careful about what he does here because when the present life is over, he will be presented before Olódùmarè, (the Supreme Being) to give an account of the life lived.

When a person dies, the soul goes to the other world to dwell with the ancestral spirits, the divinities. It is a sort of separation which is seen as unhappy and is privately marked with fear and haste. In order to make it painless, necessary rituals are performed for those who are left to remove symbolically the ‘hands’ of the deceased from the family, clan and cult. In traditional Ìjèbú society, the funeral rites are, therefore, a passage ritual from the physical world to the spiritual realm. Mbiti, (1981, p.113) reiterates that:

Death marks a physical separation of the individual from other human being. This is a radical change, and the funeral rites and ceremonies are intended to draw attention to that permanent separation. Meticulous care is taken to fulfill the funeral rites and to avoid causing any offence to the departed. This is not done for unknown strangers, for thieves, murderers, witches and other trouble-markers in the community, or for those who have died abnormal deaths.

can be thrown away anyhow. There are rituals in Ìjèbúland for the disposal, of the body of the deceased. In the female-oriented cults there are various rituals (*àtò*) concerning the disposal of the corpse, especially for aged people. They know that life goes on beyond the grave. Therefore, they do all within their power to give their beloved ones a befitting burial. In Ìjèbú traditional society, funeral rituals are performed to ensure that a dead person becomes a revered, honoured and respected ancestor.

When an old person dies in the family, the people believe that he still retains his position in the family life spiritually and is thereafter, akin to the divinities. Those that are living respect them by giving them various rituals and they in turn keep an eye on their loyal and trusted descendants. When a woman worshipper dies outside her home, she is carried back home with “*pàkálà*”, a sort of casket made of bamboo for burial.

In the case of the death of a member of a female-oriented cult, once death is confirmed and announced by the chief priestess on behalf of the deceased family, the other cult members far and near come around because the body must be disposed of without undue delay. Immediately death occurs the body of the deceased is stretched, rubbed with shea-butter and covered with a long white wrapper. Salt in a small white bowl is placed on the deceased person’s chest. This process is known as “*tító ara òkú*” (a form of funeral rite) and it is the traditional way of preserving the corpse from decomposition before burial. After this, a suitable place within the compound or inside the house or inside the shrine is chosen to bury the corpse.

In Ìjèbú traditional society, the dead are buried horizontally and the corpse is placed face upwards. The two hands of the deceased are rubbed with white chalk and camwood. This confirms the traditional Ìjèbú people’s prayer, which says “*Omo ló ma kó efun lé mi lówó*” (may my children paint my hands with white chalk). This is a way of praying for old age and that one’s children would eventually bury one.

Among the items for the funeral ritual *àtò* are; *Ape méji*, *òrí*, *òbí*, *adiye*, *ako adiye*, *ìjàpá*, *efun*, *osùn*, *àti aso funfun* (Two medium size clay pots, sheabutter, kolanut, hen, fowl, tortoise, white chalk, camwood and white cloths). The body is bathed with the local black soap and the local sponge with some herbal leaves. As they are washing, they would be invoking the spirits of the dead, that is, other ancestors, to come and receive the deceased who has just joined their rank.

After washing, the body would be rubbed with sheabutter and white chalk placed in the two hands and wrapped with white cloths. Afterwards, the corpse will be placed in the grave already prepared in a corner of the shrine. They would then slaughter the hen and fowl and sprinkle the blood on the grave to wish the corpse journey mercies to the next world. After this “*àtò*” (rituals), one of the clay pots is used to cover the already covered grave upside down. The other pot is used to cover the “*àtò*” which they have placed at the entrance of the house. On the seventh day, another ritual would be performed for the deceased in whom the children would be taken to the riverside and would be told to walk

Man is not a rag, that after his or her death, he or she

across the river (*kojá odò, fesè sí inú omi*). This is supposed to be done for the children before the fourteenth day during which there will be procession to the river to fetch the ritual *otùn* water and followed by *otùn* dance. They would also prepare the bean cakes for people to eat.

After this rite come the fourteenth day ritual, in which they would fetch water, *otùn* water. On coming back from the river, they would break one *otùn* pot and break one “*àtòrì*” (cane) at the graveside. This is to symbolise the fact that they have removed the deceased pot. Henceforth, she is no more one of them because she has joined the cult of the ancestors.

When they have ritually broken the *otùn* pot and the cane, the *otùn* dance follows, together with feasting, merry-making and thanking *Olódùmarè*, for surviving one’s parent. This according to Mbiti, (1981, pp. 115-119)

....is partly to confront the bereaved and to bring life back to normal and partly to thank those who have officiated in the funeral rites...By doing these things people are able to come to terms with the agonies, sorrows and disruption caused by death. By ritualizing death, people dance it away, drive it away, and renew their own life after it has taken away one of their members...the right funeral rites must be performed to send it off, to enable it to go away and let it join other spirits.

One year after the burial ceremony, there is another rite known as “*ehinba*”, which is an ancestral veneration rite. The rite is performed by the children of the deceased to have communion with their parent’s spirit. During this rite, the children sacrifice to the family divinities inside the house which may be the room for the deceased while alive or any room dedicated for such rite. The eldest person in the family with the chief-priestess and others in attendance leads this rite.

During this rite, they address their deceased parents, beg for special favours and ask the deceased not to sleep in heaven but to look after his or her children and the entire family. From time to time, they would also perform this rite for the deceased, especially during the annual festival or the initiation ritual or when there is a recurrence of death in the family or the death of somebody close to the deceased. The *Ìjèbú* people believe that during these periods, the deceased would come around. There are no limitations imposed by the

physical life on the dead as they move around in spirit. They can be seen in dreams and trances. They can send information through other cult members to their families and friends.

The “*ehinba*” rites among the *Ìjèbú* are a manifestation of an unbroken spiritual tie between the deceased who has gone to the spirit world and the children who are still here on earth. Items used for these rites include those things the deceased had used or eaten when alive. For instance, the cloth he had worn or food he has eaten or beer he/her is used to take. A ram, will be slaughtered and its blood, beer and gin will be poured into a hole made on the grave, cigarette and matches will be buried in the hole dug. The ram’s body, especially its neck, would be rubbed against the grave. Pounded yam with stew would be placed at the grave and a corner of the entrance of the house of the deceased three times. The ram’s head would also be placed at the corner. The remaining body of the ram would be cooked and eaten by all the children, family members and everybody present as a sort of communion with the deceased and other ancestors who had gone before. Before slaughtering the ram, starting from the eldest child, all the children would come out to offer prayers with all the ritual items.

With the funeral rites fully performed, the survivors of the deceased believe the dead will not haunt them and that the spirits have been sent to their appropriate abode in according to them, death is not an end in itself; it is a journey back “home”. Come what may, death is the ultimate end of a human being on earth, the separation of the body from the soul.

From the above discussions, women are seen as men in the conduct of the religious affairs in *Ìjèbúland*. Parrinder, (1949, p.101) says:

The psychic abilities of women have received recognition and scope to a much greater degree in African religion than they have in Islam or Christianity where women are still barred from the priesthood.

In *Ìjèbú* societies, one can see the inestimable value of the women through the various roles they played in the female-oriented cults which cannot be underestimated. It is the concern of the female-oriented cults to promote and develop the quality of life for the present and the oncoming generations. Through their various knowledge and use of natural resources, they have been able to provide assistance for their families, cult members and the community at large.

Despite the roles played by women in these cults, it does not in any way impinge on the statutory roles played by men in their religious cults. In other words, men have been found to be performing roles which are complementary in the society. Men are still found to be taking leading roles in society and in their sacred places of worship. Hence, the roles

played by women do not invalidate the role played by men in the different rites of passage in Ìjèbùland.

The Relevance of Female Cults in the Affairs of the People

According to Ijebu world view, the universe is created and maintained by the Supreme Being (*Olodumare*). He brought the divinities and spirits who are of various categories to act as His ministers and functionaries in the theocratic government of the universe.

The Ijebu people, both young and old, are still attached to the various cults, particularly, the female cults which serve as a source of succor in times of troubles. They have not drifted away from the worship of the various *Imale* (divinities). The young as well as the aged female are still found in the worship of these various divinities and the performance of their cultic rituals. There is no inflexibility in matters relating to the performance of ceremonial ritual roles of the female and male. There are no impediments in the way of the woman as to what to do and not to do. There is a common Yoruba adage *Bi okunrin ri ejo bi obinrin pa a, ki ejo saa ti ku, abuse buse* (A man sights a snake, and a woman kills it; as long as the snake is killed, the job is accomplished).

The resilience of the female cults in Ijebuland is due principally to the fact that both the older generation of women and the younger ones collaborate to see to the task of perpetuating their religious faith through the initiation of new members. New female members are initiated from time to time. Not only the old females are left devoted and trusted to the cults, the young females work hand in hand with the old women to make necessary repairs in the shrines. Invariably, the young and old female devotees are adherents of the traditional religion. Awolalu, (1981, p. 10) remarked that:

Old people (women) have been dying, and yet the number of divinities has not been reduced. Generations after generation of Africans have passed away and the festivals have not reduced in number: neither has the enthusiasm with which they have been celebrated and are still being celebrated diminished in any way.

It is instructive to note that *Iyemule* and *Iyemoji* festivals are still being celebrated among the Ijebu people on a yearly basis. The various female cults in Ijebu-Igbo and its environs still observe the various cultic and rituals in honour of the *Imale* who give support to the maintenance of peace in their communities. There are various rituals observed by both aged and youngsters in the traditional society and they are connected with the various customs of their communities. Nobody in Ijebuland dares sell the new yam at any Ijebu markets until the sixteen Agemo priests have returned to their

various towns from Imodi-Imosan. Everyday, sacrifices are placed at road junctions, cross roads and roundabouts. The priestesses and other women in their groups numbering up to twenty file and march to the river-side to offer sacrifices to the river divinities and other gods in Ijebuland.

The various *Imale* are still relevant in the affairs of the Ijebu people, because apart from being the monitors and intermediaries between man and the Supreme Being, they also monitor human behavior on behalf of the Supreme Being. The *Imale* are charged with the responsibility of keeping moral order in the society. They command good behavior and good character and are always ready to punish the recalcitrant in the society.

Sacrifices are offered by the priestesses to the divinities believing that *Olodumare* will accept such offerings through them. They serve as messengers of the community to the Supreme Being. The community worships, adores and praises them because the people have absolute trust in them and they believe the *Imale* can solve all human problems. People with their multifarious problems ranging from barrenness, had crops, to pestilence and those seeking good employment etcetera, come to them with vows, sacrifices and offerings with the hope of turning their fortunes around.

The different *Imale* cults serve as a unifying factor within the Ijebu community. Within the various female cults, we see cooperation, love, tolerance, friendship and affection which are demonstrated among the people. The *Imale* usher in peace, prosperity and help to re-shape the life of the people and their community. They make peaceful environment to the people.

In conclusion, we need to note that the main aim of worshipping the divinities in the various cults in Ijebuland is to be on the right side of these invisible spirits and eschew misfortune, disaster and various calamities. They are believed to defend, save the innocent and assist the poor and helpless. They act as avengers of evil and prevent crimes and all forms of misdeeds. The Ijebu people believe in the goodness of these various *Imale* and do all within their power to be in good relationship with them.

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