

RELIGION AND PRE-COLONIAL IGBO DIPLOMACY-

THE NNEWI EXAMPLE

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Abstract

There are a few scholars who are of the view that a large proportion of African societies including Igbo land in the pre-colonial era were not involved in diplomatic practices until the takeover of the region by the Europeans. Yet it would be difficult to accept such assertion hook, line and sinker especially in the light of the various inter-group relations that took place among the various African societies in the pre-colonial era. Human existence and the various co-operations that go with it has made the practice of diplomacy essential among groups of human societies including African societies in pre-colonial times. Hence right from the pre-historic age when people began to come together in societies it was necessary for them to co-exist and co-operate in their quest to harness nature and in their efforts to subdue and muster the environment to man's advantage. Therefore the practice of diplomacy in pre-colonial Igbo land was not a strange phenomenon, as diplomacy was practiced through various modes/channels and at different levels. Thus, this work is targeted at highlighting religion as a key mode/channel by which diplomacy was practiced during the pre-colonial times in Igbo land generally and particularly in Nnewi. This to a great extent would prove that religious activities did facilitate diplomatic practices in pre-colonial Igbo land. Religion in pre-colonial times hence provided the avenue for religious co-operation, alliances and intergroup relations between Nnewi and her neighboring communities as well as among other Igbo communities, thereby enhancing diplomatic intercourse among the various Igbo communities.

Key Words- *Diplomacy, Religion, Oracle, Diplomatic-Agents, Igbo-land.*

Introduction

Strides and Ifeaka (1971) noted that during the pre-colonial era in Igbo land, it was believed that the farther away the oracle was from the clients or disputants, the more possibility that there will be an impartial verdict given by it. It is therefore this believe that motivated and encouraged religion as a means or channel for diplomatic intercourse among pre-colonial Igbo communities, as oracles and priests located in a particular community could be consulted by people from various other communities that are quite distant from them. Oracles are shrines at which appeals can be made to a god. The mouthpiece of the god is usually a priest and after offerings are made by clients the priest then issues the judgment of the gods. Oracles in Igbo land secured the blessings of fertility to barren women and pronounced judgment on disputes. Strides and Ifeaka (1971) noted that there are about four oracles which became nationally popular in pre-colonial Igbo land and this was mostly due to their impartial verdicts. They were the Agballa oracle of Awka, the Igweke Ala oracle at Umunora, the Amadioha oracle at Ozuzu and the most popular of them all- the Ibini Okpabe or Long Juju oracle at Arochukwu. Thus communities all over Igbo land during the pre-colonial era do travel long distances to consult these oracles and their priests and in the process diplomatic ties are formed between and among these communities.

Okeke (2015; Personal Communication) pointed out that Nnewi's diplomatic relations with her distant neighbours in the pre-colonial times also extended to Nri as they most times relied on Nri spiritualists for some form of spiritual assistance especially with regards to spiritual cleansing of the land whenever sacrilege was committed on the land. Thus, Nnewi in pre-colonial times diplomatically formed alliances with some of her distant neighbours in order to achieve her spiritual/religious needs and interest.

Religion and Diplomacy

The interplay between religion and diplomacy in the contemporary times is witnessed more in the diplomatic role of religion in conflict resolution. Johnston and Sampson (1994), highlighted on the positive role religious belief can play in resolving political conflicts. They noted how Jimmy Carter, while playing a meditative role appealed to the common precepts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in order to win Menachem Begin and Anwar el-Sadat to the Camp David Accords, and encouraged religious leaders to use their moral authority and harness the numerous human resources of their communities in the enhancement of peacemaking. This thus shows that even in the contemporary era religion still offers a platform for diplomatic intercourse, this is because according to McDougall (2018) quoting Ayatollah Khomeini states that people are easily

attracted to religion not necessarily because it is an opiate, but essentially because it is a medicine for mortal, suffering, souls. Furthermore, McDougall (2018), highlighted that religiously motivated mediators may succeed in employing the authority of religion in the negotiation process and as a result win conflicting parties to concessions they may not ordinarily agree to make for the reason that the parties would be acceding, not to their enemies, but to some divine principle their people can understand.

Also, the various pilgrimages embarked upon by Christians and moslems from all over the world to Israel and mecca in Saudi Arabia respectively has as well fostered diplomatic relations between these two middle east countries and many other countries of the world, highlighting the role religion plays in facilitating diplomatic relations in the contemporary times.

Religion and Pre-Colonial Igbo Diplomacy

As earlier noted, during the pre-colonial era in Igbo land, the farther away an oracle was from the clients or disputants, the more it is believed that there will be an impartial verdict given by it. Thus this believe helped establish religion as a means or channel for diplomatic intercourse among pre-colonial Igbo societies, as oracles and priests located in a particular community are consulted by people from very many other communities that are quite distant from them. A good example is

the oracle at Arochukwu- the Ibini Okpabe which became the most famous oracle in Igbo land during the pre-colonial era. This oracle had the most efficient and prosperous network of agents known in Igbo land, among other things these agents played the role of sourcing for clients from different parts of Igbo land for the oracle as well as initiating and negotiating agreements between the oracle and its various clients. These agents who were known in those days as middlemen could also be referred to as diplomats today because they did a whole lot of negotiations as they moved around various Igbo communities representing and pursuing the course of Arochukwu's Ibini Okpabe. Again, Strides and Ifeaka (1971) highlighted on the diplomatic dimension of religion in pre-colonial Igbo land regarding Arochukwu's Ibini Okpabe, stating that at those times kings of delta city-states were coming to Arochukwu to consult Ibini Okpabe and to bring cases to the oracle.

Onwuzirike (2005), as well highlighted that there were some nationally famous oracles in Igbo land which includes the ones aforementioned, he stated that people all over Igbo land and beyond consulted these oracles and this of course to a great extent facilitated inter-group relations and diplomatic relations among the various Igbo land. Furthermore Onwuzirike (2005) as well noted that as this led to friendship and interactions among various peoples of Igbo land, in some cases

plans were made by a far off community to establish a shrine of the particular deity in their town, it thus enhanced the spiritual/oracular as well as the diplomatic links between clans and towns.

Another angle through which religion played a role in pre-colonial Igbo diplomacy was by conflict resolution. In those days any man who felt that human arbitration had failed him could seek the arbitration of the oracles. According to Onwuzirike (2005), an Aro trader (in this instance plays the role of a diplomatic agent /mediator), usually recommends the oracle to the parties to a dispute, he then takes them to Arochukwu's Ibini Okpabe and since he had lived among the disputing villages, he had an intimate knowledge of the issue in dispute. He knew the decision of other trial bodies in the village over the case and the trend of responsible public opinion on the issues. He therefore secretly makes known these facts to the oracle priests, and for these services he is paid some money. Thus, when finally the oracle delivered judgment everybody is impressed and its judgment is generally accepted, mostly because of its perceived supernatural power, especially its knowledge of the history of not only the village but the disputing parties as well. Hence, in this way the oracle won much respect throughout Igbo land.

Hence, pre-colonial Igbo diplomacy has always as in contemporary times utilized religion as a channel to foster diplomatic interactions among the various Igbo communities.

The Nnewi Example

In pre-colonial Nnewi, religious interactions were indeed a veritable diplomatic practice for establishing diplomatic ties with her neighbours. Okeke (2015; Personal Communication) stated that from ancient times religion and worship served as a medium of interaction between Nnewi and other communities. He also pointed out that it was believed that Edo a goddess in Nnewi came from another goddess known as Idemili whose deity is in Nnobi. So as a result of this Nnewi and Nnobi right from antiquity had strong religious relations, which facilitated diplomatic intercourse between them. Hence, Ifekandu (2015; Personal Communication) stated that Nnewi people had a day they come to worship Idemili in Nnobi during which they sacrificed a cow and other items to the deity. This ceremony takes place once every year before the new yam festival. Ifeakandu (2015; Personal Communication) also noted that in pre-colonial times chief priests from Nnewi were normally contacted to assist chief priests in Nnobi when there were tough spiritual issues to handle. Thus this high level religious relations and understanding between these two communities could only be achieved through well tailored diplomatic negotiations.

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Along the same line, Okeke (2015; Personal Communication) pointed out that as Nnewi was fighting wars and conquering their neighbours, some of them such as Oraifite, Amichi and Ichi started worshipping the Edo goddess together with Nnewi thus creating room for closer relations among them. This worship led to the establishment of a deity called Ezemewi in Amichi which is a deity in Nnewi referred to as Edo-Ezemewi. Amichi people at the beginning of each year sacrifice a cow and other items to this deity. Thus in this situation religious activities did pave way for a more robust relations between the two communities which were initially fighting and at loggerheads with each other. Also Olisa (2015; Personal Communication) highlighted that Ezemewi which is a god in Nnewi also being worshiped in Amichi and Nnewi people participating in Amichi festivals, did foster relations between the two communities.

Alutu (1963, p. 120) further stated that Nnewi had religious relations with Orlu, pointing out that when otolo Nnewi fought with Awka-etiti and failed they had to consult two sorcerers- husband and wife from Orlu known as Agba and Osite respectively to find out the reason for their failure. Religious necessity has thus provided a platform for Nnewi and Orlu to establish relations.

Religion was a key channel of diplomacy used in pre-colonial times by Nnewi.

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Chukwuka (2015; Personal Communication) pointed out that some of the deities in Nnewi were gotten from other communities through some religious negotiations. Such deities include Ulasi and Okpu. Ulasi was brought by Diala Odogwu from Njaba while Okpu was brought from Ozubulu by a woman married from Ozubulu by Nnewi man. These transfer of gods were a significant way through which diplomatic relations were established in pre-colonial times.

Chukwuka further highlighted that the diplomatic ties that existed between Nnewi and communities like Nri and Ora-eri were actually on religious grounds. This was because whenever “Alu” (sacrilege) such as incest or suicide was committed and the land was then defiled, it was Nri and Ora-eri chief priests that are always contacted for land cleansing. This cleansing according to (Chukwuka), is done by the Nri and Ora-eri spiritualists using a sheep while the person(s) who committed the sacrilege dresses half naked acknowledge the evil they have done by speaking it out over the sheep. After this the person(s) who committed the sacrilege lies on the ground while the sheep is made to climb on the person(s). When this ritual is completed the land is cleansed of the evil committed. Thus, chief priests in pre-colonial times served as diplomatic agents/personnel too.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion it is quite obvious that religion in pre-colonial Igbo land played a key role in facilitating diplomatic contacts and fostering diplomatic relations among Igbo communities. Thus religion as a platform for diplomatic interactions, right from pre-colonial times till now has proved to also be a valuable instrument for conflict resolution. Hence, even in modern day diplomacy, religion has also provided avenues for diplomats and statesmen to foster negotiation and meditative processes.

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3	Mr. Augustine Olisa (Ofubosi)	Village Elder	Amichi	81years	Direct	5/8/15
4	Mr. Ifeakandu Onubuogu Emmanuel	Trader	Nnobi	60years	Direct	7/8/15