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## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OGOGO DEITY of AYOKORO COMMUNITY, OGBIA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, BAYELSA STATE

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### Abstract

*This study investigates the Ogogo snake deity of the Ayakoro people in Ogbia Local Government area of Bayelsa state. This all-important deity to the Ayakoro people has not been researched on and documented, this is the pane of this study, it is an attempted to create records on the deity. The author used the historical and phenomenological methodologies to guide the work. From our findings, the deity has served the Ayakoro people in different capacities for example it is a war god to the people, it also protects them, it serves as a tool for social control in the community and it is also a beneficent god. From what we have observed about the significance of the god, it is not out of place for the author to submit that the god had been a source of strength to the Ayakoro people and so its worship be encouraged to continue. This will assist in preserving this aspect of the cultural life of the people. The literature that the study has generated would add something new to the body of knowledge because this is a pioneer research study on Ogogo deity. Its significance cannot be over emphasized, particularly when it has to do with the rapid nature of how African cultural activities are going into extinction. As it is, the continues worship of the deity will to a large extent give life to the cultural and traditional life of the Ayakoro people.*

**Keywords:** *worship, Deity, fishing, festival, celebration.*

### Introduction

*Ogogo* is known as snake in Ogbia language and what we mean by *Ogogo* deity literarily is simply snake deity. In most cultures, snake deity exists, and the Ayakoro community's *Ogogo* is not an exception. It is believed in ancient cultural setting, particularly in the indigenous religion of most traditional communities and

methodology, snakes were seen as entities of vigor or strength and life renewal. However, that of the snake deity of the Ayakoro people, a community deity has not been researched on and literature generated on it. This is the focus of this study, to

document the social, religious and cultural functions of this deity that is of utmost importance to the Ayakoro community's people.

## Literature review

According to the Columbia electronic encyclopedia, 6<sup>th</sup> (ed), "snake has been variously venerated as a negative power, God of evil, god of benevolence, god of war and favour, as phallic deity, solar deity and god of death. Snake in some cases has also served as the symbol of satan as in the Biblical story of the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1-17) and as symbol of healing like in the story of Moses in the book of numbers 21: 6-9 where the children of Israel disobeyed the Lord and were punished and when they eventually repented, Moses constructed the symbol of a snake and raised it up at a vantage position so that any one that was afflicted by the bite of a snake that looked at the symbol of the snake would get healed, and because of this, the heath institution use the image of snake as its symbol.

The snake had also served in the pre-historical period for example as the symbol of Apollo, God of the Greece people and Ra the Egyptian god. In Aztec mythology, a half-divine half-human being descended to earth for a while as the great teacher of mankind and they called him "feathered snake" or serpent. In Egypt, each temple in the ancient times had an area retained where snakes are kept. In Greek religion, the Snake was frequently mentioned and considered as divine. Among the Greek Dionysian cults, snake is signified as symbol of wisdom and fertility.

In African tradition, snake worship has several rules guiding it which includes that it should not be killed and that has to do with specific snakes according to the area in question mostly the python. If such happened, the culprit is either condemned to death or in some cases, a fine to substitute for the death penalty. On such situation, after carrying out the rituals involved or attached to such sacrilege for example giving a befitting burial to the snake in question the culprit is exonerated. Some of such societies that highly regards snake worship as their gods in Nigeria are Mgbidi, Imeoha, Eziali, Umuekwe, Okwudor among others in Imo state. In Bayelsa state of the south-south region of Nigeria we have the Nembe- Bassambiri people, the Yenagoa community, and Yenzuegene community in Epe-Atissa.

### Discussion on the Agogo Diety of Ayakoro community

Agogo snake deity is well revered among the Ayakoro people in their traditional religious and social life from the foundation of the community. According to chief Oruama Olali (Oral Interview) *Ogogo* deity's totem *Odumu* or Python is sacred to the people as such it is defied. As a result of that, as it has earlier been mentioned, the Ayakoro community's people neither kill nor eat the *Odumu* as a delicacy. It is believed that the god is a god of longevity or it enabled them to live long. It is also believed that the deity is a god of justice, wealth, hospitality and war. Other beliefs hinged around or attributed to the deity are protection of the Ayakoro people against the attack of evil forces, fertility, and as earlier mentioned long life and prosperity and it also functions as a tool for of social control to the people.

Hence to them, the python snake is very dear to them and hence their community god.

### The Ayakoro people

It is expedient for us to know more about the people of the confines of our research area Ayakoro community. Ayakoro is a community located in Ayama clan, Ogbia Local Government Area

in Bayelsa State, south-south Nigeria. The community has about five compounds namely the Egba-Polo, Erimme-Polo, Onugakeme-polo, Abidewari-polo and lastly Ogbuku-polo.

Historically, the community was founded by the founder of the old Ologi community, a sister community to Ayakoro. However, the actual date of the founding of the community is lost in the antiquities but it is believed that the people settled there at the same time with other Ogbia communities of the Anyama clan of the Ogbia nation. It is believed that the Ayakoro people migrated to their present site from Nembe and that should be about 53,421 years ago (Alagoa 2005, p 180).

### History and the Concept of *Ogogo* Deity

Historically, according to Mrs. Mary Amina, one of the priestesses of *Ogogo* deity. *Ogogo* is the foundation deity of the Ayakoro people. The Python has been venerated or worshipped even in some other cultures as it has earlier been indicated in this work. However, the python as biologists classified is a non-venomous snake and it feeds mainly on small warm-blooded animals which it kills by wrapping it with its muscular body around tightly to suffocate. The people considered it harmless and the devotees sees it as their father and advocate. The *Ogogo* deity's temple is situated at Ogbutu-polo and Erimme-polo of Ayakoro Community. The deity is also considered to be the chief deity of every other Ayakoro people's satellite communities. This position is aptly captured in the praise name or title of *Ogogo* deity, with its interpretation as the all-conquering priest-king, (Owolo 1958).

### Worship of *Ogogo* deity

*Ogogo* deity's worship takes place on every sacred day according to the native calendar of the Ayakoro people. People visit the shrine of *Ogogo* from all works of life especially during its worship days. This visit is also mostly done annually during when they celebrate the deity.

People that had made vows before the deity and have eventually got their request fulfilled normally attend the festival to redeem their vows and, on such occasion, too, the adherents go before the deity to ask for requests to be fulfilled at certain periods of the following year. Most of the attendees of the festival are mostly those people who have not gotten the result of what they wanted and people that also want assistance from *Ogogo*.

During the celebration too, the chief priest or priestess of the deity normally goes into ecstasy and when she or he is under this state of mind, as the case may be, she manifests the characteristics of the python. Elder Danapu Ogbo in an Oral interview confirmed this when he said:

*The spirit of the python goes into the medium/priest of Ogogo deity who wriggles on the floor like a snake, uttering strange sounds and talking in a strange language which has to be interpreted to the people. While the priestess sang songs, the priest usually prophesy to the people about their problems and probable calamity that will befall the Ayakoro community and also recommends solutions to them.*

However, in recent times, the spirit of the deity no longer come on the priest to prophesy to the people but instead, it communicates to them through ladder divination known in Ogbia as the *Ebege*. The *Ebege* or ladder oracle is constructed with two bamboo poles and a costly cloth known as *Kano* cloth tied to its front or anterior part. In the Ogbia Language, the cloth is known as *ekagebara*. After the

oracle has been cleanse with *Ogogo* native gin, the spirit of the *Ogogo* deity would then come upon the ebege and then it could now be questioned. As questions are put to it, the oracle answers or react to the chief priests' questions through sign language by either moving backward or forward. The backward movement indicates No and the forward movement indicates yes answer. Through this way, the deity communicates with the people.

Usually on such divinatory séance, the priest would stand at the front or anterior part of the divinatory oracle with a bottle of *Ogogo* before putting questions to the *Obege*. At the end of each of the questions put before it, he will pour the native gin on the oracle's frontal part and the oracle will answer to the question.

### **The Socio-Religious Significance of *Ogogo* Deity**

*Ogogo* deity is very significance to the Ayakoro people. This is because all their religious activities revolve around it. In fact, it is not an overstatement to say that the *Ogogo* deity had played a major role in the life of the individuals of Ayakoro people religiously, socially, and politically.

Socially, *Ogogo* deity serves as a unifying factor to the Ayakoro people, this is because during its worship and annual festival, it brings people together. During this period, rites like purification rite, sacrifice, cleansing of the community rite and other traditions and customs are carried out in the open. All the rituals involved in their worship sessions are carried out in the public and this serves as a school to the younger generation, hence enhancing the continuity of the people's religious and cultural heritage. During the *Ogogo* festival, sacred songs are sung and traditional talking drum is beaten, this is done to invite the ancestral spirits of the land and also the spirit of the deity to the arena of the celebration so that they could also participate in the festival.

It is during this period that, a communion meal is prepared and this meal is believed to be taken communally between the spirit of *Ogogo*, the ancestral spirits of the community and the living amongst them. Hence, it is not out of place to assert that the deity brings the Ayakoro people together. It is a period of fanfare and this had helped to bring the community's people together socially.

In the area of traditional politics, *Ogogo* deity is also very significant to the Ayakoro people. This is because it is the deity that chooses a new king after the burial of the former king through divination. In other words, after the death of a king and a new king is to be chosen, *Ogogo* deity is involved in the process of who becomes the new king. It is only when *Ogogo* okays the would be king through the chief priest of *Ogogo* that such king designate could be crowned. The deity was also involved in the process of the installation of a new king. In the area of the installation of the new king proper, many rituals are involved for example sacrifices, and cleansing rituals are carried out by the chief priest of *Ogogo* deity on behalf of the community. This must be done before the new king could be crowned. At the death of an old king too, the priest of *Ogogo* deity carry's out the cleansing of the land ritual, and sacrifices before the late king could be buried. In fact, it is *Ogogo* deity that even decides on when and the date that a late king is buried, (Sammy Ikio, Oral Interview).

At the time of war in the good old days, when inter- community wars were common, *Ogogo* deity had also functioned as the war god of the Ayakoro people. The deity is usually consulted whether Ayakoro people will win a war or not and it is with the affirmation of *Ogogo* deity to the positive that the community could embark on such war. Before the war starts, the youths who were the army of

Ayakoro then are expected to go to the shrine of *Ogogo* for cleansing, fortification and purification rites. It is only when this has been done that they would be allowed to embark on such war. There are stories that with the approval and protection of *Ogogo*, they had often won their wars. Some examples of the wars that the Ayakoro people fought and won through the instrumentality of *Ogogo* deity were wars between Ayakoro people and Nembe, Okrika, Kalabari, Bile all in the Niger Delta Area.

*Ogogo* deity is also regarded as the intermediary between the Ayakoro people and the sacred. Usually, they used to consult *Ogogo* to know what led to some unusual happenings. Solutions had always been sought from *Ogogo* to salvage such situation. A good example of situation like that are situations like the outbreak of epidemic that would occur in the community, frequent deaths of young promising persons or opinion leaders in quick succession, accident deaths, death by snake bite among others.

*Ogogo* deity also functions as a tool for social control to the Ayakoro people. This is because the deity abhors evil and as such, deviants who committed atrocities are punished by the deity either through sickness or death. This to an extent had helped to check the excesses of the evil ones among them. Some examples of such categories of people are the people that carry out money rituals, witches, wizards, sorcerers, blood oath takers etc. In the good old days, human sacrifices too were offered to *Ogogo* particularly during the times of serious war fare. However, these days, such sacrifices have been discontinued. Nevertheless, the method of offering the human beings then were through burnt offering, the human sacrificial victims were burnt alive.

There was a festival that the people of Ayakoro community used to celebrate during the period of the coronation of a new king known as *Indi-Olali*, which means the 'feast of fish'. At such occasion, the new king designate and the chief priest of *Ogogo* would embark on what they call 'fish market'. When they finally return, the festival proper would start and this involves human sacrifice and other rituals. This have been discontinued. This is due to the coming of Christianity and western civilization to the area.

During this festival as earlier indicated, they offer various sacrifices to *Ogogo* deity and this also includes, according to them, what they call 'clean money' and this is referreing to 'clean human beings' or an albino. It is only after this human sacrifice as at then, is carried out that the new king could be enugurated and would start to function (Akpoti p.32 2019.)

### **The consequences of Killing the Totem of *Ogogo* Deity (the python Snake).**

The killing of the python snake whether knowingly or unknowingly by any of the devotee of *Ogogo* deity usually attracts severe consequences. Accroding to Akpoti money (2019), If one deliberately kills the python in Ayakoro Community, the penalty in the good old days was death penalty but if such offender want to save his or her life, the person concerned would carry out expensive ritual of burying the snake like a king or the person involved would pay a huge fine in form of money. The burial in question as earlier indicated is expected to be as expensive as that of a king or as an alternative, the culprit would bring a person from his family which would be his son or brother to substitute for the dead python snake. The substituted person automatically becomes the property or estate of the chief priest. If these penalties are not met, then, there will be series of deaths in the family of the offender. This type of punishment is always contagious. In such

cases, the human surrogate's descendants too will automatically become slaves to the chief priest.

Meanwhile, if a devotee just saw a dead carcass of a python, the person would bury the carcass of the snake as a human being. This usually includes the shooting of gun or cannon to honour the dead snake but if it was in a strange land, the person could hire the inhabitants of the area to bury the snake. If this is not done, the *Ogogo* deity would afflict the person involved with strange diseases until the person confesses and the appropriate rites carried out to placate the deity or else it could lead to the death of such person.

In the case of accidental killing of the Python Snake too, the culprit or the person concerned is required to pay a very huge fine and in addition will also carry out the necessary rituals to appease the *Ogogo* deity, (Sammy Ikio, Oral Interview).

## Conclusion

The focus of this paper had been to discuss and document the functions of the *Ogogo* deity of the Ayakoro people. Records has not been created on this very important and deity of the Ayakoro people and our effort here is to do so for posterity.

From findings, the deity had both benevolent and social functions. It had been the war god of the people and at the same time particularly, at the time of danger, it had also protected them. However, most indigenes of Ayakoro community that knew much about this deity to a large extent are dying out. The advent of Christianity and Western Civilization too has affected the potency, and its patronage and this has led to the neglect of the deity by the people. However, if nothing is done, this aspect of the people's cultural heritage that concerns the deity in question will die a natural death, hence this effort by the author to create records on the activities and function of the deity.

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