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THE WORSHIP OF OBENARI DEITY OF OLOGI COMMUNITY, OGBIA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF BAYELSA STATE.

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Abstract

The paper has investigated and discussed the worship of Obenari deity of the Ologi people in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. The Study used the Phenomenological and historical approaches to guide the work. The study is embarked upon in other to generate materials on the worship of Obenari deity because no research has been done on that, and so by implication the literature that the work will generate will add something new to the body of knowledge. From the findings of the study, Obenari deity is of paramount importance to the Ologi people. The deity is believed to have protected the Ologi people from harm, enabled them to be victorious in the wars that they fought in time past, enabled them to have large harvest of crops and also enabled them to be successful fishermen. The god is also a god that have made the farmers among them to be successful in their farming activities and also a god of fertility to the indigenes of the community, and by implication, it makes the women and men of Ologi community to be very fertile and good at procreation. Meanwhile, in the course of the study the researcher also mentioned briefly the activities of other principal deities of Ologi community. From what we have discovered, it is not out of place to submit that the deity to the Ologi people is a good god. As such the youths of Ologi community should identify and activate the activities of the worship of the deity in other to enhance its continuity. The continued worship of the deity will be of benefit to the Ologi people and so its existence in the scheme of things of the Ologi people would continue to thrive for the betterment of the life of the people

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

Introduction

The preview of this paper is an attempt to research and document the activities of the *Obenari* deity of Ologi Community located in the Ayama axis of Ogbia Local Government Area but what is fascinating here is that the community's deity of our focus *Obenari's* Chief priest has always being a woman or in other words its priesthood had always been chosen from the women folk. This is a paradigm shift from what is obtained in most Ijaw communities. In most traditional Ijaw communities, women can only be carriers of individual deities or divinities, not the priesthood of community or clan deity. They might belong to some of the national deity's cults like the Egbesu movement or brotherhood, the *benikukuru* cult but to be saddled with the responsibility of the priesthood of a compound, community and clan deity is not common in Ijaw land. Meanwhile this deity of the Ologi people has not been investigated and records created for it, this is the solution that this study provides.

Discussion

The *Obenari* deity is believed to inhabit the water body of a lake and this lake has boundaries with the Ozezebiri community in Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State, the Otuedi, Ayama and also passes through Okodi community, because it is a river like lake all in Ogbia local government Area of Bayelsa State. The deity its self is a female deity as such, it is believed to have many children and so all the aquatic reptiles that are found in the lake and the forest around there are assumed to be her "Children", so no Ologi person kills and eat them. Some of those reptiles are the python snake that is even its totem and crocodile. The fishes in the lake are not to be killed by any Ologi person. This can only be done during the fishing festival that is carried out in honour of the deity.

The *Obenari* deity is believed to have a spiritual husband call 'iyi' and they had many children and as earlier indicated they included the *Adumu* or Python snake, crocodile and even other animals that inhabit the forest around the lake, the dragon fly that procreates or breeds in the water inclusive. It is believed that it also has human children. This may not be unconnected with some of her votaries of the Ologi community. It is also believed that the *Obenari* as a female deity loved her children very much, both humans and other creatures and so it guides and protects them jealously; (Prince Olotu, Oral Interview). The *Obenari* deity according to Mr Agridari, (2015) in an Oral Interview conducted at Ologi, have also attributed to the victories of Ologi community against their opponents in sports like wrestling and football marches to *Obenari* deity because of the love that it has for her children.

The History of Obenari Deity

The *Obenari* deity is not the only deity worshipped by the Ologi people but because of its many functions. It is the most revered among them. Other deities that are also worshipped by the Ologi people are *Akputakpu* deity, *Obonowiri*, *Agbaka* and *Akulu* deity, but among all these, the people recognized the *Obenari* to be the chief deity among them because of its numerous perceived contributions to the welfare of the community. In fact, it was because of its benevolent disposition in all aspects of the Ologi people's life that they gave the name *Obenari* to the deity which means "our owner".

The *Obenari* deity is said to have been founded by the first man that settled at the present-day site of Ologi community by name chief Ode Nakaba. History had it that when Ode Nakaba came to

settle at the site of Ologi community, he decided to survey the environment to see how conducive it would be for him to abide and he came across the *Obenari* lake. Because of curiosity, he decided to get closer to observe the contents of the lake and discovered that the lake is the habitat to so many aquatic creatures like different species of fishes, aquatic animals like *abedi* iguana, Crocodile, water tortoise, turtle, the python snake and other types of aquatic snakes among others. The forest hosting the lake too has so many wild animal species that lived there like monkeys, leopard, gorilla, wathog and other 'uncountable' species.

The disposition of the *Obenari* lake does not end there. The feature of the lake looks very awful, from the colour of the water to the steep gradient of the slope of the river bank or lake and even the gigantic trees around the lake pointed to the fact that the lake would not be an ordinary lake. So he had to consult diviners to find out why the lake and its environment had such awful look, and it was revealed that the lake was the home of *Obenari* deity, that *Obenari* deity also has a spiritual husband called *Iyi* and that all the creatures around and inside the lake are her spiritual children, by that we mean, all the reptiles, fishes, trees, animals around there etc., As a result of this discovery, Ode Nakaba decided to venerate and worship *Obenari* deity. He from time to time at the initial stage of the institution of the deity's shrine would go and offer some sacrificial materials like white native chalk, plantain pellets, soft drinks and throw them into the lake as a way of offering to the god.

As time goes on and when Ologi community developed to village status, they adopted the deity as the community's deity and it is also believed that all the indigenes of Ologi are also her children, and so it takes care of them as their mother spiritually and even physically. It has assisted them to have successful fishing career for the fishermen and women and successful crop production for the farmers amongst them, (Prince Olotu 2019, Oral Interview).

The Functions of Obenari Deity

The *Obenari* deity functions as the tutelary god of the Ologi people. It's a guardian spirit to them, god of protection, god of fecundity and also the god of longevity of their life. It's also a war god and so the people approach *Obenari* with great reverence. People worship the god with fear and trembling because it is also a fearsome and ferocious god. This is because it does not spare the evil people among them and those of them that break its laws like the killing of any of its totems, for example crocodile and the python snake etc., in the lake and the deity do not permit, any person to fish in the lake when it was not yet the fishing festival's time that is carried out in its honour. If anybody does that, the offender would die. *Obenari* would strike the culprit with the disease of swollen stomach swollen legs or even lunacy, and sometimes unusual experiences and behavior. Such person could only recover when he or she had confessed and the corresponding rites performed to pacify *Obenari*. If the person only confesses and refused to carry out the rituals, the sickness could lead to the death of the deviant (Lawson, 2015).

The Worship of Obenari Deity

The *Obenari* is mainly worshipped during the fishing festival period organized in its honour and the worship session is always led by the chief priest. *Obenari* is a female deity that is why almost all the chief priests or heads of the *Obenari* deity's cult had always been chosen from the female folk by *Obenari*.

On ordinary worship days outside the festival period, particularly when an offender has come to pay restitution for a taboo that the

person had broken, the priestess would summon the cult members of the shrine and they will carry out the necessary rites as the occasion demands to solve the client's issue. This is also applicable to when people come to make pledges and also to redeem vows that the people had made and its expectations had been met.

On such occasions, the rituals usually involve the killing of animals like goat, fowl accompanied with the pouring of libations, prayers and even the payment of a token as appreciation to *Obenari's* goodwill.

In most cases, cleansing rituals are also involved. On such occasion, native drums are beating and sacred music made and the worshippers dance to the rhythm of the music. Some of the songs that they most often sang are praise songs to *Obenari* and invocation songs to invoke the spirit of the deity to join them and partake in the sacrifice and other rites. The priestess of the deity under spirit possession had always prophesied to the people on spiritual issues and even other sundry occurrences that would cause harm to the Ologi people either individually or collectively and the remedies to advert such impending dangerous development. In most cases, the prophesies have always pointed at the direction of death of an Ologi prominent son or an outbreak of epidemic. There are reports that when the prescribed sacrifices and, in some cases, fasting had been carried out, it has always averted such expected calamitous situation, (Ayibanegiegha, 2019 oral interview).

The Festival of *Obenari* Deity

Most festivals in the African traditional setting are celebrated to honour deities, divinities, and even the ancestral spirits particularly festivals that are in connection with the display of masquerades. The above submission is what is obtained in the Ologi traditional scenario as regards the *Obenari* festival.

The *Obenari* festival is an annual fishing festival that attracts Ologi Sons and daughters from far and wide to the community. It is a fishing festival that is always celebrated when it is dry season, that is when the flood water of the previous year has ebbed to its lowest level.

However, before the festival date is taken, there is a divinatory seance that is carried out to find out whether *Obenari* deity would give approval for the festival to be held in the particular year in question or not. This divination involves a piece of iron or grinding stone in the good old days when blacksmiths had not come to the area and a very light floating object preferable a piece of dry bamboo pole. These two objects will be taken to the *Obenari* lake by the chief priest, which is always a woman that is above menopause age and the elderly people in the community including the cult members of *Obenari* deities. At the centre of the lake after making the necessary incantations, offerings and sacrifice to the spirits that inhabits the lake, the priestess would now invoke the spirit of *Obenari* and when the priestess is sure that the spirit of the deity had come up to the surface of the lake, because they use to know through signs, she will then place the two objects side by side on the surface of the water and leave it to observe which one of the objects would float or sink. If the iron or the heavier object floats, then the deity have approved of the festival to beheld that year, then a date would then be fixed and the preparations would start but when it is the opposite that is when the bamboo piece or the lighter object floats, then the *Obenari* deity did not approve of that year's festival and so it would be pos-pond till the following year when the divination would be repeated again.

The *Obenari* fishing festival normally last for seven days and the 'D' day is always held on the seventh day of the festival. Ologi people and even people from other sister communities that wish to participate in the fishing activities proper and the social aspect of it will converge at the bank of *Obenari* lake. After every participant had gathered, the priestess of the deity would then offer sacrifices and this sacrifice always involves native chalk, drinks, preferably, strong local gin known as *ogogoro*, eggs, biscuits etc., to the deity announcing their arrival to the effect that her children have come to fish in the lake and that the deity should allow them to do that. If this is not done, there is the likelihood that during the fishing activities, crocodiles would attacked somebody. In one of the years that the sacrifice was not properly done according to the prescribed way, a crocodile attacked one of the participants, a female person in the lake and not too long after she was rescued, she died, (Prince Olotu, 2019, Oral interview).

At the end of this ritual, the fishing would now start, it was said that after the commencement of the fishing proper and in the process of the fishing even if one steps on a crocodile, it would not hurt the person. There are also reports that participants had always had huge fish catch in each of the festivals that had taken place so far from time immemorial.

On the festival day proper, masquerades are required to entertain the guests in the community. As earlier indicated the *Obenari* deity is a female deity and so it is believed to have so many children and these includes its totems like the crocodile, the python snake, tortoise, and different species of the fishes and as such, each family in Ologi village is expected to have one of these creatures as their totem, of and so on the 'D' day, the various families would present a masquerade depicting or carrying the carved image of one of those animals. They would all be paraded to entertain the guest. It is a very good sight, for one to behold because one would see a masquerade wearing the carved image of a python snake, another with the carved image of the crocodile, yet another, with the image of a certain fish, in fact, different types of fish species, animals and birds. This is because as we have earlier recorded, it is believed that all those animals are the children of *Obenari* deity and so all the family's in the community must show case them in honour of the celebration of their 'Mother *Obenari* deity', (Alfred 2019, Oral Interview).

Other activities that is also carried out during the festival are the display of boat regatta, war boat known as *Orukearara* in Ogbia Language and each family in Ologi also presents a dance troupe that will entertain the guests. Each group would come and display wearing their various colour of costumes. The various priests of the deity too particularly the female ones and some few males among them, dressed in their priestly regalia would parade round the arena, it has always been a very entertaining sight.

The youths of the community too are not left out of the activities of the festival. On the very first day of the festival, the young female maiden of the community that have not known 'Men' are made to line up along the road leading to the lake as the chief priests and the other officiants of *Obenari's* shrine walk to the lake to kickstart the fishing activities. The virgins are used for two purposes and it is that, as young maidens of the Ologi community they are made to be involved in the sacred aspect of the festival in order to enable them understudy the priests and other women involved in the services of the deity so that they could prepared for a possible takeover when the elderly women are no more. Secondly, it is believed that when the *Obenari* shrine's cult members are going to

start the commencement of the fishing activities of the festival, if they came across a woman that had sexual intercourse with men on the road, whatever power that they are imbued with and even the spirit of *Obenari* deity that is believed to be present in the vicinity, would be driven away and the power of the deity rendered impotent. As such, they used, at least girls, that have not known men to line up along the road at this point so that the shrine cult members will not get in touch with any defiled woman. The virgins are also the ones that are saddled with the responsibility to carry the belongings of *Obenari* shrine officials like chairs, and other personal effects that the king of the community and his cabinet members would use at the bank of the lake to their desired position.

The functions of other deities in Ologi Community

Let us also take a look at the functions of these other four deities that the Ologi people worship. They are *Akputakpu*, *Obonowiri*, *Agbaka* and *Akulu* deity. The *Akputakpu* deity is also attributed to have protected the people of Ologi community from external aggression. It was said that when King Koko of Nembe Kingdom wanted to attack Ologi, his army were prevented by *Akputakpu* deity from having access to Ologi community, so their effort ended in fiasco, (Ayibanenagie, Oral Interview). *Akputakpu* deity did that by spiritually making the army of the Nembe people not to know and locate where Ologi community was located so that they could attack. As a result of the difficulty that the army of Nembe King experienced in annexing the community because of the protection of *Akputakpu*, they had to enter into a covenant with Ologi people never to attack Ologi community again in life. During the Nembe Kingdom's expansion campaign for the purpose of invading and annexing all Ogbia communities to be part of her kingdom, Ologi was one of the communities that they could not succeed to annex. This was attributed solely to the role that *Akputakpu* deity played.

Obonowiri deity is also one of the deities that the Ologi people worship. *Obonowiri* deity is a war like blood thirsty deity so it is only Ologi community's warriors that were members of its cult. In these days when the community warriors were to embark on an attack of other communities, the sign of victory that they used to experience was that there will be heavy rain and thundering. When this happens, the priest of *Obonowiri* deity would go to the river bank and collect some parcel of mud and place it inside a sacred calabash, and he will keep the mud under a sacred tree dedicated to *Obonowiri* deity until the warriors conclude their mission. This sacred rite has always given Ologi Warriors victory in their campaigns.

They also served and worshipped two other deities known as *Ogbaka* and *Akulu*. These deities are their gods of fertility. It is believed that they make women of Ologi to be fertile and the men too to be potent in making children, they are also responsible for making the agricultural farm lands of Ologi community to be fertile. As a result of these functions, Ologi is noted in Ogbia Kingdom as one of the communities that produces crops of all types in large quantity in Ogbia Kingdom (Alfred 2019, Oral Interview).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the *Obenari* deity of Ologi community in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. This deity that was very paramount in the Ologi people's traditional and religious scheme of things has been greatly neglected by the people because of the introduction of Christianity

to the community. Its activities in those days when there were no government agencies to enforce security helped a lot to control vices in the village and by implication contributed to the peace and tranquility that reign in the community. It has also been attributed that the deity also acted as a source of blessing, prosperity, bravery in the times of war and even wrestling prowess among Ologi wrestlers. Sequel to the above roles that is believed *Obenari* to have been playing, it is the desire of the author that its existence be encouraged among the Ologi people. Its continued worship will be of great benefit to the Ologi people as it has been in the good old days.

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