



African Traditional Religion in Isuokoma, Nigeria: Focus on Tenets and the Role of Spirits

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ABSTRACT

Religion has remained a major source of hope for man's existential experiences. In Africa, the domineering effects of Christianity and Islam have undermined the history and practice of the African Traditional Religion (ATR) that was hitherto the original religion of the people. The influence of Christianity and Islam has thus brought observable changes that affected the dynamics and practices of African Traditional Religion creating a clash of civilization and internal communal conflict, arising from misunderstanding from faithful of other religions. This study focused on ATR in Isuokoma, Nigeria. It identified the ideas and religious practices of the people using primary and secondary data that were interpreted thematically. The study found that ATR was very pragmatic and realistic, adjusting ever to meet the needs of the existential circumstances, notwithstanding the dwindling percentage of adherents in Isuokoma. The study concluded that African Traditional Religion, in its pre-colonial form, offers the Isuokoma men and women some explanations in relation to why they are where they found themselves, why things continue or discontinue to happen and, reasons for some changes often expressed in the Isuokoma religious culture and civilization. It recommends increased religious socialization in Isuokoma and Nigeria at large as a way of building sustainable societal harmony. The study contributes to the body of knowledge in Religion, and African Traditional Religion in particular as well as enhances studies in inter-group relations.

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INTRODUCTION

African traditional religion is the religion of the traditional and pre-colonial African men and women. It is a religion that was handed over to the present age by the ancestors of the African people. For a fair appreciation of African Traditional Religion (ATR) in Isuokoma land and different parts of the continent, it would be good to start with the analysis of the people's religious worldview, especially because the religious life of the Isuokoma people in particular and African people in general, till date, can hardly be separated from their socio-cultural life. "Both are interwoven to a point that we can hardly speak about one without necessarily speaking about the other."¹ The worldview of any given

¹ P. U. Anya, *The Born-Again Christian and The Rest of US: The Crisis of Unrooted Faith* (Lagos: Mbey; Associates (Nig) Ltd, 1999), 10.

group reveals to a very large extent the ground upon which the people base their interpretation of reality. It tells why people behave in the way they do in various circumstances of their life and existence, especially as it consigns relations with the Ultimate God.

Originally, the forebears of the Isuokoma culture presumably generated their worldview through “a series of agreements... concerning their perception of reality and how they regard and react towards reality.”² However, with changing circumstances and innovations, Isu people’s worldview became elastic and thereby began to admit some changes in line with changing global reality. Through the familiar process of teaching and learning, especially at the informal education level, the young Isuokoma children, who were brought up in the traditional Isuokoma culture were conditioned to interpret reality in terms of the concepts offered to them. Thus, Kraft contended that people’s culture is conceived of the relationship between the universe and humanity, which individuals simply submit to, uncomplainingly due to the circumstances of his or life.³ However, one’s culture is equally conceived based on the division of existential time or space, and one will ordinarily come to perceive life in these terms. It is from the people’s culture that the ATR was developed.

ATR may be considered as one of the richest parts of the Isu cultural heritage in pre-colonial times. John S. Mbiti, one of the greatest African philosophers as it relates to ATR and culture sees Africa in the same light. This is because, in traditional African societies, religion permeates every aspect of the man’s life. Mbiti stated that “it (ATR)) has dominated the thinking of African people to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, their social life, their political organizations, and economic activities.”⁴ An attempt to separate religion from the cultural or traditional life of the Africans in general and Isokomau people in particular, is not yet possible. Both are interwoven and they influence one another. It should be noted that unlike many other religions of the globe, African Traditional Religion has no founder both in Isuokoma land and continentally, as in the sense we could speak of Christianity and Islam. Being part and parcel of the African heritage, one may speak about its origin pointing to hundreds and thousands of years back. Mbiti further underlines this point when he observed that “African Religion is the product of the thinking and experiences of our forefathers and mothers; that is men, women and children of former generations. They formed religious ideas, they formulated religious beliefs, they observed religious ceremonies and rituals, they told proverbs and myths which carried religious meanings, and they evolved laws and customs which safeguarded the life of the individuals and his community.”⁵

In other words, ATR has no founder, no written materials from the start is not blessed with missionary enterprise outside the territory of its multiple African locations. It is an integral part of the life of its African adherents; hence, nobody brought the religion to Isuokoma. The Isuokoma people and Africans continually carried it to any new location just for their practice and not for the sake of theological conversions. Being territorial, the African Traditional Religion operates more and survives more in the continent than in other parts of the globe. Thus, ATR ceremonies are carried out within the clan using a traditional communal calendar, especially during certain traditional feasts like the New Yam festival. They are affairs more of the family, village, town, or the whole population of one area rather than that of the individual. The rituals in ATR are memorized since there are no written guides. They are informally passed on to younger ones across ages. Again, the individual may believe whatever he wishes to believe provided it does not conflict with the communal spirit and the collective will of the ancestors and Isuokoma earth goddess. Otherwise, he or she might find himself cut off from the overall life of his people.⁶

This study is developed through primary and secondary data that was collected from the field by the researcher. The researcher interviewed a number of the ATR faithful to develop the content of

² Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 53.

³ Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*.

⁴ S. J. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Nairobi: East African Education Publishers Ltd. , 1992), 10.

⁵ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 13-14.

⁶ Anya, *The Born-Again Christian and The Rest of US: The Crisis of Unrooted Faith*, 12.

the article and their ideas were thematically presented. Their views are presented anonymously using key informant interviews (KIIs) to represent them.

The Tenets and Practice of African Traditional Religion in Isuokoma

Isuokoma traditional religion is a part of the Igbo traditional religion. The Isuokoma traditional religion has two doctrines of the world. Among them include the world that is presently inhabited by man and other living things (*Uwa oma anyi no*) and the world of spirits (*Uwa ndi mmuo*). The world of man and living things is where all visible elements inhabit. They include the animate and the inanimate objects. While in the world of the spirit exists the Great God (Chineke/Chukwu), the divinities (*umuagbara*); the ancestors; and the good and bad lesser spirit (*Ezigbo na Ejo mmua*) as well as the future dwelling place of the living after death. Hence, men and women are expected to be conscious of their behavior as it will directly affect their lives here on earth and in life thereafter death. These indicate that there is a belief in a Supreme God without neglecting the existence of small gods. This is the central concept of the hierarchy of being in ATR. All beings were regarded as having their own power; influence, and operational scope that ranged in order of hierarchy. The greatest being with the highest power and influence on the life of man is God, the Creator (*Chukwuokike*). He is placed at the apex of the pyramid of gods. Next to the apex were the ancestral being and the divinities. They are followed by the magical powers and lastly at the bottom of the hierarchy of being is man, situated with the reach of the influences of the higher beings from all angles.

African traditional beliefs and practices found their full expression in the religious rituals, ceremonies and festivals of the people such as birth, naming a baby, initiation, marriage, funeral, harvest, rain-making, etc. ATR is highly practiced in individual, kindred and communal shrines, as well as built and forest-marked sacred temples. These places could be compared to the idea of churches where people gather to seek the intervention and blessings of the Ultimate God. It should be noted that objects such as sacred trees and animals are used to make sacrifices to individual and communal gods in rocks, hills, mountains, caves, temples and forests while religious articles like amulets, charms as well as music and dance are rendered in mere human words or proverbs, riddles and wise sayings as a way of inviting the Almighty and other gods to partake in human fellowship during the ATR worship. ATR finds expression in names, stories, myths, legends and biographies, language and in all aspects of the life of the people.⁷ It could be said therefore that “to be an African in the traditional setting is to be truly religious.”⁸ Africans in general and Isuokoma people in particular, believe in the presence of other spirits that are subordinate to the Almighty God. Some natural objects and forces are personified as living and powerful beings. Objects and forces such as the sun, moon, stars, meteorites, rain, rainbow, wind, hurricane, thunder and lightning, are in some areas considered agents of the spirits and in some other areas, they are not.

In the Igbo land of Nigeria, for example, God is named Chi-Ukwu (The Great or Mighty God), *Obasi-di-elu* (The High God), and *Chineke* (Creator God). God is so great and so high in the traditional African view that one belittles Him by going directly to Him for whatever reason.

Thus, though people are free to approach God directly, and often do so, they also feel the need for a bridge between them and their creator. The intermediaries are not intended to cut God off from the people. They are windows and channels through which people may come closer to God for some of the minor needs of life, people may find it more fitting not to trouble God, but prefer to address themselves only to the intermediaries.⁹

Ironically, the biggest weakness of ATR is that most of the time, the adherents of ATR approach God through intermediaries or helpers and very seldom try to go to God directly. The intermediaries could be spiritual beings or humans who are believed to possess some extraordinary

⁷ Anya, *The Born-Again Christian and The Rest of US: The Crisis of Unrooted Faith*.

⁸ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 30.

⁹ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 69.

gifts from God. “The human beings include priests, kings, medicine men/ women, seers, oracles, diviners, rain-makers and ritual elders.”¹⁰ The spiritual beings are simply divinities, spirits of past good leaders and heroes and the spirits of the ancestors who are still remembered by their families.

A study of the Isuokoma traditional religion from a different perspective shows a heavily polytheistic religion in which divinities were multiplied as many as there exist communities, villages and individuals that are ready to adore them. A particular divinity or deity remains independent of the others. Each “exercised in its own personal sphere, an autonomous power over men.”¹¹ The freedom among the gods perhaps contributed to the unceasing multiplication of their numbers. This study shall only enumerate the categories of the well-known gods, particularly those that had notable influences on the entire society. Among the categories of gods in Isuokoma are the higher gods (Grade A), the village gods (Grade B), the acquired gods (Grade C), and the personally controlled gods (Grade D).

The Higher gods (Grade A gods): These are the type of gods that dictate for man and exercise great power over him. Among these gods include the *Igwe* (the Heavenly goddess); and the *Ani* (the Earth goddess). The Higher gods control man’s destiny through mystical means. Man has little or no influence on these cosmic gods. This pushes Isuokoma men to have extraordinary obeisance and reverence unto them. Chukwuma Ugo writing on this grade of gods maintained that whatever man obtains from these gods is taken without much question. For example, if the rain refuses to fall or the sun is too harsh, if the weather is not conducive to man etc all these need propitiation and appeasement of these powerful gods.¹² Ironically, the reality of climate fluctuations remains a fundamental issue in the faith of the ATR faithful that are farmers.

The Village gods (The Grade B gods): This is the type of gods found at least in every Isuokoma village or community depending on the basis of analysis of the Isuokoma clan. Hence, the village traditionalists have adherents to these gods. These gods are assumed to be highly welfare-oriented in nature. The practitioners of the religion claim that these gods ward off diseases from their adherents and provide complete protection to their believers from foreign enemies that attack the village or community. “The most striking quality of these gods is that they derive their names from the environment in which they are found”. *Among these gods include Ani of the different communities, like Ani Obeagu and all the Akpam Una Eja in the different villages of the Isuokoma clan* (KIIs II, 2023). The services to these gods are performed by some mysteriously selected men and women priests. These people are selected to serve in ATR alter by the spirit and they experience defined existential realities that would convince them to take up the responsibility and be trained on the tenets of the chief priest's office. *The adherents look at them with high esteem. Most of these gods are mainly located in Ogbu-walled compounds or around strong trees near a river/forest and sometimes beneath large mass stones* (KIIs III, 2023). *In ancient times, revelations about dangers, omens, disasters, famine, diseases etc which would overtake the village were revealed by them* (KIIs I, 2023).

The Acquired gods (Grade C gods): These are the types of gods that were imported into the community by an Isu man or group of men from a different community and ethnicity, outside Isuokoma. The importation of these gods is mostly caused by the pressure to avert an intending omen or catastrophe. An example of this type of god is the *Igbo kparanku* and the Aro oracles of Arochukwu which had colonies in some villages of the Isu clan in ancient times.¹³

Other gods found in Isuokoma were acquired from Cross River State, Edda, Item, Abriba, Enugu Ezike, and Agbaja (KIIs, IV, 2023). These gods are communally based because the community bears the cost of its acquisition. These gods, especially, the *Odeeshi* of Obeagu and Mgbalukwu are

¹⁰ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 68.

¹¹ P. E. Aligwekwe, *The Continuity of Traditional Values in the African Society: The Igbo of Nigeria* (Owerri: Tontan Publishers Ltd., 1991).

¹² C. Ugoh, *Polytheism: The Gods of Abakaliki, A Historio-Religious Link* (Enugu: Handel Publishers, 2003), 30.

¹³ A. Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture* (Ibadan: University Press Limited, 1981).

carried to war fronts where the warriors expect it to work like the Judaic Ark of Covenant and give them both victory and protection.¹⁴ These gods have been alleged to have given Isuokoma land victory in some past conflicts between the Mgbalukwu-Obeagu Isu and Ojiegbe people.¹⁵ When the warriors or militia fighting for Isuokoma groups desecrate the requirements of the gods or the ark of the deities is captured during warfare, the enemies begin to win on the battlefield. *However, the ark sometimes turns into a tool and source of disaster for the enemies that captured it and sometimes for the community that imported it, especially at the end of the conflict, when the necessary rituals and sacrifices required by it are no longer adhered to* (KIIs V, 2023). *This was a popular opinion amongst the formal militia that used Odeshi to fight for Obeagu Isu during warfare* ((KIIs V, 2023).¹⁶

Furthermore, some analysts have stated that the negative fall-out and the wanton barbaric killings of the members of an 'innocent' family members in Obeagu by the defunct 'ECOMOG' sect that participated in the Ojiegbe-Mgbalukwu-Obeagu conflict, was because of the sect's inability to renew their sacrifice to the odeshi deity (KIIs, VI, 2023).¹⁷ The implication was that the whole Obeagu community was thrown into an existential nightmare, which was more damaging in its psycho-social analysis than the experience in the years of the conflict.¹⁸ Unfortunately, the crisis raged on for long, turning the Obeagu people into 'refugees' and 'asylum-seekers' in 'strange lands.'¹⁹ The writer notes that a comprehensive study would still be undertaken on the negative fall-out of the war while calling for religio-communal cleansing to be led by Rev. Fr. Prof. Ede, who mediated in the conflict or order great ministers of God. This is because there is an increasing need to invite a strong Christian Minister, who would destroy some if not all the acquired gods on one hand while *the ATR faithful of the communities must continue to make necessary sacrifices to sustain the sanctity of these gods* (KIIS, VII, 2023).

The Personally Controlled gods (Grade D gods): These are the type of gods found in the homes and families of many ATR believers in Isuokoma. *It is often enshrined in a mud house by some people; others build the Ogbu around it while the rest build a unit hut for it* (KIIS, VIII, 2023). These gods are revered by all or selected members of the family with the oldest man as the chief priest. *The family pours libation using mainly unadulterated palm wine, cola-nut, and chickens as a sacrifice that will be sent to the Almighty through the ancestors and other intermediary gods in order to rejuvenate its potency. It is uncustomary for a girl or woman to build this type of god. It is completely reserved for the men in the family. Consequently, we shall discuss the role of some popular goddesses which include; the Ani, the goddess of the land, the river goddess, or the Ngene Ogwe, the Anyanwu, or the sun god, and the Akparala or the thunder goddess* (KIIS, XII, 2023).

FINDINGS ON SOME POPULAR ISU GODS AND GODDESSES

Ani Isuokoma- the goddess of the motherland: *Ani Isuokoma* is "the divinity nearest to the daily life of the society."²⁰ The *Ani Isuokoma* houses the ancestors of the community. It creates a platform for man to inhabit. It is the warehouse for the food that man eats. Hence, the people give it the attributes of a woman or mother. She can promote fertility and fruitfulness. *Ani Isuokoma* however, can punish men whenever they commit a taboo. When *Ani Isuokoma* begins to fall out with evil men, it is very difficult for other spirits to withhold *Ani's* punishment from them. The only time the *Ani Isuokoma* punishes man is when a heinous crime called *nsoani* (sin against the land) is committed. When such

¹⁴ Kelechi Johnmary Ani and Dominique Emmanuel Uwizeyimana, "Ode-Eshi and Inter-Communal Conflicts in Igboland: Focus On The Obeagu-Mgbalukwu And Ojiegbe Conflict, 1910-2007," *Gender and Behaviour* 20, no. 1 (2022): 18954–63.

¹⁵ Ani and Uwizeyimana, "Ode-Eshi and Inter-Communal Conflicts in Igboland..."

¹⁶ AnAni and Uwizeyimana, "Ode-Eshi and Inter-Communal Conflicts in Igboland..."

¹⁷ Ani and Uwizeyimana, "Ode-Eshi and Inter-Communal Conflicts in Igboland..."

¹⁸ Ani and Uwizeyimana, "Ode-Eshi and Inter-Communal Conflicts in Igboland..."

¹⁹ Kelechi Johnmary Ani and U. S. Osisioma, "Ezza-Ojiegbe and Mgbalukwu-Obeagu Isu Intermittent Conflicts of 1910-2007: A Review of Migration and Culture of Hospitality to Internally Displaced Persons," *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Management Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 1–8.

²⁰ Aligwekwe, *The Continuity of Traditional Values in the African Society: The Igbo of Nigeria*, 168.

crimes as incest, manslaughter, feeding from a wife you know to be promiscuous, etc were committed, punishment becomes obligatory on the culprit(s). Before she rains down her punishment, so many things would happen as an exhibition of the anger of the clan goddess.

The culprit is then either expelled or banished from the community or engages in necessary ritual sacrifices to appease the clan goddess. In a number of cases, death was considered the appropriate punishment for one who had committed an infraction against Ani Isuokoma. Such a culprit never receives the normal burial process, if s/he dies because s/he is denied the right to a grave in any of the Isu communities or villages. The corpse would be thrown into the Ohia-ojoo (evil forest). Issues relating to soil fertility, bountiful harvest, begetting of children, business prosperity and livestock multiplicity are all petition cases often taken to Ani Isuokoma by ATR members (KIIS, XI, 2023).

The River goddess or Ngene Ogwe: There are so many infamous river divinities that were consulted by the Isuokoma traditional people. They include *Ngene Ogwe, Ora Ani, Uzam, Mkpuma Okwe* etc. The names of this goddess correspond with the names of the rivers, streams, or lakes which they are associated with. The people believe that a powerful goddess inhabits the geographical location of the multiple streams in different villages of the Isuokoma clan. The stream that has popular adherents forbids the masses from extracting the fish therein through magical means. The fish and other aquatic species therein are believed to be the property of the goddess and hence, should not be touched by an ordinary human being except the priests in the pre-colonial era.

In some of these rivers, streams, or lakes, annual feasts and sacrifices were offered there to the river goddess. This sacrifice is done mainly to obtain favor from the river goddess. Evil men were meant to avoid such esteemed sacrifice due to the belief that any atrocious being who attends such feast was traditionally believed would either be drowned or die while drinking such water. Today, this is not the case as such streams, rivers, and lakes have become the low altar for ritual sacrifices of all forms.

The Sun God or Anyanwu: This god was highly associated with the power to decide if a man would see the next day or not. The “*Anyanwu*” was believed to be a messenger of the Almighty “*Chukwu*”. The believers in this god would constantly offer sacrifices to it for the cure of serious sicknesses accompanied by fever and the palpitation of the heat, but it was always necessary to have the prescriptions of a diviner before a sacrifice could be offered to “*Anyanwu*.”²¹

The Akparala or Goddess of Thunder: This goddess was believed to be the voice of the sky goddess. It is equally believed to be the messenger of God’s justice and wrath on men and other creatures. This goddess is invited when people engage in oath-taking, and covenant. The ATR adherent believed it was the quickest answering goddess. Hence, it was heavily consulted in cursing an evil man, swearing all forms of oaths and judicial settlements in Isuokoma land. It has to be remembered that these beings are simply esteemed and venerated (sometimes exaggerated) but never worshipped, contrary to spontaneous imagination. The socio-cultural setting among the Igbo people in Nigeria admits that when meeting some important personalities such as kings for aid, it is often more encouraging for one to launch one’s appeal through certain agents or assistants close to such personalities. Therefore, by going through the intermediaries to carry or receive some favor, the Christian people erroneously feel they are giving more honor and reverence to deities without knowing that the ATR faithful are only reaching to the Almighty God through the spirits and gods.

DISCUSSION ON SELECTED CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN ATR

The key issue in Isuokoma traditional religion agrees with the wider beliefs of African Traditional Religion and philosophy. These key issues for C.S. Momoh are “the African doctrines or theories on

²¹ Aligwekwe, *The Continuity of Traditional Values in the African Society: The Igbo of Nigeria*, 169.

reality and the universe.”²² J.S. Mbiti in his book, *African Religion and Philosophy* asserted that “the Africans are notoriously religious.”²³ The adherents of this African Traditional Religion in Isuokoma believe strictly in a coordinated, harmonious, united and religious universe. In this universe, “the supreme being interacts with human beings through the lesser spirits or divinities.”²⁴ Among the key issues to be discussed here include the concept of reincarnation, witchcraft, death and the interaction of beings.

Reincarnation: “This is simply the belief in life after life. It is a belief that the human soul of the dead ancestor re-enters into a new body, human, animal, or plant. It cannot be verified empirically, logically and critically.”²⁵ This lack of empirical verification of reincarnation is also part of the wider religious culture of the globe, in which many of the ideas cannot be scientifically or technologically verified. All Isuokoma men and women who lived a good life and reached the age of maturity could reincarnate. When such men are alive, they live a refined and ethical life believing that at death, their good life would offer them the opportunity to reach the spirit world peacefully and be accepted in the council of the Isuokoma ancestors, so that they could reincarnate. It is believed that one would be prevented from reaching the spirit world if he or she lived a bad life. Azenabor while writing on the belief in reincarnation among the people maintained that reincarnation is one of mankind’s earliest beliefs and has one of the questions of all times.²⁶ Reincarnation could be described as the successive animation of different human bodies by one human mind. Reincarnation could also mean that at death, a person passes into another living creature, man, animal, or plant. Reincarnation can only take place within a people of the same clan.

The spiritual forces could equally punish a family, for their crimes through re-creation of children that died some years after their birth in a given family. Uzoechi maintains that “African believers take this life as a brief resting place on the way to beingness.”²⁷ Reincarnation or recycled life and death called *Ogbanje* carries this idea. It goes with punishing the wrong-doing family with more and more deaths. Only the diviners and the fortune-tellers can halt them”. The people therefore believe in the existence of their ancestors either in the form of spirits or in the form of reincarnated members of the family or community. There is the belief that the reincarnated children return with the characteristics of their ancestral personality or its opposite.

Reincarnated persons often display skills and talents that are claimed to have been inherited from their former incarnations. They often adopt patterns of behaviors that would have been natural for the person they claim earlier to have been. They also claim to know things that could presumably, not have been discovered by them or the present life. Such circumstances generally contribute much of the popular interest surrounding reincarnation stories.²⁸

Reincarnated children are recognized through their maintenance of a family member’s behavioral pattern, and physical body marks and through consultation with diviners, as well as through memory transfer or retro-cognition. Here, children possess the knowledge and the ability to recount the history of an ancestor and his life story, which they had no empirical access to.

Witchcraft: This is the “natural exercise of evil by persons who are possessed by malevolent but sometimes innate power; which can be employed to hurt people.”²⁹ In Isuokoma society, witchcraft is

²² O. Oladikpo, *The Idea of African Philosophy* (Ibadan: Hope Publication, 1998), 16.

²³ E. Nwokerike, *Philosophy: A Contemporary Approach for Beginners* (Enugu: Handel Books, 2002), 135.

²⁴ J.O. Eneh, *An Introduction to African Philosophy and Thought* (Enugu: Satellite Press Ltd, 1999), 14.

²⁵ Eneh, *An Introduction to African Philosophy and Thought*, 39.

²⁶ G. E. Azenabor, “Reincarnation in Africa Metaphysics,” in *Metaphysics, Phenomenology and African Philosophy*, ed. Jim Una (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1996).

²⁷ I. F. A. Uzoechi, *A Basic History of Nigeria* (Enugu: Benalice Publications, 2004), 8.

²⁸ Azenabor, “Reincarnation in Africa Metaphysics,” 362.

²⁹ Nwokerike, *Philosophy: A Contemporary Approach for Beginners*, 151.

an acceptable reality. This is because, the people constantly discuss the evils brought upon some citizenry through the esoteric and mystical powers of the witches and wizards. S.B. Oluwole described witchcraft as “a mystical and innate power which can be used by the possessor to harm other people.”³⁰ For J.S. Mbiti, “witchcraft is a mysterious phenomenon that seems to defy even immediate scientific explanation.”³¹ It is noteworthy that witchcraft and sorcery are not the same. The difference lies in the fact that while witchcraft is the natural exercise of evil, sorcery on the other hand involves an unnatural exercise of evil. In sorcery, somebody could “employ the power of evil, through the application of appropriate instruments and processes, to destroy or hurt an enemy or rival. One engages in sorcery as an ordinary person and not as a witch.”³² Witchcraft is the mystical ability to perform and afflict man with varieties of afflictions. Witchcraft remains sufficiently real in the African belief and metaphysics to date. Nnadi and Udabah wrote that:

When I speak of witchcraft, I am referring to that which is very disturbingly real as it affects the lives of Africans in every walk of life. And by Africans, I mean not only the illiterates, who carry on with their traditional customs intact, almost as they received from their forebears. I mean also ‘educated’ men and women in the civil service, in the mercantile houses, well known politicians, university professors, university graduates and undergraduates, medical doctors, imams, Alhajis, Archbishops or Bishops and a host of ministers: Muslims and Christians. To the person in these categories, witchcraft is an urgent and very harassing reality. It is a diabolical soul-enslaving presence.³³

The spirits of witches sometimes elope from their bodies in the night and engage in nocturnal visitations to their victims and return before daybreak. They assume the form of cats, spiders, rats, snakes, leopards, etc for their operational period. They are believed to travel in the form of night birds, owls and bats. “Whatever happens to the animals, into which the witch has turned herself during her nocturnal missions, happens to the witch as well, thus, if the animal gets killed, the witch dies.”³⁴ “Witches sought to preserve lives or to destroy the lives of enemies; to destroy the property of enemies or clients; to acquire wealth for themselves or clients. Witches were believed to rely on the powers of gods or other spirits, leading to the belief that witches employed demons in their activities.”³⁵ Witchcraft is a known reality in the Isuokoma traditional society. It cannot be easily dismissed by academic empiricism or other religious theology. This is because a study of the villages of the clan shows that the belief in witchcraft is still strong. “The employment of the mystical forces to do harm to other people is uncompromisingly condemned among the African peoples.”³⁶

Death: Death is the direct opposite of birth in the man’s worldview. The people believed that the type of life you lived would determine how the person would die. Among the Isuokoma people the thought of how man would die, when man would die and where would his/her spirit inhabit after death, lingers in their psyche. To make sure they would inhabit the abode of their ancestors, the people live their lives trying to obey the suggestions of Seneca, the Stoic Philosopher who goes thus “see that you are beloved by all while you live and regretted by all when you die. Punishment should not be inflicted by you out of anger or from the spirit of revenge, but for the purpose of correction.”³⁷

³⁰ Azenabor, “Reincarnation in Africa Metaphysics,” 317.

³¹ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*.

³² D. A. Offiong, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Magic and Social Order Among the Ibibio of Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers Co. Ltd. , 1991), 59.

³³ C.E. Nnadi and C.U. Udabah, *Philosophy: A Definition* (Enugu: Rabboni Nig. Ltd., 2004), 95.

³⁴ Nnadi and Udabah, *Philosophy: A Definition*, 97.

³⁵ O. M. Maduagwu, *The Belief in Witchcraft in Contemporary Africa: A Philosophical Discourse* (Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publisher, 2010), 5-6.

³⁶ J. I. Omeregbe, *Knowing Philosophy: A General Introduction* (Lagos: Joji Educational Research and Publishers Ltd., 1990).

³⁷ Omeregbe, *Knowing Philosophy: A General Introduction*, 29-30.

There is equally the belief that when a person dies his or her “spirit will remain around his home hovering for some days. This time the spirit prepares for the journey to the land of the departed. It is expected that within this period, the burial rites and funeral ceremonies befitting the dignity of the deceased will be completed.”³⁸ These ceremonies at the moment of one’s death are rooted in the belief that it would promote an easy passage of the spirit of the dead from the world of the living into the world of the spirit. Hence, there is always the fear that if a notable person was not given a respectable burial, the spirit of such person would undertake revenge, by causing high misfortunes on the living members of that family. To give the dead a befitting burial remains a progressive tradition.

On the other hand, in the traditional Isuokoma society, the bodies of lepers, men who died of mysterious diseases like smallpox are thrown into the evil forest. It is customary to bury the dead within his village. It is something of a shame to a kindred unit who could not bring the corpse of their son home no matter where he died. Holding the most profound belief in the supernatural, the Isuokoma people are highly conscious of their relationship with the unseen world, and every precaution is taken to keep the spirit of the departed in a state of peaceful contentment. “When a man dies, three things happen: (i) his body decays (ii.) he is reborn (iii.) he begins to live a spiritual existence in the spiritual world and continues to maintain some relationship with the living.”³⁹ When a man dies, she or he is believed to have “gone home” or simply as having “gone to the spirit world” and the whole act of mourning the dead by the family survivors is simply an act of “farewell”. The act of second burial for a traditionalist is vital. It is believed that the spirit of dead members of the family who did not receive a second burial was disturbed. *Ikwa Ozu* is a costly affair. “The very poorest will spend their all, and often heavy debts are incurred in the desire to give best possible “send-off” to a relative.”⁴⁰

The Interaction of Being: The interaction of beings in the people’s worldview is meant to promote the integration among beings. The people believe that life should be ensured in a highly religious universe. They believe that there exists a hierarchy of beings. God occupies the highest position. Next to God in the hierarchy of being are the divinities, conceived as spiritual beings that are extra-ordinarily powerful but remain subordinate to God. Each divinity is believed to have a “chair” or area of influence left for its control by God. The divinities are followed by the spirits of the dead that are living in the spirit world. It is alleged that their forms are intangible and never visible and that they a times visit or speak to man for a particular purpose but must not be touched by man. The spirits are followed by man. Man is the highest of the beings in the corporeal world but is insignificant when compared to the spirit world. They are followed by animals, plants and inorganic objects.

The philosophy of the interaction of beings is rooted in the fact that those living in the spiritual world are interested in and often intervene in the affairs of those living in the corporeal world. The Isuokoma people believe that God and the spirits are heavily interested in the affairs of man here on earth. Hence, they sometimes intervene to render help or to maintain justice, for they see and know everything that goes on in this world. While man is subordinate to God, the divinities and the spirits on one hand; animals, plants, and inorganic objects are subordinate to man. Man utilizes the things in the corporeal world for the emancipation of his interest while the spiritual beings use them to shape man’s attitude and make man feel their presence. “There is a harmonious linkage between these forces and human beings, animals, plants and other lesser creations.”⁴¹ This therefore makes the traditionalist construct some shrines through which they would consult the deities, and oracles, and the divinities for protection, procreation and the promotion of their general welfare.

The traditionalists in Isuokoma believe in the existence of so many forces. Among these include the divine force, terrestrial or celestial forces, human forces etc, with God being the greatest force. Due to the ontological relationships among beings, people know and feel themselves “to be in an intimate

³⁸ M.N. Eze, “Ancestor Worship in Igbo Land: With Special Reference to Achina,” *An Unpublished N.C.E. Project, Institute of Ecumenical Education* (Enugu, 1988), 22.

³⁹ Omeregebe, *Knowing Philosophy: A General Introduction*, 24-25.

⁴⁰ G. T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (Lagos: University Pub. Co p., 1983), 121.

⁴¹ Nnadi and Udabah, *Philosophy: A Definition*, 87.

and personal relationship with other forces acting above or below him in the hierarchy of forces". The contemporary challenge of ATR in Isuokoma land is the challenge of lack of relevance and acceptability amongst the populace.

It is the duty of the traditional institutions in conjunction with the various town Unions to rescue our dying cultural and traditional identity. An Isu Okoma without culture and is therefore an orphan of itself. It amounts to religious bigotry to suggest that Christianity negates the totality of the culture of the people. Acculturation is today the order of the day all over the world as people make conscious efforts to remove aspects of culture that offend humanity rather than throw away the entire culture of the people of Isu Okoma cannot be an exception.⁴²

The ATR in Isuokoma has come under continuous attack and criticism from many corners, as many people wrongly believe that it is increasingly becoming a tool for the killing of innocent and promising Isuokoma men and women, an act that needs to be checked if reasonable societal progress would be made in the land. There is again, the increasing problem of deception and commercialization of Churches and ATR. Both Christianity and ATR in Isuokoma land seem now than ever before to come under fierce attack, scorn, or at least skepticism.⁴³ The skepticism over Christianity is rooted in the increasing commercialization of churches and its use as a popular tool for exploitation and commercial enterprise in Isuokoma land.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents the tenets and practices of African Traditional Religion in Isuokoma. It conceptualizes and traces the different hierarchies of spirits as well as the powerful gods and goddesses within the communities and villages that make up the Isuokoma clan. The study documented the controversial issues that are found in ATR within Isuokoma. It should be noted that the worldview of Isuokoma society influences their conceptual values. This worldview and belief transmitted into the material and immaterial culture while using them to mold the behavior of the Isuokoma men and women over time. The norms, values, beliefs and religious tenets in any society are used to understand and interpret their everyday reality as it relates to their activities with man and with the supernatural, thereby influencing their religion. The religion of the people embodies among other things, the basic assumptions concerning the ultimate things, upon which they base their lives. African Traditional Religion, in its pre-colonial form, offers the Isuokoma men and women some explanations in relation to why they are where they found themselves, why things continue or discontinue to happen, and, or reasons for some changes often expressed in the Isuokoma culture and civilization.

Finally, this Isuokoma traditional religious thinking and formulation evolved alongside other aspects of the people's heritage and declined over time with the coming of Christianity. Therefore, the specialized trend of practicing or way of worship in African Traditional Religion belongs to each group of people within which a given act of ATR evolved, with a general trend that cuts across the different schools of practitioners in different families and communities. In other words, African Traditional Religion is territorial, and therefore it is not preached from one people to another in Isuokoma, the way pastors and priests move around to preach. This explains why some authors speak of African religions since religion takes different forms and expressions according to ethnic, tribal, clan, communal and group settings. It should be noted that an attempt to transplant it to an entirely different society may be a wasted venture unless the Africans go there with it. The study recommends increased inter-religious socialization in Isuokoma and Nigeria at large, as a path to the management of ethno-religious crisis that weakens the nation-building process of the Nigerian state.

⁴² M. Njoku, "Effective and Positive Leadership for Development," *Isuokoma Renaissance*, December 2010, 12.

⁴³ E. E. Ekuwem, "Foreword 1," in *The Divine Deceit Business in Religion*, ed. Fidelis K. Obiora (Nimo: Rex Charles and Patrick Ltd., 2008).

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