

Not All Deities Were Transformed in Igboland: A Cultural History of the *Api-Opi* Deity

Mathias Chukwudi Isiani¹, Stanley Jachike Onyemechalu², Somtochukwu C. Osinem², Sopoluchukwu Amarachukwu Dimelu³, and Ngozika Anthonia Obi-Ani¹.

Abstract

This study examines the culture-history of the *Api-Opi* deity in Opi, Nsukka, Enugu State of Nigeria. The study set out to examine the re-emergence of youthful worshippers of *Api-Opi*, despite the penetration of Christianity in the area. The Study employed ethnographic observation and field visits to the shrine of *Api-Opi* in Opi community of Enugu state, Nigeria. In addition, this study uncovers new information drawn from semi-structured interview questions undertaken in the study area between March and October of 2019. Against certain claims on the impact of Christianity on Africa's traditional religions, the study found that the *Api-Opi* deity has withstood these post-colonial changes, growing its followership, particularly among the youths. It demonstrated the resilience of Igbo Traditional Worship System even in the midst of culture clash and religious iconoclasm advanced by Christianity in Igboland, Nigeria. Evidence from this study helps debunk the notions of Eurocentric scholars who say African traditional religions are fetish, barbaric or primitive. It also shows how indigenous communities have protected and preserved their religious heritage despite the wave of modernization and other external influences. The study contributes to the increasing conversations about the role of traditional religion in the cultural resilience/revitalization of indigenous communities.

Keywords: *Api-Opi*, Deity, Traditional Religion, Cultural Resilience, Cultural Heritage.

1.0 Introduction

Deities in Igboland are one of the features in determining the ‘development, achievement and advancement’ of an Igbo society before the penetration of the colonial authorities in the various hinterland of the community (Arinze, 1970; Ikenga-Metuh, 1981). Ogbuka (2020, 33) postulated that “Deities were the reason for the numerous outputs enjoyed in Igbo society in precolonial society... the recent economic scourge in the society is as a result of the total neglect

¹ Department of History and International Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.

² Department of Archaeology and Tourism, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.

³ Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.

on the worship of deities and the influence of Christianity.” In recounting the religious consciousness of the Igbo society, Isichei (1976: 24-25) citing a German missionary of Aboh in 1841 noted that:

The Igbos are in their way, a religious people. The word ‘Tshuku’- God – is continually heard. Tshuku is supposed to do everything... Their notions of some of the attributes of the Supreme Being are, in many respects, correct, and their manner of expressing them striking. ‘God made everything: He made both White and Black’, is continually on their lips. Some of their parables are descriptive of the perfections of God.

The thrust in the religious practices of the Igbo society was reverence through acknowledging the various *chi* or deity as one would call it. In Opi community, the *chi* was a scavenger whom later turned out to be a river and had maintained her royalty to the community. It had assisted the community in war times and also played judicial roles among the various families in Opi. There was a peaceful co-existence among all the inhabitants living Opi before the Christianization of the community in early 1930s (Isiani, 2020).

The Christianization and transformation of the Igbo society came in form of a yam tendril. First, it started with the conversion of ‘the poor, the needy and the rejected: the mothers of twins, women accused of witchcraft, those suffering from diseases such as leprosy which were seen as abominable (Isichei 1976: 162). It later shifted to the conversion of chiefs, wealthy personalities and subsequently conquering the belief system of the Igbo society. in 1930s according to Isiani (2020) the belief structured system of the Opi people have been affected with the penetration of the Christ Missionary Society (CMS) in Aho-Opi and later the Roman Catholic Mission. These transformations witnessed by the people affected the belief system of the society as many were seen running to the colonial missionaries for ‘safety, healing and salvation’ (Isiani, 2020). This also goes in line with Isichei (1976) observation of a notable woman Christian, Ikpeghe Oyediya Anya who ‘her family were pagans but she chose to be Christian against the wishes of the family ... the love of God and humanity grew stronger when she became a mother in her own house (Isichei, 1976: 179). In Opi, Ugwuagbo (2019) narrating the conversion of families and how they left Api Opi practices postulated that:

The community came into the hands of strangers that introduced them into another aspect of religion ... before we could know it our culture, norms and tradition began to dwindle.

The wave of modernity including Christianity, western education, migration and technological innovations in recent times have challenged the historical ties and cultural norms of many traditional communities in Igbo land. The socio-political and economic structure of the Igbo people have been and still is affected by the penetration of the aforementioned aspects of modernity. To some Eurocentric scholars, Africans were primitive in terms of religion and should embrace the European religion for 'rapid development'. Njoku corroborates Ikenga-Metuh's (1981) findings when he succinctly noted that, "all the Christian mission came to Nigeria with a common but mistaken conviction: that traditional African religion, along with African culture, was heathen and had to be eradicated, if the people were to benefit from the presumed largesse of Western civilization" (Njoku, 2014:212). Opi community is one such traditional Igbo communities that are challenged by modernity especially her belief system.

Opi is one of the communities that make up the present Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State. Opi is located some 62 kilometers north of Enugu metropolis, 21 kilometers south of Obollo-Afor and about 10 kilometers southeast of Eha-Alumona. On the north west, Opi is bounded by Ede-Oballa, on the east by Mbu and on the southwest by Lejja. Opi also shares common boundary with Ohodo, Ekwegbe, Leke and Ugwuogo Nike. Opi is a very large town both in terms of land mass and population. It is one of the densely populated towns in Nsukka Local Government Area. In the 1930s, According to Nigeria's most recent population census, Opi is a home of 309,633 (National Population Commission, 2006)

Opi is made up of three major quarters which consist of different villages and clan. The three notable quarters are Idi, Ibeku, Ogbozarra, all classified based on seniority. It is pertinent to note that there is paucity of written sources on Opi history before 1900, and according to Afigbo (1981), scholars are yet to make a determined effort to tackle the problem of reconstructing the Igbo pre-colonial past. Historians are only now beginning to exploit what little documented information exists on pre-colonial and colonial histories of the Igbo society. The knowledge elicited from elders and aged men in Opi might not recollect all the activities of Api-Opi in precolonial and colonial times but it will go a long way to fill some of the existing gaps in Opi's

religious history. Through such oral accounts, physical observation, photographic documentation and comparisons with existing literature, this study will examine the cultural and historical value of the infamous *Api-Opi* deity in Opi community. This study will show the significant roles played by this feminine deity within the Opi community, including assisting them out of tough challenges, including but not limited to conflicts (war), financial crises, infertility and low agricultural produce. The mode of worship, items of worship, taboos and other socio-cultural practices tied to this deity will be discussed in this paper. Also, this paper shows how modernity and overzealous religious proselytization have demystified and punctured the once feared worship of *Api-Opi*. The study will also shed light on the interesting recent re-emergence of youthful worshippers of *Api-Opi*, despite the penetration of Christianity in the community.

2.0 Literature Review

In discovering the extent at which colonialism affected the functions and duties of traditional deity worship like *Api-Opi*, Ogunbado (2012) carried out a study titled 'Impacts of Colonialism on Religions: An experience of South Western Nigerian', which was borne out of the need that the advent of the European's religion in Nigeria especially the south-western part, has impacted immensely on so many things like social, political, religion, economy and educational set up of the country. This to him, implies that the negative impact of colonialism on religion, outweighs its positive impact. Using qualitative research method, Ogunbado was able to solidify his argument on the negative, positive impact of colonialism and the resistant techniques of the masses as well as the overpowering of that techniques by British government. Studies done in the past decades, reveals that sequel to the advent of European religion called Christianity, traditional and Islamic religion have been existing, which means that a religious system has been working for Africans long before the addition of European religion. Elaborating on the impact of colonialism on religion, Ogunbado opined that amid those positive impact (which is the introduction of new religion, western civilization and learning, eradication of human sacrifice, electricity, transportation network and other social amenities), the intensions are tailors down to the negative reasons. This means that the intension of the Europeans towards the behavior they exhibited as regards to the civilization brought to Africa, was to their own benefit and not to the good of mankind in general or African in particular. This study draws insight from the work under review

as the understanding of Api-Opi functionality and duties would be based on the resistance and resilience nature of its worshippers, irrespective of the colonial interference.

Most scholars believe that the functionality and duties of African deities, has always be efficient as seen in its ability to punish offender when invoked. In complimenting this point, Ojo (2014), conducted a study titled ‘incorporation of *Ayelala* traditional religion into Nigeria criminal justice system: An opinion survey of Igbesa community people in Ogun state, Nigeria’. He summarized it by adopting a concurrent method with 52 participants, to elicit information concerning the genuinity in *Ayelala* functionality and duties. His study however, reveals that incorporation of *Ayelala* traditional religion or in the case of Api-Opi, would go a long way to reset the standard in African social, political and economic life of the continent. This implies that a larger populate believes in the efficacy of this traditional religion. As par the study contribution to the present study, it gave more insight in understanding of the function and duties of Api-Opi in the context of people of Opi as well as its application to diverse situations or cases. Despite the high recommendation of traditional religion being incorporated into Nigerian criminal justice system, Amigo (2015) opine that this traditional religion, currently faces great challenges as most of the would be priest are seriously converting into Christianity. This has resulted in shrines being deserted with no priest in attendance. The story of Api-Opi traditional religion in every way tolls the same part as studies, reveals that a lot of cases had occurred where a priest who was supposed to take over the responsibility, declined due to the same effect of Christianity.

According to Ikuenobe (2014), in his work titled “traditional African environmental ethics and colonial legacy”, the people of Africa has been indoctrinated to accept the notion that the western ways of life and value are always regarded as a saving grace to mankind while traditional African way of life and values is barbaric, primitive and uncivilized. The good thing is that, African are beginning to have a rethink, based on the fact that this view or belief painted bad by western belief, is not so when analyze in the context of its functionality and application in places where necessary. In a nutshell, the work of Ikuenobe (2014) contributes massively to this study as it provides an insight to the understanding on extent at which attitudinal nature of the people of Opi, influences the traditional practices of Api-Opi, vis-a-viz the traditional religious resilience after the interference of European belief or view.

Ikuenobe (2014) submits that the religious problem in Africa must be addressed to have a practical implication for finding solutions to African's environmental issues. And because religion serve as strong hold that can boost or retard societal development, Obi (2012) opined in his work titled "religion and societal development: A philosophical Appraisal of African situation", that this is as a result of man's inability to discover himself and where he is coming from in other to know how things are fixed around him with what he has, rather than expecting manner from heaven with no effort put in. in trying to comprehend the concept of religious functionality and application in societal development, Obi (2012) adopted philosophical method of hermeneutics which provide answers to his roles and finally the functionality aspect when analyzed in the context of the worshippers as in the case of Api-Opi. In conclusion, the work reveals that extreme religiousness on African, is one of the factors that retard development. From the above postulation, it can be deduced that too much of everything is bad. However, the work of Obi (2012) gives a clear view of how religion can be used for societal development through its functionalities, which is in line with where this study is headed.

3.0 Methodology

We did a rigorous review of literature to identify and select relevant existing literature on the subject matter. This was followed by ethnographic observation during field visits to the shrine of Api-Opi in Opi community of Enugu state. In addition, this study uncovers new information drawn from semi-structured interview questions undertaken in the study area between March and October of 2019. The interviews examined the opinions of key informants who have been deemed by the researchers to be very knowledgeable on the subject; due to their age (>50) and status (priest, devotee or, community elder). The total number of respondents (N= 12). The respondents were identified at or in the immediate vicinity of their households. The interview questions included demographic questions to determine age, occupation and gender (excluding questions regarding level of education because these were deemed unnecessary). This was followed by interactive open-ended questions regarding Api-Opi, its history, mode of worship, functions amongst others. These interviews were conducted in the language most preferred by the interviewee, which was also within the linguistic range of the interviewers, including Igbo, Nigerian pidgin English and English. A good number of the interviews were recorded and those not in English were translated during the transcription. The process achieved a reasonably even distribution in terms of gender

(men N = 8, women N = 4). The number of respondents only reflects those that were available during, and willing to partake in, the interview process. Thus, these form a qualitative ‘purposive sample’ and are not necessarily representative samples of the total community of people knowledgeable about *Api-Opi*. Worthy of note here is that permission to make photographic documentation was very limited and, in most cases, outrightly denied.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Origin of *Api-Opi* – Some Myths

The origin of *Api-Opi* deity is as old as the community itself. There were conflicting versions from the respondents regarding the oral traditions covering the origin of *Api-Opi*. However, among these different versions, the authors were able to document some historical evidences of *Api-Opi* in pre-colonial and colonial times.

Api-Opi deity, as gathered from different versions, is said to be a woman who migrated from an unknown place to Opi carrying a calabash (see figure 1). On entering Opi, she was approached by a young man from Ogbazzara whom did not know that she was *mmuo* (spirit). The woman rejected his approach and moved further to Ovoko in Idi-Opi, where she felt at home and was accepted by the community. At her old age, she got blind and died. Upon her death on *Nkwo* market day, she vetoed that “for one to worship her, the person must be the eldest of the Ovoko community, and the person would go blind upon assuming the priestly role” (Focal discussion, 2019). Years after her death, the entire Opi community was said to have acknowledged her worthy character while alive and paid homage to her grave. Following her burial rites, the grave turned into a stream that now exists till date in Opi called *mmiri Api*. This stream was a sign of peace between the woman and the Opi people. The eldest person in Ovoko clan in Idi-Opi was said to have gotten blind instantly after the burial rites of the woman was concluded. The community was at peace with the incident and began to reverence the deity as one of the most powerful deities in Opi and its environs. Subsequently, the woman was nick-named “‘*Ede-Oga*’ and this what the chief priests and devotees since generations often call the deity during their incantations” (Isiani, interviewed 2019).



Figure 1: A Road-sign leading to Api-Opi Shrine (Authors, 2019)

In another version, which seems to be more narrative than the former, *Api-Opi* is said to be as old as the town itself; although, the version also acknowledged that the deity is a woman and had a good character while alive. To further deepen the discussion, Ugwu (2018) stated that:

Api-Opi is a deity I have known since I was a child. My father told me of the myths surrounding the deity but never acknowledged that she was a migrant... Api-Opi had served the community in wars during the pre-colonial and colonial times. And even till date, people who ran to her for safety had lived. The chief priest of the shrine is also from Idi because Idi is the eldest community in Opi and is also where the shrine is located. But where there is no person from Idi, Ibeku person can serve as the chief priest. Nevertheless, people from the Ogbazzara caln has no right to serve as the priest of Api even when the aforementioned two are unavailable. I still do not know the reason for such. (Ugwu interviewed, 2019).

Another evidence alleged that *Api-Opi* had no child but had turned to be a river as seen in Fig. 2 as proof of her fertility to the community. Through this river, the branches of Api in Umuolu, Ovoko, Ama-eze in Idi can worship, cure and reverence the deity. This was proven during the course of the research as people from these different localities came to the river for worship and healing. Many of them denied the authors from taking pictures of them during the visitations. Nevertheless, whether the above myths are true or not, the knowledge elicited from these key-informants in Opi would be used in reconstructing the history of *Api-Opi* and other objectives of this study.

4.2 Mode and Place of Worship, Festivals, Sacrifices and Offerings of *Api-Opi*

As a profoundly religious people, sacrifices and offerings have long been and continues to be a crucial part of their mode of worship or communion with the divine (Arnze, 1970). Their belief system and an elaborate religious worship organized around it confirm this (Uchendu, 1965:94). The worship of *Api-Opi* deity is democratically organized. It takes place in diverse forms with regards to the need of the worshippers. The worshippers of *Api-Opi* come to the shrine located in Ama-eze Idi Opi where the river is located with kolanuts, yams, fowl, palm wine, white pigeon and gunpowder depending on the nature of their needs. At first, on entering the *Api-Opi* place of worship, the worshipper removes his or her shoes, bows down to the deity with his or her fingers on the floor touching his or her chest for four times as a sign of entrance ritual. This ritual is called *Ede-Oga* ritual (Ugwu, 2018).



Figure 2: The entrance to Api-Opi shrine (Authors, 2019)

Sacrifices and offerings, as Mbiti in Ugwuayi (2012) asserts, are to be distinguished in terms of blood killing of animals and non-killing of animals during worships. In Api-Opi like in other Igbo deities, sacrifices and offerings are made based on the challenge faced by or the needs of the supplicant at the time. According to the Eze in his narration of the sacrifices offered to Api-Opi he opined that:

Sacrifices and offerings differ from individuals... for a young lady seeking for husband she comes to the shrine with key and a gallon after which and incarnation would be made on her behalf. Such ladies offer to the shrine any promise they made on the day of the cleansing. Some would promise a cow, she-goat or their services to Api till death (Eze interviewed 2019).

To further strengthen this assertion, Ugwu noted that:

Individuals and groups come for fertility in Api-Opi shrine... For fertility, the woman comes to the river with the *umu-ama* (male youth in the shrine) for bathing. The *umu-ama* while bathing her uses his finger in the woman's vagina as instructed from the Chief Priest during the incarnation... the same happens to a man with low sperm count or impotent

as another section of *umu-ama* from the female wing bath him and suck his penis as instructed. These persons present one of their children with *adada* (rough hair from bath) as an offering to the shrine (Ugwu interviewed 2018).

In some instances, where the offerings requested by Api-Opi are not brought, properties of the supplicants can be would be confiscated by the deity. As shown in the picture below of a house confiscated by the deity since 1994 (Ugwu, 2018). The deity also serves as an economic assistance to individuals who comes for it. The economic assistance might be in form of ownership of houses, land, prosperity and business breakthrough. In documenting this economic propensity of the shrine, Okenye lamented that:

Api-Opi is a giver of wealth. It gives to groups as well as individuals. People travel form far and near to collect abundance from the deity. In collecting money form Api-Opi, the person usually come to the shrine with a little money which will be used for incarnations after which he or she goes back to trade with the money. The money multiplies at he or she exchange the currency with people in the market... however, he promises the shrine his or her percentage in return which if not return might lead to death or confiscation of the property (Okenye, interviewed 2019).

Collecting the same assertion of economic assistance from Api-Opi in a focal discussion, they narrated that:

People that comes to the shrine to collect money as a loan should be careful of the promises they made. In Ede-Oballa, Opi and Nsukka town; Api-Opi has seized many properties and killed many individuals because they could not fulfil their promises in due time. The promises are not form the deity but individuals and groups make vows to the shrine and sidetrack the shrine after their challenges are solved (Focal discussion 2019).

Nevertheless, the Api-Opi as a deity has played significant role against what the Eurocentric scholars had documented. Its mode of worship and reverence shows decentralization and respect the community has for their belief system.

4.3 Economic, Judicial and Socio-Political Roles of *Api-Opi* Deity

The economic, judicial and socio-political roles of *Api-Opi* deity is as the same as in other parts of Igbo society. The economic mainstay of Igbo societies in the precolonial, colonial and post-colonial period is agriculture. Agriculture was by far the most pervasive of the economic engagements of the Nigerian peoples in the 19th century, as it certainly had been even much earlier; still is today and may likely continue to be in the very distant future (Njoku, 2014:19). The agricultural produce in Igboland led to the establishment of markets among communities whom had difference in ecology. According to an informant, the reason for the development of trade and market in Africa was due to geographical and ecological variations which made different communities to seek for a way to satisfy human consumption (Odey, 2014). Thus, in Opi the sharp demarcation between the Opi-Uno that has poor soil fertility and Opi-Agu with good rich fertile soil brought the idea of exchange of goods for goods at Aho-Opi market. By the beginning of the 20th century, Opi communities experienced an influx of European explorers in search of raw materials and markets. These raw materials such as palm oil, palm kernel, honey procured from Aho-Opi market necessitated the establishment of modernized infrastructures in Opi. These developments in Opi were and still as a result of the presence and influence of *Api-Opi* deity. According to an informant, the reason for the massive production in Opi is because of the sacrifices of our yearly produce to *Api* (Isiani, 2018). Each farmer comes to *Api-Opi* deity with a large quantity of his produce for his yearly thanksgiving (Ugwu, 2018) “during these thanksgiving service, each of the farmers plead and makes promise to the deity for another successful production in the next farming season (Eze, 2019). These homages were to protect the farm from evil people and for abundant harvest.

The traders in Aho-Opi market in the same line provides their articles of trade to *Api-Opi* as a symbol of appreciation. Long distance traders according to an informant would come to the deity with collected sands from major markets in Igbo land for incarnation (Agbo, 2019). Treading in the same point, Ugwu observed that:

The traders in the process of their engagements with other Igbo markets such as *Ogbete*, *Oba Idemili*, *Onitsha*, *Aba* and *Umuahia* collects sands from the market. On return from these places, the *Attama* of *Api* would collect the sand from

these traders and invoke incantations and libations. These was to ensure the growth of Aho-Opi market (Ugwu, 2019).

The Api-Opi deity stream also provides medical treatment to the people. The stream as noted early was a sign of peace between the deity and the Idi people after the death of originator of the deity. Individuals and groups come to the stream to procure treatment from their different illness. According to Isiani,

We come to Api-Opi deity if we had suffered from poison, infections and other bacteria harm. On coming to the stream with the help of Attama of Api, he performs incarnations and gives the patient some water to drink. The patient might be cured instantly or advised to stay at the shrine for some days (Isiani, 2019).

In the same note, Cecilia Eze opted that:

I am a living witness of the medicinal impact of Api-Opi stream. I was infected with poison after eating in a burial funeral. I was rushed to Api-Opi deity after which the priest performs some incarnation and libations. Ongoing to the stream, I was forced to fetch the water with a plastic cup which I did and drank. After drinking the water, I had a runny stomach and vomited out black substance (Eze, 2019).



Figure 3: The Api-Opi Stream (Authors, 2019)

Another group in a focal discussion had discussed to the researchers how traders spray the water from Api-Opi stream in their shop for prosperous transactions. According to them, “traders from Aho-Opi market and other community markets come to Api-Opi deity for the water from Api shrine ... the water was and still is used in different shops as it attracted buyers after spraying and chanting Api-Opi in their shops” (Focused-group Discussion, 2019).

Apart from the economic roles, Api-Opi deity has also played some judicial and socio-political roles. According to Aligwekwe, divinatory powers also perform judicial functions: they were consulted to solve problems such as those arising from disputes and accusations related to sorcery, to murder of which the guilty was yet unknown, and to the accusation of *aru* or *nso* (Aligwekwe, 1991: 170). In cases of theft and rape, Api-Opi has acted as a judge. In finding out the truth, the people involved go to the shrine with a keg of palm wine and three pieces of kolanut (Isiani, 2019). The chief priest performs incarnations and informs the people of the consequences of any found guilty. According to an informant, he narrated how a boy died after three days of swearing in Api-Opi against an allegation of rape of a young girl. To him, “the boy swore to the shrine that if he was the one that raped her let him die with the next Aho market day” (Agbo,

2019). Treading in the same line, Onyishi Uwelu posited that Api-Opi also sends bees to anyone found guilty of any crime. To him:

After swearing in the deity, on getting home the deity would send a bevy of bees to the victims' house. The bees would cover the house that nobody would enter. The bees in Opi signifies danger and evil hovering around the house. The victims must come to Api-Opi for sanctification with any items requested from the priest (Onyishi Uwelu, 2019).

In the area of theft or refusal to pay debt, Api-Opi deity had showed justice in dealing with the culprit. In the case of theft, Api-Opi gives the accused person some days to think about the allegations before coming to the shrine for final verdict. On arrival to the shrine after some days the chief priest would ask the accused if he or she had thought it twice before coming to the shrine. The priest performs his rituals which the people receive instant judgment in the shrine. The accused if exposes faces death or mad penalty (Onyishi Uwelu, 2019).

Exposing the dealing for refusal to pay debt, Ugwu narrated that:

Api-Opi deity till date confiscated a three storey building along Ugwu Nkwo Nsukka (see figure 4). The debtor came to Api-Opi for money which after performing some rituals was given a huge amount of money. He promised to return the money after some years... however the duration lapsed and his promise was unfulfilled. The deity was said to have sent a message to the debtor to return the money or face the consequences. After three months of this message, terrible accounts became to happen in the debtor's family such as death and finally confiscation of the house. Nobody had entered the house till date (Ugwu, 2019).

Continuing the same story on the confiscated house (see Figure 4), Agbo opined that "the debtor's family in 2004 constructed and fixed a black iron gate in the house after appeasing the shrine yet the shrine had refused one to enter the house until the debtor's corpse is brought to the shrine" (Agbo, 2019). Interviewing Obi-Ani a Grail worshipper opposite the confiscated house in Ugwu Nkwo, he opted that "all the religious group that had in recent past hired the house for worship ran out with one month... the house is under a siege."The Api-Opi claims land and other properties of anybody who fails to fulfil his or her promise after the manifestation of his or her plead. In Lejja,

Api had confiscated a land and had been accused to have killed the debtor because of his refusal to pay back his debt and fulfil his promises (Eze, 2019).



Figure 4: A disputed property confiscated by Api-Opi (Authors, 2019). 4.4 The Wave of Modernity and the Re-emergence of Api-Opi

The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed the presence of the British colonial power in Nigeria. This was brought about by the tireless efforts of British traders in search of markets for raw materials as well as markets for the British factory goods. They came inland along the Niger expedition to explore the Niger and Benue Rivers. For want of a clear economic policy and safeguard the Niger- Benue region, the British colonial government mandated the Royal Niger Company, under Sir George Goldie, to administer the area in 1886-87 shortly after the Berlin conference. The company was granted a trade monopoly for its reward (Odey 2011:85). Sequel to the British traders were the church missionaries who came into the hinterlands of Africa with a conviction that Africa belief system was fetish and heaten. These British authorities was alleged to have come to Opi in the early 1930s first as traders and explorers and later as missionaries (Monica interviewed 2019). Since this period, the belief system of the community was interrupted and have been distorted by the post-colonial converts. In narrating how Opi people were converted to Christians, Ogbute in his interview posited that:

By early 1930s the people of Opi witnessed the penetration of British missionaries behind Aho-Opi. The missionaries look like the traders and the explorers who had earlier come for raw materials and palm oil and kernels... By 1935 worshippers of Api-Opi deity were seen exchanging vows in a small hut behind Aho-Opi market with the missionaries who promised to give them clothes, mirror and gin... these converts started to preach against Api-Opi deity as subsequently received massive converts (Ogbute 2019).

In the same line with Ogbute above, Isiani observed that:

My grandmother who was an ardent worshipper of Api-Opi deity was converted in 1945. She became an Anglican convert and stopped her children from participating in masquerade dancing, Api-Opi functions and other rituals ceremonies that we earlier participated. People worshipping Api-Opi after the independence was referred as outcast and castigated by the majority of the people who has turned to Christianity (Isiani, 2019).

Migration and the rise of urbanization were also observed to be one of the immediate causes for the collapse of Api-Opi deity in Opi. Many urban centres in Nigeria arose as a result of colonial administrative development and mining activities. Port Harcourt, Enugu and Kaduna emerged as administrative, commercial or mining centres. As people migrate to these urban centres they adopt the culture and settlement pattern of the natives. The major urban centres in Nigeria attracted the natives in different parts and subjected them to new life, language, mode of worship and belief system. Opi settlers in Onitsha were asserted to have jettisoned their belief system for Christianity which had early had its wave in Onitsha since 1857 (Okpala 2019). Some of the natives on return to their homelands saw the deity as 'local' god and should be abandoned. In narrating a personal experience, one of the participants of Api-Opi deity echoed that

Api-Opi deity should be burnt and destroyed. It has ridiculed the society and witch-hunted the development of the community. As an earlier participant of the deity, I was blinded with its evil deeds but currently after my migration to Onitsha since 1974 and with the wave of Christianity and development in the city I came to a conclusion that Api-Opi has destroyed the community and sent many inhabitants into demise (Asogwa, 2019).

Despite these modernity and developments in the community, it was observed that in recent times there is influx of youths worshipping and paying reverence to the deity. The youths in Opi have challenged the Christians converts in Opi for neglecting the religious belief of their forefathers. The youths of Opi through the eldest among them administer the shrine if the chief priest is not around. Uche narrated that:

We the youths of Opi will not leave the belief of our forefathers for white-man religion. The shrine was here before the white-man came to Opi and will be here to see the demise of Christianity. I and my colleagues must worship Api-Opi till we died (Uche, 2019).

In focal discussion during one of the interviews with Opi youths, they echoed that:

The white men came and deceived us with clothes, mirror, gin and bible. For them to win our hearts and take our land we were asked to jettison our belief system which our fathers did... we have found out that the white men deceived us and we are ready to take back what belongs to us... for us and our families, we will remain a strong worshipper of Api-Opi (Focus Group Discussion, 2019).

Nonetheless, the presence and operations of Api-Opi deity still has its roots in Opi. The confrontations of the so-called Christians have not stopped the worshippers from reverence. The Api-Opi deity day still remained till date with unique approaches. The youths of Opi have also used the deity to collect money from those who secretly come to the deity for powers in their churches and ministries (Uche, 2019). For one belief system to fade off it should be divine not a 'forced man-made approach' (Isiani, 2019). Api-Opi deity just like other deities in Igboland had received confrontations from both the religious groups and migrants but yet have survived till date. Presently in Opi it is obvious that the presence of Christianity and the wide spread of Pentecostalism has not affected the belief system of majority of Opi inhabitants. The belief system of the people seems to be scared and sacrosanct; those who claim to be Christians but faced some life challenges such as child bearing, trade and sexual feelings secretly comes to the shrine at night. As Achebe (2012) rightly writes "a man who does not know where the rain began to beat him cannot say where he dried his body."

4.5 Taboos as A Conservation Mechanism at Api-Opi

A taboo is a consensus held by a society, where certain actions or behaviors are tagged as ‘forbidden’ or ‘abomination’. Often, taboos are targeted at preventing access to or the exploitation of something valuable. Taboos are common among many societies in Africa and other parts of the world – largely because it brings a sense of sanity and reverence to certain phenomena in the community. For example, the stealing of yam is taboo in Igboland, Nigeria. Particularly, digging up planted yam seedling is an abomination against *Ifejioku/ahajioku*, the yam deity and *Ala*, the earth goddess. Doing so is often likened to digging up one’s buried relative; a crime that angers the gods. Many scholars have noted the role of taboos as one of the various traditional management mechanisms for safeguarding cultural heritage (Onyemechalu & Ugwuanyi, 2021; Poullos, 2014; Peoples & Bailey 2012; Oriji 2011; Joffroy 2005; Ndoro & Pwiti 2001).

Jianguo, Daily, Ehrlich and Luck (2003) observed that for a long time, humans societies have tried to conserve or protect natural and cultural landscapes for various value-based reasons. For instance, at the Lejja iron working site in south-eastern Nigeria, Eze-Uzomaka (2009) noted that the pile of slag blocks at the Lejja village square (or *Otobo Dunoka* as it is locally called) are still intact because of the traditional taboos preventing people from “tampering with, or removing them from the village square” (Eze-Uzomaka 2009, p.44). Also, Gundu and Adia (2014) observed that taboos helped in the conservation of plants and animal prior to the adoption of modern conservation methods by preventing the killing of certain animals or cutting of certain trees/plants. A study by Adedeji, Omotayo, Oyediran, Chikezie and Jeje (2021) showed how taboos, among other traditional mechanisms like community surveillance, were instrumental in the sustainable conservation of the Osun-Oshogbo sacred grove – which is now a World Heritage Site. Their study showed yet again that people can be ‘encouraged’ (or coerced) into a conscious involvement in the sustainable conservation of shared cultural spaces.

According to our informants, the Api-Opi deity has certain human actions or behaviors that were regarded as taboos (*aru*). One notable taboo is that no one is allowed to wear footwear on the grounds of the Api-Opi shrine. Also, we were told that, while everyone is allowed to worship at the shrine and consult with the deity directly, menstruating women were forbidden from coming anywhere around the shrine. In Asogwa’s words:

“When they are on their periods, women are not allowed to come close to the shrine. We always warn new visitors about this before they enter. Those who have lied about

their period or just ignored our warning have suffered different consequences, including unstoppable hemorrhage” (Asogwa, 2019).

Some other actions that were noted by our informants as taboos for the Api-Opi deity include using the left hand to give, take or receive anything in the shrine, telling lies, burying the corpse of someone thought to have been killed by the deity and trespassing on a disputed property that has been cordoned off by the deity. Others are incest, cannibalism (i.e., to eat human flesh), murder, passing unjust judgement, leading a blind man astray and suicide (or organizing a funeral for a person who committed suicide). We observed that people are mindful of these taboos because sudden death, famine or incurable sicknesses have been consequences linked to people known to have broken the taboos. These taboos, one might deduce, help to restrict access to the shrine and keep it clean. They also help in maintaining the sacrosanct ambience of the Api-Opi shrine, making it one of the most feared deities in all of the Nsukka area of Igboland, Nigeria.

The globally-renowned Igbo author, Chinua Achebe, recounted in his book ‘*There Was A Country*’ of an interesting Igbo taboo: “Traditionally, no one was allowed to pick [Kola nuts] from the tree; they were supposed to ripen, fall, and then be collected from the ground, and by men—not by women” (2012, p.13). Using the same Kola nut taboo example to discuss women’s rights in Igboland, Amadiume further deepens our understanding of taboos as “sociocultural constructs”, stating that “the ritualization of Igbo kola is therefore what is at issue, not the kola nut in its materiality...” (2015, p. 126). Taboos surrounding deities in Igboland are strictly enforced, with dire consequences awaiting those who dared to violate them. Oriji (2011) recalls how Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe’s ‘*Things Fall Apart*’ had to perform certain rites when he violated the taboos of *Ala* by “beating one of his wives during the ‘week of peace’, he was obliged to pay the priest of *Ala* the necessary restitutions for cleansing the earth” (Oriji 2011, p. 44).

The Igbos are not also alone when discussing communities which have punishments for people who break a taboo. In addition to noting the punishments for people who broke taboos in the Twi area, Meyer (2010) observed that in urban areas, taboos do get broken without much ado. However, in the case of the Api-Opi deity, as have been discussed in an earlier section, we found that people who broke the taboos of the deity faced the consequences (including sudden death or property seizure) wherever they are, in the city or not. As a management technique, taboos have also been

observed to “function to lessen the demand for certain resources” (Sutton & Anderson 2010, p. 124). While we think

5.0 Conclusion

Despite the threat of Christianity to its identity, her the Igbo traditional belief system have remained resilient. The youths whom have earlier left the Api Opi practices for Christianity is currently the principal authors of the shrine as observed by the researchers during the fieldwork. They claimed that the colonial missionaries and their activities in Opi deceived and introduced them into the imperialist religion.’ Christianization is a forced traditional that never lasted for a good period of time. The deity has continued to triumph in Opi, where the study noted how church pastors were said to journey to the deity for prophetic powers. The study also noted that the deity has a wide range of taboos. These taboos, the authors have observed, are geared towards self-preservation and the sustainable conservation of their heritage properties. This study will hopefully add to the ongoing conversations within international organisations like the United Nation’s Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2003) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS, 2014), about incorporating taboos and other traditional self-preservation techniques of local communities in the wider spectrum of sustainable cultural heritage management efforts. Seeing the way Api-Opi is able to provide justice and adjudicate disputes, it is safe to contend that Nigeria can harness phenomenal conflict management and dispute resolution strategies embedded in our rich traditional societies. These can be adopted, modified and deployed locally or regionally and be given stronger constitutional backing. In all, evidence from this study demonstrated the resilience of Igbo Traditional Worship System even in the midst of culture clash and religious iconoclasm advanced by Christianity in Igboland, Nigeria..

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka Library and our interviewees for their cooperation throughout this study. We also thank Dr. Uche Okonkwo, who assisted the researchers with relevant books for this study.

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