

IGUE FESTIVAL IN EDO LAND

It is the time again. May we not forget our history as did the people of ancient SUMER. They are now forgotten in the pages of human history. MERRY XMAS AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR TO EVERYBODY.

IGUE FESTIVAL-part one

The Christians have XMAS, the Muslims have the FEAST OF RAMADAN, the Jews have the HANUKKAH, the African-American have the KWANZAA and the Edos have the IGUE FESTIVAL. If African American can invent and contrived a festival called Kwanzaa, it will be sad were the Edos to desert Igue Festival.

Inspite of all out Christian onslaught on IGUE FESTIVAL, it has waxed stronger and stronger over the years. But what is most astonishing and confusing to some christians and non-Edo speaking people ,is the fact that no matter how an Edo man preaches and embraces Islam and Christianity, he does not play with Igue Festival . It carries different names in other Edo-speaking areas with the exception of Benin City and its environ.

When an Edo man says he is celebrating IGUE FESTIVAL, what does he mean? Igue festival ushers in the new year for every Edo-speaking man before the incursion of the white man into his life. Igue emhasizes " the ritual of Head worship " by every Edo-speaking man. It takes place during this time of year. The Yorubas shares this notion with the Edo people. Bolaji Idowu in his book OLODUMARE , described it this way:

" Ori is the word for the physical head. To the Yoruba, however, the physical , visible Ori is a symbol of Ori-Inu--the internal head, or the inner person. And this is the very essence of personality. In the belief of the Yoruba, it this ori that rules , controls and guides the life and activities of the person.....Ori in its totality is an object of worship. There are two reasons for this. First, as it is essence of personality , it must be kept in good condition so that it may be well with the person. Secondly, one must be on good terms with it, so that it may favour one."

Describing an offering to the Ori, Idowu wrote: " To make an offering to the ori, the physical ori is the common emblem. Kola-nuts, fish, fowl, or animal victim may be offered. A piece of the kola-nut is stuck on the fore head " while the blood of the fowl or animal is smeared on it." Ori means UHUNMWUN in Edo language. When you substitute Ori with Uhunmwun, you are looking at Edo man's belief about his head. To the Edo man, it is the head that takes you through life journey. The head must be good to perform this life's journey. Interwoven with this, is the belief of the Edos in EHI-his second self-" The spiritual self that guides and protect the temporal self."

Igue Festival is also the time the Oba and some chiefs are involved in AGWE (fasting). We do not know how fasting came into Edo man's religious life. But it does takes place and the Oba goes into seclussion, not to be seen by visitors. It may have been a christian/muslim influnce more than 500 years ago. It could have started on its own or earlier.

When the Oba and his chiefs break the fast, they are ready to perform UGIE ERHA OBA-A ceremony honouring the Oba's ancestors. The Edos believe in ancestral worship and everybody joins the Oba in Ugie Erha Oba. The Edo man's belief, is in no way different from that of the Jews, when they call on the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. The ceremony

of the worship of the head-the real IGUE, of the reigning Oba takes place openly at this festival. . This is followed by that of the princes and princesses. This is rounded with up Ugie Edohia and Ugie Ewere three days later. The Enogies and any traditional ruler in the ancient kingdom, fixes their own dates in their respective domain after Ugie Ewere.

It is important to note that, it is this central point of the festival that the christians and some muslims have consistently tried to undermine. If they understood that their Holy Books emphazised that man is created in the image of God, they would have understood the Edo man's belief. There are no shrines, and no artifacts. It is nothing but an attempt by the Edo man to thank OSANOBUWA-OSANUDAZI-OGHENE-OGHODUA also identified as the creator God, the Alpha and the Omega, the Unmoved Mover for GUIDING " the MAN " through the vicissitudes of life.

The Edos do not use the Gregorian calendar when calculating the year. We use the moons. From the Igue festival of 1896, you can understand what it meant. The massacre of British troops at UGBINE on January 4th 1897, took place at the height of the festival of the year-1896. It is necessary at this point to explaln the meaning of the word UGIE. It simply means FESTIVAL. You can now understand that the Igue festival is made up of many festivals.

Before Ugie Edohia and Ugie Ewere comes Ugie Iron. This is a celebratory re-enactment of the conflicts between the Oba of Benin and the seven hereditary chiefs-the UZAMAS. The royalists were triumphant. Other historical incidents of the life of the Edos, such as the drowning of Oba Ehengbuda and the assasination of an Iyase of Benin on the directives of an Oba of Benin are re-enacted. The Ugie Iron -festival used to be separated from other festivals by 4 to 14 days. This is Edo history being taught publicly though songs and re-enactments. One hundred years ago, we had no school. We did not develop the art of writing. We wrote our history in re-enactments, songs, carvings and bronzes. The present day Igue festival is a shadow of its former glory. Between 1897 and 1914, it was not celebrated. Oba Ovonramwen was entombed by human security network of the British agent, Sir Ralph Moor at Calabar. At this time in 1899, Iyase OKIZI was the de facto Oba of Benin and not Chief Agho Obaseki. General Ologbosere have been captured and executed by the Biritish soldiers. The guerrilla warfare led by General Ologbosere had lost steam after the battle of Okemue. The crown Prince Aiguobasimwin, later Oba Eweka II, was on the run with his own military batallion. The Esans (Ishan) were still resisting British rule especailly Irrua and Uromi. The Enogie of Uromi had made it known to the British Resident that, he had not sufficiently explained to him, what they have done to Oba Ovonramwen.

Iyase Okizi, was an Edo patriot and soldier, who organised the defence of Ekiti land against the Ibadans. At his defence in 1897 trial after Benin fell, he was more concerned with Yoruba soldiers fighting on the side of the British. Some of these soldiers he had trained in the art of warfare while he was in Yoruba land. He did not deny his involvement in the massacre of 1897. In fact, he gave the order to General Ologbosere, to use all means possible to prevent the white man, from making it to Benin through Ughoton. When the British soldiers showed their faces, he gave the order to attack. Since he was not physically on the scene of battle, the British agent could not convict him. On him then rested the organisation of a civil administration. He became the leader of the Native Administration. He started building a new palace for himself, having been told Oba Ovonramwen was not coming back. He soon got involved in a running battle with other chiefs especially the royalist and the Briitish agents. He died suddenly in

his sleep in the early days of 1900 without spending one night in his new palace.

Igue festival came back with the restoration of the monarchy in 1914. Chief Agho Obaseki, the right hand man of Oba Ovonramwen was now the Iyase of Benin. The Christians quickly moved in on both of them. Chief Agho was converted to Christianity. Oba Eweka II refused to celebrate Igue festival of 1916/17. Then Influenza epidemic struck in 1918 in the after math of the WORLD WAR 1. Thousands of Edo-speaking people died as a result of the epidemic. The Edos blamed it on the non-observance of Igue festival . Law and order almost broke down in Benin City as the common man went rioting. The Governor had to send troops down to Benin to restore order. The Governor was furious and was bent on punishing Oba Eweka II for causing such a disturbance. A Commission of Inquiry was set up ostensibly aimed at Oba Eweka II.

At the hearing, Oba Eweka II turned the table on the British Administration. He laid the blame of non-observance of Igue Festival on the three people:

- a) The Resident for supporting and encouraging Chief Agho Obaseki to convert to Christianity
- b) The Christians for converting his Iyase-the Prime Minister.
- c) Chief Agho Obaseki for converting to an alien faith while holding on the highest traditional office in Edo land.

" I can not celebrate Igue Festival without my Iyase. When you took my Iyase away, you took Igue festival with him," Oba Eweka II was reported to have told the Commission of Inquiry. The Commission, in view of other complaints, many of them false, recommended that Chief Agho Obaseki be stripped of his titles and office. It was leaked to the old man, who had gathered a lot of enemies since 1897, when Oba Ovonramwen was taken into captivity from chief Agho Obaseki's house. The very night the report left Benin en route to the Governor in Lagos, Chief Agho Obaseki died. THAT IS THE POWER OF IGUE FESTIVAL ON THE EDO PEOPLE.

The present format of Igue festival is very different from that of 1896. The Igue itself-where the Oba perform the head worshipping ritual used to be hidden from the public. When the Christians and the enemies of the monarchy continued to accuse Oba Eweka II of human sacrifices, he decided to open it to the public. Some of the walls at Ugha Ozolua were pulled down.

Oba Akenzua II reorganised it into a fourteen day period. That is what we have today.

We do not know when Igue festival started. It has been celebrated continuously for the past 600 years. We do know that European travellers and missionaries have written about it from 1600's. According to Alan Ryder in his book, " Benin and the Europeans", the Spanish Capuchin Missionaries were in Benin City, on August 10, 1651 and had problem having an audience with the Oba. They came during the Igue festival of 1651. Here is how Father Felipe de Hajar's described what he saw:

" The chief men of the city who, the natives say , number more than two thousand , were entering the palace, all wearing the various costume appropriate to the ceremony. They went in until they filled the four courtyards of the palace., and as it was now one o'clock and the palace was crowded and we entered the first court yard. Among those who were watching us was a venerable old man who, by outward appearance , seemed veritable St. Peter. He made a sign that we should follow him. We were amazed because

we had never seen him before that moment, and also because the negroes had always taken care that we should not see the sacrifices. In the end we went with the old man from one court yard to another until we reached the last one where, of his own accord, he told us to stand under the gallery of the courtyard. In the middle of the gallery we found a table on which lay the scimitars that were used to decapitate five men and five animals of every species found in that country. They performed their ceremonies, finished their cries; then the great men started to dance; and the King with them, making a turn of the courtyard so that they caught sight of us."

The Oba of Benin referred to here is probably Oba Ahenzae (1641-1661A.D), the Oba who refused to see any white man, on the ground that an oracle had predicted that, a Benin Oba would die in the hands of the white man. The Spanish Capuchin Missionaries were promptly expelled from Benin City, for seeing what they were not supposed to have seen. They were dumped at Warrigi (modern Warri) and warned never to return to Benin City

The Dutch traders have also left some documents for us. Alan Ryder again quotes , A Raems writing to H Hertog on October 22 1736. Both of them were members of the Dutch Trading Company based in Benin. Raems was reported to have " witnessed a parade of Oba's wives, which pleased him far more than the spectacle of the ceremonies performed for Oba's father (Ugie-Erhoba)" Ugie Erhoba is Edo man's equivalent of a memorial/remembrance service of the western world. The Oba on the throne at this time is probably Oba Akenzua I(ca 1713-1735 A.D) Igue Festival have been here for about a thousand years. It will be here for many years. It is heart and soul of Edo nationalism.

The rituals for celebrating Igue, varies from place to place within the Edo-speaking world. The economic status of the individual also play a role into what is used or how it is done.

Basically, the following are a MUST no matter your status:

- a) Kolanuts: This is easy to get even in USA.
- b) Coconut- all split, washed up and salted-arranged in a bowl-easy to get in USA. The juice is saved in a cup.
- c) A live animal-a chicken (rooster), a goat or a cow. (Where a live animal is not available, use an already prepared one from the grocery store). Blood is the essential requirement in this ritual and because it will be difficult to get a live animal in the USA, just invoke the presence of blood when you say your prayers. For example, you can say the following:

"Almighty God of creation, the God of our fathers and mothers, we have before you the following (name them one by one). These cooked animals once had blood. It has been shed when they were being prepared for food. Then thank God for keeping your head on top of your neck in the midst of all the travails of life. Beg Him for good luck for the New Year. AND POUR YOUR HEART OUT TO THE ALMIGHTY MERCIFUL GOD called

various names-Jehovah, Yahweh, Jesus Christ, OSANOBUWA, OGHODUA, OGHENE(by the Edos) Olodumare, Chineke, Allah etc.

d) Some smoked-dried-fish.

e) Palm Wine, or just plain wine, spirits-gin, whiskey, rum or just SODA

f) A piece of WHITE CHALK

HOW TO DO IT STEP BY STEP:

1) For the free Edo man or citizen, the chief priest for this ritual is the head of the family or the oldest in the group, if it is a group ritual. The royal family has priests performing this ritual. They are headed by the CHIEF ISEKHURE OF BENIN. He touches his forehead and that of other members of his family or friends, who have gathered to observe the ceremony with him, invoking the name of the Almighty God.

2) He prays with all the items present kola nuts, coconuts etc putting a small piece of each item on the floor marked by a white circular mark. This white circular mark symbolizes the presence of the CREATOR GOD in the midst of those gathered-that the Almighty God is as clean and transparent as a white chalk.

3) He touches his forehead, his chest , shoulders and that of others present with white chalk and blood (If available by slaughtering a live animal there and then). It is the presence of live animals and blood that have led some IGNORANT and CONFUSED Christians into believing that Satan is being worshipped. It is important to note that the PRESENCE OF BLOOD is CENTRAL to all known religious faith in the world. In Christianity, salvation is anchored on the shedding of the BLOOD OF JESUS CHRIST AT CALVARY. The sound of IGUE AWENYEN is heard from every throat as the prayers are said. It becomes a song:

"Awenyen Awenyen

awenyen

Igue awenye O

Igue Awenye O

Igue Awenye O

Igue Awenye O

Awenyen Awenyen

Awenyen.

4) Kola nuts and coconuts are now passed round. Individuals are allowed to say personal prayers if they wish to, at this point as they give their tiny pieces of the kola nuts and coconuts back to the performing priest, when their prayers are done. These little pieces are put on the floor, in the white circular mark.. .a piece of meat, fish or a sprinkled wine is also put there. THAT IS FOOD FOR THE ALMIGHTY GOD. Since we do not know the abode of the Almighty, everlasting and all knowing God, we just put the

food on the floor. Some tiny pieces are taken out and thrown outside to the keep evil spirits away from the house . The Almighty God has to eat first and the rampaging evil spirits have to be kept at bay. Individuals can now eat their pieces of kola nuts and coconuts, drink wine, eat snacks or what ever is put out there.

5) Story telling and songs now take over form here. Family tales are told and retold. Laughter reverberates everywhere. Exploits, conquests, defeats and good news are reported. THE NEW YEAR HAS COME!!!

ISELOGBE, EDO!!!!

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