

**THE RE-AWAKENING OF THE WORSHIP AND VENERATION OF A
MISINTERPRETED DEITY *EKWENSU* AMID THRIVING CHRISTIANITY
IN OBOLLO, ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA**

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Abstract

The worship and veneration of ekwensu deity is normally a yearly ritual among Obollo people of the northern Igbo sphere. Formally the intrusion of Christianity in Obollo made the deity to become infamous as against how it was extolled in the primordial culture of the Obollo people. Succinctly there became a sudden re-awakening of the worship and veneration of this deity which formally suffered extinction amid thriving Christianity in the area. It is this sudden re-awakening of the people's culture amid Christian dominated group such as Obollo that this work is out to investigate. Many Christians of Obollo extraction claim that the deity ekwensu, in their understanding, is the same with the Christian devil or satan and should not be reckoned with. Those who embrace these views are mainly Christians. Even among academics of religion, one can still observe this deportment. The study adopted the phenomenological research approach and made use of descriptive research design which also involved the use of data from primary and secondary sources, in its method of data analysis. The study reveals that ekwensu, represents a deity in Obollo and it is not the biblical devil, it reveals the worship and veneration of the deity among the people, among other things it reveals the spots where ekwensu was worshiped during onwa-assa festival and masquerade and forest dedicated to ekwensu. It is also evident that Christianity had somewhat a tremendous impact on the people's culture which formally engendered the extinction of ekwensu deity.

Keywords: re-awakening, veneration, Igbo deity, ekwensu, Obollo

Introduction

Unsurprisingly, some people from Obollo having embraced Christianity through the effort of the western missionaries may have been inducted to misconceive *ekwensu* a deity among the people as the devil. The words satan and *ekwensu* are often used interchangeably by Obollo people be they Christians or traditionalists of the area. Exponent of the above assertion are by and large Christians. They

understand *ekwensu* as the devil and attribute all forms of malice to it. Even among intellectuals of religion, one can still observe this predisposition. This is clearly evidenced in Nwala (2010:171) who posits that “*ekwensu* the devil is purely a malevolent spirit”. Nwala’s position was further disputed by Opata (2005:9), who holds that “*ekwensu* is not a conceptual equivalence of the Christian devil”. While Opata, held that “*ekwensu* is a spirit and spirits are non-corporeal and are disembodied beings”. Onoyima (2013:12) states that “*ekwensu* (satan) is an angelic being who out of pride and rebellion was chased down to earth”. In a contrary view, Ndiokwere (1990:26) sees *ekwensu* from exclusively uncomplimentary point of view and affirms that, “in the traditional African society suffering and death, as well as various type of misfortune, are attributed to the evil one, *ekwensu, ajo mmuo*”. He is responsible for all malicious acts”.

Succinctly Arinze (1970:56) agrees that *ekwensu* is the devil and thus describes *ekwensu*; “as the spirit of the dead people, called *Akalogoli* that is reckless individuals, *Ndi Ajo Mmuo* (bad spirits) or *umu ekwensu* (Devil’s Children)”. In like manner, the views of Oguejiofor (1996:83) are also in sharp contrast to the above opinion, he claims that, “*ekwensu* guides the Igbo community and is invoked during warfare”.

The views of Arinze about *ekwensu* suggest that it is evil and if one should go by such assertion then, the numerous references to *ekwensu* as a warlord and god of fertility which is venerated among different Igbo group should be thrown overboard. Arinze’s position is not in conformity with the views of those who affirm that “*ekwensu* is not evil and ascribe good qualities to *ekwensu*. Ebelebe (2009: par. 14) affirms that; “*ekwensu* is an Igbo deity with a convoluted modern identity. Among the Christian Igbo, this deity is misrepresented as the Christian “Devil” or satan and is seen as a force which places itself opposite to that of *Chukwu*”. Udoye, (2011) in turn avers that *ekwensu* represented the spirit of war among the Igbo, invoked during times of war and banished during peace time to avoid its influence in inciting bloodshed in the community, warriors set up shrines to *ekwensu* to help war efforts. It therefore follows that if *ekwensu* is invoked during wars and it has shrines in some places in Igbo land, then the reference to *ekwensu* as opposing God (*Chukwu* in Igbo) is adjudged to be erroneous. According to Agozino (2010) as quoted by Opata (2005), “the credibility of this statement, is based upon the finding of old shrines dedicated to the worship of *ekwensu*’s spirit as well as the recounting of old oral stories which depicts the character of *ekwensu*”. The views of Ezeanaji Ugwu (interview 2020)

lay more credence to the opinion of Agozino as he helped the researchers to explore shrines and forests dedicated to the adulation of *ekwensu*.

It is against this backdrop of mix-up that one can observe the interplay between Christianity and African Traditional religion and the problem of misrepresentation of the two terms in the different religion which led to the extinction of the worship and veneration of the deity in the area under study.

This work therefore, is motivated by the observed re-awakening of the worship and veneration of *ekwensu* deity amid thriving Christianity in Obollo. Many people of Obollo origin recently resorted to the worship and veneration of *ekwensu* held resolutely to their understanding of *ekwensu* as warlord and a superhuman deity while many others, believe that *ekwensu* is a matching of the Christian devil/satan. The study adopted phenomenological research approach and made use of descriptive research design which also involved the use of data from primary and secondary sources, in its method of data analysis. The research will further help to unveil the real concept of *ekwensu* in Obollo. The study will critically discuss shrines, names, ceremonies and festivals dedicated to *ekwensu* and also look at the impact of Christianity in the culture of the Obollo people. The work will help reverse the impression of Christians and non-Christian about *ekwensu*.

Activities and perception of *ekwensu* in the Tradition of Obollo

In the area understudy, people have a contradictory view of *ekwensu* some people perceive the deity *ekwensu* to be entirely evil but in spite of this, many writers also see *ekwensu* as a deity who should be adjudged of playing a double standard of good and evil. It is with regards to this, that Ekwunife (1995) adds that:

For an outsider the dual and complementary role of *ekwensu* may seem meaningless but not for the traditional Igbo people, this complementary dualistic conception has implications at the cosmological level of Igbo thought with this perception, good and bad are seen as co-existing in the same realities, creativity and destructiveness may be achieved by the same agencies.

With the position of Ekwunife the dual nature of *ekwensu* is obvious because it wields the powers to do good and evil depending on the occasion of its duty. Egharevba (1971:23) affirms that, "*ekwensu* is however, known to act as the spirit

of violence, the patron and god of warriors. The views of Isichie (1997) compliments the above clarification, he rightly posits that “the primary aim of *ekwensu* is to aid the acquisition of wealth and its ceremony is characterized by the display of wealth and people enjoy the result of their hard work and military success and victories”. Metuh (1981:222) proffers an elucidation to re-establish *ekwensu*’s original meaning in dual perspective that is, in time of war and in time of peace. He explains that *ekwensu* is capable of causing disaster in the community during peace time, its activities bring misfortune, and in this circumstance, he is regarded as an evil spirit, however at wartime, his activities are propitious and he is invoked as a superior spirit. Nevertheless, the potency of *ekwensu* to coalesce forces is a reality in Obollo. For Ugwuoke Godwin (interview 2020) *ekwensu* is a most venerated deity in Obollo and its high merit exceedingly renowned as perceived by the people. Ugwuoke further holds that some indigenes of Obollo are known to resort to shrines committed to *ekwensu* in time of adversity for supplication but due to the incursion of missionaries to Obollo the knowledge and influence of *ekwensu* became shallow as it is now juxtaposed with the biblical satan. Despite westernization, recently there has been upsurge in the people’s interest to awaken ceremonies attached to the *ekwensu* deity. The festival of *ekwensu* is still celebrated in Obollo every year in a ceremony designated as *onwa asaa* usually held between the months of July and August though this dating may vary according to the communities in Obollo. This is clearly evidenced in the word of Eze Raphael who supports that Umu-Itodo Obollo and other Obollo communities do not celebrate *ekwensu* deity on the same date because of the message of the threat of inversion by Benue people they Umu-Itodo people postponed their date of the ceremony in order to be battle ready for the threat of inversion while the other clans of Obollo celebrated the deity. This difference is still observed till date. According to Eze Benard (interview 2018) *ekwensu* spirit still oversees the affairs of the people who are committed to it, irrespective of their religious affiliations or modern day life as Christians”. It is pertinent to note that *ekwensu* to the people of Obollo is seen as a spirit that possesses dual characteristics of doing good and evil. This is evidenced in the various opinions of some authors as stated above. Below is a pictorial evidence of the forest where *ekwensu* is worshiped in Obollo.



Woods and spots dedicated to *ekwensu* at Obollo. Photo credit: author

The worship and veneration of *ekwensu* in Obollo

Although many negative thoughts and allusion have defined *ekwensu* among the Obollo people, one thing that stands thought through is that the positive activities of the traditional deity (*ekwensu*) according to the people knows no bound. Ezeme Anthony (interview 2016) submits that in the primeval history of the people of Obollo, there is ubiquitous belief in *ekwensu* and the worship of *ekwensu* is predominant among the people. Onah Augustine (interview 2016) aligns himself with the views of Opata (2005) and agrees that *ekwensu* is a good spirit of war for Obollo people; the worship of *ekwensu* is mainly during the new yam festivities. This may juxtapose *ekwensu* with baal the fertility god of the canaanites. *Ekwensu* is seen as a warlord and a god of fertility normally worshiped during new yam festivals. The views of Umeh (1999:200) corroborates this opinion when he avers that; "*ekwensu* the eagle spirit of war victory glides down the earth with its countless victories at war". Going by Umeh's opinion, Augustine Odo (interview 2018) agrees that *ekwensu* is a spirit in charge of war and it is celebrated during *onwa asaa* (seventh native month) festival in Obollo. If this is true, then the reverse of semantic and the juxtaposition of *ekwensu* with the devil is elusive. The Biblical narratives which ascribe war qualities to Lucifer according to Douglas (2009) is in the Bible where the angels of God engaged satan in a fierce battle and expelled him from heaven. But the *ekwensu* in this context as conceived by the Obollo people and supported by Okpe Emmanuel (interview 2018) is a deity of war appeased by the people and revered in the area under study. To buttress the fact that *ekwensu* is a venerated deity known among the Igbo land, Opata (2005:36) submits that, "During the era of active inter group war between Obukpa and some neighbouring communities; Obukpa had made

for themselves a potent *ogwu* (juju) which helped the people to be victorious at wars fought". Also Eze Elias (interview 2021) holds that, "*ekwensu* was used by Obukpa in their fight against Orba people of Udenu Local government area over a land dispute at Obukpa hill". It can be observed that for some people of Obollo origin, to be victorious at war; they must worship and appease the deity in charge of war (*ekwensu*) this happened during the war between Ikem and Obollo people and through the veneration and worship of *ekwensu* the people of Obollo emerged victorious. Mba Godwin (interview 2017) further states that the Obollo people of Udenu Local Government Area are said to have fought wars with the people of Benue State as a result of boundary dispute. The Obollo people became victorious because of the company of the traditional deity *ekwensu* and *awoma* a female deity in Obollo. The worship and veneration of *ekwensu* before any war is a sacrosanct event. The worship and veneration of *ekwensu* is predominant in Obollo. Obollo comprises of Obollo-Afor, Obollo-Eke, and Obollo-Etiti. *Ekwensu* is predominantly adored during *onwa asaa* (Seventh Month). This is in conformity with the views of Achebe (1958), Basden, (1982), Mbiti (1969), and Ugwu (2014) who agrees that some festivals held in commemoration of ancestors are still in vogue in some part of Igbo land. For Eze John (interview 2018) the *Igo ekwensu* (worship of *ekwensu*) was normally performed at the shrine of ancestors this is usually championed by the family head and the rituals were performed to strengthen the god of fertility, god of war (*ekwensu*) and the god that guards against infidelity (*nna*) within the female folk. Ugwu Augustine (interview 2017) avers that rituals and sacrifice were made to *ekwensu* the god of war and fertility gods of Obollo people. The claim beyond is indicative that *ekwensu* has shrines and is worship as a deity and not satan/devil as most proponents of the Igbo Bible suggests.

Below is a pictorial representation of *ekwensu's* shrine at Obollo Afor.



***Ekwensu's* shrine at Umu-ezejor Obollo Afor:** Photo credit: field assistant

The above pictorial evidence is to buttress the fact that *ekwensu* is venerated and adored at umuezejor Obollo. Nnadi Clement (interview 2018) corroborates this opinion and maintains that “it is a common belief in Obollo community that *ekwensu* is the god of fertility in terms of agriculture and hence its festival at a time when harvest is at its peak”. The new yam festival also falls within this period. At the seventh native month, “*onwa asaa*” seven native weeks were usually counted from the first sight of the moon and the nearest “*Eke*” market day to the seventh native week is declared the “*onwa asaa*” festival. According to Eze Theophilus (interview 2017) the second day after the “*onwa asaa*” festival is said to be the “*afor ekwensu*”, that is the second and the last for *Akatakpa* masquerade outing on *afor* market day. Ezeme Ugwuanyi (interview 2019) asserts that the market day is a day of celebration which is done annually and which is also the festival of *ekwensu* (known as *egba ekwensu*). All the festivity or celebration and sacrifices are dedicated to *ekwensu*. Odo Joseph (interview 2017) agrees that *ekwensu* is worshipped at *onwa asaa* in Obollo Afor Here the worship of *ekwensu* heralds the end of *onwa asaa* (seventh native month) and at this site of the worship all the male who partook in the “*onwa asaa*” *Akatakpa* masking is expected to mount his last used cane at the red anthill in the environment and also sacrifice some money there. For Ugwuodo Paul (interview 2017) the significance of this is that the said individual by dropping some money is set free from the influence of *ekwensu* that protected him throughout the “*onwa asaa*” and *Akatakpa* masking period. On the penultimate day to *Idu ekwensu* (the day of appeasing the *ekwensu* to ward off its influence), the eldest man of Umu-Onah collects the cane, makes proper sacrifice and rituals according to the tradition of Obollo and incinerates the cane in order to ward off the negative influence of *ekwensu* and for *ekwensu* to retire to its fold. The worship of *ekwensu* in Obollo is marked by real outing of different masquerades good and bad to exemplify the double standard played by *ekwensu*. The pictorial representation below shows some masquerades and its followers carrying canes to fulfill their obligation as traditionalist and advocates of the worship and veneration of *ekwensu* on the day of Afor *ekwensu* (*ekwensu*'s market day) in Obollo.



Cane rituals on the day of Afor *ekwensu* : photo credit author

Akatakpa Uturu: this brand of masquerade is usually black and there is the spirit of *ekwensu* in this masquerade called *okaranabo* which makes it to strike people with cane and it has charm to neutralize the problems caused by such malicious behaviour. Ugwu (1999:101) adds that “this masquerade is very violent; it beats people and collects money by force from people.



Photo of Uturu Akatakpa. Photo Credit: Authors

Another great masquerade is the *Owegara akakakpa*. This masquerade has many followers and is believed to be masquerade of the elders. They follow the masquerade with heavy drumming and flute of different magnitude. *Owegara* masquerade is well vested in minstrels' pithy saying and words of wisdom known for its ecstatic beauty and proud movement. Below are the pictures of *Owegara akakakpa*.

Photo of *Owegara Akatakpa* credit: Author



To buttress that *ekwensu* possesses dual nature as stated by scholars, Ugwu Nnajofofor (interview 2017) opines that the *Akatakpa ekwensu* has a *juju* (*ogwu*) called *okaranabo*. This *juju* is made up of two ram horn with a heavy diabolic substance tied on the centre of the ram horn. The ram horn signifies that the ram is a powerful fighter and the *akatakpa* should possess its power. For Onah, James (interview 2017) the *juju* instigates the *akatakpa* to violence and also neutralizes the effect of such violence. Eze Peter (interview 2018) further explains that the interpretation is that one ram horn is a bad force designed to make trouble while the other one is a good force ever ready to neutralize its force and this goes down well with Ekwunife (1995); Metuh (1987) and Opata (2005) who believe that *ekwensu* possesses dual characteristics of doing good and evil. Below is the image of *okaranabo ekwensu*.



Photo of *okaranabo ekwensu*. Photo credit to the Author

If the activities of *ekwensu* in the Obollo Northern Igbo sphere were widely known and recognised in the contemporary and primordial history of people, why would such deity of great substance suffer extinction? Although this question may seem rhetoric, what stands clear is that the problem of translation and misinterpretation may have dealt with the deity under study and intentionally diminished its popularity amid the people of the area under study. In is with regards to this assertion that this research work seeks to x-ray the impact of Christianity on the culture of Obollo people.

The Impact of Christianity on Obollo culture

Christianity has been adjudged to have dealt a huge blow to the culture and religion of the people of Obollo people but due to the fact that the culture of the people as it appears is an obstinate reality, it has refused to quit and hence the survival of some of the aspects of the people's culture and ways of life overtime. According to Eke (1985) as quoted in Uwaegbute (2021:5) who asserts, that it has been argued by the Igbo Church historians that it was from Eke, between 1921 and 1960 that other church missionaries and the Roman Catholic church started spreading to towns like Enugu, Nsukka, Agwu, Udi and Nkanu. Uwaegbute further asserts that right from onset; Christianity's interaction with the cultural practices of the Igbo people was mostly very strained, direct antagonism and condemnation of the people's cultural practices, especially their traditional religion. In conformity with the above assertion Eze (2004:23) suggests that:

They also impose a new meaning on some of the existing construct notably *ekwensu* which in the true Igbo religion is the deity that repels, ward off or otherwise frustrate evil decisions. Not finding the equivalent of the concept, of satan, in the host society, the Christian missionaries adopted the name of this anti evil deity but reversed its semantics.

“They” as used in the context of the above extract suggests that it is the missionaries who introduced Christian religion to the Obollo people and made the traditional *ekwensu* to assume the same feature with the Christian Lucifer and hence the misrepresentation of *ekwensu* deity and the extinction of its virtues and veteran characteristics at war. In spite of Christian dominance in some part of Igbo land, it is evident that some people in the area under study still worships *ekwensu* and appreciate its activities in their lives but what stands clear is that Christianity and western type of education associated with it reversed the original meaning of *ekwensu*. This is evidenced in the views of Anugwom (2002:72) who argues that, “western education led to the abandonment of certain traditional institutions and values such as those based on superstition magic and charms”. General Eze Godwin (interview 2020) agrees that “the Christian messenger schema drastically affected some culture and tradition of Obollo people. Most excruciating is their tendency to declare the Igbo culture as satanic and the juxtaposition of Igbo gods and deities with the evil. Apparently, Christianity makes the Igbo man of Obollo origin see things differently from their traditional worldview and they now describe the activities and worship of *ekwensu* as satanic. But from the array of opinion sampled and collected about *ekwensu*, it is obvious that *ekwensu* is seen as a war veteran and a fertility deity among the people of the area under study. This is clearly obvious in the views of Ugwuomaga Bernard (interview 2016) who observes that, it is obvious that the people of Obollo were totally oblivion of biblical devil before its introduction to them, which later degenerated to the derogation of the deity ‘*ekwensu*’. The above exposition is seen in the people’s total denial of the presence of any alternative deity opposing *Chukwu* (the great God). Okpe Emmanuel (interview 2018) suggests that it is the ability of *ekwensu* to induce violence which was one of its dual attributes that made the missionaries to juxtapose *ekwensu* with the biblical Lucifer/satan. A situation supposed to be an overturn of *ekwensu*’s denotation.

Conclusion

In the first instance, the set objective of the research was unambiguously spelt out. This research work involves the quest into the concept of *ekwensu*, throw light on the mode of worship and veneration of *ekwensu* in Obollo also pointing at forests and spots dedicated to the worship of *ekwensu* and among other things, discuss the impact of Christianity on *ekwensu* deity in Obollo. In the study it was apparent that, the linking of *ekwensu* with the biblical Lucifer is termed a great mistake made by the Missionaries in their bid to Christianize and westernize the Obollo people. They dislodged the early Christian converts from their traditional

religion and got them acquainted with the new religious idea and worldview that is totally alien to the people and thus minimized their traditional understanding of deities such as *ekwensu* the god of war in Igbo cosmology. To this end, *ekwensu* is now viewed by the people as equivalence of Christian devil (Lucifer). This misrepresentation is illusive because *ekwensu* in the Igbo thought is the god of war and fertility among the people of Obollo. Its virtue is adorned and felt all over among people who are committed to it in Obollo. It is unthinkable for a deity which is celebrated in Obollo cosmology to become a sole antagonist of God in Christian worldview. This is not also true as *ekwensu* is of the Igbo origin while the sole antagonist of God is Lucifer (Satan). In addition, in Obollo there is total absence of a being, which is in total opposition to God and mankind greatest enemy. However, what cannot be denied out rightly is the existence of some ambivalent and malevolent beings in the tradition of Obollo such as the spirits of witches, mermaid spirit, ogbanje (born to die children). These spirits constitute terror in Obollo sphere but are not a sole equivalent of Lucifer. In all it could be adjudged that associating *ekwensu* with the devil has its origin from the translation of the Christian bible and the missionary derogation of deities and not necessarily that *ekwensu* is the Devil.

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