

**ON THE QUESTION OF CULTURE: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE  
ODO AND EZUGU CULTS IN ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA**

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DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.10452.14720](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.10452.14720)

**Abstract**

*This paper is an exploratory and critical examination of the Odo and Ezugu Cult Saga that blew open in some parts of Enugu State at the dawn of this decade. The paper notes that the cult saga, especially that of Odo, is nebulous and ubiquitous, and could be considered from many angles-culture, religion, cultism, economy, politics, legalism, etc. The paper, however, addresses the claim that Odo is a culture, even “our culture”. It laments the fact that many Africans remember their culture only at the appearance of masquerades. The paper argues that even if the Odo masquerading and masquerades were part of the people’s culture at inception and invention, they should have been reformed to make room for contemporary, historical needs. It argues that it is precisely the failure of the Odo adherents to understand that culture is a dynamic, human creation that led to the conflicts and crisis that engulfed many societies as a result of the desire by many members of these societies to seek and make alternative rational choices. The paper addresses the Odo cult saga as an example of how African Philosophy should constructively engage pristine, autochthonous beliefs in order to see how they can (possibly) be relevant for contemporary life. The paper considers the philosophical basis for the emergence of the Odo cult and sees it as a great irony that a culture that emerged to solve a problem, with all its artistry and creativity, could not creatively transit from its original philosophy to address and reform into a new need. The paper blames this on the traditional authoritarianism of the African past. It ends with a random expression of lessons that could be learned from both the emergence of the Odo cult and the crisis that trailed its failure to undertake what Kwasi Wiredu calls “critical and reconstructive self-definition”.*

**Introduction**

Philosophical works or treatise have always, down the ages, had to reflect the expediencies and exigencies of the times. These works may be sophisticated or simplistic, bulky or small, metaphysical and ontological or positivistic and empirical, metaphorical/satirical or direct. However, any reflective reader would always know that they are addressing concrete, real-life, existential challenges of man. That is why Plato’s *The Republic* can only be understood

against the background of the Peloponnesian War, which, according to Desmond Lee (in his "Introduction" to his translation of *The Republic*), "began just before [Plato's] birth, lasted until he was twenty-three and ended in defeat and humiliation for Athens, and in the break-up of the confederation which she had led since the Persian Wars..." (p.xiv). Was *The Prince* of Nicolo Machiavelli not a product of the crisis within the Italian cities of his day? The same applies to the *Social Contract* of Jean Jacques Rousseau, Hobbe's *Leviathan*, Locke's *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, Marx/Engel's *Communist Manifesto*, just to mention a few.

This paper beams a philosophical light on the controversial Odo and Ezugu Cults that are replete in towns, villages and societies in Enugu State, Nigeria. It reflects on an issue that has a complicated nexus that would involve discussions on culture, religion, economy, cultism, freedom, human rights, etc. The Odo and Ezugu cults may not sound too familiar to you the reader, but by the time their operations are x-rayed, you soon discover that they are similar to what you have either witnessed or heard about within your own African, Asian, Carribean or European environment, either in the distant or immediate past or recently.

I, therefore, write this piece, not just because I am a preacher, a scholar or an intellectual. Rather, I make my contribution because of two main reasons: my practical involvement in confronting the cults and my philosophical (phenomenological) orientations and convictions. Again, the furore generated by the "collapse" of the two cults in their haven, Neke, Isi-uzo L.G.A., Enugu State and the reactions of the high and mighty (former Governors, former Supreme Court Judges, Professors, etc), and the simultaneous love and hate expressed by the appearance of my two books on this matter, *Odo Cultism in Neke* (2002) and *Odo Occultism in Enugu State* (2005, hence forth, OOES in this paper), require that we ask: What is the hullabaloo all about? And why is there so much attention to the Odo Cult? These questions fall within the domain of philosophy.

The philosophical basis for this paper, therefore, is the fact that the Odo cult is baptized with the names "culture" (sometimes, "our culture") and "religion". This paper will focus on the "culture" dimension, while we leave the discussion on religion for another time. Indeed, the Odo cult can only be thoroughly discussed from one or two perspectives at the same time. And although my opposition to the Odo cult may have been fired by my (Christian) religious convictions, it is not circumscribed within the confines of Christianity. Infact, the 2005 book was written because I wanted to respond to my critics by telling them that one does not need to be an "Arch-Pope" to abhor almost all the activities of the Odo Cult. Philosophy demands answers, "reasonable reasons" for our

positions. And for Africa, the need for her philosophers to subject pristine beliefs to critical appraisal is germane. Conflicts, confrontations and clashes for change have become inevitable results of Christianity's appearance in most African Communities. But far and beyond these conflicts, we need to go beyond religion to provide a sort of "social philosophy" for our various societies. We need to provide our societies - both "GeneratioNow" and "GeneratioNext" - a basis for the reformulation, refounding and refundamentalization of the basic thoughts, beliefs, mores and institutions upon and through which we have existed over the decades and centuries, if we hope to remain relevant in a globalized world. We must question, interrogate and constructively engage our notions and conceptions of what constitute the "real".

It is true that modernity arose, via the spirit of science and the secularism that came with it, and claimed that it liberated the West from the monolithic hegemony of religious medievalism, but the dawn of postmodernism is questioning both the Science and Reason (rationality) upon which modernity had stood. Even though matters of faith are not amenable to direct scientific investigation, such barriers cannot be erected (is not erectable) against philosophy. Philosophy must investigate institutions, services, mores, belief-systems and convictions created by faith. There is no doubt that no matter how African traditionalists and/or Afro-centricists reject it, the enlightenment that we witness today against a romantic recourse to obsolete pristine traditionalism in Africa was brought about by Christianity in company of the virtues and values of education. A visit to Neke, the headquarter of the Odo cult, would reveal the refreshing mental and physical atmosphere created since the demise of the Odo Cult. In chapter 15 of *OOES* (titled "Development Enters as Odo and Ezugu Exit"), I had written about the definite benefits that had come to the community since the destruction of the two cults:

Now, when we talk about development entering and locating dwelling places in Neke at the capitulation of Odo and Ezugu, we are not merely talking about the appearance of the good things of life. When the Bible talks about the "blessings of God" that "makes rich" (Prov. 10:22), we must understand that the blessings are not the riches, they are not cars, houses, degrees, good roads, etc. The blessings are the "capacities", the "capabilities", the "enablements", etc that have the unlimited potential to produce not just riches but richness, enjoyable, unsorrowful riches!... The demise of Odo opened up the "spiritual" atmosphere in Neke. Odo and Ezugu were like a combined siege, a black blanket over the town. Their

destruction was like breaking the walls that held a Dam. At release, the waters of liberation poured out with incredible velocity, watering the town in delight. The “death” of Odo signalled the automatic release of bright sunlight dazzling across the dark clouds. When a caged eagle is released, the soaring potential of such disentangle bird is almost difficult to imagine or quantify. That is Neke for you. The benefits and blessings of God to Neke since the year 2001 are multidimensional. While some are spiritual, others are religious. There are also political, economic, educational, and emotional as well as infrastructural gains. (p.196).

Vigen Guroian captures this type of atmosphere in a visit to Armenia, in the summer of 1990, after the break-up of the Soviet Union. In his paper, “The New Nationalism and the Gospel Witness: Western Tolerance Vs. Christian Repentance”, he writes that “we cannot expect to understand or influence events if our eyes pass over all of what is at stake in these lands, not only the fate of democracy but the ethos and faith of people who are struggling to reenter history after a long submersion in darkness and humiliation. The Churches will play an important role in sewing seeds of either discord or of peace. Let not our own secularity or even unbelief blind us to that force and all its possibilities” (p.303)

This paper would, therefore, discuss the meanings of culture, with a view to arguing that the Odo cult is no more a culture and that as a cult, it was a “secret” one. The paper also argues that a total abandonment of the Odo cult may not have been necessary but for the original claim that the masquerades are “Spirits”, and because of its intimidating and hypnotizing influence on the psyche of the people. The paper would conclude by pointing attentions to certain values of both the Odo cult itself, and its eventual collapse, that could be appropriated to enable us move the society towards a higher level of spiritual and social organization. However, the paper would take off proper by presenting the “gory story” of the Odo and Ezugu Cults. It is the belief that without this “tale”, the reader would not be able to follow the argument of re-appraisal, of reconstruction and the polemical attitude adopted by the author. The paper would, therefore, begin from what Kwasi Wiredu in his, “Post-Colonial African Philosophy: Some Comments” would call “expository and clarifying” and then proceed to become “reconstructive as well as evaluating our heritage in order to build upon it” (p.17). I approach this paper, therefore, not with a *disdain* for the Odo/Ezugu Cults, but with a *pain* for what they have cost society with their insistence to continue to discountenance contemporary needs and demands by holding on to what Wiredu has called, “regressive traditionalism” (Ibid., p.21).

After all, philosophy does and should indeed, interrogate culture! In his work, *Philosophy Interrogates Culture*, Isaac E. Ukpokolo writes that, "...the very idea of philosophical anthropology affirms the possibility of a uniquely philosophical inquiry about human nature and human phenomena such as culture. (p.7)

### **The Reasons behind the Demand for Re-Appraisal**

Something happened that led to the need to re-appraise the Odo Cult, first in Neke, and then later in several towns in Enugu State. The story of Odo began from the people of Neke. Anywhere there is Odo in Enugu State (even in some parts of Ebonyi State), they always acknowledge that the Odo in Neke is their progenitor. That is why even at Ngwo (the community that houses the capital city of Enugu State), there is a place called "*Onu Odo Neke*" (literally "The Temple of Odo Neke"). The people of Abor, Udi Local Government Area; Aku and Ukehe, in Igbo-Etiti Local Government Area, all in Enugu State agree that they owe their Odo tradition to Neke as well. The Odo activities are basically similar, except that in certain communities, there are degrees of "refinement", which one may not find in the classical Neke variant. For in Neke, there is no watering-down of any of the practices, ceremonies and procedures. Several decades ago, and having seen the level of lowering-of- standard in other Odo towns, the people of Neke had to compose a song used for celebrating the Odo festival. The song says: "*Igbo hara-ayi Odo; na-unu amaghi usoro Odo*" meaning: "Foreigners or strangers, leave Odo for us, for you people don't know the methods or procedures of Odo".

In Neke, a foreigner or non-Nekean is referred to as "Onye-Igbo", while in the classical Odo diction, such a person is called "Ahetugo".

The crisis that led to the clashes of this decade began proper in May, 2001. It was in that month that Christian leaders, having seen the darkness that was unleashed on the society between February 14 and 16, 2001, decided to meet the custodians of the Odo Cult to request that the activities that would mark the return of Odo to "the land of the spirits" (Una-Odo), be done in the night so as to at least reduce the level of the disruption of social life within the community. As I wrote in the book, *OOES*.

They knew the implications of their demand. But that did not deter them. For, indeed, it has never happened before! Odo in Neke has never been made to 'go' in the night! That's another way to undermine its all-embracing power and scope of influence. But that demand was enough. I have always maintained that it is a waste of

time negotiating with the forces of darkness, even though I believe that sometimes one may be compelled to inevitably hold consultations with some of its agents who do not know that they are being used! Christianity is purely a confrontation between two powers: Light and Darkness. However, technically and logically speaking, there is no contest between light and darkness; for where the former is, the latter cannot thrive. ... The idol worshippers considered the demand of the church, as presented by her leaders on behalf of the rest of society, as an affront! There was a disagreement and a deadlock. The 'going' of Odo was, however, postponed for the first time in history. Yet its adherents could not see the handwriting that the "finger of God" was writing. The tension in the land heightened! "What was going to happen?" was the question on everyone's lips. It was later fixed for the 26<sup>th</sup> of May 2001, the same day the Church fixed an inter-denominational crusade! Behold the cow and the knife! Who will go in for the kill? (p.107).

The failure of the Odo adherent to listen to the voice of reason, to make adjustment to societal needs, to realize that society cannot continue to move around in a circle, to see that the 400-year old conception of Odo as the absolute decider of societal respiration is being questioned, led to a clash and confrontation of unimaginable dimension. That clash re-vibrated across the globe in deed. For the news was on both local and international (print and electronic) media, including the CNN and BBC. The request of the Christian leaders, on behalf of the vast majority of the populace, was not even an expression of disdain or rejection of the activities of the Odo cult. It was simply a live-and-let-live demand. The demand was, unfortunately, seen as a questioning of the authority of the Odo (which was okay in any case) as well as a demand for why the procedure of Odo's "return to the land of the spirit" should ground society (which would have been a philosophically-necessary demand, but for the authoritarian nature of traditional African Societies).

Kwasi Wiredu has been very critical of traditional African Culture for this authoritarian orientation. He observes that this authoritarian orientation can be explained by the nature of traditional African Societies. In his, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, he argues that "traditional society was founded on a community of shared beliefs in the wisdom of the age, the sanctity of chieftaincy and the binding force of the customs and usages of our ancestors" (p.4).

This paper feels that when an event in a community begins to attract the private and public comments of political leaders at the highest level, when the media gets agog and unleashes a blitz on an issue, when that matter gets to many Inspectors General of (Nigerian) Police, when over 5 cases (resulting from that same matter) appear both at the Magistrate and High Courts of a State, then an intellectual re-examination of that issue is not out of place. What I have decided to do in the section is, therefore, to flip-back and show the *reasons* behind the request made by Christians in Neke in May 2001. I do this by taking some excerpts from chapter 1 (“A Tale of Two Devilish Deities”) of my book, *Odo Cultism in Neke*. And without minding being branded “reductive”, I want to say that these excerpts are pointers to what happens in other towns in Enugu State, where the Odo and Ezugu Cults exist. But while the Odo Cult is basically called the same name, what the people of Neke call *Ezugu* may have other names in other communities – but the activities and practices would basically be the same: a collection of human skulls and ceremonies to, as it were, venerate the shrine. For example, in Ikem Community, Isi-Uzo L.G.A, Enugu State, their own Ezugu-like temple is called “*Amanama*” and the activities are just the same as you would find in Ezugu as described in the next session. You would not find the following lines amusing in this twenty-first century...

### **The Gory Story of Odo and Ezugu**

#### **Descendancy**

The people of Neke are said to have migrated from the Edemoga Area in the present Kogi State to the present place where Ogwash-Ukwu in Delta State is located. That is why one often hears people call them “Neke Ogbazhi”. Here “Ogbazhi” is an acculturation of the word “Ogwashi”.

The people that make up Neke community today were said to have, however, rebelled against the authority of the Oba of Benin in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, the Benin Empire was made up of what today we call Delta and Edo States and even beyond. This rebellion resulted in an attack by the Benin Monarch and consequently, a war ensued. The attack became unbearable and so, Neke people decided that it was time to go back to their original homeland. Like the Israelites in Egypt, they felt that it was time to go back to their Canaan land. But in that kind of war situation, they could not return unprepared and unequipped, especially bearing in mind the places they would pass through. In order to ensure their safety in the light of the prevailing circumstances, they had to think fast. God gave men wisdom and whatever they would use that wisdom for

would no longer be determined by Him. They are at liberty to employ their wisdom in whatever they would.

## **Odo**

The people of Neke were said to have decided that they would not procure normal masquerades that are made of clothing - as most other clans had done. They needed a masquerade that would be intimidating and scaring to behold. The people were also said to have felt that masquerades made with clothes cannot resist arrows, spears, machets and clubs, especially when inflicted at close range. The spears of palm trees are culturally used when people die and also used by some native doctors to cordon-off their premises. Its yellow colour makes it appear arresting while its fetish smell gives it an aura of other-worldliness. It is, therefore, this yellow-coloured spears of palm trees that the founding fathers of Neke used in preparing the Odo masquerade. This physical contrivance had never been seen or even used before by any people as a masquerade. So, its appearance instilled fear into the hearts of those with whom the people of Neke had to fight against.

To prepare just one Odo is a Herculean task. It takes times, energy and skill. In the middle of the night, when sane and normal human beings are resting from the stress inflicted by the day's struggles, young adherents of the Odo cult climb healthy palm trees in the bush (and even sometimes within the town) and with very sharp double-edged knives, noiselessly rip-off the spears. What they gather would be carried quietly to the Odo forest (**Uham**) for processing. These young men take great care to ensure that no traces are left either on the palm trees or around them, so that no woman or uninitiated person or stranger would suspect that any spears were removed.

Using the same sharp knives, these devotees strip off the fresh, yellowish leaves from the spears. Next, tough forest twinners and climbers are cut to be used in constructing the head and shoulder skeleton of the Odo-in-making. The processed yellowish leaves are tied and fixed on this skeleton. The length and bulk of any Odo masquerade depends on the height and strength of the man who would carry the competed product.

The head of the competed Odo is painted with various colours, ranging from red to black, blue and yellow. The ugliest of all the Odos is **Okurenkpume**, because its face is painted black. The name literally means. "Fire cannot consume stone". And it got that name because it was said to have been set ablaze during the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War, but it failed to burn. It was said to have acquired its



black face as a result of the fire. So, it used it to brag: that it was able to display itself during the war! The two flagships of the Odo deity in Neke carry many feathers on their chests, usually stuck there with the blood of chickens, goats and cows sacrificed to them. The head is also stuck with the long feathers from the tails and wings of sacrificed chickens. These dreaded Odo flagships are **Nchuma and Okurenkpume**. All other Odos (the lesser Odos) owe allegiance to these big two. Each of these Odos has its own messenger. For Okurenkpume, Ngbavuru is the messenger while Nchuma has Bakawu as its messenger.

### **Brutal secrecy**

The Odo cult operates one of the most sophisticated secret net-works that the world of demonism has ever known. Infact, the driving force of the Odo cult is the secrecy surrounding the procurement and manifestation of its masquerades. It is around this secret that the most-callous and barbaric activities of the Odo cult spring.

The masquerade that the human beings wear is said to have come from the spirit world. As a result, it is held in awe and many would gladly do anything for Odo as far as it is said that it was a pronouncement from the spiritual world. Everything must be done to preserve this secret; no cost is too much, no price is too high to pay, as long as the secret is kept intact!

Women, children and strangers (non-natives) are not admitted into the cult. Even male natives are not admitted until at such an age when the person would appreciate the value of jealously guarding the secret. Divulging any Odo secret is visited with instant DEATH! This death can be through brutal beheading, hanging, strangulation or poisoning using clandestine methods.

Any woman or non-native that is known to have got access to any of the Odo secrets is brutally killed with swiftness before she/he talks. This savage cruelty is also visited on the relations of the murdered victim if they as much as murmur or openly complain about it. Men had to stand still and watch the cult devotees strangle their own wives or even their own brother who disagreed with the cultists! Sometimes, they're given the charms to kill their own brothers! And they had better do it. It is unheard of for any victim to complain to security agents of the State. It is a deadly offense too! Death, arson, and other harms would await the reporter.

In those days, if a woman killed a scorpion, either at home or in the farm, the woman's husband would go and tell the cultists. They would come with one

Odo in the night and tell the woman to bring a piece of cloth, a cock, yams etc to be used in “burying” the scorpion! For Odo usually claims that the scorpion is its “son”. Of course, not knowing that it was her own husband that told them, the poor woman would quickly produce the items and then add some money to it. In the first place, it was the fear that the cultists would know eventually that would make the woman tell her husband her deed. But instead of protection, the poor, innocent woman would play into the chauvinist hands of her own husband.

To carry the Odo mask is a big task. And so, during the night, the cultists would not cover themselves with the Odo mask. They would carry it alright, but they would bring out their heads so as to take fresh air to avoid the obvious suffocation that usually results. This is why it is said that any woman or uninitiated person that sees Odo in the night would die! The person would not actually die! He or she will be murdered!

### **Language**

In order to be able to properly safeguard its secrets, the custodians of the Odo cult had to develop their own diction; infact, it is a language. And this is a language that no one else in the world can speak, except those that have access to the cult’s secrets. Not all the initiated males can understand the language unless they can diligently study it. The impenetrable secrecy guaranteed by the language makes the entire Odo activity very mysterious. Only the person carrying an Odo (ie, wearing an Odo-mask) is allowed to publicly speak it. The language is totally strange. On no account should anyone not wearing the mask speak the language, except inside the various Odo forests.

Usually when any Odo visits a family, it comes with a gang of devotees. And when it begins to speak, one of the devotees would be interpreting what it is saying to the people in the compound and to all the other people who would be listening. All things that would make Odo to be seen in human terms are removed. Thus, even to say that there are “3 or 4 Odos coming” is a taboo for the woman! The woman, during the afternoon and even when the Odo is dancing, is not permitted to stare thoroughly at it. This is done to prevent her from counting the toes and seeing that they are five - just like the human toes!

In order to prove the distinctiveness of the Odo language, I want to cite the following examples from English words. You reader can check whether the Odo language equivalence is from your own language. I challenge any reader to prove this claim wrong. Check out the following: woman (ahon), head (oji), hand

(njegere), heart (nguduma), Face (egedege), water (ogbam geregere), wine (otum geregere), stranger (ahetugo), meat (ajigbu), food, especially pottage (uputu), child (tete ebi), beat or hit hard (mie kpoo), gun (ode girigiri), cock (ikok), the list is endless. And like any other language that is alive and dynamic, when new words are needed, they are produced. When the Whiteman came and brought some new things, the following words entered the cult's lexicography: book (hachakpa) money-coins (gwegiri), money-note (hakpara), lorry (oya wuwuwu) sword (ogbugu), etc.

### **Paralyzing Harm**

The Army of Christ (AC), a group of non-denominational Christians of Neke, committed to the end of evil in the society, wrote that no one would really have been worried if the Odo cult and its patrons were making evil money without doing paralyzing harm to Neke and members of the Nigerian community at large. It is impossible to exhaust the havoc done by these agents of retrogressions without making this publication unbearably bulky. Only a few of the innumerable illegalities will suffice here.

(i) Deprivation of the Right of Movement

(ii) The cults members compel all women and non-natives (Christians included) not to come out of their premises between 7pm and 6am, in any year Odo roams about Neke. The only exception is if such a person would procure an initiated native male to shout "Ogbanedu"! meaning, "I am uninitiated". This is supposed to be a public acknowledgement that Odo holds sway over ALL persons in Neke.

(ii) Disruption of life: Mgbamike is one of the special feasts held in honour of Odo. It lasts for three consecutive days. During this period, Christians are marked for torture. Hordes of marauding young ruffians put on hastily made Odo masks known as 'ujeme', they assault Christians found outside their premises and often loot their property to obtain money for reckless orgies in alcohol and hard drugs. In the view of the Odo cult members, it is an affront for anyone to go to church, school or any activity not pertaining to Odo worship. Penalties could be death, maiming, or mass looting of property.

In 2001, one double-dealer who boasts of being a "catholic" (but in fact is not a Christian) had the audacity to publish a warning notice indicating to non-natives that for three days things would not be normal in Neke. In his recklessness and

over-confidence, he sent copies of his notice to both the police and Isi-Uzo Local Government Council Headquarters.

True to the plan to suppress Christians, a Senior Catholic male teacher was badly beaten by a gang of Ujemes for his failure to obey Odo's rule that Christians should not go to school.

**(iii) Una Odo:** On the days Odo finally disappears (two days in the year), no woman or non-natives (including Christians) is allowed after 10am to leave her premises until the next morning. No church business can take place outside the church building; none in the open church compound! No school can function!!! For any breach, there is no fine; the punishment is death!!! For during this period, the devotees line up stark naked, and walk around the town with lots of charms, talisman, etc. It's a twenty-first century horror!...

**(vi) Disfranchisement:** A new trend which members of the Odo cult used to adopt, in order to ensure that Christians do not participate in discussing important issues that affect the lives of all members of the community, is to schedule meetings to take place in Odo forests. They know that Christians cannot submit to attending meetings in such profane places. The consequence is that decisions affecting Christians are taken without their participation.

**(v) Public Officers:** As a result of the fear created in the minds of the members of the public, many employees of government and its agencies decline postings to Neke. They prefer to lose their jobs if it is inevitable rather than work in a community where Odo cultism subjects everyone to persistent insecurity of life and property. Students who are not natives of Neke refuse to attend schools in Neke where Odo cult has scared away competent teachers. Even students who are natives do all they could to transfer to Isi-Uzo Secondary School from the Community Secondary School, Neke. The result is that the school in Neke has become deserted, dilapidated ghost of what its founding fathers dreamed and the bubbling giant it once was.

**(vi) Retrogression:** The avoidable schism, frustration and confusion which the evil and increasing lawlessness of the members of the Odo cult have unleashed on Neke community are combining to destroy the patriotism and unity of purpose which Neke needs in order to march forward in modern life.

## **Ezugu**

If the activities of the Odo cult are harmful, destructive and callous, then Ezugu is the height of brutality, inhumanity and death! Infact, it was the discovery

made at Ezugu that drew world attention to Neke. How could few men in a community compel that community to have and maintain a museum where human skulls are displayed with so much relish? This was the million-dollar question on the lips of sane humanity when the bizarre discovery in Ezugu was made.

The Ezugu cult is supposed to be the “god of war”. The people of Neke were involved in so many wars of survival. Infact, like the Amalekites, the people of Neke were having wars “from generation to generation” (Ex. 17:16), and like Amalek, Neke and her people soon became “war-like people”. Surrounding communities within her present location always dreaded fighting the people of Neke because of the presence of the Odo cult. For they would always lose such wars against Neke.

These constant wars soon gave birth to another brutal cult. The place where Ezugu has its major temple contains a kind of museum where the skulls of those killed in these ancient inter-tribal wars are kept. These skulls are displayed in rolls and as new ones come in, old ones are removed and buried in layers within the temple. One could have thought that the Ezugu cult and its worship would cease as modernity approached, but that was not to be!

### **Status Symbol**

Ezugu soon began to exercise demonic hold on the psyche of young men. Any young man worth his salt wanted to be a member of the cult in order to be identified as a “warrior”, a “strongman”! This identity gives you access to dance the **Ikpa** Ezugu - the Ezugu war dance! And the only way one can be a part of the dance is to bring the head or skull of at least one non-native male (not female) to the temple. Suddenly, Ezugu changed from being a “god of war” to being a “god of murderers”. Some people have several skulls in the temple!

When the British came to Nigeria, all human sacrifices were out-lawed and it became a criminal offense (not just a sin against God) to sacrifice human beings to the gods. So, Ezugu should have been long abandoned. But the devil, who has come to “steal, to kill and to destroy” (John 10:10), looked for other avenues to perpetrate his demonic activities.

Consequently, young and energetic men of Neke origin soon began to embark on human head-hunting expeditions so as to procure skulls to join the elitist(?) “War cult”. At peacetime, they would comb the border towns for any unfortunate male victim. Sometimes, they also lure unsuspecting strangers, who came looking for

friends who they met outside Neke. They would kill them by brutal beheading and take their skulls to Ezugu!

A man who is well above 60 years told me the story of how he joined the cult of Ezugu. According to him, he longed to join the Ezugu cult but he could not bring himself to kill an innocent man at peacetime. Of course, the skull of a Neke person is not acceptable. One cannot dig-out the skull of someone who was buried peacefully; the custodians would easily detect, using their “powerful” charms.

This man later became a soldier in the Nigerian Army, and later fought for Biafra during the civil war in Nigeria (1967-1970). And in a battle with some soldiers from the Nigerian side, many lost their lives. So, he told me that he cut off the heads of two dead Nigerian soldiers, buried them somewhere and put a mark there to identify it. This was around 1968. So, at the end of the war (January 1970), he went and dug up those skulls, put them in a disguising sack and brought them to Ezugu. That way, he was able to join the “respected” Ezugu cult and still keep a clear conscience. Today, the man is one of the ruthless fighters against Ezugu... So these days when one sees a 30 or 40-year old man dancing to the Ikpa Ezugu, one wonders which tribal war he fought in since Neke has not fought any war with any town for so many years now. There is, therefore, only one way to explain such involvements: they have killed fellow human beings in cold blood

### **Orgies and Taboos**

The Cult of Ezugu is also surrounded by certain orgies and taboos. For example, those who attend the ceremonies at the shrine, usually drink palm wine the human skulls there. The chief priest also sits on human skulls and as a member of **Oha Neke** (the Neke Council of Elders), he is entitled to certain privileges! Other chief priests of deities that are also members of the “Council of Elders” are those of Amanyi (the river goddess) and Ani (the Earth goddess). It was believed that in the olden days, the heads of female victims of war were deposited at the shrine of Ani which is close to that of Ezugu...

There is also what is called **Agbara** Ezugu which is usually carried behind the chief priest on any of the few occasions he has to pass through the town. This Agbara is a white sack that is carried by the “prime-minister” to the chief priest and it can rightly be called “the ark of Ezugu”. And no one really knew what that sack used to contain until the 26<sup>th</sup> of May, 2001. On that day, Christians brought

it out, loosened it and discovered to their dismay that it always contained the most fresh skulls brought to Ezugu!

Neighbouring towns dreaded passing through Neke at the peak of the Odo and (especially) Ezugu worship. Their notoriety ensured that Neke indigenes were abhorred. And to allow such things to continue would be to kill the next generation of innocent children of Neke - even before they're born!

The Christians felt that they're the promoters and protectors of both their own interest and that of the entire community. They decided that it was time to let their light shine (Matt 5:14) even if it meant death! But our trust in the ability of our God made us confront this sophisticated demonic network, first and foremost, in prayers spanning decades, and then also physically. For God must use someone to answer someone else's prayers!

This is just a foot note to the grand deception that was Odo and Ezugu. But it gives an insight into what was on ground before the "war" began. It also gives an idea of what would happen if these cultists are allowed to bounce back! Battles have been won; the war is still on, both in the spiritual and in the physical...

### **Odo As Culture**

The original reason for the "attack" extended to those of us who insisted that society would not develop and move forward in the face of terror and fear was because the Odo Cult, and all the activities that surrounded it, were seen as the "culture of the people". From the immediately considered section, it looks like it is an incontrovertible fact. Odo was an invention of Neke people. It was adopted, inherited by or diffused to other communities within the state. The recognition of this fact is true, correct and, on its own, harmless. But this is exactly where our task begins. We must put philosophy in the service of society. As Olusegu Oladipo puts it, in an "Introduction" to a selection of 4 of Kwasi Wiedu's *Essays, Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy*, our task in philosophy, our "preoccupation in African philosophy is to put philosophy in the service of human well-being through a critical and reconstructive scrutiny of the ideas we live by" (p.5).

This scrutiny demands that we raise questions as to what we mean by "culture". What does the average man-on-the-street understand by culture? No wonder Isaac Ukpokolo, in the work already cited, says that "in public discourses, the general trend noticeable is that the term 'culture' is used almost completely

unreflectively; its commonsense understanding always taken for granted or assumed as given" (p.16). Why would, for e.g, a full-grown adult African, living in Africa, dressed in Suit, eating spaghetti and Quaker Oats, with a glass of red French wine in his hands, listening to Michael Jackson or R. Kelly's music, suddenly remember his culture when he sees a masquerade? Why have we tended to treat culture as a dead, grounded, ossified reality? How did the African transit from, say palm wine, to red wine or from "fufu" or "amala" to spaghetti and sarmovita? It would certainly become too superogative for us to take a plunge into the vast horizon of the understanding (by definition) of culture. In as much as we are not going to avoid defining, explaining or describing what culture is, our major interest is to show that culture, whatever it is, is a human creation that has definite temporality, historicity and departure-place. There is nothing like a universal of eternal culture! In his paper, "An Analysis of the Role of Language in Cultural Development", Nwabuiro Ideyi sees man as a being of culture, and then states further that culture must operate, must be understood within the context of a "society". He argues further that:

Culture itself is the product of human mind. Mind is dynamic in nature, so is culture. Culture has to change as man's needs change. This is because culture owns (sic) its relevance to the extent it assists man to resolve the questions of his needs. For that reason, any aspect of culture which, refuses to change when there is a need for such, stands dated and obstructive to development. This calls for constant fine-tuning of every aspect of culture to comply with the needs of the time (p.91).

Discourse on culture is as varied as it is permeating, especially since the dawn of modern anthropology which treats culture as its subject-matter. We would try to delimit our theoretical excursion into the domain of culture so that we would stay within comprehensible limits and so that we would properly understand the context within which our critique of the Odo/Ezugu Cults should be conducted.

Bearing in mind that we cannot treat culture dismissingly in this paper, we can only satisfy our curiosity by going way back to the classical reflectors on culture such as Edward Taylor, Clyde Kluckhohn, B.W. Andah, Susan Langer, Alfred L. Kroeber, Clifford Geertz, etc. In his monumental book, *Primitive Culture*, Taylor conceived culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits required by man as a member of society" (p.7). On the other hand, Kroeber and Kluckhohn, in their



book, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, write that culture consists of:

Patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the other hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action (p.357).

The focus by Taylor, Kroeber and Kluckhohn reveals the complexity, wholeness, societal-nature, symbolism, essentiality, transmittability, historicity, productivity, conditionability, acquireability, constitutability, traditionality, requireability, legality, etc of culture. The implication of their position is that culture is seen as an empirical, experimental science that searches for law to explain behaviour and regulate society. Culture, in this sense, is seen as an objective science studying artifacts and behaviours.

However, Clifford Geertz, in *The Interpretation of Cultures* disagrees with the above conclusions, preferring to explain Culture in terms of a science of interpretation in search, not of law, but of meaning. This is why he defines culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of intended conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicated, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (p.86). Interpretation, however, can become very problematic, especially when over-stretched and minutized. And while interpreting, the delima of whether to interpret the whole alone or the parts alone, sticks out like a sore throat. George F. McLean captures this delima clearly in his article, “Ethnicity, Culture and 'Primordial' Solidarities”. For him, “the circumstances of the Greek messenger make manifest the basic dilima of hermeneutics (from Hermes, the ancient Greek messenger from the gods) and interpretation, which has come to be called the hermeneutic circle. This consists in the fact that any understanding of the parts requires an understanding of the whole, while the grasp of the whole depends upon some awareness of its parts” (p.152). The interaction between the empiricization and interpretation of culture is not really our preoccupation here. But it is important to notice that it is the understanding fostered by a grasp of the symmetry between the empirical and the hermeneutic that provides the basis for our appraisal of culture. For there can be no doubt that certain behaviours, actions, symbols, etc have practically

created the institutional structures that bear our mores and laws. These institutions and structures, together with their legal and moral results, have become the tradition that has in turn become the foundation of our now-culture.

If we agree with Martin F. Asiegbu that “without culture, philosophy is impossible” (p.41. “African Philosophy: Problems, Debates, Approaches, and Challenges”), we immediately see the need for our present investigative examination. Although culture is not philosophy, culture provides the data, the pedestal as well as the Mind for which and by who philosophy is carried out. In an earlier paper, “Africa Within the Globe: Confronting the Parameters of Cross-Cultural Philosophy”, I had disagreed with those who denied the possibility of an “African Philosophy” by collating and collecting specimen of African Culture and calling them “African Philosophy”. I had called them “uncharitable” because what creates a philosophy is not a way of life, but the *reason(s) given* for that way of life. It is the critical reflection on that culture, that behaviour that produces a philosophy and later a philosophical tradition. That is why Hobbes and Locke (in England), Voltaire and Rousseau (in France), reflected on the medieval feudalism and authoritarian Monarchy within their societies. By the time they were done with reflecting, they had produced a liberal, laissez-faire philosophy from where the culture and tradition of Liberty, Equality, Democracy and Capitalism, etc became entrenched.

Martin Asiegbu (in the paper earlier quoted) gives us a list of the content of culture, and in the process, curiously includes philosophy.

According to him:

Actually, if culture defines the way of life of a people, then it is not philosophy. A people’s way of life embraces a long list of unending items, embracing their lore of knowledge, their philosophy and proverbs, their artifacts, their feasts, their pride and prejudices, celebrations, songs and funerals, patterns of doing things and poetry, language and medicine, commerce and craft, their cosmology, legends, myths, witticisms, wise-sayings, laws and customs, religion and their conceptual framework and, indeed, whatever makes their pattern of life - together, all form their culture (p.41).

The implication of the foregoing is that while philosophy can be a culture, culture cannot be philosophy. However, do we have any such thing as “the philosophy of a people”, since philosophy is understood by many as being a product of an “individual mind”? Again, at what point does a personal

philosophy become a public or popular philosophy? And are we saying that once the philosophy, as it were, “goes public”, it would lose its essential value within the complex, gigantic spiral of cultural dynamics? These questions are crucial because from available evidence, the culture of Odo emerged at a particular time in history when it was of imperious necessity – the people needed to survive the attack from one of the greatest empires in Africa’s recorded ancient history, the Benin Empire. It would also be a truism to agree that the decision to come up with the Odo contrivance could not have been a democratically, publicly made choice. This means that certain individual or individuals might have suggested it, and do we now say that the reason(s) given (the “why” and “how”) constitute(s) the “philosophy of Odo”?

Asiegbu’s inclusion of philosophy as part of culture means, therefore, that we can have a “culture of philosophy”, and within this expression, it either means that philosophy becomes also “part of” a culture but not “a culture” or it could mean “creating and entrenching” an attitude of philosophical enquiry or of philosophizing. In *OOES*, I had written that “to create a ‘culture of...’ anything, it would take several centuries as well as certain institutions that would be the external expression of such a culture” (p.10). The point being made, therefore, is that saying that philosophy can be culture while culture cannot be philosophy is too simplistic and slippery. For if subjected to the type of hermeneutics that McLean earlier spoke about, which one, between philosophy and culture, would be the whole and which, the parts, and vice-versa?

Again, if we say that culture cannot be “philosophy”, can we also say that a culture cannot be “philosophical”? And what does being “philosophical” mean in relation to being a “philosophy”? Was it Thales, Plato or Kant that thought for and taught the ancient Africans to proceed from using stones to pluck Mango fruits from the Mango trees to using long and curved sticks to hook the branches of the mango trees and then shake down the mango fruits? Or was that change not reflective? And is the capacity and then ability to “reflect” not a veritable signature for the presence of a philosophy? This is why C.S. Momoh, in his paper “On Cultural Philosophy” writes that “a familiarity with Ancient African Philosophy shows that African elders reflect logically on their cultural experience, they are intellectually alert and acute, and are concerned, as were their Western counterparts, with the problems of Man, Nature, God and Society” (p.36).

The fundamental question that is relevant within a consideration of the “philosophy” behind the Odo cult is to ask: are the circumstances that led to the

invention of Odo still there? However, does the mere absence of these circumstances justify any demand or desire to abolish the Odo Cult? Now, if the answer to both questions are “No”! on what ground do we stand to justify our claim that the Odo culture has become anachronistic, moribund and obsolete? In *OOES*, I wrote that “Culture is the entirety of the living process of a community, a society, an institution, a group, etc; it is the way the people are organized, live and relate. Infact, culture is life. It is usually a creation. Yet it is a dynamic process! It grows! It can and does die – as historical needs demand. A static culture is a dead culture; it is culture free of air; that is, free to suffocate!” (p.2) This is why Clyde Klockhohn and Kelly William in their paper, “The Concept of Culture” believe that culture is “historically derived”.

Cultural changes or developments depend a great deal on epochal or historical needs or demands. The experience of a particular period should not become exhaustive, comprehensive and eternal definers of a culture. This is why Professor C.S. Momoh’s distinction between Culture and Experience becomes crucial for us as we x-ray the Odo/Ezugu aberration. For him, culture is the **totality** of experience, while experience is a **moment** of culture!. Odo and Ezugu, Ogwugwu and Omebe/Akatakpa and all these terrorizing devices which we call masquerade-gods are only “momentary experiences” in the evolution of our culture. The fact that they have lasted for centuries cannot suffice to keep preserving them, even to our detriment.

Our inability to understand these experiences as “moments”, have led to the grounding, stifling and ossification of culture, which originally gave these “experiences” their bearing. In his monumental work, *Philosophy of a New Past and an Old Future*, Momoh laments that, “for the moment, culture is static and passive while experience is dynamic and active”. (p.105). It is this dynamism and activeness of experience that is making it to discard with and disapprove of Odo masquerading and all other harbingers of our uncritical past, so as to propel culture forward again and save it from total collapse! Living culture should be able to distill, crystallize, revolutionize and synthesize our experiences, as TIME would demand.

In the words of the late HRH, Igwe Godwin A. Ugwuegede of Opi, “people cannot kill other people and we call it culture, not only culture, but *our* culture”! People just move round without being able to grasp even what is happening around them and why they are here. In the midst of fetish, senseless and unrational practice, People hide their ignorance, stupidity, lack of will power,

confusion and inabilities by calling them “culture”. Sometimes, these are people who should know better, people who are educated exhibit ignorance and perversion. But we can see that these people are no more than “educated-illiterates”!

When the mercurial Ghananian thinker and scholar, Kwasi Wiredu, advocated for the appraisal of traditional conceptual schemes, he was branded a “foreign” or “western” thinker, a repudiator of ethnophilosophy. Let me save you all the theoretical troubles and only quote from Wiredu in order to explain better his position. For Wiredu, “the answer to Africa’s problem of identity in the contemporary world does not lie in a cultural traditionalism but in a critical and reconstructive self-definition”. (p.38).

Wiredu understands culture as something that goes beyond art, songs, and dances. It is the totality of a people’s life. That we have noted earlier. However, we are interested in Wiredu’s distinction between the contingent and the non-contingent elements that constitute a culture. For him, contingent culture contains elements such as language, style of dressing and of addressing, dance, music, recreation, courtship, marriage e.t.c. He argues that a people would engender a crisis of identity if they change these elements in favour of foreign ones. Our societies have embraced foreign languages, music, dances, dressing etc., and no one is addressing them. But they want to retain elements that are destructive and dehumanizing.

On the other hand, Wiredu argues that there are elements of a culture that have essential bearing on human well being, where truth and values are sort. In this area, it won’t be desirable; even if it is possible, to ignore developments in other cultures in the name of “self-definition”. This area contains elements such as philosophy, science and religion. For a full discussion of this, see Olusegun Oladipo’s book, *Philosophy and the African Experience: The Contributions Of Kwasi Wiredu*.

What this distinction has done for our current argument is that we cannot ignore philosophical, scientific and religious developments from other cultures all in the name of “self identity” because according to Oladipo, that will be “foolhardy”. The emergence of philosophy from mythology and science from the former, have armed us with the rational mentality to appraise and evaluate our beliefs.

We must arise to question the paradigms and schemes around which, and from where, we have generated concepts. That the Odo Cult capitulated in its haven in Neke, and is following suit in other communities, may be seen to stem from our failure to see what F.H. Odimegwu saw as an inevitable need: “the need to wake from the nostalgia of [our] romanticized past, to forsake the leisure of idealistic speculation, and to step out on the streets of our daily existence and peep deeply into the corridors of our history as a people” (p.1, in his, “How Communalist is Africa?”). We cannot continue to romance the stones of our past which, as a result of its accumulation of weighty, historically-determined nuances, have fallen into the bottom of the boisterous tides of the ocean. Such attempts would drown us. We cannot see anything as sacrosanct including, (surprisingly) the Christian culture whose imbibed attitudes and values led to the questioning of the tradition of the Odo Cult. Our leaders, and those who exercise political, religious and economic rule over us, should not hold on to this authoritarian traditionalism that was the hallmark of our past. And as we conclude this section, we cite a classic example of how this authoritarian carry-over nature is affecting us politically in Africa. According to Segun Oladipo, in, *Philosophy and the African Experience*:

Witness, for instance, the tendency of public officials to refuse to entertain questions about some established procedures of the institutions they serve, thinking that the mere fact that these procedures exist is enough justification for them, or the attitude of some contemporary political leaders in Africa who equate power with wisdom and would always want to regard their own answer to a problem as the right, at times the only, answer. All these are some clear indications that the authoritarian mentality is till a prominent feature of contemporary African societies. But no society can survive in the contemporary world with this kind of mental outlook which is anti-reason. Hence, the need to combat dogmatism and intolerance in all their manifestations. (p.48)

### **Random Critical Reflections**

That epistemology is not a continuum but a discontinuum, that at every epochal development of society; there are always new possibilities and elements that provide a basis for that epoch, has been instructively put forward by postmodernists like Michael Foucault. Again, if we remember Jacques Derrida’s “de-construction” of culture through what he “diagonosically” refers to as the “logic of supplementarity” (that the door to the improvement of what we know

is always open), we immediately see the futility of holding on to anything with a sacrosanct mentality. If the so-called grand, totalizing theories of Plato, Hegel, Kant, Marx, Locke, etc have come under the uprooting scrutiny of a pluralized, territory-dismantling world, why should a practice invented just about 400 years ago constitute a barrier for the progress of society? All cultures must submit itself to or install an inbuilt mechanism for a dialectical discontinuity of its continuity. By this, I mean that all cultures must be able to continue by discontinuing with and discarding elements that become moribund and obsolete for current reality.

This is why it is important for the African Philosopher to be informed about and grounded on the facts of the African past. Those who (ignorantly and fraudulently) attacked Placide Tempel's *Bantu Philosophy* as non-philosophy forget that the book fired their interest in the epistemological consideration of that ontology. C.S. Momoh makes a distinction between systematic and critical epistemology, insisting that the former must precede the latter. He argues that all Africans owe it as a duty to investigate WHAT is known (or to be known), while we the scholars face HOW what is known is known. In his, "On Cultural Philosophy", Momoh writes that; "critical epistemology cannot come before systematic epistemology. We cannot ask how the Africans claim to know what they claim to know without a clear statement of what it is that the Africans claim to know. The issue of what knowledge the African claims to possess is prior to the issue of the epistemological evaluation of the knowledge in question. The later understanding is a job for the scholar, the first a task for the African himself" (p.27).

The implication of the above is that it explains why we have spent space to exhibit the Odo/Ezugu Cult practices because it displays a corpus of what the adherents understand (know) as reality. Our job as philosophical scholars is, therefore, to ask "how" and "why" that body of systematic, historically-conditioned, culturally-driven knowledge. Any one who understands the logic and dynamics of the Odo cult, is bound to think of the condition which the society where it had been would look like without it, either from a positive or negative angle.

One of the greatest challenges that would have faced anyone who desired to "reform" the Odo cult was the fact that the Odo masquerade was originally conceived as a "spirit"; and all the aura and splendor surrounding its existence was derived from and maintained by this conception. The "grand secret" (that Odo is not a human being) was the ontological primacy and the epistemological

basis for its existence. Any conception contrary to this would make it lose its very significance. Nze F.M. Okolo from Abor in Udi L.G.A, Enugu State had, in a memorandum to the Abor/Umu-Avulu Religious Crisis Peace Committee, dated 13<sup>th</sup> February, 2005, and written when the Odo crisis in Abor exploded, defined Odo thus: "Odo is a full-grown man in mask, pretending to be a spirit, patronized by a demon" (see, p.192: *OOES*).

At its inventive inception, at the "itinerous" march of Neke people from the Edo axis, the perception of Odo as a ubiquitous "spirit-masquerade" was perfectly in order and significantly needed. However, when the people settled down and the masquerade transformed into an instrument of veneration, its spirituality should have remained only at the level of charms and amulets. However, that such a dubious and deceptive claim lasted for centuries speaks glowingly of the power behind its secret network. Our nation can also make do with the commitment and dedication of the Odo adherents. For them to disappear into forests and farm-settlements several kilometers away from home, and in the dead hours of the night (usually between 12 and 4 am), in order to secretly procure the palm spears, is an amazing feat of courage and diligence. In these days when our youths are looking for the fastest, easiest and cheapest routes to the top, they need to imbibe the patriotism of these devotees whose actions are eloquent expressions of how to keep faith with the course of a cause!

Another lesson we can learn from the Neke example is that a society can decide that it was time to remove a decaying tooth so that the entire societal-mouth could, as it were, masticate the sweet goods of reality. Hon. Justice F.I.N. Ngwu (then a Barrister) puts it succinctly when he said, in his, "Let Us 'Neke-nize' Nigeria":

...it is good to note that Neke is in every part of Nigeria - with particular reference to Odo and Ezugu, where human lives are allegedly involved. Last year when the Neke case started, it looked as though heaven would kiss the earth. Many people thought that something unbearable, unimaginable and infamous has happened in Igbo land. **The News** magazine titled its discussion of the Neke phenomenon: "32 People Killed to Appease the Gods", and then added a rider, "Secret Shame of an Igbo Town". The Neke cult saga is only unique in one sense: the way in which the vast majority of her citizens decided that they have had enough of evil men and their evil activities!...



For almost every person, every community, every race in Nigeria would be “Neke-nized” when they go about exposing and fighting the evil among them. If this is done, Nigeria (and indeed the world) would be a safe place for all...

Let us expose evil, to the good of humanity, not to destroy Neke, but to sanitize Neke. I want to introduce Neke or the Neke approach to Nigeria’s fight against corruption. Neke in Nsukka, Neke in Benin, Neke in Adamawa, Neke in Nigeria, and indeed, Neke in the world. That is the only way our societies would be safe for habitation. (pp.176-177, OOES).

But that they failed to realize that it was time to reform is as a result of both the fact of authoritarian traditionalism and what we had just explained: that the secrecy is at the very hub of its existence. I had written that “in the light of current needs and demands, we cannot continue to allow people to hide inside mask, perpetrate evil of un-imaginable dimensions, and escape prosecution because they are treated as ‘spirits’” (p.8 OOES)

But be that as it may, one must confess that the Odo cult was not such a violent contrivance originally. After the people settled and it became an instrument of religious (?) cohesion, it was a rallying point for the people of Neke. And the discussion of the question of the point at which it became vicious can be attributed to both the coming of the Christian culture as well as its failure to admit necessary, time-demanded changes! Similarly, the diffusion to and adaptation of Odo by other towns, may also have contributed to its perversion of the original objective. This diffusion resulted in the construction of Odo masquerades with items other than the original, yellowish palm spears – items such as clothings, ordinary palm fronts, grasses, etc, things alien to the Odo mask. Democracy is suffering the same consequence in Africa, where every and anything is baptized with “democracy”. And each time Western observers come to Africa, they see our laughable attempts at western-style democratization and they are not amused at all. This explains why Vigen Guroian (in the paper earlier cited) writes that “Americans should not expect democracy in the East to look exactly like democracy in the West or that pluralism and tolerance have been easily achieved anywhere. Culture and history matter” (p.296)

Despite the thorough and continuous attempts made by the West to export and teach Western-liberal democratic ideals, institutions and standards to Africa, the efforts have met with minimal success because of the culture of the people. On the contrary, the people of Neke has no record of deliberately exporting the Odo cult(ure) to any community. So, one can only imagine the riotuous divergency of its adapted variants in these other communities. At the point when communication and interaction was minimal, it presented no challenges; but the moment communities began to converse more, problems became inevitable. The liberalization (?) of Odo “worship” in some of these communities, affected the secret network that was at the core of the Odo cult.

That Odo is a secret cult is, perhaps, a discourse for another day. But we must point out here that the definition of “Secret Cult” in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria fits the cult like a measured, tailored cloak. The constitution defines a “Secret Society” as:

Any society, association, group or body of persons (whether registered or not)

- a. That uses secret signs, oaths, rites or symbols, and which is formed to promote a cause, the purpose or part of the purpose of which is to further the interest of its members; and so aid one another under any circumstances without due regard to merit, fair play or justice, to the detriment of the legitimate interest of those who are not members.
- b. The membership of which is incompartible with the function or dignity of any public office under this constitution and whose members are sworn to observe oaths of secrecy; and
- c. The activities of which are not known to the public at large, the names of whose members are kept secret and whose meetings and other activities are held in secret.

The reason for the above point is to show how difficult it has been fighting cultism in our tertiary institutions. Why are we finding it difficult getting the National Assembly to pass the Freedom of Information Bill (FOIB)? The reason is simple: our society has thrived on secrecy. Fathers keep their activities secret from their sons; and if the sons must know, they need to sware oaths of secrecy. Mothers keep discussions of sexuality secret from their daughters. No wonder the files in our offices are marked “Top Secret” or “Secret”, as if government is a “Secret Cult”! Why would we continue branch-cutting fighting cultism in

schools, when we should be doing root-digging fighting it from our societal backgrounds?

It is difficult to determine when Odo transited from a culture to a cult; but one can guess that it must have been at the dawn of the contact of traditional cultures with Anglo-Christian culture. The moment some initiated males began to embrace the new culture built around another cult figure (Jesus Christ), the Odo cultists had to look for ways to safeguard their grand-secret. That must have been when the culture of brutality, dehumanization and torture of non-initiates began. Before then, the fact that the Odo “aura” provided a rallying point, a social discipline of some sort, cannot be gainsayed. I have dared anyone who thinks the Odo language (it is not a dialect) looks like one he/she knows or that it is a dialect of a known language, to come forth and prove it. It is ingenious! Likewise, the precision and creativity involved in producing an Odo mask (that bears the palm spears) is a lesson in how to be meticulous. It was art and craft at the highest level, produced with raw materials procured from the forest, including all the black, red and yellow colours used in carefully painting the various Odo masks. These colours don’t get washed off by rain!

It would have been a wonderful thing to export that creativity to the outside world. It could have been re-packaged and fine-tuned for contemporary appreciation. But the adherents just refused to move with the time. Of course, there is nothing that says that a change in the material (palm spears) used in the production of the Odo masquerade could not have been effected. For it is on record that the palm trees, whose spears are constantly ravaged, can hardly produce palm nuts-from where oil, Kernel, etc could be extracted. This is economically disadvantageous to the society. Imagine the idea of ravaging the spears of all the palm plantations planted by M.I. Okpara (former Premier of the then Eastern Region of Nigeria) in, say Calabar and Umuahia, just to produce masquerades that have no economic (except to the custodians) and tourist values! I am sure that when Malaysia came to collect palm fruits from Nigeria in the early-80s, they didn’t have masquerades in mind.

The violent destruction of Odo, Ezugu and their artifacts would not have been necessary. The crisis and mistrust within the society would never have been engendered but for the inability of the traditionalists of Odo to accept change and their capacity to threaten co-existence. Freedom is an indispensable social good. The capacity of Odo adherents to reject the freedom of movement of others was just unacceptable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When people have been bottled, checked, harassed, dehumanized and traumatized, the moment they get the

slightest of chances to be free, the first and most-crucial thing they address is that “freedom”, and not how to preserve part of the wreckage of a past and institution that have produced the bondage. This, to my mind, is the only way to explain the loss of the Odo artifacts. Of course, no one today would encourage the preservation of a museum of human skulls, not used for scientific or academic study, but for some orgies!

If the Odo masquerades or masquerading would survive, then citizens/adherents in towns where they still exist, must eschew the idea of seeing Odo as a “spirit”. For one, their non-adherents have, through exposure in other towns, know that Odo masquerades are worn by their brothers; two, the degree of exposure, communication and traveling have made such claims at best, ignorant and at worst, stupid! Again, if Odo masquerades would ever display again in towns where they have been destroyed, the generation that witnessed its destructive effects, it appears, would pass away before it could be fine-tuned and used again as a cultural symbol of for the purpose of tourism.

But the possibility of the culture of Odo disappearing, just like that, is remote because the remnants of the cult members are still there in many communities. This is the reason why Isaac Ukpokolo says that “the limit beyond which a culture changes is related to the physical survival of its members” (p.32). And unless the members of the Odo cult can provide for themselves a rational base for another choice, they would keep having a mental display of Odo masquerades in their hearts. Traditions are difficult to jettission, hard to abandon. But we must only keep the ones useful for our current realities. As we end this paper, let us remind ourselves what George McLean says:

The content of tradition serves as a model and exemplar, not because of personal inertia, but because of the corporate character of the learning by which it was built out of experience and the free and wise acts of succeeding generations in reevaluating, reaffirming, preserving and passing on what has been learned... Tradition, then, is not simply everything that ever happened, but only what appeared significant in the light of those who have appreciated and described it... But neither is tradition a passive storehouse of materials to be drawn up on and shaped at the arbitrary will of the present inquirer; rather, it presents insight and wisdom that is normative for life in the present and future (p.157).

## **Conclusion**

Unfortunately, this is a “conclusion” in which nothing is concluded. This is because, this paper has only scratched the surface of the enormous period and activity of the Odo Cult. And for the purpose of focus, the religious aspect has been left untouched. However, we have seen that the major concern for us is the fact that culture must be dynamic since the human beings that created that culture are mentally, spiritually and physically dynamic. We have seen that the Odo cult is paying a prize for refusing to flow with the times. We have also seen that a people can suffer cultural attack from outside and that it was actually the contact of the Odo cult with other cultures, that began to create problems for them. And we have pointed out that it was at the point of this contact and the rational choice for alternative culture(s) that made Odo activities to transit from a culture to a cult.

We could see that it is somewhat ironical that the then Odo culture, with tremendous capacity and ability to be artistically creative, homogeneous in discipline and social cohesion as well as developing a unique language, got caught in the “discontinuity of its continuity” by succumbing to the pressure of traditional authoritarianism. And we have seen that our other cultures would suffer similar fate if we fail to take cognizance of developments in other cultures. We have seen, from the foregoing, that we must bring-in a critical-philosophical mind-set to bear on our traditional conceptual schemes if we hope to make contributions to a global debate on culture and the conception of reality. And holding on to an anachronistic culture would lead us to logo-centric metaphysics, which in turn would result in the (unnecessary) total destruction of our heritage.

It is hoped that this paper would make the African philosopher to look down and start from his feet to understand the world around him or her. Our culture must provide us the material to philosophize and this is the only way we can then entrench a culture of philosophizing and consequently, the only way we can maintain the symmetry and symbiotic relationship between culture and philosophy.

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