

Deities in a Changing Igbo Society:  
*Ndi Nsukka, 1960-2016*

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## ABSTRACT

Deities have always been an important factor in the socio-political life of the Nsukka people, defining and regulating inter-personal and inter-group relations. In other words, the institution ensured that there were cordial relationships not only at the horizontal but also at the vertical levels of society. Deities were, therefore, believed to have provided Nsukka - and the entire Igbo - with an ultimate vision of themselves and the world. This institution that hitherto promoted peace and harmony among the people through its impartiality in administering justice and arbitration, has, in recent years, been faced with relentless attacks from organised religion – particularly from Christianity. Unfortunately, this aspect of Nsukka history has been neglected, uninvestigated and unharvested. As a result of this, our knowledge of this hitherto time-honoured institution is patchy and distorted. This study explores this neglected area so as to broaden and enrich our knowledge of the history of the Nsukka people. The year 1960 is chosen as the commencement date for this study for two obvious reasons. It witnessed Nigeria's independence which was expected to have ushered in a cultural rebirth that would encourage Nsukka people to reorganise their violated gods or *battered deities*. With the establishment of the University of

Nigeria, Nsukka in 1960, numerous Christian sects 'invaded' and drew huge numbers of converts from the indigenous people. The year 2016 marks the end of the study because of the landmark events which culminated in two young men committing suicide apparently at the instance of a deity. Apart from depleting the numbers of traditionalists, some misguided and overzealous Christian converts, under spurious guises, have blatantly destroyed and burnt some effigies of sacred deities. Ironically, some of these apostates have had recourse to return to these deities in times of challenges and troubles. Such patronage of deities would seem to have sustained their relevance in the lives of the traditionalists in the Nsukka cultural zone. Rather than disappearing, as claimed by the universal religions, deities have continued to soldier on in Nsukka, just as they have done elsewhere in Igboland. The focus of this study is to examine the continued relevance of these deities in this age of Christianity and westernisation.

## Keywords

*Ndi Nsukka, Igbo, deities, Eze Chitoke, Chukwu, Adoro, Ube, ikpo mma, arusi, African Traditional Religion, Nigeria*

## Introduction

The Igbo are one of the three largest ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, the other two being the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba. The Igbo nation is made up of several sub-cultural groups, including Nsukka. The sub-cultural groups speak distinct dialects of the Igbo language which are more often than not influenced by the language(s) of their non-Igbo neighbours. Apart from this, other aspects of life are similar to those of the other Igbo people. The Igbo have their own brand of natural religion. It does not claim to have been revealed by God as is the case with Islam and Christianity. Deities bridge the gap between God and the people. In Nsukka area, like other parts of Igboland, deities perform various duties, ranging from the political and economic to the social and judicial. In other words, deities have had enormous influence on Igbo life before and after the advent of Islam and Christianity into Igboland.

In the Nsukka area, virtually every community had (and some still have) one deity or another. However, they have been losing their followers to the two universal religions. These traditional deities, to some apostates, are either dormant or dead. Although they *have been badly battered by the joint forces of Islam, Christianity and Westernism* (western culture, science and technology) *but, (sic) stark realities in our villages and cities confirm that... (they) are not in their death-throes.*<sup>1</sup> Investigation has shown that some of the deities in the area have remained relevant to people of all walks of life. They have, therefore, remained gods of justice to the oppressed, weak and vulnerable in Nsukka society.

## The people's perception of deity

Deity as a concept does not have one generally accepted definition. As a result, *while some use it as another word for God, others associate it with a specific god.*<sup>2</sup> The term being a derivation from the Latin word *deitas* or *Deus* meaning 'god', some divine qualities have been ascribed to them like God, whose ambassador they are to the people. In Nsukka, and indeed in Igbo cosmology, the Supreme Being (God) is invisible; hence direct interaction with Him is not easy. Furthermore, *Chi, Chi-Ukwu, Chineke* or *Eze Chitoke* – the creator God – is great and powerful and has attendants like deities to address human needs.<sup>3</sup> To a Nsukka person, *Eze Chitoke* endowed the various deities that dot the landscape with the power to intervene in the affairs of the people. E.O. Anyacho would appear to have Nsukka as his focus when he observed that *...as a result*

*of their (deities') closeness to God and their superiority over man, they are accepted as intermediaries between God and the society with the powers to save, destroy and to provide for the needy.*<sup>4</sup>

One quality which deities share with the creator God is invisibility. However, at their altars or shrines are found objects, pictures and statues which were misconstrued, misinterpreted and misrepresented by early missionaries and writers as idols, *juju* or fetish objects. For instance, in the opinion of Emil Ludwig, an early missionary, the term 'deity' was an abstract concept that was not understood by the savage Africans. In the light of this, he contended that *deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing in their minds.*<sup>5</sup> It is against this mindset that the African, and indeed the Igbo god, was believed by early missionaries to be *deus absconditus, deus remotus, deus incertus*, etc., meaning 'god that has absconded', 'remote god' and 'uncertain god', respectively.<sup>6</sup>

Among the Nsukka people, *agere sequitur esse* – action follows being, suggesting that deities derived their being from the functions they were believed to have performed. What is more, deities being spirits cannot be said to have absconded, nor have they been remote. It is plausible to state that deities lived with, controlled and influenced the lives of the people. F. Seth Singleton et al would appear to be saying that *Ndi Nsukka have always lived in a world where events had a religious meaning and a magical explanation.*<sup>7</sup> To a Nsukka person, *Eze Chitoke* – God represented by a deity – was (and still is) always present. Austin J. Shelton's position on this was likely to have been informed by Nsukka people's perception of deities as spiritual beings that control human beings. In his opinion, first, and rather obvious, is the fact that God as the guardian spirit does not distance Himself from human creatures as *Chukwu* tends often to be when considered, in himself, as the supreme being.<sup>8</sup>

In the area under investigation, the omnipresence of deities was undoubtedly epitomised in the spiritualised earth – *Ala, Ani* or *Ana* – upon which man lived and worshipped, especially the elders and the traditional clergy. Deities were such a pervasive reality that some adherents regarded them as 'patron saints'. To such people, it was these deities who provided them with the strong motivation to achieve which they possessed.<sup>9</sup> Their omnipresence meant that deities effectively shielded

traditional Nsukka society from threats or fears of danger or harm to life, liberty and property. This study is focused on four exceptionally powerful deities, namely *Adoro*, *Ube*, *Ohe Imufu Enugu Ezike* and *Ochegi Orba*. However, illustrative references will be made to some other deities to strengthen the argument.

### Deities as agents of social control

Societies develop themselves and their institutions in response to challenges. The growth of any community, as well as institutions that permit the existence of such a community, is often the result of experiences that tend to overwhelm it. In other words, Nsukka society devised and developed some institutions to provide solutions to the problems that had confronted it. Among such institutions was that of chieftainship – *Eze*. In his ethnographical report on the old Nsukka Division, Charles Kingsley Meek observed: *If it is said that the idea of chieftainship is foreign to the Ibo (sic), the assertion would be untrue as far as the Ibo (sic) of Nsukka (sic) Division are concerned.*<sup>10</sup> However, it needs to be stated that the title was in some cases a mere status symbol rather than a political reality as it conferred little authority on the holder.

Generally speaking, Nsukka society developed a gerontocratic system of government, one of whose features was the institution of deity. This institution was all the more necessary to forestall *homo homini lupus* (a state in which 'man is wolf unto his neighbour'). Shelton writing on the Nsukka people some years ago contended that the Nsukka *Igbo over a long period of time developed new methods of coping with the different kinds of familial and societal problems....*<sup>11</sup> It is against this backdrop that the institution of deities can best be explained. On the strength of this, deities were believed to be endowed with salient values that not only sustained them, but also helped them to provide succour and solace in the spiritual and socio-economic challenges faced by their numerous adherents.<sup>12</sup> The Nsukka people believed that deities possessed a vast array of spiritual powers – both friendly and hostile, according to whether a person was good or evil.

The argument advanced by Christian adherents that these deities are impotent, ineffective, lacking influence and control over human activities appears misplaced. The importance of these deities is that their power and influence extended far beyond the limits of the villages where they were found. These deities *attracted clients*

*over quite wide areas despite the lack of centralised political institutions*<sup>13</sup> in most of the Nsukka communities. It is noteworthy that cases that had to do with both private and public law in traditional Nsukka society were always referred to the deities. Such cases as murder, kidnapping, theft, poisoning, adultery, bewitching etc. that were considered so terrible that human intervention could not resolve them, were brought before deities because of their impartiality in dispensing justice. Interestingly, *offences were supposed to create a debtor relationship with the gods that could only be liquidated by getting the offender or a relation of the offender punished in this world.*<sup>14</sup>

In the present day judicial context, there were some punishments meted out by deities that can be seen as extreme, but from the traditional perspective they were normal. For instance:

*Ochege, (Ochegi) the great independent Abere of Oye Oba (sic), the important central market of the Oba (sic) village complex, on May 19, 1964, killed a renowned professional thief. This thief had offended the alusi by having stolen from Oba people and by having murdered an Oba man...all his worldly goods, his children, wives, cattle, goats, foodstuffs, farmland, and all other property, after divination decreed it, were taken by the attama (priest) in the name of the alusi.*<sup>15</sup>

As extreme and primeval as this action of the deity might appear, it served as a deterrent to those given to misdemeanours which threaten the existence of the society. Furthermore, given the ignominious death of such a victim, he was not only seen to have cut himself off from his ancestors but also could not himself qualify to be accorded ancestral status.<sup>16</sup> In Nsukka, and even the entire Igboland, nobody would wish to be treated with such disrespect.

The issues involved here – stealing and murder – were as serious as they were heinous. Human life was considered too sacrosanct for mere mortals to take away. It was against these human dramas that the *Ochegi* deity provided appropriate and adequate solutions in order to domesticate the wild instincts of man. The idea that 'Thou shalt not be caught' which appears to guide the conduct of men in contemporary society was non-existent in traditional Nsukka society. Commenting on the western legal system, Pita Ejiiofor has this to say: *for most offences, individuals do expunge themselves of their crimes to*

*society by just paying fines without suffering any corporal discomfort.*<sup>17</sup>

This legal system, which creates room for criminals to evade justice, is at variance with what had hitherto obtained in traditional Nsukka society.

Most of the deities, especially *Adoro Ero*, *Ube Ihunowerre*, *Ohe Imufu*, as well as *Ochegi Orba*, have extended their influence and spiritual authority beyond the Nsukka society of northern Igboland. Writing on the Igbo people in the first quarter of the 20th century, G.T. Basden said this about Adoro: *A god named Adolo* (sic) *holds sway in this part* (i.e. Nsukka area). *His priest is held in great respect and he, the priest, exercises considerable influence and authority. It is a lucrative post by virtue of the many sacrifices presented to the god*<sup>18</sup> – and, of course, other property inherited from its victims. As T.C. Nwali has observed, offenders had to propitiate the deities through sacrifices, supplications and presents, not just to atone for anti-social acts but also to seal and narrow the gap in fellowship between such people and deities.<sup>19</sup>

It is instructive that the property of the deities was at the disposal of their clergy – the chief priests and disciples, except *Ube*, whose priest has had to rely on consultation fees. Currently, at the shrine of *Ube* one can see piles of currencies (both local and foreign) recovered from its victims. With respect to *Adoro*, there was an incident in June 2011 when a woman who bought a car, believed to have been forfeited to the deity by its victim, was subsequently compelled to return it and also to recompense the deity.<sup>20</sup> Fear of the wrath of deities went a long way in checking criminal activities among the people. One thing common to these deities is that each of them had (and still has) a maiden – *nwada* – who executed its pronouncements with respect to stolen items. In other words, the maiden ensured that the culprit returned the stolen item to its original owner.

As in all societies, the Nsukka people recognised and respected the private rights and freedom of individuals in order to ensure the corporate life and solidarity of the community. In a situation where someone who was weak, poor and vulnerable became a victim of poisoning, theft, murder or unjustifiable dispossession of his personal effects, and other sundry wrong-doings, there could always be a petition to a deity. This was referred to as *ikpo mma* or *arusi*, a petition for the deity to defend the

weak by identifying the evildoer. Through their protection of the vulnerable, deities have acquired fame as *the final guardian of law and order and of the moral and ethical code*<sup>21</sup> of society. In fact, this was exemplified by a case at Amahor, Ibagwa Ani, Nsukka where a widow who became a victim of a series of robberies in 2011 resorted to *ikpo arusi* – the invocation of the spirit of *Ube* deity after her warnings went unheeded.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, when in the same year, 2011, Amauchekukwu Ajima's house was burgled and the sum of eight thousand naira (N8000) was taken, her Agbo kindred of Akuma Ibagwa Ani could not uncover the identity of the offender. Hence, recourse was made to the *Ube* deity. A disciple of the deity – a woman with a 'utopian (faked) pregnancy' – gave 28 days' grace for the culprit to return the money. It was more than a coincidence that at the expiration of the period, the culprit, Amauchekukwu Ugwu, died in a ghastly motor accident in an Abuja-bound vehicle shortly after passing the town of Obollo Afor. His family had to pay the sum of N1.5 million as a propitiary sacrifice to the deity to stem its continued vengeance on members of the family.<sup>23</sup> In its characteristic approach to cases of oppression and misdemeanour, the deity unleashed the death sentence on these culprits at Ibagwa Ani, and in this way deities can be said to have been *powerful factors in the observance of law and order*<sup>24</sup> in the Nsukka cultural area of Igboland.

In recent years, deities have adopted new methods of executing their judgment on those found guilty of certain crimes. In some cases, petitioners in search of justice for the violation of their rights and property have had to approach a deity like *Ube*, with a *long rope* with which the culprits could hang themselves. For instance, in October 2016, two young men committed suicide by hanging themselves at Eziani Nsukka; this was attributed to the vengeance of the *Ube* deity.<sup>25</sup> Deities thus demonstrated zero tolerance for crime and oppression against the weak and poor by the strong. What is more, the fact that in some cases deities visited the sins of the fathers on their children has created some measure of social order, justice and harmony, as no father would want to leave his children to the wrath or anger of a deity. This view is also shared by E.U.M. Igbo et al when they argue that *...the influence of deities... impinged on the psyche of people and constrained their inclination to engage on* (sic) *serious misconduct, thereby working for the community as a potent deterrence* (sic) *against crime.*<sup>26</sup>

## Deities as the conscience of society

The institution of deities, to a large extent accounts for the communal existence of Nsukka society. The fact that Nsukka people, like most other Igbo sub-groups, did not possess a large-scale state system did not mean that there was pervasive lawlessness and disorder. However, Nsukka society, like other human organisations, was not trouble-free. The society's judiciary system was complemented by the institution of deities who not only abhorred deviant social behaviour among the people, but also promoted inter-personal and inter-village relations. The assistance of deities had always been solicited in resolving issues ranging from the recovery of debts, title to land, divorce, boundary disputes, protection of the weak and their property, licentiousness on the part of married women and so forth.

Oath-taking seems to be one of the main ways of establishing the innocence or guilt of an accused person in this traditional system of jurisprudence. The period of determination or disposal of a case upon which an oath was administered varied between a month of twenty eight days and a year depending on its nature. For instance, in a civil or criminal case, the period was a month, but in land cases, which were often complex, it was one full year. The period was to allow the deity before whom the oath was sworn to properly delve into the details of the case so as to establish the truth and discover who was guilty. Oaths were only resorted to where there was insufficient evidence, or there seemed to be uncertainties or doubts as to the veracity of the submissions from the parties involved, thus ensuring that both parties were given a fair hearing.

Through oath-taking, these deities have created a niche for themselves by shaping inter-personal and group relations. As a result, their fame and popularity have reached beyond Igboland. In a recent study, Udobata R. Onunwa posits that:

*...people travel to Nsukka even from outside Igboland to swear to an oath at the shrine of the Adoro Deity at Alor-Uno. This female deity is believed to strike dead anyone who swears falsely by its name. At its shrine... one sees many household property (sic) packed at the outskirts. They belonged to the victims of false oaths. Those who swore falsely to an oath and died have their personal belongings brought and packed at the shrine of the deity.<sup>27</sup>*

It was also expected that such victims' corpses would be buried in the deity's land. In recent years, the corpse of a victim could be ransomed, but not the head which was always exhumed and taken away by the deity's agents at night. No Nsukka person would readily accept the loss of his name and fame to the shame and stigma attached to such an ignominious death. Quite understandably, where such victims were given fitting burial/funeral rites, the deity had to be propitiated with a gift of a maiden – an *igbere* (*igbale* in Igala language). This is how some of these extraordinarily powerful deities have acquired families of *igbere* who attended to the deities' daily needs and those of their clergy.

Debt recovery is one area where deities are believed to have served the needs of the weak in Nsukka society. In the Nsukka cultural area, some creditors have had to institute cases of debt recovery before deities. Consequently, defiant debtors have in such circumstances been dragged to appear before one deity or another. This is on the understanding that there is justice and fair play in cases adjudicated by deities which hardly gives any room for manipulation. *The system*, according to J.S. Obeta, *has no loopholes as it is under the so-called modern legal system.*<sup>28</sup> An informant, jokingly, but certainly correctly, likened the *Ube* deity of Uhuwore to the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), an anti-graft organisation in Nigeria, because of the way it recovered what had become bad debts.<sup>29</sup> Where a debtor consistently refused to honour the promise made when borrowing from his creditor, the magical powers of the deity were invoked against him.

This was aptly exemplified in the cases of two top civil servants – one a Local Education Authority Secretary and the other a school principal, who died in 2010 and 2016, respectively. According to Anselm Odo, the former took a loan of 530,000 Naira (N530, 000) from one Emmanuel Ugwueze but refused to repay his creditor who later instituted a case against him before *Ube*.<sup>30</sup> After the expiration of the 28 day grace period given to him by the *Ube* clergy, he met his end.<sup>31</sup> The school principal, a practising Christian, also died mysteriously after a mystical girl blocked his vehicle while it was moving. Given the above account, one cannot but agree with O.B.C. Nwolise in his argument that *the stories about Ogwugwu akpu of Okija, Adoro Nsukka keep reminding us that while these deities can protect when happy with people, they can also be threats to the security of persons when offended.*<sup>32</sup>

Although these deaths were apparently natural, the timing suggested the deities were involved.

When title to land and boundary disputes became so serious as to raise doubts in the claims of the litigants, deities were invoked because of their impartiality in administering justice. Unarguably, as an agrarian society where people's livelihoods depended on farming, land was of ontological value to the Nsukka people. This explains why in the past, it was one of the sources of communal conflicts that most often defied easy resolution. Some vulnerable members of the society whose 'patron saints' these deities were, even handed over their own lives and property to them for protection and safeguarding. This action not only reduced areas of conflict that would constitute a threat to law and order, but also enhanced interpersonal and group relations, and integration for the survival of the society. On the basis of this premise, law enforcement in Nsukka communities was considered inseparable from religious sanctions as the deities had the last word on virtually every issue.

In the Nsukka social environment, adultery was not just prohibited but strictly abhorred by a cluster of powers including the earth goddess – *Ala*. In most parts of the area under study, especially Enugu Ezike, Obollo and Imilike, adultery was considered as a serious injury to the husband of the licentious woman accused, as it was against the earth goddess. Hence it is – *nso ala* – an abomination. While the woman was made to confess her wrongdoing, the man involved in the adulterous relationship was expected to provide items to be used in propitiatory sacrifices to the deities. For instance, in one of the old parishes of Nsukka, a Christian priest who committed adultery on December 30, 1990, was made to provide sacrifices to the deities. This ceremony was officiated by Felix Abah, the Onyishi (eldest man) of Umuideke family.<sup>33</sup> According to E. Ngwoke, ...*the chief reason for offering such a propitiatory sacrifice is pollution, a breach of nso ala.... Major pollutions are called abominations and these threaten the whole community.*<sup>34</sup>

In this context, deities were able to chastise adulterous women and thereby check promiscuity and licentiousness. D.U. Opata shares this view, arguing that the *system while it lasted secured for the people a greater morality than what we have today.*<sup>35</sup> Just as deities protected the institution of marriage in Nsukka, so were they involved in arranging divorces. Before divorce cases were finally settled, the two contesting parties were required to enter into a covenant

– *igba ndu*. Each of the couple took an oath in the name of the deity not to do anything that would cause harm, injury or the death of either the former spouse and his/her relatives, or damage to their property.<sup>36</sup> J.S. Mbiti seemed to be writing about this practice when he noted that *this oath places great moral and mystical obligations upon the parties concerned; and any breach of the covenant is dreaded and feared to bring about misfortunes.*<sup>37</sup> This goes to show why deities were regarded as the highest guarantors of truth and social conscience.

## Continuity and change

Generally speaking, *Ndi* Nsukka were (and still are) religious people, a development that prepared the ground for the germination and growth of Islam and Christianity. Contrary to expectations, Christianity was introduced as *onochie* – a substitution or displacement of traditional religion, not as *ononye* – an accompaniment. By implication, right from its debut in Igboland, Christianity has striven to drive African traditional religion, together with all its spirituality, into oblivion. In other words, the new faith, as a 'bad tenant' has made spirited efforts not to live side by side with its more accommodating and friendly 'landlord', but to destroy and replace it.

Its doctrine and teachings to its faithful to treat deities with contempt created a frosty relationship between Christianity and African traditional religion; hence the Igbo referred to the early Christians as *ndi okwu n' uka* – mischief makers – from which the term *Ndi uka* for 'Christians' was derived.<sup>38</sup> The activities of some overzealous Christians, especially their profane assertions against deities, are intended to create the impression that deities are man-made and are of doubtful existence. This seems to have informed the opinion of some scholars like Edmond Ilogu who argue that ...*at Nsukka, all the more grotesque of Ibo (sic) traditional religious practices, have died out as a result of the influence of modernisation brought about by school education, Christianity and Colonial Administration.*<sup>39</sup>

The huge harvests of converts made from the Mission Schools sent a wrong signal that the Igbo had abandoned their traditional ways of life for the ones introduced by Christianity and westernisation. Reacting to this, I.R.A. Ozigbo opined that *a close observation reveals that the more the Igbo change, the more they appear to remain the same.*<sup>40</sup> The upsurge of converts to the new faith was not necessarily because of their love for it, but for the

attendant education which offered brighter prospects of a better standard of living. This is why some have relapsed and now defend their traditional faith. Admittedly, deities in the Nsukka area have been victims of organised attacks by the received religion – Christianity – but interestingly, they have continued to soldier on. Even though the number of their adherents continues to be depleted, some nominal Christians have consulted deities during life's travails. There is hardly any doubt that for such Christians, their new faith is only skin-deep and a smokescreen.

The assertion that deities have waned in influence and patronage appears misplaced also, as investigations have revealed. In recent years there has been high profile patronage from big businessmen, politicians, pastors, lawyers, policemen, soldiers and victims of injustice who come with all sorts of gifts to solicit assistance from the deities. To such people, deities remain the reason for their success and they therefore see themselves as the soldiers of the deities, who are recompensed at the end of every year.<sup>41</sup> Ironically, most of those who pay homage to these deities are 'day-light Christians', like those who invoke the deities to recover for them what have hitherto been regarded as 'bad debts'. What is more, with the increasing wave of crime and insecurity there has been a steady increase in the number of people who go to deities for assistance in bringing criminals and culprits to justice.<sup>42</sup>

Undoubtedly, the influence of deities on the social life of the people has been responsible for misguided attacks by some revivalists and crusaders. It is reasonable to surmise that time and space never constituted any barrier to the deities in bringing offenders like licentious women to justice. Having been born and bred in the traditional religion, and aware of the unfaltering position of deities against infidelity, some women have in fact championed attacks on them. Such attacks are epitomised or typified by the destruction and burning of effigies at the *Adoro* shrine in 1994 by Ngozi Ogbu and her followers.<sup>43</sup> What these evangelists and crusaders fail to understand is that deities are spirits and therefore infinite. The actions of these evangelists are at variance with the view expressed by one of the early Irish missionaries – Bishop Joseph Shanahan – about the natural religion of the people. According to him *what the Igbo traditional religion* (in the form of deities) *needed was transformation and not destruction.*<sup>44</sup>

The western judicial system established by the colonial rulers has inadvertently bolstered the spiritual influence

and judicial functions of deities among traditionalists. The establishment of the University of Nigeria in a society with a penchant for tradition has also made its mark on the indigenous legal system operating at Nsukka. The import of the above factors is that many more people have come to embrace a more 'modern' legal system of redress, the unnecessary adjournments of cases based on frivolous applications notwithstanding. However, those who could not afford the high cost of litigation, unending adjournments and the perversion of justice experienced in the new system have had to continue with the *status quo ante*. This is increasingly accounted for by the fact that the new system allows *artificial compromises* (which) *do not assuage the feelings of the oppressed and marginalised*<sup>45</sup> in society. This can also be seen in the aphorism that 'justice delayed is justice denied', demonstrating that in spite of the long sojourn of Christianity with its ally, the judicial system, a good number of *Ndi Nsukka* have remained attached to their traditional legal system with deities at the centre stage. Also quite worrisome is the fact that most victims of the wrath of deities in recent years have been Christians of one denomination or another.

One very noticeable change about some of the deities in Nsukka is that their priests are now drawn from the Christian community. For instance, cases abound where Christians have renounced their faith to become traditional priests (*attama*) of some deities. Such priests include Adolphus Akere, the *attama* of *Idenyi Ugwu Agu* in Iheaka, Fidelis Ali, succeeded another Christian as the *attama* of *Ohe* in Imufu Enugu Ezike. In the case of *Ochegi* in Orba, it has had a succession of priests who were formerly Christians. While the immediate past priest was Chief John Ezema, the present is Mathias Onyishi, and that of *Amanyi* Orba is Brendan Eze, all of whom were once baptised Christians; a new dimension indeed. They have tended to bring their youthful energies and Christian influence to bear on the course and acceptability of these deities thereby 'winning many more souls' back to them.

Some of these same priests were once in the vanguard of the anti-deity movements organised by *Ndi Uka* (Christians) in the course of their revivalism and evangelism. In addition, modern technological culture has also brought some effects to bear on the widespread influence of some of the deities. Their spiritual influence now transcends the confines of their precincts to towns outside Igboland. In a way, these deities have also enhanced integration between *Ndi Nsukka* and their neighbours.

## Conclusion

This study has attempted to present a fairly consistent and coherent account of how *Ndi* Nsukka were caught at the cross-roads between receptivity to Christianity and the natural instinct for self-preservation and survival. Amongst *Ndi* Nsukka, deities with their oracular power achieved a greater degree of peaceful co-existence, cohesion and social justice than the western judicial system ever did. Their jurisdiction involved a wide range of issues from breaches of contract to the law of tort. The study emphasises the close relationship deities have with their adherents and their direct punishments and rewards. This is why they are feared and venerated. In other words, deities provide a shield from threats or fears of danger or harm to life, liberty and property. In the area of debt recovery from unyielding debtors, the deities have been effective in recent years. In the same manner, deities have settled and regulated conflicts, and administered customary law in a spirit of justice, whereas Christianity effectively eroded the old order.

The increasing moral decadence and deterioration of the value system in society is a clear demonstration of the inability of the Christian God to perform the functions of the deities in the lives of the people. In an age of weakening moral fibre in society, where people have abandoned their moral precepts in the pursuit of material acquisition, deities have played a significant role in reducing the occurrence of cases and enhancing harmonious relationships. While they abhor *nso ala*, they have engendered discipline among married women, while Christianity appears to be more compromising. The crusade-like responses by some Christians is proof that they do not always appreciate the hospitality and comradeship of the African traditional religion. Those who led such campaigns against *Adoro Ero* and *Aluum* of Amufie Enugu Ezike seem to have died mysteriously. To the adherents, these experiences go a long way to show that deities are not powerless, old, dead gods, a curious view expressed by some Christians.

The study has also attempted to show that though deities have been battered and bruised, they have continued to enjoy patronage from high profile politicians, business executives and people from other walks of life. Most such persons profess Christianity. In other words, those who go to church during the day often hedge their bets by patronising deities at night in order to conceal their dual identities. In recent years there have been a lot

of conflicts and compromises because at one time the adherents of the two religions were at loggerheads, at other times some of them crossed over to the other side. Between the two religions there seems to exist a spirit of give-and-take with respect to their adherents. The deities are thus regarded as powerful spiritual institutions whose influence has been soaring higher than the expectations of their adversaries. The deities now have many more clients drawn from the Christian community, with some coming from outside the villages where the deities are domiciled. On the strength of this, we can deduce that contrary to those Christians who subscribe to the view that these deities are dead and inactive, African Traditional Religion and its attendant deities are alive and well in Nsukka. 🏠

## ENDNOTES

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- 42 See Okwor, op cit.: p.67.
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- 45 Opata, op cit.: p.73.