

rites of passage African traditional region

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ABSTRACT

Rites of passage as could be seen in this work dealt with the various ritual which an individual undergo from one stage to another.

In chapter one, Pregnancy rites was one of the rites of passage. Here it made mention of the different ways, of how pregnant woman are subjected to one taboos or the other in various towns in Africa including my area, Ika North East Local Government, Area of Delta State.

Chapter two deals with Birth rites. In this chapter mention was made on some of the ceremonies accompanied with Birth in various ways. The sacrifices which are performed when a women delivered safely or otherwise was also highlighted upon.

Also in chapter three, another rites of passage written upon was naming rites. Here also naming ceremonies entails a lot of preparation and sacrifices to appease the god. Many ways in which it differs in African countries was mentioned.

In another chapter, puberty rites were mentioned as another rites of passage. Here again the writer made mention of the various ceremonies which accompany puberty and its significance in African traditional religion.

KEY WORDS: pregnancy, birth rites, naming rites, puberty rites, ritual

1.0 PREGNANCY RITES:

In my area Ika North East L.G.A of Delta State, a lot of rituals precede birth and immediately after birth. The rituals however vary from country to country and even within the same country.

Pregnancy is the first indication that a new child is on the way. Therefore the rituals of birth begins with the pregnancy of the mother. The birth of a child is greeted with joy throughout Africa. Even the desire to have many children especially sons is a sign of pride, wealth and prestige.

So when a woman is pregnant, she rejoices with her husband and the immediate family. Necessary precautions are taken to ensure normal gestation and delivery. These precautions include both medical and spiritual attention. Sacrifice of thanks is made to the supreme God, or the family gods or ancestors. Prayers are offered for the health of the mother and her baby.

In many African societies the pregnant woman must observe certain taboos and regulations, partly because pregnancy in effect makes her really sure and chiefly in order to protect her and the child. Some of these taboos include wearing protective amulets which have the virtue of preventing evil spirit such as witches and also helping in delivery. She avoids doubtful foods for fear that these foods would interfere with the health and safety of the mother or child or could cause misfortune for either of them after birth. Among the Abamba (Kenya), the expectant mother is forbidden to eat fat, beans and meat of animals killed with poisoned arrows during the last three months of pregnancy. However she may eat a special kind of earth found on antihill. In my area Ika(Nigeria) a pregnant woman can eat any food she likes except on the advice of elders, midwives, nurses or doctors.

Among the Akamba (Kenya) and Gikuyu (Kenya) all farm implements are removed from the house of the expectant mother before birth takes place. People believe that iron articles attract lightning. Among the Mao (Ethiopia) a pregnant woman does not speak directly with her husband. The couple communicates with each other through an intermediary. This is because the pregnancy, it is believed, makes her rituality unclean and her husband must therefore be protected from that. This custom is also a means of protecting the expectant mother from any physical, psychological and ritual harm, she might otherwise suffer by being in direct contact with her husband.

In some parts of Africa, there is a general taboo of intercourse between wife and husband for a considerable period, if not during the whole pregnancy period. The usual idea is that the intercourse will harm the child and cause the mother's milk to dry up.

In Ika(Ibo) Nigeria, a pregnant woman or the husband, or the parents or relations from time to time consult native doctors to know or predict that obstacles if any are on the way of the expectant mother. Often there must be obstacles; the usual thing done to prevent any disastrous consequences is to appease the gods of iron (Ugu) or make sacrifices which may involve the feeding of young children. The young children as it is believed will bring luck to the expectant mother. Sometimes the expectant mother may be told to worship the gods of the rivers Olokun (Ika Ibo) if she is found to be Ogbanje the daughter of the river.

In many African societies the expectant mother may be smarmed all over her body with white chalk and wears protective amulets. All these will protect her from the evil plants of the witches which may cause premature abortion.

It must be noted that the African society loves to have children. So unhappy is the woman who fails to get children. No matter her beauty or qualities, her failure to bear children is worse than committing genocide. When she dies, there will be nobody of her own immediate blood to remember her to keep her in the state of personal immortality. She will simply be forgotten. The fault may not be her own but this does not excuse her in the eyes of the society. Her husband may remedy the situation by raising children with another wife, but the childless wife bears a soar which nothing can erase. She will thus suffer permanent and irreparable humiliation for which there is no source of comfort in traditional life.

2.0 BIRTH RITES:

Practices connected with the actual birth vary considerably throughout Africa. In some African countries, birth generally takes place in the house of the expectant mother or in the house of her parents. In a few cases, it takes place in a special house constructed for the purpose, either inside or outside the village.

In my area, almost any elderly woman can act as a midwife, though this is generally done by native or local specialists. As a rule men and people in a state of impurity such as menstruation are forbidden to be present in the house where delivery is taking place. The reason for this is that the child would be ashamed to be born.

In some parts of South Africa, birth may take place on the grinding stone which is the symbol of a woman's work/ in Udhuk (Ethiopia) when a woman is about to deliver, she does alone into the bush, to give birth there. She returns home with the child after delivery. When a Gikiyu (Kenya) woman has given birth, she screams five times if the child is boy, and four times if it is a girl

In most African countries if the birth is difficult, it may be ascribed to various causes. Sin on the part of the woman, adultery or theft are common accusation of a delayed birth. If the mother confess the name of a lover then the child may now be born. Witchcraft or sorcery may be looked upon as the causes of prolonged labour and especially of a still birth.

In my area Ika (Ibo) the ceremony that follows the birth of a child is merriment. Many well wishers always visit the home of the child's parents to greet them and in most cases present gifts. The woman is treated specially for a period of 3 months. She has to confine herself in her home for these three months. This confinement is necessary to enable the nursing mother to take proper care of the baby. Another reason is that some elderly women forbid seeing new baby until after three months. The nursing mother is not allowed to cook during the 3 months. She is meant to be served. She is given special food, in most cases pounded food. The food is rich with meat especially bush meat. After the 3 months she and the child among other relatives will go to market. The going to the

market will mark the end of the confinement. It should be noted that this tradition is no longer strictly observed as a result of the Western way of life.

The birth of twins and triplets in most African countries is regarded as extraordinary. Therefore in many African societies twins and triplets are treated with fear. Formerly, some societies used to kill such children, other kill both the mother and the child. However, this is not the universal practice everywhere because other societies greet the birth of twins with great joy and satisfaction. It is regarded as a sign of rich fertility. Children of such births are believed in some societies to have extra powers. For example in central Africa, they are known as the children of God and heaven, and when a village is threatened with calamity, people turn to them to pray on behalf of their communities.

There is high rate of infant mortality in traditional African societies. The rate has considerably reduced due to the use of modern medicine and better child care. But disease and malnutrition are still the greatest enemies of African infants and children.

3.0 NAMING RITES:

Nearly all African names have a meaning. The naming of children is therefore an important occasion which is often marked by ceremonies in many societies. Some names mark the occasion of the child's birth. For example if the birth occurs during the rain the child would be given a name which means "Rain" or water; if the mother is on a journey at the time, the child might be called "Traveller", "Road" or "Wanderer".

A naming ceremony takes place a few days after the birth. The parents of the child invite friends, relatives and well-wishers to the ceremony. It receives a personal name which marks its ritual entry into the family. Prayers are offered and libations poured on the ground for the ancestors or Mother Earth. Visitors and guests bring presents to the parent's child. An elderly person in the family or among the invitees usually announces the name of the child. He carries the child, throws him up and spits little alligator pepper into the child's mouth. The alligator pepper is the symbol of boldness and prevent shameful acts in later life.

Some names describe the personality of the individual or his character, or some key events in his life. There is no end to the giving of names in many African societies so that a person may acquire a sizeable collection of names by the time he becomes a grownup person.

In some African countries, for example in Rhodesia, there is no special ceremony for naming their children. This is done by the father a few days after birth. Among the Luo (Kenya) the child's name is sought when the child is crying. During this period, different names of the living-dead are mentioned, and if the child stops crying when a particular name is called out, then the child receives that name. The names have meaning according to the occasion or other significance at the time of the birth. The Akamba (Kenya) give names to their children on the third day, the occasion being marked by fasting and rejoicing. On the fourth day the father hangs on iron necklace on the child's

neck after which it is regarded as a full human being and as having lost contact with the spirit world.

4.0 PUBERTY RITES:

The rites of birth and childhood introduce the child to the corporate community, but this is only the introduction. The child is passive and has still a long way to go. He must grow out of childhood and enter into adulthood both physically, socially and religiously. This is also a change from passive to active membership in the community. Most African peoples have rites and ceremonies to mark this great change, but a few do not observe initiation and puberty rites.

Initiation rites have many symbolic meanings in my area Ika. The youth are ritually introduced to the art of communal living. The significance of the rites is to introduce the candidates to adult life. In the community they are allowed to share in the full privileges and duties. They enter into the state of responsibility, they inherit new rights and new obligations are expected of them by society. The initiation rites also prepare young people in matters of sexual life, marriage, procreation and family responsibilities.

Modern life and ways of life have thinned down other customs to minimum, often the performance of circumcision is the sole remaining rites.

In Akamba (Kenya) initiation rites, children go through the first stage of initiation rites when they are about 4 to 7 years of age. The ceremony takes place in the months of August to October, when it is dry and relatively cool. Boys undergo clitoridectomy. The date of the ceremony is usually announced when the date reaches, all the candidates are gathered together by their parents at home where the ceremony is to take place.

Specialist men circumcise the boys and specialist women perform the operation on the girls; and a special knife is used in each case. During the ceremony, men gather round to watch the boys and women to watch the girls. The operation is painful, but the children are encouraged to endure it without crying or shouting, and those who managed to go through it bravely are highly praised by the community. Afterwards, there is public rejoicing with dancing, singing, eating and drinking and making libation and food offerings to the living-dead.

This circumcision rites symbolizes separation from childhood. The dancing and rejoicing strengthen community solidarity. It is after this initiation that young people are allowed to join in public dances. Making of offerings and libation to the living-dead emphasizes and renews the link between human beings and the departed.

Nowadays owing to modern ways of life many areas in Africa do not celebrate circumcision rites. In most cases it is done individually with little or no ceremony. In Ika (Ibo) children are circumcised before 3 months from birth. Specialist women performs the operation irrespective of sex. She is usually given 7 tubers of yam, a bottle of oil and 50K. Many educated people have

departed from this practice because circumcision could be done in hospitals by midwives or nurses. This is most hygienic.

Puberty rites have also suffered the effects of modern changes. Previously in Ika (Ibo) ladies of marriage age go for 3 months seclusion. They usually go in groups i.e. age groups. They wear beads round their necks and waists. The end of the 3 months is marked by feasting and dancing. Girls are free to marry after this ceremony. In Boys there is no ceremony in entering any grade in the society. Age merely demarcates one stage from the other. Boys enter the next grade usually between 3 – 4 years especially when the eldest man in the community dies.

People from Isoko (Nigeria) and some parts of Urhobo (Nigeria) do not circumcise their girls until they have reached puberty. This is usually done during the first pregnancy.

As said earlier, changes are rapidly taking place in Africa. This partly because children at that age are going to school and partly because Christian Missionaries and some governments have attacked or discourage the practices.

5.0 MARRIAGE RITES:

Marriage is a complex affairs. For African people, marriage is the focus of existence. Marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society. Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person has rejected society and society rejects him in return.

Marriage and procreation in African communities are a unity; without procreation, marriage is incomplete. Biologically both husband and wife are reproduced in their children, thus perpetuating the chain of humanity. In many African societies it is believed that the living-dead are reincarnated in part so that aspects of their personalities or physical characteristics are reborn in their descendants. Everybody therefore must get married and bear children; that is the greatest hope and expectation of the individual for himself and of the community for the individual. An unmarried person is regarded as an irresponsible man in the society.

Marriage in Africa is a social affair. It involves the families of the bride and bridegroom. There must be understanding between the two families.

Different customs are observed in the matter of finding partners for marriage. In some societies the choice is made by the parents. A fairly widespread practice is the one in which the parents and relatives of a young man approach the parents of a particular girl and start marriage negotiations. If either the girl or the young man very strongly and firmly rejects the prospective marriage partner, then the negotiations are broken down; although there are cases where force or pressure is applied to get the reluctant young person marry the partner chosen by the parents or relatives. The normal practice however, is for the parents to make their own choice and afterwards inform their parents about it. Then the parents and relatives begin the betrothal and marriage negotiations.

Among the Ethiopians, courtship and marriage take place at an early age. When a boy decides to marry a particular girl, he goes to meet her on the path and openly declares his intentions. The girl

pretends to get a shock and chase the man away. When the girl reaches home, she puts her bed against the back wall of the house. At night the boy visits the home when people have gone to sleep and puts his hand through openings in the wall until he reaches her. She feels the hands and identifies him by the ornaments round his hands. If she still rejects him, she cries aloud and the parents awake. The young man then runs away and probably never returns to persuade her further. The girl keep quiet if she accepts the offer for marriage and the two carry on a conversation in whispers. The boy repeats the visit after few days or weeks to consolidate relationship. When the relationship is strong, the girl begins to wear beads which immediately makes her parents enquire who the suitor is. If the parent approve, then the boy and the girl are allowed to meet publicly and this leads to marriage.

The parents arrange the marriages among the Senegalese and the Gambians. The same procedure is adopted in most parts of Nigeria. When a young man meets a girl who he intends to marry he tells his father about the matter, his parents send an intermediary to the girl's parents to enquire if the suggestion for such a marriage is favourable in their sight.

If it is favourable the boy's parents send kola nuts to the girl's father together with formal request for marriage. The girl's father then consults his wife and daughter if they agree, he also gives his consent and shares the kolanuts among the household and family, neighbours and friends. The young people now begin a formal courtship, and every time the boy visits the girl he must take kolanuts to the family and bring her new dresses for the festivals of the year.

In traditional societies marriage is not allowed between close relatives. Since the range of kinship extends vary widely, the degree of these prohibitions is also very extensive. Taboos exist to strengthen marriage prohibitions. For example, it is feared that children of close relatives will die and that the living-dead are displeased with such marriages and would therefore bring misfortune to those concerned. In Ika (Ibo) if a man marries a girl of his choice and discovers later that they are relations, he is instructed by both families (i.e. the family of the boy and the family of the girl) to kill a goat to appease the living dead. If this is not done, so many obstacles will befall the marriage such as sickness, childlessness or death of any child born by the couples.

Bride price differs from one country to another, and even within the same country it differs from tribe to tribe, bride price is never the same in Nigeria. In Ibo culture high bride price is demanded from the boy's family. This of course vary from the type of girls. The bride price of educated ladies are higher than their illiterate counterparts. In some area in Nigeria, there is little bride price. In Urhobo area, kola and wine with little amount of money could serve for the purpose.

Couples may decide to marry in a customary way or wed in the Church. Whatever way they choose, the marriage is solemnized by the two families and the Priest or Pastor or Catechist as the case may be respectively.

There is little or no initiation rites in marriages. The criteria are the attainment of the marriage age, understanding between the couples and their families and economic viability.

Like any other custom, marriage is also affected by modernity. Boys and girls could come together even without the consent of their parents. Once the couples have agreed to marry, the parents of both merely set on the approval of the couples.

6.0 DEATH RITES:

The rituals surrounding death is complex and varies from place to place. After death the corpse is washed and then dressed in the best clothes. However some religious sets do not dress the corpse. Usually a befitting coffin is bought especially for persons who are either advanced in age or wealthy. If a small child dies, no coffin is bought and there is little or no ceremony. A proper funeral is organized for the departed so that his spirit may be contended in the world beyond and will not return as a satisfied ghost to plague his family.

There are two types of burial in most African societies. The first burial applies to any person who dies irrespective of age but the second burial is restricted to persons who are old. In the first burial as soon as the person dies the relatives after washing and dressing the corpse a grave is dug. Before the interment, it is customary for some area in Ika (Ibo) to find out what was responsible for the death. How this is done is not understood to the ordinary mind. At the interment various objects are put in the grave especially money. These are meant for the use of the deceased on his journey to the world beyond.

When the body is placed in the grave, prayers may be made asking the deceased's spirit to give blessings to the family. The dead will be wished so many good things. For example if he was a poor man before his death, he will be instructed to bring riches when it reincarnates. On the other hand if the deceased was killed by witches or wizards, it will be instructed by the relatives to revenge.

The second burial is merely ceremonies and involves a lot of expenses on the part of the family. The second burial varies from a few weeks to a year or more. As there is much expenses involved the rite may be delayed, but if the ghost of the dead man is believed to be troublesome, and to appear in dreams, then the complete rites is hastened.

If a married man dies, his widow will be in mourning mood for some months. In some parts of Ibo (Nigeria) especially in my area, she will continue to wear only the dress she had on when her husband died until he was buried and to also sleep on the floor or on a tattered mat as well as to eat from cracked plate. This is to deceive the husband's ghost so that it will not return to have relations with her, which would be dangerous. If a woman died, the former husband is meant to eat with a separate utensil and sleep on the floor. He is not supposed to bath for a specific period.

CONCLUSION

Rites of passage in Ika North East Local Government Area of Delta State entails a lot of ceremonies accompanied with sacrifices, for any child to accept the African traditional religion he/she must undergo all the various stages mentioned in this book.

But great changes have taken place in Africa in the last century. These changes have inevitably altered the religious picture. Not only had social changes occurred, in new forms of government, but new religion has appeared on the scene. Christianity and Islam have come as missionary religions and have had considerable success in displacing much of the old faith. Their success has understatedly been much greater than it would have been in past countries, because of the unsettlement of African society in our days.

In my Area Ika some people who have practiced African Religion had become Christians. Even among those who accepted the new religion, there are some aspects of traditional belief which they still adhere to, in an assessment of religious life. In the villages, the conservatism of society strengthens the retention of the old faith. The new religion was disliked because they undermine old customs. The chiefs and Obi's in my village have regarded the missions as undermining their authority. If the chief's authority is attacked, men say, not only will it cause disorder on earth but the very foundations of nature will be overturned. Crops will not grow, rain will not fall and women will not bear children.

On the other hand, students of African society have felt deep concern at the rapidity of social and religious change in Africa. Some would have prohibited missions from doing their work; but the dock cannot be turned back. C.K. Meek, an anthropologist who made a study of the Ibo of Nigeria after riots in 1929, included "some ethics will disappear with old gods but new gods will create new ethical values. It is a common place to say that magic worked well, but we cannot lightly discount the fact that diviners, witch-doctors and ministers of ordeals were frequently bribed to give a favourable or unfavourable decision".

The greatest danger in African religious life is that the old should disappear, without some new religions force to take its place. Unchecked individualism self-seeking, corruption and materialism are the great enemies of modern Africa. Yet the past has been so thoroughly impregnated with religion and its ethics that it is difficult to see how an ordered society can be established without them.

Finally I saw that African traditional religion plays a great role in the upbringing of a child through the various rites of passage.

The fifth chapter was that of marriage as one of the rites of passage. This chapter made mention of the rituals that accompanied Marriage.

Finally Death rite was the last chapter and details are written about it.

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