

THE PARADOX OF SECRECY IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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Abstract

Recent studies in the area of religion, especially in the last twenty years, have led to the resurgence of interest in the issue of secrecy in religions. This has emerged as scholars from different openings of knowledge have sought entrance into different religious treasures of secret knowledge, the limitation of knowledge to the divine, secret religious activities and various other secret religious traditions. Theorists of religion, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, etc., have shown in their studies that secrecy is an important element in most religious traditions and specific religious practices. In the area of African Traditional Religion (ATR), secrecy constitutes a fundamental problem. Many African priests, priestesses and other sacred functionaries, who are the custodians of this ancestral religious heritage, are not always willing to disclose major aspects of ATR. Medicine-men or practitioners of African medicine hardly reveal the elements necessary for any effective medicine to an investigator. The result is that many of them die with their knowledge, without transmitting it to the world or the next generation. In a world that is constantly and speedily globalizing, this work argues that African Traditional Religion needs to open up itself for the preservation of the religion both as a practice and an area for research. For the purpose of this research, the hermeneutic and phenomenological methods of inquiry were employed.

Keywords: Secrecy, African, Traditional, Religion, Medical

Practitioners, Life Circle.

Introduction

The phenomenon of secrecy is a universal experience, thus Blake (1827) refers to it as a human dress, and Beidelman (1993) avers that it is central to human affairs. It is found at all levels of animal life, from the lower animals to the higher animals. Lower animals usually keep secret their nests and dens to avoid the visitation of a predator. As regards food preservation, lower animals like the squirrel preserve nuts under the ground in secret places known only to them. The tortoise and lizard lay eggs under the ground in secret places known only to them. A cursory glance at this dimension of the life of lower animals reveals that the two major reasons for secrecy are, first, for preservation and second, for protection. This is also not very different when it comes to the use of secrecy by human beings. Individual human beings consciously conceal aspects of themselves from others to avoid shame, violence, rejection, harassment, or loss of acceptance, etc. Most people, if not all peoples, have aspects of themselves which they do not want other people to know about. Families keep secrets to protect the integrity of the family or to avoid an unprecedented hindrance; such secrets are referred to as 'family secrets'. Beyond the family circle, governments also conceal information from other governments and the public. These secrets can be referred to as 'State secrets'. State secrets include secrets such as weapon designs, military plans, diplomatic negotiation tactics,

etc. Every nation of the world has official secrets. Related to this are military secrets of nations that are purposely not made available to the general public and hence to any enemy, in order to gain an advantage or to not reveal a weakness, to avoid embarrassment, or to help in propaganda efforts. Corporate Organizations keep secrets as well, especially as it concerns competitive advantage. New products under development, unique manufacturing techniques, or lists of customers usually kept secret to avoid another corporate organization taking advantage.

Recent studies in the area of religion, especially in the last twenty years, have led to the resurgence of interest in the issue of secrecy in religions. This has emerged as scholars from different openings of knowledge have sought entrance into different religious treasures of secret knowledge, the limitation of knowledge to the divine, secret religious activities and various other secret religious traditions. In this work, there is a focus on secrecy as it relates to the African traditional society, and particularly, religion. It studies with particular interest the issue of secrecy in the area of African traditional medicine, rites of initiation, worship and secret societies. The purpose is to enhance better conceptualization secrecy from the traditional African perspective.

The African Society and the Paradox of Secrecy

The African society is one in which there is a very strong relationship not just between the living members of society but also

between the living and the living dead, and in fact all other elements of the spiritual world. Among the living, especially between members of the same clan and village, there is a very strong bond between people, that the concern of the one becomes the concern of the other, and the joy of the one become the joy of the others. To be in traditional African societies is to be with the other. It is about the 'We' and not the 'I'. It is the 'We' that gives meaning to the 'I', for instance, when a child is born, it is the community into which the child is born that gives the child an identity- this identity does not mean that the child apart from the community has no metaphysical unity that separates it from others. Every child that is born always has its own identity, but there is an identity that the community gives to the child, which predates the birth of the child. This is not to mean that the 'I' has no contribution to make except to be subsumed into the 'We'. It is the 'I' that sustains the 'We' by making its contributions to the 'We'. As much as the 'We' gives meaning and identity to the 'I', there will be no 'We' if there is no 'I'.

In a society of this kind, a society of relationships, communication occupies a very fundamental place. There has to be the sharing of ideas, emotions, attitudes, or perceptions with another person or group of persons through words (written or spoken), gestures, signals, signs, or other modes of transmitting images. The proper understanding of a message is an important aspect of communication. If it is not understood by the receiver in the same way in which the sender of the message wants him or her to

understand, there may be confusion, chaos or inefficiency. In view of this, it should be said that communication is not merely the transmission of message from one to another but also the correct interpretation and understanding of the message. It is, therefore, a process of passing information and understanding the message that has been passed. Where then lies the paradox of secrecy in African traditional societies? The paradox of African traditional societies and secrecy lies in the following:

1. the traditional African society is one of relationships and one in which communication occupies a very fundamental place, yet it is one in which secrecy pervades virtually every dimension of its walls. It is a society of relationships, and thus communication, and at the same time a society of secrecy.
2. in as much as traditional African societies conceal information, the concealment of such information also reveals information not just about the society that conceals but also about what is concealed. The paradox arises from the fact of the revelation that is borne from the concealment of information.
3. it creates another world in the world that we already know. Those who possess the secret in another world that is in the world that we have found ourselves. Simmel (1950), Bellman (1984), Butt-Thompson (1969) and Webster (1992) speak of a second world in the world. It is to such a

world that secrecy introduces us into, a world in the world.

4. There is the suspicion of the concealment of secrets in most traditional African societies, and this is what makes the secret to have a social existence. There is a secret and yet there is the knowledge of the existence of the secret.

Having identified the paradoxes of secrecy in African traditional societies, this work would investigate the major areas where the spirit of secrecy dominates.

African Traditional Medicine and Secrecy

Medicine men belong to a class called variously: specialists, sacred personages, special men, sacred men or sacred specialists (Maclean 1971, Twumasi 1975, Johada 1977, Ademuwagun 1979, Ityavyar 1982, 1984). They are also called traditional doctors or traditional healers, herbalists because they have power and control over herbs (Quarcoopome, 1987). Traditional doctors are also called *Dibia* in Igbo and *Waganga* in Swahili. They principally concern themselves with sickness, disease and misfortune. They symbolize the hope of society: hopes of good health, security and prosperity. Sickness, disease and misfortune are generally believed to be caused by the ill will or ill action of one person against the other. The medicine man is thus consulted to diagnose the type of sickness and trace the cause of it. As a solution to the problem in question, the cause must be found, counteracted, uprooted and punished. It is also the duty of the medical practitioner to provide countermeasures that can counteract

future inflictions. Mbiti (1969) refers to them as the friends, pastors, psychiatrists and doctors of African traditional societies. As sacred specialists, they have a language, symbolism, knowledge and skill of their own.

Notwithstanding their roles in the lives of the African people, their activities are usually shrouded in secrecy. I remember one morning when some young people were cutting grass around the Church compound one of them was stung by a scorpion. Others came to his rescue by using razor blade to cut open the spot where the boy was stung and squeezed the liquid from onions into the wound. The liquid from the onions was supposed to go into the boy's body and neutralize the poison of the scorpion that the pain may stop. After this, the pain persisted. One of the young boys told us of a medicine man within the neighborhood who has medicine for scorpion bites. We rushed the boy to the house of the medicine man but he was not around, however, his son was around. When we told him about the problem, he ran into the bush and cut some leaves and went into the house and brought some substance and mixed them together. He took the leg of the boy and rubbed the substance on it and did some incantations, saying words which only him knew the meaning. Immediately the boy was healed. When we asked him how he went about it, he refused to tell us; and said that it was a family thing. It was like a family secret. If perchance the whole family dies, the secret to that medicine would die with them. In most cases, there is no laid down formula for the development of African medicine.

Many medicine men have died with great powers without handing it over to the next generation.

Initiation Rites into Adulthood and Secrecy

During the initiation of adolescents into adulthood, there is an institutionalized revelation of secrets to those who are transiting into adulthood. The initiation rites, introduces the child from the world of dependence to that of independence, and the rights, privileges and duties of adulthood. It is a sign that they are ready for marriage and have reached the biological maturity necessary for reproduction. The rites for boys and girls differ according to their particular roles in society as husbands and wives (Kanu 2015a & 2016). While the women are taught folktales, dances and songs and roles that are peculiar to women in the home, the men are taught roles that they would play as the head of the home. This is a period of learning for both men and women about sexuality, etiquette, comportment, etc. At the end of the rites, the women are beautified and brought to the village square where they would display their beauty and dance as well to the admiration of spectators. Men who are in search of wives usually find this period very interesting. The boys are also initiated into secret societies and masquerade cults. They undergo great hardships that they may learn through suffering, especially to prepare them for the challenges that would come with being a father. After this period, the boys come to the open and eat with the elders, a sign that they have arrived. Their seclusion and

public appearance are symbolic: it symbolizes the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood, the end of dependency and the beginning of independence (Kanu 2015b, 2017a & 2018).

The place for the initiation is usually not known by people, except by those who initiate the adolescents. They candidates are taken into the bush, imbued with impenetrability and concealment. In some traditional societies, the bodies of the candidates are cut as part of the transformation process of the body. During the cutting, there are secrets said to be put into the body of the persons being initiated. And by secret, Beildenman (1991 & 1993), Panofsky (1939) and Turner (1962 & 1967) avers that it is not meant an entirely new knowledge, but rather a deeper understanding of what they have been seeing and hearing before. The riddles they have heard before, the masks they have seen before, the songs and stories they have heard before, the rituals they have seen implemented before and the legends and genealogies they have heard of before from their parents or as elders discussed or prayed. The difference here is that they are explained to them in a profound way that leads to new insights. This process can be understood as a poetic and imaginative reconsideration of what is already known. There is, however, the disclosure of the secrets of initiation; an experience the candidate is having for the first time and which might not be fully communicated to another until the person goes through it. And as soon as they return to the world apart from their new world, a world is created in the normal world: a world of those who know the secret and those

who are yet to know the secret.

African Secret Societies

Secret societies in Africa are a group whose activities, events, inner functioning, or membership are concealed from non-members. The society may or may not attempt to conceal its existence. The exact qualifications for labeling a group as a secret society are disputed, but definitions generally rely on the degree to which the organization insists on secret, and might involve the retention and transmission of secret knowledge. Such secret societies have personal bonds among members, and the use of secret rites, rituals and language which solidify members of the group (Wikipedia 2018a). Examples of African secret societies include:

- a. **Abakuá** is a secret society specially meant for men. They play a great role in the initiation rites of adolescents into adulthood. It is also at this time that adolescents are initiated into the society. It originated from fraternal associations in the Cross River region of Southeastern Nigeria and Southwestern Cameroun. It is found in **Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast**. The members are known as *Ñáñigos*, and are believed to be able to turn into leopards to attack their enemies. They had masquerades for the society and initiated the young into hunting. (Miller 2015).
- b. **Ekpe** is a secret society that is flourishing chiefly among the

Efiks of Cross River state. Members are also found in Akwa Ibom State, Arochukwu of Abia state, as well as in Cuba and Brazil (Hugh 1911).

c. Sande is a women's secret society very popular in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast. They play a lot of roles during the initiation of girls into adulthood. They were known to perform rituals for female genital mutilation. It is alleged to confer fertility, instill notions of morality and proper sexual comportment, and to maintain an interest in the well-being of its members throughout their lives. This society also champions women's social and political interests and promotes their solidarity. They have a masquerade clothed with a wooden face, which is controlled by them (Wikipedia 2008b).

Secret societies in Africa have secret languages and structures which every member swore oath not to divulge to non-members. There are times when divulging such information leads to death or the stripping of the person of membership. It not a common sight to find people who divulge such secrets.

Shrines and the Politics of Secrecy

Most shrines in traditional African societies thrive on secrecy and fear. Usually the secrecy that surrounds the shrine and the activities going on in the shrine instill awe and fear in the

worshipper. The hidden powers of the deities in their shrines were promoted and manipulated by the priests in charge of the shrines through the use of adornments that instilled fear and wonder. The shrines were made in such a way that they hinder public access, however, still providing informative and symbolic decorations that proclaimed the powerful identity of the deity. For the purpose of this discourse on shrines and secrecy, the Arochukwu and Okija shrines will be studied.

a. ***Okija Shrine- The Home of Ogwugwu Akpu***

Ogwugwu Akpu was just like any other shrine in Igbo land which served as checks against impunity and man's inhumanity to man. People who were aggrieved over the manner they were treated in business deals, land disputes, among other issues, took solace in Ogwugwu shrine, which they believed, was capable of delivering justice in favour of the down-trodden (Ajumadu 2015). For many years, the activities of the shrine has prospered on the grounds of secrecy until a team of Police men led by the Anambra State Commissioner of Police Felix Ogbaudu visited the Okija shrine where they made eye opening discoveries. They saw headless bodies, human corpses, skulls, and a register of names in the shrine. It was believed that the guilty party usually died within a year and the priests at the shrine would demand the dead body and all material possessions of the victim which included millions of naira. Ajumadu (2015) reported that notable amongst the clients of this

shrine were the late Chief Victor Okafor, popularly known as Ezeogo who reportedly had a dispute with one Nzeribe a member of the House of Representatives. Ezeogo died in a ghastly motor accident believed to have been caused by the gods. His body was amongst those discovered by the Police and according to the Police it had a very conspicuous name tag. Apart from the dead body, the family of the deceased was ordered to turn over millions of naira owned by the deceased or the gods would visit their anger on the living which the family of the deceased complied with.

The Police also observed that only the richest of the party in the dispute is always guilty. The agents of the shrine trailed the individual and placed poison or charms on their cars while some were forced to drink some concoction after which the person died. The leader of the chief priests is said to own property in Lagos valued at millions of naira. It would appear that it is not the Arusi that kills, but the chief priest who produce juju charms and place it within the sphere of their victim. They cover their deeds by claiming it is the Arusi that killed. The key to the success of the chief priests of Okija shrine is the secrecy with which they operated and fear that they have been able to instill in their victims (Ajumadu 2015). The attachment of nametags to the victims of the Arusi and the use of Registers convinced new or stubborn clients and instilled fear in them.

b. *Arochukwu Shrine- The Home of Ibini Ukpabi*

Arochukwu; it was known in the Eastern Delta as *Tsuku ab yama*, which translates to “God resides there.” According to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), it has the power “to identify sorcerers, witches, poisoners, etc. People also believe that she can make barren women fertile, and give success in trade, fertility of crops and victory in war” (p. 94). Ibini Ukpabi transformed Arochukwu to a place where major issues and conflicts were adjudicated. And the shrine of this great deity was the venue, the supreme court, and its judgment was final, with no further appeal. No other shrine or deity entertained the adjudication of a case already settled by Ibini Ukpabi. And persons or communities never challenged her judgment; to do that was to risk being invaded by either Ohafia or Abam warriors who protected the integrity and supremacy of the Arochukwu deity with their military might. The height of its powers was during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, when it was the most powerful deity in Igboland. Its power also made the Aros supreme and advantaged as they served as middlemen in the trading between the whitemen and the Igbo in hinterland (Kanu 2017b).

Uguru (2015) avers that the reputation of Ibini Ukpabi was based on its ability to deliver swift judgments. Once a person entered the shrine, if found guilty, the person never returned. The relations would only see blood flowing out form the shrine and then would know the person was guilty and assume that the person had been killed by the deity. However, some scholars have argued that it was all a ruse as the priests would never kill; it was all animal blood

all a ruse as the priests would never kill; it was all animal blood which was poured out, while the person was taken through a door to a secret location to be sold as slave. The offenders, after walking into the tunnel, were stripped naked at a place known as the '**Hill of Rags**' and clandestinely sold into slavery instead of being killed. The truth is that tunnels of disappearance led to outlets in the former slave trade routes in the border villages for onward transmission by boats to the port in Calabar. From here thousands of enslaved Africans were shipped to the Americas. Njoku (2004) observes that the people of Arochukwu took control of the hidden location of the Cave Temple Complex and used it to their economic and political advantage.

Sacred Specialists and Secrecy

Sacred specialists were those who played sacred and political roles among the Africa people in traditional societies. These include the Priests, Rain Makers, Healers, Prophets, Kings, etc. These men's personalities are ruled and swallowed up by their office personalities. They are not commonly seen. Their office requires that they remain secret and come out only when it is necessary, and so they are not a common sight. And the fact that they are not a common sight often gives meaning to their appearance. They are sometimes like relics, hidden from view so as to emphasize their powerful natures and also paraded from time to time for public appreciation and veneration. They are the icons and manifestations of their office. For instance, in the Oyo Empire, the *Alaafin* was the sole voice of authority, however, with limitations. He had a large amount of ritual restrictions which limited his authority. For

instance, he was not allowed to leave the palace except during important festivals. The *Alaafin* was also a spiritual leader who was regarded as a representative from the spirit world. He was, therefore, required to devote himself to the worship of *Orisa*. His sacred authority and restriction accompanied his personality with some degree of secrecy. Alongside the *Alaafin* was the *Babalawo* who was the spiritual guide of the *Alaafin*. Although he was not required to be part of the council, he was very often consulted to provide spiritual advice. His relevance is based on the belief that he was in direct communication with the spirits, and thus, his advice is considered a divine knowledge. As a sacred personality, his activities were surrounded with great secrecy. They are considered so sacred that sometimes their death is treated in secrecy and sometimes manipulated to the point of denial. These sacred personalities like a cosmic mysterious lore remain enigmatic and awesome.

Conclusion

The issue of secrecy is a universal phenomenon, even though the concept of secrecy might differ from place to place or from culture to culture it is deep concern everywhere. Theorists of religion, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, etc., have also shown in their studies that secrecy is an important element in most religious traditions and specific religious practices. However, from the study of secrecy in African traditional thought or religion one can discover that secrecy in the African thought can be

conceptualized at two levels: the first is the social level that gives a particular group of people their identity, and thus differentiates them from others. In Africa, almost every social group has a secret which is a social convention that also helps the group to communicate among themselves. The second level is the level of mystery. This kind of secrecy is associated with kings, sacred specialists, shrines, masquerades, etc. This sense of mystery gives these realities their sacred personalities.

This notwithstanding, secrecy is part of society, and there would hardly be a society without secrecy. Secrecy gives identity, creates a bond, and enhances communication. However, there are also times when secrecy can be manipulated for personal advantage or interests. At this point, secrecy requires the attention of appropriate authorities as it does not only promote identity, bond and communication, but destroys the society. This also leads to the classification secrecy that is positive and the secrecy that is negative. In Africa, the level of underdevelopment is not completely unaffected by the management of secrecy. Like in the area of African traditional medicine, if not for the issue of secrecy, African would have made a huge contribution to the development of international medicine as China and other parts of Asia are making at the moment. The culture of secrecy has kept Africa at the background of recent developments in the globalizing world. In being secretive, something of her identity is lost. Also a lot of

corruption thrives under the umbrella of secrecy and fear. While there are many areas of life to be kept secret, Africa's management of her culture of secrecy would go a long way in determining her place in the community of nations.

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